

25 BATTALION

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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.

Some keywords in the header are a local Electronic Text Centre scheme to aid in establishing analytical groupings.

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Removed unwanted linebreaks and associated markup.

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Colin Doig

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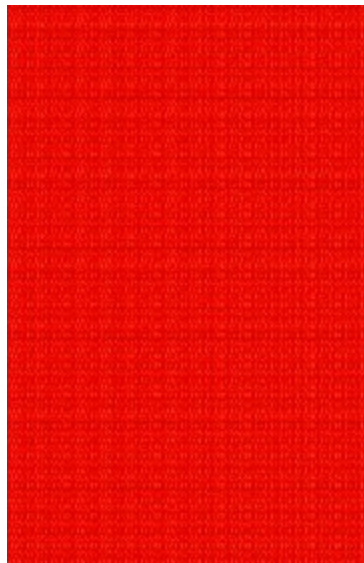
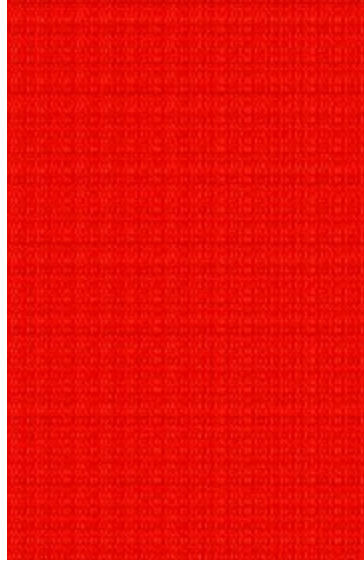
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New Zealand

25 Battalion

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DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND
1946

25 BATTALION

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25 Battalion

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25 BATTALION

[FRONTISPIECE]



Sixth Brigade on the march at Helwan, September 1941

Sixth Brigade on the march at Helwan, September 1941

25 BATTALION

[TITLE PAGE]

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

Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Puttick KCB, DSO and bar, MC (Greek), Legion of
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25 BATTALION

FOREWORD

Foreword



windsor castle

By [Lieutenant-General the Lord Freyberg](#)
vc, gcmg, kcb, kbe, dso

I feel honoured to be asked to write a foreword to the history of 25 Battalion. Perhaps the highlight of its active service was the Second Libyan Campaign of November-December 1941, in which the battalion in its first attack fought magnificently, losing more men killed in a single action than any other battalion of 2 [New Zealand Division](#) throughout the whole war. In fact some two-thirds of those who took part in this attack became casualties. The battalion's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel McNaught, was himself wounded three times before he was evacuated, but the battalion to a man behaved superbly.

Twenty-fifth Battalion went overseas with the [Third Echelon](#) in August 1940 under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel 'Tim' Wilder, who took it successfully through a difficult rearguard action at [Molos](#) in [Greece](#) and relinquished command on being promoted Brigadier in September 1941. Colonel McNaught succeeded him; when he was wounded he handed over command to Major Burton, who served the battalion well throughout the rest of the Libyan battle. Lieutenant-Colonel George commanded it in [Syria](#) and at El Mreir, where he was taken prisoner when German tanks overran the battalion on the morning of 22 July 1942. Ian Bonifant took it through the break-out battle at [Alamein](#) and on to [Tripoli](#); Tom Morten commanded it in [Tunisia](#) and at [Orsogna](#); Major Norman and Lieutenant-Colonel MacDuff led it at

Cassino, where its men fought particularly well on 15 March 1944 to capture Castle Hill. After Sora Colonel Norman returned to take command, and he led the battalion with distinction for almost a year until he was wounded on 23 April 1945, just before the Division reached the River Po. His successor, Lieutenant-Colonel Barnett, was the battalion's tenth and last Commanding Officer.

In all these battles 25 Battalion fought with distinction. Many of its officers and men won honour on the battlefield.

The publication of this history gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to a fine unit. I hope many New Zealanders will read this history of an excellent Infantry Battalion.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

24 May 1960

25 BATTALION

PREFACE

Preface

This record of the arduous and splendid service of a fine battalion has, in the main, been based on the unit's war diaries and their accompanying operation orders, maps and sketches, and reports. Reinforcing these were private diaries and letters and personal accounts by members of the battalion, sent to me direct or collected by others, a valuable source which, however, I feel has by no means been exhausted.

The assistance rendered me by all the staff of the [War History Branch](#) has been invaluable: the accurate day-by-day account in detail of the operations of all units of the 2nd New Zealand Division, prepared by the narrators for the campaign histories, furnished a ready and vital guide; and in the preparation of the history for publication the work of the Sub-Editor, [Mr W. A. Glue](#), greatly facilitated its completion. The maps are the work of the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department and the index was compiled by Mrs W. G. Woodward.

I wish to extend my grateful thanks to those who have assisted me, including the 25 Battalion Association Committee and all the Commanding Officers (other than Lieutenant-Colonel J. L. MacDuff, abroad), who perused the draft and contributed to its interest and accuracy.

E. Puttick

wellington

31 March 1960

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Crossing the Po

Trieste

Lt-Col A. S. Wilder

Lt-Col G. J. McNaught

Lt-Col H. G. Burton

Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant

Lt-Col T. B. Morten

Lt-Col E. K. Norman

J. Finlay
collection
NZ Army (G.
F. Kaye)

W. J.
Wakeling
collection

NZ Army (G.
R. Bull)

NZ Army

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CHAPTER 1 – TRENTHAM—VOYAGE OVERSEAS—TRAINING IN EGYPT

CHAPTER 1

Trentham—Voyage Overseas—Training in Egypt

On 15 May 1940 large numbers of men from all parts of the [Wellington](#), Hawke's Bay, and Taranaki provinces arrived at [Trentham Military Camp](#), which at that time was the training camp of the Central Military District. This influx continued for three days, when a little over one-third of the men who were to form the units of the [Third Echelon](#) of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force were in the camp. At the same time the remainder of the echelon was assembling at the district training camps of [Papakura](#) (near [Auckland](#)), [Ngaruawahia](#) (near [Hamilton](#)), and [Burnham](#) (near [Christchurch](#)).

Twenty-fifth ([Wellington](#)) Infantry Battalion was forming at [Trentham](#), its neighbours being [8 Field Company](#), New Zealand Engineers, [Divisional Provost Company](#), Overseas Base (Records), Base Pay Office (Details), [Base Post Office](#) (Details), 2 NZ General Hospital, 6 Infantry Anti-Tank Company, Divisional Signals, Headquarters [6 NZ Infantry Brigade](#) with 19 Light Aid Detachment attached, and Headquarters New Zealand Division (Details), together with first reinforcements of 1228 all ranks. The total strength of this section of the [Third Echelon](#) (which does not include the first reinforcements) was 2808 all ranks; [Papakura](#) with [Ngaruawahia](#) had 2703 and [Burnham](#) 2333 all ranks.

Twenty-fifth Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel [Wilder](#),¹ was one of the three battalions of 6 NZ Infantry Brigade, the other battalions being 24 Battalion at [Papakura](#) and 26 Battalion at [Burnham](#). The First and Second Echelons had also passed through these camps and included 4 and 5 Brigades, now overseas. Each of these brigades was similarly organised into [Auckland](#), [Wellington](#), and Canterbury-Otago battalions, 4 Brigade comprising 18, 19, and 20 Battalions, and 5 Brigade 21, 22, and 23 Battalions. Two other battalions, but not forming part of any of the infantry brigades, were in the Division; they were 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion and 28 (Maori) Battalion, the latter usually being attached to 5 Brigade.

As was the case in the preceding echelons, officers and non-commissioned officers for the [Third Echelon](#) had commenced their training in advance of the men, entering the camps on 1 February. Many of these officers (chiefly adjutants,

quartermasters, and officers second-in-command of units and companies) and selected warrant officers and NCOs were attached for a short period to units of the [Second Echelon](#), a preliminary 'canter' giving most valuable practical experience in the duties they would shortly undertake in their own units.

Despite the very low state into which the military forces of the Dominion had fallen in the years preceding the war, there were fortunately, in addition to the small but very efficient Regular Forces, considerable numbers of [Territorial Force](#) officers and NCOs who had maintained an active interest in the forces and kept abreast of the times. Many of these were veterans (though they would disclaim the term) of the 1914 – 18 war, and together with others of similar war experience were an invaluable leaven in the great, inexperienced mass forming the greater part of the new enlistments. Among the men, too, were a few with war experience and also a great many who had had some years' training in the secondary school cadets, which often included periods in camp and one or more courses of instruction. The Territorial Force units had also provided a good many partly trained men. All these were a great help, either as officers and instructors or in the ranks, where they were able to show the 'run of the ropes' to those ignorant of camps and army life.

[Trentham](#) had long been a military training camp but in the years between the wars its buildings had been increasingly used as part of the very large Ordnance Depot housing great quantities of weapons, equipment, and military stores. On the outbreak of war a large and urgent building programme had been commenced to provide hutted accommodation for over 2500 men and excellent facilities that included a cinema, library, wet and dry canteen, institutes (Church Army, Salvation Army, and [YMCA](#)), Post Office (including telegraph, telephone, money and postal order, and savings-bank facilities), hot showers, drying rooms and laundry, an excellent hospital (including a contagious diseases hospital), dental hospital, and a very useful shopping area. In the second year of the 1914–18 war mud and dust had created a serious and dangerous nuisance, and to prevent a repetition of this, all the roads and the parade ground were sealed by the Public Works Department, an activity in which the Minister of Public Works, the Hon. R. Semple, took an enthusiastic and urgent interest.

The first few days in camp were spent in organising the battalion into its companies, platoons and sections, and in issuing bedding, clothing and equipment.

All was not plain sailing as the heavy demands made by the mobilisation of some 20,000 men in a few months were of course beyond the capacity of the peacetime reserves, and industry was just beginning to show in increased production the results of the expansion programme. Issues in some items had necessarily to be made almost from day to day as supplies came to hand and attendance at quartermasters' stores often tried the patience of all concerned.

Such then were the camp and generally the conditions in which the men of 25 Battalion were to live for the next fifteen weeks. They were to have the privilege, as it seems to have been universally regarded, of receiving as members of the Third Echelon the newly adopted battle dress, which was not ready in time for the earlier echelons. It proved to be a well-designed and popular uniform, particularly suitable for active service. The absence of brass buttons with their attendant drudgery may have had something to do with its popularity. The small men of the battalion, however, were a little unfortunate as there was a shortage of the smaller sizes and they had to wear drill or the older pattern serge uniforms when on leave.

As an economy measure denim jackets and trousers were worn for training and for fatigues, serge trousers being worn underneath for warmth during the cold weather. This denim working dress was certainly a cure for vanity, a great leveller, and until one became accustomed to it tended to confirm the adage that 'clothes make the man'. It was, however, very suitable for the purpose for which it was used. It was easily cleaned, dried quickly, and relieved the strain on supplies of normal uniform. Men in denim uniform could take no pride in their appearance but as all men were dressed alike it mattered little. The striking transformation which took place when the men were dressed in their battle dress was adequate compensation. After wearing denims a man in battle dress felt he really was someone and in every way looked the part.

The real purpose of the battalion's presence at [Trentham](#) was training and that commenced in earnest, on a syllabus that had been prepared months ahead, after the first week or so of settling down. The men came from all walks of life, from all parts of the district, from cities, towns, villages, and country areas, including the back country. Men accustomed to work in the bush or on the farm found the sharp, quick movements on the barrack square and the continuous alertness required both

difficult and tiring. Sometimes, too, the hard surface worried their feet. The townsman, though more at home in these respects, found the all-day exercise in the open air equally strenuous. These comparatively minor troubles passed and very soon a considerable improvement in carriage, movement, and mental and physical alertness could be observed.

As the training progressed it lost much of its monotony. Weapon training reached the stage when range practices could be commenced, and a very useful introduction to these was the use of .22 rifles converted from .303 rifles. One hundred were issued to the battalion and they helped a great deal to overcome a shortage of rifle-range accommodation, caused by the priority given to other troops who were going overseas almost immediately. The use of the short ranges for the .22 rifles speeded up the practices and it was often a help for the men to see exactly where their shots went. These rifles were also valuable in introducing the tyro to rifle shooting, especially so for those men who were nervous when required to fire the .303 weapon. It was quite surprising to find that a few such men, hailing from town and country alike, could be found in a country such as New Zealand. Taken patiently, however, they were usually brought up to the same standard as the others. A cheap and plentiful supply of .22 ammunition enabled plenty of practice to be given.

In July the men had their first experience of what could perhaps be called an old army custom, frequently to be repeated, never welcomed, yet of great value to all. This was an injection, on this occasion of tetanus prophylactic. It was a curious fact that from time to time cases occurred of strong, tough men of undoubted courage fainting while awaiting their encounter with the needle; the anticipation of this deliberate and cold-blooded triviality seemed to have this strange effect upon some men.

The troops soon became accustomed to this ordered life with everything done to time and its strict insistence upon punctuality. The training made steady progress and became more interesting as the early recruit stage was passed. Route marches, cross-country runs, and various sports kept the men fit despite the wet, winter weather. Football was played on grounds behind Quinns Post Hotel, the troops marching there and back, and it was remarkable how many men disappeared at half-time. A good deal of training had necessarily to be carried out in the men's quarters and over the whole period in-camp training was also hampered by sickness, which

included an influenza epidemic of three or four weeks' duration. It was difficult for the battalion to arrange that all men who had missed training received additional and special instruction to bring them up to the general level, though a considerable effort was made to do so.

In the usual report rendered on a unit just prior to its departure overseas the state of the battalion and the progress it had made were reviewed. It stated that all ranks were well up to the standard of the previous echelon in physique, intelligence and keenness, but discipline generally was not quite up to the same standard. This was ascribed to the greater proportion of inexperienced officers, NCOs, and men in this echelon and to the presence in the camp of small sub-units raised for special duties, and with little previous training, which could hardly reach the same high standard that was essential for a fighting unit such as an infantry battalion. The officers and NCOs were reported as keen and hard-working; many of them showed the benefit obtained by attendance at the District School of Instruction. Despite the difficulties caused by the weather and the shortage of rifle-range accommodation, the battalion's weapon training was regarded as satisfactory.

By comparison with battalions of the previous echelons 25 Battalion was unfortunate in having to train in the winter and could not be expected to make quite the same progress. It had, however, reached a reasonable standard of training and was expected to make rapid progress in the excellent training camp in Egypt.

The Officer Commanding the Central Military District, Colonel R. A. Row, inspected the battalion in July after it had completed two months' training. A few days later the Governor-General, [Viscount Galway](#), visited the camp and after an inspection addressed the troops.

Before 25 Battalion left New Zealand it saw the end of the system of voluntary enlistment, conscription by ballot coming into force after 22 July. (It is of interest to notice that by that date the total voluntary enlistments were 59,644. Of this number 13,373 sailed with the First and Second Echelons; 8799 were in camp with the [Third Echelon](#) (including a surplus to replace casualties during training); and 9190 were in the three training camps as reinforcements. The remainder of those who had registered voluntarily had either not been called up at this date or had failed to pass the medical examination.) This development was of some interest to 25 Battalion

and the other units of the [Third Echelon](#) as in future their reinforcements, apart from those already in camp, would be provided under the new system.

The establishment or strengths of the various components of an infantry battalion were altered slightly from time to time, but in 1940 they were as given below:

Battalion Headquarters consisted of 4 officers, 1 WO, 4 S-Sgts and Sgts, 2 Cpls, 36 Ptes—Total 47, plus 1 MO attached.

Headquarters Company, chiefly specialists, had a strength of 8 officers, 210 other ranks, consisting of:

	Offrs	ORs
Coy HQ	1	6 (plus 5 attached)
No. 1 Signal Platoon	1	33
No. 2 Anti-Aircraft Platoon	1	15
No. 3 Mortar Platoon	1	16
No. 4 Carrier Platoon	1	29
No. 5 Pioneer Platoon	1	19
No. 6 Admin Platoon	2	92
	—	—
Total Coy	8	210 (plus 5 attached)

There were four rifle companies, each associated broadly with the military areas from which its men were drawn, A Company (Wellington City), B Company ([Wellington](#)-West Coast), C Company (Hawke's Bay), D Company (Taranaki). A rifle company had a Company Headquarters of 2 officers, 10 other ranks, and three platoons, one of which had 1 officer, 38 other ranks, and the other two each of 1 officer, 37 other ranks, a company strength of 5 officers, 122 other ranks. The total strength of the battalion was therefore 32 officers, 741 other ranks, plus 1 officer, 5 other ranks attached. A first reinforcement of 7 officers, 147 other ranks, was to accompany the battalion overseas.

The battalion's departure for a theatre of war was now imminent. Final leave was given on 1 August and the men returned to camp between 12 and 15 August, allowances being made for variations in travelling time. The men had some doubt as to whether this was really 'final' leave, but the preparations for embarkation which

began on their return to camp speedily convinced them that sailing date was near. From 5 p.m. on 13 August the battalion was placed 'On Active Service', a change of status which increased materially the pains and penalties attached to absenteeism.

On 17 August a farewell parade was held in [Wellington](#) when the troops marched through the streets and, at a short farewell ceremony, were addressed by the Governor-General, the Prime Minister and others. It was the first occasion on which battle dress was worn by all troops and the parade made a deep impression on all who saw it. Similar parades were held in [Auckland](#) and [Christchurch](#).

At long last, ten days later, the time arrived for the battalion to leave [Trentham](#) and embark. It was, of course, an occasion of mixed emotions. All were glad to end the monotony of the training camp and looked forward with keen anticipation to the voyage, the first experience of overseas travel for the great majority of the troops. Mounting excitement and the urge to move onward to the task for which they were in training were tempered by memories of sad partings and by the deep realisation of all that this departure, a significant and irrevocable step, meant to those who must remain behind and wait and pray and hope. But the bustle of departure, the novel surroundings, the proximity and companionship of hundreds of others, and the resilience of youth soon dissipated any sombre thoughts, and so the excitement of the occasion reasserted itself.

The officers of 25 Battalion on embarkation were:

Lieutenant-Colonel A. S. Wilder, DSO, MC, Commanding Officer

Major S. M. Satterthwaite, Second-in-Command

Major C. D. A. George, Officer Commanding A Company

Major C. J. Williams, Officer Commanding C Company

Captain J. D. Armstrong, Adjutant

Captain H. F. Smith, Officer Commanding B Company

Captain A. J. R. Hastie, Officer Commanding D Company

Captain H. G. Burton, Officer Commanding HQ Company

Captain F. R. McBride, Second-in-Command C Company

Captain S. W. Josland, Second-in-Command D Company

Captain W. H. Roberts, Second-in-Command A Company

Captain H. J. Dalzell, Second-in-Command B Company

Captain P. L. Bennett, Quartermaster

Lieutenant R. Morrison, 4 Platoon (Carriers)

Lieutenant B. H. Wakelin, 13 Platoon

Lieutenant S. M. Porter, 1 Platoon (Signals)

Lieutenant W. L. Rutherford, 6 Platoon (Transport)

Lieutenant M. J. Mason, Intelligence Officer

Lieutenant N. Bancks, 16 Platoon

Lieutenant W. A. O'N. Canavan, 10 Platoon

Lieutenant W. J. Heslop, 17 Platoon

Lieutenant H. G. Witters, 14 Platoon

Lieutenant G. A. W. Possin, 9 Platoon

Lieutenant G. Colledge, 8 Platoon

Lieutenant R. M. McLeay, 15 Platoon

Lieutenant C. M. Sealy, 5 Platoon (Pioneers)

Second-Lieutenant H. H. Hollow, 18 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant G. J. B. Morris, 12 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant J. P. Tredray, 11 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant I. D. Reid, 3 Platoon (Mortars)

Second-Lieutenant H. Macaskill, 7 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant M. Handyside, 2 Platoon (Anti-aircraft)

Attached:

Captain L. H. Cordery, [NZMC](#), Medical Officer

Rev. C. E. Willis, Chaplain

The battalion embarked in HM Transport No. 11, the trans-atlantic Cunard liner [Mauretania](#), of 35,739 tons, at 9 a.m. on 27 August, the total number of troops aboard being 2334 all ranks. Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder was appointed Officer Commanding the convoy; Lieutenant-Colonel Weir, ² commanding [6 Field Regiment](#), was appointed OC Troops; and similar appointments were made for the two other ships of the convoy, the Empress of [Japan](#) and the [Orcades](#).

The [Mauretania](#) and the Empress of [Japan](#) left the wharf early in the afternoon and anchored in the harbour until next morning. This pause enabled essential ship's routine and organisation to be established before the vagaries of the ocean could exert any unsettling influence. Escorted by the cruiser HMS [Achilles](#), the ships sailed at 8 a.m., 28 August, and an hour later were joined in Cook Strait by the [Orcades](#) from [Lyttelton](#). The sight of the [Achilles](#) of [River Plate](#) fame sent a thrill through the troops, the more so as she belonged to the New Zealand Squadron.

On the second day the escort was reinforced by the Australian cruiser [Perth](#) but lost the [Achilles](#) the next day when she turned back for New Zealand, her crew cheering each ship in turn as she passed along the convoy. Everyone was sorry to see her go. The following day, 31 August, the Australian contingent which sailed from [Sydney](#), escorted by HMAS [Canberra](#), joined the convoy, whereupon [Perth](#) departed.

The first few days of the voyage were spent in settling down to shipboard routine. Regular submarine lookouts were established and boat-drill was frequently

practised to ensure that everyone knew his duty and station if an emergency occurred. Life jackets, which had to be carried at all times, were regarded as a cumbersome nuisance, or worse. In these big ships, with their numerous decks, corridors, lifts and stairways, it was easy to get lost and only constant practice offered any prospects of avoiding disastrous confusion if trouble arose. The large numbers aboard necessitated careful routing and timing to prevent 'traffic jams' and it had to be remembered that enemy action at night by mine, torpedo, or gunfire could destroy the ship's lighting system and so immeasurably increase the difficulties.

Fortunately the weather was fine during these preliminaries and all went well. Elementary training proceeded throughout voyage, including, in addition to physical and recreational training, a good deal of weapon training, semaphore signalling, and lectures on a variety of subjects. The training was hampered by a shortage of equipment and lack of space; route-marching round the decks with the men wearing boots is very useful exercise and also the best way of keeping the feet in good condition. Unfortunately, 25 Battalion and other troops from [Trentham](#) and [Ngaruawahia](#) were denied this advantage as both pairs of boots on issue had been hobnailed and so, because of the damage that would be caused, could not be worn on the decks.

The 800 miles of the [Great Australian Bight](#) produced its usual great rollers from the south, to the discomfort of many of the men, and of course disrupted the training. [Fremantle](#) was reached on 4 September and the ship berthed at noon. For the majority this was the first sight of a land other than their own and it carried a thrill of interest and anticipation which few will forget. It was of course well known by repute, through reports from preceding troops in both wars, as the gateway to a land of unbounded hospitality, which was never diminished by the frequent demands upon it nor by the boisterous behaviour of a proportion of its visitors, both Australian and New Zealand. Leave was granted from 1 p.m. to midnight and the troops enjoyed the same enthusiastic hospitality in [Perth](#) and [Fremantle](#) as those who had gone before. The Third Echelon must have established a record by having only one man absent on sailing time, though ten others who were too late to rejoin their own ships were placed in the last ship to leave.

The convoy, which had now completed some 3100 miles of its voyage, sailed

just before noon the next day and encountered a moderate sea which had the usual effect, but from then onwards, as the ships approached the Tropic of Capricorn on their north-westerly course, the weather was fine with calm seas and rising temperatures. Sports meetings were commenced soon after the voyage was resumed, a boxing tournament and tugs-of-war creating keen interest; the officers distinguished themselves by winning the tug-of-war. 'The Sunday Church parades were impressive,' said one man, 'with 6 Brigade band playing the hymns.'

The tropical weather was rather a revelation to many of the men, who found the high temperatures in the sleeping quarters below very trying. A strict blackout had been maintained throughout the voyage and the various ventilation devices, efficient though they were, did not overcome the effect of closed portholes and doors. Vaccination and an inoculation (Tet. Prop. II), which had been purposely delayed to avoid interfering with training in camp, had been given during the first few days after leaving [Fremantle](#), and their after-effects aggravated the discomforts below. Sleeping on deck was permitted and was popular, though there was sometimes a tropical shower and always the unwelcome interruption when decks were hosed down very early in the morning.

In addition to its effects on ventilation the blackout prohibited lights of any kind on deck and smoking there was forbidden. Double doors, one of which had to be closed before the other was opened, were installed, and all portholes were masked. Unless there was moonlight it was pitch dark on deck and this caused one amusing incident. On opening a door to go on deck an officer was grasped firmly by someone on the outside who said fervently, 'I just stepped out for a breath of fresh air and I've been groping round for that door for the last half-hour.' Collisions with objects animate and inanimate also occurred with results that had better, perhaps, be left to the imagination. But it was a serious matter when the ever-vigilant escorting cruiser reported a light showing. This was regrettably frequent and caused a considerable flurry among the officers both of the ship and the army, for the troops were not always at fault.

On 15 September the ships reached [Bombay](#) after a voyage of about 7000 miles from [Wellington](#) and were then a little under 3000 miles from [Suez](#). Unfortunately it was now necessary to tranship as the big liners were required elsewhere, being too

valuable with their speed and carrying capacity to be exposed unnecessarily to the risk of attack in the narrow waters at the entrance to the [Red Sea](#). Twenty-fifth Battalion and other troops from the [Mauretania](#) were to re-embark in the [Ormonde](#) and those in the [Orcades](#) in the Orion.

The battalion spent 15 and 16 September in the [Mauretania](#) at anchor in the stream, the shore authorities stating that no transport was available to take the troops ashore. At seven next morning disembarkation into another vessel, the Rona, began and after what appeared to be an unnecessarily long delay in the very hot sun, the men were landed, had lunch, marched two miles to the [Ormonde](#), which lay alongside the wharf, and embarked. Leave was then granted from 3.30 p.m. to midnight.

But the men's troubles were by no means ended. While on leave the troops were drenched by a severe thunderstorm, with torrential rain of a density far exceeding any they had previously experienced, and on their return to the ship found there were no drying rooms or a change of clothing available. Altogether it had been a trying day, for the men had had trouble in changing their money, [Ceylon](#) rupees placed on board in New Zealand for use at Colombo, the usual and expected port of call. The trading banks could not change this currency and the native shopkeepers would not accept it. However, the Reserve and Imperial Bank of [India](#) and the larger European stores converted the rupees into Indian currency at face value, though money-changers charged up to 7 per cent. It was most frustrating and exasperating to run into this difficulty, which wasted a good deal of precious leave.

Next morning, 18 September, the [Ormonde](#) moved into the stream and anchored. It was soon evident that the change of ships was a change very much for the worse so far as the men's accommodation was concerned. The messing arrangements were poor and the sleeping quarters overcrowded. The ship was dirty and insanitary as there had not been time to clean up after the disembarkation of British troops the day before, and the very hot climate aggravated the conditions. The contrast between the [Ormonde](#) of 15,000 tons and the [Mauretania](#) of 35,739 tons was startling.

The troops remained on board during the 18th as again transport was not available to take them ashore. At dinner that night the meat was bad, with a

peculiar taint. There had previously been very strong comment amongst the men about the way the meat had been handled at the wharf, where natives had been noticed walking over the carcasses, which were exposed to the blazing sun and to numerous flies while awaiting loading. That this made a very deep impression amongst the men of the battalion is very evident since men in discussion about it eighteen years later condemned it in the strongest terms.

Colonel Weir did his best to remedy the bad conditions aboard. He tried without success to have New Zealand beef transferred from the [Mauretania](#) and to have 400 men disembarked from the [Ormonde](#) to make more room. Another serious difficulty was the different ration scale, the [Ormonde](#) being on the British scale which was less generous than that to which the men had been accustomed. It was unfortunate, too, that the continuous rain forced the men off the decks and so accentuated the discomforts below, which as the ship was stationary, were more acute than when she was under way.

This catalogue of errors and misfortunes came to a head shortly before 1.15 p.m. on 19 September when the convoy was due to sail. A large body of men, allegedly encouraged by a disgruntled crew, occupied the ship's bridge and wheelhouse, telling the Captain they were taking charge and that the ship would not sail till their grievances were adjusted. A deputation then waited on Colonels Wilder and Weir and all the grievances, other than the one of accommodation, were disposed of satisfactorily. In the meantime the remainder of the convoy had sailed at the appointed time.

On discussing the situation with the naval and embarkation authorities ashore, Colonels Wilder and Weir were told that the convoy had been slowed down to enable the [Ormonde](#) to rejoin, that the action of the troops was very serious, and that the ship had been placed in arrest. Colonel Wilder had earlier declined an offer of naval assistance to restore order aboard.

On his return to the ship Colonel Weir told a conference of officers that the overcrowding had been largely overcome by arranging for many of the men to sleep on deck. The trouble then seemed to have died down, guards were posted at various points early next morning, and at 7 a.m. the ship sailed without further incident.

This very unfortunate occurrence was the subject of an inquiry held on board during the voyage to [Suez](#) which elicited the facts already related. There were also inquiries from the [New Zealand Government](#), which had received disquieting reports regarding the discomforts of the troops during the voyage. [General Freyberg](#)³ reported that he was satisfied the trouble had been mainly due to the poor transshipment at [Bombay](#), a contributing factor being the inexperience of officers and other ranks. He said that although the New Zealand Government might think it worth while making representation to the [War Office](#), it had to be remembered that New Zealand had a case to answer as the sailing of the [Ormonde](#) had been prevented by the concerted action of a body of other ranks. He recommended that no action be taken.

There seems to be no doubt that, whatever the difficulties, the arrangements made by the embarkation staff at [Bombay](#) failed in several respects. Surely the [Ormonde](#) could have been cleaned and no arrangements should have been accepted by that staff which did not provide for this to be done. Then there was the question of leave. To keep men in crowded transports at anchor in a tropical climate for two complete days on arrival and for a further day after transfer to the [Ormonde](#) was just not facing up to the realities and requirements of the situation. In a large port such as [Bombay](#), it is difficult to believe that transport from ship to shore could not have been provided had there been the will to do so; even the ship's launches and boats could have broken the back of the problem and after the re-embarkation the [Ormonde](#) could surely have remained at the wharf for another twenty-four hours.

The suspicion is inescapable that the shore authorities did not wish to have the troops ashore for a longer period than the bare minimum; perhaps they feared disorders or the civil situation may have been delicate, as it sometimes was in [India](#). But whatever the real reason, if one existed it should have been explained; and in any case it was not sufficiently realised that troops from a temperate climate would suffer severely in the hot and humid atmosphere, and that on this, their first visit to [India](#), leave would have a strong and very special appeal, especially after a voyage of nearly three weeks.

People living in temperate zones with no experience of the tropics have no conception of the heat and humidity of [Bombay](#) and of how unbearable it is to young

men encountering it for the first time. The broiling the men received during their transfer from the [Mauretania](#), the leave situation and the delay in changing their money, the drenching from the tropical storm and the absence of a change of clothing and of drying facilities, the dirty, insanitary, and crowded state of the [Ormonde](#), the tainted maggoty meat and the reduced scale of rations, the constant rain which drove the troops off the decks into the overheated and crowded quarters below—all these add up to a formidable total of exasperation and frustration. At all events they proved too much for a number of troops still undergoing transformation from civilian to soldier. There we must leave the matter. ⁴

Eight hours after leaving [Bombay](#) the [Ormonde](#) rejoined the convoy of the Empress of [Japan](#) and Orion escorted by HMS Colombo and HMAS Kanimbla. Very hot fine weather was experienced during the rest of the voyage so that the large number of men sleeping on deck not only relieved the crowding in the sleeping quarters below but also enjoyed better conditions, untroubled by the sudden rain storms that are apt to occur in that locality. The convoy was soon approaching the straits of Bab el Mandeb (the Gate of Tears), bordered by the Italian territory of [Eritrea](#) to the west and Yemen of south-west Arabia to the east. The straits are only 20 miles wide at their southern end but gradually widen to 50 miles opposite Mocha, the Yemen port famous for its coffee, 50 miles to the north. The island of Perim, occupied by [Britain](#) as a precaution about eighty years ago, is in the southern entrance to the straits, which do not reach a width exceeding 100 miles until the island of Kamaran is reached, 200 miles from Perim.

These narrow waters were naturally a source of some anxiety to the British naval authorities responsible for the passage of the convoy, and the troops took an increased interest in their local geography and in their escort as they approached the straits on 26 September. The previous day HMS [Ajax](#), two destroyers, and an anti-aircraft cruiser had taken over the convoy from Colombo and Kanimbla, and with such evidence of naval alertness the troops manning the submarine lookouts and anti-aircraft posts showed increased keenness. However, the Italians made no attempt against the ships and two days later the destroyers departed for duty with another convoy, followed by the remainder of the escort late the same day. The convoy then broke up, the ships sailing independently for [Port Tewfik](#) at [Suez](#), which was reached early in the morning of 29 September.

General Freyberg came aboard to greet the troops and a message of welcome from the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, was read. General Wavell emphasised the necessity for all ranks to work their hardest so as to reach a high state of training in as short a time as possible; their job was, he said, to fit themselves to take their places among the other Empire troops of the Army in the Middle East who had been training hard since their arrival in the country.

That day an advance party of two officers and six other ranks was sent to Maadi Camp and the battalion followed the next day, disembarking in barges at 4.30 p.m. and entraining a few hours later.

And so this long voyage of thirty-two days and almost 10,000 miles had ended. During it the German air attack on Great Britain, which had begun nearly three weeks before 25 Battalion left New Zealand, had continued with great intensity and had been opposed with considerable success. The first night bombing of London had occurred two days after Fremantle had been passed. The United States had come a good deal closer to entering the war by transferring fifty destroyers to the Royal Navy in return for bases. These items were of great interest and some encouragement to the men of the battalion on their first entry to a theatre of war. Perhaps less encouraging but of more immediate and personal interest was the threat to Egypt by large Italian forces under Graziani, which on 18 September had advanced to Sidi Barrani on the Mediterranean coast 50 miles inside Egypt. It was to be expected that these forces, which greatly outnumbered the British forces in Egypt, would continue their advance in the near future. Clearly, as the men of the battalion recognised, General Wavell's message regarding hard training and quick results had stated the obvious.

The first day in the new camp was taken up erecting tents and settling in. To give protection against bombs the tents had to be dug in, a laborious task which evoked little enthusiasm at the time. This attitude, however, changed completely about three weeks later when an enemy aircraft dropped a few bombs half a mile away. Although practically all the units of the First Echelon were at Baggush near Mersa Matruh, in reserve to the British forces facing the Italians, and the Second Echelon was still in the United Kingdom, the battalion had a good many visitors from the camp staffs and reinforcements anxious to greet the new arrivals, hear news

from home, and find relatives and friends. The men soon learnt the run of the ropes and training commenced in earnest.

Troops arriving in a strange country naturally have much to learn, and if they are inexperienced and the country is non-European the need is the greater and the more urgent. Some of the conditions in Egypt as they affect the individual and collective health of the troops, such as the preparation and handling of much of the food for sale, the condition of the water (apart from the established civil supply systems), the hordes of flies, and the curious habits and standards of the people, were quite foreign to New Zealand. Personal safety in some quarters of the great city of [Cairo](#), with a population of well over a million and a quarter, was not necessarily secure; the mixed population made the work of enemy agents comparatively easy; respect for religious customs which were unknown to many New Zealanders and correct behaviour by the troops in their contact with the people were of great importance.

These subjects and others, to help the troops become acclimatised to the unusual conditions, were explained in several lectures to the battalion during the first few days at [Maadi](#) Camp, the lecturers being the Deputy Assistant Provost Marshal, the Field Security Officer from General Headquarters, Middle East, and the ADMS New Zealand Division.⁵ On the medical side the men were warned against one disease in particular which threatened men accustomed in their own country to drinking water from almost any stream: that was bilharzia, of which the average New Zealander was completely ignorant. New Zealand troops of both world wars were warned against this disease in terms which everyone seems to have remembered and which made them loth even to dip a hand in the waters of the [Nile](#). The troops were told that bilharzia is a worm disease, found in fresh water where the very small snails *Bulinus* and *Planorbis* feed and multiply on certain water weeds. These snails are hosts of the bilharzia worm and they thrive par-



ticularly well in the irrigation canals into which the snails discharge the tiny parasites. The water spreads these over the fields, where they quickly penetrate the skin of people working there and so reach the liver, resulting in various distressing and dangerous ailments and early debility and lassitude. Clearly it was a disease to be avoided.

Within the first fortnight [General Freyberg](#) addressed all officers and all NCOs above the rank of corporal on the subject of 'Defence', which was one of the roles the battalion might be required to undertake in the existing situation in Egypt. In addition to being instructive the lecture gave the GOC NZ Division and his audience their first really close contact.

The first leave out of camp in this strange land was of course a great event and was granted on 5 October, half the strength of the battalion being granted leave daily (after duties were completed) until 10 p.m. Late leave until 1.30 a.m. to allow travelling by train from [Cairo](#) was granted for 80 per cent of the strength on Fridays and Saturdays only, but the men were required to be out of [Cairo](#) by half an hour after midnight.

Very strict sanitation rules were enforced in [Maadi Camp](#) to control or reduce the severe fly nuisance and as a safeguard against disease generally. These were of such a nature as to impress the men with the seriousness with which the medical authorities regarded health questions in Egypt.

The presence of large numbers of troops in and around the capital of a foreign country necessitated greater care than usual to secure a satisfactory standard of

conduct. In addition to the military police (the Red Caps) maintained by the British Army, each division had its provost company and the units their regimental police which were given such duties outside the camp as were thought necessary. In addition pickets, usually under an officer, were provided by the various units to patrol the streets, maintain order, and take into custody men incapable of taking care of themselves or who were guilty of gross misbehaviour. An innovation, 'behaviour patrols', had been introduced in [Cairo](#) to help and advise men who showed signs of getting into trouble; names were taken of men misbehaving themselves and in cases of gross misbehaviour the offenders were arrested. There were three of these patrols, each commanded by a sergeant, with one man of the [Cairo Military Police](#) as a guide, two Australians, three British, and one New Zealander. Drugging as an excuse for drunkenness was not accepted as there was little or no risk of drinks being drugged in reputable establishments, though elsewhere there was considerable risk.

Another kind of trouble arose in connection with trains running between [Maadi](#) and [Cairo](#). Men were not paying their fares, the most recent method of evasion being to tender a one-pound note in payment of a fare of one piastre. This was checked by requiring men to have the correct fare before boarding the train. Individuals of the civil population were also a cause of trouble from time to time, for the camps attracted villagers and Arabs with fruit or curios for sale or with hopes of acquiring some useful trifle such as a tin or bottle; such people were not above picking up something more valuable, perhaps clothing or a rifle. In the desert areas bordering the camps the Egyptian Government maintained Sudanese patrols, mounted on camels and armed with rifles and whips, to intercept, question, and sometimes chastise any wanderers. Rifles have always been attractive loot and it was a standing order that when not in actual use they must be chained and padlocked to the tent pole with a special fitting provided for the purpose.

The men of the battalion had much to attract them in [Cairo](#) and its immediate vicinity and as opportunity offered visited the Pyramids, the Sphinx, mosques, the Citadel, Old [Cairo](#), the splendid museum and equally fine zoo, the Virgin's Well, the Mousky with its metal workers and other arts and crafts, the [Nile](#) with its bridges and the feluccas and other craft constantly moving up and down the broad river, and all the varied scenes within the city itself. Organised trips to these and other points of

interest at low cost took place each week, the bookings with the various agencies concerned being arranged by Padre Willis,⁶ the battalion's chaplain. More ambitious trips were also arranged, one such tour leaving camp at 7 a.m. on a Sunday for [Ismailia](#) on the [Suez Canal](#), travelling along the Canal to [Port Said](#) and returning to camp by 11 p.m.; lunch and tea were provided, the total cost being 83 piastres (a little over sixteen shillings) and the distance about 270 miles. Other tours covered [Alexandria](#), the [Delta Barrage](#) on the [Nile](#), 15 miles north-west of [Cairo](#), and two long journeys up the [Nile](#), one to the [Aswan Dam](#) at the first Cataract about 600 miles from [Cairo](#), and the other to [Luxor](#) a little under 500 miles away, for both of which special leave was necessary.

Intensive and thorough training continued throughout the battalion's first month in Egypt, the emphasis being mainly on close-order drill, rifle exercises, and strict march discipline, interspersed with weapon training, rifle shooting, and a general refresher in a variety of subjects. A little company training in defence was also introduced in preparation for battalion exercises shortly to take place.

A strict blackout was maintained in the camp, a wise precaution as was shown on Sunday evening, 20 October, when an enemy aircraft dropped a few bombs half a mile west of [Maadi](#) Camp, causing several casualties among the inhabitants of the village of Bassatine. This first glimpse of war and the continued presence of the Italian invaders at [Sidi Barrani](#), 400 miles to the north-west, where they had been 'marking time' for nearly five weeks, gave zest to the training and all were looking forward to the time when they could be adjudged fit to take the field. The bomb-dropping near the camp and the occasional air-raid warnings raised an interesting financial problem in connection with the cinema established in the camp. After programmes had been interrupted and the soldier-audience dispersed on several occasions, it was arranged that if this occurred before half-time, refunds of admission money would be made, otherwise there would be no refunds. There had been a good deal of dissatisfaction with the cinema (which incidentally culminated in its destruction at a later date), the troops alleging that the proprietor arranged half-time long before it was due.

There were several inspections during October. General Wavell made an inspection early on the 12th; the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Barrowclough,⁷ who on arrival in Egypt on the 13th took over command from Brigadier [Inglis](#),⁸ made

his first inspection six days later; and the third inspection of the month was made on the 25th when Mr Anthony Eden reviewed all the troops in camp at a ceremonial parade and left the following message:

'I welcomed your first contingent when they arrived in Egypt; I have just seen them fighting-fit in the [Western Desert](#); I saw the second contingent in England waiting for [Hitler's](#) invasion. To-day I have seen the third contingent and I cannot tell you how impressed I am by the wonderful physique and bearing of the New Zealand troops.

'I wish to convey to all ranks the keen appreciation of His Britannic Majesty's Government of the part that they are playing in the Empire's cause. Good luck and God's Speed.'

On 20 October, the day the bombs were dropped, 25 Battalion undertook its first duty outside the camp when five officers and 120 other ranks were detailed for one week's guard duty at the Tura Caves. These caves, situated about midway between [Maadi](#) and [Helwan](#), had been converted into excellent magazines for bombs, explosives, and ammunition of all kinds and were proof against the heaviest bomb. The men welcomed the task as a relief from the exacting grind of the training camp, but training of course was hindered. Later such duties, which normally would not have been given to a battalion which had not completed its training, were concentrated in one unit over a period of a week, with a free interval of about three weeks before recurring; in November, for instance, the battalion provided for guard duties at Tura Caves, [Helwan](#), and [Abbassia](#) 16 officers and 546 other ranks for one week.

[Japan's](#) military alliance with the Axis powers on 27 September aroused keen interest and some apprehension throughout the battalion, New Zealand's action in despatching within a month strong forces to [Fiji](#) emphasising the possibility of a dangerous situation arising in the [Pacific](#).

A period of intense tactical training was now to begin, with the first battalion exercise taking place between 31 October and 2 November in the vicinity of [El Saff](#), a village on the east bank of the [Nile](#), 30 miles south of [Maadi Camp](#). Apart from a very narrow ribbon of cultivation adjoining the river, the whole of the country was

desert, with a four-mile strip of flat or gently undulating ground rising to a height of a thousand feet or more ten miles east of the Nile. There were numerous wadis, ridges, and isolated hills to give scope and variety to the training, and the absence of fences, houses, roads, and other encumbrances of civilisation completed an attractive training area.

The first exercise gave practice in movement by mechanical transport, a good deal of route-march training, the digging and occupation of a defensive position in detail, and administration and bivouac training in the desert. It involved, as many of the tactical exercises did, a good deal of hard pick-and-shovel work, very rough and dusty travelling in the vehicles, meals which were adequate but not to be compared with those provided in camp, hard and probably cold sleeping conditions, and much monotony; in fact, practically all the ingredients of active service with the exceptions of excitement and danger.

But the desert has a strange and strong attraction for most men. Its limitless horizons, the complete absence of artificial obstacles and restrictions and of any aids as well, the silence and stillness and the danger to the ignorant or the unwary of its blazing heat and waterless wastes, the mirages and dust-storms, its brilliant sunsets, and the importance with which these attributes clothe any minor happening or intrusion, all these exert a powerful influence on those who stand on its borders or travel its surface. All men, however, do not regard the desert in the same way and there are those who have described it as 'miles and miles of ... all', or in even more picturesque language, with admittedly a good deal of justification.

With winter approaching, the weather was now much cooler and November was consequently a good training month. Many excellent schools of instruction in the numerous subjects required for modern war were available both in British Army and NZEF establishments, and a constant stream of officers and NCOs from 25 Battalion attended them. This soon had a marked effect on the quality of instruction within the unit. Two rifle ranges, 'D' range at Abbassia and 'No. 2 Improvised' range, had been allotted in turn to all companies of the battalion and Battalion Headquarters, and so the majority of the men were able to complete their rifle courses and pass the qualifying tests.

The battalion was now well up to standard in its elementary training and was

showing increased confidence and pride in itself, with some comprehension of how war was waged and a dawning realisation of its strength and the heights this could reach in the future. Tactical training now took most of the time available, and in the desert bordering the camp companies were able to practise their own exercises. These included the company in attack and defence both by day and night, defence against aircraft by the use of infantry weapons and by dispersal, patrolling, and protection at rest and on the march. March discipline was practised on the way to and from the training areas. All this led up to the wider battalion training of which the unit already had had three days' experience. On 18 November there was a very early start with reveille at 2.30 a.m., hot soup at 3, and move off at 3.45. An hour's march brought the battalion to the forming-up position and half an hour later an attack was commenced. The end came with the sounding of 'Rally' and the troops marched back to breakfast.

Two days later there was an all-day route march of 21 miles, starting at 7 a.m. and returning to camp about 5 p.m. A midday halt was taken from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and hot tea was provided with the meal, which was carried on the ration lorry. A distance of sixty yards was kept between platoons and protection against air attack was insisted upon both as a training measure and as a precaution against possible but improbable attack. Each man armed with a rifle had twenty rounds of ammunition and the carrier platoon picketed the route, the starting point, and the midday-halt area, providing anti-aircraft protection at these places. Strict march discipline was observed and any man compelled to fall out had to obtain written permission from his platoon commander, thereafter joining the rear party, which included the medical officer and moved at a slower pace.

Following this lengthy route march the Black Hills nearby were attacked; the next day an attack was practised over ground at the back of the unit lines, preparatory to a night attack over the same area, and repeated a couple of days later.

There had, of course, been other training sandwiched between all these tactical exercises. On 25 October several weapons, new to 25 Battalion, had been received, a notable event arousing considerable interest and giving increased variety to the training. Among these was the Bren light machine gun, which in the training manuals was described as the principal weapon of the infantry battalion, which was required

thoroughly to train every man in its use. The men found it a very efficient weapon, easy to handle, very accurate and, a matter of considerable importance to the men carrying them in action, not easily distinguishable from a rifle and so not likely to draw concentrated enemy fire. The scale of issue to a battalion was fifty (nine per rifle company and fourteen for HQ Company); the first issue was twenty-six which was ample for training purposes.

Another new but unpopular weapon was the Boys anti-tank rifle, of which ten were received against an establishment of twenty-three per rifle company and fourteen for HQ Company. It was a long-barrelled, heavy, very cumbersome and conspicuous weapon, effective only against lightly armoured vehicles, and was in the category of being better than nothing. It was discarded later when two-pounder anti-tank guns became available in sufficient numbers.

Three of the new 2-inch mortars were also received, the full establishment being a total of twelve, or three per rifle company. This was a very small mortar, so small in fact that there was a tendency to regard it as a toy. It was intended to be a front-line infantry weapon and was useful if skilfully used and in suitable circumstances, but was deficient in range and burst in comparison with enemy weapons. Its smoke bomb was particularly effective.

In this welter of training recreation was not neglected—no risk was taken of Jack becoming a dull boy. As a general rule Wednesday afternoons were set aside for organised sport, which included a tabloid athletic meeting and rugby, soccer, hockey, cricket, and other games in season or when practicable. On 27 November teams for rugby, soccer, and hockey were organised in readiness to commence the season.

Events of interest during November included, on the 9th, the rather unique experience of being inspected on a ceremonial parade by the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan; another inspection was one by the Chief of the New Zealand General Staff, Major-General Sir John Duigan.⁹ Four air-raid alarms added some interest throughout the month, three in the evening and one at the rather uncomfortable hour of 4 a.m., but there was no apparent enemy action.

During December tactical training continued on much the same lines as in November though the first week was interrupted by the guard duties already

mentioned. On the 12th a further interruption was caused by the transfer of 6 Brigade from [Maadi](#) to [Helwan Camp](#), ten miles to the south. Several days were spent settling in, 25 Battalion having to erect a tented camp and dig in its tents to provide protection against bomb splinters. The camp provided a welcome change of scene, the nearby and perhaps the only attractions being the town of [Helwan](#) and the [RAF](#) airfield. Extensive training areas were available immediately south of the camp and so conveniently situated both for the tactical training of platoons and companies and the larger manoeuvres of the battalion and the brigade. A slight disadvantage from the troops' point of view was the increase of ten miles in the journey to [Cairo](#), a small matter as the train service was speedy and cheap.

The great event of the month, which naturally created the most intense interest throughout the battalion and elsewhere, was the opening on 9 December of the British offensive against the Italian forces in the [Western Desert](#). It achieved spectacular success against very superior numbers and within two months was practically to annihilate the Italian army in [Libya](#) at comparatively small cost to the British forces. Visible evidence of the initial success of the operations was brought almost to the front entrance of [Helwan Camp](#) by the establishment of a large prisoner-of-war camp in the vicinity, and it fell to the lot of 25 Battalion on 19 December to detail three officers and 119 other ranks to keep guard over its numerous occupants.

Early in December it was decided to provide some protection against air attacks on the camps. Anti-aircraft light-machine-gun posts were established at suitable points throughout [Maadi](#) and [Helwan](#) camps and these were manned continuously for twenty-four hours each day by No. 2 (Anti-Aircraft) Platoon of HQ Company of each battalion and by the anti-aircraft sections of other units also. This precaution continued until the progress of the British offensive made it unnecessary.

A brigade tactical exercise within an hour's march of the camp was held on 19 December, the brigade attacking objectives to a depth of 9000 yards from the starting line. Twenty-fifth Battalion, one of the two leading battalions, was on the right of the attack, with 24 Battalion on the left and 26 Battalion in reserve. Sixth Field Regiment and [1 Machine Gun Company](#) supported the attack and 6 Squadron Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment co-operated on the right flank of 25 Battalion. A skeleton enemy showed flags to indicate they had opened fire and flashed mirrors at

those troops at whom the fire was directed. Exercises such as these were of special value in practising the infantry commanders of all ranks in making the best use of the supporting arms to help the infantry to secure the objective; the strengths and limitations of the various arms were exposed and tactical plans influenced accordingly; and the officers concerned got to know each other.

Demonstrations of the use of various weapons were frequently arranged, one battalion staging the demonstration while the others looked on. Usually the demonstrating battalion had an officer or other instructor who had recently been taught the subject at a school of instruction and thus passed on his knowledge to a wide and discerning audience, or the battalion had shown special aptitude in the subject. A demonstration of the mortar detachment in the attack was given by 25 Battalion, followed by one of tank hunting by 26 Battalion.

Though not entitled to be termed a tactical operation, there took place at the end of December an exercise which gave many of the men just as much trouble. This was a cooking trial designed to prepare the men for those occasions such as active operations when they would have to fend for themselves, and they were required to cook their breakfasts over open fires, with what results is not revealed in the battalion's records.

Mid-winter in northern Egypt is of course on 21 December, and although the [Cairo](#) area is within eight degrees of the Tropic of Cancer, very low temperatures are experienced, the climate being continental in character. The change of seasons was marked on 5 December by the closing of the swimming baths and by an order that battle dress was to be worn at and after the evening meal and for leave and all duties until 6 a.m. The weather in the daytime was usually gloriously fine and really warm, though an occasional cold wind made conditions unpleasant.

A motor-cycle platoon as part of HQ Company of each battalion was formed on 9 December, the commander being Lieutenant [Handyside](#),¹⁰ who interviewed the men who volunteered for it. It had a very short life, however, being disbanded twenty days later.

Sports of all kinds were much to the fore in the cooler weather, with tabloid sports meetings every Wednesday afternoon as was customary and inter-company

and inter-unit matches on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. These matches created keen interest and great rivalry throughout all units of the Division, 25 Battalion distinguishing itself by winning the divisional rugby seven-a-side tournament and in consequence receiving a cup from [General Freyberg](#).

Christmas Day was celebrated in an atmosphere of good fellowship and conviviality, tempered inevitably by thoughts of home. For the majority of the men it was the first Christmas spent away from home or at least from their homeland, and the separation was felt particularly by the married men, especially those with children, with whom Christmas is inseparably associated. The comradeship of good companions and the festivities arranged within the battalion, however, made the occasion a happy one. An excellent Christmas dinner, which included turkey, plum pudding, and most of the trimmings, was provided and the spirit of the season was heightened by the army custom of the officers waiting on the men. Beer was served with the meal and cigarettes, chocolates, and other dainties were provided from canteen profits. Patriotic Fund parcels and others from relatives and friends in New Zealand provided a host of additional delicacies and the large New Zealand mail which had arrived most appropriately in time brought home very close to these men in a foreign land. Liberal leave and gay festivities in [Cairo](#) completed a memorable Christmas.

After the feast came, not the famine, but a lengthy route march on Boxing Day, when the whole brigade marched 16 miles, a march which the festivities of the day before and the wearing of battle dress for the first time on a march rendered a good deal more difficult than usual.

Live-shell practices enlivened the training during the next few days, 25 Battalion firing 3-inch mortar practices and the 25-pounders of [6 Field Regiment](#) firing from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily between 30 December and 2 January. The battalion had now been under training in New Zealand and Egypt for seven months, though the voyage and guard duties had disrupted the continuity of the instruction. Much had been achieved. Individual, section, and platoon training had been given the close and persistent attention essential to the development of a sound, well-disciplined battalion, and in the higher training every exercise showed an improvement in leadership, handiness, endurance, and a general understanding by all ranks.

Weapon training was well advanced though, as was always the case, there were some men who had still to qualify on the range with the rifle and the Bren gun, the men to whom shooting does not come easily, as well as those who had been absent at times for a variety of reasons. Rifle and bayonet, the Bren, 2-inch and 3-inch mortars, anti-tank rifle, grenade, pick and shovel, all these, the weapons of the infantry soldier, had been attended to. Specialist training, which was largely centred in Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company, had necessarily received the closest attention.

In the somewhat complex HQ Company the six platoons, each with its own clearly defined task, were also trained as normal infantry. No. 1 (Signal) Platoon had to master its technical equipment (wireless, telephone, telegraph and flag) and reach high speeds in sending and receiving signals; it also required a knowledge of cable-jointing, map-reading, and compass. No. 2 (Anti-Aircraft) Platoon had to be expert in handling the Bren against air targets and also against ground targets. No. 3 (Mortar) Platoon was concerned with the technical and tactical handling of mortars. No. 4 (Carrier) Platoon's job was to handle the Bren carrier over all types of ground and to the best tactical advantage in widely different roles, from semi-cavalry reconnaissance ahead of advancing columns to close support of tanks and infantry in attack and defence; the men had to be well trained in the Bren gun and have a good knowledge of map-reading and desert navigation. No. 5 (Pioneer) Platoon contained the handy men or tradesmen of the battalion, ready also to take part in battle at any time. No. 6 (Transport) Platoon required expert knowledge of motor vehicles and was responsible for driving, maintenance, checking and testing, camouflage and concealment, and dispersal of vehicles. As in the case of the other specialist platoons, it had to be able and ready to fight when required.

The first month of the New Year was fortunately free from the exasperating guard duties of previous months. This was due to the return from the [Western Desert](#) of the fully trained 4 Brigade, which relieved 6 Brigade of these duties and was able to help in other ways, notably in the loan of its vehicles and drivers to enable 6 Brigade to stage full-scale, mobile desert exercises.

Twenty-fifth Battalion suffered a setback in January when, from the 6th to the 15th and again from the 20th to the 26th, it was placed in isolation because of some

cases of anterior poliomyelitis, but this did not interfere with training to any extent. It did, however, stop the usual weekend jaunts to [Cairo](#) and elsewhere.

Increased attention was paid early in the New Year to advanced tactical training and some interesting exercises, some of them a little unusual, took place. The attack practised on 19 December was repeated, though 25 Battalion attacked on the left instead of the right flank. On 7 January the unit, moving by MT, endeavoured in an all-day exercise to 'intercept and destroy' an enemy motorised force advancing from the south along the east bank of the [Nile](#). The carrier platoon fanned out to the front and flanks to provide protection for the battalion, which advanced in 'box' (or square) formation over the open desert. The exercise ended with an attack on 'Horse Ridge', the troops moving in their vehicles close up to the enemy position before debussing to finish the attack on foot.

A demonstration of the company in the attack was staged by A Company the next day and a route march of 15 miles followed. An unwelcome visitor, a sandstorm, arrived just after breakfast on a Sunday, four days later, but fortunately ceased about 4 p.m., an unusually short visitation. Apart from these sandstorms, which smother everything in sand and reduce visibility sometimes almost to zero, the weather during the winter in Egypt is almost ideal.

Probably the most interesting of all the training so far took place on 15 January when the battalion crossed the [Nile](#) in folding boats and established a bridgehead on the west bank. The folding boats were delivered to a point close to the bank, C Company carrying them to the water's edge. That company then crossed to an island and established a local bridgehead or covering position there while the boats returned to the east bank and took A Company to the island. A Company then carried the boats across the island and, crossing over to the west bank, established a bridgehead. The boats then returned to the east bank and took over B and D Companies, Battalion Headquarters, and (from the island) C Company in that order, those troops advancing through A Company and occupying positions beyond.

The carrier, mortar, and pioneer platoons crossed at allotted times, followed by the first-line transport. Altogether it was a considerable undertaking and a novel experience which the troops thoroughly enjoyed. It was, in fact, a rehearsal for a night operation and, excepting in the matter of light, was carried out as such, all

precautions being taken to avoid noise from talking, splashing, bumping and rattling of the equipment, and from oars and rowlocks; no lights could be used at night so smoking was prohibited. The confusion that could so easily occur in darkness was guarded against by a careful drill in the handling and launching of the boats and the forming-up and embarkation of men and equipment.

In order to break them in to some extent to the noise and some of the realities of battle, and especially to demonstrate the powerful support which is normally given to infantry both in attack and defence, all three battalions of the brigade in turn carried out an attack on Point 97, Siesta Hill, with actual fire support from medium machine guns and the 25-pounder guns of the artillery. On 20 January 25 Battalion watched with close attention a demonstration of this attack by 24 Battalion and then rehearsed the operation, completing it with fire support the next day. Naturally the men were much impressed with this exercise; the shattering reports of the 25-pounders together with the ominous rattle of numerous machine guns from immediately behind them, and the noise overhead of the shells and bullets, gave a sense of reality and danger, which was heightened by the savage crash of the exploding shells a few hundred yards away, the smoke, flame, and dust of the explosions, and the screaming ricochets of the bullets. When the men were told that, because of the need to exercise reasonable economy in ammunition, the demonstration fell far short of the real thing, they had no doubts of their ability, when supported with such power, to carry out against an actual enemy all the operations of war they had been practising.

This interesting demonstration was followed by five days' manoeuvres by 6 Brigade in the [El Saff](#) area and 25 Battalion marched there on 24 January, practising defence against air attack on the way. That night it occupied a defensive position in the vicinity of El Tibn Knolls. Next day the march was resumed to Wadi Rishrash, seven miles south of [El Saff](#). There a 'landing' exercise on Gebel Heyela was practised, a good deal of imagination being necessary to turn the desert into an ocean and the bottom of the hill into a foreshore for the purposes of the exercise.

Bivouacking for the night, the battalion in the morning marched to Nag Hassan, action against flank attacks by mobile columns being practised during the march. The night of 29 January was spent at Nag Hassan and next day the battalion attacked El Tibn Knolls and on the following night exercised the troops in a move by

MT to the north, closer to the camp. On the final day Wind Hill was attacked from Wadi Amman and the battalion returned to camp at midday.

The next day [General Freyberg](#) gave a lecture on the operations to all officers and NCOs of and above the rank of corporal. He commented on each exercise, pointed out the weak points, and indicated how he thought the operations would have fared against an enemy. Thus the lower ranks obtained a better understanding of each operation and the lessons learnt were driven home to all present.

As usual other training was sandwiched between the tactical exercises during the month. This included weapon training and range practices, the crossing of barbed-wire entanglements, street fighting, bayonet fighting, unarmed combat, patrols, gas protection, hand grenades, tank hunting, and some revision of elementary training. The training was strenuous but sports were continued much as usual. Divisional boxing championships were to be held and 25 Battalion began to sort out and train its boxers. Tabloid athletics, football, and basketball were in full swing and cricket made its appearance under considerable difficulties as regards wickets and equipment.

During January the offensive against the Italians continued with unabated success, [Bardia](#), [Tobruk](#), [Derna](#), [Benghazi](#) and [El Agheila](#) all being captured, the two last in the first week of February. Enormous quantities of arms, equipment, and stores were captured as well as many thousands of prisoners, who for the campaign between 9 December and 8 February numbered over 133,000.

A difficult night-operation exercise on 12 February involved a landing from pontoons, the establishment of a local bridgehead, and a subsequent advance to an all-round defensive position at Sandy Hills and Coal Hill. Carriers, anti-tank guns, and first-line transport were landed with the troops and were hauled up cliffs by hauling parties from each company of the battalion to which they belonged. Other exercises by 25 Battalion included the digging of a defensive position, and one by the companies moving independently in the dark across country on compass bearings to a given area, in which at first light a defensive position was dug and occupied.

On 21 and 22 February a command and staff exercise was conducted by 6 Brigade to practise the commanders and staffs of brigade, battalions, and companies

in conducting various operations. Route marches were continued as usual during February, two by 6 Brigade each of twenty miles, and two of ten miles each by 25 Battalion. There was also a good deal of marching to and from the tactical exercises so that this toughening process was receiving adequate attention.

One of the most important duties of officers and senior non-commissioned officers is the testing and selection of men likely to make good leaders. Fortunately there is no dearth of such men in New Zealand units and early in the month an eleven days' course for prospective NCOs was commenced. Miscellaneous training at this time provided variety and less physical exertion than the constant work in the field. A little instruction in anti-gas training was given as a precaution against surprise gas attack and was repeated at long intervals. On 6 February a very interesting demonstration of anti-tank mines, minelaying, and the use of Bangalore torpedoes (long pipes filled with explosive) for cutting wire entanglements was given by the Engineers. Another demonstration which aroused interest was street fighting by 20 Battalion; it was quite a spectacular and rowdy affair and was viewed with a professional air by 25 Battalion, which had already had some training in this fierce type of fighting.

Sporting activities on the usual scale continued and rugby, soccer, hockey, cricket, baseball, basketball and boxing, a somewhat unusual variety, had now made their appearance on the current sporting menu. A higher plane had been reached and inter-unit matches were frequent. Within 25 Battalion many games were played on a company level. These created considerable rivalry, contributing in no small measure to the maintenance of a strong esprit de corps in the unit.

The battalion had now been in Egypt for five months and in one month's time would qualify for the seven days' leave of absence which, provided circumstances permitted, was granted to all ranks after six months' service in the [Middle East](#). But, as will be seen, circumstances were not to permit the granting of this privilege, at least not on the due date.

Towards the end of February an issue of nine Thompson sub-machine carbines, universally known as tommy guns, was made to each rifle company of the battalion, a very popular innovation. The gun had a good reputation, and for close-quarters fighting, in villages, in wooded or other country with plenty of cover, and for fire

during movement, this rapid-fire short-range weapon was of considerable value.

For some time the strength of the battalion had been slowly dropping till, on 1 February, it was four officers and 175 other ranks under establishment, a rather serious shortage at such a vital training period. The shortage was soon to be made good with reinforcements trained at [Maadi](#) but the new arrivals would require some time before they were fully incorporated in the battalion. Fortunately that time was to be available before the battalion was engaged in operations against the enemy.

The strength of the battalion and of its headquarters, companies, and platoons when up to establishment has already been given. It is now necessary to say something of its transport, weapons, and ammunition.

The transport provided for a battalion consisted of thirty-five bicycles, fourteen motor-cycles, one (four-seater) car, nine 8-cwt trucks, thirty 15-cwt trucks, two 15-cwt (water-tank) trucks, thirteen 30-cwt lorries, ten carriers. One additional car, a two-seater, was provided for the chaplain.

The weapons and the ammunition available for them within the battalion were:

weapons ¹¹	ammunition		
	With man or Reserve	gun	Total
46 pistols	12	270	822
765 rifles	50	68,000	106,250
22 anti-tank rifles	200	880	5,280
50 light machine guns	1,000	25,000	75,000
24 pistols, signalling	20	—	480
2 mortars, 3-inch (HE)	75	45	195
(Smoke)	45	27	117
12 mortars, 2-inch (HE)	9	180	288
(Smoke)	27	540	864
(Signal bombs—Proportion may be allotted in addition to HE and Smoke)			
Hand grenades	—	180	180
10 pistols, signalling, for carriers	18	—	180

Additional reserves of ammunition were carried in Brigade Reserve and in the

Ammunition Company of the Division.

The tools carried by the battalion were 12 felling axes, 37 hand axes, 160 pickaxes, 13 crowbars, 57 wire-cutters, 56 machetes, 4 folding saws, 14 hand saws, 188 shovels. A divisional reserve of axes and shovels was carried by the Field Park Company, as were assault, reconnaissance, and folding boats and bridging equipment. Mines were also carried by the Field Park Company and by the [Divisional Ammunition Company](#).

The transport vehicles in the battalion could carry only 16 officers and 321 other ranks, leaving 16 officers and 420 other ranks to march or to be carried in vehicles allotted from the [Reserve Mechanical Transport Company](#).

The figures given above varied from time to time.

¹ [Maj-Gen A. S. Wilder](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d., Order of the White Eagle (Serb); Te Hau, [Waipukurau](#); born NZ 24 May 1890; sheep farmer; Wgtn Mtd Rifles 1914 – 19; CO 25 Bn May 1940–Sep 1941; comd NZ Trg Gp, [Maadi Camp](#), Sep-Dec 1941, Jan-Feb 1942; [5 Bde](#) 6 Dec 1941 – 17 Jan 1942; [5 Div](#) (in NZ) Apr 1942–Jan 1943; [1 Div](#) Jan-Nov 1943.

² Maj-Gen Sir Stephen Weir, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular Soldier; CO [6 Fd Regt](#) Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA [2 NZ Div](#) Dec 1941–Jun 1944; GOC [2 NZ Div](#) 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commander, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, 1951–55; Chief of General Staff 1955–60.

³ [Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg](#), VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Greek); born [Richmond, Surrey](#), 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; commanded 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917-18; GOC [2 NZEF](#) Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor- General of New Zealand Jun 1946–Aug 1952.

⁴ It is only fair to record that the war diary of 25 Battalion remarks, 'very few 25 Battalion personnel participated in this action'.

⁵ ADMS, Assistant Director of [Medical Services](#).

⁶ Rev. C. E. Willis; England; born England, 29 Jun 1907; Anglican minister; wounded and p.w. Nov 1941.

⁷ Maj-Gen Rt. Hon. Sir Harold Barrowclough, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre (Fr); Wellington; born Masterton, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 7 NZ Inf Bde in UK, 1940; 6 Bde May 1940–Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in Pacific and GOC 3 NZ Div, Aug 1942–Oct 1944; Chief Justice of New Zealand.

⁸ Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Gk); Hamilton; born Mosgiel, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan-Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde 1941–42, and 4 Armd Bde 1942–44; GOC 2 NZ Div 27 Jun–16 Aug 1942, 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, Germany, 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate.

⁹ Maj-Gen Sir John Duigan, KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Mar 1882; served South Africa, 1900–1; 1 NZEF 1915–18; Chief of General Staff, NZ Military Forces, 1937–41; died 9 Jan 1950.

¹⁰ Maj M. Handyside, DSO; Hundalee, North Canterbury; born Invercargill, 20 Dec 1918; shepherd; three times wounded.

¹¹ Thompson sub-machine guns are not included in this table.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 2 – GREECE

CHAPTER 2

Greece

Early in March there were some indications, apart from the usual rumours, that the Division would soon be engaged in operations against the enemy. The culmination of the training programme, which seemed to have covered every phase, the checking of unit and personal equipment (including gas respirators), the issue of tommy guns, the sharpening of bayonets, and the assembly of the complete Division by the arrival from England of the [Second Echelon](#) were of considerable significance. Conjecture as to the probable theatre of operations was rife, with [Greece](#) perhaps the favourite though [Libya](#) ran it close.

The decision so far as the New Zealand Division was concerned, however, had been communicated to [General Freyberg](#) on 17 February when he was informed that British forces were to proceed to the assistance of [Greece](#), already attacked by [Italy](#) and threatened by [Germany](#). It was recognised that the forces available had little chance of success against a full-scale attack, but there were hopes and some prospects that British intervention might result in [Yugoslavia](#) and [Turkey](#) also coming in against the Axis powers.

The New Zealand Division commenced the move from Egypt to [Greece](#) on 6 March, the destination being kept secret, though the brigadiers had been informed and had had an opportunity of studying maps and military reports on [Greece](#) and the campaign there. The commanding officers of units had been told that the Division was moving to a theatre of war; otherwise no information was divulged.

On 3 March seven officers and 206 other ranks marched in to the battalion to bring the strength up to establishment plus 1st Reinforcements. Base kits were sent to [Maadi](#) for storage on the 4th. An advance party of one officer and nine other ranks left for [Amiriya](#), 12 miles south-west of [Alexandria](#), on the 5th, and 25 Battalion, in a column which included 24 and 26 Battalions, [4 Reserve MT Company](#) and the Petrol Company, left [Helwan](#) at 10.30 a.m. on 6 March. [Amiriya](#), 145 miles distant, was reached at 6.45 p.m.

The movement was an impressive one. The column of 394 vehicles, divided into blocks of approximately thirty-five vehicles with five miles between blocks and eighty

yards between vehicles, covered 60 miles of road. The sight of one of these columns emphasised the necessity for most accurate staff work (and punctuality) in the despatch of vehicles at the start and in their reception and disposal at the destination. The need for first-class road-discipline and close attention to orders by the drivers and others concerned in controlling the movement was evident, especially so as other columns and individual vehicles would probably be using and perhaps crossing the same roads, all working to a close timetable.

The possibility of air attack could not be disregarded and was met by the provision of two light machine guns in each block of vehicles, while each rifleman carried fifty rounds of ammunition. The main protection against any serious air attack was of course the presence of units of the [RAF](#) in the [Western Desert](#) and in the vicinity of [Cairo](#) and [Alexandria](#).

[Amiriya](#) transit camp was a most unattractive area of desert with much fine, loose sand churned up by numerous vehicles; the men were accommodated in tents with none of the facilities and comforts to which they had become accustomed in the permanent camps of [Maadi](#) and [Helwan](#). A very severe sandstorm or 'khamseen' on 14–15 March is still remembered with great displeasure by members of the battalion who experienced it. The Intelligence Officer of 25 Battalion at the time, Lieutenant [Mason](#),¹ wrote a vivid description of it:

'No one who was there will ever forget the khamseens at [Amiriya](#),' he wrote. 'They were colossal—it didn't seem possible that the wind could pick up so much sand. They lasted on and off for three days and the fine yellow powder got in everything—in wrist watches, in gear-boxes and oil sumps of the trucks, in stomachs and in lungs of men, everywhere. You couldn't see more than a yard in front of you, even at noon, and men going from tent to cookhouse, a mere matter of ten yards, frequently became lost and finally got round to using compasses. The sand covered everything—before getting into your blankets you had to shake a couple of inches of dust off the top. The sandstorm at [Helwan](#) on 12th January, which at the time had seemed so tough, was by comparison a piffling puff of wind.'



GREECE

The only compensation was swimming in the [Mediterranean](#). The ocean was a short five miles away and the dip in the warm water was right out of the box. If only leave could have been granted to [Alexandria](#), shimmering so invitingly there ten miles away'

The officers of the battalion on embarkation for [Greece](#) were:

Lieutenant-Colonel A. S. Wilder, Commanding Officer

Major S. M. Satterthwaite, Second-in-Command

Major C. D. A. George, OC A Coy

Major C. J. Williams, OC C Coy (Seconded temporarily to [Divisional Headquarters](#) as embarkation officer, 5–23 March)

Captain J. D. Armstrong, Adjutant

Captain H. F. Smith, OC B Coy

Captain A. J. R. Hastie, OC D Coy

Captain H. G. Burton, OC HQ Coy

Captain H. J. Dalzell, 2 i/c B Coy

Captain W. H. Roberts, 2 i/c A Coy

Captain R. Morrison, 2 i/c D Coy

Lieutenant (T/Capt) S. M. Porter, 2 i/c C Coy (OC C Coy 5–23 March)

Lieutenant W. L. Rutherford, 6 Platoon (Transport)

Lieutenant M. J. Mason, Intelligence Officer

Lieutenant W. J. Heslop, 17 Platoon

Lieutenant H. G. Witters, 14 Platoon

Lieutenant G. A. W. Possin, supernumerary on Bn HQ, later IO

Lieutenant R. M. McLeay, 15 Platoon

Lieutenant G. Colledge, 1 Platoon (Signals)

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) T. W. G. Rolfe, Quartermaster

Second-Lieutenant H. H. Hollow, 5 Platoon (Pioneer)

Second-Lieutenant G. J. B. Morris, 12 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant J. P. Tredray, 11 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant I. D. Reid, 3 Platoon (Mortars)

Second-Lieutenant H. Macaskill, 7 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant A. H. Armour, 8 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant M. Handyside, 16 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant W. M. Clarry, 2 Platoon (Anti-Aircraft)

Second-Lieutenant S. G. L. Smythe, 18 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant A. W. Clark, 10 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant R. F. Sherlock, 4 Platoon (Carriers)

Second-Lieutenant I. C. Webster, 9 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant F. C. Corlett, 13 Platoon

Attached:

Captain L. H. Cordery, [NZMC](#), Medical Officer

Rev. C. E. Willis, Chaplain

Except for small advance parties and the first-line transport, Bren carriers, and motor-cyclists, which embarked on 12 March and sailed in convoy for [Piraeus](#) at noon the next day, 25 Battalion remained at [Amiriya](#) until the 17th. It then embarked in the cruiser HMS Orion and in company with HM ships [Ajax](#) and [Havock](#) and [HMAS Perth](#) sailed at noon. The troops were given a warm welcome aboard the cruiser, receiving a good meal right away, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. 'The sailors were wonderful to us,' wrote Wakeling ² of the RAP, 'and nothing was any trouble.'

This movement of 520 miles across the [Mediterranean](#) was not without considerable risk of air, surface, and submarine attack, including mines. But the troops seemed quite unconcerned, being content to leave their protection to the Royal Navy. Actually, few losses of shipping were incurred, a total of seven ships being sunk and four damaged during the whole movement of the British, Australian, and New Zealand forces to [Greece](#). The naval battle of Matapan occurred during the passage of the forces, three Italian cruisers being sunk. Our shipping was affected only to the extent that the ships carrying the vehicles spent some twelve hours longer at sea through being turned back as a precaution for a short period during the battle.

Disembarking at [Piraeus](#) after a fast passage of twenty-five hours without incident, the battalion after three cheers for the crew, marched off for [Hymettus Camp](#), ten miles away at the foot of the mountains at the south-eastern outskirts of [Athens](#). 'What a march and were we welcomed en route,' commented Wakeling. 'A thousand Iti prisoners passed down one side of the road as we marched up the other.'

Liberal leave was granted and the opportunity to explore the historic city was eagerly taken. The green countryside, the flowers, the general cleanliness, the almost complete absence of flies, and the warm-hearted welcome of the people were in strong contrast to the conditions experienced in Egypt; it seemed to be a different world. It was, however, very cold, with snow visible not far away, and winter woollens were much appreciated.

At this time the fighting front was some 270 air-miles north-west of [Athens](#). There the Greeks with about thirteen divisions were holding the Italian invaders (who had been severely mauled) 30 miles inside Albanian territory. Nearly 300 miles to the north and north-east of [Athens](#), on or near the frontier between [Bulgaria](#) and [Greece](#), the Greeks had about four divisions disposed for delaying action and defence of selected areas, including [Salonika](#). A further three Greek divisions were allotted for the [Aliakmon line](#), with part of which 25 Battalion was shortly to become familiar. Naturally the best Greek troops and equipment were on the north-western front facing the Italians, the remainder of the Greek forces being in many cases hastily trained and poorly equipped. Their transport was more suited for mountain warfare than for a war of rapid movement over considerable distances, which in fact they were quite unable to undertake.

Marching through enthusiastic crowds in [Athens](#) en route to Rouf railway station, three miles away on the northern outskirts of the city, 25 Battalion at 4 p.m. on 21 March entrained for [Katerini](#), a small town on the Gulf of [Salonika](#), 35 miles south-west of the town of [Salonika](#) and 180 air-miles north of [Athens](#). [Katerini](#) was reached after an interesting though somewhat tiring journey of twenty-three hours, many men being seated on the floor of cattle trucks. With the exception of A Company (which occupied a hall in the town) the battalion marched a couple of miles to an area on the outskirts where the men were accommodated in tents. The first-line transport and motor-cyclists, travelling by road from [Athens](#), arrived the following day. [Katerini](#) was a somewhat picturesque and quaint little town, nestling at the foot of [Mount Olympus](#), snow-clad and over 9500 feet high, 16 miles away to the south-west.

The next day, 24 March, a move was made to the village of Alonia, a march of 12 miles to the north of [Katerini](#), and then two days later, to another bivouac area in

a defensive position which was being prepared by units of 19 Greek Division three miles to the north. Sixth Brigade took over this position from the Greeks, 25 Battalion relieving 192 (Greek) Regiment on 28 March, though the defences were not actually manned until some days later.

The defensive position was part of the [Aliakmon line](#). The New Zealand Division had been allotted the coastal sector with its left or inland flank resting on high ground at, but exclusive of, the village of [Elafina](#). Twelfth Greek Division was on the left, with another division extending the line north-west to the Yugoslav frontier. Nineteenth Greek Division, on completion of its relief by the New Zealand Division, had an anti-parachute role north of the [Aliakmon River](#) and also provided a reserve.

To the north-east of the Allied line the British 1 Armoured Brigade had the role of delaying the enemy by fighting and demolitions, the latter including all crossings of the Aliakmon River.

In the New Zealand sector 6 Brigade was on the right, 4 Brigade on the left, and 5 Brigade in reserve in a defensive position astride the [Olympus Pass](#), 21 Battalion of 5 Brigade being detached to hold the railway tunnel and road at [Platamon](#) between [Mount Olympus](#) and the sea, 20 miles south of Katerini. The New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment was to oppose the enemy on the [Aliakmon River](#) and fight a delaying action back by prescribed routes through the main New Zealand position. No. 3 NZ Machine Gun Company was allotted to 6 Brigade and 4 MG Company was in position south of the Tranos River, about two miles back, to deal with any enemy penetration; the remainder of [27 MG Battalion](#) was with a mixed force ([Mackay Force](#)) at [Vevi](#), 50 miles to the north-west, near the Yugoslav frontier.

The New Zealand Divisional Artillery supported the forward brigades, 4 and 5 Field Regiments covering 6 Brigade front; 32 and 33 Anti-Tank Batteries and one troop of the 31st came under command of 6 Brigade.

The brigade's frontage was 8000 yards, an excessive front completely beyond the power of a brigade to hold against serious attack. It was finally decided to hold the position with all three battalions forward and thus cover the anti-tank obstacle in front with a more-or-less reasonable amount of fire. This plan left Brigadier Barrowclough with no reserve, a serious matter, and before adopting it he sought

and obtained the approval of [General Freyberg](#), who had retained 22 Battalion of 5 Brigade as a divisional reserve.

In contrast with the wooded position of 4 Brigade on its left, 6 Brigade's area was open, undulating country with some steep ridges and valleys running generally east and west. It was very suitable for tanks and anti-tank obstacles were consequently of major importance. An anti-tank ditch was being prepared by the Greeks along a stream from Skala Elevtherokhorion, and thence along the forward slopes of a ridge to the Toponitsa River, which was a very good natural obstacle. The forward defended localities were sited to the south and covered the ditch, though in some places it could not be covered in this way and would have to be watched by snipers and observers by day and patrolled by night.

A system of concrete pillboxes was planned on the line of the forward defended localities and in positions in depth; SOS light signals were arranged to bring down artillery and machine-gun defensive fire in front of the foremost troops; seven main demolitions were prepared, for a bridge, railway and road embankments, two road culverts, and two tracks over the anti-tank ditch, all on the brigade front. An allotment of 2000 anti-tank mines and 100 anti-personnel mines had been made to 6 Brigade, and of these 750 and 75 respectively were to be issued to 25 Battalion. Passwords were arranged and a white armband was to be carried by each man, to be worn when ordered on either arm as notified from time to time, to distinguish between enemy and friendly troops. Such an arrangement has obvious dangers, the consequences of which could well be disastrous, and, perhaps fortunately, it was never carried out. For some special enterprise, such as a raid, it could serve a useful purpose, as in the trench raids in [France](#) in the 1914–18 war where it was frequently used.

Reserves of ammunition and rations were established at suitable points as well as a prisoner-of-war cage and a refugee-collecting centre. Wireless silence was imposed, traffic control carefully planned and put into effect, and the transport in the forward area reduced to a minimum by brigading the surplus vehicles near the village of Korinos, ten miles back.

This detailed description will give some indication of the study and work involved in the planning and preparation of a defensive position. Each position varies

considerably and so has its own special problems, and frequently, conflicting requirements necessitate some compromise.

Brigadier Barrowclough placed 24 Battalion on the right of the position, 26 Battalion in the centre, and 25 Battalion on the left, the respective frontages being 1700, 3000, and 3300 yards. Colonel Wilder had three companies forward, D Company ([Hastie](#)³) on the right, B Company ([Smith](#)⁴) in the centre, and C Company ([Williams](#)⁵) on the left. A Company ([George](#)⁶) was in reserve at St. Elias, 2500 yards in rear of the forward defended localities. The positions were not occupied.

Since its arrival in the area on 26 March, 25 Battalion had been working with the Greek troops in preparing the defences and actively continued the work after the departure of the Greeks on the 28th. The plan for the holding of the divisional front, which has already been explained, did not reach finality till 1 April, when the frontage of 6 Brigade was extended to the left to include the hill of St. Elias which previously had been in 4 Brigade's sector.

On 6 April it was learnt that [Germany](#) had declared war on [Greece](#) and [Yugoslavia](#) at midnight 5 – 6 April and 25 Battalion made final preparations to occupy its defensive position at short notice. At dawn the explosion of pre-arranged demolitions in [Salonika](#) was heard and left no doubts that war was very near. Work on the defences was accelerated and next day (when, incidentally, a little rain fell and summer time was adopted, clocks being advanced one hour) the fire plan was completed, areas for mines selected, and all was more-or-less ready for an encounter with the enemy.

Fortunately for the comfort of the men and the progress of the defensive works, the weather, apart from a little wind and rain on the evening of the 25th and a dense morning fog a couple of days later, had been delightful. Spring had arrived with all the trees bursting into their new foliage and wild flowers starting to bloom. Judas trees dotted the landscape with their brilliant colour and Greek children selling eggs and figs to the men completed a peaceful and most attractive scene which war was on the eve of destroying.

[General Freyberg](#) had clearly stated to General Wilson, the commander of all

British troops in [Greece](#), his opinion that the Aliakmon position could not be held for more than a few days with the troops available, and a good deal of work had been done on the only practicable position, the precipitous [Olympus Pass](#) in rear, where 5 Brigade with supporting arms was in position. General Wilson had no illusions on the vulnerability of the Aliakmon position and intended to keep troops there only if the Yugoslavs delayed the enemy advance and prevented the Allied line being turned via the Monastir Pass.

Two days after the German declaration, when it was clear that [Yugoslavia](#) could impose little delay, 4 Brigade with attached troops moved from the defensive position on the left of 25 Battalion and, passing over the [Olympus Pass](#), occupied a position on the [Aliakmon River](#) at the village of [Servia](#), 30 air-miles south-west of [Katerini](#). There it was under command of Australian Corps. At the same time 26 Battalion, on the right of 25 Battalion, marched back to [Olympus Pass](#) to prepare defensive positions there. These movements were of course a prelude to the abandonment of the forward position and the holding of the position in the pass.

In the meantime a detachment of one composite company of 24 Battalion, one platoon of 25 Battalion, and one platoon and a carrier platoon of 26 Battalion was organised to fill the gap between 24 and 25 Battalions. No. 4 MG Company was given a supporting role to the composite company, which was commanded by Major George, 25 Battalion. Sixth Brigade's front was thus generally covered, but the left flank to the west of 25 Battalion, completely uncovered by the withdrawal of 4 Brigade, was to be secured to some extent when the Divisional Cavalry, after vacating the line of the [Aliakmon River](#), went into reserve in a position where it afforded some such protection.

During this day, 8 April, it was learnt that the Germans had penetrated 50 miles into [Yugoslavia](#) and that a Yugoslav division had surrendered. The Germans were also reported at [Salonika](#) and elements of the Greek Army were falling back through 6 Brigade's lines, together with increasing numbers of refugees from north of the Aliakmon. When darkness came, the sight of fires in [Salonika](#), demolished oil installations, visible about 25 miles away from the higher ground in 25 Battalion's position, was most impressive. At 10.15 that night, on orders from [General Freyberg](#), the Divisional Cavalry demolished the bridges over the Aliakmon and 6 Brigade was ordered to explode its demolition charges, other than those on the railway and road

bridges.

The following day the flow of refugees and Greek Army stragglers had increased. Artillery fire and bombing was to be heard all that day and night, and aircraft, believed to be British, were passing overhead throughout the day. Late in the afternoon, after the battle positions were occupied, 6 Brigade was told that it would be withdrawn to the [Olympus Pass](#) position that night or the next day. At 10.30 p.m. 25 Battalion received a warning order to move and a few hours later, at 2 a.m., 10 April, the withdrawal commenced, [Katerini](#) being reached after a most arduous 17-mile march at 8.40 a.m. 'It was one of the worst the Battalion had experienced,' said one man, 'rough roads and a fast pace and many fell out.'

Five hours later the journey was continued in first-line and RMT vehicles over the steep and tortuous [Olympus Pass](#) to the village of [Dholikhi](#), on the plain at the foot of the mountains, about 30 miles by road from [Katerini](#).

Back at the Aliakmon position a covering force had been left. This consisted of the three carrier platoons of the battalions, 3 Company [27 MG Battalion](#), and 34 Anti-Tank Battery, all under Lieutenant-Colonel [Duff](#)⁷ of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment. This force remained till all other troops had withdrawn from the defensive position when, at about 4 a.m., it also withdrew. The [Divisional Cavalry Regiment](#), however, maintained its watch on the [Aliakmon River](#). A few hours later, fifteen minutes after 25 Battalion had reached [Katerini](#), the commander of the German [2 Panzer Division](#) in the [Salonika](#) area received an order: 'Send out a strong recce force immediately over the Vardar towards Edessa, Verria (main axis of advance) and [Katerini](#)', and, when asked when the main body could advance, replied that all bridges over and west of the Vardar had been destroyed and that he could not advance until they were repaired. As it happened, the foremost German troops did not reach [Katerini](#) till 2 p.m., 14 April.

The first day at [Dholikhi](#) was dull and bitterly cold and the men had a welcome rest. A very cold night followed and the morning of the 12th revealed fresh snow on the ranges above the camp as the battalion moved back up the pass for work on road improvements near [Kokkinoplos](#), on the north-west shoulder of [Mount Olympus](#), behind the position held by 5 Brigade. The roads generally required much improvement and the Greek population, consisting almost entirely of old men,

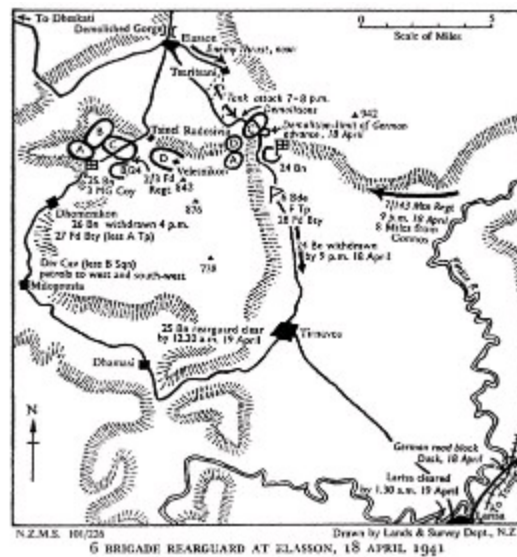
women of all ages, and boys and girls, earned the respect and indeed the commiseration of the troops as they carried out essential maintenance. The elevation above sea level was over 3000 feet, with [Mount Olympus](#) (9571 feet) seven miles to the south-east, and the climate was severe for men who had spent some time in Egypt. The road to [Kokkinoplos](#), where 25 Battalion was working, was extremely perilous at any time and snow the previous day made it much more so, the transport drivers earning high praise for their expert handling in such conditions.

Each evening the battalion returned to [Dholikhi](#), but on the 14th it moved forward to the [Ay Dhimitrios](#) locality and took over the position just vacated by 26 Battalion, which on the previous day (Easter Sunday) had moved at the shortest notice to fill a gap between 4 Brigade at [Servia](#) and 19 (Australian) Brigade on its left. Twenty-fourth Battalion had also been moved, over extremely difficult country, to fill another gap between the left of 5 Brigade and the right of 16 (Australian) Brigade, which had taken up a position on the right of 4 Brigade. These movements formed the new defensive line stretching from 21 Battalion (on the right at [Platamon](#) on the coast), along 5 Brigade's front at [Olympus Pass](#) and 24 Battalion's new position to 16 (Australian) Brigade. But it was a very temporary affair as after a few hours 24 Battalion was recalled and a general withdrawal was impending.

The enemy advance into [Yugoslavia](#) and the early collapse of that country enabled the Germans to turn the left of the Allied line, while his advance to [Salonika](#) and across the Axios River directly threatened the [Olympus](#) passes. There was a serious risk that the Germans would reach [Larisa](#), the important road and rail centre 30 miles south of [Mount Olympus](#) and on the main road to [Athens](#), by an outflanking movement from the north and west and, as it subsequently developed, from the east also through the pass held by 21 Battalion.

The enemy was in close contact with the British at various points. On the afternoon of 10 April an attack was made against [Mackay Force](#) in position south-east of [Florina](#) (about 50 miles north-west of [Olympus Pass](#)), where it was guarding the route southwards towards [Kozani](#) and [Servia](#) behind the Allied positions on the left of the [Aliakmon line](#). On the 13th the enemy was attacking the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment 25 miles north-east of the pass; the following day, on the withdrawal of the Divisional Cavalry, 21 Battalion was attacked at [Platamon](#) on

the right, and on the same day an attack on 4 Brigade at [Servia](#) was repulsed with heavy enemy losses. [Mackay Force](#) had withdrawn a few hours earlier. It was obvious the enemy was pressing his advance with vigour, and that the British and Greeks had not sufficient force to hold it.



6 brigade rearguard at elasson, 18 april 1941

The New Zealand Division received orders to withdraw to [Thermopylae](#), 100 air-miles to the south and about one-third more by road. Sixth Brigade with attached troops was to withdraw to [Ellasson](#), 25 miles to the south-west on the main road to [Larisa](#), a further 25 miles to the south-east. The brigade was to hold a rearguard position at [Ellasson](#) till the night 18–19 April. Fifth Brigade from [Olympus Pass](#) and 4 Brigade from [Servia](#) were to withdraw through 6 Brigade when ordered by New Zealand Division and go in stages to [Molos](#), ten miles east of the [Brallos Pass](#), via [Larisa](#), [Almiros](#) and [Lamia](#). The Divisional Cavalry Regiment was to form a rearguard and hold a position east of the junction of the [Olympus Pass](#) and [Servia-Larisa](#) road until 5 Brigade had passed through and 4 Brigade had cleared the junction.

Orders for the withdrawal were received on the night of the 14th and at 4 a.m. next day 25 Battalion left [Olympus Pass](#) and returned to [Dholikhi](#), where it remained till dark. It then proceeded by MT to the position allotted to it on a ridge three miles south-west of [Ellasson](#). Just south of [Ellasson](#) the main road forked into two branches, which joined again 12 miles to the south at [Tirnavos](#) and then ran south-east to [Larisa](#). For three miles south of [Ellasson](#) the two roads traversed level ground. The eastern road then continued to the south over a high pass by a steep and tortuous

route till it reached the level ground again six miles south of [Ellasson](#), thence it ran along the [Larisa](#) plain to [Tirnavos](#), skirting the high ground.

The western road was an easier but much longer route. Between the two roads was some steep country with peaks from 2200 to 2600 feet high, much of it so steep as to be virtually tank-proof. The covering position selected was on the high ground just south of the [Ellasson](#) plain and extended for six miles. At the moment 6 Brigade had only 24 and 25 Battalions, both without their carrier platoons which were on an anti-parachute role under [Divisional Headquarters](#). Attached troops were to include a field battery (or regiment if available), an anti-tank battery, a machine-gun company, a section of engineers and a field ambulance.

Twenty-fourth Battalion (less one company) on the right covered the eastern road and 25 Battalion (plus one company of 24 Battalion) was astride the western road. There was a gap of three miles between the two battalions. The field artillery was to take up a position near the western road and from there cover the whole brigade front, its tasks being the defile and bridge in [Ellasson](#), the flat ground south of the town, and protection of the left flank of 25 Battalion. There was no effective anti-tank obstacle on the western road so all the anti-tank guns were sited to cover that road, although one section (two guns) had initially been allotted to the eastern road to assist 24 Battalion. With the exception of one section allotted to 24 Battalion, 3 MG Company came under command of 25 Battalion, the forward slopes of the high ground in the gap between the two battalions being its main task. The engineers were given demolition tasks which included a culvert on the western road in front of 25 Battalion.

The situation on the flanks of the position was somewhat obscure. There were routes into [Larisa](#) both from the north-east and the west and the safety of 6 Brigade depended as much on the troops guarding those routes as upon the successful defence of its own position against attack from the north. Arrangements were therefore made for a troop of 25-pounders, covered by a carrier platoon when available, to guard the approach to [Tirnavos](#) from the north-east. Some safeguard against trouble from the west was to be provided by placing 26 Battalion in reserve at [Dhomenikon](#) behind the left of 25 Battalion when the former unit became available.

Next day, Wednesday, 16 April, 26 Battalion made its appearance after a particularly lengthy and very arduous march from an area west of 4 Brigade's position at [Servia](#), 25 Battalion's transport meeting it en route to assist it back to [Dhomenikon](#). Though it had not been in action against enemy ground forces it had experienced heavy air attacks and suffered considerable hardships. The carrier platoons of the battalions also returned the same day, rejoining their battalions with the exception of the platoon of 24 Battalion, which, leaving one section with its battalion, joined the troop of artillery at [Tirnavos](#) previously mentioned.

Another very welcome reinforcement was the artillery, the 2/3 Australian Field Regiment, [5 Field Regiment](#) (less one troop), and one troop 64 Medium Regiment, [Royal Artillery](#), taking up their allotted positions, though one battery (less one troop) of [5 Field Regiment](#) was soon sent on to [Larisa](#).

Heavy rain which fell nearly all day caused considerable discomfort but, on the other hand, greatly reduced enemy air activity which had been severe the previous day. In common with the other units, 25 Battalion concentrated on defensive works in its extensive position of 6000 to 7000 yards of front, which it held with all four rifle companies forward. These occupied company defensive localities on high ground overlooking the tiny villages of Stefanovounon (Tsinel Radosivia) and As (Kato) Ompa in front of D and C Companies and to the right front of B Company, while a similar village lay to the left front of B and A Companies. D Company (Hastie) was on the right with the hamlet of Velesnikon in its area; B Company (Smith) and A Company (George) were on a dominating hill west of the western road and overlooking, in addition to the villages referred to, a small stream in front of Koniste. C Company (Williams) was astride the road and B Company 24 Battalion, which was under command of 25 Battalion, was about a thousand yards behind with its left on the road. As stated, the battalion's front was a very wide one, but being a rearguard position it was required not for prolonged defence but to force the enemy to deploy against it and so cause delay. It was in this position that 25 Battalion at last was to undergo its baptism of fire.

All British forces (the term including [United Kingdom](#), Australian, and New Zealand troops) from the forward areas had passed through the position by the night 17–18 April, with the exception of the Divisional Cavalry which, during the morning

of the 18th, withdrew through [Elasson](#) and along the western road through 25 Battalion to take up a position covering the approaches from the west.

Following a dive-bomber attack on [Elasson](#) at 9 a.m. on 18 April, enemy tanks two hours later appeared in a defile just north of the village and were very effectively engaged by the medium artillery. Many enemy tanks and MT soon appeared and were heavily engaged by our artillery, one troop of Australian 25-pounders firing 2000 rounds (500 per gun) in the course of the afternoon. It was noticeable that even long-range fire from the 25-pounders had a strongly deterrent effect on the German tanks. During the afternoon, and especially as dusk approached, there was some apprehension of enemy movement from the east of 24 Battalion and to meet this possibility a troop of 25-pounders and the carriers of 26 Battalion were moved from the reserve position at [Dhomenikon](#) to guard the right flank of the brigade.

Throughout the afternoon the battalion's position had been fairly heavily shelled and enemy aircraft had joined in. 'Heavy guns going off all round us,' wrote Wakeling in his diary, '... not washed for 2 days and not shaved for 5 days. MGd from the air and 2 men brought in hit by MG from aircraft and knocked about considerably. A/c overhead all day and very disheartening not to have a plane of ours in the air for days while the Hun does as he likes. Heavy gunfire dropping all round us....'

The battalion had its first casualty when a man of A Company was hit on the arm by a rock hurled from a shell-burst, and its telephone line to Brigade Headquarters had been broken. Orders for the withdrawal had been issued, 24 Battalion moving first and 25 Battalion providing the rearguard, which consisted of C Company, carrier platoon, wireless van and the signal section, one troop of the Australian field regiment, one troop 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, and 7 MG Platoon, and was commanded by Major Williams. This rearguard covered the withdrawal of the battalion, 33 Anti-Tank Battery, and all the medium and field artillery, which withdrew in that order. In his report on the activities of the rearguard, Williams wrote:

'1900 hours. Sent carrier platoon out to take over forward coy areas—one sec to D Coy area, one to B, and one to support C Coy astride the main road. Two troops of carriers from Div Cav reported to assist in covering C Coy during its march back to

the MT—placed them on ridge previously held by reserve coy. Remainder of Div Cav (less one squadron) watching left rear south of [Domenikon](#).

'Ordered arty to maintain intermittent fire and carriers and forward platoons to fire flares and occasional bursts till times set down for their respective withdrawals. No determined attempt by enemy to come on by night though signs of movement on the other road, to the east.... 2230 hours. C Coy started to move back on foot to embussing area near [Domenikon](#)....'

Just after midnight (18–19 April) as the rearguard passed through [Tirnavos](#), where it was joined by a section of carriers from 24 Battalion, the enemy was closing in on the village from the north-east. The bridge there was destroyed by our engineers and the rearguard, urged by Brigadier Barrowclough to make for [Volos](#) as quickly as possible, pressed on for [Larisa](#). At 1.30 a.m. the rearguard passed through [Larisa](#). 'No sign of anyone,' wrote Williams, 'town burning. Enemy flares and desultory firing about 3 – 4 miles to NE—evidently from Peneios area where [21 Bn](#) with two Aust Bns had been. 0430 hours. Very difficult driving along narrow swamp road towards [Volos](#).'

The main body of 25 Battalion had embussed at 8.30 p.m. the previous evening, bound for a reserve position three miles south-east of [Molos](#), via [Tirnavos](#), [Larisa](#), [Volos](#), [Lamia](#), and [Molos](#), a journey of about 170 miles. South-east of [Larisa](#) the road became progressively worse. Recent rains had created a quagmire in several places and drivers and motor-cyclist despatch riders had a very trying journey until they reached a good tar-sealed surface some miles north of Molo.

[Volos](#) was reached about dawn and so far the battalion had escaped the very severe air attacks experienced by those units which had made the journey by daylight, though aircraft occasionally passing overhead were a reminder of the danger daylight could bring.

Just prior to the withdrawal of 6 Brigade, Divisional Headquarters had arranged for the troops to occupy defensive positions in the vicinity of [Volos](#) for the day, to cover the withdrawal of the force from the [Pinios Gorge](#). Accordingly 24 and 25 Battalions with their attached troops took up suitable positions, the former ten miles south-west of [Volos](#) and 25 Battalion about twelve miles to the north-west at

Velesinon, where a secondary road turned southwards off the [Larisa- Volos](#) road and rejoined that road three miles south-west of 24 Battalion's position.

The head of the rearguard overtook the tail of the column north-west of [Volos](#) about dawn and occupied a rearguard position astride the road. There it collected stragglers from 21 Battalion and Australian battalions which had borne the brunt of heavy attacks by vastly superior enemy forces at [Platamon](#) and the [Pinios Gorge](#) north-east of [Larisa](#). Trucks and other vehicles of 21 Battalion and the Australians, some guns of [5 Field Regiment](#), and a squadron of the Divisional Cavalry also appeared at the rearguard position and were directed towards [Molos](#), still about 90 miles away, by a circuitous route skirting Oreoi Strait and Maliaic Gulf.

The enemy did not immediately follow the withdrawal and it was soon obvious that Williams's rearguard, with elements of the Divisional Cavalry, would be able to cover the remainder of the move. [General Freyberg](#), who was present, therefore ordered 6 Brigade and attached troops to resume the march to [Lamia](#) and [Molos](#) as soon as practicable, to join the rest of the Division at the next defensive position.

Twenty-fifth Battalion accordingly moved off about noon, the rearguard continuing its protective role. About an hour and a half later, however, the rearguard came up with 24 Battalion, whose vehicles had gone on to [Molos](#) when that battalion had halted in the morning. While efforts were being made to get the vehicles back or secure others, 24 Battalion had started on foot. Major Williams therefore took up a perimeter position covering the battalion, with the Divisional Cavalry in position on hills to the north-west. Petrol was obtained from [Lamia](#) for a number of vehicles and at 6 p.m. Brigadier Barrowclough arrived with RMT vehicles. He directed Williams to take over the role of advanced guard ahead of 24 Battalion while the Divisional Cavalry would provide the rear-guard, and the column set off. Shortly afterwards it was machine-gunned from the air, losing two trucks and an anti-tank gun and suffering several casualties among anti-tank personnel. Darkness set in, making the drive to [Lamia](#) very trying. The advanced guard picketed the route near the [Lamia](#) junction with its carrier platoon, MMGs, and anti-tank guns, and, when the column had passed, followed across the Alamanas bridge and through 5 Brigade, then dispersing its sub-units. C Company and the carrier platoon rejoined 25 Battalion south-east of [Molos](#) just before dawn. The rearguard had performed an arduous duty with distinction.

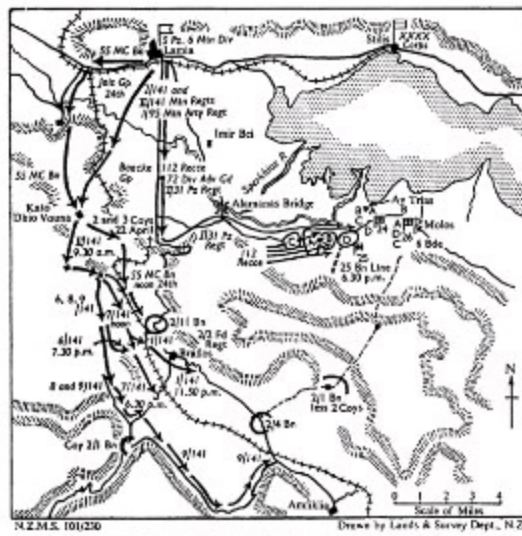
Twenty-fifth Battalion had reached its bivouac area the previous evening. The creek bed in which it was situated was thickly covered with trees, providing excellent cover from air observation. There it rested until 21 April.

With the exception of a few stragglers and some remnants of 21 Battalion, the whole Division was now in the [Molos](#) area, preparing its defensive position on the right of the [Thermopylae](#) line. This extended along foothills from the village of [Ay Trias](#), on the southern shore of the Maliaic Gulf, westward along the [Molos- Lamia](#) road to join the Australian right flank, which was astride the main [Lamia- Athens](#) road in the [Brallos Pass](#). The Sperkhios River ran in front of the New Zealand position, the road from [Molos](#) to [Lamia](#) crossing it by a bridge, now demolished, in front of the left flank.

After several changes in plan, the position was organised with two brigades forward, 6 on the right and 5 on the left, 4 Brigade being in reserve near the right or eastern flank. The artillery of the Division had been reinforced by 2 [Royal Horse Artillery](#) Regiment (field artillery), 102 Anti-Tank Regiment, three troops of anti-aircraft guns, and 64 Medium Artillery Regiment.

Sixth Brigade's front extended for 6000 yards from the sea on the right to its junction with 5 Brigade, 24 Battalion being on the right, 25 on the left, and 26 in reserve immediately west of [Molos](#). A secondary road from the [Molos- Lamia](#) road passed through [Ay Trias](#) and, crossing the Sperkhios River opposite the boundary between 24 and 25 Battalions, ran in a north-westerly direction towards [Lamia](#). Behind the front of 25 Battalion south of the [Molos- Lamia](#) road the ground rose very steeply, about one in five, to the high range to the south.

The battalion had a frontage of 4000 yards along the road and held the position with three companies forward, B right, A centre, and C left; D Company also was along the road and on the right of B Company but was behind the left of 24 Battalion opposite the bridge on the secondary road already



brallos pass and thermopylae, 24 april 1941

mentioned. A section post of 9 Platoon on a small spur was the only element of the battalion north of the road. The position had been taken over, on 21 April, from 22 Battalion of 5 Brigade, which on the 19th had temporarily manned the whole divisional front.

C Company (Williams) had first occupied a reserve position behind B Company but on the night of 22 – 23 April took over the position just vacated by 22 Battalion on the left of A Company. This change was due to the withdrawal of 5 Brigade, resulting from a decision, made known on 22 April, that the British forces were to evacuate Greece; meanwhile 6 Brigade was to hold the position. Some detachments of 5 Brigade were still holding their ground under command of 6 Brigade, three carrier platoons and two platoons of 23 Battalion covering the demolished Alamanas bridge on the left flank about 5000 yards north-west of 25 Battalion; two platoons of 22 Battalion occupied a flanking position a few hundred yards to the left-rear of C Company.

Within the position held by the battalion were numerous guns of the field regiments and the anti-tank regiment. One field regiment had an anti-tank role only and, together with neighbouring two-pounders, was to prove most effective. Also covering the brigade front and under command was 3 MG Company, the platoons being under the battalions, with 7 Platoon under 25 Battalion.

The Germans first made contact on the late afternoon of the 21st when two motor-cyclists rode up to the Alamanas bridge and were engaged by a carrier section

there, one being killed and the other wounded. Maps and documents were secured indicating that the men belonged to a reconnaissance unit of [5 Panzer Division](#). Much enemy movement in the vicinity of [Lamia](#) was observed as the enemy built up his forces for an attack, and his air forces also were active. During the 22nd light enemy shelling fell on the New Zealand front and also on the Australians' sector where, in the early afternoon, German infantry were seen at the foot of the [Brallos Pass](#). Although an immediate attack was expected, as had been experienced by 5 Brigade at [Olympus](#) and 4 Brigade at [Servia](#), it did not occur, probably because of the delaying effect of the demolitions and traffic jams on the enemy supply system.

It had been anticipated, from [General Freyberg](#) downwards, that there would be no retreat from the [Thermopylae](#) position and the troops had in fact been so informed. Although 25 Battalion had been through only one minor action the men had been shelled, at [Elasson](#), without being able to retaliate; they had had to leave two positions on which a good deal of hard work had been done; and above all, they had been threatened and harried from the air to their acute discomfort and resentment. Looking around them at [Thermopylae](#) they thought that here they had a strong position where they could meet the enemy on reasonably even terms, which was all they asked for. They had no fears as to the outcome.

It was with some astonishment and disappointment, therefore, that the men heard, in the mid-afternoon of 22 April, of the decision to leave [Greece](#), but when they were told of the collapse of the Greek armies, which left the western road to [Athens](#) wide open to the Germans, they realised that no other course was possible.

During daylight on the 23rd, especially in the afternoon, enemy aircraft were busy machine-gunning the roads, and hostile artillery fire was directed at the battalion's area, chiefly at the gun positions. The German guns could not be located for some time and then they were found to be out of range of the New Zealand field artillery. Brigadier [Miles](#)⁸ (CRA) therefore had three medium guns brought forward to the vicinity of [Molos](#) and from there about nightfall engaged the enemy batteries. About four that afternoon enemy troops on cycles and motor-cycles appeared at the Alamanas bridge and about eighteen who had crossed the river were driven back by the detachments of 23 Battalion left there to watch the place.

During the afternoon it was decided that the 5 Brigade detachments on the left

of 25 Battalion were to be withdrawn that night and that all field and anti-tank guns in front of the spur just east of the [Thermopylae](#) baths were to be brought back to positions in the vicinity of [Ay Trias](#) and [Molos](#). As this left a troop of 25-pounders (which were in an anti-tank role) in front of the two-pounder anti-tank guns, four other two-pounders were brought up. As the withdrawals proceeded, 25 Battalion established a road block of disabled carriers and logs, covered by a two-pounder anti-tank gun, near a bridge about 1200 yards north of Battalion Headquarters. At dawn next day the block was removed.

In the late afternoon of the 23rd the battalion received orders to withdraw the following night. Early the next morning there was intermittent artillery fire by both sides and shortly after dawn a carrier patrol of 24 Battalion (the three battalions provided these patrols in turn) reported that the enemy had repaired a span of the Alamanas bridge and had a patrol south of the river. Accurate artillery fire was directed at the bridge and was continued throughout the morning on this and other targets, except during air attacks on the gun positions, which although frequently dive-bombed and machine-gunned, appeared to suffer no damage.

Artillery fire from both sides and enemy air attacks increased considerably during the morning, the latter causing the loss of one carrier. 'It was during that morning,' wrote Sherlock,⁹ the carrier officer, 'that one of the carriers that had occasion to move down to the road was destroyed by aircraft machine-gun fire. Tracer bullets had hit the petrol tanks and the carrier burst into flames. The crew escaped injury.'

The general situation and the increased enemy activity made it evident that an attack would take place very shortly, and in fact it had been ordered for that day. The German orders for the 24th directed that an armoured force of [5 Panzer Division](#) that morning 'will attack astride the [Lamia- Thebes](#) road with the top of [Thermopylae](#) Pass¹⁰ as its first objective. After reaching this objective a force is to move on [Molos](#) along the northern edge of the mountains.... [8 Air Corps](#) will support the attack from 0630 hours by attacks on known gun positions and enemy troop concentrations.... The main body of 6 Mm Div will advance via [Lamia-Kutsia- Molos](#)', that is, along the road covered by 25 Battalion.

In a later description of the situation the Germans wrote: 'The English were

making use of their last chance for a real defence on the classical ground of [Thermopylae](#). They had blocked and demolished the roads leading south, sited strong rearguards in this most favourable position, and held up the pursuing motorised troops of the Pz divisions since the morning of 21 April. On the right flank [i.e., west of 25 Battalion, up the main [Lamia- Athens](#) road through the [Brallos Pass](#)] ... the main factor holding up the attack was the difficult terrain, but on the left, between the north slopes of [Thermopylae](#) and the Gulf of [Lamia](#), the main factor was the great defensive fire power of the entrenched enemy.'

Most of the enemy effort in the morning was directed against the Australians holding the [Brallos Pass](#), but with little success there. A troop of tanks was then diverted to push through alone to [Molos](#), it 'not being expected that the enemy will defend this road strongly'. The troop soon reported 'Unexpected and extremely heavy opposition. Artillery firing like mad. Road block removed. Danger of mines.'

At 11 a.m. three tanks rounding a bluff two to three miles west of C Company were engaged by our artillery, one being disabled while the other two withdrew. These were the tanks diverted from the [Brallos Pass](#) attack and not a detachment, as was first suspected, that had crossed the Sperkhios by the Alamanas bridge or between there and the sea. Shortly after midday, when Colonel Wilder was visiting C Company headquarters, there was much air action up and down the road and against the gun positions for about an hour, followed by increased artillery fire by both sides and a good deal of area bombing and machine-gunning by aircraft.

At 2 p.m. tanks were reported on the eastern side of Salt Springs, 6000 yards away, one tank and possibly another being hit by our artillery fire and four retiring behind the aqueduct there. Half an hour later dive-bombing and machine-gun fire from the air became most intense. This was a prelude to an advance by enemy tanks and lorry-borne infantry, preceded by sixty to eighty motor-cyclists, down the straight road from the west towards C Company; a few minutes later a dozen ordinary cyclists near 14 Platoon of C Company were fired on. The attack did not come on but it was not long before enemy infantry on higher ground south-west of C Company were firing down the ridge on the company's positions. Two sections of 14 Platoon were withdrawn to the vicinity of Company Headquarters, where they took up a position in a gap between C and A Companies. About this time, a little after 3 p.m., Colonel Wilder was giving the company commanders their orders for

disengaging and withdrawing that night, in accordance with the evacuation plan, though Major Williams could not attend on account of the threat to C Company.

The two forward platoons of C Company, 15 and 13, kept the enemy pinned down 200 yards away by rifle and Bren-gun fire while the 3-inch mortars maintained a steady fire on the scrub-covered area which sheltered them. The enemy continued to infiltrate on the high ground behind the left of C Company, ground which 7 MG Platoon could not engage because of an intervening ridge. About 4.30 Major Satterthwaite, after telephone discussions with Williams and George (A Company), instructed C Company to withdraw and report to Major George; it was to reorganise behind A Company headquarters and the two companies were then to hold a defensive position. Instructions were sent to 13 and 15 Platoons and the two forward sections of 14 Platoon by Private [Common](#),¹¹ who volunteered to take a message. The citation for the Military Medal he was awarded explains the situation:

'On the 24th April, 1941, at [Molos](#), when the coy was almost surrounded and under intense fire, volunteers were called for to take an order for the withdrawal to the fwd pls. Pte Common immediately volunteered, and owing to his dash and daring, the withdrawal was accomplished. Pte Common subsequently did good work in rallying men under fire and volunteered again to wait behind to destroy a truck, a task which he also successfully accomplished.'

The two platoons were in a difficult position with continuous machine-gun fire forcing them to use the lower slopes near the road. Some of 14 Platoon's pits had been occupied by the enemy and fourteen tanks were on the road below A Company, resulting in some of the men being caught by the shortened artillery fire directed against the tanks and in a number of men being cut off. Casualties from enemy machine-gun and rifle fire also occurred. Many of the men were forced to take cover but later were able to get back.

The enemy continued to move along the high ground and soon A Company came under this flanking and reverse fire, its forward No. 9 Platoon also coming under the artillery fire directed at the tanks. No. 7 Section of the platoon fired on the tanks with its anti-tank rifle, only to receive overwhelming retaliation. The platoon was forced to withdraw and was fortunate to get back to a new position below A Company headquarters. To meet the threat from the high ground, 7 Platoon moved

two Brens higher up the ridge and a little later Major George ordered a section of 8 Platoon to move higher up also to cover the flank and rear of his company. The absence of reserves on the high ground from which they could anticipate and prevent or delay enemy outflanking movements had created a dangerous situation.

The position at this stage and subsequently has been dealt with in detail in a battalion report:

'By 1700 to 1715 hours C Coy had fallen back through A Coy positions, moving between Nos 7 & 9 Pls. Before withdrawing a number of C Coy men were seen to gather under a tree where they became a good target as they moved back in bunches and some men were seen to be hit. At 1710 hrs Sgt [Winter](#)¹² (No 9 PI) encountered Major Williams who was directed to A Coy HQ and then, on moving forward to make a recce, encountered some two secs of C Coy and endeavoured to indicate to them the best line of withdrawal to higher ground. Cpl Hale [Williams](#)¹³ (who was wounded in the leg) took his section up the spur and Cpl Connor's¹⁴ section moved towards the road, where, it is believed, they were fired on by the tanks. At 1715 hrs 14 tanks had passed along the road in front of A Coy's area.... Three lorries of enemy infantry debussed opposite No 9 pl's original positions at about 1730 hrs. At this time B Coy withdrew the left fwd pl (No 12) to higher ground in its rear to deal with the threat on the left flank and to protect the rear of the other two pls. At the same time the centre pl (No. 11) was ordered to place its centre section in a posn to watch the rear and the position vacated by the left platoon....in the meantime most of 13 and 15 pls crossed the creek and were working their way up ridge near A Coy's right pl (No 9). From 1710 to 1740 hrs remainder of coy (C) worked their way up through scrub under heavy MG fire and sustained heavy casualties.

'Meanwhile several sections to avoid MG fire had gone down ridge to near road where they came under heavy fire from tanks. At this stage our Arty concentrated on road to right of A Coy and many of C Coy men were caught between Arty and enemy MG fire....A few men only found their way to A Coy HQ.

'Tanks were seen by D Coy for the first time about 1715 hrs. There were four and a fifth one also appeared but only for a few minutes, in front of B Coy area. Of the four, two were hit. Later two more appeared, one getting well through before

being stopped. The second tank, in the opinion of one of D Coy sgts., was stopped by A/TK rifle fire damaging the tracks. Shortly after 1700 hrs D Coy was subjected to MG fire from the high ground on their left. Also at this time, some of the men of the forward coys, presumably C, came through D Coy lines. Most of these men were wounded.

'By 1800 hrs the two secs of No 9 pl, who had moved back earlier, fell further back and were then placed in position at A Coy HQ. Some of C Coy personnel had also been collected and placed in posn to cover the rear of the spur on which A Coy HQ was situated, where some enemy infantry, who had got out of the tanks, were endeavouring to get behind this position. At 1830 hrs B Coy were heavily shelled. Enemy MG fire was being directed on to occupied areas from the high ground to the rear. Capt [Armstrong](#)¹⁵ advised Bn HQ accordingly and it was agreed it would be wise to reform the coy front. This was done immediately by withdrawing the centre pl (No 11) to a posn about 200 yards south of the right pl (No 10) and withdrawing the left pl to a posn about 100 yds south of the centre pl. This gave B Coy a new line facing almost due west. (The Coy was previously facing almost due north.) At this stage B Coy HQ was moved back to a position immediately east of the junction between the centre and left pls. Wire was reeled and communication was re-established with Bn HQ. Enemy tanks were reported to be proceeding round the road and two were seen moving back towards the bridge near the track leading to Bn HQ. These tanks were heavily shelled and were stopped, both tanks burning fiercely.

'1900 hrs. At this time No 5 sec of No 8 pl (A Coy) was moved still higher up the ridge into some ruins which the enemy were approaching and our artillery opened up on this area at the same time. The shelling was ceased on receipt of advice that A Coy were occupying the buildings. About 60/70 had been seen approaching the posn. Phone communication with the Bren carriers established that they had moved up also at this stage to cover left flank. Our artillery also opened up on the forward slope of the ridge previously held by C Coy and now in occupation by the enemy who had debussed from lorries in that vicinity.... Heavy fire from enemy MG positions was directed on to the left pl (No. 12, B Coy) and on account of the setting sun it was impossible to locate these positions. The right and centre pls (Nos. 10 and 11) of B Coy were being continuously shelled by what appeared to be mortars and 2-pounders, presumably by tanks further forward in front of area vacated by B Coy's

left pl (No. 12). At 1930 hrs OC C Coy (Major Williams), Lieuts Witters¹⁶ and McLeay¹⁷ (both C Coy) and two or three men from C Coy came back to B Coy area. These two subalterns remained with the left pl of B Coy and assisted in re-organising C Coy men to help hold this posn. Shortly after this Sgt Brown¹⁸ of A Coy came in through the left pl of B Coy with about 30 men. 2/Lt Morris¹⁹ who showed great coolness under fire, placed them in position on his (Morris's) left flank (of 10 pl). 2/Lt Morris reported that Sgt Brown showed both initiative and courage in controlling his men and getting them into position under fire and also that this NCO went forward again in an attempt to collect more of his Coy personnel....

'A Coy reported that at about 2000 hrs ... voices of enemy who had penetrated through the bush below their HQ were heard, and when they had advanced up to this position they were dealt with by hand grenades, rifle fire, and a brief but decisive bayonet sortie. The enemy's retirement provided A Coy with an opportunity to disengage and commence to withdraw and at approx 2000/2030 orders were given to that effect. A Coy moved back steadily and the three known wounded were brought back to the RAP. The withdrawal was covered by LMGs leap-frogging from ridge to ridge. On reaching B Coy area ... the two coys joined forces and moved through D Coy at 2050 hrs. No. 7 pl withdrew through Bn HQ and was then given the task of covering the gully in which Bn HQ was situated.'

At 8.15 p.m. B Company (Armstrong²⁰ had reported that the enemy was working round its left flank and that it was under heavy machine-gun fire from that direction. The company was ordered to withdraw by platoons, at five to ten minutes' intervals, to a ridge farther back. Captain Armstrong with his headquarters withdrew to D Company headquarters, where about the same time Majors George (A Coy) and Williams (C Coy) with their men and the left platoon of B Company also arrived. The men were placed in a small valley under cover and after a conference of the company commanders it was decided that, as darkness was falling, it was advisable to push back with everyone as soon as possible, with D Company holding on for another fifteen minutes. The withdr ceeded across country to the bridge north of Battalion Headquarters and, after a short delay, the troops were embussed and taken to [Molos](#), where a convoy was joined.

Some of C Company's vehicles which had been sent forward to pick up the men

ran into trouble. Although they were warned, they went on too far with the object of saving the men further exertion and ran into the enemy. 'Suddenly 4 English lorries, completely ignorant of the situation, came round the bend,' said a German account of the incident. 'At the sight of our tanks they jammed on their brakes and stopped a few yards away. Our machine guns shattered their windscreens. Some of their occupants fled into the darkness, falling over themselves in their haste. What did our men care that the Tommies were still all around? By the greatest of good luck they found in the lorries canned fruit, beautiful juicy pears. We were thirsty. Our throats were parched. How long had we been fighting?'

The carrier platoon also found itself in serious trouble, which Second-Lieutenant Sherlock describes:

'The carrier platoon were ordered to move at 2050 hrs night 24/25 April and to move down from the high ground to the road and thence to the bridge. The German tank that had been put out of action just short of the bridge was at that time burning furiously. Knowing that the only way through for him was the road, he [Sherlock] instructed his driver to go straight through the flames that enveloped the road. This was done. He looked back and saw his platoon truck and remaining carrier come through also. At this time the party were only about a hundred yards from the bridge. As he turned round to look to his front again, he was fired on by anti-tank guns and LMGs. The first 2-lb shell passed through the front of his own vehicle. Almost at the same time the platoon truck and also the other carrier was hit.... The casualties were:-Seven wounded, three killed, and one unaccounted for. One of the seven wounded has since died while P.O.W. All wounded were brought back to a Dressing Station and were eventually taken P.O.W.'

It was all most unfortunate and was due to the confusion of battle. When Sherlock's party emerged suddenly through the flames and smoke, the anti-tank gunners and machine-gunners naturally thought they were the enemy and opened fire instantly. Sherlock thought that the Germans had penetrated to the bridge and returned the fire with a Bren. He then ordered the men to abandon the vehicles and crawled along a ditch to identify his assailants. After a while the password was accepted.

Apart from machine-gun fire from the high ground on the left, between 8 and 9

p.m., D Company (Hastie) was not troubled, the enemy making no attempt to come forward in the dusk. The company kept continuous touch with 24 Battalion. Two forward sections withdrew to Company Headquarters about 9 p.m. while the third section held the vicinity of a track and road junction on the right of D Company's position. About half an hour later, under instructions from Battalion Headquarters, two sections were sent to it down near the road to where the headquarters had withdrawn. A few minutes after this, D Company received orders to hold its position until 10.30 p.m. No. 18 Platoon (Handyside), however, through some misunderstanding, withdrew immediately, together with two sections of 16 Platoon, to Battalion Headquarters, the two sections being sent back to the company.

At 10.30 p.m. D Company withdrew without difficulty and the battalion had successfully disengaged. An NCO riding on the last truck reported to 26 Battalion, which, together with artillery and two ambulances, was providing the rearguard for the journey southwards, that 25 Battalion was clear of the battle area. Two detachments of A Company, who had arrived at the artillery lines at the rear of Battalion Headquarters about 9 p.m., were taken out in the artillery transport. Second-Lieutenant [Armour](#),²¹ commanding 8 Platoon of A Company, was not so fortunate. He was cut off, but although he evaded the Germans, he could not overtake the battalion and was at large in [Greece](#) for several months before being captured.

It will be noted that the weight of the German attack on the New Zealand position fell almost entirely on 25 Battalion and its supporting arms. This was due to two causes: the withdrawal of 5 Brigade from its position between the left of 25 Battalion and the right of the Australians, and the fact that 6 Brigade was deployed facing north with the main road from [Lamia](#) entering the brigade's position through its left flank. The gap created by the withdrawal of 5 Brigade left the way wide open for the enemy to penetrate to the high ground to the south, from which he could turn east against and behind the left of the battalion.

The real danger to the position was the German infantry, not the tanks. The enemy tanks had only one feasible line of advance, that is, along or near the road, and a very formidable anti-tank defence was established by the siting of many of the 25-pounders in an anti-tank role to back up the anti-tank guns. With reasonable infantry strength in position to meet enemy infantry advancing along the line of the

road and the slopes south of it in support of their tanks, the defence of the road could be regarded as secure for a short term, especially as 24 and 26 Battalions were nearby.

But an enemy advance eastwards along the high ground behind 25 Battalion was a very different matter. Such an advance would immediately render untenable both 25 Battalion's position, including the anti-tank defences within or near it, and the successive artillery positions to the east. The refusal of 25 Battalion's left flank so that it reached well back on the high ground, together with fighting patrols beyond it to conceal the flank, would have increased the security of the battalion and considerably delayed the enemy. If, in addition, a reserve company from 26 Battalion could have supported the refused flank it would have been most valuable. In mountainous areas reserves and patrols on high ground have the great advantage that they can move downhill to counter an enemy moving uphill.

In considering this action of 6 Brigade in general and of 25 Battalion in particular, it must be remembered that it was a rearguard position, to be held for a limited period and therefore permitting dispositions which could not be accepted for normal defence. But although a period for holding the position may be stated, it cannot be taken for granted that that period may not be extended, which was in fact the case in [Greece](#) with the rear-guard actions at [Servia](#) and [Kriekouki](#). Had 25 Battalion been required to hold its position for a further twenty-four hours the situation could have been very difficult. There was fortunately no question of that, however. But a wide, outflanking movement to cut the brigade's withdrawal route east of [Molos](#) would probably have done so by the evening of the 25th.

Caught at some disadvantage, 25 Battalion reacted well, fought stubbornly, and readjusted its dispositions so as firmly to hold the enemy. The Germans were unable to break the defence along the line of the road and were held to some extent along the high ground in rear of the battalion, or on its left when it changed front. The British campaign history describes the battle briefly:

'On the 24th there was an artillery duel lasting until the middle of the afternoon and culminating in an attack on the 6th New Zealand Brigade at [Molos](#) by infantry and tanks of the 6th Mountain and 5th Panzer Divisions. The weight fell on 25th New Zealand Battalion, which stood firm, dealt with the German infantry, and enabled the

artillery to destroy about fourteen tanks. At 9 p.m. the action was over and 6th New Zealand Brigade was able to start its withdrawal as intended.'

A controversy arose amongst the Germans as to the parts played respectively by the infantry and the tanks, arising from the award of a decoration to an infantry officer and from newspaper reports neglecting to mention the part played by the tanks. The following extracts from detailed enemy reports on the action give some indication of the enemy's plan and of his difficulties, and at the same time are a tribute to the staunch defence put up by the battalion and its supporting arms, especially the artillery. (German time was one hour ahead of British.)

'0900 hrs. Baacke Gp (of 6 Mtn Div) ordered to advance ... and attack Molos. 112 Recce Unit was to follow immediately behind.... 1200 hrs. Baacke Gp and 112 Recce Unit moved off.... the terrain difficulties (deep gullies, steep hillsides on the right and swamps on both sides of the road) made this attack mainly an infantry one and in fact one for mountain troops.... 1515 hrs. The advance guard made the first enemy contact 1 km west of Weinberg. An attack was mounted from the move, with 2 companies forward. It gained 300 metres and was then halted by heavy opposition and accurate shellfire.

'1530 hrs. 1/31 Pz Coy with a heavy infantry gun platoon and a battery of AA guns reached Kutsia and stopped there because of the heavy shelling east of it. The company commander (Capt Prince von Schoenburg) planned to take advantage of any pause in the firing to push the company forward against the enemy positions at Molos and roll them up. III/ 141 Mtn Regt was ordered forward at 1550 hrs....

'1630 hrs. 2 guns of 61 AA Bty went into position at Kutsia and opened fire on the enemy guns located west of Molos. At the same time the attacking tanks began to advance. This attack was held up south of Trias by accurate concentrated shelling from fresh enemy batteries and by A Tk guns. The country was most unfavourable—steep hills to the right of the road and swamp to the left—and the leading platoon of 1/61 AA Bty could not take up firing positions. Neither could supporting fire be opened from the road, as this part of the road went up a rise and was blocked by our tanks, which could not leave the road and some of which had been knocked out by the enemy. 8 heavy tanks were burning. Soon afterwards the other platoon of 61 AA Bty had to cease fire as its targets were no longer visible due to the smoke from the

burning tanks and the enemy barrage. Also it could not be observed where the foremost attacking troops of **6 Mtn Div** had got to. Baacke Gp was having hard fighting and gaining ground slowly. The enemy was being forced farther and farther back to his main positions at **Molos**. Until 1900 hrs his shellfire continued undiminished. At dusk our troops reached the ridge west of Aj Trias. Not until then did an 88mm bty in position at Stylis [seven miles north of **Molos**, on the northern shore] open fire in support of the advance guard which had been fighting hard since 1600 hrs in urgent need of support. If arty had been sited in the Stylis area in plenty of time during the previous few days it could have shot the enemy batteries at **Molos** (6 batteries!) out of their positions from the flank.... The GSO 1 (1900 hrs) wirelessly ... to Corps HQ that the cycle battalion was attacking **Molos** in company with tanks. ... At 2000 hrs the advance guard renewed its attack from the area west of Aj Trias and by 2100 hrs had fought its way on to the ridge east of it. [Note: should be 'west']....

`2100 hrs. The commander of 111/141 received detailed orders ... to attack on 25 April via ... Mendenitsa [five miles south west of **Molos**] to Kumnina [six miles south-east of **Molos**. This was the wide outflanking movement referred to earlier.]

`2230 hrs. Divisional orders for the continuation of the attack on 25 Apr sent to formations. ... [A mountain regt and an arty regt were also ordered to move forward to the Koutseki area about six miles south of **Lamia** by 4 and 5 a.m. respectively.] During the evening of 24 April the enemy west of **Molos** defended his positions fiercely against our advance guard. The latter cooperated with the tanks and after hard fighting reached the area west and south of Aj Trias. Early on 25 Apr **6 Mtn Div** was to continue the attack east by sending troops over the hills south of the road towards **Molos**. 2330 hrs. Wireless message to 18 Corps that the advance guard had launched an attack on **Molos** at 2200 hrs. Since 1900 the enemy shelling had been decreasing and at 2300 hours it stopped altogether. About 2100 hrs the advance guard attack was stopped in error by the commander of the armoured unit [this was denied by the commander referred to]. The advance guard commander was contacted and the error rectified and so the attack on **Molos** continued at 2200 hrs against weakening resistance. The tanks were asked to take part in the night thrust but their commander refused.

` Fri 25 Apr 41. 0130 hrs. The attack reached the ridge west of **Molos**.... 0250

hrs: 2/Lt Elsnitz's MC platoon ... reached [Molos](#), after having overtaken some Pz units and found troops of the advance guard moving on from there.... The 6 Mtn Div troops had pushed forward energetically at 2300 hrs, taken the enemy from the flank about midnight, and attacked him so vigorously that he was compelled to evacuate [Molos](#) under cover of night with heavy losses and abandoning a large quantity of equipment. The following extract is from 1/61 AA Bty's report on the action: "The victory at [Thermopylae](#) is to be ascribed to [6 Mtn Div](#), as our tank attack was halted by the enemy fire".'

So much, then, for the infantry version which, it will be observed, gives no credit for the 'victory' to the planned British withdrawal, which was successfully accomplished. Now for the German armour's version, subsequent to the despatch of the troop of tanks from the [Brallos Pass](#) attack to push through to [Molos](#), which has already been mentioned:

' 24 Apr 41.... about midday the company [No. [1 Coy](#), Capt Prince von Schoenburg, 1/31 Pz Regt] was diverted [from [Brallos Pass](#)] east along the road to [Molos](#). Here a platoon of [1 Coy](#) sent ahead to recce a flank was halted by terrific shellfire. This fire continued unabated but [1 Coy](#) pushed forward yard by yard to a point 1½ km from [Molos](#). Losses were heavy— there was not a single heavy tank (37-, 50-, or 75-mm) in going order; some of them were brewed up, and others had severe track or mechanical damage, and there were only two able to shoot. [1 Coy](#) could not carry on alone, and about 1900 hours the rest of the unit, which had been waiting at the foot of the pass, was sent up to exploit.

'About 2100 hrs the unit reached the positions [1 Coy](#) was holding so gallantly and during the night assembled for an attack at first light. 25 Apr 41. During the night the commander discussed with the leader of the mountain division's advance guard an attack on [Molos](#) which the latter was mounting at 0230 hrs. Patrols of mtn tps went out and reported at 0300 hrs that [Molos](#) and its vicinity were clear. [1 Coy's](#) relentless advance and the arrival of the rest of the unit (which had been observed by the English) had caused the enemy to abandon his excellent positions under cover of darkness and flee towards [Thebes](#).'

This official report was supported by a very lively appendix of which, unfortunately, there is space for only a few extracts:

`... a new attack was ordered. Push through to [Molos](#) and destroy the artillery. The leading tanks assembled behind a mountain ridge. The enemy had seen us. Naturally he greeted us with heavy shellfire. The shells were bursting damned close. ... While this was going on, the boss sitting a little aside was weighing up the chances....He spoke very calmly....Forward! The coy advances without its attached troops. It is going to meet an enemy superior in numbers ... and our drivers—they drive like the devil.

`With Lieut Wetstein's platoon leading, 19 tanks in file charged along the yellowish country road. The sun shone down hot on the steel. We had long ago taken off our coats.... Ahead of us the first shells burst on the road ... we could not deploy. On our right the hills rose 800 metres, and on our left stretched the dreaded [Thermopylae](#) swamp. We had to push on, go on, do anything but stop. Again and again the tanks were shaken as by giant fists. The drivers involuntarily pulled their heads a few inches back from their driving slits.... The shells screamed more and more madly into the middle of the attacking company.

`In the shallow ditches our forward infantry, who a few hours before had been halted here, lay pressed into the ground. They could not do any more on their own. Suddenly we came under fire from 6 or 8 guns. Without halting we swung our turrets round to the right and answered the fire with great effect. Our guns fired as rapidly as they could and our 50-mm tank shells spread death and destruction. We were still moving. We must get through!

`But at the next curve all hell broke loose. Shells burst on all sides, and several machine guns chattered. A few Tommies ran across the road and disappeared in the thick scrub. A heavy tank was hit direct. Enemy anti-tank guns! A flash of flame shot from the petrol tank and in a few seconds the tank was ablaze. Thank God the crew jumped out and made for the nearest cover. A few yards farther on a light tank had run into the hillside. Nothing moved round it. Its abandoned machine guns stuck straight up. In its hull was a hole the size of a plate, and its tracks hung in shreds from the driving sprocket.

`In the middle of the road sat three other tanks, all on fire. Machine gun bullets whistled through the air in thousands. Shellbursts tore the steel bodies apart. The leading tank was still burning and two others were hurled back with serious damage.

Where was the boss? Wireless communications were out and in the headphones only fragments of questions and orders could be heard....

'Shell and anti-tank fire, altogether about 40 guns performed a danse macabre.

'Forward where the boss was, the situation was grave. Prince Schoenburg had already burst through the enemy's main gun positions, but his tank had been immobilised and he was defending himself hard. Behind him was his faithful paladin, Sjt Maj Nagel, supporting him....

'The deadly anti-tank shells whistled only a few centimetres over the turrets of these two forward tanks. When would we be hit? When would the English counter-attack? When would reinforcements arrive? The company was completely annihilated. Did it not seem useless to stay there? "I will not think of withdrawing," cried the boss into the microphone. Fight on. Shell after shell sped from our gun and success was not long in coming.... Help arrived in the shape of our heavy self propelled infantry guns. With incomparable resolution these giants charged the enemy. Their effect was absolutely decisive. From all sides the wounded dragged themselves towards the doctor who began his healing work in the middle of the terrific fire. Friend and foe received first aid. And there were many in dire need of it. [Dr Preiss](#) did miracles at the risk of his life. ... It must have been almost midnight. Verey lights went up, a few pistols cracked, here and there a rifle shot echoed among the scrub. The battle was over.'

Meanwhile on 22 April 4 Brigade had withdrawn to take up a covering position eight miles south of [Thebes](#), a small town 50 miles to the south-east (but 80 miles by road). Fifth Brigade had gone the same day and, after resting in concealment 15 miles south-east of [Molos](#) during daylight the next day, had reached its embarkation beach at [Porto Rafti](#), 20 miles south east of [Athens](#), by dawn on the 24th.

Twenty-fifth Battalion joined the 6 Brigade convoy at [Molos](#) about 11.30 p.m. on the 24th and a little after dawn on Anzac Day reached the small village of Oinoi, immediately behind 4 Brigade's covering position. In his diary, Wakeling describes his last day in the [Molos](#) position and the withdrawal:

' Apr 24. Aircraft hammered us all day—dive bombing and MG. Had a poor night's rest as everyone's nerves on edge and an ominous lull of uncertainty still

hanging around. Dive bombers still active on the roads and this waiting no good. The Battalion in bloody action to-day and several chaps killed that I know ... 14 Hun tanks burnt and hundreds of troops killed, some in a bayonet charge. Leaving to-night. Apr 25. What a night—shelled all the afternoon and as we were pulling out at 9.30, shells falling all around. Travelled all night.... For the first few hours a terrible uncertainty as to whether we should get out or not. Driving past quite close to our big guns for the first five miles and the noise deafening. Lots of wounded about this morning but all brave chaps and still cracking jokes. Camped for breakfast in a wood somewhere near [Athens](#) (twenty miles to the south-east). Moved on again at 10 p.m....

A well-wooded area provided ideal concealment for the very tired battalion during the daylight hours of the 25th, though Colonel Wilder and his staff were busy reconnoitring beaches and, owing to alterations due to enemy action, the [Corinth Canal](#) area through which 6 Brigade was now to pass.

It was first intended that after crossing the Canal into the [Peloponnese](#), the troops would again rest in concealment during the daylight hours of 26 April, but enemy landings on the northern coast of the peninsula made it necessary to push on, 70 miles to the south-west, in case the route to the beach was cut. Defensive positions covering the roads north-west and south-west of [Tripolis](#), an important road and rail centre, were to be occupied. Moving at dusk on the 25th and picking up the battalion commanders and their staffs at the [Corinth Canal](#), the brigade pressed on for 40 miles through the town of [Argos](#), 25 Battalion going under cover for the daylight hours seven miles farther on in the vicinity of [Miloi](#). This village, on the Gulf of Argolis, is at the foot of a high mountain range which is crossed by the road to [Tripolis](#), 25 miles distant, the road reaching a height of 2600 feet and then descending about 400 feet to the plain on which [Tripolis](#) is situated.

If the whole brigade could not reach [Tripolis](#), detachments at least were required to block the roads that day, 26 April. Two rifle companies each from 24 and 25 Battalions were there fore ordered to [Tripolis](#), a disagreeable duty by day as there were certain to be air attacks on the way, though these were rarely very effective in mountainous country. The orders had scarcely been issued when they were amended, a report having been received that enemy parachutists had landed

at the [Corinth Canal](#). This was a very serious matter as 4 Brigade, still holding its covering position to the south of [Thebes](#), about 60 miles by road to the north-east of the Canal, was to cross it that night.

Sixth Brigade was ordered to send two rifle companies to assist the defenders of the Canal area and two companies to occupy defensive positions north of [Argos](#). Twenty-sixth Battalion was to undertake these tasks, which were likely to be very difficult in the absence of any supporting arms and in the face of severe air attacks. Sixth Brigade was also ordered to have a complete battalion in reserve near [Milo](#) and 25 Battalion, detailed for the duty, occupied a defensive position between the village and the mountains immediately to the west. Twenty fourth Battalion was to undertake the original task of blocking the roads at [Tripolis](#).

There was a great deal of enemy air activity after dawn and 26 Battalion was under heavy air attack on its way towards the Canal. It encountered the enemy in a strong defensive position a few miles south of [Corinth](#) and was preparing an attack when it was ordered to break off the engagement and cover the town of [Argos](#) and the port of [Navplion](#), from which large numbers of troops, including some New Zealand nurses, were to be embarked that night. The change in role for 26 Battalion was due to information that the Canal bridge had been destroyed. It was therefore impossible for 4 Brigade to cross, and so the reason for 26 Battalion's task, which was to help 4 Brigade to cut its way through, had gone. (After considerable difficulty in getting signal communication with 4 Brigade, a period of acute anxiety for [General Freyberg](#), a message was sent through 1 Armoured Brigade covering the beaches east of [Athens](#). Fourth Brigade had no difficulty in withdrawing to those beaches and embarking the following night, 27 – 28 April.)

In the meantime 24 Battalion had reached [Tripolis](#) and was covering the roads as ordered. There was little information regarding the German forces in the [Peloponnese](#) but they were clearly in a position to threaten, not only [Tripolis](#), but also the southern embarkation ports. The plan was for 6 Brigade to embark at [Monemvasia](#) in the south-east of the [Peloponnese](#), 90 air-miles south of the [Corinth Canal](#). No troops had hitherto embarked from this place, which was about 90 miles from [Tripolis](#) by very tortuous roads over several mountain ranges, and was difficult for the enemy land forces to reach. It was also furthest removed from the nearest German airfields.

It was impossible for the whole brigade to cover the distance in one night. Part, therefore, would commence withdrawing that night; the brigade would remain in concealment during daylight on the 27th, move to the [Monemvasia](#) area that night, keep under cover till nightfall on the 28th, and then embark.

Twenty-sixth Battalion from its covering position near [Argos](#) moved at dusk on the 26th and, passing through 25 Battalion's position at [Miloj](#), crossed the range to the low valleys near [Tripolis](#). The same night 25 Battalion moved to the top of the pass on the [Miloj- Tripolis](#) road and held a position there on the 27th, while 24 Battalion remained near [Tripolis](#). These dispositions protected the brigade from an enemy advance from the Canal, and the route through [Tripolis](#) was guarded, while 26 Battalion in a central situation provided a reserve for either battalion.

During daylight on the 27th enemy aircraft attacked any movement on the roads, but the troops, being under cover, were not seriously interfered with. The journey to [Monemvasia](#) after dark was the vital move. The nature of the country made it slow and difficult and there would be barely sufficient hours of darkness to complete the journey. Everyone was warned to avoid traffic blocks and men were stationed at road junctions to prevent vehicles taking the wrong road. That the latter precaution was necessary had been shown the previous day, when two trucks carrying men of D Company to the reserve position near [Miloj](#) missed a turn-off and travelled on to [Tripolis](#), pursued in a platoon truck by Captain [Morrison](#)²² and Company Sergeant-Major [Daly](#).²³ One truck was turned back but the other, under Corporal Jack [Jarvis](#),²⁴ could not be found and reached [Kalamata](#), where, together with large numbers of British troops awaiting embarkation, the men were captured by the Germans.

Twenty-fifth Battalion had the most difficult task in the impending move. Its vehicles, sheltering on the plain of [Tri polis](#), had to return up the narrow, winding road to the top of the pass and there turn. When the troops were aboard the vehicles were to return down the pass, cross the plain to [Tripolis](#), and then take the road southwards via [Sparta](#) to [Monemvasia](#). It was unsafe for the transport to move before 9 p.m. and the column was required to clear [Tripolis](#) on the return journey by midnight in order to give 24 Battalion time to complete its journey before daylight on the 28th. If this were not achieved, 24 Battalion would cover only part of the

distance and, lying hidden during daylight, would be beyond support from the rest of the brigade if attacked, or the enemy might cut the road beyond it.

All ranks of 25 Battalion were required to be on the alert to avoid the slightest waste of time and to co-operate in speeding the battalion on its way. Brigadier Barrowclough and his staff recognised that time was all too short.

Twenty-fourth Battalion concentrated in [Tripolis](#) and, together with 6 Brigade Headquarters, awaited the arrival of 25 Battalion. At midnight, the appointed time, there was no sign of it, and, as always at such times of strain, the suspense grew and imaginations pictured all kinds of misadventures. But at ten minutes past twelve the faint rumble of vehicles in the distance was heard, dim lights appeared, and presently 25 Battalion, its vehicles close-spaced and headed by Colonel Wilder, swept past at speed, its tail clearing [Tripolis](#) by 12.30 a.m.

No time was lost in the endeavour to cover the hundred miles of unfamiliar mountainous road in the five hours of darkness still remaining. Though almost worn out, the drivers drove as their duty required, with skill and concentration. Nothing was allowed to delay the column and any vehicle breaking down was pushed off the road, its load being transferred to other vehicles. By dawn on Monday, 28 April, the battalion, followed by Brigade Headquarters and 24 Battalion, had arrived at its destination and was under such cover as was to be found amongst the rocks and olive trees in the neighbourhood.

It was of course possible for the enemy to follow and interfere with, or even prevent, the embarkation, as in fact had happened the previous night at [Tolos](#), east of the old concentration area at [Miloj](#), although this was not known at the time. The troops at [Monemvasia](#) were disposed over a wide area, [Divisional Headquarters](#) being near the beach, where it was endeavouring to get in touch with the naval authorities. Twenty-fourth and 25th Battalions were 12 miles away, and there were two Australian platoons in a covering position astride the road eight miles farther north. Ample warning of an enemy approach would thus be given to enable the two battalions to take up suitable tactical positions.

Shortly after dawn the inevitable flight of enemy bombers appeared. 'I counted about 70 in the first covey,' said Colonel Gentry. ²⁵ 'They did not spot any of [6 Bde](#)

and as far as I know dropped no bombs on any NZ troops.' The bombers attacked a small trawler in the bay and eventually sank it but the troops were not molested all day.

There was considerable anxiety among commanders and staffs as to whether all the troops could be embarked that night. There would be ample accommodation in the ships but it was doubtful whether the number of small craft for ferrying the men from shore to ship would prove sufficient. It was possible that one battalion would have to stay until the next night, an unpleasant prospect which 'was accepted cheerfully by 24 Battalion', which was next for duty for a task of this nature. However, a search of the beaches in the district revealed a number of small boats, some of which were sufficiently water tight to be used, and a flotilla, organised by Lieutenant Andrews ²⁶ of the brigade signal section, an experienced boat man, and manned by suitable men from the units, stood ready to ferry the troops from the shore to a Greek caique, which would take them to the ships. In the event the arrangement worked splendidly, the small boats taking off about 800 men; and so, to the relief of all, 24 Battalion did not have to stay behind.

After dark 4 [Field Ambulance](#) with the wounded went to the beach and was followed at stipulated times by the other units, each accompanied by stragglers who had joined up during the last few days. There was no sign of enemy troops. As each unit arrived at the beach it destroyed or seriously damaged its vehicles, some being pushed over the cliffs while others were drained of oil and water and their engines run until they seized. Engines were broken up as much as possible with hammers and tyres were slashed. Fire as a destroying agent was out of the question since it would provide beacons for the enemy. As was the case at all the other embarkation beaches in [Greece](#), the locality was a veritable graveyard of mechanical transport.

This destruction was naturally the cause of deep regret to all the troops. These vehicles had performed such vital service, and driven and maintained with skill and devotion, had alone enabled a successful withdrawal to be made to the beaches.

After the troops had arrived at the beach a considerable time elapsed before the ships appeared. This period—the arrival of the ships, the embarkation, and the departure—is graphically described by Brigadier Barrowclough in his report:

'The vanguard of the force arrived at the beach shortly after 9 p.m. and then ensued a long rather anxious wait for the ships. This was no fault of the Navy. Obviously the ships had to stand off the coast a considerable distance during the hours of daylight or they would have been subjected to heavy attacks and more over the course they were steering would have indicated the point of embarkation....

'At last however the watchers on the beach became aware of dim lights in the bay and presently the dim but unmistakable outline of destroyers was seen. Then came the welcome sound of the Diesel engines of the ALC approaching the shaded guiding lights which indicated the embarkation points.... The first boat loads were naturally the wounded but to the consternation of all these boats returned with the information that only destroyers were in the bay and that the destroyers could not accommodate the wounded. There was nothing for it but to carry the wounded ashore again and leave them there pending the arrival of the [Ajax](#). Unwounded troops were then embarked but the rate of embarkation seemed disappointingly slow. Not all the destroyers had arrived yet and some of the ALC had not yet put in an appearance. The naval officers on the beach began to express doubts as to whether some of the rescue ships might not have been bombed and sunk. The Admiral said that he felt compelled to warn us that possibly only half our force could get off and that we must take precautions for the disposing of the remainder in some defensive position ashore. The situation caused considerable anxiety to all who were responsible for the success of the operation.

'Soon after one o'clock however more destroyers had arrived, more ALC were on the job, and miraculously the tempo of the operation was appreciably increased. Boat-load after boat-load got away and at ever diminishing intervals there came the welcome signals for the next boat-party to move down to the beach. Finally HMS [Ajax](#) herself appeared and to the great relief of everybody the lines of stretcher cases on the beach were put on board and safely embarked on to the cruiser.

'It soon became apparent that the whole force was going to be got off, especially as the Admiral indicated that the ships were prepared to stay until 4 a.m. and take their chance of getting clear of the coast before the enemy dive-bombers could approach them. Shortly before four o'clock there came the complaint from the Navy that boats were waiting and that there were no troops to fill them. The

explanation was that practically the last boats were filled by the personnel of the skeleton divisional and brigade staffs and others who were superintending the loading operations. HMS Ajax was already on the move as the divisional and brigade commanders and their staffs climbed up the ladders to the decks and almost immediately the ship was making at full speed for [Crete](#) and [Suda Bay](#).

The welcome of the Navy was typical and hundreds of weary officers and men were being revived with hot meals produced miraculously from the overtaxed resources of the ship. Every cabin and indeed every square inch of space on the ship's decks were soon crowded with officers and men whose one thought was sleep undisturbed by any possible threat of enemy action. We were more than happy to leave to the Navy the task of dealing with them whilst we enjoyed the luxury of sleep. The following morning found all the ships in [Suda Bay](#).

Sixth Brigade arrived safely in [Suda Bay, Crete](#), about 8 a.m. on Tuesday, 29 April. There it was learnt that 4 and 5 Brigades and some divisional troops were already in [Crete](#), and the arrangements at the moment were that they would remain there until transport was available to take them to Egypt. Sixth Brigade was to go on to Egypt immediately. Australians and other men of units which did not form part of the brigade were disembarked and the brigade transferred from HMS [Ajax](#) and the destroyers [Griffin](#) and [Isis](#) to the SS [Thurland Castle](#) and SS [Comliebank](#). These ships sailed at noon in a convoy with a large naval escort and arrived at [Port Said](#) at 2 a.m. on 2 May.

And thus, for 25 Battalion and the rest of 6 Brigade, their first experience of war came to an end.

Subject to some slight degree of error (though the figures agree very closely with those compiled elsewhere) 25 Battalion's casualties in [Greece](#) were 13 officers and 167 other ranks. Of these, 1 officer and 12 other ranks were killed, and 4 other ranks died of wounds. Four officers and 55 other ranks were wounded, of whom 47 other ranks were taken prisoner of war, about twenty of them after being evacuated to hospital in [Athens](#). A further 8 officers and 96 other ranks were also prisoners of war.

Lance-Corporal [Kerr](#),²⁷ reported as missing, was taken prisoner 15 miles south

of [Lamia](#) on 25 April. After a week at [Lamia](#) and a fortnight at Chalkis, he was sent to [Larisa](#). A week later he escaped by means of a rope made from pack-straps, walked to [Katerini](#), thence by the regular sea service to [Salonika](#) and on foot to Stavros and towards the Bulgarian border. Hearing that escape that way was impossible he returned to [Salonika](#), which he reached on 30 May.

Through the Greek police and the American consul he met a British agent, who arranged accommodation and also for a boat to pick him up, together with other refugees, at Oros. On 8 June he set off for Oros with a British WO II, a Greek nurse, a Greek officer and the latter's fiancée. But the Germans arrested those bringing the boat round as well as the agent, and, sheltered by the monks till 1 July, the party remained at Oros. Kerr then walked to the vicinity of Stavros and, with two other escapees, hid in the fields till 26 July. Then by easy stages they walked to Eviron, where they bought a boat from the monks on the promise of £50 and on 4 August left for [Turkey](#). Calling at Imbros and Tenedos, and not being allowed to land, they succeeded in landing on the Turkish mainland only after their boat had been sunk.

For his excellent initial escape and subsequent persistence, enterprise, and endurance, Lance-Corporal Kerr was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

The number of prisoners of war had been swelled very considerably by the capture at [Kalamata](#) of the majority of the battalion's 1st Reinforcement, which had been left at [Athens](#) on 21 March, and of eighteen men of D Company whose truck was directed in error to [Kalamata](#) on 27 April. Sixth Brigade's casualties for the campaign were 261 killed and died of wounds, 387 wounded, 1856 prisoners of war (of whom 212 were wounded and 30 died of wounds).

¹ [Capt M. J. Mason](#), MC; [Wellington](#); born Pahiatua, 19 Dec 1912; accountant; p.w. 23 Nov 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), 11 Sep 1943; rejoined Allied forces 17 Jun 1944.

² [Sgt W. J. Wakeling](#); [Wanganui](#); born [Wanganui](#), 1 Jan 1909; meter reader.

³ [Lt-Col A. J. R. Hastie](#), ED; [Manaia](#); born [Kakaramea](#), 25 Oct 1898; farmer; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

⁴ Maj H. F. Smith; Hastings; born Hastings, 18 Jul 1907; bank clerk.)

⁵ Lt-Col C. J. Williams, ED; Opotiki; born England, 16 Apr 1907; school teacher; served with UNRRA and Allied Military Government, Germany, 1945-47; International Refugee Organisation 1948-52; Principal, Opotiki College.

⁶ Lt-Col C. D. A. George, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 9 Mar 1906; draper; CO 25 Bn 5 Dec 1941-22 Jul 1942; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped, Italy, 9 Sep 1943; reached Allied lines 19 Oct 1943.

⁷ Brig C. S. J. Duff, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 19 Nov 1898; Regular soldier; comd 34 NZ A-Tk Bty 1939-40; 7 A-Tk Regt Oct 1940-May 1941; 4 Fd Regt Aug 1941-Apr 1942; CRA 3 NZ Div Aug 1942- Oct 1944.

⁸ Brig R. Miles, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914-19; CRA 2 NZ Div 1940-41; comd 2 NZEF (UK) 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; died Spain, 20 Oct 1943.

⁹ Lt R. F. Sherlock; Christchurch; born Cobden, 15 Sep 1916; general engineer; wounded Apr 1941.

¹⁰ The Germans so described the Brallos Pass, held by the Australians.

¹¹ Cpl R. W. Common, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 26 Mar 1917: seedsman; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

¹² Sgt T. P. Winter; Lower Hutt; born Aust., 9 Jun 1918; salesman; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹³ Cpl G. H. Williams; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 21 Jul 1915; farmer; wounded and p.w. 24 Apr 1941.

¹⁴ Sgt L. T. Connor; born NZ 14 Jun 1917; clerk; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁵ Lt-Col J. D. Armstrong, m.i.d.; Silverstream; born Ireland, 20 Apr 1905; Regular soldier.

¹⁶ Capt H. G. Witters; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 17 Jan 1906; warehouseman.

¹⁷ Maj R. M. McLeay, ED and bar; Wellington; born Napier, 23 Feb 1912; clerk.

¹⁸ W O I R. Brown, MM, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Junee, NSW, 12 Aug 1896; master grocer; won MM with AIF, France, 1917.

¹⁹ Lt G. J. B. Morris; born NZ 6 Mar 1912; farm worker; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

²⁰ Vice Capt H. F. Smith, evacuated 22 April; Lt Mason was appointed Adjutant vice Armstrong.)

²¹ Capt A. H. Armour; Wellington; born NZ 20 Nov 1915; civil servant; p.w. 1941.

²² Maj R. Morrison; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 10 Jul 1902; company representative.

²³ WO I. F. H. Daly; Paeroa; born England, 8 May 1906; Regular soldier; wounded 28 Apr 1941.

²⁴ Cpl A. U. Jarvis; born NZ 24 Jul 1912; professional boxer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; deceased.

²⁵ Maj-Gen Sir W. Gentry, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Bronze Star (US); Lower Hutt; born London, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO II NZ Div 1939–40; AA & QMG 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (in NZ) 1943–44; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, 6

NZ Div, and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; 9 Bde (Italy) 1945; DCGS 1946–47; Adjutant-General 1949–52; Chief of General Staff 1952-55.

²⁶ Maj A. A. Andrews; Wainui, Banks Peninsula; born Fairlie, 28 Sep 1909; civil servant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

²⁷ Cpl W. T. W. Kerr, DCM, m.i.d.; Dannevirke; born Ohakune, 8 Nov 1905; sheep farmer; p.w. 25 Apr 1941; escaped 25 May 1941; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942; repatriated Aug 1944.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 3 – SECOND LIBYAN CAMPAIGN: PRELUDE

CHAPTER 3

Second Libyan Campaign: Prelude

The ships from Crete berthed at Port Said at 7 a.m. on Friday, 2 May, and after breakfast the battalion disembarked. A six-hour train journey followed. The troops detrained about dusk at El Qassasin, a village on the Sweetwater Canal, and reached the tented transit camp at El Tahag in transport vehicles about half an hour later. After the hard conditions in Greece, the men found the straw palliasses and blankets, the shower baths, and the simple camp amenities very much to their liking.

After three days at the camp, enlivened, but only slightly, by an air-raid alarm at 10 p.m. on the second day, the battalion returned by train to Helwan and quickly settled down once more to camp routine. The highlight of the first few days was the accumulated letters and parcels which awaited most men, while the general leave granted to 15 per cent of the battalion from noon to 10 p.m. was a fitting accompaniment, though a little tardy in reaching the later groups.

During the two months the men had been out of Egypt the weather had become much warmer and some very high temperatures, reaching 119 degrees in the shade, were experienced. For days on end the thermometer passed the 100 degrees mark during a spell of the hottest May weather for many years. The battle dress in which the men returned from Greece had, of course, been replaced by summer dress, but the men had to accustom themselves to profuse and continuous perspiration, to extreme temperatures in the messrooms, to butter in the form of oil, and bread which dried almost like toast as it was cut. These desert camps had one great drawback in the absence of natural shade, while that afforded by the small buildings was negligible with the noon sun vertically overhead, and in any case was valueless because of radiation from the blazing sands around. These climatic hardships necessitated a proper mental attitude to them if men were to keep well, and a wise balance in control between too much and too little activity had to be maintained.

The swimming baths in Helwan Camp naturally were a great boon though at times shortage of water made it necessary to close them. It had been established that 50 per cent of the men in New Zealand units could not swim, a rather startling situation and one that could have tactical disadvantages. The baths were valuable

in reducing that percentage.

During the battalion's absence in [Greece](#) the military situation in North Africa had deteriorated. The British forces there had been weakened by the withdrawal of considerable forces, including equipment and stores, for the campaigns in [Greece](#) and [Eritrea](#) and, with the exception of a garrison holding [Tobruk](#), had been compelled to withdraw to the Egyptian frontier. Once again Egypt was directly threatened.

Elsewhere the war situation was far from good, apart from the passing of the United States Lend-Lease Bill, the recapture of Berbera, [Keren](#), and Harar, and the suppression of a rebellion in [Iraq](#). But it is doubtful whether the unsatisfactory war situation had the slightest effect upon the outlook and the spirits of the men of the battalion.

To avoid the worst heat of the day the training hours were altered and reduced. Short route marches, weapon and section training, and lectures on the recent fighting in [Greece](#) occupied most of the time allotted, while once more duties outside the camp had to be undertaken; on 12 May eight officers and 360 men were provided for guard duty in the large prisoner-of-war camp between [Helwan](#) and the [Nile](#).

The presence of enemy forces on the Egyptian frontier had certain reactions, one of which was a renewal of the measures formerly taken for the defence of [Cairo](#) against both attack and internal disorder. The New Zealand Training Brigade had an important part to play in that matter and 25 Battalion on 19 May sent four officers to it to assist in defence preparations.

At this time there was good news from [Abyssinia](#), [Eritrea](#), and Somaliland, where the campaign virtually ended on 16 May with the surrender of the Italian Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of Aosta, though many Italians continued to surrender for some months to come.

The equipment lost or abandoned in [Greece](#) was gradually being replaced and training proceeded on the hot-weather syllabus for those not on external duties. On Sunday, 18 May, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, made an inspection at a ceremonial parade of all troops returned from [Greece](#), and addressing the parade,

congratulated all ranks on their excellent work in the campaign. The failure of the loud speakers, a defect all too common with this equipment both in army and civil life, unfortunately made it impossible, in the high wind that was blowing, for the men to hear what he said.

The situation in [Crete](#) caused much anxiety and the men were very conscious of their separation from the majority of the New Zealand Division there. The increasing intensity of the enemy air attack in [Crete](#) heralded the opening of the battle on the morning of 20 May, and from then until the end, the main interest of all New Zealanders in Egypt was centred on the island.

Other matters, however, also claimed their attention. The arrival on 24 May of three sergeants and 152 men from the Training Brigade, followed by another fifteen the next day, rebuilt the battalion to its proper strength, making good the gaps caused by the casualties in [Greece](#) and by normal wastage due to sickness and accidents. When the detachment returned from guard duties at the [Helwan](#) prisoner-of-war camp on the following day after a two-weeks' tour of duty, the hitherto attenuated battalion again looked the part.

The resumption of camp life near large civilian centres brought complexities, incidents, and problems, which were almost completely absent in the field. Discipline had to be maintained and the usual pickets had again to be provided for a variety of duties, which included keeping order on leave buses and trains, preventing wastage of water from taps and showers, and guarding the camp against thieving by outsiders, which was rife. Within the camp some care had to be taken to keep gambling within reasonable limits so that men would not be impoverished by 'experts' and so possibly resort to theft in order to provide fares, tobacco, meals in [Cairo](#), and other requirements.

A change of scene was now in the offing and, on 28 May, 6 Brigade moved to the [Suez Canal](#), 24 Battalion to [Suez](#), 25 Battalion to Kantara West and East, and 26 Battalion to [Ismailia](#). Twenty-fifth Battalion manned the outer perimeter defences at [Kantara](#) on both sides of the Canal, paying special attention to all pumping and filter stations, ferries over the Canal, bridges and roads, the railway and approaches, all anti aircraft guns within the defences, and the airfield. Battalion Headquarters with the mortar and anti-aircraft platoons and A, C, and D Companies crossed the Canal

to Kantara East and bivouacked in the Rest and Transit Camp. B Company and Headquarters Company (less the mortar and anti-aircraft platoons) occupied the hospital area on the west bank.

Defensive positions were prepared to meet attacks by parachute and airborne troops, the possibilities of which were thrown into high relief by the situation in [Crete](#), where the defenders were now retreating to the embarkation beach on the south coast. Sabotage was also a risk, much increased by the enemy success, which naturally gave great encouragement to enemy sympathisers in Egypt.

The month of June passed with little incident. The forced landing of an [RAF](#) aircraft on the 7th in A Company's area gave that company some excitement and also the duty of protecting it against thieves and souvenir hunters with a guard of one NCO and three men. Despite the heat useful training was done, including mortar practices with live ammunition, rifle and Bren-gun qualifying practices, and classes of instruction for six NCOs from each company. An unusual task was the erection of netting to catch parachutists, and throughout the month there was much to interest the troops. The traffic in the Canal was considerable and included, according to one diarist, HMS Leander and a large submarine, a destroyer which was towed past with its stern blown off, and many ships passing both ways, some going north loaded with new trucks. Along the road and the railway on the western side of the Canal there was much traffic, on many days a continuous stream of new trucks and other vehicles passing by, some carrying [RAF](#) air craft. Overhead, aircraft appeared in increasing numbers and the 'experts' in the battalion identified Tomahawks and Hurricanes, two of the latter entertaining the battalion 'with high-class aerobatics in a mock fight'.

[Port Said](#) was popular with the troops, the Britannia and [Piccadilly](#) clubs providing most welcome amenities. The mixed population was always of interest, though the Arab quarter was out-of-bounds, while in the streets and on the wharves there was a 'real mixture' of troops, 'NZ, Aus, Tommy, Indian, East African, and Egyptian'. As usual, it was necessary to guard against disorder, and all units provided pickets, 25 Battalion detailing one officer, one NCO, and six other ranks daily for this duty. With the Canal alongside the battalion's positions, swimming was most popular and a great relief from the oppressive heat, though the nearby civilian population

and the passenger ships passing by made it necessary to wear bathing dress. Fishing, of course, was not neglected though catches have not been recorded. Mosquitoes were rather numerous and many men suffered from festering sores caused by scratching the bites. There were also some cases of sandfly fever.

The battalion, with the exception of those on duty, heard on the 13th a most interesting account by Colonel [Dittmer](#),¹ the commanding officer of the [Maori Battalion](#), of the fighting in [Crete](#) and the lessons learnt there against attacks by paratroops. Later in the month it was announced that seven days' leave had been granted for all men who had served in [Greece](#) or [Crete](#), and that in recognition of the [Royal Navy's](#) magnificent and self-sacrificing work in evacuating the New Zealand forces, some tangible recognition was proposed. This took the form of voluntary subscriptions from all ranks in [2 NZEF](#), which resulted in a sum of approximately £850 being handed to Admiral Cunningham, to be used as thought fit for the welfare of the Navy.

The evacuation of [Crete](#) had been completed, as far as it was practicable, by 1 June, and although [Port Said](#) had not been disturbed, apart from an air-raid warning on the 14th, [Alexandria](#) received its first heavy attack on the 5th when heavy damage and many civilian casualties were suffered.

The battalion was now to move on, and on 8 July, after an advance party had been sent to Kitchener Camp, [Moascar](#), and a West Yorkshire Regiment advance party had arrived, the troops entrained in the afternoon and reached their new camp a little before midnight. Within four hours of the battalion's arrival there was an air alert and three more within the next four days.

The defensive area for [Moascar- Ismailia](#), for which the unit was responsible, was shaped rather like a horseshoe, with an outer perimeter of 9000 yards and a depth of 1100 yards, covering the airfield and Moascar Camp. A, B, and C Companies were allotted positions on the perimeter and D Company a reserve position near the transit camp. Mortars and carriers also had their role, but the positions were not to be occupied until ordered.

Daily leave for 25 per cent of the strength from noon to 10 p.m. commenced the day after arrival and the men found the attractive town of [Ismailia](#), with its well-

arranged buildings and shady gardens, a very pleasant change from [Kantara](#). The [YMCA](#) and Blue Kettle clubs were most popular, the latter being organised and conducted by the women of [Ismailia](#); the men thoroughly enjoyed the [YMCA](#) bathing beach on the Marine Beach, with its excellent facilities, especially its large, shaded area, fresh-water showers, and refreshment room.

A church parade in St. George's Garrison Church on 13 July was notable as being the first occasion since the battalion left New Zealand that a church was available for the parade. On the 23rd Bishop Gerard, ² Senior Chaplain to the NZEF, visited the camp and confirmed one man of the battalion.

In the early hours of the 10th there was a prolonged air raid on the Canal close by and the huts in which the men were accommodated shuddered with the explosions of bombs. Many anti-aircraft guns were in action and aircraft could be heard overhead, but most of the men stayed in bed.

Training during July followed what had become a familiar pattern, with a little field training and some route marches, interspersed with weapon training of all kinds, drill, physical and recreational training, bayonet fighting, and grenade training. Care was also taken to see that the men knew what to do if the enemy commenced gas warfare, and that respirators and other equipment were in good order. The field training included night attacks, manning the [Moascar- Ismailia](#) defences, occupation of a prepared position, and attacks at dusk, mostly on a company level.

On 30 July there was another move, this time a march of 30 miles to the south, in two stages, to Geneifa Camp. Starting at 6 p.m., the battalion halted for the night a little before midnight and moved on again the following evening, reaching the camp at 12.30 a.m.; the actual marching time was nine and a half hours. A small reinforcement of one warrant officer, two corporals, and nineteen men from [Maadi Camp](#) reported next morning.

The weather was now very hot, with occasionally an exceptionally hot day, and the men found it very trying. Air alerts were increasing, ten occurring in the seventeen days the unit spent in this camp. No bombs fell in or near the battalion area, the enemy air attacks being directed chiefly at the towns in the vicinity of the Canal and the Canal itself, with the object of blocking the waterway or reducing the

volume of shipping passing through. Mines had been dropped in the Canal for this purpose and a carefully planned watching system had been established to pinpoint the splashes and so fix within narrow limits the position of every mine. The troops were warned not to bathe in the vicinity of minesweeping operations as there was a danger of electrocution and of detonating a mine.

On 5 August the battalion set up its own canteen, administered by a committee which included a representative of each company. It proved to be popular and successful and augmented the unit's funds. In the middle of the month Major [Satterthwaite](#)³ left the unit on his promotion to lieutenant-colonel and transfer to HQ 2 NZEF at [Maadi Camp](#). His successor as second-in-command was Major George of A Company, which was now commanded by Captain [Roberts](#).⁴

Some unpleasant incidents with Egyptians had been occurring in the vicinity of Bab-el-Louk railway station, where New Zealanders had been attacked, usually after unsuccessful attempts to steal paybooks, wallets, and other valuables, and violent assaults had been made on individual men. The men were advised to keep in groups of not less than three when returning to the station at night. These Egyptian 'toughs' were certainly looking for trouble as it would take very little of this sort of thing to bring about severe retribution.

The men had a change of occupation early in August. A convoy of ships which had arrived at [Suez](#) was bombed and, naturally enough, the Egyptian dock-labour fled. Twenty-fifth Battalion filled the gap and unloaded several ships, making quite a name for itself at this work. According to the Port Officer the rate of unloading was twice that achieved by the usual dock labour and the rate of ullage and pillage was considerably less. It is understood that the pillage that did occur included American canned beer and silk stockings, and one ship's captain remarked, 'A small price to pay for the speedy unloading which enabled the ship to sail the next morning.'

Once again the battalion moved on, leaving for [Helwan](#) on 16 August, the carriers entraining with it to save track-wear while the remainder of the transport travelled by road. At Fayid station near the west shore of Great Bitter lake, there was some stone-throwing by Egyptian hooligans, and it says a good deal for the discipline of all ranks, who showed admirable restraint under such gross provocation, that serious results for the Egyptians did not ensue.

The normal base-camp routine followed and training on the usual lines was resumed. Brigade manoeuvres for four days took place from 1 September in the familiar [El Saff](#) area, movement in vehicles in desert formation and debussing well forward to attack receiving a good deal of attention.

Sunday, 7 September, was a 'National Day of Prayer', approved by the King and by order of His Majesty's Privy Council. Special denominational church parades were held throughout the camp.

A change of battalion commanders took place on the 9th when Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder, on promotion to brigadier, was appointed to command the New Zealand Training Group at [Maadi Camp](#); he had commanded the battalion from the day it was formed and had won the respect and regard of all ranks. He was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel [McNaught](#),⁵ who in [Crete](#) had commanded with distinction the Suda Dock Force under very severe and constant air attack, and who had also commanded 32 (Training) Battalion at [Maadi](#). A farewell parade for Brigadier Wilder was held on 10 September and the occasion was also a welcome for the new Commanding Officer, who inspected the battalion.

In the following week the battalion was busy preparing to move to [Baggush](#) on the [Mediterranean](#) coast, where troops of the [First Echelon](#) had spent several months in the latter part of 1940. After a false start for [Kabrit](#) in the [Suez Canal](#) zone, to which an advance party was sent on the 14th (the intention then being to carry out brigade training there), the battalion, preceded by another advance party on the 16th, left two days later, reaching [Sidi Haneish](#) station, near [Baggush](#), after a train journey of about seventeen hours. This included a halt at [Amiriya](#) transit camp for a hot meal in the evening.

[Baggush](#) was always a favourite spot, mainly because the [Mediterranean](#) not only provided splendid sea-bathing but also had a favourable effect on the climate. There was, too, the feeling that although it was not exactly 'the front', it was well on the way to it, and there was usually a certain amount of enemy air activity against [Matruh](#), 30 miles to the north-west, and airfields and other targets a good deal closer, including occasionally the [Baggush Box](#) itself. Our own aircraft in an operational role were to be seen in considerable numbers. But perhaps, apart from all this, the fact that they were a long way from the humdrum monotony of the base

camp was the principal source of the men's satisfaction with their new location.

In the following twelve days the unit experienced quite an assortment of what [Baggush](#) had to offer. Swimming was of course a daily matter, apart from bathing parades. Two days after the battalion's arrival, and again two days later, an unidentified aircraft a little after midnight dropped numerous parachute flares nearby. Showers of rain then made their appearance, but no flooding occurred and the weather was cool. Finally, a dust-storm arose on the 26th.

Training was soon under way with tactical exercises, desert navigation for officers and the Intelligence Section, and attack exercises in motor transport moving close up to 'enemy' positions. The training was mostly on a battalion and brigade scale and its type and intensity made it fairly obvious that operations against the enemy were probable in the near future. Co-operation between tanks, infantry, and artillery was closely studied at demonstrations and conferences, and by officers of these arms attending each other's exercises. To save wear and tear on tracks and engines the tanks themselves were not used, though the ubiquitous Bren carriers sometimes represented them.

October was a bad month for dust-storms, of which there were four, two being particularly severe. After one of these, a brigade exercise in co-operation with the divisional artillery took place over a period of two days. Day and night, movements over considerable distances were practised, culminating in a brigade attack at dawn with artillery and tank support. This move was made partly in moonlight and partly in complete darkness, and it was not surprising that it drew the divisional comment: 'both [6 Bde](#) and div arty were in the wrong locations'. They were not the only formations that found themselves in the wrong locations after an exercise of this sort.

In the middle of the month a squadron of I tanks gave a very interesting demonstration of their capabilities and methods in an area 14 miles south-east of [Matruh](#), before a large number of spectators, of whom 25 Battalion contributed 25 officers and 40 NCOs. This was followed the next day by a demonstration by [7 Field Company](#) of how mines were laid and lifted and minefields cleared; a couple of days later a demonstration was given to officers and NCOs of an assault on barbed-wire entanglements. In early November 12 Platoon under Lieutenant Morris demonstrated

this method before General Auchinleck, and it was described by [General Freyberg](#) as 'impressive'. Later, the same platoon gave a similar demonstration to the officers and NCOs of 5 Brigade. Colonel McNaught explained that an officer of the [Green Howards](#) had invented the method.

Towards the end of October an interesting interchange of two officers (Morris, B Company, and [Porter](#),⁶ C Company) and one sergeant from each rifle company of the battalion was made for a couple of days with similar numbers from the Botha Regiment of the South African Forces. This recalls the remarkable coincidence that a quarter of a century before, South Africans and New Zealanders were in the same region and took part side by side in operations against the [Senussi](#) to the south and west of [Matruh](#).

The battalion took its turn from time to time as the duty unit, available on call for a period of one week, for defence against sudden attack by parachute troops or raiders, especially raiding forces conveyed along the coast in small coastal craft. A coast-watching organisation, with posts every two miles, had been established by the Egyptian Frontiers Administration Brigade. These were manned in part by Ghaffirs, identifiable by red, green, and black armbands bearing the number of the post of the wearer.

Arrangements were now being completed to form a New Zealand armoured brigade and subaltern officers of the battalion were given the opportunity to join it. Those selected would commence a fourteen-weeks' course on 15 November at the Royal Armoured Corps School. Two captains from 25 Battalion, [Wakelin](#)⁷ and Morrison, had been selected several months previously.

The canteen established by the battalion at the Canal in August had proved successful, showing a profit of £199 on a turnover of £2000, which represented practically the 10 per cent discount allowed by [NAAFI](#) on bulk purchases. The profit was used to increase the variety and quantity of stocks and to provide additional comforts for all ranks. Christmas was now but ten weeks away, and in order that preparations could be made for it, a special Christmas grant to units was announced. This amounted to is. 6d. per man from the National Patriotic Fund Board and one shilling per man from special Expeditionary Force Institutes' rebates.

Intensive training continued in November with emphasis on movements in MT in desert formations and methods of protection against attack, especially by tanks and aircraft, during movement or when halted on a march or in bivouac. Co-operation with aircraft was practised in a brigade exercise in which A Company, with Headquarters and signal personnel of the battalion, took part, and the converse was also studied, an officer and two men attending a three-day course with 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery. The possibility of a raid or attack from the sea was still being guarded against and B Company had a tour of this duty on the coast near 26 Battalion.

Officially, the intensive desert training was merely for the purpose of bringing the Division up to a high state of readiness for action, which in fact was the case, but it was not disclosed, though everyone sensed it, that the Division in the very near future would be fighting in the [Western Desert](#).

Relief from training was provided by the delightful bathing, by [YMCA](#) cinema pictures, and by one great highlight, the long-awaited rugby match between the New Zealand Division and a South African brigade team on 8 November. A good game resulted in a win for the Division by eight points to nil.

The inspiring news of the Navy's great action south of [Taranto](#) on 9 November was received the next day. The enemy loss of all but one of the ten supply ships in the two convoys attacked, and of three destroyers sunk and two damaged without loss to our ships, could well have a dire effect on the enemy's land and air operations, both by the actual losses and by delaying future convoys.

Once more the battalion was preparing for a move and, amongst other activities, the packing of vehicles was practised, it being important that the vehicles accompanying the troops in battle should be packed to a standard plan and so save time in getting articles and ammunition required during battle. But in practice there was always something to add to the loads. An amusing account of the loading of the platoon truck has been contributed by Major R. Morrison:

'After training had progressed a while in Egypt the great day arrived when full transport for the Battalion was issued down to Platoon Trucks. These platoon trucks were 4 × 2 15 cwt. Pickups intended to carry the tools and heavy equipment of each

platoon. Very soon the question of loading details came up and those concerned can remember loading and unloading practices to determine just precisely where each article should be put and whether pick helms should be turned this way or that. Finally a cyclostyled packing-sheet was issued and "The Hill" was happy. It was soon decided that it would be in order if a box were provided, in which the unconsumed portion of the men's home parcels could be carried on the truck. Then camouflage nets were issued and these of course were carried on the Platoon Truck.

'Next was the Boyes Anti Tank Rifle which came in a case as large as a coffin and with particular instructions that the case was under no circumstances to be lost. This of course went on the Platoon Truck together with its ammunition.

'On arrival in [Greece](#) the units were issued with small tents and these went on the truck, and it was also found the cartage of the men's bed rolls by R.M.T. did not work out and from then on these were carried on the Platoon Truck.

'The next thing was the issue of a tea chest full of empty bottles. These were filled with petrol, a short fuze added, and were to be used to the detriment of enemy tanks. Known as "Molotov Cocktails", these were carried on the Platoon Truck. Of course, it would have been imprudent to carry on without a reserve of petrol, so each truck acquired a case or two.

'On top of all this lot was often perched the odd soldier who for various reasons was unable to march but would not leave his unit. Then, as the action progressed and we were falling back the boys could not bear to see so many good cigarettes etc being abandoned in our D.I.D.s and dumps and quite a few "personal necessities" found their way on to the Platoon Trucks.

'We leave it to the readers to work out just what these trucks carried when one was lost by enemy action and the troops had decided to save what they could of their possessions and pile them on another truck.

'Yes, we had moved a long way from the cyclostyled packing sheet.'

It was ever thus with vehicles in the Army, and every now and then a ruthless brigadier, colonel, or other responsible officer would cause the accumulation of extras to be cast aside.

On 11 November, Armistice Day, out came the great news: the Division was to take part, within the next few days, in an offensive in [Libya](#), and so any lingering doubts were dispelled. There was a hum of excitement about the camp, but for Major George and sixty-seven officers and other ranks there was grievous disappointment as they were informed that, in accordance with the policy of leaving selected officers and other ranks out of battle, they were to remain at [Baggush](#). Such personnel, termed LOBs,⁸ were to provide a nucleus on which to rebuild the unit in the event of heavy casualties.

At this date, 11 November, the officers of the battalion and their appointments were as shown below:

Bn HQ

Lieutenant-Colonel G. J. McNaught, Commanding Officer

Captain M. J. Mason, Adjutant

Lieutenant M. J. T. Fraser, Intelligence Officer

Lieutenant G. Colledge, Signals Officer

Lieutenant L. C. McCarthy ([NZMC](#)), RMO

Rev. C. E. Willis, Chaplain

HQ Coy

Captain H. G. Burton, Officer Commanding

Lieutenant H. H. Hollow, Pioneer Platoon

Lieutenant I. D. Reid, Mortar Platoon

Second-Lieutenant C. S. Wroth, Carrier Platoon

Lieutenant T. W. G. Rolfe, Quartermaster

Lieutenant J. H. Birch, Transport Officer

A Coy

Captain W. H. Roberts, Officer Commanding

Second-Lieutenant B. Campbell, 7 Platoon

Lieutenant B. R. Henderson, 8 Platoon

Lieutenant J. R. G. Jack, 9 Platoon

B Coy

Captain F. R. McBride, Officer Commanding

Lieutenant D. A. Wilson

Second-Lieutenant C. H. Cathie, 10 Platoon

Lieutenant J. P. Tredray, 11 Platoon

Lieutenant G. J. B. Morris, 12 Platoon

C Coy

Captain W. J. Heslop, Officer Commanding

Second-Lieutenant W. E. W. Ormond, 13 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant F. R. Porter, 14 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant P. W. Robertshaw, 15 Platoon

D Coy

Major A. J. R. Hastie, Officer Commanding

Lieutenant M. Handyside, 16 Platoon

Lieutenant W. M. Clarry, 17 Platoon

Second-Lieutenant P. de V. Holt, 18 Platoon

Officers left out of battle (LOB)

Major C. D. A. George, Battalion Second-in-Command

Captain H. G. Witters, Second-in-Command D Coy

Captain R. M. McLeay, Second-in-Command C Coy

Captain R. C. Wilson, Second-in-Command B Coy

Lieutenant R. G. Stevens

Second-Lieutenant I. C. Webster

Second-Lieutenant W. S. F. Moffett

The advance of the Division towards [Libya](#) commenced that day when 5 Brigade Group moved off, followed next morning by 4 Brigade Group and [Divisional Headquarters](#). Sixth Brigade Group left on the third day, all formations concentrating in the divisional assembly area in the vicinity of Qaret el [Kanayis](#), about 60 miles west of [Baggush](#).

The date of 6 Brigade's departure was the 13th but superstition did not seem to worry anyone, least of all [General Freyberg](#), who had a series of 'thirteens' at this time. He left [Baggush](#) for the assembly area on the 13th, had thirteen to dinner at his mess the previous night, and the division he commanded was part of [13 Corps](#). Incidentally, the despatch bag he carried was the one he had in the tremendous battle of the Ancre, twenty-five years previously to the day.

The RAF gave protection during the march and the sight of many aircraft in the skies, all British, was exhilarating. No enemy aircraft were seen though the night before they had been bombing [Matruh](#) and [Fuka](#), which they illuminated with parachute flares. An air liaison officer from the [RAF](#), Wing Commander Magill, appropriately a New Zealander, was attached to [Divisional Headquarters](#) for the campaign.

In 6 Brigade 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery and 33 Anti-Tank Battery came under command and took up positions allotted to them within the Brigade Group for

defence against air and tank attack respectively, both during the march and when bivouacked. One section (three guns) of 43 LAA Battery and one troop (four guns) of 33 Anti-Tank Battery came under command of 25 Battalion for a similar purpose. The section of anti-aircraft guns, however, was passed over to the ASC units at the end of the first day's march.

Very large numbers of vehicles were on the roads everywhere and no lights were allowed in the bivouac area, so that the evening meal had to be prepared and eaten in daylight. The troops rested on the 14th when instructions for resuming the advance were given at a brigade conference, where plans for the campaign were fully discussed with all officers down to and including company commanders. Thirteenth Corps operation instructions were also read to and discussed with commanding officers by Brigadier Barrowclough.

The 15th November was a beautiful day with no wind, and the whole division, in desert formation, moved westwards for 44 miles. This enormous mass of transport, guns, carriers and tanks, moving at 200 yards' interval over the vast desert plain, was a most impressive spectacle. [General Freyberg's](#) diary gives an apt description:

'Seen from any slight vantage point on top of an undulation, the whole expanse of desert was peppered with moving vehicles as far as the eye could see, and on the horizon fresh lines of black specks were popping up like puppets on an endless chain.'

The speed was restricted to seven miles in the hour, as the country was very stony, with great slabs of 'crazy pavement' at times and patches of scrub, around the base of which the sand had packed in small, hard mounds up to a foot high. These provided a most uncomfortable passage for vehicles (and a very much worse one for the crowded troops inside) and were indeed a real obstacle to progress and a danger to axles and springs.

Private S. W. [Brown](#)⁹ of the mortar platoon relates his experience:

'Thousands of vehicles were on the move en masse as far as the eye could see, sometimes necessarily slowly in low gear when there was treacherous ground to be negotiated, and at other times at what seemed breakneck speed whenever the going developed into long stretches of hard-crusting gravel and sand.'

'For the mortarmen who were stretched out on the back of their trucks on tarpaulins, observation was very good, but only up to a point. For instance they had to face the full force of all weather, which at that time of the year was often bitterly cold, and whenever the convoy ploughed through one of the numerous sandy patches billowing clouds of fine dusty sand would rise from every vehicle, and if the stretch was a long one, would increase in density until vision was obliterated as in a terrific sandstorm. Fortunately these patches were usually heralded by warning shouts from occupants of the forward vehicles. ... Almost invariably they emerged from these man-made sandstorms completely covered with a thin layer of dust and looking for all the world like flour men. Often too they would be almost thrown off the back of their truck through a sudden swerve by the driver to avoid crashing into bogged trucks in front, whose indistinct outline would only become visible when one was right on top of them, at a distance of only a few yards.'

The battalion moved with 6 Brigade Group in the right-rear of the Division. Hourly halts were observed and the bivouac area was reached about 6 p.m., when the units dispersed to their allotted positions for the night. Next day, Sunday, 16 November, the GOC [13 Corps](#), Lieutenant-General Godwin- Austen, visited 6 Brigade Headquarters, where he met Colonel McNaught and his company commanders. The day was mild, once the sun rose, but was rather windy and dust was rising later in the day. The Division began to move on at 5.30 p.m. and for this night march 6 Brigade Group moved on a nine-vehicle front, with not more than ten yards between vehicles and at a speed of four miles in the hour. A large British minefield lay directly ahead of the Division, and to avoid it the direction was changed, after the first 15 miles, from south-west to almost due south for four miles before again turning to the south-west, no small manoeuvre for such a mass of vehicles. When the Division halted for the night, just before midnight, the minefield lay within half a mile of the troops on the northern limits of the Division. Fourth Indian Division, old friends of the New Zealanders, had marked the southern end of the field with red lights for that night and the New Zealand [Provost Company](#) had set out lines of green lights at intervals of a thousand yards to help the units forming this great mass of vehicles to reach their proper areas.

The battalion covered about 23 miles that night, reaching the dispersal area a

little before midnight. It was a very cold ride and the men remained in the vehicles in their close night formation till dawn, when the widespread daylight formation was adopted; slit trenches were dug, guns, protected by infantry detachments, were placed on the flanks in an anti-tank role, and the men slept and rested as best they could for the daylight hours. A cold wind which raised the sand made conditions unpleasant. At dawn that day thirteen to fifteen squadrons (about 180 aircraft) of the [RAF](#) were to attack [Gazala](#) aerodrome, 40 miles west of [Tobruk](#). The only enemy aircraft spotted since the Division left [Baggush](#) were five Messerschmits seen in the sun on the first day.

The advance was resumed in the evening to the accompaniment of a large electrical storm to the north, which naturally gave rise to a good deal of speculation as to its cause. Some rather wild theories were advanced to explain it. There was no thunder and the absence of noise ruled out any ideas that a big battle was in progress. The battalion halted shortly after midnight, in the very early hours of the 18th, and the usual routine followed. This was D1 day, the master or controlling day for the planning of the operations, so designated to keep secret the actual date, minus signs being used to indicate prior days, D-I day being the 17th, D-2 day the 16th and so on, while D2 day would be 19 November.

The general plan for the British offensive was briefly this. The Eighth Army was divided into four groups, [30 Corps](#), [13 Corps](#), [Oasis Group](#), and the [Tobruk](#) garrison. Thirtieth Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Norrie,¹⁰ consisted of 7 Armoured Division, 22 Guards Brigade and 1 South African Division (less one brigade). Its role was the destruction of the enemy's armoured forces and then the relief of [Tobruk](#).

Thirteenth Corps (Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen) comprised 4 Indian Division, New Zealand Division, and [1 Army](#) Tank Brigade, plus additional artillery. Its task was to isolate the enemy's forward defensive area (Libyan Omar— [Halfaya Pass](#) — [Sollum](#)— [Capuzzo](#)— [Bardia](#)) by advancing northwards around its southern flank and later mop it up.

The Oasis Group, a mixed column situated at Giarabub (an oasis about 130 miles south of [Sollum](#)), was to move westwards in an attempt to deceive the enemy, capture the oases of Augila and [Gialo](#), and if possible cut the road near [Agedabia](#)

(about 250 miles west of Tobruk) or elsewhere near the Gulf of Sirte.

In the period up to the beginning of the offensive, the RAF was to restrict enemy reconnaissance and interfere with his supply system on land and sea. After the battle started strong fighter sweeps were to protect the advancing columns and escort the bombers attacking the supply system and communications, and also take part in direct support of the Army.

The Royal Navy was to continue waging its relentless and highly successful war against the enemy sea routes to North Africa. It was also to bombard Sollum, Bardia, the enemy positions around Tobruk, and other points, and threaten enemy communications along the coast.

On 18 November 30 Corps started its northward advance. Its operations were on a wide front, extending 50 miles westwards of the frontier, while in 13 Corps 4 Indian Division was edging closer to the frontier defences. Fourth Armoured Brigade was moving into position a few miles westward of the frontier, to operate on the right flank of 30 Corps and in contact with the left flank of 13 Corps. It had the dual role of co-operating with the rest of 7 Armoured Division and protecting the left flank of 13 Corps.

Until the late afternoon of 18 November, while the movements just described were taking place, the New Zealand Division remained in its dispersal area about 15 miles east of the frontier. In the morning two enemy reconnaissance aircraft passed over but the day was uneventful. At the usual conference at Brigade Headquarters to receive orders and information, Colonel McNaught learnt that there was some concern at Divisional Headquarters regarding the petrol situation, as owing to the very slow speeds at night and the prolonged low-gear work, the consumption had upset all calculations. This crisis, however, was overcome, though the NZASC unit concerned had to work 'overtime' to do so.

At 5.30 p.m. 25 Battalion resumed the advance westwards, crossing into Libya about 8.30 p.m. through a gap in the frontier wire. The night was cold and bracing as the vehicles halted half an hour before midnight at the dispersal area about four miles west of the frontier. As usual the closed-up night formation was maintained till dawn. During the night the sound of heavy gunfire to the north, where 4 Indian

Division was facing [Sidi Omar](#), and the vivid flashes of the guns made everyone realise that the war was now on their doorstep.

It was now 19 November, and with the rest of the Division 25 Battalion moved out to its dispersal area, the whole division being in a defensive position awaiting the outcome of the armoured battle.

There was a little excitement in the afternoon when two enemy aircraft attacked a target to the south of the battalion and were heavily engaged by light anti-aircraft fire. Apart from this the skies were clear of the enemy, the [RAF](#) holding visible and indisputable command of the air. The absence of enemy aircraft seemed rather extraordinary and so out of character that there was a feeling that something big was brewing, 'the calm before the storm'. It was learnt later that the electrical storm on the night of the 17th had brought very heavy rain along the coastal strip, flooding some of the enemy airfields. This, together with the very successful [RAF](#) attacks on aircraft on the ground, explained the enemy air inactivity.

News was received during the day that the armoured battle had begun and that 4 Indian Division was investing the Omars, 16 miles south-west of [Sollum](#) and the same distance northwards of the Division. In the afternoon a tank battle between 4 Armoured Brigade and [21 Panzer Division](#) developed 20 miles to the north-east of the New Zealand Division.

The Division had been warned that it would probably advance to the [Trigh el Abd](#), ten miles to the north, after [7 Indian Brigade](#) had taken Bu Deheua, which was ten miles north of the Trigh. An order to move as soon as possible arrived early in the afternoon and the march was timed to start at 3 p.m. This move at short notice showed the great difficulty of getting the whole Division into motion from desert formation, and as a result of delays the destination on the Trigh, 14 miles to the north-west, was not reached till after dark. Consequently, as [General Freyberg](#) said, 'we were not in a good defensive position on the first occasion we had been in close proximity to enemy tanks.' Twenty-fifth Battalion was situated close to Trig 190, nine miles south-west of [Sidi Omar](#), where the enemy was still holding out. [Tobruk](#) was 70 miles to the north-west. Wakeling in his diary describes some of the air activity of the day:

'2 Hun planes over—hot reception from our Bofors. A great sight at 1.15 p.m. as 36 of our planes going up passed 24 coming back and on the ground 15 tanks heading for the Hun. Another 24 planes went up at 1.30.'

According to [General Freyberg's](#) diary, from information available at 9 a.m. on the 20th, 22 Armoured Brigade on the left of the northern advance had knocked out forty-five tanks of [Ariete Division](#) and was moving north towards [El Adem](#) (about eight miles south of the [Tobruk](#) defences); 1 South African Division was approaching [El Gubi](#) (14 miles south of [El Adem](#)) to provide a secure base for the forces operating near [Tobruk](#). Seventh Armoured Brigade Group was pressing north in the centre on to the escarpment east of [Tobruk](#); 4 Armoured Brigade Group on the right of the northern advance had engaged enemy tanks five miles north of the [New Zealand Division](#) that morning: it then advanced towards [Bir el Hamarin](#) (12 miles north of 25 Battalion). Later in the day [General Freyberg](#) was told that 4 Armoured Brigade was moving north towards [Tobruk](#) and that the Division was to make itself secure where it was in case the enemy struck south.

In the afternoon two enemy aircraft approached 25 Battalion's position and were driven off by fire from LAA guns, but otherwise there was no revival of enemy air activity. The battalion was kept ready for an immediate move and the carrier platoon, together with the attached anti-tank troop, formed a protective screen on the right flank, under the command of Major [Burton](#),¹¹ who was second-in-command of the battalion in the absence of Major George at [Baggush](#), as well as OC Headquarters Company. Various warning orders to move were received and later cancelled as rapidly changing situations developed in the armoured operations elsewhere.

The general situation at this stage seemed to be developing favourably, but the mobility of the contending forces created fresh situations at short notice over a vast area, and neither side could be quite certain of its opponent's dispositions.

The night was very cold and the morning of the 21st was overcast, with low, dark cloud. The men found it difficult to keep warm and, as was to be expected, footballs appeared and were kicked and chased about with great zest. From intelligence reports that morning it was learnt that about 200 enemy tanks the previous afternoon had been opposing 4 Armoured Brigade 17 miles north of the

New Zealand Division, the battle moving southwards, while 22 Armoured Brigade was coming across from the west to render assistance. It was clear, therefore, that the Division might very well have had a battle with enemy armour on its hands.

The air situation remained favourable and sweeps of British fighter aircraft were passing over the New Zealanders every hour from 6.30 a.m., 'like a tram service' as the divisional diary put it. It appeared that the actions on the morning and evening of the 20th by 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades were against the main enemy armoured forces, which were reported to be withdrawing at full speed, pursued by 4 Armoured Brigade. An intercepted enemy message said that 'the situation was one of extreme urgency'.

The general situation now seemed favourable enough to permit the New Zealand Division to assume a more active role. The battalion received a warning at 11 a.m., the Division began to move a little after midday and 25 Battalion at 2 p.m., passing half an hour later just to the rear of the artillery of 4 Indian Division shelling Libyan Omar. No one had any wish to loiter as the enemy was replying briskly and shells were falling too close for comfort.

The Divisional Cavalry was leading the advance, reporting successive 'bounds' clear of the enemy and so enabling the rest of the Division, some miles back, to follow in safety. Sixth Brigade Group was the rear formation and, as was the case with the other two brigade groups, had all-round defence and a reserve composed of one-third of the field and anti-tank artillery. At dusk the Divisional Cavalry surprised [Sidi Azeiz](#) (ten miles west of the enemy-held [Bardia](#) defences), taking fifty-three prisoners, and moving on in the dark secured the final bound, the escarpment overlooking the [Bardia- Tobruk](#) road.

An hour after the Division had left [Trigh el Abd](#), [General Freyberg](#) had a discussion with the brigadiers and issued orders. Sixth Brigade Group was to move north to El Hariga, 16 miles west of the [Bardia](#) defences, stay astride the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) until dawn, and then attack any enemy units in the vicinity. Resuming the advance at 4.15 p.m., with 25 Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left, and halting at Bir et-Tgheit to issue verbal orders, the Brigade Group moved steadily northwards. At 6 p.m. soft mud due to the recent storm caused considerable delay. Detours involving careful exploration were necessary, but three hours later the

march was continued though soft areas difficult to negotiate were still encountered.

A few minutes after midnight 25 Battalion had a minor encounter with the enemy. '.... we stumbled on a German LAD unit,' wrote Colonel McNaught. 'My Intelligence Officer was about 50 yards ahead of me with three Bren Carriers for protection. He was doing the navigating. There loomed up in the dark a number of vehicles and a figure stepped out from near one. Fraser ¹² promptly raised his revolver and challenged. The German officer dropped his revolver and surrendered. My Intelligence Section then investigated one vehicle and found one officer and six other men asleep. They were bagged. Then I got a platoon and we pulled out about 18 more. We took two of the big trucks and put our prisoners into them. Brigade HQ grabbed a small Fiat car and we went on.'

Major Burton also referred to this encounter: 'About midnight the Brigade advanced troops consisting of our Intelligence section and Bren carriers ran right into a German Tank LAD, two officers and 18 other ranks being captured. Eleven vehicles and a considerable amount of equipment were handed over to Brigade and there was a lot that wasn't handed over. Our Bren Carrier personnel could substantiate this statement. There was not a better-equipped platoon on the desert than the 25th Battalion Carrier Platoon.'

L. Grant ¹³ of the Carrier Platoon wrote: '.... we encountered a small group of German vehicles unguarded. They called to our crew for volunteers and we didn't need to be asked twice. Being the gunner in the forward vehicle, I helped to investigate and discovered it to be a complete unit for maintaining trucks. We roused the poor devils out of their bunks, made them dress and loaded them on a truck, 22 of them. Their trucks and gear were very high class, some trucks being V 8s, the first German ones I had contacted.'

The going was still very heavy and as the Group was making little progress, the Brigadier decided to halt till first light. The force then moved on to the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), two miles to the west of [Sidi Azeiz](#), and turning to the west, moved a couple of miles nearer Bir el Hariga at 9.45 a.m. B Company (less one platoon) and a section of carriers reconnoitred the vicinity of the escarpment but found no sign of enemy occupation. Sixth Brigade Group then prepared for its next probable task, an advance to [Bir el Chleta](#) and [Gambut](#), 20 miles to the west.

Meanwhile, 5 Brigade Group had moved on to [Sidi Azeiz](#), which it held with 22 Battalion, while it sent 23 Battalion against Fort [Capuzzo](#), 11 miles to the south-east. That battalion captured the fort during the night. Fourth Brigade Group had also been active, passing [Sidi Azeiz](#) at midnight and pressing on to the escarpment overlooking the [Bardia- Tobruk](#) road, where it surprised an enemy camp. As the light strengthened on the morning of the 22nd, its artillery had perfect targets on the road. All telegraph wires were cut and many vehicles and prisoners captured, together with valuable codes, documents, and maps. In that position 4 Brigade Group was blocking the coast road west of [Bardia](#), which was held by a strong enemy garrison.

In the afternoon [General Freyberg](#) was told that the Support Group of 7 [Armoured Division](#) had been surrounded and General Gott had asked if 6 Brigade could be accelerated to relieve it. Brigadier Barrowclough was ordered to push on to [Sidi Rezegh](#) and start fighting. In the meantime 6 Brigade Group, which at 3 p.m. had been reinforced by a squadron of Valentine tanks and was to come under command of [30 Corps](#), began advancing westwards a quarter of an hour later. After 18 miles were covered a halt was called for an hour while the advanced guard cleared minor enemy forces from Gasr el Arid, three or four miles ahead and 25 miles from [Sidi Rezegh](#).

The advance was continued until about 8 p.m., when the force halted for a much-needed meal and rest. The Brigade Commander decided to resume the march eight hours later. Orders from [30 Corps](#) by liaison officer instructed that the Brigade Group was to proceed with all speed to [Sidi Rezegh](#) and establish an all-round defence on Hill 175, which was on the escarpment six miles east of [Sidi Rezegh](#).

Brigadier Barrowclough called in his battalion commanders to discuss the situation and give his orders. After another brief conference, McNaught had the misfortune about 3 a.m. on the 23rd to lose his Adjutant (Mason), his sergeant-clerk ([Heyward](#) ¹⁴), his driver and his car, and has written this account of the circumstances:

‘Conference with the Brigadier from 9–10.30 p.m. It was decided that my battalion should lead the next day. The move was set down for 3 a.m. and we were to go about 20 miles to attack [Sidi Rezegh](#) (just a series of hills and ravines on the

escarpment). We were now under command of 30th Corps ... and our instructions were to leave out [Gambut](#) (originally we were to attack it) by going south and then swinging north-west. Quite a number of things did not go according to plan. One was a personal point. Having taken my battalion to the head of the column at 3 a.m. and seen that the tanks (we had a squadron) were alongside and my anti-tank guns in position I went back 200 yards in my car to report to the Brigadier. I haven't seen the car since, or my driver, Adjutant, and Sgt Heyward and my gear.'

'Later that night,' wrote Major Burton, 'the C.O. informed us that his car, with Adjutant, Sergeant, and the driver, were numbered with the missing, but he had hopes of them turning up later. And so they did! The Sergeant returned some months later when [Bardia](#) was captured, the Adjutant in 1944, and driver in 1945.'

About 4 a.m. the whole Brigade Group was moving westwards with 25 Battalion on the right, 24 on the left, 26 Battalion right-rear, Brigade Headquarters and [6 Field Regiment](#) in the middle, and tanks and anti-tank guns on the flanks. The force moved on compass bearings calculated to bring it on to the escarpment 5000 yards south of [Bir el Chleta](#), a place likely to be occupied by the enemy and so to be avoided to prevent delay. But after a halt was called for breakfast at 6 a.m., just before dawn, it was discovered that the Brigade Group was on the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) close to [Bir el Chleta](#). This navigational error was to cause an extraordinary accidental collision with the enemy, which may well have had a considerable effect on the important and widespread operations of the next few days, very much to the disadvantage of the enemy.

The moment the force halted, everyone was busy preparing a meal in which hot tea would occupy pride of place and innumerable small fires sprang up all around. At 6.30 a.m. when the visibility had increased to about 300 yards, a column of armoured cars, staff cars, lorried infantry, and towed anti-tank guns appeared, unobserved of course by the majority of the men, whose first intimation of anything amiss was the sudden, startling roar of our artillery and anti-tank guns, firing at point-blank range.

At the head of the battalion the first sign of anything unusual was the capture of a young German medical officer, who was between [McNaught's](#) and [McBride's](#) ¹⁵ vehicles. 'A few minutes later,' wrote [McNaught](#), 'a group of stationary vehicles was

seen parked beside those of B Coy and C Coy. Fire opened from these first and then was heard the roar of our artillery in the rear. I then got into a Bren carrier and went round the bn area, urging the troops to get into action outside the vehicle lines. This was done very promptly by all, the officers having already taken the necessary steps, despite the surprise and the incredulity of the men that such a thing could happen to them. When I returned to the head of the column I talked with the Brig on the wireless, who wanted to know what it was all about. He wanted to be sure we were not just firing on our own troops. I assured him we were not and he asked if I could go across to see him. As all the commotion except on the right of A Coy had now died down, I went across in a Bren.'

Lance-Sergeant [Huse](#) ¹⁶ of 13 Platoon C Company said: 'November 23, 1941 was the day when everything happened to me.... Since crossing the wire we had been acting as a protection platoon for a 6th Field Regt detachment on the perimeter of the Brigade convoy.... Nov. 23 started with an early brush with ... the staff echelon of some Panzer outfit. This approached us in the half-light ... just after dawn. An artillery despatch-rider was sent across to investigate and when, having identified the Germans at uncomfortably-close quarters, he swung his motor bike about and came hurtling back, everything started to happen. Our artillery opened up at point blank range and had most of the enemy vehicles in flames in a matter of minutes. One small group led by a German staff car headed straight for our platoon lines, firing as they came, and these were stopped with small arms fire. Prisoners taken included a German Colonel and his adjutant, both wounded.'

'The Battalion was now the forward battalion of the Brigade,' said Burton, 'and our flank guard was recalled to form a forward protective screen. On seeing two somewhat suspicious looking tanks not far away we moved toward them but they disappeared. They were bearing our red-and-white distinguishing mark and were also flying their pennants in the approved manner for the period. We were at this time about 1000 yards to the flank of the Battalion and, looking down the escarpment we could see a very large column approaching along the desert road leading from [Gambut](#). We watched this column and at first thought it to be the [5th Brigade](#), which we believed had been operating in that area. However we soon discovered that a large enemy column was about to run right into our Brigade. The alarm was given and our guns opened fire at point-blank range. A Company were

quickly in action. The carriers and anti-tank guns returned to the flank and were soon in action.

'The Germans were not long in recovering from their shock and retaliated vigorously with their small but efficient anti-tank guns. They firstly knocked out my truck, fatally wounding Don Smart,¹⁷ the driver, and severely wounding ... [[Alf](#) [Stott](#).¹⁸ Two carriers were knocked out and two Bren Carrier Corporals were killed (Cpls [Pine](#)¹⁹ and [Charteris](#)²⁰). One three-ton truck was also a write-off. Our R.S.M. and several others were wounded.

'While this encounter was in progress the Brigade moved on, leaving A Company and a section of carriers to cover their movement. The Brigade moved westward toward [Sidi Rezegh](#), along the high ground, whilst simultaneously the enemy moved westward toward [Sidi Rezegh](#) below the escarpment.'

Continuing his account, McNaught wrote: 'The Brigadier sent for me and said we'd have to disengage from battle as we had to push on.... We took quite a number of prisoners and did considerable damage to the enemy. They did not molest us as we left, but they had done us out of our breakfast. By the time we had formed up on the escarpment it was 10 o'clock and we pushed rapidly on.'

It was soon discovered that this encounter was not only a collision with an enemy column, as was at first thought, but also involved the headquarters of the [Africa Corps](#), which was overrun by 25 Battalion. No connected account of the action is possible as personal accounts are localised by the limits of vision of the observers. It seems, however, that [Africa Corps](#) Headquarters was encamped near [Bir el Chleta](#), with a German supply unit a mile or so to its north, and that 25 Battalion halted between the two. Sixth Brigade Headquarters was to the left-rear (south-east) of 25 Battalion so that the German headquarters was more or less sandwiched between the two. Twenty-fourth Battalion was on the escarpment and south of Brigade Headquarters, while 26 Battalion was some distance east of 24 Battalion.

A German column then came down from the north, passing through the rear of 25 Battalion and Brigade Headquarters and coming up on the left or southern flank of 25 Battalion.

When the firing started the rear part of the German column swung westward

between the right or northern flank of 25 Battalion and the German unit to the north, resulting in the lively fighting and the close-range targets for the New Zealand artillery, as already described. Although the Corps Commander (General Cruewell) and some of his staff had left a few minutes earlier, several of his senior staff officers were captured, together with many valuable documents, including the enemy code list for the day and most of the Corps' wireless sets. Among the prisoners was Colonel Lavera di Maria, the chief Italian liaison officer at Corps Headquarters. Over 200 prisoners were taken and the Germans lost quite a few killed and wounded as well as equipment and supplies. The loss of the main wireless vehicles of the [Africa Corps](#) was severely felt throughout the campaign. Twenty-fifth Battalion's casualties were five killed and five wounded. Two brigade signalmen at Battalion Headquarters were also killed. Two carriers were destroyed and Burton's anti-aircraft machine-gun truck lost; several vehicles were damaged.

As mentioned by McNaught, the advance was resumed, 25 Battalion moving to the top of the escarpment, covered by its rearguard. The right flank-guard—A Company, carrier platoon, K Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery, and a troop of 29 Field Battery—under Major Burton, resumed its role and was soon required to deal with enemy troops along the escarpment whose small-arms fire was troubling the main body. The carrier platoon was given the task and silenced or overran a succession of machine-gun posts situated mostly in the wadis at the edge of the escarpment.

There were several good opportunities of 'mopping-up' parties of the enemy but, somewhat to the mystification of some of the men, nothing was done about them, 'the Brigadier', in the words of one of the men, 'seeming to have an urgent appointment further west', as indeed he had. That appointment was looming up before 25 Battalion which, before many hours had passed, was to be engaged in a difficult and desperate battle.

¹ [Brig G. Dittmer](#), CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO [28 \(Maori\) Bn](#) Jan 1940–Feb 1942; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) Apr 1942–Aug 1943; [1 Div](#) Aug 1942–Jan 1943; [Fiji Military Forces](#) and [Fiji Inf Bde Gp](#) Sep 1943–Nov 1945; Commander, Central Military District, 1946–48.

² Rt. Rev. G. V. Gerard. CBE, MC, m.i.d.; Rotherham, England; born Christchurch, 24 Nov 1898; Lt, The Buffs, 1918–19 (MC); SCF, 2 NZEF, May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; repatriated Apr 1943; SCF, 2 NZEF (IP), Apr–Dec 1944.

³ Col S. M. Satterthwaite, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Timaru, 7 Jan 1897; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde (Lt) 1917–19; CO 26 Bn Dec 1941–Apr 1942.

⁴ Capt W. H. Roberts; born England, 3 Feb 1909; civil servant; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁵ Lt-Col G. J. McNaught, DSO, ED; New Plymouth; born Wanganui, 26 Nov 1896; schoolmaster; NZ MG Corps 1916–19 (2 Lt, 1919); CO 29 Bn (UK) Jun 1940–Mar 1941; 25 Bn Sep–Nov 1941; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁶ Capt F. R. Porter; Wellington; born Gisborne, 24 May 1918; bank officer; wounded and p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

⁷ Lt-Col B. H. Wakelin, m.i.d.; Rangiora; born NZ 16 Jul 1912; school teacher; sqn comd 19 Armd Regt 1944; CO NZAC Trg Depot May–Aug 1945.

⁸ Left out of battle.

⁹ Lt S. W. Brown; born Wellington, 20 Sep 1915; clerk.

¹⁰ Later Governor of South Australia and afterwards Governor-General of New Zealand.

¹¹ Lt-Col H. G. Burton, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Christchurch, 1 Dec 1899; plumber; NZ Mtd Rifles 1918–19; actg CO 25 Bn 23 Nov–5, Dec 1941; CO 25 Bn 22 Jul–12 Sep 1942; CO 1 and 2 Trg Units, 1944.

¹² Capt M. J. T. Fraser; New Plymouth; born New Plymouth, 17 Jan 1919; wholesale merchant; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹³ Pte L. Grant; born NZ 27 Nov 1915; labourer; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁴ Sgt A. W. Heyward; Hastings; born NZ 21 May 1914; clerk; p.w. (Bardia) 23 Nov 1941–5 Jan 1942; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁵ Maj F. R. McBride; born Ohau, 8 Dec 1909; civil servant; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁶ Sgt J. Huse; Plimmerton; born Palmerston North, 1 May 1918; journalist; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁷ Pte D. McG. Smart; born Hawera, 9 Mar 1917; auctioneer and stock agent; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁸ Pte A. F. Stott; Lower Hutt; born NZ 20 May 1917; box-maker; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁹ Cpl W. Pine; born Taihape, 2 Jan 1905; labourer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

²⁰ Cpl A. H. Charteris; born Scotland, 28 Dec 1907; hardware salesman; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 4 – SIDI REZEGH

CHAPTER 4

Sidi Rezegh

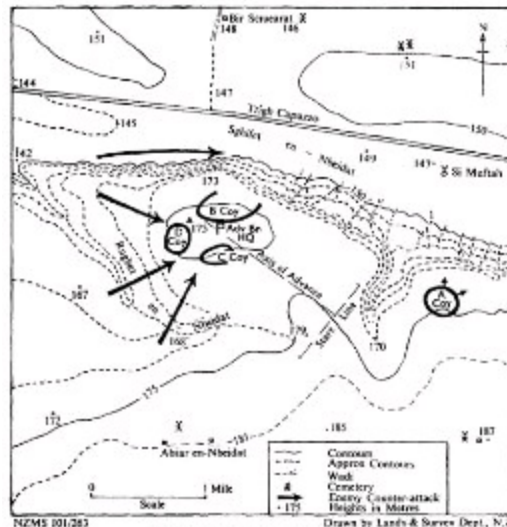
Shortly before 11 a.m. the battalion halted 4000 yards east of [Point 175](#). This feature was merely a trig point on almost flat ground rising very gently towards it from the east. The trig was marked by a cairn of stones and was shown on the map by an egg-shaped contour 1500 yards from east to west by 800 yards wide and 175 metres in height above sea level. Six hundred yards to the north of the trig point the ground fell sharply about eighty feet down an escarpment to flat ground, traversed from east to west by the desert track, the Trigh [Capuzzo](#), a mile to the north of the trig. An unnamed wadi or gully 3000 yards east of the trig ran in a southerly direction for 1200 yards from the escarpment. Some 2500 yards west of [Point 175](#), another wadi, the [Rugbet en Nbeidat](#), pierced the escarpment and ran in a south-easterly direction, passing the trig 1200 yards to the south-west and reaching the 170-metre level 2300 yards to the south-east. Apart from the two wadis the whole of the nearby country south of the escarpment was on about the 170–175 metre level and gently rising towards a further low escarpment a couple of miles away.

The ground generally was even, featureless, and devoid of cover except for scattered, stunted saltbush nine to twelve inches in height. The surface was sand with rock or hard-packed sand approaching sandstone a few inches down.

About 11 a.m. on 23 November Colonel McNaught received verbal orders from Brigadier Barrowclough to attack and capture [Point 175](#) immediately and to consolidate and hold it. The operation was urgent, said the Brigadier, and McNaught agreed that he could start the attack within half an hour. The company commanders and other officers were summoned and given their orders. They were told there was no information as to the strength of the enemy holding the position but it was thought to be lightly held. The general situation was then explained. The remainder of the New Zealand Division was in the [Capuzzo](#) area; a South African brigade was somewhere in the vicinity to the south of 6 Brigade, and 26 Battalion and 30 Battery were to move south to gain touch with it. Information regarding the British armoured forces was vague.

The battalion would attack with two companies forward, B on the right, D on the

left, with C Company in reserve following 800 yards behind D Company. A Company was engaged at the moment against enemy on the right flank; when that task was finished it was to support B Company. The



point 175, 23 november 1941

inter-company boundary was the cairn [Point 175](#) on the low rise and this cairn was inclusive to D Company. One detachment of two 3-inch mortars was attached to each forward company, and 29 Battery (eight 25-pounders) commanded by Major [Wilson](#),¹ already in position in the Wadi esc Sciomar,

about three miles east of [Point 175](#) and under command of the battalion, would support the attack; its FOOs² would move forward with the companies.

The axis of advance, first stated to be 309 degrees, was later corrected by the IO to 312 degrees. The start line, which was being laid out at the time, was about 2700 yards from the objective and was immediately to the west of the unnamed wadi. The starting time was 11.30 a.m. As soon as the objective was reached, transport was to move forward with ammunition and tools.

The timing of the attack gave the company commanders and other officers no chance to study the ground though they were able to see something of it during the issuing of orders. No time was available to do more than issue the barest essential instructions to platoon commanders and for the latter to instruct their section leaders, who would pass on to the men the little information they had. The men in

the ranks had therefore little knowledge of the general plan of attack, though, indeed, with such meagre information regarding the enemy and his position, there was little to tell them; in such flat, featureless country all that could be done was to move forward in more or less orthodox attack formation and deal with tactical problems as they developed.

Captain McBride commanding B Company on the right decided to attack with two platoons forward; the right platoon, No. 10 (Second-Lieutenant [Cathie](#)³) was to deal with the escarpment and everything over the edge of it, while the left platoon, No. 11 (Lieutenant [Tredray](#)⁴), would move forward to the right of the cairn, which, as mentioned previously, was in D Company's sector. The reserve platoon, No. 12 (Lieutenant Morris), was to follow 300 yards in rear. The total extent of B Company's front, from the escarpment to the cairn, was about 600 yards.

On the left D Company (Major Hastie) was also to have two platoons forward, 17 (Lieutenant [Clarry](#)⁵) on the right and 16 (Lieutenant Handyside) on the left, with the reserve platoon, No. 18 (Second-Lieutenant [Holt](#)⁶) following in the centre 800 yards to the rear. The company had an open left flank.

The [Rugbet en Nbeidat](#) had its origin immediately to the left of D Company at the start line, about 500 yards from the inter-company boundary. The wadi ran almost due west (and therefore at an angle of forty degrees to the axis of advance) for 2500 yards, at which point it was 2000 yards south of the trig on [Point 175](#). It then turned to the north-west, passing through the escarpment as already described. This wadi diverging from the axis of advance, together with the CO's instructions (when amended orders were issued) to pay special attention to the area left of the trig, were no doubt largely the cause of D Company moving too far to its left during the attack, as will presently be referred to.

While Colonel McNaught was giving his orders firing was taking place to the right of the start line on or below the lip of the escarpment. There A Company was deployed covering the right rear of B Company, while the latter was forming up on the start line, and was clearing up enemy pockets. Lieutenant [Jack](#),⁷ commanding 9 Platoon, wrote: 'Advanced to the north, that is to the escarpment to mop up suspected enemy pockets ... 9 Platoon fired on by enemy machine gunner from stone cairn on edge of escarpment soon after this advance commenced —pinned down for

a few minutes, enemy gunner shot and killed by Pte N. Peterson.⁸ Advance then continued to escarpment and the area below—this had obviously been hurriedly evacuated and no further enemy was located.'

Commenting on the firing heard to the right of the start line, Major Burton says: 'This firing could also have come from some of our carriers which had moved forward below the escarpment from Bir Chleta, part of the flank guard.'

At 11.30 a.m. the leading sections of B and D Companies advanced to the attack, but ten minutes later orders to halt the attack and wait for tank support were received. The company commanders were called in and amended orders issued. They were told that probably the enemy was in strength and on the high ground on both sides of the [Rugbet en Nbeidat](#); he probably had tanks and perhaps some captured British ones. C Squadron 8 Royal Tank Regiment, with sixteen Valentine tanks (Mark III Star) and two troops, each of four two-pounder anti-tank guns en portée (K and J Troops), had been placed under the command of the battalion.

The tanks would advance in two waves, the first at a top speed of fifteen miles per hour to capture the objective, crossing the start line at noon; the second wave would move with the reserve company (C Company) 800 yards behind the leading companies and at the same pace as the infantry. The tank commander was instructed to consult Colonel McNaught on the objective before bringing the tanks back to a rallying position to the rear of the objective. Coming out, the tanks would move by the right or northern flank.

The Bren carriers of the battalion would move immediately behind the first tank wave, also at fifteen miles per hour, and assist the tanks. The reserve mortar section of two mortars (each forward company had a detachment of two mortars, it will be recalled) would move near advanced battalion headquarters.

The infantry rate of advance was to be 100 yards per minute, the normal marching pace along a road and so a fast rate across country. The object of this was to get the infantry on to the objective as soon as possible after the tanks for mutual protection; the speed of the tanks was no doubt determined with a view to their overrunning the foremost enemy defences before these could effectively oppose the infantry, and also perhaps to achieve some measure of surprise. McNaught stressed

his opinion that the area to the left of the cairn would be strongly held and he instructed Hastie, commanding D Company, to pay particular attention to that area and to ensure that it was cleared.

As there was little information regarding the enemy positions the artillery support would have to be left largely to Major Wilson to arrange. Fire was to be opened at noon against earthworks that were visible, to cover the initial assault, after which the artillery OP officers would engage any other targets that were available. Until the enemy disclosed his positions or better observation was available, the rate of fire would be slow, i.e., two rounds per gun per minute. After the position was taken fire was to be on observed targets; Major Wilson was to accompany Colonel McNaught during the advance.

A section of two anti-tank guns of K Troop was to move 800 yards behind D Company and prevent enemy tanks from moving on to ground captured by our troops, and the other two K Troop guns were to protect the right flank.

Respirators and greatcoats were to be left behind and the transport (excepting platoon trucks, which would go as far forward as possible) would remain under the Headquarters Company in its present position about 1200 yards east of the start line. Wireless sets were to be issued to B and D Companies. It was found later, however, that D Company did not get a set and messages to and from that company were taken by despatch rider or runner. The RAP was established by the MO (Lieutenant [McCarthy](#)⁹) in the unnamed wadi, just to the east of the start line.

The orders were completed a quarter of an hour before the starting time, and as the battalion was already deployed in its battle formation, with the two leading companies each on a front of about 400 yards, once more the orders could reach few beyond the platoon and section commanders.

At noon the attack was resumed. The tanks, travelling at fifteen miles per hour as ordered, were on the objective six minutes later under covering fire from the artillery and had no difficulty at this stage in neutralising or silencing the enemy posts. The Bren carriers, which had been refuelling, were late in getting up and the leading sections of B and D Companies were of course several hundred yards behind the tanks but were advancing rapidly. 'The tanks went too fast and we couldn't keep

up,' wrote Handyside, commanding 16 Platoon, evidence that at least some details of the orders did not reach the platoon commanders. The Bren carriers soon joined the tanks and closely supported them as they cruised round on the objective, firing their guns and machine guns in all directions at enemy targets to protect the advancing infantry.

McNaught ordered the artillery at six minutes past twelve to cease fire on targets at the objective; fire was then directed against observed targets. During the advance D Company had moved too far to the left and a gap of 700 yards had opened between B and D Companies.

'During the approach to the objective when some 500 yards short of it,' wrote Major Hastie, 'I noticed with concern that the gap between D and B Companies was increasing considerably and as my left flank did not appear to be coming into enemy held ground I ordered an almost half right wheel by the two forward platoons in order to help close the gap. Just after this Sergeant Young¹⁰ of the mortar section asked if he could assist with some mortar fire as we were getting a considerable amount of MG and rifle fire. I told him to do so but to watch out for our tanks, one of which was on part of the objective....'

The enemy had opened fire on D Company as 16 and 17 Platoons approached the forward defences after an advance of about twenty minutes. 'When about 100 yards off the enemy FDL he opened up with Spandaus and mortars,' said Lieutenant Handyside, 'and we started getting casualties. From here we went in rushes with sections covering each other and were soon about 25 yds from the Jerries, who started putting up their hands. I told the boys to run forward all together and take them prisoner. I got halfway up myself when I got hit by a bullet which shattered my arm above the elbow and knocked me head over heels. The Jerries then all surrendered and a good swag of them. Panzer Grenadiers I think they were. That was the last I saw of the surviving 16 Pl. As far as I know, 12 were killed and the rest prisoners, except four of us wounded who got out that night. There was no cover except low scrub about 9 inches high. The ground as flat as a board and the enemy on higher ground. We had no artillery support for the attack (i.e., after 12.6 p.m.) but the tanks had softened him up a bit I think. I believe almost all the tanks were knocked out by the time we got there.

'I lay on the ground and C Coy passed over us. A 3-tonnei came up but got shot up. The Jerries then counter-attacked with one tank that I saw and plenty of infantry. One of our Bren carriers fought a good rearguard here, slowly giving ground and firing single shots all the time from its gun. The German tank was knocked out finally after 39 direct hits from a 2- pounder (I quote Mick Ollivier ¹¹ who was commanding these guns).

'The other wounded and I spent the rest of the day among the Jerry, who were battling then with 24th Bn that had been brought up. One man got hit again. At dusk a Hun showed us where our lines were and when it was darker told us to go back there, which we did. The chap with me pulled himself along on his hands for 2½ hrs., as he had a broken leg. The 24th Bn wanted to take a shot at us, but we talked them out of it.'

With the assistance of carriers, which throughout the day gave most valuable and gallant service, D Company occupied the forward or eastern enemy fire-pits, collecting 200–250 prisoners who, under a small escort, were sent to the rear. 'We were ordered to dig in,' said Private Walker, ¹² 16 Platoon. 'Hopeless task—hard ground—no tools. Used small holes vacated by Gs no more than six inches deep. In a short time we were fiercely attacked by two or maybe three G tanks on our flank. We quickly turned our face to meet them but Bren and rifle fire not much good. Tanks advanced with their machine guns sweeping and G infantry moving behind. I was using a G Sp MG and owing to its height above ground etc I and the gun were hit by a burst from tank no. 1, which could not have been more than 50 yds from me. We were finally ordered to surrender by Major Hastie at approx 3 p.m. ... We were taken to a German field dressing station and given first aid.'

Private Elliott, ¹³ 18 Platoon, which was D Company's reserve, had much the same experience. 'After advancing about 2000 yards,' he wrote, 'we came under heavy fire from mortars and machine guns. Lt Holt was killed, shot twice by a sniper whom we suspected to be lurking in a derelict German Half-Track. A few bursts from the Bren seemed to settle him! ...' After capturing prisoners and occupying the position, the platoon was counter-attacked by infantry who were repulsed. 'Shortly after a number of German tanks surrounded our position,' Elliott continued. 'We became from then on guests, first of the Italians and later again, of the Germans.'

A Bren-gunner of 18 Platoon, Private [Gyde](#),¹⁴ mentioned that 'the prisoners I believe, were taken back by Ptes P. Greenlees¹⁵ of Waitara, J. [Gray](#),¹⁶ and Rae.¹⁷ As far as I know they were the only three men who were able to get back. Lt Holt ... was killed very early on in the attack. Sgt T. Tattersall,¹⁸ now of [Kaponga](#), then took over. He also received a wound but was captured with the rest of us. After capturing the ridge we were ordered to advance to the left and dig in—we had started to advance when we came under particularly heavy MG fire. While pinned down the enemy tanks encircled us and slowly closing in the circle forced us to surrender, or else! About 3.30 in the afternoon Major Hastie told us to surrender....' Referring again to Holt's death, Gyde said: 'As we drew level with this [the derelict half-track or burnt-out tank mentioned by Elliott] there appeared to be bursts of MG fire from the tank directly across us. As Lt Holt stood up to move forward with the platoon behind him, he fell, whereupon Sgt Tattersall went to him, ordering me to open fire on the tank. In my opinion it was a gun under the stationary old tank that killed him about halfway to the ridge.... To my satisfaction the gun remained silent afterwards though we didn't go over to investigate....'

Private [Pritchard](#),¹⁹ also of 18 Platoon, gave a good account of the capture of the forward enemy positions, and continued: '... we were told to advance further as the attack had just started. We advanced ... not more than 4 or 500 yards before we were pinned to the ground with very intense automatic-weapon fire. Personally I could not see where this was coming from and no one else was very sure either. In the meantime our tanks had been recalled and we were stuck in an exposed position with no support and rifle and bayonet our strongest weapon, because to man a Bren meant raising oneself to a position which was the signal for intense fire. This position continued for a couple of hours. C Coy 25th Bn tried to advance in a bayonet charge and were cut about drastically before it gained momentum....'²⁰

Elsewhere on the battalion front there was unfortunately little variation in this tale of disaster. On the right Captain McBride, commanding B Company, had been unable to get in touch with the supporting field battery as the FOO (Captain [Fisher](#)²¹) in a Bren carrier had gone well forward beyond the point reached by McBride and was actively supporting the advancing tanks and infantry by engaging enemy posts, including mortars and machine guns. McBride's right forward platoon, No. 10 (Cathie), became involved almost from the start in clearing pillboxes and dugouts

and in dealing with small tented camps over the edge of the escarpment, 800 yards from the start line. In consequence this platoon was a long way behind the general line of D Company and of the left platoon, No. 11 (Tredray) of B Company, which had reached the forward enemy defences about the same time as D Company.

No. 11 Platoon had much the same experience, initially, as Handyside's 16 Platoon on the left flank of D Company. The platoon attacked the enemy in the forward defences with the bayonet and captured about 150 prisoners. On continuing the advance, however, it found the approaches to the further objective under heavy machine-gun fire from a point about 150 yards to the west of the cairn and was 'pinned down'. B Company's reserve, 12 Platoon (Morris), was then ordered forward. Private Reed ²² gives a description of the platoon's approach march 300 yards behind 11 Platoon and of its final advance:

'... we set off as reserve platoon ... on a mile-and-a-half attack. We breasted a small rise and came under machine-gun fire from the right flank. Country was fairly flat with quite dense foot-high scrub. Soon were going fire and movement style but saw no targets. Saw some Huns surrender to the tanks in front. Ben Morris said, "I think it's only spent stuff. Get up and walk", and we did, though it didn't sound too spent to me. Cpl Dix ²³ was carrying two grenades in his trouser pocket and got hit, the bullet smashing the bakelite one and glancing off the Mills. He took the detonator of the smashed one out very gently and was glad to leave it on the ground behind. Got amongst the Huns and four chaps under Keith Marshall ²⁴ herded them up and started back with them. - tinued our advance for another 500 yards or so till things got very hot. Went down. Ben Morris hit in the upper leg, Bernie Willis ²⁵ Bren gunner killed, McLaughlin ²⁶ hit, I got one through the arm. Ammo getting low. Three tanks hit in front of us and knocked out and began to burn. Saw the crew of one surrender. Seemed to have lost contact with our own crowd. We had right-inclined before going down and were fired on from all sides even our rear. Sgt Harry Martin ²⁷ now in charge. Slight escarpment on our front and right flank but we couldn't get to the lip of it but could hear a lot of row and heard a tank on our right flank.... Had to pull back. Some of the chaps carried Ben back while I covered them, then I made a dash and relied on them. When we got back a bit found McLaughlin had not come. His pal Pete Easton ²⁸ ran back to him and tried to bring him back but found him blinded. Germans advancing so had to leave him. Retired further. A captured German

RAP chap did what he could for Ben but he died. McDonnell ²⁹ was hit (lost a foot) and Brownie ³⁰ killed.

'At last reached some of our own chaps and got some ammo from B 2 which charged up but was stopped by a mortar or something of that nature. Colonel McNaught turned up and asked what had happened, then ordered us to attack again. Went over to our right to the edge of the escarpment and attacked up there. Jim Granville ³¹ hit and died, Len Suff ³² killed, J. Walker ³³ killed, Jeromsen ³⁴ killed.

'Before the action we had been told that one of our I tanks had been captured by the Germans. It turned up then coming up on our right flank. Col McNaught was walking over to it as though to give the crew orders when it opened up with machine guns. I then saw one of the coolest things of that day. Close to me was a 2-lb anti-tank gun up on its portée. It had been facing our front but when the tank opened up I saw the Sergeant in charge slowly circling with his hand giving the driver instructions to back and turn the truck. They then went into action and the first shot snapped off the wireless aerial of the tank. These chaps were stuck up on the tray of the portée and under heavy machine-gun fire all the time (the regular gunner had been hit while the portée was turning). The tank scuttled back down the escarpment and the portée backed to the edge and finished it off.

'We advanced a bit and then Capt McBride was hit and I saw Colonel McNaught bowl over, get up and shortly go down again, and it was not till the third time that he stayed and would not leave until he had explained the position to whoever took over.... Other companies took over from us as darkness fell and we were reserve.... Keith Marshall and the boys came back and told us they had 270 prisoners when they tallied up.... Of my section which went in ten strong we had had four killed, three wounded. The check up that night put B Coy's strength at 2 Officers, Lt Wilson, ³⁵ 2/Lt Cathie and 36 ORs.'

Sergeant Martin assumed command of 12 Platoon in difficult circumstances and acquitted himself well, retaining command for the succeeding eight days of the battle. With tactical skill he used fire and movement to push home counter-attacks and neutralise strong enemy positions and for his excellent leadership was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

As mentioned earlier, the right forward platoon of B Company (No. 10 Platoon, Cathie) was engaged over the escarpment, well behind the first objective. On the extreme right of the attack, it had advanced at zero but was fired on by machine guns from the escarpment.

'I could soon see our front would be this escarpment on our right,' wrote Cathie, 'so we moved forward a section at a time until we were near enough to make a bayonet charge. I went in with two sections ... and the Jerries appeared from everywhere with their hands up. Most of them had machine guns but they dropped them pretty smartly. There were about twenty in this first haul and we had killed about five Huns. I sent these prisoners back and we collected about thirty more in another charge. Up till [this] time I had one man slightly wounded. However my other section had become anxious about us and, instead of staying where they were, as I had instructed, they had gone in down an exposed re-entrant higher up (i.e., to the west). We came round to them and found three wounded, two seriously, one slightly.

'Jerry then proceeded to give us a pretty hot time with machine guns, mortars, but with the help of the RAP men, who were splendid, we were able to get these poor fellows back.

'We were now firing back with some effect but were running short of ammo, so I decided to get back on the high ground and replenish from the platoon truck. Also I had more or less lost contact with the company and company commander. However, we replenished and as we could see the old colonel waving his arms, eight of us clambered on to a pick-up and, with the rest of the platoon following on foot, we went over the escarpment with our bayonets fixed and we collected 16 more prisoners (mostly officers). Then two Jerry tanks came round towards us. I had a whang at one with a certain weapon we have [2-inch mortar?] but it fell short, so I ordered everyone to lie low and say nothing. The tanks did not see us but they recaptured those prisoners whom I had sent back with two men. However, we managed to evade them and one of our anti-tank guns got one and we popped off the personnel as they came out of the tank.

'It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon now and Jerry was counter attacking, so I decided to get on to higher ground. In getting there I was pipped through the

shoulder, and we carried on, firing back, although we were fairly exposed, but this point simply had to be held. Here I lost two corporals killed (Cpl F. Beamsley³⁶ and L/Cpl A. McK. Black³⁷) and the RAP orderly was shot next to me. All these men had been splendid throughout and were always there when wanted.

'We struggled on till darkness began to fall. I had seven wounded round about and I told them to lie still as if dead, as Jerry was sending a fair bit of hail round about.

'At last we were relieved and we got the wounded back and I was patched up and I went back to try to help with the remaining fit men in the company. My men were a splendid crowd and I never once saw a wounded man cry. They were there to the last and we were hungry, as breakfast had been our last feed. However, I had some chocolate and a few of us ate that. Then we got some bully later on....

'Needless to say I was glad to be alive as both of my fellow platoon commanders were killed early in the action....'

After the war, in referring to the above account which he had written shortly after the battle, Cathie explained that 10 Platoon advanced along the top of the escarpment for perhaps 800 yards before being fired on from below the escarpment. Sending one section forward a short distance to bring plunging fire down on the enemy, he attacked with the other two as described in his account. He mentioned that the men were mostly new to battle but very keen, some too much so, and the section on top should have waited until the two sections under Cathie came along below, but it could not wait. On returning to the top of the escarpment the platoon continued the advance just below the lip. More tents and a few vehicles could be seen to the north-west, but before they could be fired on the platoon came under both mortar and machine-gun fire and there was not much cover. After replenishing ammunition and speaking to Colonel McNaught, Cathie found that the fire from below was fairly heavy and that his men were usefully employed in preventing the infiltration of small enemy parties round the foot of the escarpment to the rear of the battalion position. Cathie then got an 8-cwt truck and, with several men aboard, drove right up to the edge of the escarpment and mounted a short, sharp bayonet charge down the slope to a little group of tents. Later in the afternoon, after working farther along the escarpment and engaging any enemy parties appearing below, the

platoon was joined by the survivors of the other two platoons (whose officers, Morris and Tredray, had been killed); Lieutenant Wilson took charge after McBride was wounded, very much impressing Cathie as 'the coolest, quietest, and best soldier there'. Cathie himself showed great activity and ability in this action and (to quote the citation for his Military Cross) 'distinguished himself by his skill, his daring, and his cool leadership'.

Meanwhile, the Commanding Officer, McNaught, had been doing all he could in the very difficult situation which had arisen. He had arrived at Advanced Battalion Headquarters, 500 yards east of the trig, about 12.30 p.m. when D Company was advancing towards the final objective and 'mopping-up' the area. That company reached its final objective about 1 p.m., at which hour a despatch rider brought orders from McNaught to dig in on the objective. 'At this stage things were fairly quiet,' wrote Hastie. '16 Pl were well out on left flank and 17 Pl were near me on right of position and 18 Pl ... had come up into 17 Pl's area. I moved across and indicated areas to 17 and 18 Pls.' When, however, McNaught was able to see something of D Company's position on the exposed forward or western slope of the hill, he decided it would be better for the company to advance to the far side of the Rugbet en Nbeidat in front. 'Just about 1330 hrs,' continued Hastie, 'a D.R. arrived to say I was to push on as the tanks would only be with us for another ten minutes. The D.R. had only left me when Capt Heslop ³⁸ with C Coy arrived in my area....'

Half an hour after receiving the order to dig in, therefore, Hastie was ordered to advance and endeavour to clear the wadi, with the assistance of the tanks which would remain forward for another ten minutes instead of rallying in rear as had been ordered. At this stage Captain Heslop, with C Company, the battalion reserve, arrived in the area. It had advanced with two platoons forward, No. 15 ([Robertshaw](#) ³⁹) on the right and No. 13 ([Ormond](#) ⁴⁰) on the left, with No. 14 (Porter) in reserve. Heslop could see B and D Companies engaging the enemy in the forward posts and, noticing the gap between the two companies, he advanced to the support of D Company, his 15 Platoon with three tanks having on the way been ordered forward into the gap by McNaught.

As D Company was already digging-in, some delay would ensue before orders could reach the platoons and the advance resumed, and the tanks would not then be available. Seeing C Company advancing, Major Hastie arranged with Captain Heslop

for C Company to continue its advance in place of D Company. Referring to this matter, Heslop wrote: 'I then came upon Major Hastie who had been my original Coy Commander when the Bn was first formed ... I asked how he was doing and he told me he had had heavy casualties and gathering that D Coy was spent, I said to him "Shall I move on through you" to which he agreed. Shortly after this a D/R came up to me to say "The CO says to push on and that we are to be reinforced soon". I told the D/R to tell the CO we needed help right away....

'We proceeded on about 50 yards and the mortar fire thickened considerably forcing us to ground and to what little cover we could find (an odd camel-grass bush). We again moved forward a few yards in short bounds.... Shortly after ... 3 German tanks appeared from the gully on the left some 75 yards away ... 2 of the tanks were German Mark IVs I think, and the centre one was a captured I Tank complete with our markings and pennant. They moved forward slowly followed by a few German infantry and proceeded to inflict heavy casualties on us with MG fire from the tanks. We eliminated a few of the infantry following the tanks. Then on my left where the tanks were nearest, my chaps and those left of D Coy surrendered. We were too close to the tanks for the artillery to open fire on the tanks and there was no available route for withdrawal. I looked back for any reinforcements but could not see any moving up. Each time I looked to have another "look-see" ... MG bursts welcomed me at uncomfortably close quarters. The right hand tanks continued to move in, whereupon the remainder of us surrendered. I gave no orders to surrender apart from saying to my runner, L/Cpl T. Eagan,⁴¹ "Looks like we've had it". I would not say there were "Germans everywhere"—the tanks and mortars were our undoing....'

No. 15 Platoon of C Company (Robertshaw), on advancing into the gap between B and D Companies under orders from McNaught, moved towards the escarpment, and the three tanks accompanying it, when passing over the crest of [Point 175](#), were destroyed by tank and anti-tank gun fire. No. 15 Platoon killed the crew of an anti-tank gun but came under heavy mortar fire which was covering the advance of the enemy infantry.

'We had a sharp action for a while,' said Robertshaw. 'At this stage I was astonished to see some fifty or more of the enemy, who had been captured by the

forward companies before I joined the tanks, coming up from our rear with their hands up so as not to draw fire from their own lines. I could also hear a tank coming back up the escarpment and I could not see any of our own troops anywhere. Up to this stage the platoon had only a few casualties.

'I then ordered the sections to withdraw independently until they contacted some of our own troops, platoon HQ under A/ [Sgt L. T. Connor](#) going with the first section while I went round the rest of the platoon to give them their orders.... I got out by a lot of luck ... Sgt Connor and I were the only ones to regain our lines that day.

'Once on their feet the sections drew a hail of small-arms fire and were practically all killed or wounded. Those who were not killed lay up in unoccupied enemy positions and remained there until the ground was regained by the 24th Bn forty hours later. Several wounded survivors of 13 Platoon were also found. I believe a few of the walking wounded did come out and found our lines on the night of the 23rd but I did not contact them. The few still fit stayed with the badly wounded. Of a platoon strength of 36, fourteen were killed, nine wounded, and six taken prisoner.'

Robertshaw referred to one special casualty. 'S/Sgt [Marshall](#) ⁴² who was C Coy CQMS was a veteran of World War I. He took a rifle and bayonet and joined 13 Platoon on the start line "just to go along with the boys", and was very badly wounded when C Coy was captured. He remained on the ground with other C Coy wounded until the ground was regained on the morning of the 25th when he was picked up still alive but died shortly afterwards.'

Several other accounts by members of C Company tell very much the same story. [R. F. Thorpe](#) ⁴³ mentions a shortage of ammunition after the company had passed through D Company, as do several others, and he also refers to a couple of demands from a German officer fifty yards away that the men in the vicinity should surrender. There was no response. Thorpe was slightly wounded when the German tanks were about thirty yards away, when the men surrendered.

[H. H. Hanlen](#) ⁴⁴ of 13 Platoon said the enemy brought up three British tanks which sprayed the ground with machine-gun fire and ran over the men. Three Bren carriers manned by Germans accompanied the tanks, he said, and rounded up the

New Zealanders. This occurred at 3.10 p.m. During the advance C Company had rooted out a few machine guns but soon had to go to ground. Some men were lucky enough to have enemy machine-gun pits for cover; there was no cover for the others. The men had one hundred rounds of ammunition each and there were 400 rounds for each Bren gun. When the attack halted, the enemy were about seventy yards away and there was good shooting for a time but the ammunition soon ran out. The company had nothing to deal with the tanks.

An apparently derelict tank, which 'came to life' when his section was right under its guns, caused heavy casualties, said Sergeant J. Huse, 13 Platoon, who continued: 'We advanced in extended order and commenced losing men very early in the piece.... We had fixed bayonets at the start and cleared a number of well-dug German machine-gun positions, taking ... prisoners. The further we moved up the more our numbers dwindled. When we came up with D Coy there were only remnants of both companies left.... Our little show was wound up about 4.30 p.m. After firing steadily for an hour or so when the Germans counter-attacked, most of us were down [to] a few rounds for our rifles. Two or three men had been sent back for more ammunition and for new instructions but apparently had collected a bullet en route. There was quite a bit of fire coming from behind us, probably from Jerries who had lain "doggo" under camouflage sheets until we passed; we had already flushed one or two of them out. Enemy artillery had started up and I remember looking back at the depressing sight of a number of our trucks in flames.... We were speedily disarmed and hustled back through uncomfortably thick fire from our own artillery for a couple of miles or so....'

Lieutenant Porter who commanded 14 Platoon, in reserve to C Company, said his platoon did not suffer any casualties until it was well up to the enemy; rifles were slung for most of the way and the light fire encountered was probably, 'in the main, made up of spent rounds'. During the last few minutes before capture he was 'trying under the Company Comdr's orders to remove the remaining men of my platoon over to the left in order to get at the enemy who was shooting us up from that flank. We managed to move only a short distance before we were well pinned down in the open, mainly by tank fire. This action was at very close range and when some infantry moved in with tank support we were in no position to do anything about it and we had to choose between complete annihilation or surrender....' Porter gave

the casualties of his platoon as twelve killed, two killed while prisoners on board a torpedoed ship, four wounded, two wounded and PW, twelve prisoners of war.

Lieutenant Ormond, commanding 13 Platoon, wrote: 'We were under scattered fire after 500 or 600 yards, MG and rifle, but only one or two casualties to my knowledge. Sgt Huse and his section were 70 yards to my right and may have had more. ... Just prior to coming up with ... the remnants of D Company I ... sent a runner Pte "Mac" Campbell ⁴⁵ to Capt Heslop with roughly this report, "Big mass of transport to left and rear (perhaps 2 miles away no more). Part of D Coy in trouble on our left, I propose joining them, may be a counter-attack from here".... At this stage I thought the rest of the Bn had got their objective and would be settling in, so turned left with my two sections—Sgt Huse being out of touch on right— and prepared to hold the flank till relieved.

'Moved up through Cpl Quinn ⁴⁶ (with remnants of D Company) and his half dozen men. He was splendid, drawing a lot of fire but walking round to collect his men and explaining to me that we were on the edge of strong German positions that shouldn't have been there at all according to our briefing—"An isolated pocket of resistance to be cleaned up". I told Quinn to withdraw through me and give his dope to Bn. He must have been killed just after this as I found his body on the Tuesday (two days later), an MG burst had got him.

'Settled my two sections in German slit trenches and told Sgt Brown-Bayliss ⁴⁷ we'd have to hold the position. Then went forward a bit with my runner Pte A. Scott. ⁴⁸ 40 or 50 Germans stood up and surrendered 150 yards away so started over towards them when they didn't obey my signal to come over. Then I noticed a whole lot more Huns lying ready to fire and also a tank I hadn't noticed before which was giving us occasional bursts; so got back smartly to the rest of the platoon—Scott killed somewhere here by bursts from tank. We hung on there till I was knocked out by a trench mortar, the Germans advancing a bit as we got short of men and ammunition.

'When I came to, the Germans were in possession, none of our men about and no firing close by. I lay quiet in my trench till dark. Then collected some of our wounded, Tom Gaddum, ⁴⁹ Hugh Campbell, S/Sgt Bill Marshall and a couple more. Had a yarn to them, got some Huns to find them blankets and was then marched off

to a Div HQ.... After a hell of a lot of questioning and threats was put in with a tent full of German soldiers. Stayed with them till Tuesday morning when position overrun by 20th Bn I think. Rejoined 25th Bn about 10 p.m. Tuesday. Was recaptured the following Sunday morning through my own darned stupidity....'

As is generally the case in battle, the times given in diaries, reports, and personal accounts are by no means reliable and those given here have been selected as the most probable. As already stated, Colonel McNaught arrived at Advanced Battalion Headquarters, 500 yards east of the trig, or within the foremost enemy defences, about 12.30 p.m. Ten minutes later K Troop (anti-tank) took up a position in line with the Headquarters. All seemed to be going well at this stage and at 1 p.m., when D Company was on the final objective, casualties had been light, and many prisoners had been taken; D Company had been ordered to dig in and the tank commander told he could go out or rally, as planned, at 1.10 p.m. The I-tank squadron had already suffered heavy loss and on the way out, round the right flank, several more tanks were hit.

It was about 1.30 p.m., apparently, when, as already described, D Company received orders to advance across the wadi in front, and C Company was approaching. About this time McNaught was wounded in the knee but carried on. Shortly afterwards, before 2 p.m., the enemy counter-attack commenced and some B and C Company men were seen falling back on Battalion Headquarters but were rallied on three occasions without great difficulty. It was then obvious to McNaught that the situation was serious, with C and D Companies largely overrun. He had already sent a despatch rider to A Company ordering it forward from its task over the escarpment back near the start line, and later the Brigadier offered a company of 24 Battalion.

A Company (Roberts) had practically completed its task at the escarpment, experiencing little difficulty except for an unfortunate incident with what looked like the supporting tanks which, despite recognition signals, killed two men and wounded another in 9 Platoon while it was withdrawing near the top of the escarpment. On receiving McNaught's order, A Company about 2.15 p.m. advanced rapidly. Lieutenant Jack, commanding 9 Platoon, gave an account of the action:

'We were hurriedly deployed,' he wrote, 'and proceeded with the advance

towards Pt 175 where D and B Coys had already been committed. Platoons came under fire immediately. Advance continued by short bounds. 7 Pl on right, 9 centre, and 8 left. Heavy casualties at this stage. 7 and 9 Platoons finally pinned down by fire from enemy tank which remained stationary and which was believed to be out of action. Tanks then moved up and attempted to run over our troops which were prone on the ground. Our anti-tank guns then obtained direct hits on the tank and put it out of action (I was wounded very soon after this incident).

'It was at this stage that a Bren carrier came up to us with ammunition and also brought fire to bear on the enemy MGs some 150 yards ahead. This Bren carrier also took back four or five wounded, including myself and then returned to repeat the performance....'

While the rest of A Company had moved up in its trucks, 8 Platoon advanced on foot, as after leaving its trucks in the morning for the advance on the escarpment, it did not see them again that day. The intention was for the attack to go up the left centre of the position but it seems to have been directed a good deal more to the right, due perhaps to a reconnaissance made by Roberts 'to find the best line of attack', as Major Burton remarked. The company suffered severe casualties as it advanced but carried on and was finally pinned down about 150 yards from the objective by heavy fire, mainly from numerous machine guns. Casualties were nearly twenty killed and about forty wounded.

When Jack became a casualty, wounded three times early in the fight, Sergeant Winter took over and, leading the platoon forward, used sticky bombs against the tank mentioned by Jack, but, as he said, without effect. 'At this stage,' he wrote, 'it was impossible to obtain a coherent appraisal of the situation, a continuous stream of wounded was passing to the rear, enemy fire was intense, and our own 6th Field were putting down a spot barrage that was suicidal in its closeness, captured German vehicles were shuttling up and down between Brigade H.Q., Bn H.Q. and the attached arms. A Company was desperately short of ammunition and ... moved in open order by platoons and proceeded to advance across the plateau with bayonets fixed. Enemy fire from concealed positions and tanks decimated the company before 100 yards had been covered.'

Winter himself was badly wounded but remained in action though his platoon

was reduced to five. Captain Roberts had also been wounded. McNaught had again been wounded, this time in the left thigh, but continued to direct operations. About 2.30 p.m. the wireless truck was hit and men killed, the IO and the Signals Officer being wounded.

Meanwhile D Company (Captain [McDonald](#)⁵⁰) of 24 Battalion was moving forward to support the right flank of 25 Battalion, and driving along the foot of the escarpment, debussed about 3.30 p.m. when it came under fire, and advanced up the slope. Tragically, this was a collision with part of B Company 25 Battalion and considerable fire was exchanged before the error was remedied. A party of Headquarters Company details and other men, organised by Major Burton and doing excellent work in combatting enemy enterprises round the right flank, was also involved, and it seems that the mistake was a natural consequence of McDonald's company coming under fire from enemy positions farther west along the escarpment and thinking this fire came from where B Company was. However, the company succeeded against severe opposition in taking up a position on the right flank of 25 Battalion, greatly aided by the anti-tank gun en portée previously mentioned, which destroyed a threatening tank, and by the action of four repaired Valentine tanks which advanced along the top of the escarpment. Unfortunately, D Company 24 Battalion lost Captain McDonald, killed just before the tanks appeared, and this, together with the confusion caused by the collision with 25 Battalion and the unfamiliar terrain, caused the company to lose the opportunity of following the tanks and recapturing the ground lost on that flank. Its presence where it was was none the less welcome to the harassed troops of 25 Battalion.

Another company of 24 Battalion, C Company (Captain [Tomlinson](#)⁵¹) had also been ordered forward and reached the forward area on the left flank probably about 4.45 p.m., following much the same route as that taken in the attack by D Company 25 Battalion. In the meantime, McNaught had been wounded a third time, on this occasion in the other knee, and went back in a carrier to hand over to Major Burton. Not able to find him, McNaught reported to Brigadier Barrowclough, who sent Colonel [Shuttleworth](#),⁵² 24 Battalion, to take over command. McNaught returned to the battle to hand over to Shuttleworth and then retired from the scene.

Tomlinson had been unable to find anyone at 25 Battalion Advanced Headquarters as Burton was actively engaged on the escarpment and McNaught was

meeting Shuttleworth, who stayed on the right. The remainder of the headquarters were on their way to the rear. In the absence of orders from 25 Battalion (which he had been led to expect) Tomlinson about 5 p.m. launched an attack in the vicinity of the cairn, instructing his platoons that in the event of severe opposition they were not to press the attack but to hold a defensive position on the eastern slopes of [Point 175](#). The enemy were found to be holding the position in strength and Tomlinson therefore occupied a defensive position, easily repulsing an enemy attack which soon developed. Two guns of 9 MG Platoon were on the right flank, where D Company 24 Battalion was firmly established, and the other two, though farther back, could not get into action because of enemy fire from close range. There were still a few men of 25 Battalion in the vicinity and these were rallied to fill a gap between the two 24 Battalion companies, thus establishing a fairly reasonable defensive front, though with little depth. A detachment of A Company 25 Battalion under [Lieutenant Henderson](#)⁵³ was, however, still in position about 300 yards in front of D Company 24 Battalion.

Major Burton, the only company commander left in 25 Battalion and its senior officer on the departure of McNaught, was unaware for some time that the latter had gone and that Shuttleworth was in command. 'Late in the afternoon,' he says, 'on learning that Colonel McNaught had retired severely wounded, I assumed command of the battalion. I appointed Lieut Wilson to command the troops of the defensive position I had organized, over the edge of the escarpment, earlier in the afternoon (when an enemy attempt was being made to cut in behind the forward elements of the Bn some 200 yds behind Bn Forward HQ).

'This group was designated B Coy altho it contained members of all Coys excepting D Coy. It was organized in two platoons. Wilson and Cathie were the platoon commanders. Later we were joined by Lt Robertshaw and some men from C Coy.

'We undoubtedly repulsed the enemy penetration but later came into conflict with [24 Bn](#) who came up attacking our position.... This unfortunate exchange of fire was easily understandable to me because I had been operating along the edge of the escarpment most of the morning and afternoon and it seemed to me that there were prearranged enemy defensive positions along the whole lower part of the escarpment

from Bir Chleta to the area below Pt 175. I met Capt McDonald who was most apologetic and who stated he had no idea that 25 Bn were so far forward. I showed him our Bn HQ and pointed out to him what I believed to be Pt 175. I saw him no more.

'I received a verbal message that Col Shuttleworth was to take the 25th Bn remnant under command. Leaving Wilson in charge with instructions to hold the position until ordered otherwise by higher authority, I then proceeded to (i) locate 24 Bn commander, (2) move back to B Echelon and have a hot meal, blankets, ammo sent forward, and more men sent to reinforce the position.

'On meeting Col Shuttleworth he said, "I have been instructed to take your Bn under command; as you are on the spot you look after your own men. I've got enough to do looking after my own Bn, but I want every wireless set you have. There will be a conference at my HQ tonight. I will advise you later." I showed him where our B Coy was situated and he suggested that they remain there and he showed me his intended dispositions which included some 25 Bn personnel. On seeing his proposed dispositions I told him that we had troops of A Coy in front of him. He doubted this and told me so. Whereupon I told him what had occurred in regard to 24/25 exchange of fire during the afternoon and asked him if he would please advise his forward troops that any movement in front of their position could possibly be a portion of A Coy who had earlier worked their way around the escarpment. This later proved to be correct for the next day [Lieut Henderson](#) and a number of A Coy personnel reported in from that locality.'

As the light faded there was little fighting and Shuttleworth disposed his D Company above the escarpment instead of in its first position along the slopes. They were quite close to the enemy. In the meantime the remnants of B Company 25 Battalion had formed two platoons from 10 Platoon (Cathie), which had had about eight casualties and a couple of men away escorting prisoners, a few men of 11 Platoon, and about twenty of 12 Platoon as well as stragglers from other companies. Burton took command, with Wilson and Cathie as platoon commanders, but soon left to see Shuttleworth, leaving Wilson in command. Some of B Company's men were used to reinforce 24 Battalion on the edge of the escarpment and the remainder were brought into line a little in rear of Shuttleworth's D Company. The men of 25 Battalion's HQ Company and Battalion Headquarters remained as riflemen in the

right rear on the escarpment. The detachment of A Company under Henderson stayed in its forward position.

Back at the transport, Reid⁵⁴ (Mortar Officer) and Birch⁵⁵ (Transport Officer) brought the vehicles into close laager at the head of the wadi near the artillery and disposed the men for its protection during the night.

Private S. W. Brown has given his 'experiences and impressions in a mortar detachment' during the battle:

'The ground to our front was a wide and seemingly flat area of about two square miles. This fact made the mortarmen shudder ... each forward company would have a detachment of mortars under command and none with the reserve company. As the infantry started their advance the enemy was nowhere to be seen nor was there a shot to be heard. Only an occasional tussock could be seen on the long stretch of ground that sloped gradually upwards to where the enemy were in hiding.

'The detachment supporting the left flanking company was following up behind them about 200 yards in the rear. The mortar trucks tailed their crews about 50 yards to the rear. As we advanced the distance between the crew and the infantry was lessened, the tanks began to rumble up, and it was clear that they intended to overtake the forward troops and drive on. The infantry was setting a very hard pace and the mortar-men were gasping for breath. The advance continued for about a mile without any opposition. I then noticed that there was a large gap between their company and the company on the right which appeared to have gone too far to the right. An order was then heard to close in on the right, that the mortar crew and the left company were too far to the left. There was a change in direction and as they pivoted the chaps on the flank almost had to run to catch up. Before they had time to straighten out, they got everything that the enemy had to give. Between the very few lulls the troops moved on, being somewhat confused by this time. Then suddenly a call was made for the mortars. Jumping to their feet they signalled their truck on, which was now some distance back. The driver in the face of enemy fire and understanding the urgent signal, dashed forward with his charge, and immediately commenced to help the crew to unload the gun and ammunition.

'Working frantically, the gun was set up in about 30 seconds. With the infantry

pinned down and the mortar directed on ground about 800 yards away, the enemy were soon able to pick up such a group of men. Resultant fire caused them to go to ground again.

'When the moment was right the 2 i/c decided the position was hopeless, so signalled up the driver again and was away again with small-arms and anti-tank fire to lend them wings. On reaching the spot where another mortar truck was, it was noticed that the fire was less fierce. Interesting observations were made from here within the next few minutes. Our three tanks were seen up with the infantry but were soon knocked out by an enemy anti-tank gun. Next a line of men with hands raised and being disarmed were seen and numbered about 200. At the same time a deadly menace was creeping in from the left uncovered flank in the guise of a British tank. Not much notice was taken of it until it opened up on the Bn's vehicles. In the distance more men were seen with hands raised and they were soon found not to be Germans. While the mortar crew was wondering what to do, two of the Bn's A/Tk guns came forward to put the "British" tank out of action.

'At this stage the whole position was precarious for the mortar crew, who were without their mortar commander, and had two guns but only one crew. The tanks had been lost and the carriers had suffered badly. The reserve coy was still in the rear. But there was one consolation in that the menace of the tank was gone.

'As they were about to operate the two guns with one crew, up came a familiar figure, the C.O. in his car. [Note by McNaught: I had been there for at least an hour. The reserve coy was sent for by me at least an hour after I was on the spot.] We dashed over to him through the reserve coy who were moving up to reinforce the thin ranks. It was noticed that he was badly wounded in the leg. But paying no heed to his own disability he set about to direct the fire of the two mortars and was responsible for laying down an effective barrage for the counter-attacking reserve coy. This went on for 20 mins till the ammunition was expended.... With their ammunition spent the crew, who had been also reinforced by some mortar-men, who came forward with the reserve coy, packed up quickly, and moved back to platoon HQ for replenishment but the platoon commander, counting up the reserve he had, decided against it.... The likelihood of any further action that day seemed remote as the sun was sinking low on the horizon. The crew was instructed to make themselves useful with the wounded.... While assisting the RAP orderlies and the MO

I discovered some of the chaps of the missing mortar crew, whose gun they had taken over when the CO had made his appearance. This crew had suffered badly when it became mixed up with the forward troops. Their commander had been killed. [Later, Brown's own missing gun commander returned unscathed after a hectic time with the forward troops.]'

Amidst all this turmoil of battle the battalion's communications (the vehicles with ammunition, tools, weapons, and so forth, and despatch riders carrying messages in the absence or failure of wireless) had to be maintained as far as possible and all concerned displayed great gallantry and devotion to duty. This is illustrated in the citation for the award of a Military Medal to J. B. Kinder,⁵⁶ a despatch rider:

'On Sunday, 23 November, 1941, the 25 Bn under the command of Col McNaught, attacked an enemy strongpoint ... in the Sidi Rezegh area. The battle raged for several hours causing heavy casualties to the Bn. The Coy wireless sets had been put out of order. The only means of communication was by D/R. Pte J. B. Kinder displayed the utmost coolness and devotion to duty during the entire action by delivering messages to and from the Bn HQ and the coys. His M/cycle was shot away from under him but he quickly put the cycle back into running order and proceeded on his way. Later in the day he was able to procure an enemy cycle which he used till it was disabled by enemy fire. Throughout the whole day and under ceaseless fire, he carried out his duties in the most inspiring manner.... his soldier's record has been consistent with his services in the Greek Campaign.'

Colonel McNaught has written a connected account which considerably clarifies this somewhat confusing battle, though neither in this nor any other account can the times given be regarded as always reliable. 'The attack had to be launched in haste,' he wrote, 'with no reconnaissance worth mentioning. ... The forward companies were a few hundred yards ahead of the start line (having been halted there when first orders for attack were cancelled). At zero hour the first wave of tanks went through the infantry. They appeared to go more than the 15 mph ordered. When attack started I received word from HQ Coy Commander that the carriers might not be on time as several were busy refuelling. I ordered all to move up as soon as ready and all that could follow the tanks in.'

`Tanks arrived on objective with covering fire and artillery had no difficulty at first in neutralizing enemy posts on 175. Some carriers arrived before the infantry but most came up with them. Artillery fire on 175 ceased at 1205 on my orders to Major Wilson, Battery commander, who was observing with me. The tanks were then on 175. The infantry moved forward very quickly. D Coy appeared to arrive at enemy trenches forward part of hill without opposition and with carriers rounded up about 150 enemy. B Coy on right seemed to be meeting with opposition. As soon as C Coy had got going across the start line I moved in wireless truck through them, arriving at what was Forward Battalion Headquarters just after D Coy. There appeared to be too many of D Coy in charge of the prisoners and I ordered two men and a carrier to escort them in two groups to the rear, and the rest of D Coy men with them to join their company which had now advanced towards the western edge of 175. This would be about 1220 – 1230. I contacted the Tank Commander a few minutes later, and he asked if he could take his tanks out. I asked him to remain for another ten minutes until we could get more troops up. So far there had been little enemy fire but when D Coy on left and B Coy on right moved further towards final objective machine-gun and rifle fire began to sweep the position. Mortar fire followed. Counter attacks developed from the west and south-west: at first apparently without tanks, later with tanks. C Coy came up under fire and pushed on after D Coy. Men had little cover and the ground was too rocky to dig in. Some had the use of the enemy's hastily dug holes. Companies were moving forward by short section rushes. B Coy were having difficulty in getting forward, being heavily engaged on north-eastern part of the position slightly to my right front. They pushed reserve platoon up towards western edge. Two platoon commanders were killed earlier in the encounter leading their men in hand to hand attacks. There appeared to be several well concealed enemy machine guns and anti-tank gun positions going down into the wadi on the right.

`K Tp A-Tk had come into position on line with Adv Bn HQ by 1240. J Tp did not arrive till much later and did not come as far up.

`Up until 1300 hrs the position appeared satisfactory and we were making progress. I sent an order to D Coy Cmdr. to try and dig in where he was at 1300 hrs. His company appeared to be well up to his objective. It became clear to me a few minutes later that there was a very big gap between the forward companies and I

sent a further message to D Coy Cmdr to attempt to move forward in the direction of the Blockhouse (this would tend to close the gap). This message was received by Capt Hastie but he was unable to move, being fully engaged (this I learned only in 1946 when next I saw Major Hastie); he sent a runner back to me. (This was apparently the man who reported to me but who before he was able to deliver his message was shot down and fell at my feet.) A little later I saw B Coy Cmdr (Capt McBride) who reported that his reserve platoon was well forward. I considered with him trying to push it further forward and to the left in the direction of the Blockhouse, but decided to leave it to hold its present forward position. He requested reinforcements as he had lost fairly heavily but as things at this stage were deteriorating on the left front I told him to hold on and attempt to get another platoon further up and I would use carriers to help. From 1315 hours things moved swiftly. The enemy were now shooting us up from both flanks particularly from the left. Bullets at first were over our heads. It was soon obvious that tanks had attacked C and D Coys. At 1400 hrs the situation on the left had deteriorated. I received a bullet clean through the right knee about 1330 hrs but I was still able to keep on my feet. The I.O. and Signals Officer were wounded about the same time and shortly afterwards the wireless operators were killed. The artillery F.O.O. was up with me and I instructed him to bring down fire in support of C and D Coys. This fire fell into the wadi (but from Major Hastie in 1946 learned that much of it fell too far over). The F.O.O.'s remote control was shot away and he had to go back a bit, but continued directing fire under my orders all afternoon. The A/Tk guns of K Troop were in action and suffered casualties. I was hit again, this time in the left thigh. I was knocked over but no great damage was done and I could keep on my feet though I was losing a good bit of blood.

'Earlier I had ordered the left platoon of C Coy to move up to cover the gap that was still troublesome between the forward elements of B and D Coys.

'There was some falling back upon battalion Adv. H.Q. but I was able to rally them. About 1345 hours it was apparent to me that D and C Coys had been largely overrun, but by using the carriers I was able to hold the enemy off. I sent a D.R. back to A Coy (Capt. Roberts) to leave their task and report to me for a counter attack. They came forward quickly and got up about 1415 hrs. I told Capt. Roberts the state of affairs and ordered him to counter-attack up the left flank and go about

400 yards. His reply, characteristic of this gallant leader was "Leave the b ... to us, we'll drive them back." A Coy had done most of the fighting in the battle at 0600 hrs but they went at this new task with determination and for the time stabilised the position. They suffered fairly heavy casualties in the process.

'While I was in touch with the Bde Cmdr I had asked him for reinforcements and he sent up one coy of the 24th Battn. to come into reserve, and a section of M.G. to assist on the left flank. I gave my orders to the O.C. Coy of 24 Bn, but he only moved a few paces away when he fell. It was about this time, or just before, that an enemy tank appeared on the right flank about 60 yards away from me. The A/Tk gun on my left hit it three times and it moved off. It was a captured British tank and fooled me for a few seconds. Enemy tanks on the other flank seemed to have been put out of action.

'B Coy on the right were still pinned down, but continuing to engage the enemy in the wadi from their higher ground. One enemy M.G. post and some A/Tk guns were still a thorn in their side at 1545 hrs. The position seemed now to be a bit easier though Mortar and M.G. fire were still heavy upon us. I was able to direct a reserve mortar of our own on to harassing fire into the wadi where it was obvious the attacks against us were originating. All this kept me personally very busy and I was not conscious of the great amount of blood I had lost although I was pretty stiff on my walking. I was moving towards a carrier to take me forward to Capt. Roberts about four hundred yards away when I was hit a third time by a bullet through the left knee. I was able to get to my feet after a while and a D.R. (Pte Tomlinson ⁵⁷) from Bde H.Q. who arrived opportunely in a small two seater car was able to convey me to the rear. I asked him to take me to Major Burton ... in order that I might hand over to him. We could not find him (at the transport) and so as haste was necessary I got him to take me to Bde H.Q. where I reported to the Brigadier.

'Things became rather mixed after this. Major Barrington ⁵⁸ (Brigade Major) gave me a man sized whisky which made me more dizzy (I had had neither breakfast nor lunch that day). However I do remember going off to hand over to Colonel Shuttleworth. He took over the action thereafter. The rest is a blank.'

McNaught had played a worthy and gallant part that day, a part worthy of the pertinacity and courage of his battalion. The operation had been a particularly

difficult one. It had been hurried to such an extent that there was no time for reconnaissance nor for consideration and discussion of plans of attack, and practically no information was available regarding the enemy. It was in effect almost an encounter attack for 25 Battalion but not so for the enemy, who was in position with tanks, machine guns, mortars, and artillery providing a very effective fire plan supporting his infantry and with all his dispositions hidden from view, with the exception of the few trenches on the eastern side of Hill 175. The substitution of the 12 noon attack with tanks, for the 11.30 a.m. attack without tanks, must have caused some uncertainty and doubt in the minds of the troops. Nevertheless, the men advanced with determination and in the later stages against very severe fire. Gallantly led, they attacked with the bayonet, inflicted many casualties, and captured several hundred prisoners.

Lacking proper observation and sufficient strength, the artillery did its best but its covering fire was quite inadequate for the task, and the same applied to the anti-tank guns. In consequence, three enemy tanks were able to escort infantry into the battalion's forward positions and so leave the troops there, completely without trenches or other cover as they were, no choice but to surrender or be annihilated. The nature of the ground prevented fire positions being dug without proper tools, which could not be brought up against the heavy fire which developed. The battalion's mortars, Bren guns, and rifles therefore could not operate efficiently under the heavy enemy covering fire, which necessitated adequate fire trenches or other cover from which to subdue or reduce it. Unfortunately the medium machine guns with the brigade, which probably would have been very effective with long-range fire against the Rugbet en Nbeidat and positions beyond, were not detailed to support the attack until mid-afternoon.

The British tanks did splendid work and also displayed great courage, but in the absence of adequate covering fire, could not withstand the powerful anti-tank weapons of the enemy.

When it is remembered that, in addition to these disabilities, the operation was the battalion's first desert battle and in fact its first attack, and that the majority of the officers and other ranks had had little battle experience, it is remarkable that the battalion succeeded to the extent that it did.

It did in fact capture and hold Hill 175, though it did not capture the whole of the objective beyond the cairn and was forced to give up that part of the further objective captured by D and C Companies. In the words of Major Burton: '... from the C.O. down to the least of the private soldiers, all fought a gallant heroic fight. No battalion could have done better under such conditions.'

Twenty-fifth Battalion's casualties in this very severe battle were extremely heavy, the dead alone probably exceeding 100 and the wounded about 150, the heaviest casualties in dead and wounded of any similar battalion action by New Zealand troops in the whole war. Another 100 were captured.

The wounded had a very difficult time. It was practically impossible to collect a great many of them during daylight in the bullet-swept areas, and owing to the large numbers there was considerable congestion at the RAP and the ADS. Private H. R. Mackenzie,⁵⁹ a battalion signaller, describes the scene at the RAP:

'I took a turn of duty at the phone for a few minutes and then, since the boys were coming in too fast for the Doc and the medical orderlies to cope with, I went down the hill to where the RAP truck was. By now I had forgotten that a dinner-time on this day ever existed and it was becoming late in the afternoon. More prisoners came along with whom were some wounded Huns.... The morphine needle was flowing freely all day. Doc McCarthy, Padre Willis, the orderlies, even the captured German doctor, worked till they were almost to the point of collapsing. I helped to dress various chaps.... Darkness was coming and the last of the wounded chaps came in. Tea had been brought down to us by the cooks and I helped to spoon-feed some of the poor chaps who were incapacitated. I had a copious supply of cigarettes and I gave many away to our own fellows, looking to their needs and comforts as best as I was able to.... The wounded were being taken away now in ambulances and trucks. There were even some German vehicles including ambulances....

L. Grant (Carrier Platoon) who was wounded, wrote:

'I had to cease fire shortly after as I had stopped a lump of shrapnel in the back. Lt Wroth⁶⁰ examined my wound, swung the carrier round and set off for a truck to take me to the Casualty Centre.... After getting into a MT truck, partly under my own steam, I was given a casualty net to lie on, and believe me it was a God-send. We

eventually arrived at the Dressing Centre where Dr McCarthy was waiting to accept us. ... After being made comfortable with a shell-dressing I lay down to await further proceedings. Our Padre (Willis) did a marvellous job of work, giving us all cocoa and chocolate. We lay here from about 2.30 p.m. until approx. 8 p.m. until the ambulances came to shift us a little further away from danger. At arrival at our next destination the worst cases were put in large tents, when we received a shot of morphia and anti-tetanus. Personally I spent a bad night, along with many other patient sufferers. Next morning the tents were dismantled and we were preparing to move again by ambulances. The German artillery at this stage decided to drop a few shells around us. The Padres and Doctors held up Red Crosses but with little avail, so it fell to a lot of our artillery to put a stop to it, which they did.

'While we were being loaded on to ambulances, I noticed Colonel McNaught—he was sitting on a stretcher smoking his pipe, quite unconcerned—this was the spirit that prevailed throughout. A little later our convoy was halted to form up for the long journey ahead; this was a sad moment for us all; we were suddenly attacked by a column of German tanks. Those of the drivers who used their own initiative were not long in driving at high speed to safety—others were left to the mercy of the enemy. This part of the journey was anything but Heaven, as we had to travel about 90 miles over very rough going, much to the displeasure of many of the wounded.... That night about 9 p.m. we arrived at the 14th C.C.S....

Colonel McNaught was in the midst of all this and relates his experience:

'I was bandaged up and put to sleep for the night. I don't remember much about that. Then came a very interesting and exhausting time.... A convoy of 2 ambulances, 10 3-ton trucks and a captured German ambulance were ready at 6.30 a.m. 24 Nov. I was put in the front of the German ambulance and with a compass set out to lead the convoy. I was very uncomfortable with one leg stuck out under the driver. We had to go through German lines, past German tanks and German machine gunners in the scrub. My driver was a bit scared but I told him to keep straight on and no one troubled us. You see there were all sorts of rings within rings of different troops at this time. I had to report 15 miles away to an advanced CCS, but it wasn't there and all the ambulances and Clearing Stations had moved back because some German tanks had got through the ring and were making things merry for rear administrative units. We ran into it all, and some German tanks opened fire

on my convoy. We had to scatter and go for it. They killed one of their own men in one of our ambulances and one of our men. They captured an ambulance but drove it straight into the South African lines, so we got it back. In all we went 50 miles that day but the last 20 I did on a stretcher in an ambulance. About 7 p.m. a Tank Major beside me died—the journey was too much for him. The next day was uneventful but tiring—40 miles: the third day was the worst, 55 miles and over very rough ground: the fourth day was better, 42 miles and we were in Egypt and slept in beds in a casualty clearing station. In all I had been in 3 different ambulance units—food had been light, 2 meals a day, one of which, breakfast, was usually just porridge, tea and biscuits. The fifth day we entrained in an ambulance train and were in it for 25 hours before arriving at Hospital on the canal. (Note: After the first day I was on my own as the other vehicles ran beyond me. I spent several hours trying to find them. I learned later that they all got back through the wire 24 hours ahead of me and reported me missing. I also learned later that it was Rommel's tanks making their move towards the wire to disorganise the administrative units and supplies that came upon us. My vehicle was not hit though bullets came all around it.)'

The men of the battalion who were with 24 Battalion remained in their positions and the following morning 25 Battalion with its transport moved to an area 700 yards north-east of the cairn on Hill 175, remaining under command of 24 Battalion, which that morning had advanced and regained the crest of the hill a little beyond the cairn. The transport moved back to the brigade transport area, being shelled without effect on the way, and Burton set about the reorganisation of the battalion. He established Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Company, and two rifle companies which, in order to make up a workable strength, included the pioneers, anti-aircraft gunners, sanitary men, clerks, cooks, and drivers.

Lieutenant Ian Reid (Mortar Officer) was appointed Adjutant; Sergeant [Slade](#)⁶¹ and Corporal [Coombe](#)⁶² were to do the intelligence work; Lieutenant [Rolfe](#)⁶³ remained Quartermaster; the company commanders were: HQ Company—Second-Lieutenant Birch (who also remained Transport Officer), A Company—[Lieutenant Henderson](#), B Company—Lieutenant Wilson.

A search of the forward area was made after dark on the 24th to find wounded men reported to be there by one of the wounded. Major Burton and Private [Maloney](#)

⁶⁴ in a truck went as far forward as possible and brought back a number of wounded, chiefly from 15 Platoon of C Company and the forward elements of B Company. A great many dead of both sides were seen.

With the withdrawal of some of the men from the forward positions and the arrival of stragglers, the strength had increased somewhat, B Company, according to Private Reed, from thirty-eight to about seventy. 'We eventually raked up about 230 fit men,' wrote Lieutenant Cathie (10 Platoon), '... and Wally Ormond strolled in the following morning from the German lines, after the 24th had made a dawn attack on Jerry and had knocked him back a fair way. We had five rifle company subalterns left—Bruce Campbell, ⁶⁵ Tubby Henderson, Wally Ormond, Paul Robertshaw, and myself. We eventually formed two depleted rifle companies with the assistance of Headquarters Company, which had not been so badly hit.' There was plenty of ammunition but Bren guns and tommy guns were rather scarce. Most of the troop-carrying vehicles attached to the battalion had been used to take the wounded back and very few returned to the unit. Second-Lieutenant Ormond, who had been captured the previous day, escaped and returned to the battalion, where he was warmly welcomed.

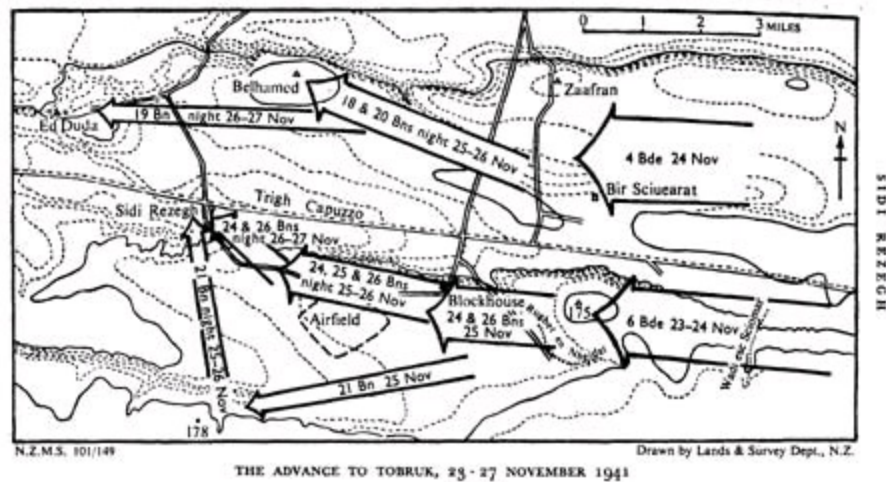
The enemy continued to hold the [Rugbet en Nbeidat](#) and the ground to the west of it towards the Blockhouse, from which he harassed 24 Battalion's position.

In the operation against [Point 175](#), 6 Brigade Group had been in a very exposed position, far in advance of the rest of the Division and very vulnerable to attack from the strong enemy armoured forces in the neighbourhood. But the situation now improved. The enemy armour, which had inflicted serious losses on [7 Armoured Division](#) and on the afternoon of the 23rd had overrun 5 South African Brigade, six miles south-west of [Point 175](#), had laagered that evening not far away; fortunately, next morning it moved off to the south-east in an enormous column about 20 miles long, bound for the Egyptian frontier some 50 miles away. The movement was seen by 22 Armoured Brigade, which earlier that morning had concentrated five miles south of 6 Brigade under orders to assist the New Zealand Division. Fourth Armoured Brigade, with similar orders, was a further 12 miles to the south-east; both armoured brigades had had severe losses.

(Rommel himself led the German armoured mass towards Egypt. So far as is

known, he was not present during the operations against 5 South African Brigade, and it is of some interest to 25 Battalion to know that there is a probability that he personally was involved in the direction of the battle against the battalion.)

Sixth Brigade's perilous isolation fortunately had ended as 4 Brigade Group that evening, 24 November, approached its northern flank, both formations facing towards [Tobruk](#), and New Zealand Divisional Headquarters had also come forward.



the advance to tobruk, 23–27 november 1941

The security of the southern flank of 6 Brigade had also been improved by the arrival of [21 Battalion Group](#), which about dusk had halted a little to the east of the unnamed wadi and next morning would occupy a position on the southern escarpment about four miles south-west of [Point 175](#). (Twenty-second Armoured Brigade was farther to the south and east of 21 Battalion.)

That night, 24 – 25 November, 6 Brigade was to advance along the escarpment to a point beyond the Blockhouse, an advance of about two miles, it being decided, in the words of [General Freyberg](#), that 6 Brigade should 'just enlarge their show without worrying about timing of attack'. Fourth Brigade on the right would move up level at daybreak. The ultimate objective of the New Zealand Division was to effect a junction with the [Tobruk](#) garrison, which was to sortie at dawn on the 26th provided the Division had taken [Ed Duda](#), three miles north-west of [Sidi Rezegh](#). Fifth Brigade was still operating in the [Sollum – Capuzzo](#) area.

During the early hours of Tuesday, 25 November, 24 Battalion on the right and

26 Battalion on the left advanced westwards, the former encountering severe opposition in the Rugbet en Nbeidat and at dawn being held up and digging in on the western slopes of the Rugbet below the Blockhouse. Twenty-sixth Battalion reached its objective, the [Sidi Rezegh](#) airfield, shortly after daylight with little opposition other than some flanking and reverse machine-gun and mortar fire from the vicinity of the Blockhouse. With assistance from artillery, machine guns, and mortars, and one company and carriers from 26 Battalion, an attack by 24 Battalion against very strong opposition from the Blockhouse area succeeded, at least 200 prisoners being taken. It was from this position and the slopes and the Rugbet east of it that 25 Battalion had encountered such determined resistance against its attack on Sunday. In the course of its attack across the Rugbet 24 Battalion released a number of 25 Battalion men who had been captured on the 23rd and held in tents by the Germans.

Early in the afternoon 25 Battalion, whose troop-carrying vehicles were still detached, marched about 3000 yards westwards to the vicinity of the Blockhouse in readiness for the next advance.

In the late afternoon Brigadier Barrowclough issued his orders for an attack that night. Sixth Brigade was to make a silent attack against [Sidi Rezegh](#), about four miles west of the Blockhouse, and in a second phase advance on [Ed Duda](#), where contact would be made with the [Tobruk](#) garrison. At the same time as the [Sidi Rezegh](#) attack, 4 Brigade on the right would attack [Belhamed](#), three miles north of [Sidi Rezegh](#). Time was pressing as [Ed Duda](#) should be taken by dawn, the time arranged for the sortie by the [Tobruk](#) garrison. There was little time to spare.

In the first phase 24 and 25 Battalions were to form a corridor 2000 yards wide for the passage of vehicles, supplies, and troops, Colonel Shuttleworth (24 Battalion) being in command of both battalions for the operation. After the corridor was formed, 21 and 26 Battalions would pass through to secure [Ed Duda](#), Colonel Page ⁶⁶ (24 Battalion) commanding both units for that operation. Brigade Headquarters and other units would then pass through the corridor, which was to be held for twenty-four hours. Twenty-fifth Battalion was to form the southern edge of the corridor, facing south on a frontage of 2000 yards, the eastern flank to be three miles from the Blockhouse. The battalion was to prevent any penetration of the corridor. The northern edge of the corridor was to be secured by 24 Battalion.

The starting time from the Blockhouse was first fixed at 8 p.m., about an hour after the orders were issued; as 25 Battalion was about a mile east of that point and Burton had to get back, form up his battalion, issue his orders, and get the unit to the starting line, he objected that the time was insufficient, an objection that was frowned upon. However, the time was extended to 9 p.m. Twenty-fifth Battalion formed up with its transport in column, marching troops on either side, a protective screen in front and the carriers in rear, and after some difficulties the Blockhouse was reached about 9 p.m. This surprised Shuttleworth, who found he was unable to start 24 Battalion before about 11 p.m.

Thus two hours late, the two battalions advanced through the dark night and over difficult ground, 24 Battalion leading. A three-mile march in such circumstances (and some of the men had four miles to cover) seems interminable, but 25 Battalion had no special difficulty and met with no opposition. Major Burton gives a good description of the operation:

'As the head of our column reached the three mile point (past the Blockhouse) we could hear enemy fire and could see the enemy anti-tank gun bullets and tracer bullets from small arms flying through the air. It was a dark murky night and difficult to select a good defensive position. I established my headquarters approx 1000 yards from the 3 mile point and faced the south. A Coy was then on my right and B Coy on the left with HQ Coy in the centre. HQ Coy was to look after approx 400 yards of the new front and each Rifle Coy was to cover 800 yards. Owing to the intense enemy fire from our rear, I particularly stressed the necessity for all-round defence as it seemed we would be much more concerned with a northerly aspect rather than a southerly one. A Coy had reached the limit of its frontage and were considerably mixed up with troops of the [24 Bn](#). A Coy were now under considerable fire. The position was organised with as much depth as could safely be used and then all set to work in earnest to dig in. We were very fortunate in the centre of the sector for we struck clay which allowed of fairly good digging. I moved westward to contact the [24 Bn](#) but could not locate the CO. Their move was not going too well and it looked as though they would not form the northern line of the corridor. I took a look at A Coy and later B Coy areas but only when flares lit the skies could one get any idea of the ground we had occupied. The Bn was to face south so naturally our vehicles were better in rear of us. But then it looked as though if the [24 Bn](#) failed to

secure their position we would be fighting facing north with our vehicles in front. We decided to widely scatter vehicles and all drivers to dig in and be prepared to fight. Picks were burrowing deep into the ground. The scraping and bumping of shovels could be heard all around as slit trenches, gun pits and mortar pits were made. Near to Bn HQ was dug a pit for the Brigade wireless as it was considered safer to have it underground than on the truck. The time was about 3 a.m. on 26 Nov and we awaited the passage of 21 – 26 Bns.... They did attempt to secure their objective but their columns ran into the same withering fire from the same direction ... [as] 24 and 25 Bns ... during the early part of the night. They turned and came back. Many of their vehicles ran amuck in the darkness and came thundering through our position.... Two lads of our Bn were run over and had legs broken. I narrowly escaped being run over myself. A 3 tonner stopped with its wheels hanging over our Bn HQ trench. Another vehicle ran over Signal HQ and squashed the Brigade wireless set almost to pulp. There was wild confusion as these vehicles madly careered through the darkness with enemy fire whizzing all around them. However, they had soon passed through our position and probably returned ... whence they came. Then came the dawn and with it much trouble....'

Lieutenant Cathie also narrowly escaped the trucks:

'On Tuesday night we moved into a new position and spent an uncomfortable night digging in under sniper fire with an occasional burst of machine gun fire for luck. It was not a very nice experience, particularly that damned sniping. It was bitterly cold too and at about five o'clock when I lay down in a pit with my then company commander, Doug Wilson, I said to him that I did not know whether I was shivering with fright or with cold. We were unfortunate enough to have three blokes casualties this night, run over by our own trucks. Just an error of judgment. How the sergeant, Doug, and myself escaped a similar fate I do not know.'

H. R. Mackenzie of the signal platoon was also a target for the runaway vehicles. He had dug a fairly deep, tight-fitting slit trench for himself and about dawn heard the noise of vehicles and saw a truck heading straight for him. 'I ducked and over it came leaving both its left-hand wheel track marks up my right foot and over my left shoulder, leaving me dazed for quite a while as to what had just happened.'

Burton was quite right in assuming that 24 Battalion was having difficulty in

forming the northern side of the corridor. On reaching a position somewhere near the southern side that 25 Battalion was to occupy, 24 Battalion was to turn to the right and advance 2000 yards to the north to occupy the northern side. Two companies seemed to have done this against some opposition, but there is some doubt as to the action of the other two, none of their officers having survived. Two machine-gun platoons with 24 Battalion took up positions facing west on the open western side of the corridor, between the western flanks of 24 and 25 Battalions. Twenty-fourth Battalion had much difficulty with the hard ground, encountering a rocky surface in which positions could not be dug, and there appears to have been a good deal of confusion generally.

Meanwhile 4 Brigade to the north had been completely successful in its attack on [Belhamed](#), and 21 and 26 Battalions had moved forward towards the corridor. Twenty-fourth Battalion was being strongly opposed and was under heavy fire, and 26 Battalion was encountering a good deal of fire from its right as it moved westwards towards 24 Battalion. Colonel Page was told, incorrectly, by wireless from Brigade Headquarters that 24 Battalion was a thousand yards short of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) tomb, though in fact some of its men were well to the west of that point. Twenty-sixth Battalion halted therefore a little to the east of 24 Battalion until the route ahead was clear.

Twenty-first Battalion (Colonel [Allen](#) ⁶⁷), on the other hand, understood that [Sidi Rezegh](#) was held by 24 and 25 Battalions and moved on for its pre-arranged rendezvous with 26 Battalion, and with the intention to push through to [Ed Duda](#). Looking for 26 Battalion, Allen and part of his battalion passed the tomb and reached the flat ground north of the escarpment and close to the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). A few men were north of the Trigh and the remainder of the battalion on the escarpment or south of it, engaged with the enemy. Twenty-first Battalion was thus somewhat scattered and there was no prospect of its advancing to [Ed Duda](#). This second phase was cancelled about 5 a.m. and 26 Battalion remained in position on the escarpment, facing north and north-west, on the right of 24 Battalion.

To 6 Brigade Headquarters the situation was very obscure, especially as regards 21 Battalion, and it was not until about 7.30 a.m. that it was learnt that 21 Battalion had been heavily counter-attacked just beyond [Sidi Rezegh](#) and scattered. Before then, 6 Brigade had been ordered to 'consolidate on Sidi Rezegh', make a plan for an

attack on [Ed Duda](#), but not to attack until ordered.

The enemy along the crest of the escarpment kept up a brisk fire against the various detachments and positions of 21, 24, and 26 Battalions and also against the western flank of 25 Battalion. The course of the fighting had required 25 Battalion to face about, that is, face north as Burton had anticipated. Continuing his previous account, Burton wrote:

‘Instead of facing south we were required to face and fight northward.... Bde had run a line to our Bn so we were in touch with them at last. The Brig called me up and I outlined our precarious position to him. I remember his remarks quite clearly. “You are the only Bn in position—I am relying on you to hold on at all costs. I cannot give you any help at present. I cannot give you artillery or machine gun support for some hours yet. I will give you support as soon as possible.” We seemed to be almost surrounded and were subjected to violent shelling, mortaring and machine-gunning. We replied with our Bn mortars and LMGs. The enemy were closing in on us. There were several points from which continuous machine gun fire was being delivered. To hold our ground these had to be neutralised. We put down mortar, HE concentrations and smoke and then rushed our carriers into the strongpoints with success.

‘A Coy on the western flank of our sector was having a very bad time but were holding the enemy back. To the west of them was the pioneer platoon whom I had placed in position to hold the flank which had appeared very vulnerable—they were not enjoying life at all that morning. The Huns were attacking again on the left flank. A Coy were getting the works. ... Amid the smoke and dust I could see troops with their hands in the air. The Germans were surrendering but as the air cleared and looking through the glasses I saw to my horror that it was our troops who were surrendering. Then suddenly from the German side came a mortar bombardment. It looked as though the Germans did not intend to take prisoners. Those who had considered it wise to surrender now decided to carry on the fight and all got down to work again and were once more successful in preventing the enemy from penetrating the position. The enemy renewed his attack in the centre, immediately in front of Bn HQ and HQ Coy. We advised Bde HQ as to the progress of the battle and were advised that assistance was forthcoming.

'We badly needed help and it now arrived as across the desert ... [came] A Coy of the 21 Bn under Capt Ferguson⁶⁸ and the 24 Bn carrier platoon under Lt Yeoman.⁶⁹ There was no time for elaborate planning. Something had to be done and done quickly as the German fire power seemed to be increasing all the time. Immediately in front was an area within 500 yds which slightly dominated our area. A considerable amount of fire was coming from this direction. We decided to seize this open piece of ground.'

It was about 11.15 a.m. when Captain Ferguson with A Company 21 Battalion and 24 Battalion's carrier platoon reached 25 Battalion, covered during the movement by heavy fire from 25 Battalion's carriers and mortars, including a smoke screen. With this support the company seized the higher ground referred to by Burton on the western flank of A Company (25 Battalion). The carriers of both battalions were of great assistance, attacking enemy machine-gun and other posts and being ably supported with HE and smoke by the mortars. The smoke at times created difficulties for the carriers, two of which from 25 Battalion collided head on in the smoke; one of the carriers was disabled but the crews fortunately were unhurt. Apparently the density of the smoke had been increased through the Germans also using it to cover their withdrawal.

Throughout the day there was much hostile activity from the west, where the two machine-gun platoons in their very advanced positions were stubbornly and effectively defending the open western flank of the corridor; they were under heavy fire of weapons of all descriptions, including tanks, and ultimately suffered very heavy casualties.

When the situation on 25 Battalion's western flank seemed to have quietened, 24 Battalion carrier platoon, whose commander unfortunately was severely wounded, rejoined its unit. With the exception of heavy enemy mortar fire about 3 p.m. and again at dusk and spasmodic machine-gun and rifle fire, the afternoon was comparatively quiet.

In the late afternoon at a conference at Brigade Headquarters at the eastern side of the airfield, Brigadier Barrowclough said that General Freyberg had ordered that Sidi Rezegh must be taken that night, 26 – 27 November, without fail. Twenty-fourth and 26th Battalions were given the task, while 25 Battalion, 2000 yards away

to the south, was to remain in position until 11.30 p.m. to provide a firm base for the attacking battalions. It was then to withdraw and join 21 Battalion in brigade reserve. At Barrowclough's request Burton lent two of his best men ([Tiffen](#)⁷⁰ and [Cox](#)⁷¹) from the 'I' section to 24 Battalion for the operation.

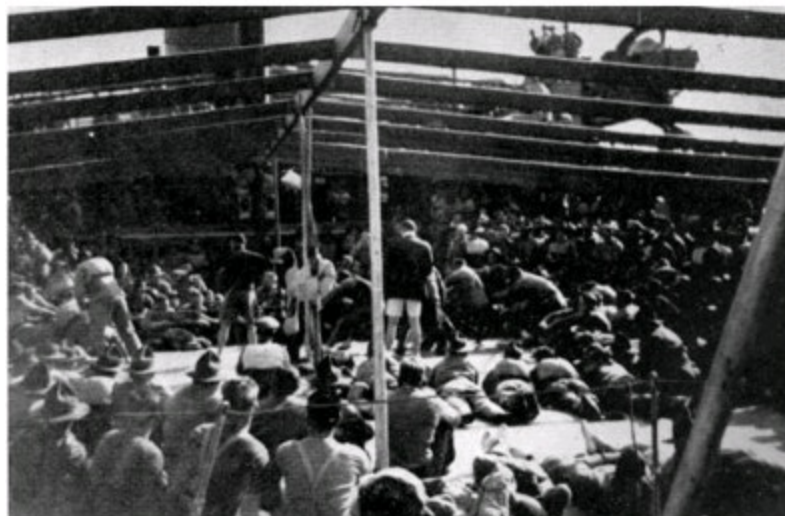
A Company of 21 Battalion had been withdrawn before dusk to join 24 Battalion for the impending attack, and the battalion then awaited the time for its withdrawal. It had been an anxious and hard day for the troops, following so closely the very severe battle for [Point 175](#), and there was nothing to do but hold on and fight back. But there was one bright period:



Farewell parade, Wellington, August 1940

Farewell parade, [Wellington](#), August 1940

Tug-of-war on board the *Mauretania*



Tug-of-war on board the [Mauretania](#)



Bound for Greece. *From left:* Maj C. D. A. George, 2 Lt G. J. B. Morris, Maj S. M. Satterthwaite, Capt L. H. Cordery (RMO), 2 Lt I. C. Webster, 2 Lt I. D. Reid

Bound for [Greece](#). From left: Maj C. D. A. George, 2 Lt G. J. B. Morris, Maj S. M. Satterthwaite, [Capt L. H. Cordery](#) (RMO), 2 Lt I. C. Webster, 2 Lt I. D. Reid

On the wharf at Piraeus



On the wharf at [Piraeus](#)



Resting on the roadside in Athens; Lt R. M. McLeay, standing
(nearest camera)

Resting on the roadside in Athens; Lt R. M. McLeay, standing (nearest camera)

In the Olympus Pass. Divisional Headquarters at Dholikhi



In the Olympus Pass. Divisional Headquarters at Dholikhi



In the snow at Olympus

In the snow at Olympus

Looking west from left flank of 6 Brigade's positions at Molos: swamp to the right, ridges to the left—a post-war photograph



Looking west from left flank of 6 Brigade's positions at **Molos**: swamp to the right, ridges to the left—a post-war photograph



Returning from Greece on board the *Thurland Castle*

Returning from **Greece** on board the **Thurland Castle**

25 Battalion officers, Helwan, 1941
Back row, from left: Capt G. A. W. Possin, Capt R. M. McLeay, 2 Lt B. Campbell, 2 Lt J. R. G. Jack, Lt W. M. Clarry, Lt I. D. Reid, Lt J. P. Tredray, Lt H. Macaskill, Rev. C. E. Willis (Padre), 2 Lt P. W. Robertshaw, Capt R. C. Wilson, Lt L. C. McCarthy (RMO), Lt G. Colledge. Middle row: Capt W. J. Heslop, Capt W. H. Roberts, Maj C. J. Williams, Maj C. D. A. George, Brig A. S. Wilder, Capt M. J. Mason, Capt A. J. R. Hastie, Capt H. G. Burton, Capt F. R. McBride, 2 Lt C. H. Cathie. Front row: 2 Lt C. S. Wroth, Lt G. J. B. Morris, 2 Lt J. H. Birch, Lt H. H. Hollow, Lt D. A. Wilson, Lt T. W. G. Rolfe, 2 Lt M. J. T. Fraser, Lt M. Handyside



25 Battalion officers, Helwan, 1941

Back row, from left: Capt G. A. W. Possin, Capt R. M. McLeay, 2 Lt B. Campbell, 2 Lt J. R. G. Jack, Lt W. M. Clarry, Lt I. D. Reid, Lt J. P. Tredray, Lt H. Macaskill, Rev. C. E. Willis (Padre), 2 Lt P. W. Robertshaw, Capt R. C. Wilson, Lt L. C. McCarthy (RMO), Lt G. Colledge. Middle row: Capt W. J. Heslop, Capt W. H. Roberts, Maj C. J. Williams, Maj C. D. A. George, Brig A. S. Wilder, Capt M. J. Mason, Capt A. J. R. Hastie, Capt H. G. Burton, Capt F. R. McBride, 2 Lt C. H. Cathie. Front row: 2 Lt C. S. Wroth, Lt G. J. B. Morris, 2 Lt J. H. Birch, Lt H. H. Hollow, Lt D. A. Wilson, Lt T. W. G. Rolfe, 2 Lt M. J. T. Fraser, Lt M. Handyside



Assaulting barbed-wire entanglements—a demonstration by a 25 Battalion squad, November 1941

Assaulting barbed-wire entanglements—a demonstration by a 25 Battalion squad, November 1941

Colonel McNaught addresses officers and NCOs at Baggush before the November 1941 campaign



Colonel McNaught addresses officers and NCOs at **Baggush** before the November 1941 campaign



6 Brigade Headquarters at Point 175, near Sidi Rezegh

6 Brigade Headquarters at **Point 175**, near **Sidi Rezegh**

Looking eastwards towards Point 175



Looking eastwards towards **Point 175**



The Mosque at Sidi Rezegh
The Mosque at Sidi Rezegh



'Jerry gets amongst our trucks at Sidi Rezegh'

'Jerry gets amongst our trucks at Sidi Rezegh'



Assault landing exercises in the Great Bitter Lake, February 1942

Assault landing exercises in the Great Bitter Lake, February 1942

In the Zabboud area, Syria

From left: Lt-Col C. D. A. George, Capt R. C. Wilson, Capt H. G. Witters (sitting), Maj R. L. Hutchens, Maj F. R. McBride, Maj J. C. Porter (sitting, front)



In the Zabboud area, Syria

From left: Lt-Col C. D. A. George, Capt R. C. Wilson, Capt H. G. Witters (sitting), Maj R. L. Hutchens, Maj F. R. McBride, Maj J. C. Porter (sitting, front)



A Kurdish village in North Syria

A Kurdish village in North Syria

Bren carriers in Aleppo



Bren carriers in Aleppo



Troops bivouac in the Sinai Desert on the way back to Egypt, June 1942

Troops bivouac in the Sinai Desert on the way back to Egypt, June 1942

Sandstorm at El Alamein



Sandstorm at El Alamein



The barrage at Alamein, 23 October 1942

The barrage at Alamein, 23 October 1942

Miteiriya Ridge. Sixth Brigade positions between 25 and 26 Battalions



Miteiriya Ridge. Sixth Brigade positions between 25 and 26 Battalions



The New Zealand Division parades for Mr Churchill at Tripoli

The New Zealand Division parades for Mr Churchill at Tripoli



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

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

C Company watersiders at Tripoli



C Company watersiders at Tripoli



6 Brigade Group laagers for the night, Tripolitania
6 Brigade Group laagers for the night, Tripolitania

Bivouac area near Enfidaville



Bivouac area near **Enfidaville**



Takrouna, from 25 Battalion positions
Takrouna, from 25 Battalion positions



A convoy passes through Marble Arch on the way back to Egypt

A convoy passes through Marble Arch on the way back to Egypt

'All was quiet to the west,' said Mackenzie (Signal Platoon), 'and suddenly I heard a low drone. I roused myself and looked up. They were our planes. I could hear them, then slowly from the clouds they emerged, 15 bombers and 50 fighters (65 planes, 80 engines in all). They dropped their cargoes of death about 5 or 7 miles behind the Hun's lines. Terrific columns of dust and smoke rose high into the still air and a few seconds later the concussion thudded heavily past my ears. I stood up and watched this magnificent display of fireworks. Anti-aircraft guns were outranged and not a plane was touched. The whole formation circled behind our lines, the roar of the engines filling the air with a resounding deep drone, shaking the very ground upon which I stood. Around to the north they came in the same line of their first attack. The flak went up to meet them twice as fast as before, and down came their bombs again, leaving a tremendous pall of dust and smoke, making an even more vicious concussion than the first one. Then came three squadrons of Hurricanes out from the clouds and flat along the ground letting rip every set of their 12 machine guns simultaneously. Strafing they call it and it sounded just as if ten thousand window shades were all tearing at once, as their 108 machine guns all spat out their streams of liquid lead.'

An exhilarating sight, obviously, to the weary, hungry, and strained men on the ground.

About an hour before midnight the attack by 24 and 26 Battalions commenced and very desperate hand-to-hand fighting ensued, with heavy casualties to both

sides. An hour or so earlier, troops of 4 Brigade with tanks advanced towards Ed Duda to make contact with the [Tobruk](#) garrison, which had captured this key position earlier in the day. Long before daylight on the 27th, Barrowclough heard that the 4 Brigade operation had succeeded, and, as was learnt later, with practically no opposition and no casualties.

It was a different matter, however, on 6 Brigade's front. After a very confused battle 24 and 26 Battalions had secured the objective, though some withdrawal from exposed positions was necessary at dawn. Both Tiffen and Cox of the 'I' section, whom Burton had lent reluctantly to 24 Battalion, were taken prisoner.

Twenty-fifth Battalion withdrew at midnight 26 – 27 November as planned. Wakeling wrote of his experiences in the sector and the withdrawal:

'Nov 26 ... 3 a.m. and the fireworks started while we were digging in—a really hectic night. No hope of getting out of our hole all day. Snuggled in without water or tucker. What a day and glad to see the darkness and moved back at midnight (26 – 27 Nov) under heavy shellfire and no one will ever know how we walked through that barrage with no casualties, as the shells were in amongst us and all around us. Our luck held and we slept till 5 a.m. after coming back 2 miles. Moved back to Bde HQ. One or two of ours a bit gone in the nerves and it's only a marvel we are not all the same way. Took up a defensive position in the afternoon.'

Mackenzie (Signals) was doing sentry duty, the line to Brigade being out of action, and woke the sergeant in time to prepare 'for a quick getaway'. He wrote: 'A sniper's shot cracked whistling high to our left. Instinctively we ducked. They must have been wise as to our move and later a few machine-gun bullets whistled over at irregular intervals. At 12.15 an odd mortar or two crashed nearby and at 12.20 there was quite a serious barrage being aimed at our area. Odd bullets whined close by and I was almost scared to move out of my hole for a while. I ran behind a carrier for shelter and waited until 12.30 came and we moved out in a slow orderly convoy. Somehow I got a little ahead of our own chaps on the sheltered side of the mortar amn truck. I looked back to see how the convoy was proceeding just as a shell landed within 20 yards of one batch. Not one was hit; it was a miracle and just went to prove that the Hun's shells are more noise than casualties. Shells crashed all around us, but on we went till we were just out of range. We stopped for a rest and

Cyril produced some brandy. Hoppy and I and the others took a proffered sip. It was good stuff indeed and warmed the cockles of our hearts. Still the shells came falling short until we were lulled to sleep by their regular monotony.

'At 5.30 a.m. (27 Nov) we got out and marched again somewhere, I didn't care where, I just plodded on. Dawn came and I could hear the sounds of a fierce battle behind me, probably tanks in it too. Occasionally a spent bullet whined nearby and plopped into the ground. Sig 2 had a flat tyre but she rolled slowly on. [Sidi Rezegh](#) aerodrome was in sight with its 37 smashed up (German) planes littered over the entire area. Several burnt-out tanks lay immobile on the slope of the hill. We passed near one of ours which the Huns had been using and got a Spandau machine gun and several other useful pieces of equipment from it. The whole area was littered with uncountable pieces of shrapnel, shell cases, belts of unused ammo, dampened primer charges for our 25 pounders, dud German anti-tank shells, some used shell cases of our own, and almost everything which had been left after a hectic battle.... We finally parked near a collection of salvage of both our own and Hun (the latter being more plentiful). We dug in and made ourselves as comfortable as possible all around the trucks....'

Burton had withdrawn the battalion to the south-eastern corner of the airfield where Brigade Headquarters had been a few hours earlier before it had moved to a position a little to the east of 26 Battalion, near the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. The battalion transport had also gone from the area, so Burton decided to stop there for an hour or two and dig in while he discovered where Brigade Headquarters was. After the men had rested a couple of hours the battalion moved south of the airfield and, with 21 Battalion, formed the brigade reserve. Both battalions were at very low strength and it was at first intended to amalgamate them; this was not done, however, as they were some distance apart. At 11 a.m. next day, Friday, 28 November, 25 Battalion established a mobile observation post consisting of a section of Bren carriers and the Intelligence Section on the southern escarpment. An excellent all-round view was secured and considerable movement of enemy tanks and transport from east to west was observed and reported to Brigade Headquarters throughout the day. The post also witnessed a tank engagement about two miles from the battalion's left front in mid-afternoon, the enemy being driven off.

A little before midnight Burton received orders to move to the Blockhouse, while

his B Echelon transport was to go to the new brigade transport area a little farther west; 21 Battalion was to occupy [Point 175](#), the scene of 25 Battalion's battle on the 23rd.

The battalion moved off in the moonlight at 2 a.m. on Saturday, 29 November. The air was cold and raw and this early campaigning was not too popular with the troops, but everyone of course recognised the necessity for avoiding observation when taking up a new position. Only A Echelon vehicles, flanked by marching men with fixed bayonets, moved with the troops. There was a screen of men about 150 yards ahead with a direction party immediately behind it, Corporal Coombe of the Intelligence Section being responsible for keeping direction. At the rear of the column was the Bren-carrier platoon. A great many flares lit up the surrounding landscape, the lavish use of flares being a long-standing custom of the Germans who, as in the 1914–18 war, made much more use of them than did the New Zealanders, and had a far greater variety.

With such confusion reigning throughout the extensive battle area and much liberty of movement, there was a distinct possibility that the enemy might be occupying the Blockhouse area and the battalion was very much on the alert. Cathie (10 Platoon) provided the vanguard and describes what happened:

‘My platoon was the advance guard of our column. I found that the weight of my pack made my shoulder sore [he had been wounded there] so I put it on one of the trucks and just carried two grenades and my rifle. At last we could discern what looked like a building some hundreds of yards ahead. It was a moonlit night and I was sent forward with a patrol to make sure that it was our objective and to ensure that there were no Jerries about. About 300 yards from where the column had stopped we came upon two deserted sleeping places—two blankets, two Jerry mess-tins, and two Mauser rifles. Of course I immediately thought that we had disturbed some Huns, but on closer examination of the mess-tins, I found that they had been run over by a vehicle as they were both badly crushed and vehicle marks could be seen on the ground.

‘I can assure you that the old heart was working overtime and I was still very anxious about our reception. However, after being firmly convinced that the building in front was the Blockhouse—our objective—by careful scrutiny through my

binoculars, we retraced our steps to the head of the column, with the Mauser rifles in our possession. After finding signs of rust on these weapons and deducing that these Jerries had been disturbed by the 24th in a dawn attack four days previously, Captain Burton, who was in command, gave the order to move on. We all felt reassured but leaving nothing to chance, I went forward again to examine the Blockhouse and see that it was unoccupied. With a grenade in my hand and Ken Cragg ⁷² with a Bren gun at my side and a section of men behind me you might think that I felt secure, but I was damned frightened. However, we searched the place thoroughly and found it concealed no Jerries and thereafter, being allotted positions, we dug in for the night.

'On the Saturday morning as day dawned we found that we had dug in in relatively good positions around the Blockhouse. The whole outlook was a little confusing at first as there seemed to be transport in the distance all around us.

'However we soon discovered Brigade and in front of us we had Pt 175....'

A couple of miles to the east, on [Point 175](#), 21 Battalion about 8.30 a.m. scored a notable success, capturing the commander of [21 Panzer Division](#), General von Ravenstein who, unescorted, drove into the position, thinking it was held by the Germans. Maps and papers showing plans for the destruction of the New Zealand Division were secured and forwarded with the prisoner to Brigade Headquarters.

Twenty-fifth Battalion occupied the Blockhouse position with A Company west of the Blockhouse and facing mostly north, and B Company to the east partly facing [Point 175](#). In the darkness the two companies became somewhat entangled but this was soon corrected. The troops immediately dug in, using picks and shovels in the rocky ground, and at daylight 'stood to' in readiness to meet attack from any direction, but for the moment all was quiet. A few adjustments were made in the dispositions: Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company took over 300 yards of front; B Company to the east was allotted a thousand yards; and A Company extended its flank to about 1400 yards to the west to bridge a gap to [8 Field Company](#), New Zealand Engineers, who were employed as infantry along the escarpment north of the airfield. The position was to be held until the arrival of a South African brigade which would occupy a position near [Point 175](#).

Early in the morning Lieutenant [Needham](#)⁷³ (6 Field Regiment) established an artillery OP in the Blockhouse. The battalion also had various OPs under Sergeant Slade of the Intelligence Section. Added security against enemy tanks was provided by a troop of three two-pounder anti-tank guns, sent by Brigade Headquarters and very gladly received; there was a good deal of visual evidence that its services might well be required. The guns were portée type and were under Lieutenant Mitchell, NZA,⁷⁴ who later 'managed to dig up a fourth'.

With such an extensive view as the Blockhouse area afforded, the OPs had much to report with considerable enemy movement in several directions. During the morning and again in the early afternoon 21 Battalion on [Point 175](#) was attacked by infantry, but with the aid of tanks and artillery held its ground, though with some difficulty.

In the early afternoon the approach of an armoured force from the north caused some alarm in the battalion, but it was recognised in due course as British and proved to be part of [7 Armoured Division](#); this detachment had escorted Brigadier Clifton's⁷⁵ supply convoy to the New Zealand Division and, driving right through 25 Battalion's position, went off southwards to rejoin its division.

Twenty-first Battalion on [Point 175](#), like the 25th, was awaiting the arrival of the relieving South African troops, which were expected at any moment. Some little time before dusk a large convoy headed by armoured cars and tanks appeared and the familiar black berets were seen above the turrets. Men left their positions to welcome the new arrivals, but most unfortunately they proved to be Italians in captured South African vehicles and 21 Battalion was quickly overrun; about 5.30 p.m. Brigade Headquarters informed 25 Battalion that Hill 175 was once more held by the enemy. Barrowclough also told Burton that a South African brigade would detach a sufficient force to attack and occupy the hill during the night, and that his battalion was to be very much on the alert and hold its ground. Burton was assured that the South Africans would be easily recognised by their type of vehicles and by the armoured cars preceding them, a description which seemed only too closely to fit the force which overran 21 Battalion.

A good many men of 25 Battalion had seen the enemy attack against Hill 175 and were appalled at the outcome. Of this action Cathie said: 'Later on Saturday we

observed that a brisk action was taking place on 175 and it turned out later that the poor old 21st had been overwhelmed by Jerry armoured cars and troops. Only a few of the 21st escaped, after putting in a desperate counter-attack and bayonet charge. But bayonets won't, unfortunately, stop armoured cars.' Mitchell's troop of anti-tank guns did not stand idly by; though the range was considerable it engaged enemy tanks on the western slopes of the hill and, apparently, caused them to retire though the effect of the fire could not be observed. Wakeling in his diary remarked: 'Things started to pop again at 4 p.m. and we had visions of a hectic night but it wasn't so bad.'

But 25 Battalion was taking no chances that night. A good deal of German equipment was found throughout the area, including arms, equipment, ammunition, hundreds of stick grenades, and also foodstuffs. The Provost Sergeant ([Jones](#) ⁷⁶) went round the weapon pits distributing enemy machine guns, stick grenades, and anything else likely to be useful, and showed the men how to use them. (This illustrated the value of familiarising the troops with enemy arms and equipment, which to some extent was done during training in Egypt.)

During the night, 29 – 30 November, there was a good deal of noise from various directions and, true to form, the Germans (and Italians) kept the countryside illuminated with their innumerable flares. There was a commotion in the direction of Hill 175 during the night, causing some speculation as to whether the South Africans might possibly have arrived.

An hour before dawn broke on the 30th (Sunday) the battalion stood-to-arms. Brigadier Barrowclough had directed that an officer's patrol should be sent out to ascertain the situation on Hill 175. Cathie refers to the matter in one of his letters home:

'Before dawn on Sunday morning Wally Ormond went out alone to see if [Point 175](#) was now occupied by South Africans or not. But Wally unfortunately was taken prisoner by a Jerry armoured car. Captain Burton would not allow any more officers to do patrol work because we were so short in this respect. Personally I think a few of us could have had a go at some of the Jerry tanks at night, but still, our job was to hold the Blockhouse position and skirmishing may have been costly. Our artillery had a real field day on Sunday and cut up a lot of Jerry and Itie transport—we were

certainly blessing those 25-pounders—and I'll bet Jerry was cursing them. Apparently Rommel's column had arrived back behind us from the south-east, as we could now see quite a large number of Jerry tanks on our front. The situation did not look too healthy, and we were still waiting for the South Africans.

'On Sunday evening at dusk five Jerry tanks attacked us but our anti-tank guns got three and the other two withdrew in confusion. Two of our chaps were wounded and the Padre took them off in his car, heading for [Tobruk](#).'

Wakeling's comments on the day contained a reference to the air: 'Not much support from the air but we suppose they are busy elsewhere. Not many Hun planes to be seen.' But there was plenty of support from the field guns, which fired a memorable divisional concentration on the Italians on Point 175 that morning.

During the morning Burton was told by Brigade Headquarters that the South African brigade which was to attack Hill 175 would first move to [Sidi Rezegh](#) to debus and then attack the hill from that direction, that is, from the west. However, there seemed to be some doubt about the operation as a South African officer, arriving a little later in an armoured car and on his way to Brigade Headquarters, made it clear that the South African brigade would not be attacking Hill 175, as the brigade had already been badly knocked about.

From the battalion's eastern OP many enemy tanks could be seen in the [Rugbet en Nbeidat](#), the wadi between the battalion and Hill 175. These tanks naturally were a considerable threat and from time to time several of them would start their engines and move off in various directions, returning after a few minutes. These manoeuvres did nothing to allay the anxieties of the battalion during what was, throughout, a worrying day. In mid-afternoon enemy tanks, supported by lorried infantry, advanced to within one and a half miles of the left flank but withdrew when engaged by the artillery.

Later in the afternoon a warning order was received from Brigade Headquarters that the battalion would embus on first- and second-line vehicles, move to [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque, debus there, and then move in a south-westerly direction to support 24 Battalion. It was half an hour after this that the battalion was attacked by the tanks referred to by Cathie. No further orders were received about this move but

another troop of anti-tank guns was brought up to assist in meeting any further tank attacks and, as dusk approached, the battalion was told to continue to hold its position.

The night was one of great anxiety. Tanks heard moving about the enemy positions suggested that preparations were under way for a dawn attack; the usual enemy flares lit up the sky at frequent intervals; machine-gun fire was heard by B Company and then a little later by A Company. The night was exceedingly cold and the men tired and nearing exhaustion, but a keen watchfulness was maintained. The general situation of the Division was bad and Brigadier Barrowclough was a very worried man, as well he might be. Just before dusk (30 November) 24 Battalion and all but two companies of 26 Battalion, after being heavily shelled for several hours, had been overrun by enemy tanks on the escarpment at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and the survivors had taken up a position covering Brigade Headquarters and the brigade transport. A shortage of gun ammunition, originating in the disruption of the supply line when Rommel's armour raided the Egyptian frontier, contributed to the disaster.

There were large enemy concentrations in the vicinity and, unless strong armoured support came, the Division was in danger of annihilation. At dawn on Monday, 1 December, the enemy artillery continued its attack against 6 Brigade and a serious threat was developing against 4 Brigade. During the morning 20 Battalion was overrun at [Belhamed](#). However, 18 Battalion had been able to withdraw westwards from [Belhamed](#) and was in contact with the [Tobruk](#) garrison, which already included half of 19 Battalion. The other half had withdrawn from [Belhamed](#) to [Zaafran](#), four miles to the east, where the other troops then available to 4 Brigade were a field company of engineers, a machine-gun company, ninety South Africans (from 5 SA Brigade, overrun on 23 November), and a few I tanks.

For a time it looked as if the remnants of 6 Brigade would be destroyed, but the appearance of British tanks with field artillery in support caused the enemy to waver, and the survivors of 24 and 26 Battalions were able to withdraw behind the 4 Brigade position at [Zaafran](#).

In the meantime, 25 Battalion near the Blockhouse had sent a patrol at 7.30 a.m. towards Hill 175 and found that it was still held by the enemy. It happened to be Major Burton's birthday, and from where he and his adjutant (Reid) stood in the

early morning, with the latter singing a few bars of 'Happy Birthday', smouldering fires and smoke could be seen at various points. On Hill 175 there were many enemy vehicles and an ammunition dump still smoking heavily, and some trucks in 6 Brigade B Echelon area were also sending up columns of smoke. The disastrous tank attack on 4 Brigade at [Belhamed](#) was also seen and heard. About 8 a.m. two carriers approached from the north. They proved to belong to the Divisional Cavalry and had been in touch with the South Africans, who, they said, would be attacking Hill 175.

Groups of vehicles—some moving, some stationary—could be seen in almost every direction from the elevated position near the Blockhouse. Until 9 a.m. there was considerable movement of enemy tanks and transport on the southern approaches of Hill 175, moving westwards along the southern escarpment.

At 9 a.m. a large force of light tanks and attached artillery approached from the south and within the hour this force, which was found to be part of 4 Armoured Brigade with 110 tanks, took up a position in rear of 25 Battalion.

An hour or so later orders were received by Burton for an immediate move to [Bir Sciuearat](#) on the northern side of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), two miles to the north of Hill 175 and the same distance south of [Zaafran](#). The battalion at that time was under artillery, anti-tank, and machine-gun fire from Hill 175. The troops were withdrawn from the forward areas and, under cover of the escarpment, embussed in first-line transport in readiness for the move. However, Brigade Headquarters and the B Echelon transport, much to the surprise of Burton and other observers, were then seen moving towards Hill 175, which of course was still held by the enemy, and the battalion awaited the outcome. This was not long in coming, in the shape of heavy fire from the hill, and the vehicles turned away towards [Zaafran](#).

Moving towards [Bir Sciuearat](#) as ordered, the battalion came under fire from that direction and also moved to [Zaafran](#), where it found units of 4 Brigade. At 2 p.m. orders were received to occupy a defensive position facing east and to be prepared to move into [Tobruk](#) after dark. All this was changed within the hour, when the battalion was ordered to be ready to move immediately, as part of 4 and 6 Brigade Groups, towards the Egyptian frontier. About 4 p.m. the vehicles of A and B Echelons were moved up from their covered position in readiness to embus the troops, but heavy and accurate artillery fire forced them to withdraw and the men

moved on foot to covered positions and, embussing there, departed eastwards, 25 Battalion providing the rearguard to the Brigade Group.

The position held at [Zaafran](#) by [Divisional Headquarters](#) and survivors of 4 and 6 Brigade Groups (other than those in [Tobruk](#)) was almost surrounded and casualties and losses of equipment (including most of the guns of [6 Field Regiment](#)) had reduced the units to very low fighting strengths. It would be difficult for the force to cut its way through any serious opposition and practically its only hope of doing so would be a night attack. Fortunately, this proved to be unnecessary, and the column, moving east for three miles and then south-east after dark, passed through a gap in the enemy forces and eventually halted at 4 a.m. on 2 December 40 miles away in the vicinity of [Bir Gibni](#), 20 miles to the west of the Egyptian frontier opposite [Sidi Omar](#). It was a providential escape 'Out of the jaws of what appeared to be a pincer movement,' says [General Freyberg](#)'s diary; he also 'hoped Ariete and German troops would run into one another in the dark'. One remark heard during the day, according to the diary was, 'My morale is alright but its had a h—of a fright', a remark which most certainly had very wide application.

The last day in the battle, Monday, 1 December, was described by both Cathie and Wakeling. Cathie wrote: 'Next morning we were pasted with artillery fire and we could see that Brigade had been attacked by tanks. Things were not at all rosy. However, Brigade decided that things were too hot—we had lost a fair number of guns in the tank attack—and so they moved out towards the [4th Brigade](#) who were pinned down. We were to act as rearguard.

'At last it came our turn to move and although we were under fairly heavy artillery fire the chaps behaved splendidly. Bruce Campbell had lost a few men, but mine were unscathed. I can assure you that I did not feel too happy with 30 men in the back of a truck running the gauntlet under a hail of machine-gun and anti-tank bullets. However, off we went like stampeding cattle. It was the only thing to do, but as we went we saw tanks coming towards us. Sixty of them and British too. They certainly looked good

'Naturally we felt rather despondent. The brigade had stuck it out for eight days, expecting relief for five of those days, and here we were getting out from those positions which we had won and lost. However, as we found out later, the [6th](#)

[Brigade](#) had really broken Jerry, as an enemy message had been intercepted that read: "Cannot hold on any longer. Casualties very heavy"; so we know now that our efforts were not in vain.

'That night we moved some fifty odd miles, nearly back to the frontier and we looked a dirty, unshaven crew if ever there was one. Spirits were soon revived and the battered old 25th withdrew to "port".'

'A quiet morning till 11.30,' said Wakeling, 'and then hell let loose again and we made a hectic dash across a flat with our tanks heading towards us and heavy Hun shellfire landing all around us. Dug in smartly while the shells were popping and did we sweat. Stayed put until 4.30 and then moved back to our trucks and Jerry gave us hell. On to the trucks and drove all night and it was as cold as charity. A good tank escort for a few miles.

'Dec 2. Stopped at 4.20 a.m. and waited till daylight and had breakfast of cold sausage and a cup of tea. Travelled all day and crossed the border into Egypt at 4 p.m. and pulled up for the night and dug in. Rum issue to-day....'

No account of 25 Battalion's operations in the [Sidi Rezegh](#) battles would be complete without a tribute to the fine work of Major Burton. On Major George being left out of battle at [Baggush](#), Burton, OC HQ Company, took over in addition the duties of second-in-command of the battalion. He showed enterprise, courage, and tactical judgment in the early morning surprise encounter of 23 November, both during the fight and as rearguard commander, and also in the operations on Hill 175. On the departure of Colonel McNaught he showed ability and steadiness, qualities which he displayed also in the very difficult and dangerous situations of the following eight days. Major Burton served his battalion well.

Shortly after crossing the frontier wire south of [Sidi Omar](#) about dusk on Tuesday, 2 December, the force halted for the night. The journey was continued in bitterly cold weather for the next two days, [Baggush](#) being reached about 4 p.m. on Thursday. A dust-storm on the Wednesday caused [General Freyberg](#) to jot down a note in his diary: 'Having crossed 200 miles of desert—it now appeared to be crossing us.'

Major George and those with him who had been 'left out of battle' on 13

November gave the battalion a great welcome, though they were shocked by the great gaps in its ranks. The strength of the unit on its arrival at [Baggush](#) was 11 officers and 276 other ranks, exclusive, of course, of those left out of battle. The battalion's losses were 402 all ranks, comprising 4 officers and 116 other ranks killed and died of wounds; 7 officers and 133 other ranks wounded; 6 officers and 129 other ranks prisoners of war and 7 wounded and prisoner of war. ⁷⁷

The officers lost to the battalion (though some of the wounded rejoined later) were:— Killed: Captain Roberts, Lieutenants Morris and Tredray, and Second-Lieutenant Holt; Wounded: Lieutenant-Colonel McNaught, Captain McBride, Lieutenants [Colledge](#), ⁷⁸ Handyside, and Rolfe, Second-Lieutenants Fraser and Jack; Prisoners of war: Major Hastie, Captains Heslop, Mason, Ormond, and Porter, and Lieutenant Clarry.

Immediate reorganisation was undertaken. Major George was appointed temporarily to command the battalion. Other appointments included: Major Burton, battalion second-in-command (temporary); Captain McLeay, Adjutant; Captain McBride, OC HQ Company; [Lieutenant Henderson](#), OC A Company (acting, while Major Burton, the appointed company commander, was temporarily second-in-command of the battalion); Captain D. A. Wilson, OC B Company; Captain [Porter](#), ⁷⁹ OC C Company; Captain Witters, OC D Company.

In the rebuilding of the battalion the great value of the selected and experienced officers, non-commissioned officers, and men left out of battle was immediately evident. It was fortunate, also, that the reinforcements included many well-trained men who had been diverted from NZEF reinforcements in New Zealand to hold [Fiji](#) when trouble with [Japan](#) had first seemed likely.

Normal camp routine was soon once more the order of the day and the battalion settled down, very well content for the moment, with a life of comparative peace and quietness in comfortable and pleasant surroundings.

The very welcome reinforcement of 20 officers and 300 other ranks from [Maadi Camp](#) arrived on 8 December and the battalion was busy for some days in distributing this great influx of strength to best advantage throughout the companies, platoons, and sections of the unit. One change in company commanders

had taken place, Captain [Baker](#)⁸⁰ being appointed to command A Company in place of its acting commander, [Lieutenant Henderson](#).

In addition to the rebuilding of the battalion, there was much work to do in clearing up various matters in connection with the recent campaign. Reports, war diaries, returns of strength, and other paper work required attention. Close inquiries had to be made into the fate of all missing men, and to deal with this a Board of Inquiry consisting of Lieutenant Reid (President) and Second-Lieutenant [Webster](#)⁸¹ was set up. After hearing all the evidence that could be secured, the Board was to submit findings showing, as regards prisoners of war, the date of capture, the place, and whether the man was wounded or not, and in the case of men not accounted for, the date each man was last seen, the place, and whether the man was wounded or not. Later on, of course, a good deal of further information would probably come to hand from reports from the enemy, the Red Cross organisation, and letters from prisoners of war. No pains were spared in the endeavour to obtain and record any information regarding missing men and the procedure outlined above was followed after all engagements with the enemy.

December proved to be a cold and rather wet month, excessively wet at times, as the occupants of dugouts and sunken tents were to find to their great discomfort. One bad sample commenced on the 9th, which was cold with a high wind and much dust, followed by occasional showers. The next day was still cold and there was an intense dust-storm and rain, the day on which, incidentally, men of the Bay of Plenty electorate had the opportunity of voting in a by-election.

Brigadier Barrowclough on the 10th visited the battalion and addressed the troops who had been in the recent fighting. A couple of days later a battalion parade was held in preparation for a brigade parade the following day; at the latter parade the Brigadier read messages from the Army Commander and [General Freyberg](#). Fortunately the day was fine, as on the two succeeding days, 15 and 16 December, there was heavy rain which caused a good deal of flooding. Some dugouts were badly damaged and a pump was necessary to clear the water from the RAP. Possibly this was responsible for the following entry in Wakeling's diary: 'Dec 16. Breakfast not so good as the cooks had a bit of a spree last night.' He himself seems to have enjoyed a celebration a few days earlier: 'Harry Martin awarded the DCM and Mr

Cathie the MC. Good evening with No. 12 (PI) as Harry has been promoted to CSM C Coy.' These were immediate awards included in a list issued in a 'Special Order of the Day', promulgated on 10 December 1941.

Field training was resumed on 17 December when A Company carried out an attack with artillery and machine-gun support, the other companies doing likewise in the three succeeding days. Similar exercises by two companies working in unison, and route marches, were the principal training items during the remainder of the month.

Christmas Day was celebrated in the traditional manner, the day being cold, and was followed by a route march on Boxing Day, on this occasion by companies and not by a brigade march as was the case a year ago.

A few changes in appointments took place in December. On the 20th, Captain McLeay, the Adjutant, was appointed to command A Company, vice Captain Baker, who took command of B Company. A week later Major Burton (acting second-in-command) left to attend a three-months' course at the Middle East Tactical School and was succeeded by Captain McBride from Headquarters Company, Lieutenant Reid (Mortars) taking temporary command of that company. McLeay was succeeded as Adjutant by Lieutenant [Armstrong](#).⁸² On 1 January the promotion of Major George to temporary lieutenant-colonel while commanding the battalion was promulgated in Routine Orders, and dated 5 December.

Although normal routine and training had been resumed, sport and recreation generally were not neglected. The former leave privilege of seven days to [Alexandria](#) and [Cairo](#) and of ten days to Palestine had been resumed on the 18th; free rail warrants were issued, with the exception that for Palestine they were available as far as [Benha](#) only. The uncertain weather, the availability of suitable grounds and equipment, and national inclination all combined to make rugby football by far the principal item on the sporting menu and Wednesday afternoons became almost gala days. On the 23rd, inter-company matches were held; the brigade band was present, and, above all, nursing sisters from 2 NZ General Hospital also attended. A week later a Possibles v Probables trial match, preceding the selection of the battalion team, was played, with the brigade band again present, and was followed by a band concert at 7 p.m. Unfortunately the day was cold with a high wind and rain from the

sea.

During the month the promotion of several officers was notified in orders, all of them with effect from dates preceding the recent November campaign. Captains Hastie and Burton were promoted to major, Lieutenant McCarthy to captain, and Second-Lieutenants Jack and Wroth to lieutenant.

The New Year was welcomed with an unauthorised display of fireworks. Very lights, parachute flares, tracer ammunition, mortars, and even artillery are reported unofficially to have contributed to a magnificent spectacle, but the war diaries make only very guarded reference to it; [General Freyberg's](#) diary says it was a 'regrettable waste of amn. and enemy flares, etc, but being New Year's Eve, only to be expected'. British units within sight and sound thought an enemy surprise attack was taking place, a very natural inference, and offered their assistance.

The weather over the New Year was very cold, with high winds which brought either dust-storms or rain to exert their unpleasant influence to the full in the featureless desert which afforded no protection against them. News of the fall of [Bardia](#) and the release of 800 New Zealand prisoners of war brightened 3 January and made everyone forget the weather. Officer prisoners were not so fortunate as all of them had been sent away before the place was captured.

On 4 January the Division, which in the middle of December was once more concentrated with the return of 5 Brigade from [Libya](#), began to disperse. On that date 5 Brigade commenced to move to [Geneifa](#) on the [Suez Canal](#); [Divisional Headquarters](#) followed and established itself at [Fayid](#) on the west side of the [Great Bitter Lake](#); and 4 Brigade moved to [Maadi Camp](#). In the meantime 6 Brigade remained at [Baggush](#), but on 23 January took over 4 Brigade's quarters at [Maadi](#). Fourth Brigade relieved 5 Brigade, which moved to a new position south of the [Sweetwater Canal](#). And so, 25 Battalion, now the veteran of two campaigns, had returned to the first camp it had occupied in Egypt over fifteen months previously.

¹ [Maj H. S. Wilson](#), ED; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 19 Jul 1907; company secretary; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

² Forward Observation Officers.

³ Capt C. H. Cathie, MC; Wellington; born Wellington, 21 Jan 1914; commercial traveller; wounded 23 Nov 1941; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; repatriated 21 Sep 1944.

⁴ Lt J. P. Tredray; born NZ 27 Oct 1916; stock agent; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁵ Capt W. M. Clarry; born England, 5 Oct 1897; advertising agent; p.w. 23 Nov 1941; died in UK, 1959.

⁶ 2 Lt P. de V. Holt; born Ormondville, 19 Apr 1916; farm manager; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁷ Capt J. R. G. Jack; Tauranga; born Onga Onga, 29 Apr 1911; clerk, P & T Dept; wounded 23 Nov 1941; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁸ Pte N. C. Petersen; Nireaha, Eketahuna; born NZ 8 Nov 1917; labourer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁹ Maj L. C. McCarthy, MC; Wanganui; born NZ 30 Dec 1911; medical practitioner.

¹⁰ Sgt T. G. Young; Heretaunga; born NZ 7 Aug 1915; clerk.

¹¹ Capt C. M. Ollivier; Kaikoura; born Christchurch, 27 Aug 1918; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

¹² L-Sgt D. S. G. Walker; Awatuna, Taranaki; born NZ 28 May 1917; farmhand; wounded and p.w. 23 Nov 1941; escaped, Germany, 6 Apr 1945.

¹³ Pte J. V. Elliott; Inglewood; born NZ 29 Oct 1919; pharmacy apprentice; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁴ Pte [W. D. Gyde](#); Inglewood; born NZ 2 Feb 1919; labourer; p.w. 23 Nov 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), Oct 1943.

¹⁵ Cpl [P. D. Greenlees](#); Waitara; born NZ 10 Jan 1913; slaughterman; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁶ Sgt [J. Gray](#); born NZ 16 Sep 1918; labourer; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁷ Not traced.

¹⁸ Sgt [T. L. Tattersall](#), EM; [Otorohanga](#); born England, 20 Oct 1918; farmer; wounded and p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁹ Pte [T. A. Pritchard](#); [Wellington](#); born NZ 19 Dec 1918; farm labourer; p.w. 23 Nov 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), Sep 1943; recaptured Apr 1944.

²⁰ After capture, Pritchard and the other prisoners spent a night in a wadi near the [El Adem](#) aerodrome and were then sent to [Benghazi](#) via [Derna](#). From [Benghazi](#) his group of prisoners on 8 December was sent off by sea and next day the ship was torpedoed off the coast of [Greece](#). 'There were numerous casualties here,' wrote Pritchard, 'mostly South Africans. We were held in [Greece](#) under appalling conditions ... near [Petras](#) and finally sent to [Italy](#) arriving about 13 March 1942....'

²¹ Maj [F. M. Fisher](#); [Cambridge](#); born [Christchurch](#), 24 Apr 1907; bank clerk.

²² Sgt [A. G. Reed](#); [Palmerston North](#); born [Palmerston North](#), 8 Jan 1917; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

²³ Lt [E. R. Dix](#); [Marton](#); born NZ 3 Dec 1918; clerk.

²⁴ WO I [W. K. Marshall](#), DCM; [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 29 Jun 1910 schoolmaster; wounded Jul 1942.

²⁵ Pte B. G. Willis; born NZ 12 May 1910; machinist; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

²⁶ Pte G. McK. McLauchlan; born NZ 18 Mar 1904; chemist's assistant; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

²⁷ Lt H. R. Martin, DCM; Dannevirke; born Tolaga Bay, 11 Mar 1918; storeman; wounded 31 Aug 1942.

²⁸ S-Sgt A. N. Easton; Foxton; born Foxton, 8 Jan 1913; farmer; twice wounded.

²⁹ Pte J. W. McDonell; Feilding; born NZ 23 Apr 1914; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

³⁰ Pte R. R. Brown; born NZ 2 Sep 1909; upholsterer; died of wounds 23 Nov 1941.

³¹ Pte J. Granville; born England, 10 Apr 1902; farm labourer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³² Pte L. E. C. Suff; born Gisborne, 26 Feb 1910; dairy-factory hand; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³³ Cpl J. R. Walker; born NZ 26 Mar 1913; clerk; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³⁴ Pte J. R. Jeromson; born NZ 3 Apr 1918; labourer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³⁵ Capt D. A. Wilson; born Napier, 14 Aug 1912; barrister and solicitor; killed in action 21 Mar 1943. Wilson was appointed to command B Company, which included stragglers from all companies. He was promoted captain on 28 November.

³⁶ Cpl F. Beamsley; born NZ 24 Jul 1912; labourer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³⁷ L-Cpl A. McK. Black; born NZ 26 Sep 1910; nurseryman; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³⁸ Capt W. J. Heslop, MBE; born Christchurch, 12 Jul 1910; accountant; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

³⁹ Maj P. W. Robertshaw, OBE, MC, ED; Porangahau; born Palmerston North, 30 Dec 1911; shepherd; CO (Lt-Col) 1 Hawke's Bay Regt, 1953–56.

⁴⁰ Capt W. E. W. Ormond; Havelock North; born Waipukurau, 27 May 1913; sheep farmer; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

⁴¹ Cpl E. A. Eagan; born NZ 24 Aug 1911; advertising agent; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

⁴² S-Sgt W. T. Marshall; born NZ 13 Apr 1903; commission agent; died of wounds 27 Nov 1941.

⁴³ WO II R. F. Thorpe; Morrinsville; born Auckland, 1 Feb 1902; clerk; wounded and p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

⁴⁴ Pte H. H. Hanlen; Greenmeadows; born Napier, 17 Jul 1919; P & T employee; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

⁴⁵ L-Cpl H. McA. Campbell; Hastings; born Hastings, 30 Mar 1917; farmer; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁴⁶ Cpl I. F. A. Quin; born NZ 10 Aug 1910; civil servant; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁴⁷ Sgt R. Brown-Bayliss; born NZ 21 Mar 1916; labourer; killed in action 23

Nov 1941.

⁴⁸ Pte A. C. Scott; born NZ 3 Feb 1919; metal worker; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁴⁹ Sgt F. J. Gaddum; Waingake, Gisborne; born Gisborne, 8 Feb 1910; labourer; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁵⁰ Capt H. H. McDonald; born Whangarei, 18 Jul 1902; Regular soldier; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁵¹ Maj E. K. Tomlinson, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Ashburton, 6 Sep 1909; bank clerk; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

⁵² Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth, DSO, m.i.d.; born Wakefield, Nelson, 19 Jan 1907; Regular soldier; CO 24 Bn Feb 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; died in UK 15 May 1945.

⁵³ Lt B. R. Henderson; born England, 8 Nov 1910; commercial traveller; died of injuries 22 Mar 1942.

⁵⁴ Capt I. D. Reid; Wellington; born Dunedin, 12 Sep 1906; public accountant; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁵⁵ Capt J. H. Birch; born NZ 5 Oct 1913; cashier; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

⁵⁶ WO II J. B. Kinder, MM; England; born NZ 1 Apr 1914; salesman.

⁵⁷ Sigmn T. W. Tomlinson; born NZ 21 Jun 1918; clerk; died of wounds 4 Jan 1945.

⁵⁸ Brig B. Barrington, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born Marton, 2 Oct 1907; insurance inspector; BM 6 Bde May 1941–Jan 1942; AA & QMG 2 NZ Div Nov 1942–Dec 1944; died Wellington, 17 Apr 1954.

⁵⁹ Sgt H. R. Mackenzie, m.i.d.; Wanganui; born Hawera, 26 Oct 1919; school teacher.

⁶⁰ Maj C. S. Wroth, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 6 Mar 1915; Regular soldier.

⁶¹ Lt G. B. Slade; Petone; born England, 15 Oct 1910; solicitor.

⁶² Lt J. B. M. Coombe; born NZ 26 Feb 1909; clerk; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

⁶³ Capt T. W. G. Rolfe; born England, 23 Jan 1900; cargo foreman; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

⁶⁴ Pte W. J. Maloney; New Plymouth; born NZ 11 Nov 1918; NZ Rlys fireman; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

⁶⁵ Capt B. Campbell; born Dunedin, 6 May 1916; clerk; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁶⁶ J. R. Page, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; Canberra; born Dunedin, 10 May 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn May 1940–Nov 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941; Commander, Northern Military District, 1950–52; Adjutant-General, 1952–54; QMG, 1956–60; head of NZ Joint Services liaison staff, Canberra.

⁶⁷ 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 28 Nov 1941.

⁶⁸ Capt C. A. Ferguson; born Auckland, 24 Apr 1908; accountant; p.w. Dec 1941; deceased.

⁶⁹ Capt A. C. Yeoman, MC; Auckland; born Taneatua, 8 Sep 1904; farmer; twice wounded.

⁷⁰ Pte J. D. Tiffen; born England, 28 Feb 1905; civil engineer; p.w. 27 Nov

1941; deceased.

⁷¹ H. W. J. Cox; Lower Hutt; born Petone, 22 Oct 1918; moulder; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

⁷² Sgt K. C. Cragg; Hawera; born Wellington, 11 Jul 1916; branch manager; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁷³ Capt F. J. Needham; Auckland; born Auckland, 23 Jan 1918; clerk.

⁷⁴ Capt N. B. Mitchell, MBE; Wellington; born Morrinsville, 12 Sep 1916; Regular soldier; p.w. 28 Jun 1942; escaped, Italy, 1943.

⁷⁵ Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and 2 bars, MC, m.i.d.; Porangahau; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); BM 5 Bde 1940; CRE NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer 30 Corps, 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb-Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped, Germany, Mar 1945; Commander, Northern Military District, 1952–53.

⁷⁶ Sgt C. H. T. Jones; Hamilton; born Melbourne, 31 May 1908; driver and slaughterman; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁷⁷ It was later learned that 11 men had died while prisoners when the Jantzen was torpedoed on 9 December.

⁷⁸ Capt G. Colledge, ED, m.i.d.; Woodville; born England, 4 Sep 1906; sales executive; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁷⁹ Lt-Col J. C. Porter, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Paekakariki; born England, 2 May 1904; farmer; actg CO 25 Bn 28 Oct-19 Nov 1942.

⁸⁰ Lt-Col F. Baker, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; born Kohukohu, Hokianga, 19 Jun 1908; civil servant; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jul-Nov 1942; twice wounded; Director of Rehabilitation, 1943–54; Public Service Commissioner, 1954–58; died Wellington, 1 Jun 1958.

⁸¹ Maj I. C. Webster; Wanganui; born NZ 23 Mar 1918; clerk.

⁸² Capt F. N. Armstrong; Katikati; born Rimunui, 11 Dec 1916; Regular soldier; p.w. 22 Jul 1943.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 5 – SYRIA

CHAPTER 5

Syria

Five days after their return to [Maadi](#) the three New Zealand infantry brigades came under command of Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt, for internal security duties, if required, the political situation at this time being uncertain. On 2 February 6 Brigade, together with various groups from base units in [Maadi Camp](#), moved into [Cairo](#), 25 Battalion to Kasr-el-Nil Barracks, 24 Battalion based on [Abbassia](#), and 26 Battalion to the Citadel. The three battalions had different roles: 24 Battalion was to prevent hostile mobs from crossing the main railway bridge and maintain order in the Shubra area; 25 Battalion was to patrol parts of Sharias Abbas and Bulac and stop mobs from forming and breaking out of the Bulac area; 26 Battalion was in reserve.

During the battalion's stay in the Barracks, the meals were prepared and cooked by its own cooks in [Maadi](#) and brought in, in hot food containers, by its vehicles, an arrangement that 'worked well'. OCTU training on the barrack square was watched with interest by the battalion congregated on the surrounding balcony and apparently all ranks were very much impressed, especially with the very rapid timing of all drill movements. With the ready connivance of the men the battalion's NCOs attempted to drill at an even higher speed, with ludicrous results, and much to the annoyance of the OCTU instructors who, after a time, realised they were being taken off. In consequence, the NCOs received a dressing down.

The situation in [Cairo](#) was very tense but soon eased and the troops were withdrawn. Twenty-fifth Battalion marched back across the [Mokattam Hills](#) to [Maadi Camp](#) on 6 February and found the going very tough through soft sand and old quarries littered with the stone chippings of centuries. The march discipline received unfavourable comment and the RMO reported many soft and sore feet.

B Company had a change of company commanders on 9 February when Captain Wilson succeeded Captain Baker, who was transferred to the [Maori Battalion](#).

Two days later a battalion parade and a brigade parade were held in preparation for an inspection of the Brigade Group the next day by General Auchinleck, who presented awards gained in the [Greece](#), [Crete](#), and Libyan

campaigns, Cathie (MC) and Martin (DCM) being the battalion recipients. ¹

Meanwhile the fighting in the [Western Desert](#) had again flared up. On 21 January the enemy had advanced from his [El Agheila](#) position and by 6 February had reached [Mechili](#), 100 miles from [Tobruk](#). The New Zealand Division had been warned that it would be required and on 11 February 5 Brigade started for [El Adem](#) in the vicinity of [Tobruk](#). The remainder of the Division, however, stayed where it was, as a further enemy advance seemed unlikely for some time.

On the battalion's return to [Maadi](#) on 6 February training was resumed. Equipment and particularly vehicles were in short supply and the numerous reinforcements had to be absorbed. Emphasis had therefore largely to be placed on individual and weapon training, the zeroing of the new Bren guns, testing of signal and other apparatus, and placing the new men to best advantage. Particular attention was paid to the Bren gun. There were 267 men of the rifle companies who were not qualified in this weapon, and of these only 107 qualified when the course was fired. The men not qualified with the rifle, numbering 291, also gave poor results when firing the course, only slightly more than one-third of them qualifying.

After a fortnight at [Maadi](#) the battalion moved by train for [Kabrit](#) in the [Suez Canal Zone](#), detraining at [Geneifa](#) and travelling partly on foot and partly in vehicles (commonly known as leap-frogging) to a tented camping area near the [Great Bitter Lake](#). The camp being close to an airfield, the risk of bombing was very real and all tents consequently were well dug-in. After bad weather the day before, the new camp was occupied under ideal conditions.

At this stage Brigadier Barrowclough left for New Zealand, where he commanded first [1 Division](#) and subsequently 3 NZ Division in the [Pacific](#). Pending the arrival of Brigadier Clifton a few days later, Lieutenant-Colonel [Greville](#) ² of 24 Battalion commanded the brigade.

Combined operations was the principal training subject in the new area. It commenced with introductory lectures and included a general hardening-up process of physical and recreational training and route marches, which everyone in the battalion was required to undertake. On 24 February 25 Battalion commenced its practical training at the Combined Training Centre School. This included practice with

boats, special equipment, scaling ladders, and the crossing of wire entanglements. The next day the rifle companies embarked in ALCs³ and moved to beaches on the east shore of Great Bitter Lake for practice assault landings. A very bad sandstorm which rose in the afternoon and continued for twenty-four hours put a stop to further work until the next evening, when the practice landings were repeated.

Six months previously the Division had been warned to prepare for a move to [Syria](#), and although this had been cancelled almost at once, rumours of a move from Egypt persisted. The popular selection was [Syria](#) though the concentration on combined training had naturally widened the scope for rumour. However, [Syria](#) it was, and the departure of Major Burton for that country and a movement order for an advance party to go there removed all doubts on the matter. The movement order itself must have caused some amusement: after instructing that petrol to bring all vehicles up to a mileage of 280 was to be drawn in 'non-returnable tins', the order directed, 'These non-returnable tins will be returned at the first petrol point.' It was of course a case of making the maximum use of tins which were not returnable to depots in the rear. (Curiously enough, 25 Battalion Routine Order No. 3 of 3 January 1942 stated: 'Henceforth containers will not be designated "returnable" or "non-returnable", but by their nature and capacity only'.)

[Syria](#) was of some strategic importance because of the risk that a successful German offensive against [Russia](#) might lead to an attack through [Turkey](#) and [Syria](#) against Egypt. The New Zealand Division would join Ninth Army which was guarding the approaches to Palestine. [Syria](#) was also very suitable, for climatic and scenic reasons, for reorganising and training the Division.

Owing to the shortage of transport the journey to [Syria](#) had to be made by rail or road as opportunity offered. Advance parties from the battalion and other units of 6 Brigade were sent off by road on 2 March and, staging at [El Arish](#), [Tulkarm](#), and [Homs](#), reached [Aleppo](#), where Advanced Brigade Headquarters was opened, four days later.

Twenty-fifth Battalion left [Geneifa](#) by rail at 3 a.m. on 8 March, four days ahead of the other two battalions, and on reaching the Canal at Kantara West crossed by ferry and at noon continued by rail to [Haifa](#). The journey from [Kantara](#)



eastern mediterranean

took twenty hours and, after a five-mile march to a transit camp at El Kehir, the men rested for five hours before embussing at 10 a.m. on the 9th for [Beirut](#). Following the coastal road through the Crusader capital of [Acre](#), the buses crossed into [Syria](#) through the frontier post at the summit of the [Ras el Nakura](#)

pass. North of the ancient towns of [Tyre](#) and [Sidon](#) the New Zealanders saw damaged buildings and burnt-out vehicles, a legacy of the fighting the previous year against the Vichy French. Lunch was taken in the Hersh transit camp on the outskirts of [Beirut](#), the capital of the present [Lebanon](#) republic.

From [Beirut](#) the convoy turned eastwards through the picturesque villages and summer resorts on the slopes of the Lebanons. This road, winding upwards along the flanks of the Kneisse and Barouk mountains, reached a height of about 5000 feet in 22 miles and low-gear running, boiling radiators, and occasional breakdowns slowed down the buses. From the summit the road dropped almost as steeply into the [Bekaa](#) or [Lebanon](#) valley to [Rayak](#), where the different gauges of the [Aleppo](#) and [Damascus](#) railways met. The journey of 44 miles over the hills had taken between five and six hours.

At Rayak the troops changed from the buses to the train—with many complaints of the crowded and dirty carriages supplied—and travelled north out of the [Bekaa](#) valley through the central plains of [Syria](#), where stops at the towns of [Homs](#) and Hama and the sight of occasional villages, many built of conical beehive houses, relieved the monotony of the rolling, unfenced, and almost treeless region.

The journey of about 200 miles from [Rayak](#) to [Aleppo](#) took seventeen hours. From [Kabrit](#) to [Aleppo](#), by the route travelled by the battalion, the distance is over 600 miles and the journey occupied seventy-two hours, made up of forty hours by train, twelve hours by motor vehicles, and twenty hours halted for meals and for changing from one form of transport to another.

On arrival at [Aleppo](#) on 10 March, 25 Battalion (with the exception of advance and road parties, and of C Company and a platoon of B Company which had travelled with the 6 Brigade rail party) was taken that day by trucks to [Idlib](#), a town of 25,000 people, about 35 miles to the south-west. The next day it took over the duties of 2/15 Australian Battalion, detailing A Company to provide frontier posts over a wide area. No. 7 Platoon was sent 19 miles to the north-east to Bab el Haoua, 8 Platoon 18 miles to the west to Qnaye, and 9 Platoon 20 miles to the north to Harim, these being the three points where roads from the area crossed into [Turkey](#). The role of these frontier posts was to help the Free French gendarmerie in controlling contraband and passports, and in manning the frontier road-blocks. A detachment of twelve men under Lieu-tenant [Sanders](#)⁴ was sent also to the control post at Akterine Station on the [Aleppo- Baghdad](#) railway, 24 miles north-east of [Aleppo](#) and therefore 60 miles from the battalion.

At Idlib 25 Battalion headquarters was in the White House, a rented house, and HQ Company in the French Barracks, formerly the Turkish Barracks. The remainder of the battalion, apart from the detachments on the frontier, occupied a camp of Nissen huts, known as Tin Pan Alley, just outside the town. C Company and 11 Platoon of B Company from the brigade rail party rejoined the battalion on the evening of the 12th.

A further detachment was made on 13 March when 13 Platoon was sent 65 miles north-east of [Aleppo](#) to occupy a post at [Djerablous](#), where on the Syrian-Turkish border the Euphrates River was crossed by a ferry.

After a bad winter the food situation in [Syria](#) was so serious that families were moving from outlying places to centres where they knew grain was stored. The French had established a rationing system and had seized quantities of hoarded grain, and the British and American Red Cross were collecting and distributing food, New Zealand units being placed in charge of distribution in their localities. The

proportions for the various sections of the people—Armenians, Greeks, Moslems, and Protestants—were fixed and the heads of each religious group, under a Free French officer, prepared lists of the poorer families. The New Zealand units placed an armed guard over the wheat or flour and made the distribution under the directions of Free French officers.

The first experience 25 Battalion had with this system was on the 14th when ten tons of flour were received from the United States Red Cross through Dr Carlton of the American University in [Aleppo](#). The flour was for the poor of [Idlib](#).

The arrival of 25 Battalion in the [Aleppo](#) area coincided with a heavy fall of rain, followed by frosts and intensely cold winds. The roads and tracks became impassable, even Bren carriers being unable to move over much of the waterlogged ground, but a week of fine weather towards the end of the month brought about a marked improvement.

As soon as the battalion had settled down, training commenced once more and consisted chiefly of route marches and manoeuvres in the hills, country which could well be typical of that in which the battalion might find itself fighting in future. All the usual operations were carried out and mobile columns were formed or organised to deal with local emergencies.

The normal precautions were taken against misbehaviour, with pickets from the various units patrolling [Aleppo](#) and [Idlib](#); certain areas and cafés and all native quarters and houses were placed out-of-bounds, and the sale of the local drink—Arak—to the troops was forbidden, the men being advised to avoid it and to confine their drinking to the selected cafés and canteens in the towns and camps. Sightseeing tours of [Aleppo](#) were arranged for Saturdays and Sundays, the principal sights being the Citadel and the underground markets, which were of very great interest.

Partly for the entertainment of the people, but also to give an impression of strength to foster respect and perhaps to curb the more turbulent, 25 Battalion headed by the brigade band marched along the one main road through [Idlib](#), and back again, shortly after its arrival from Egypt. The people lined the street and seemed to appreciate both the display itself and the implied courtesy.

Because of the poverty in [Syria](#), and possibly because of the banditry outlook over the centuries of some of its people, pilfering of army stores was prevalent, so creating at least one similarity to Egypt. Rubber mud-flaps and anything else easily removable would disappear from a truck left unattended, even if only for a few minutes, and the natives showed much daring and ingenuity in their attempts to steal stores. Dumps were of course a natural attraction, but successful and unsuccessful attempts were also made to secure articles from the backs of trucks in transit.

Although not permitted to enter the neutral territory of [Turkey](#), the New Zealanders at the frontier posts were soon on friendly terms with the Turkish soldiers there. The Turks were very sensitive to troop movements near the border and any New Zealand manoeuvres caused increased Turkish activity at observation posts and by sentries. After exercises by the battalion on 4 April, relations were, for a time, merely formal instead of cordial as before.

Commencing on 22 March, various reliefs of outlying detachments of the battalion took place. A Company's detachment at Qnaye was relieved by a platoon of D Company and that at Harim by a platoon of C Company, which with Company Headquarters and 14 Platoon had moved from [Idlib](#) to Kafer Harim. Two days later, A Company, leaving one platoon at [Idlib](#), and with a detachment of 3-inch mortars, moved to Bab el Haoua, while C Company sent one section, together with platoon headquarters, to take over D Company's post at Akterine. One troop of [30 Field Battery](#) was with A Company's detachment at Bab el Haoua, the remainder of the battery being in Idlib Camp, where K Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery, one platoon of 3 MG Company, and one section of 8 Field Company were also stationed, all under command of 25 Battalion.

Every opportunity was taken to continue training and the steep and rocky ground presented interesting tactical problems as well as stiff physical ones. Route-marching along tracks to reach suitable training areas, the use of the compass, judging distance up and down hill, gauging the effect of light in the steep country, tank hunting, attack and defence problems, the action of mobile columns, night exercises, selection and layout of battalion headquarters were included in the programme. The companies in turn left the training entirely to the non-

commissioned officers on occasions while the officers undertook tactical reconnaissances to practise them in the selection of tactical positions and to study such factors as observation points, approach and withdrawal routes, use of cover, and positions for covering-fire weapons—guns, machine guns, and mortars.

The tactical training was given direction and emphasis by operation instructions issued early in April. These set out in detail the action to be taken in the event of an emergency arising, such as an attack or the threat of attack; apart from their obvious necessity as a plan of action for active operations, the instructions were valuable in giving definite areas for reconnaissance and realistic training. In the plan laid down, 25 Battalion would have 24 Battalion on the right and 20 Australian Infantry Brigade on the left between the battalion and the [Mediterranean](#) coast; 26 Battalion had an internal security role in [Aleppo](#). A squadron of commandos in 25 Battalion's area had an independent role. Within 6 Brigade's area there were also Free French troops, including the [Foreign Legion](#), engaged chiefly in watching the frontier and protecting airfields, and some technical British units mostly in [Aleppo](#), which came under command of the brigade if hostilities occurred.

The threat of war in [Syria](#) was taken seriously and far-reaching preparations for it provided plenty of work for all the troops in the area.

One of the great drawbacks to [Syria](#) was the prevalence of malaria which, if the most careful measures were not taken against it, could rapidly decimate an army. These measures necessitated the adoption of many tiresome precautions and a strict discipline. The malarial season commenced on 1 April, a rather inconvenient date as many of the precautions involved clothing and a change to summer clothing was shortly due. Quarters were to be sprayed daily, men were to sleep under nets, guards and sentries on duty at night had to wear veils and gloves, shirts and tunics would have long sleeves, trousers or long shorts (the latter having flaps to protect the knees) would be worn after sunset, and the battalion was required to have an anti-malaria squad of an NCO and three men, and two control units each of one officer and six men with twenty-four civilian labourers, to work in the [Djedeide](#) and [Aleppo](#) areas with [4 Field Hygiene Section](#).

As can well be realised, these were formidable and irksome precautions relying to a large extent on the common sense of the men for their efficacy if present

disaster and future recurring ill-health were to be avoided.

Easter was now at hand, 3 April being Good Friday. Organised inter-company and platoon football matches were played and a shooting match was arranged between the local gendarmerie and the battalion, the former using the latter's rifles owing to an ammunition shortage. The battalion team had an easy victory.

On 9 April the battalion moved by MT to [Aleppo](#) to take part in a ceremonial parade of 6 Brigade Group, together with the Free French Foreign Legion and cavalry. The strength on parade was 3152 all ranks with 79 vehicles; this included a detachment of 50 RAF and 750 French. The French cavalry, 100 strong, was given the honour of leading the parade, a distinction which greatly pleased the French residents. [General Freyberg](#) took the salute and in a letter to Brigadier Clifton wrote: 'I want to congratulate you and your staff on the excellent arrangements made for the parade in [Aleppo](#) on the 9th. The parade was impressive, the marching good, and the general turnout and bearing of the officers and men were of a high order. Will you please convey to all ranks my personal congratulations....'

On 10 April, preparatory to 5 Brigade relieving 6 Brigade, the battalion advance party left for [Zabboud](#) in the [Bekaa](#) valley, 140 miles south of [Idlib](#). The battalion (less some outlying detachments) followed two days later, joining the brigade column at Taftanaz where the [Idlib](#) road joined the [Aleppo- Homs](#) road. On the way south the three battalions, together with the brigade band, did what was commonly known as a 'flag' march through Hama and [Homs](#). Wakeling commented:

' Sunday, April 12. All on board MT at 8, left [Idlib](#) 8.30 and headed for Hama where marched through with fixed bayonets after lunch. Very hot march. Miles and miles of oatfields on way to [Homs](#)—a great ride. Stopped at French Barracks for the night.

' 13th. Off at 8. Big stretches of straight road and climbed up to new position about 20 miles from Baalbeck. Camp of tin huts for the whole bde, up from the road. Warm but snow just above on the peaks. 16 in a hut, not bad as semi-circular with concrete slab floors.'

The battalion reached [Zabboud](#) a little before noon, followed a little later by its rear party with four suspected terrorists, two of whom were trying to cross into

Turkey in the vicinity of Harim. The men were arrested by Second-Lieutenant [Gilberd](#)⁵ and Sergeant-Major Martin of C Company and Sergeant Jarjour Kalim, interpreter, and were interrogated by a field security officer from [Aleppo](#). Another arrest had been made by the Field Security Section the day before the battalion left [Idlib](#), a case of suspicious ploughing having been reported south of Kafer Harim. By ploughing to prearranged patterns it was of course possible to signal information to enemy aircraft or to ground observers across the border, a problem which in the 1914–18 war caused some concern to 1 NZ Division in [France](#). The outlying detachments of the battalion were relieved between 14 and 16 April by 21 and 23 Battalions.

Sixth Brigade was now in the [Djedeide](#) fortress area and was responsible for the defence of the left sector on the high ground north-west of [Zabboud](#), 25 Battalion being on the extreme left, five miles from the village, with 26 Battalion on its right, both facing north, and 24 Battalion a mile to the south. The battalion was to assist in the preparation of the defences, but training, especially of specialists, was to be continued. One complete rifle company in each battalion was to be held available for offensive training in hilly country; this training was to take the form of platoon and company treks with pack mules, the troops moving self-contained for two or three days. In the defences 25 Battalion's task was to construct positions for two companies and a battalion headquarters and to improve some miles of pack-track giving access to the position.

The programme outlined, interspersed with various training exercises, occupied the unit till about the end of May. During this period, on 16 May, the battalion celebrated by a smoke concert the second anniversary of its entry to [Trentham Camp](#), the speakers on the toast list being, in order of appearance, Captain Colledge, Sergeant-Major O'Kane,⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel George, Corporal [Atkins](#),⁷ Sergeant Marshall, Sergeant-Major Martin, Captain Witters, Major Burton, Brigadier Clifton, and Captain Porter. Every member of the battalion was expected to attend and free drinks were provided.

Another item of interest was the despatch on a tour of duty to New Zealand of some of the original members of the unit, amongst them Majors McBride and Smith, Captain R. C. [Wilson](#)⁸ and Lieutenant [Hollow](#).⁹ This took place during the last week

in April, and the principal appointments in the unit then were: Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel George; Second-in-command, Major Burton; Company Commanders: HQ, Major Porter; A, Major Hutchens; B, Captain D. A. Wilson; C, Captain McLeay; ¹⁰ D, Captain Witters; Adjutant, Captain Armstrong.

Divisional manoeuvres commenced towards the end of May and extended for four days, 25 Battalion returning to [Zabboud](#) on 3 June. The men had had a strenuous time and no doubt were glad to return to camp. One of the attack exercises was as near to the real thing as it was possible to get, live ammunition being used by artillery and infantry weapons to support it. There is always some risk in such exercises and on this occasion a man of D Company was wounded by a splinter from a mortar shell fired by another battalion.

On 9 June the battalion commenced the return journey to the [Idlib](#) area, practising attacks in MT at speed on the way, and reaching its destination the next day. On the 12th the relief of 23 Battalion was commenced. A Company moved to Bab el Haoua, two platoons of C Company to Harim and one to Qnaye, and B and D Companies to the Tin Pan Alley camp. No. 2 (Anti-Aircraft) Platoon of HQ Company undertook guard duties in [Idlib](#)

On the 14th B Company had the good fortune to be sent for a rest period by the sea at [Latakia](#), 70 miles by road to the south-west, but was recalled the following day as the Division had been ordered back to Egypt.

The situation in the [Western Desert](#) had been threatening for some time. Rommel's offensive had opened on 26 May, and although early reports had been optimistic, heavy fighting on 10 June had caused a British withdrawal from [Bir Hacheim](#) and, five days later, from south of [Gazala](#). On that day 6 Brigade was instructed to prepare for an immediate move and an advance party of Australians had arrived at [Aleppo](#).

The need for the utmost secrecy regarding the pending move was impressed on all ranks. All New Zealand markings on vehicles were painted over, shoulder titles and badges were removed, wireless silence was observed, and during the journey main towns were to be avoided as far as possible. These measures, whatever success they achieved elsewhere, were not successful with the Egyptians near [Mena](#),

who greeted the New Zealanders as such when the columns passed through.

Brigade command and tactical reconnaissance parties, including Colonel George and the four rifle company commanders of 25 Battalion, left for the front via [Maadi Camp](#) on the afternoon of 16 June and were due there, after a journey of nearly 700 miles, on the latter date the battalion, with the rest of the Brigade Group (except 26 Battalion which moved independently), commenced its long journey, 25 Battalion under Major Burton joining the brigade column at Taftanaz early that morning. The battalion had been provided with thirty troop-carrying vehicles and four 3-ton trucks to augment its own vehicles. Halts for the night were made at Chounchar (15 miles south of [Homs](#)), [Rayak](#) (35 miles east of [Beirut](#)), [Tulkarm](#). (20 miles north-east of [Jaffa](#)), [Asluj](#) (180 miles from [Ismailia](#)), and [Ismailia](#). [Amiriya](#), the transit camp near [Alexandria](#) from which the battalion had departed for [Greece](#), was reached on the late afternoon of 24 June.

The journey between [Rayak](#) and [Tulkarm](#) was particularly trying. A distance of 180 miles was covered in terrific heat, which caused much delay through the petrol vaporising and the tyres bursting and occupied nearly thirteen hours. It was also a bad day in the [Western Desert](#), the fall of [Tobruk](#), an event as surprising as it was disastrous, emphasising the urgency underlying the New Zealand move towards the battlefield. Naturally the troops expected that they would proceed to the front at once, but greatly to their surprise that was not to be.

That night Brigadier Clifton, describing to the unit commanders the situation in the [Western Desert](#), said that although the rest of the Division was concentrating at [Matruh](#), 6 Brigade was to be in reserve; most of the transport, however, was to go to [Matruh](#) to make the Division fully mobile. Twenty-sixth Battalion returned to the brigade from [Matruh](#) at dawn the next day, travelling throughout the night to avoid observation and air attack.

For the next two days 6 Brigade remained in [Amiriya](#) and then, leaving rear parties in the camp, went to the seaside, 24 Battalion to [Sidi Bishr](#) camp near [Alexandria](#) and 25 Battalion with the remaining units to Agami camp, five miles from the city; owing to the shortage of vehicles, the troops had a long march. Five hours later, however, the brigade returned to [Amiriya](#), under orders to proceed at once to the [Alamein](#) area, where just before midnight on 27 – 28 June the force bivouacked

some miles south of the [Alamein](#) railway station.

¹ Lt-Col McNaught's DSO was also won in the November 1941 campaign but the award was not announced until October 1942.

² Lt-Col [A. W. Greville](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 5 Aug 1897; Regular soldier; comd Adv Pty [2 NZEF](#)1939; [DAQMG](#) 1940–41; CO [24 Bn](#) Dec 1941–Jul 1942; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

³ Assault Landing Craft.

⁴ Maj [N. K. Sanders](#), m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Blenheim](#), 10 Jun 1913; harbour board employee; CO 1 Bn, [Wellington Regt](#), 1957–.

⁵ Capt [H. R. Gilberd](#); [Wanganui](#); born [Wanganui](#), 28 Dec 1905; sales manager.

⁶ WO I [G. M. O'Kane](#); m.i.d.; born [Invercargill](#), 5 Oct 1908; commercial traveller; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁷ Cpl [C. F. Atkins](#); [Christchurch](#); born Aust., 31 Jan 1910; labourer; wounded 16 Sep 1942.

⁸ Maj [R. C. Wilson](#), ED; [Manila](#); born NZ 26 Sep 1900; school teacher.

⁹ Capt [H. H. Hollow](#); [Masterton](#); born NZ 4 Aug 1903; school teacher.

¹⁰ Captain McLeay left for New Zealand in May 1942.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 6 – THE ALAMEIN LINE

CHAPTER 6

The Alamein Line

On 28 June 6 Brigade occupied the [Kaponga Box](#) (also known as the [Qattara Box](#) and Fortress A) at Bab el [Qattara](#), with 24 Battalion on the northern face, 25 Battalion on the western, and 26 Battalion on the southern face. With a frontage of 2300 yards and a depth of 2000 yards, 25 Battalion held the position with three companies forward, A right, B centre, C left, and D Company in reserve behind C Company. The left or western flank of 24 Battalion bordered on the rear or eastern limits of A Company while the right or western flank of 26 Battalion touched the rear or eastern limits of D Company.

Situated 18 miles south-west of [Alamein](#), the [Kaponga Box](#) had been partly prepared in September last by 5 Brigade and was designed to hold four battalions. The Box consisted mostly of low sandhills crossed by several wadis and minor depressions, which gave a moderate degree of cover and some observation in this otherwise more or less featureless country.

The defences were in a reasonable state of preparedness, but at this stage the brigade had no transport, no field guns, and no mines, all of which were forward with the rest of the Division. The fortress contained ten tons of water but had no reserves of food or ammunition.

During the day parts of the B Echelons of various units of the Division reported to the brigade, having been detached or scattered in the desperate battle in which the Division had been engaged at [Minqar Qaim](#), 30 miles south of [Matruh](#). Exaggerated stories of disaster and defeat were brought back by some of these parties.

By the evening most of the Division had arrived in the area with Brigadier Inglis in command, [General Freyberg](#) having been wounded at [Minqar Qaim](#). The completion of the defences was now a matter of great urgency and the work was pushed on with all speed, the enemy being expected to arrive on the [Alamein](#) position within thirty-six hours. Mines were laid in various gaps and approaches and reserves of ammunition, petrol, oil, and food arrived, together with sufficient ammunition for one refill for an armoured division. Water was rationed to three-

quarters of a gallon per man per day (for all purposes) and a reserve of half a gallon per man was held in the areas occupied by the infantry section

During the night there was heavy enemy bombing not far away and all civilian labour, which had been employed in considerable numbers, departed, naturally enough, the next day. Rumours continued unabated and the waiting defenders faced a tense situation.

In the coastal area to the north [1 South African Division](#), withdrawn from [Sollum](#), held the [Alamein Box](#) covering the road and railway just to the east of the [Alamein](#) station. On the southern flank, 15 miles south-west of 25 Battalion, and near the edge of the [Qattara Depression](#), was Fortress B at Naqb Abu Dweis, which was to be defended by 5 Indian Division, consisting at this date of a number of mobile columns of a total strength of about a brigade.

The [Qattara Depression](#), practically a complete obstacle to vehicles of all descriptions, lay to the south, 35 miles from the sea, and consequently the [Alamein](#) line could not be outflanked.

The gap between the South Africans at [Alamein](#) and the New Zealanders at Fortress A was originally the responsibility of [1 Armoured Division](#), with 50 Division in support, but as both these divisions had suffered severely in the withdrawal from [Cyrenaica](#), 18 Indian Infantry Brigade, recently arrived from [Iraq](#), was sent to hold the [Deir el Shein](#), a depression eight miles north-east of Fortress A.

Information regarding the approach of the enemy was received from time to time at 25 Battalion headquarters. During the morning of the 29th shellbursts were reported ten miles to the north-north-west, and at 7 p.m. a German reconnaissance aircraft flew high over the battalion. A few bombs were dropped at night but none fell near.

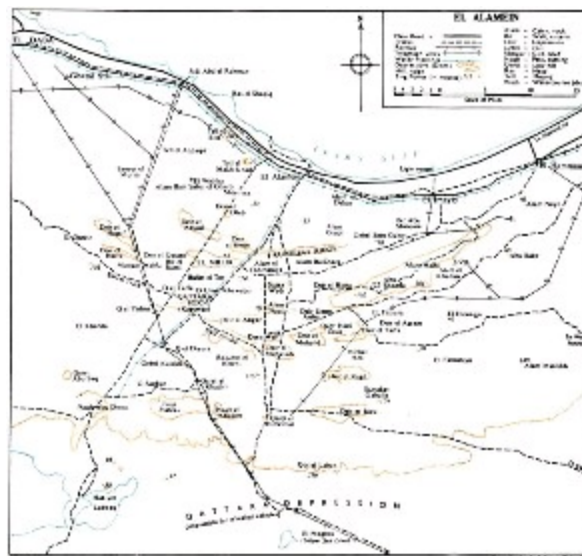
By 30 June the fortress was more or less secure; 6 Field Regiment and 33 Anti-Tank Battery were in position; and 18 and 9 Indian Infantry Brigades respectively were occupying the defences at [Deir el Shein](#) to the north and Fortress B to the south-west but were short of supplies. Sixth Brigade was able to give some assistance by providing 5000 mines for 18 Brigade and water and ammunition for 9 Brigade.

The approaching enemy columns were constantly being attacked from the air and shortly after noon on the 30th the bombing was seen by observers at the battalion's OP. A situation report received in the afternoon stated that at 10 a.m. a thousand vehicles moving eastwards were bombed south-east of [El Daba](#) and that our armoured forces were in contact with the enemy in that vicinity, which was about 14 miles south-west of the battalion. Late in the afternoon battalion observers saw forty vehicles moving eastwards and the battalion was told that the enemy's main armoured forces were about 20 miles to the west. Twenty-first Panzer Division had been engaged but no details of the action were available. The main attack was expected during the night.

To complete the perimeter of the fortress the [Maori Battalion](#) joined 6 Brigade and occupied the open eastern face while the remainder of the Division stayed outside at [Deir el Munassib](#), nine miles to the east, to provide support by mobile columns operating from an area six miles from the fortress. Other units also came under command of 6 Brigade including, in addition to the normal field regiment and machine-gun company, a detachment of 64 Medium Regiment, a survey troop, and 43 Light AA Battery. The anti-tank defence of 25 Battalion had been much improved: 33 Anti-Tank Battery, under command of 6 Brigade, was being equipped with a far more powerful gun, the six-pounder, and as these arrived its two-pounders were passed over to the battalions. In consequence, on 30 June 25 Battalion received eight two-pounders for its recently formed anti-tank platoon, formerly No. 5 (Pioneer) Platoon.

Many British aircraft passed overhead during the day but none of the enemy was seen. The weather was very hot and, combined with a sandstorm, made conditions most unpleasant. Small unidentified columns observed during the morning of 1 July moving from the west and passing south of the battalion were later identified as part of an Indian motor brigade. At ten that morning at a battalion conference it was forecast that the position would be free from attack for twenty-four hours. Companies were instructed to establish listening posts and to fire two white Very lights as a signal to the artillery if the enemy approached; patrols were to examine the wire in daylight for signs of enemy interference. During the hours of darkness one-third of the battalion was to remain dressed.

Early in the afternoon an enemy force of tanks and lorried infantry attacked the Indian infantry brigade at [Deir el Shein](#) during a dust-storm. According to earlier reports the main enemy forces were concentrating against the northern half of the [Alamein](#) line on a front of 13 miles, which would bring the enemy southern flank to a point about five miles north of



El Alamein

the battalion. Two enemy fighters (Me109) came over the battalion during the afternoon and gave the Bofors AA gunners some practice but no victims.

The night passed without incident. Very early on the 2nd it was learnt that 18 Indian Infantry Brigade at [Deir el Shein](#) had been overrun in the attack the previous afternoon and that a withdrawal might be necessary. The Indian brigade holding Fortress B at Naqb Abu Dweis on the southern flank was being withdrawn so that Fortress A became an exposed and dangerous salient. It was decided, therefore, that the fortress would not be held and that the Division would form battle groups whose mobility would give liberty of action to meet varying situations. In the meantime, however, 6 Brigade was to continue to hold its position.

During the morning the artillery under brigade command vigorously shelled enemy vehicles about four miles to the north. This drew retaliatory fire upon 24 Battalion and Brigade Headquarters and a few shells fell in 25 Battalion's position. Two Me 109 fighters again appeared over the battalion, which received some intermittent shelling about midday, apparently from 105- millimetre guns. There

were strong enemy forces in close proximity, two panzer divisions the previous night being reported to have passed just to the north, and in the late afternoon an enemy column to the north-east was said to be moving towards Fortress A. The head of the column had been bombed and the British [1 Armoured Division](#) was advancing westwards towards 6 Brigade to engage the enemy.

This advance of [1 Armoured Division](#) was the start of the counter-attack planned by General Auchinleck, and 25 Battalion, together with the rest of the brigade, had a box-seat. The British tanks were to come down from the north, turn west past Fortress A, then north through [El Mreir](#) against the enemy's rear. Columns of [7 Armoured Division](#) and 7 Motor Brigade were also taking part. An engagement took place at the eastern end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), a low ridge which ran ten miles to the east from the vicinity of [Deir el Shein](#). After an indecisive battle the German tanks withdrew to the south-west of the ridge and the British behind [Alam Nayil](#) in the direction of 2 NZ Division and about six miles east of Fortress A. A hastily organised force from [10 Indian Division](#), arriving too late to help the overrun Indian brigade at [Deir el Shein](#), had dug in on the western end of the ridge and had successfully held off the enemy armour until the Germans withdrew.

The New Zealand Division was co-operating in these operations, a mixed column under Brigadier Weir operating towards the eastern end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#) in support of the armoured attack and remaining overnight a little to the north of Alam Nayil ready to support an attack next morning. Late that afternoon as the enemy armour withdrew, 6 Brigade was warned and sent out carriers and anti-tank guns en portée to form a screen to guard against attack, but the enemy had halted. There was a good deal of firing from various directions by both sides during the day but for 25 Battalion all was quiet by 9 p.m

Early the following morning, 3 July, carrier patrols round the battalion's perimeter saw nothing of the enemy. A couple of hours later shelling was observed to the east and north-east where the [RAF](#) was bombing enemy concentrations; the artillery activity was probably a concentration of fire by Weir's force from [Alam Nayil](#), which scored a very notable success against the [Ariete Division](#) four miles to the north-east. During the morning a hostile battery shelled the battalion until eventually our artillery returned the fire and silenced it.

Meanwhile orders had been received to be prepared to move at an hour's notice. However, no move took place, as in common with so many other orders during this unstable tactical period, the order was cancelled a little later. Brigade Headquarters and 26 Battalion had already left the fortress and were on their way to the vicinity of [Himeimat](#), 14 miles to the south-east; they were directed to carry on while 24 and 25 Battalions remained in their position of 5 Brigade. That brigade, a little before midnight, was moving south from Munassib and then west of the fortress and advancing northwards in an attempt to intercept the remnants of the [Ariete Division](#). The artillery units in the fortress left to join 5 Brigade via a southern exit, thus leaving 24, 25, and 28 Battalions to hold it.

By 2.30 p.m. the 5 Brigade column had moved round the south-west corner of the fortress to the track running north-east towards [Alamein](#). During the afternoon Battalion OPs reported that the Divisional Cavalry was active three miles to the north and that a little shelling was taking place to the west of A Company. Later in the day the 5 Brigade column halted just to the north-west of the fortress and permission was then given for 24 and 25 Battalions to rejoin 6 Brigade at [Himeimat](#).

While vehicles were being loaded for this delayed move some heavy shells arrived in the area occupied by HQ Company but did no damage. An hour later the battalion moved off to the east, adopting desert formation when clear of the defences and continuing south-east along the Barrel track to the brigade's new area, where the troops bivouacked for the night. It had been a day of orders and counter-orders for the battalion, in common with the other units, a distressing situation to commanders and staffs especially, and all concerned were glad to come to the end of this particular day.

The following day, 4 July, units in 6 Brigade were ordered to send a company back to [Maadi Camp](#) as LOBs. D Company was selected. This was most unpopular, both with D Company and the rest of the battalion, though the value of leaving selected officers and other ranks out of battle in order to have a nucleus on which to rebuild a unit had been strikingly emphasised after the [Sidi Rezegh](#) battles. That, however, was very different from the present arrangement, which reduced battalions from four to three rifle companies and so considerably affected the tactical handling of a battalion. Naturally it very much reduced the fighting power of a unit, but on the

other hand it eased maintenance problems and reduced to some extent the great mass of vehicles in the field, always so difficult to protect.

The day passed quietly with the battalion making the most of a day of rest and comparative peace, though there were in fact two raids by high-flying aircraft over the brigade area and a few bombs were dropped without effect. 'Still lots of rumours,' wrote Wakeling, '2 hours notice—busy day ducking in and out of trenches as the Hun bombers came over. Listening to the news from [Berlin](#) very amusing as they put over a half-hour of Anzac news and calls for prisoners detained in [Germany](#). Very heavy shelling to be heard as we crawled into our holes for the night. [This was an attack by 5 Brigade against the [El Mreir](#) position at 9.30 p.m.]

'July 5. Very heavy fog and no sun till 8.30 and welcome for a change as all blankets damp. Read our letters while the gunfire rumbles away in the distance. Went back to Fortress A and were greeted by mortar fire and an air raid close by.'

The battalion's return to the fortress was also greeted with shells from 105-millimetre guns which fortunately caused no damage or casualties. The return was preparatory to a proposed attack by the Division from a start line west of the fortress directed north-west to Sidi Abd el Rahman, 16 miles north-west of [Alamein](#) station, and was to be part of a larger operation. Fourth Brigade, joined by the [Maori Battalion](#) from the fortress, moved to an assembly position at Qaret el Yidma to the west of 25 Battalion. Fifth Brigade remained in position on the south side of the [El Mreir](#) Depression.

The following day (6 July) was without incident except for the appearance of Stuka dive-bombers about dusk, though they dropped no bombs, while a prolonged air raid by the [RAF](#) some miles away occupied most of the morning. During the afternoon a patrol of two armoured cars of [12 Lancers](#), part of the British 7 Motor Brigade which was immediately south of the fortress, made contact with C Company.

Though the battalion was at two hours' notice to move, it was likely that it would remain in its present position for at least another day. That night 4 Brigade advanced at 3 a.m. on [Mungar Wahla](#), on the left or western flank of 5 Brigade's position at [El Mreir](#), and secured its objectives, about four miles north-west of 25 Battalion, without opposition. Ultimately, several hours later, in the afternoon of the

7th, the main attack in the north having been postponed, 4 Brigade withdrew to its former position at Qaret el Yidma, following a warning from Division of a threat of tank attack from the west.

During the morning of 7 July, possibly as a result of 4 Brigade's activities, 105-millimetre guns from the north fired a few shells into C Company's area and some bombs fell on B and C Companies without effect. At four in the afternoon Colonel George was told that twenty to forty enemy tanks had been reported moving east towards the battalion; it was thought that these tanks might take advantage of the blinding effect of the setting sun, but there was no attack. George was also told that 4 and 5 Brigades were withdrawing to the east of the fortress to regroup and that 6 Brigade would move the next day, but not before 7 a.m. Commenting on the day, Wakeling said: 'Artillery hard at it from daylight and old Jerry tossed a few back. Quite a few shake-ups from the air during the day and his airforce seems to be having this part of the skies to themselves. Shaved again to-day and washed my face with the brush....'

A considerable and continuous movement of enemy forces to the south was taking place, and as these included Germans it was likely that an attempt to turn the left or southern flank of the [Alamein](#) line would be made. The Eighth Army was shortening its front, and as a result the Division was ordered to retire behind Fortress A. Except for 6 Brigade, which moved from the fortress on the 8th, the formations and units of the Division commenced the movement on the night of 7–8 July and by dawn on the 9th were to the south-east of the fortress in their allotted positions facing north, about nine miles south of [Ruweisat Ridge](#). Sixth Brigade was to be in reserve and completed the move through [Deir Alinda](#) and [Deir el Munassib](#) to [Himeimat](#), 14 miles south-east of the fortress, by the afternoon of 8 July.

Twenty-fifth Battalion had been prepared to move at 6 a.m. but this was put back five hours. After detaching a platoon of A Company under Major [Hutchens](#)¹ as a rear party to remain in the fortress until relieved by 7 Motor Brigade, the battalion formed up in the brigade area, losing one man killed and three wounded by light shelling of the transport in the process. At noon the journey was continued to the brigade bivouac area a couple of miles north of [Himeimat](#). There it received a report that A Company's platoon in the fortress had been heavily shelled and dive-bombed and had lost one man killed and a sergeant wounded.

The following day the brigade moved back to [Amiriya](#). After considerable difficulty with soft sand along the route, the battalion bivouacked in the afternoon of the 9th near the track south of [Burg el Arab](#) and within twenty-four hours was pitching its tents (a luxury which had not been enjoyed for some time) at [Amiriya](#).

Up at the front the enemy occupied Fortress A the day after the battalion had left it. In a comedy of errors and confusion the enemy (according to the [Africa Corps Diary](#) of 8–9 July) carried out a full-scale attack against Fortress A. From late in the morning of the 9th and throughout the afternoon, 21 Panzer Division and Littorio Armoured Division, directed by Africa Corps Headquarters and supported by Stukas and part of the German heavy artillery, with the usual infantry, tanks, and engineers, attacked the abandoned position, despite a patrol report of the previous evening that it had been vacated. Even Rommel himself personally ordered 21 Division to attack at 11 a.m. and there was quite a stir (and a 'stir up' too) in the various headquarters concerned.

The 11th July was spent in erecting and digging-in tents and settling in to the camp. Daily leave for one-third of the men was authorised and for the remainder transport to the beach was provided. In a country such as Egypt sea bathing is a boon which it is impossible to exaggerate.

In the late afternoon of the 11th the remainder of the Division in the forward area was very differently engaged. Fourth and 5th Brigades were moving northwards in readiness for a night attack on [Ruweisat Ridge](#).

On the 13th Brigadier Clifton explained to the battalion that the brigade had not taken an active part in the operations of the past fortnight because of the high proportion of infantry to artillery in the brigade group. He said that 'Rommel was too good a soldier to attack Fortress A when it would have suited our plans' and that the brigade would relieve 4 Brigade in the desert in three or four days' time; 26 Battalion had moved up that day to relieve [28 Battalion](#) and join the divisional reserve group.

Before midnight the following day the Division (less 6 Brigade) commenced the attack on [Ruweisat Ridge](#) and by dawn had taken its objectives. Farther to the east attacks by other formations failed or were much delayed and British armoured forces

did not reach the New Zealand objectives as planned. The later arrival of some British tanks and Indian units gave some relief but the forward positions of both brigades were under heavy fire and ultimately were overrun by tanks.

During the evening of 15 July and the following morning the survivors were withdrawn to Stuka Valley, three miles north of [Alam Nayil](#). Fourth Brigade with 22 Battalion attached, but without 18 Battalion (which remained in the field covering the northern front of 5 Brigade's position), was sent to the rear and ultimately (on the 20th) to [Maadi](#) to refit and reform; and 6 Brigade was ordered to rejoin the Division immediately.

An order for 25 Battalion to be ready to move at 11 a.m. on the 16th was cancelled, with the intimation that the move would not take place before the next morning. Brigade Headquarters, 24 Battalion, and [6 Field Ambulance](#), however, moved westwards about noon to rejoin the Division in the [Alamein](#) line, and early the following morning the battalion followed. Ford trucks of the open cattle-truck type for delivery to 20 Battalion accompanied the column, which reached Rear Headquarters 2 NZ Division, about ten miles east of [Alam Nayil](#), after a journey of 70 miles in a little over eight hours.

In the afternoon of the following day (18 July) 25 Battalion in desert formation moved up to [Alam Nayil](#) and a couple of hours later occupied a position facing west and south on the left or southern flank of the brigade. Battalion Headquarters was 2000 yards north-west of [Alam Nayil](#), close to the boundary with 24 Battalion. A Company was on the right of the battalion sector with its forward localities about 1200 yards west of Battalion Headquarters; B Company was on the left of A Company, extending the line of localities to the south and east; C Company carried on the defences to the east, its headquarters being within 500 yards south-south-east of Battalion Headquarters. (D Company was still LOB at [Maadi](#).) Prior to reaching this position, 25 Battalion under instructions from 6 Brigade had sent forward that morning a section of carriers and four two-pounders to guard 24 Battalion's open southern flank, which was then the southern flank of the Division. By about 7 p.m. 25 Battalion was firmly established in its position, about eight miles to the east of its former position in Fortress A, now occupied by the enemy.

Enemy air activity combined with intermittent shelling had increased on the

18th, damaging two vehicles at 6 Brigade's headquarters, and there was also some heavy shelling from the south-west but with little effect. At this stage the [RAF](#) was considerably curtailing enemy air action; the Stuka raids were mostly hit-and-run affairs and the enemy bomber formations required strong fighter protection. This improvement in the air situation provided a distinct ray of sunshine to lighten the gloom of the recent disastrous operations.

A heavy dust-storm on the 19th made conditions unpleasant but there was little enemy activity against the battalion. In the morning enemy aircraft came over, and again in the late afternoon, but dropped no bombs; they were engaged by the Bofors. A little enemy shelling about 8 p.m. caused no casualties.

The capture by 5 Indian Brigade of Point 62 on the Ruweisat Ridge beyond the right flank of the Division allowed a little reorganisation of the New Zealand front. Fifth Brigade shortened its front, 23 Battalion taking over some of 26 Battalion's position. Sixth Brigade then spread its defences farther south and so covered the artillery positions of [5 Field Regiment](#) close to [Alam Nayil](#), this regiment being under command of 6 Brigade. Eighteenth Battalion in 5 Brigade's area was relieved by the Maoris and came into divisional reserve near rear headquarters of the Division.

Private [Hawkins](#)² of the anti-tank platoon gives an interesting description of the conditions:

'Once again we became infantrymen and, originally attached to B Coy, we were soon attached to C Coy with whom we remained till the withdrawal several weeks later. The life here during this period was pretty hellish, somehow a few bright spots kept us from insanity. Jerry sent over hate salvos at odd times, and at mess times which were just darned annoying. The flies maintained a blitzkrieg in overwhelming nos during the hours of daylight. The heat was rather terrific and the desert enough to growl about. Digging our own trenches by day and others by night—command posts, O-Pips, etc—and doing ever-recurring picquet-duty, kept us away from our beauty sleep more than we liked.

'But life had its moments. The early-morning brew-up after stand-to, before the flies got going, was like the evening brew-up, a happy occasion when we were able to yarn and relax altogether with few distractions. It was glorious to lie down after

dusk, just in shorts and shirt, on top of the blankets in one's trench and sink straight into much-needed sleep. The odd quota of canned beer, especially if helped by the more-or-less rum ration, occasionally brightened our evenings and brought us all together again.

'From the YM Canteen truck, which did marvellous work in coming right up to us in daylight once a week, we used to buy our whole quota of tobacco and matches, tinned fruit, milk, chocolate, etc. And last but not least, our old friend Saida George, now CO, would often call in for a chat if he happened to be passing by. But for the flies and the spasmodic "hates" which Jerry sent over life in the area would have been moderately tolerable.

'The flies in swarms attacked with democratic impartiality private or brigadier, and simply hurled themselves into uncovered tea or stew. Sleep was impossible if the flies could gain entry to one's slit trench and it taxed our ingenuity to the utmost to make our homes flyproof with blankets, bivvies, and the odd bit of mosquito netting. With our homemade swats we killed thousands which penetrated the defences. Much less disconcerting were Jerry's haphazard shellings.... Often when the salvoes fell near us, there would be one or even two or three duds. Every time one landed with just a dull thud, the whole platoon would cheer and shout "One for Poland" and old Kot [Corporal Kotlowski, ³ section-leader, anti-tank platoon] would feel pretty good about it. One day a salvo came amongst us. The first three shells just thudded into the sand. Then as one man the Platoon gave a loud cheer as the fourth, in proper fashion, made a big bang.'

Active patrolling by all three battalions of 6 Brigade was now the vogue. On 18–19 July a patrol of a platoon from 26 Battalion had brought in two Germans of 382 Regiment which had recently arrived from Crete, an identification which Army Intelligence was pleased to get. For its part 25 Battalion the following night sent a patrol of a platoon of C Company under Lieutenant Paterson ⁴ to Fortress A, where it occupied posts with the object of capturing or killing any enemy troops when they came out to occupy these posts a little after midnight, as seemed to be their custom. No enemy appeared, however, but MT was observed moving within the perimeter of the defences; the patrol returned safely before daylight on the 20th. On that same night 24 Battalion scored a fine success when its carriers raided an enemy position in the eastern end of Deir Umm Khawabir, a small depression about 4000 yards west of

25 Battalion's front, and captured forty-two Italian prisoners.

These patrols were in keeping with the policy of active patrolling for which New Zealand troops generally were noted. Provided the objectives were wisely selected and the operations carefully planned, and the patrols themselves suitably trained and directed, active patrolling had many values in maintaining morale, alarming and damaging the enemy, bringing in information and sometimes prisoners for questioning, and as training for night fighting. Some protection was also afforded against enemy enterprises and the confidence of the men holding the forward defences was increased. A man who had been out on patrol soon came to regard the forward posts as havens of safety. For these reasons the greatest benefit is obtained if all men are required to undertake patrol duty, excluding only those unusually clumsy and, temporarily, those suffering from colds.

The 20th July was a day of digging for the battalion as all trenches were to be deepened to 4 ft. 6 in. The measure was introduced rather appropriately, as Wakeling's diary reveals: 'Rum issue after stand-to. Noisy morning—all slit trenches to be deepened ... so all digging. Fairly quiet afternoon but enemy artillery a little active about 8.15 and men soon went into their holes for the night.'

There was enemy air reconnaissance as usual but no bombs. The New Zealand field guns were in action most of the day, which brought some reply from the enemy artillery. Two patrols from the battalion were out after dark. One, under Lieutenant [Bunny](#),⁵ which included an NCO and two sappers from the engineers, examined a mile of enemy wire entanglements 5000 yards in front of the battalion's position; no minefields were seen. The patrol heard Italians talking and saw what appeared to be a refilling point; it suffered no casualties and returned by 5 a.m. A second patrol, under Lieutenant Paterson, again visited Fortress A to secure prisoners and to penetrate to the enemy vehicle park to destroy vehicles. After working through two lines of wire the patrol was challenged (by a sentry of Stein Company, 288 German Special Force) and withdrew under heavy machine-gun fire, losing one man killed. There were also nine men missing, but five of these returned during the next three days, having lost direction. All six battalions on the New Zealand front had patrols out that night.

In the late afternoon the [RAF](#) bombers heavily attacked the Deir el Abyad area,

three miles to the north of [El Mreir](#), and from 10 p.m. onwards throughout the night were continuously over the enemy positions. The following morning a heavy pall of smoke was reported to be drifting over the New Zealand sector and the troops prepared to meet a possible attack. However, it proved to be a particularly dense sea mist that had come farther inland than usual. It disappeared by 9 a.m. and the rest of the day was calm and hotter than ever, with the flies an increasing and almost intolerable nuisance.

There was light shelling at times during the day, which was devoted principally to preparations for the attack planned to take place after dark. Since its first contact with the enemy opposite the [Alamein](#) position three weeks ago, 25 Battalion had fortunately suffered few casualties, though bombed and heavily shelled at times, the losses reported (subject to error in dates) being four killed, fourteen wounded, and two prisoners of war.

The RAF now dominated the skies, a welcome and thrilling situation with bomber and fighter formations passing overhead every couple of hours or less, engaged in 'softening up' the enemy defences as part of the [Eighth Army](#) plan of attack. The Army's general plan was stated by General Auchinleck in his report:

'Having made the enemy extend his front and disperse his reserves to some extent, I thought the time had come to strike hard at the centre of his line with the object of cutting his forces in half. We should thereby have a chance to sever his communications and roll up the northern part of his army. With this end in view I told General Gott to attack the enemy positions about Deir el Abyad and [El Mreir](#).'

The attack of General Gott's [13 Corps](#) in the centre would be supported by subsidiary operations on both flanks of the [Alamein](#) line, by [30 Corps](#) with the Australian and South African Divisions in the north and by elements of [13 Corps](#) round the southern flank past Fortress A to harass the enemy's rear, 12 miles to the west of [El Mreir](#). In the event of success [30 Corps](#) would press against the enemy's rear and [13 Corps](#) would swing wide to [El Daba](#), 30 miles, and [Fuka](#), 70 miles, to the west to cut off his retreat.

The RAF was to attack located targets to the west of the front until 7.15 p.m. on the 21st, the day of attack, and then turn three-quarters of its bombing force against

Pt 63 (on the western end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#)) and the eastern end of the [El Mreir Depression](#), while the remaining quarter was to attack the [El Taqa](#) plateau in support of the subsidiary southern outflanking operations. During the night of the attack air-bombing was to be kept to a line between Fortress A and [El Mreir](#), to the west of the area to be reached by the attacking troops.

The first objective of [13 Corps](#), to be taken by 5 Indian and the New Zealand Divisions, was the ground from [Deir el Shein](#) southwards about 1500 yards to Pt 63 'and thence south-west'. During the operation [1 Armoured Division](#) was to protect the southern flank of the infantry and frustrate any armoured counter-attack.

The second objective, extending from Pt 59 (three miles due west of Pt 63) due south to the southern escarpment of [El Mreir](#), was to be gained by [1 Armoured Division](#), with the two infantry divisions following up to secure the ground as it was won.

The final objective, three miles of the [Alamein-Abu Dweis](#) track astride [El Mreir](#), was to be taken by [1 Armoured Division](#), supported by the artillery of the two divisions, but the action at this stage was to be dependent upon developments.



el mreir, 22 july 1942

The task of the New Zealand Division was to capture the eastern end of the [El Mreir Depression](#). It was allotted to 6 Brigade, supported by the three field artillery regiments of the Division, the field guns of [2 RHA](#),⁶ and the medium guns of 64

Medium Battery, RA, all under the direct control of Brigadier Weir, CRA 2 NZ Division. Fourth Field Regiment was to give direct support to 6 Brigade. Fifth Brigade was to support the attack, from 8.50 to 9.30 p.m., by mortar and machine-gun fire on the eastern lip of the depression. One battalion of that brigade was then to move before daylight to the vicinity of Pt 69 (5000 yards east of [El Mreir Depression](#)), the remainder of 5 Brigade forming the divisional reserve.

Endeavours by Brigadiers [Kippenberger](#) and Clifton were made without success to arrange that the supporting tanks should move forward during the night, the Armoured Brigade commander stating that the tanks could not fight even in moonlight and were reluctant to move at all at night. The argument that German tanks did so had no effect. A request that an armoured regiment should be under Brigadier Clifton's direct command during the advance was also refused, but assurances were given and repeated that the tanks would be ordered to move up as soon as there was light enough. Tank liaison officers were attached to 6 Brigade.

The direction of the Indians' attack was from east to west and so at right-angles to the enemy front. Sixth Brigade's attack, however, was northwards, with a long approach march of about 3000 yards in no-man's land between and parallel to the New Zealand and enemy defensive fronts, and thus open to counter-attack or enfilade fire against its left flank as it advanced. This risk was accepted in preference to the congestion that would be caused if the attack went through 5 Brigade's position. It was a complicated plan, but it was claimed that it provided easy deployment on the start line and a line of advance at right-angles to the objective.

Eighteenth Battalion was to cover the flank of 6 Brigade with mortars and machine guns during its advance. Accompanied by an anti-tank battery, two anti-aircraft gun troops, and two machine-gun companies, 18 Battalion was then to move out to the left flank in order to cover [5 Field Regiment](#), which was deploying two miles north-west of [Alam Nayil](#). Patrols of the Divisional Cavalry were to protect 25 Battalion against interference from the south. New Zealand Engineers, in co-operation with [9 Indian Brigade](#), were to clear and then widen gaps in the enemy minefields in the area of advance.

The attack of 6 Brigade was to be made by 26 Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left. Twenty-fifth Battalion, in reserve, was to advance on the left

rear of 24 Battalion. As Brigadier Clifton explained: 'The Battalion (25 Bn) formed up echeloned to the south-west of 24 Bn and moved off according to orders. The formation was adopted to broaden the front of attack in the initial stage and so ensure not only that the western flank of 24 Bn was covered but also that the anti-tank defence was overrun on a wide front....'

Most of 25 Battalion's records were destroyed in the battle and the battalion's operation orders are therefore not available. The unit diary written up from notes left by the IO, Lieutenant Jackman,⁷ does, however, give most of the details of the plan. The battalion was to advance 6000 yards to a position about 1000 yards past the pipeline, where it would be in reserve 2000 yards south of the first objective. A Company was to be on the right, B Company on the left, Battalion Headquarters 200 yards behind the junction of the two companies, and C Company was to follow 450 yards behind B Company and 250 yards to the left-rear of Battalion Headquarters. Thus the battalion, while advancing on a two-company front, could rapidly form a similar front facing the left flank. The two-pounder guns of the anti-tank platoon and the carriers were to be in rear, with the six-pounder troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery following.

With its companies in open order, 25 Battalion about an hour before dark moved due west for a mile to reach its forming-up place on the start line, drawing fire from enemy guns on the way, fortunately with few casualties. Some trouble had been experienced with the start lines of 24 and 25 Battalions, and Private Bates⁸ of the Intelligence Section has explained how it occurred:

'Somehow that attack seemed destined to failure before it began. With infinite patience the three of us (Lt Jackman, IO, Pte Herbert Carter,⁹ and myself, all of I Sec) built up a row of high cairns (in no man's land as a start line) in a convenient depression, only to find they overlapped the start line marked out by 24 Bn's I Sec, who were working at the same time. Barely had we returned to HQ and gulped down a hasty, half-cold meal, than Jackman was ... demanding if I could be ready to go out again immediately. Skid (I Sec driver Pte Rapley¹⁰) drove us back into no man's land where, in full view of Jerry, we laid a fresh line further south with old petrol tins (they were flimsies), using an old iron wheel lying on the desert as the central point.... We excited mild interest in the German arty lines. The three shells he lobbed at us were close and as the old war horse (the I Sec PU) came galloping down from

the far end of the start line I leapt on the running board. (Note: It was impossible to take a bearing out to the start line. I recall looking back at the hills and trying to memorise the general direction of the start line. But we were zig zagging like fury, so it was all pretty vague. I was given a bearing later.)

'I had just time to slip back to Bn HQ, swallow a small tot of rum, stuff a pick down behind my haversack and bolt back to A Coy. My orders were fixed in my mind: "Wait at A Coy till B Coy comes round; guide them out on a bearing of 261 degrees to the left flank of the start line. Then the axis of advance will be 351 degrees."

'From A Coy HQ I could see figures moving across to the north, about 500 yards out. Shells were spattering around and among them. B Coy? Surely not. It was too early. Major Hutchins (OC A Coy, I think) came up and confirmed their identity and I gave chase. I intercepted the last platoon and learned from Lieut Sharpley,¹¹ the cmmdr, that the OC, Capt Armstrong, was ahead somewhere.

'Already soaked with sweat, I jogged over the rocky surface, pack, pick, and rifle dragging like a sea anchor. I somehow caught Coy HQ—and still Armstrong was ahead. Already the coy was too far forward. A runner who went on to catch the OC contacted him finally in the original depression, where the two fwd platoons already were. He explained (when he came back) that he had known of the change of start line but one of his pl cmmdrs, unaware of the alteration, had already gone fwd too soon. Armstrong had chased him, leaving me more or less in the air.

'All seemed chaos. Men, ant-like figures in the gathering dusk, swarmed over the base and up the northern slope of the depression, a gathering concentration that was gradually easing out into battle formation. Shells were dropping among them, each bursting like a splodge of ink flicked on to a dark photograph. Close by were a few open trucks that had brought up MMGs. A jeep whirled past, the occupants' faces set and preoccupied. The sun was a red ball, low over the western ridges.

'Somewhere in this glorious mess were two of our platoons.

'Somehow we reformed. Jerry was no assistance, following us around with his guns as though he had us marked.... I left Capt A to collect his coy and went off with his batman and several others of coy HQ to locate the start line. The sight of men

apparently going back gave the mob the idea they had to retire again. I recall turning and bellowing to Jack Bone ¹² (Armstrong's batman, I think) to stop them. Almost as I spoke the crowd turned and were streaming in my footsteps. The reason I soon discovered to be the arrival of the Colonel and Bn HQ but another shelling epidemic temporarily annulled my interest.

'The Col was quite calm and merely nodded his head when I explained what had occurred.

'(We never did find that start line.)'

On reaching the start line 25 Battalion formed up facing north. The barrage opened at 8.30 p.m. and drew fire from the enemy guns and mortars. With visibility still fair, the leading companies a few minutes later crossed the start line in fairly good order under shell, mortar, and machine-gun fire. During the advance to the objective, which was reached about 11 p.m., the enemy positions encountered gave little trouble and were quickly overrun. The principal hindrance to movement came from machine guns firing across the line of advance from slightly elevated ground to the west, guns which had fired earlier on 24 Battalion's advancing troops. As Colonel George relates: 'These guns were firing tracer on fixed lines and it was possible to walk right up to the line of fire, wait for a pause between bursts, and then slip safely across'. 'Overs' fired by the enemy in the north at 24 Battalion were also encountered.

At the objective it was found, about 1 a.m., that touch with two platoons of A Company had been lost, but it was learnt later that they had advanced so rapidly that they had caught up with the left flank of 24 Battalion and had gone on with that unit. Touch had also been lost with C Company, and one of B Company's platoons, losing touch with A Company on its right, hurried on and overran the objective and reached [El Mreir](#). On the objective the hard rock made digging impossible and sangars had to be constructed.

Part of the supporting arms under Captain Birch reached the objective about three hours after the battalion, assisted by a patrol sent out to find them. It had been arranged that the engineers should clear three 40 ft. lanes in the minefields along the brigade axis, about the centre of 24 Battalion's sector of advance, for the

vehicles of Brigade Headquarters and 24 and 25 Battalions. Captain Birch was unable to find a gap in the minefields, which caused the loss of the artillery FOO's armoured OP and one of the eight two-pounder anti-tank guns of 5 Platoon under Captain Wilson, who wrote:

'After considerable difficulty in navigation we arrived at a trig point identified by an artillery officer ... as trig 624 (marked on the map as 74). [Note: Trig 624 or Pt 74 was about 200 yards east of 24 Battalion's right boundary or 800 yards east of the Brigade axis and nearly a mile to the east of 25 Battalion's objective.] Here we encountered a wide minefield and reported by R/T to Adv Bde; as we were then very late in getting up we asked for assistance in locating either Bde or Bn. A patrol was sent out at the same time to try to contact 25 Bn. Before it returned the Brigadier ordered me to try to reach his position, which was obviously quite near, with the convoy. Before starting to do so, however, the patrol returned, having located 25 Bn and we ... gained permission ... to join 25 Bn direct. Cpl Broad ¹³ of No. 5 Pl cleared a path of mines and the convoy was shepherded through in single file. The mines were the German "Teller" pattern, sparsely laid over a depth of about 60 yards....'

In a recent letter Corporal Broad explained:

'On the night of the 21st July 1942 about midnight I was with a detachment of Bren carriers and anti tank guns which were steadily moving forward into order of battle for the dawn attack, when the leading Bren carrier ran on a minefield. There was indecision and confusion immediately ... I lifted the minefield singlehanded as described [in his book Poor People Poor Us] and as I did so detailed men to lie down to act as some sort of guide to the driver of the leading vehicle. He inched his way across, each man standing up as he came to him and I guided all the vehicles across in the tracks made by the leading Bren carrier.'

Continuing his account, Captain Wilson said:

'After crossing a metal road we met 25 Bn rifle coys at the spot indicated where they were nearly surrounded by enemy inf. Tanks were heard moving to the west of here and the portees had just moved out into position in rifle coy areas when orders were wirelessly from the Brigadier to move north to a spot indicated by a Verey flare, there to go into a defensive position with 24 Bn. The CO told me that both he

and the Brigadier considered our then position untenable and that this was the reason for the move. Great difficulty was experienced in identifying our own flare signals, all signals being given in clear, RT, and to my mind being intercepted by the enemy who put up flares in several directions to mislead us. However the rifle coys then advanced in extended order on the route shown, northwards, followed by the A Ech tpt. No opposition. About 0430 hrs we reached some British or NZ MT and I believe this was at the objective marked on the map.... The rifle coys formed up in column of route and moved off from the MT, presumably towards their defensive areas. I stayed with my portees awaiting orders but received none, for before the infantry got into position the cry came back "Tanks are coming in". I immediately sent four portees fwd to rifle coy areas, three 2-prs and one 6-pr. I omitted to mention that Lieut Betts, ¹⁴ 32 Bty, had four 6-prs with us when we started the original approach march but we lost three en route to Trig 624 through their sticking in soft sand and presumably missing the way when trying to catch up. The fourth gun which was minus an officer I took under my command with my own seven 2-prs. Four portees I kept in the transport area to protect the rear of the Bn and form a mobile reserve.

'Shortly after this, heavy fire from MGs and 50mm guns was brought to bear on the A Ech vehicles. Almost immediately one portee was hit and went up in flames, followed by a carrier and a Crusader tank that came into our area. Another portee was disabled by shellfire then and the MG fire became so intense that the two other guns had to move and take hull down positions on our other flank. The Bn now had tanks on three sides of it and was under heavy fire. Vehicles and portees particularly attracted fire. At about 0600 hours I saw a couple of men race back from where the rifle coys were, followed by our inf who fell back, it appeared to me, in two waves towards the east. The enemy machine-gunned each wave and a number of men fell. The tanks, of whom I had a dozen or more under observation on the far side of the wadi since daylight, stood off, far beyond effective 2-pr range and engaged our positions. Then they started to close in on the position and fire became very intense. From reports of Lieut Stevens, ¹⁵ comd my No. 2 det, I believe three tanks and one other vehicle to have been destroyed by our fire at this stage.

'Portees had to start falling back from one ridge to another and were fired on from all sides. Between 0625 and 0645 hours I decided the time had come to pull

back and believed that the tanks were then engaged in starting to round up prisoners.'

As related by Wilson, the battalion moved forward and reached Brigade Headquarters. 'It was then getting light,' said Colonel George in an account written shortly after the end of the war, 'and considerable machine-gun fire was being brought to bear on the position from the rim of the depression to the west. The Brigadier ordered the CO to dig in where the troops were and this was hastily carried out with only about 15 minutes of semi-darkness left in which to do it.

'As it got light hell was let loose. Tanks, reported as between 20 and 24 in number, lined the rim of the depression and pinned us to the ground with machine-gun and gun fire. In the dark it had been impossible for the anti-tank gunners to properly site their guns and most were knocked out immediately. One in command of Lieut Campbell knocked out a tank before it in turn was knocked out. Having gained fire superiority the tanks then closed in and the troops in their shallow, hastily dug weapon pits were in a hopeless position. How different it would have been if the original plan had been adhered to and our armour had now attacked. As it was, the majority of 24 and 25 Battalions and Bde Headquarters were made prisoners. Later when our tanks did attack the enemy had recovered from the initial confusion and they suffered heavy losses.

'A few escaped that morning by clambering on the jeeps and trucks and making a dash for it but those who endeavoured to retire on foot were rounded up by the enemy tanks....

'From personal observation while being marched back to the rear of the German position, the enemy had received a fright and many anti-tank guns were being pulled back. Apparently these were later brought back into position and dealt our armour a heavy blow.'

Captain Wilson has referred to a report from Lieutenant Stevens regarding the destruction of three tanks and another vehicle. For his excellent work in this action Stevens was awarded the Military Cross; the citation for the award explains the circumstances:

'At first light on the 22nd July 1942 during the withdrawal from the vicinity of El

[Mreir](#) Depression this officer when approaching 21 NZ Bn area (about two miles south-east of the eastern end of the depression) engaged enemy tanks which were following up the 2-pr gun on which he was travelling. At that time the only troops in the vicinity were two 6-prs and Lt Stevens' 2-pr. All three were engaging eight to ten tanks which were advancing, one tank at least being not more than 500 yds from Lt Stevens' gun. Lt Stevens, making excellent use of the ground, sited the portee in defilade and destroyed an enemy tank that appeared to be leading the others, while the other two guns supplied supporting fire. Lt Stevens was previously wounded on a minefield, his spectacles were broken which very much impaired his sight, but he did not wish to be evacuated. His coolness in the face of such odds must have inspired the men under his command and the operation of all three guns plus others which joined them later stopped the advance of the enemy tanks.'

C Company, which was out of touch with the battalion when the first objective was reached, had followed B Company in the advance in accordance with the attack orders and until reaching the minefield kept that company in sight. At that point Colonel George spoke to Captain Wroth, the company commander, and then went on, while the company continued the advance on the bearing laid down, 351 degrees.

'Shortly we were fired on by automatic weapons at 100 yds on our left flank,' said Captain Wroth, 'the fire being of such great intensity that we were forced to go to ground; the situation was made worse by the guns firing sufficient tracer to light up our positions as effectively as a red very light. On an order the two fwd pls and Coy Hqs rose and ran fwd, but it is not known whether 13 Pl (Mr Patterson in reserve) moved to the left to rush the guns, or carried on through the fire. Casualties were amazingly light and the coy moved on until reaching the metalled road at 4000 yds—the objective. Enemy trenches in this locality showed signs of hasty and recent evacuations. We moved on forward with the intention of contacting B coy and then turning about and taking up a defensive position. It would appear now that at this position B coy had been told to swing right as the ground was too flat for proper defence, but as word did not reach us we carried on, on the original bearing, thinking B coy (and the whole Bn) must be moving forward further than originally intended. Another thousand yards or so and 15 Platoon (left fwd pl, Mr. [Matthews](#) ¹⁶) saw several enemy on his left flank, some of whom called out "Kamerad" but as the left

section of this platoon moved left, the enemy opened fire, whereupon the pl commdr immediately swung his pl left and went in with the bayonet, killing 8 or 9 and losing 2. The enemy scattered, 20 – 30 men taking with them some sort of light tracked vehicle, but leaving an anti-tank weapon which Lieut. Matthews destroyed as far as possible with the butt of a rifle.

`After moving 4000 yards from the originally intended objective, we called a halt and laid low because of there being so much light from air force flares, taking the opportunity to decide what should be done next.

`The enemy, however, made the next move when several vehicles on our left forward flank started up and moved, proving by their rattle to be tanks. A staff car leading them completely encircled us but we withdrew before the tanks had moved sufficiently to our rear to cut us off. The enemy had apparently seen us in the light of the flares as there was a good deal of activity to our front prior to the tanks arriving. Moving back down our advance line caused us some worry for the first 1000 yards or so as very lights were constantly being fired by the enemy, the lights never appearing any further to the rear. Nearing the metalled road again (a fair check on distance was maintained the whole time by men detailed for the purpose) we were confronted by a line of vehicles, some MT and some tanks. Too long to outflank, the coy moved towards a truck in the line, threw a 36 grenade underneath causing no uncertain consternation, took four prisoners, and left others wounded. One tank under which a ST grenade exploded, moved off in great haste, and the coy moved through without being fired at, although it was noticeable that all enemy contacted, both there and during the whole night, were completely dressed and wide awake.

`Reaching the road we swung east to the line of the blue lights marking the Bde Axis line, 0400 hrs, and rested until first light when it was intended to move up the axis and find the Bn. Firing to the north caused us to decide against it, however, at first light, and we moved slightly north of east with the intention of parking up in whosever lines we happened to contact and moving up to the Bn when the coy commdr could definitely verify its location.

`The coy was, however, marched back to its original position before the attack and then withdrew with the remainder of the Bn B ech.

'The exact time or location where 13 Platoon was lost is not known, although it is possible, in addition to the possibility mentioned in the first MG episode, after crossing the metalled road a Bn runner with instructions to turn NE did meet 13 Pl (rear of C Coy HQ) and divert them.

'On several occasions in addition to those mentioned intermittent enemy fire was opened, but casualties in C Coy HQ, 14 and 15 Pls are not heavy.'

Although C Company during its movements had encountered a good deal of fire and was the only company to meet direct opposition during the advance, its casualties, apart from the loss of 13 Platoon, were not heavy. It was easy to go astray at night in the desert, but the company was guided by its bearing of 351 degrees and by men detailed to check the distances, and on these data reached a point about 500 yards east of the eastern end of the [El Mreir](#) Depression before turning back.

The RSM (O'Kane) throws a little light on the loss of touch with C Company. On the arrival of the vehicles at the first objective, O'Kane was instructed by Colonel George to lead the carriers to the various areas to deliver ammunition. He went first to B Company, where he met Lieutenants Sharpley and Cathie with their platoons. Sharpley told him that C Company was on his platoon's left flank but after going out some 400 yards O'Kane could not find it. On returning to Battalion Headquarters he was told by Colonel George that the battalion was moving forward and there was not time to search further for the company. O'Kane's account continues:

'The Bn continued forward in a northerly direction and was met by heavy MMG fire at approx 4.50 a.m. and almost immediately afterwards by mixed MMG and A Tk fire, with occasional mortar fire. At this stage the Bn was very bunched and slightly ahead was other transport, presumed to be English. 20 yds distant on the right (east) was a heavy British tank. The wounded previously picked up in the SAA truck in the minefield and elsewhere were here placed in slit trenches already dug, approx 30–40 yds away from the ammunition truck. 6-pr A Tk guns attached to the Bn withdrew under intense fire at this stage. Our portees moved into position to engage the enemy. One under Cpl [Fraser](#)¹⁷ was stuck in soft sand and though strenuous efforts were made to get it out, it was hit and caught fire. Other vehicles hit and burning were A Coy's carrier, SAA truck, and the tank. All men took to the ground

except the portee crews. Fire continued with some intensity for a half to three-quarters of an hour when light started to break. Troops could then be seen in strength to the north and large numbers to the NW. To the NE rifle coy men could be seen moving towards enemy tanks without being fired on and it was presumed that they had been forced to surrender. Enemy tanks then approached from the NE and moved to encircle the Bn position. Capt Wilson with jeep called on all men around "to make a break for it". RSM O'Kane, CSM Smith, and a man from the A Tk PI were able to get clear on the jeep and were subjected to concentrated fire from the tanks. No one was hit.

'On reaching the minefield O'Kane jumped overboard and salvaged another jeep. Both jeeps crossed the minefield safely and reached Bn HQ through [26 Bn area](#).'

Others were also lost, as an entry in Wakeling's diary shows:

'Jul 21.... Bill Small, ¹⁸ [Bill Morton](#), ¹⁹ two sigs, a section of 12 PI and myself were lost at 9.30 and wandered round, passing close to two of Jerry's tanks and on running up against his barbed wire we quickly retired east with bullets whistling all around and tank and arty shells making us duck now and then. Dug in in a little wadi and tried to sleep for a time.

'Jul 22. Up before daylight as the [RAF](#) just about lifted us out of our dugouts with their heavy bombs and old Jerry not far away.... about 8.30 started to walk back to our bn lines and were picked up by an armoured car. One of the worst nights we have ever had. Just as we reached Bn a few Stukas came over and to earth we went smartly....'

The return of RSM O'Kane to the Battalion Headquarters area in rear brought the first definite news of the calamity that had overtaken the battalion, and a little later, Captain Wilson brought confirmation of it.

Unfortunately, the fears of the New Zealand commanders that the supporting tanks would not be on the objective in time had been realised. Headquarters New Zealand Division had heard by midnight that 26 Battalion had reached its objective and had encountered enemy tanks, and was assured by Headquarters [1 Armoured Division](#) that its tanks would be there at first light. About 4 a.m. Brigadier Clifton was

in touch with Colonel Gentry (GSO 1 NZ Division) at Divisional Headquarters and asked him to ensure that tank support came up quickly. Clifton also asked one of his three tank liaison officers to call his headquarters and, climbing on that officer's tank, heard him report the situation and ask for tank support at first light. It was a tragedy that it was not so arranged.

A few minutes after 8 a.m. on the 22nd, the Valentine tanks of two regiments of [23 Armoured Brigade](#) advanced westwards along the northern lip of [El Mreir](#), encountering minefields and heavy artillery and anti-tank fire and suffering heavy losses. Several squadrons reached the objective three miles west of the pipeline but at midday, with only seven tanks left, the brigade was withdrawn, having lost eighty tanks. There was no lack of determination and courage in [23 Armoured Brigade](#).

Efforts were still being made to find out what had happened to 6 Brigade and whether part of it might still be holding out in [El Mreir](#). Second Armoured Brigade attacked late in the afternoon against the south-east corner of [El Mreir](#). Under heavy anti-tank fire, the brigade was soon in a dangerous position from which it was ordered to withdraw, with eight Grant tanks destroyed and ten others disabled. Even as late as 5 p.m. 6 Field Regiment reported that what appeared to be men of 24 and 25 Battalions were close to their objectives and the tanks were asked to investigate. Reports from survivors, however, soon dispelled any hopes in the matter.

It is perhaps futile to surmise what the result of 6 Brigade's attack would have been had the tanks arrived on the objective at or a little before first light, but the great determination and gallantry displayed when the tanks did attack leave little doubt that the operation would have been an outstanding success.

At 3.30 p.m. on 22 July Major Burton once more assumed command of the battalion, the survivors of which were ordered to withdraw to a position about nine miles back, and there re-form. Captain Wroth with C Company (less 13 Platoon) had arrived and the approximate strength of the battalion was 362. The casualties as revealed in the casualty lists were 16 officers and 195 other ranks. Of these one officer (Captain Birch) and thirteen other ranks were killed and two other ranks died of wounds; two officers (Major Hutchens and Lieutenant R. G. Stevens) and twenty-five other ranks were wounded; twelve officers (Lieutenant-Colonel George, Captain F. N. Armstrong, Lieutenants E. P. Bunny, B. Campbell, C. H. Cathie, F. D.

Christensen, J. R. G. Jack, R. H. Jackman, C. R. McColl, A. H. Paterson, P. F. Sharpley, R. B. Robertson) and 139 other ranks were prisoners of war: one officer (Lieutenant J. E. A. Wheeler) and fifteen other ranks were wounded and prisoners of war; one other rank (Private M. A. Chamberlain) was missing but was later classified as killed in action.

The battalion's withdrawal was made gradually so as to simulate a supply column, one half moving at 5.30 p.m. and the other half an hour later. Brigade Headquarters and 24 Battalion also withdrew to the same area, leaving 26 Battalion under command of 5 Brigade.

The 23rd July was a quiet day, the troops enjoying the rest and the extra ration of water that was issued. Most of the day the officers and NCOs were busy preparing rolls of personnel and lists of equipment, arms, ammunition, and vehicles to ascertain the state of the battalion.

During the day several men who had been missing after the attack, and also the five men missing from Paterson's patrol on the night before the attack, returned to the battalion. Private [McQuarrie](#),²⁰ medical orderly at the RAP, was amongst the former. He had helped to collect the wounded after the battalion had been overrun, his assistants being Brigadier Clifton, who had removed his rank badges, and Captain [Pemberton](#),²¹ a New Zealand sapper officer. McQuarrie also helped several other officers to escape when Clifton and he managed to slip away after the main body of the Germans had left the battlefield. 'During the day excellent work was done by Pte McQuarrie,' wrote Brigadier Clifton. 'He collected and dressed fifteen or sixteen stretcher cases who otherwise would have received no attention. The Germans were prepared to help but their medical resources were practically nil and their own wounded suffered also....' For his gallantry and good work McQuarrie was subsequently awarded the MM.

On the morning of 24 July Brigadier Clifton, speaking to the battalion, referred to the initial success of 6 Brigade's advance. He said that, after achieving the first objective, the brigade was overwhelmed at first light by an attack by over forty tanks, the supporting armour having failed to appear in time as had been planned. The men showed considerable feeling against the British armoured forces, but the Brigadier paid a tribute to the British crews of the armoured units.

Criticism was, naturally enough, very bitter after the disasters which had overtaken our forces. These disasters were due, in the main, to the British armour not being at hand, as planned, to meet the inevitable counter-attack by enemy armour, delivered at dawn after a successful advance by our troops, and before there was sufficient light to site the anti-tank defence. Feelings were aroused which, in the interests of the successful prosecution of the war, required to be curbed, and in a personal letter to brigadiers for the information of the troops General Gott, commanding [13 Corps](#), included the well-known and very appropriate lines, 'There is so much bad in the best of us, and so much good in the worst of us, that it ill behoves any of us, to criticize the rest of us'.

The following day, 25 July, a Special Order of the Day was issued by General Auchinleck:

Behind El [Alamein](#) 25 July 42

To all ranks [Eighth Army](#) from C-in-C.

You have done well. You have turned a retreat into a firm stand and stopped the enemy on the threshold of Egypt. You have done more. You have wrenched the initiative from him by sheer guts and hard fighting and put him on the defensive in these last weeks.

He has lost heavily and is short of men, ammunition, petrol, and other things. He is trying desperately to bring these over to [Africa](#) but the Navy and the [Air Force](#) are after his ships.

You have borne much but I ask you for more. We must not slacken. If we can stick it we will break him.

Stick to it.

C. J. Auchinleck General.

D Company, accompanied by five reinforcement officers, now arrived from [Maadi](#) after being three weeks away from the battalion. A, B, and C Companies were then formed into one company and named C Company, and after dark the two-company

battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Burton moved forward to reoccupy the position it had formerly held west of [Alam Nayil](#). D Company was on the right and C Company on the left; 18 Battalion (under command of 6 Brigade) was on the right of D Company in 24 Battalion's former position, the latter battalion having gone to [Maadi](#) to reorganise.

The night was quiet and after daybreak the companies dug in. There was a little spasmodic shelling but the principal annoyances were the plague of flies (which appeared to be increasing), the intense heat, and a heavy dust-storm which arrived at midday.

During the night of the 26th several demonstrations to simulate an attack like that against [El Mreir](#) on 21–22 July were made along the front of 6 Brigade. The purpose of these was to hold the enemy on the front while the Australian and armoured forces attacked—unsuccessfully, it was learnt later— on the coastal sector. Raids were organised, minefields blown up, artillery and machine-gun concentrations fired, and other measures taken to deceive the enemy. Fifth Brigade took similar action.

There was intermittent shelling all day on the 27th, mainly against D Company, which on that day took up a new position on the battalion's left flank, facing southwards, while 18 Battalion extended its frontage to the south to take over D Company's former front. The arrival of 105 reinforcements from [Maadi](#) enabled the battalion to form a third company, B Company, commanded by Captain [Weston](#); ²² the other two company commanders were Captain Wroth (C Company) and Captain [Macaskill](#) ²³ (D Company), Captain Wilson continuing to act as adjutant.

That night a patrol led by Lieutenant [Moffett](#), ²⁴ the Bren-carrier officer, moved towards Fortress A, finding fresh marks of MT and tracked vehicles but no sign of enemy troops. The laying of mines along the brigade front was pushed on and by the 29th the front was fairly well protected in this way. A rather unusual visitation, a plague of mosquitoes, was experienced on that date, giving everyone a bad time and for the moment superseding the terrible flies as enemy No. 1; a small palliative was the hope and the belief that the Germans and Italians were similarly afflicted. From samples of these mosquitoes sent back for identification, malaria-bearing types were found to be present. A strong breeze from the south during the night had

apparently brought the insects up from the [Fayoum](#), 120 miles away to the south-east.

Active patrolling continued each night with little result, though a patrol on the 31st under Second-Lieutenant Budd ²⁵ encountered a working party from which it attempted to cut off three of the enemy; unfortunately, because of faulty fusing of three 36-type grenades, which failed to explode, the patrol was forced to retire under fire, eventually returning to the battalion by a circuitous route with the loss of Private [Ballinger](#), ²⁶ missing, and later reported to be a prisoner of war.

The enemy was also harassed by fire from 25-pounders, mortars, and machine guns and often responded by laying heavy defensive fire around his positions, a sure sign of nerves and of the need to bolster-up the resolution of his infantry. Towards the end of July 64 Medium Regiment, supporting the brigade, fired on Fortress A in retaliation for the shelling of the brigade front.

August saw continuous patrolling by all battalions. Twenty-fifth Battalion had a standing, reconnaissance, or fighting patrol out on every night of the month, no fewer than twelve officers, including two captains, taking part, each of them on several occasions. A good deal of information about the enemy defences was obtained but there were few encounters with his troops, apart from rather heavy fire at times. The patrols operated to a considerable distance forward of the battalion's front; for example, Pt 104, where strong standing and other patrols of the battalion were almost continuously present each night, was three miles to the west-south-west of the front line.

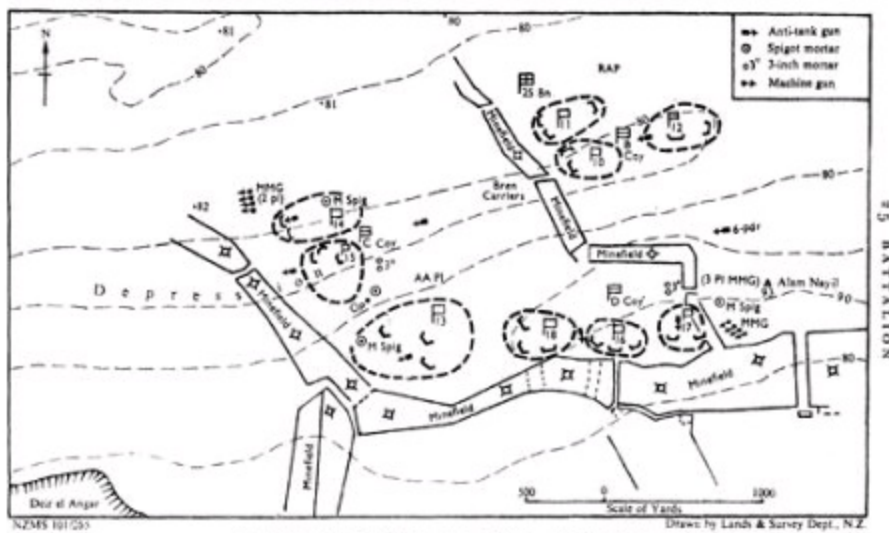
On the night of 9–10 August [Lieutenant Kempthorne's](#) ²⁷ patrol encountered a large enemy patrol a mile west of Pt 104 and inflicted and suffered casualties; [Lieutenant Kempthorne](#) and Private [Snell](#) ²⁸ were missing, the former being reported later as died of wounds and the latter as wounded and prisoner of war. Again, eleven nights later, Second-Lieutenant Budd's patrol was fired on from both flanks as it withdrew after inflicting casualties; Budd was killed and one man was wounded and missing. A third brush with the enemy took place at about 1 a.m. on 26 August when Lieutenant Hewitt's ²⁹ patrol engaged an enemy patrol of over thirty men; after an exchange of fire the enemy withdrew, losing a parachutist (fighting as infantry), armed with a light machine gun and a machine-carbine, as a prisoner.

Two nights later Moffett's patrol of carriers visited the enemy wire and, after firing on an enemy position, withdrew under fire with one carrier and its crew missing. This occurred near Pt 104, where a fighting patrol of one platoon, two sections of carriers, an anti-tank gun, one section of mortars, and a No. 18 set for R/T communication to Battalion Headquarters, all under Lieutenant Norman,³⁰ was in position; the No. 18 set, as was so often the case, was unsatisfactory.

In the very early hours of the 29th C Company had some excitement when an enemy aircraft, a Ju88, crashed in flames in the vicinity of 14 Platoon and exploded with a terrific bang, the crew of four and the aircraft being totally destroyed, though two 500-pound bombs were found intact. At midday there was a good deal of air fighting and three enemy aircraft were shot down; next day there were frequent enemy air reconnaissances.

The enemy was not inactive in meeting the intense patrolling of the New Zealanders and from early in the month showed much greater alertness. He also thickened up his defences with booby traps and used a tank or armoured car, in combination with searchlights, to cover his nocturnal working parties, thus making surprise attacks by our patrols almost impossible.

An embellishment for the head-dress that might well have formed the subject of a Bairnsfather masterpiece was the vogue at this time. This was a veil of mosquito netting hung from the rim of the steel helmet to protect the eyes, nostrils, and mouth from the persistent attacks of flies. The veil was also most useful to enable men on night duty to sleep in the daytime. The use of the veil emphasises the menace of the fly; no description can be adequate to give anyone who has not



25 battalion positions, alam nayil, august 1942

experienced it any real understanding of this fly nuisance. It baffles description as it baffled all efforts to reduce it to reasonable proportions, but it did produce innumerable and effective fly traps (which gave vindictive satisfaction to the owners) and a high standard of hygiene throughout the Division's area. An amusing little incident in [Helwan](#) hospital has reference to this matter. On her morning inspection the Matron approached a patient in bed. 'Ha!' she said, 'a patient from the Western Desert, I see.' 'Yes,' the patient replied, 'but you know me.' 'That is so,' said the Matron, 'but I know for another reason. You have a fly cemetery under your bed. Men from the Western Desert kill every fly they can reach. Other patients merely brush them aside.' This story not only illustrates the animosity a severe fly-plague aroused but it also shows that, though the fly population was infinitely lower at [Helwan](#), not even a first-class hospital could keep them out.

August was a most trying month for the Division and diaries and letters frequently referred to the conditions: 'Heat and flies exceedingly trying—Getting dirtier and stickier each day and hope for a wash soon—Breeze a little cooler in the evening —Tea not till 8 because of the flies—This sitting about all day in the heat with the flies just about eating us alive is not so hot—Dirty clothes exchanged for new in the evening—very sticky with perspiration and dust and only a bottle-and-a-half of water a day.'

During the greater part of the day the heat was intense, a blazing sun from a cloudless blue sky creating almost furnace conditions on the stony, shadeless desert.

In the afternoon sandstorms were frequent, bringing visibility down almost to zero. Early in the month the men occupied shallow slit trenches and a groundsheet over the top gave some slight protection from the sun, though the occupants found it difficult to believe. Later, as the trenches were deepened, there was some improvement. Diarrhoea and desert sores were common and jaundice even more evident, the rate of sickness being high with 1126 sick from all units admitted to the divisional dressing stations during the month. The nights, however, were a real relief with cooler temperatures, no flies, and some liberty of movement often impossible during daylight because of enemy observation. Moonlight nights in particular were brilliant, but these were bombing nights and the moon was not always as welcome as otherwise it would have been.

Early in August the rations were changed over from tinned to fresh, a very welcome change though it continued for only two or three weeks. Occasionally a little beer was available, and the daily water ration (a matter of equal importance in such an arid country) was increased in the middle of the month from one gallon to one and a quarter gallons per man for all purposes, i.e., cooking and drinking, and such washing-up by the cooks as was inescapable.

In the matter of health a German medical report of 31 July showed that the troubles were not all on our side: '... with the lull in the fighting the number of wounded has decreased, but the number of sick is increasing; most noticeable are diarrhoea, skin diseases, influenza, throat infection, and exhaustion.'

On 7 August a rearward position at [Alam Halfa](#), a prominent ridge about 440 feet above sea level and 130 to 200 feet above the level of the highest ground for miles, was reconnoitred by senior officers of 6 Brigade, including Colonel Burton, who was accompanied by the IO (Lieutenant Jackman). Fifteen miles to the east of [Alam Nayil](#), this position was regarded as of great tactical importance, and the turn of events might well require its occupation by New Zealand troops. The day was also notable for domestic reasons as leave to [Cairo](#) or [Alexandria](#) for 5 per cent of the strength for four clear days, exclusive of travelling time, was resumed. On the same day a very welcome reinforcement of 121 all ranks joined 25 Battalion, its share of 330 which reached the brigade.

On 14 August some general instruction on the defensive system, based on notes

from Brigadier Clifton, was given to the battalion. It was explained that the defences on the front, for the greater part, consisted of V- or L-shaped section posts, 4 ft. 6 in. deep, connected by crawl trenches, the spoil being spread to avoid betraying the position of the trenches. As rock was usually found a few inches below the surface, the use of compressors was more or less universal. The forward defences were protected by a minefield of two belts: the one nearer our trenches was the protective field and was thickly sown and continuous; the other or outer field was of varying density and not necessarily continuous. The former field was under the close fire of our forward posts to prevent the mines being destroyed or removed. The mines were camouflaged with sand. Spare mines were left near gaps in the minefield so that the gaps could readily be closed. Wire entanglements were planned as supplies became available. Dannert wire of one row (later two) was on the outer edge of the protective field and a low wire entanglement, seven yards wide, on the inner edge. The 2-inch mortar was best used in forward section or platoon headquarters posts for firing parachute flares by night and HE and smoke by day. The flares produced an excellent light for a maximum of thirty seconds. The range of the mortar was 350 yards.

The Spigot mortar was stated to be an admirable defensive weapon; it threw a 20-pound bomb, capable of wrecking any tank, a distance of 450 yards, or a 10-pound bomb 900 yards. It was easy to conceal and operate. (The Brigadier's opinion of this mortar was by no means universal, the general view being that it was unsuitable for desert conditions.)

As regards the two-pounder anti-tank gun, the new super-charged ammunition now being issued gave a frontal penetration of the German Mark III tank at 900 yards, which of course was most valuable, especially for an extended front. The defensive fire now provided round the front trenches, on the firing of the SOS signal, was formidable. On the brigade front, it was provided by sixteen Vickers machine guns, twenty-four 25-pounders, eighteen 3-inch mortars, and all the Bren light machine guns, 2-inch mortars, and rifles of the battalions. A main enemy attack would be met by an additional forty-eight 25-pounders (making a total of seventy-two) and twenty-four medium guns. Except for some of the shorter-range weapons, all this fire was brought down when any forward company fired the SOS signal.

Anti-tank guns totalling twenty-four two-pounders and sixteen six-pounders

were available in addition and all this was backed up by the Divisional Cavalry and any other armour in the vicinity. Sticky bombs and Hawkins grenades were effective against tanks, especially after the enemy tanks were separated from their infantry.

This general survey of the great defensive power of the Division, especially when reasonably concentrated, was a very encouraging one and was most appropriate at this time after the recent severe reverses, the inflow of large numbers of reinforcements, and the probability of enemy attack.

In the middle of August a very valuable addition was made to the Division. This was A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, equipped with thirteen Valentine and two Matilda tanks, which came under command of the Division and went into laager near [Divisional Headquarters](#). It was given two troops of 34 Anti-Tank Battery and two machine-gun platoons; with two troops of the Divisional Cavalry it formed a mobile reserve inside the divisional position, ready at short notice to move to any spot attacked by the enemy.

On the afternoon of 23 August General Montgomery (who had taken over command of the [Eighth Army](#)), accompanied by [General Freyberg](#) and Brigadier Clifton, visited the forward defended localities of 25 Battalion. At that time General Montgomery was regarded as just another general, an outlook that was soon to change.

A report that eight parachutists had dropped to the east of the battalion created some interest in the morning of the 25th; patrols could find no trace of them but pamphlets printed in Urdu were found that night. These seemed to be passes for intending deserters and were obviously intended for Indian troops.

A demonstration of the somewhat controversial Spigot mortar was witnessed about this time by two United States Army 'tank destroyers', amongst others. 'Its a grand weapon,' writes Brigadier Clifton. 'Blew a nice hole in a Valentine with second round.... If any tanks come at our front we shall prove its value alright.'

For some time there had been clear signs that the enemy had been building up his strength and every precaution was taken to guard against attack. A code-word indicating the probability of imminent attack was arranged and a permanent SOS

signal introduced, while a strict stand-to, fifteen minutes before sunrise, was ordered by the higher command. A conference at [Divisional Headquarters](#) on the 24th had discussed the situation; it was expected that the attack would take place at any time, probably on the following night and to the south of the Division. All leave was cancelled. No attack eventuated.

In the early morning of the 26th there was a spectacular display when at 4 a.m. the whole of the Divisional Artillery supported a raid by two companies of the [Maori Battalion](#) on the eastern end of the [El Mreir Depression](#). This started as the moon set and was successful in capturing forty and killing many of the enemy.

The fly plague was of course still receiving attention, and now for the first time formalin was available to the troops and proved a most effective fly poisoner. 'They just die in heaps but more come' was one rather pathetic comment.

Since the heavy fighting on 22 July there had fortunately been few casualties, despite a good deal of enemy artillery fire and the very numerous patrols sent out by the battalion. By the end of August, however, the constant attrition resulting from occupation of a front-line position had caused the loss of two officers ([McCarthy](#) ³¹ and Budd) killed and two others ([Kempthorne](#) and [Williams](#) ³²) died of wounds, one other rank killed, two died of wounds, and nine wounded, and eight other ranks (of whom two were wounded) prisoners of war, a loss of four officers and twenty other ranks.

On the evening of 30 August a raid similar to that of the Maoris a few nights earlier was planned by 18 Battalion. The objective was the Khawabir Depression and 25 Battalion was asked to assist by creating a diversion on the south of the raid. The customary standing patrol on Pt 104 was increased to include two platoons of infantry, anti-tank guns, mortars, Vickers guns and carriers, all under the command of Captain Weston of B Company. Setting out after dark, the patrol took up suitable positions around the point and at 9.30 p.m. opened fire according to plan to the west towards the [Qattara Box](#) and to the south-west. The Vickers guns expended some 12,000 rounds and the 3-inch mortars over 200 bombs. A similar diversion was carried out by 26 Battalion farther north, and between the two diversions, 18 Battalion's raid caught the enemy unawares and procured a bag of thirty-three prisoners.

As all this activity died down, heavy enemy fire broke out all down [Eighth Army's](#) front, drawing counter-battery fire from our own artillery. An hour before midnight there was heavy fire to the north where the Indians on [Ruweisat Ridge](#) were attacked by a strong patrol, and there was little surprise when at 1.30 a.m. on 31 August the code-word for impending attack was received at Battalion Headquarters. This was followed by orders to close all gaps in the minefields, which was done by C and D Companies. Enemy infantry reported at 3 a.m. to be occupying Deir el Angar, a mile south-west of the battalion, were heavily engaged by [5 Field Regiment](#) and two platoons of machine guns. Before 9 a.m. there was much enemy air reconnaissance.

The long-expected enemy attack was now under way, one hundred tanks being reported through the first minefield, ten miles south-south-east of 25 Battalion. Throughout the day there were many reports from all battalions of enemy forces moving eastwards on the southern flank of the [Alamein](#) line.

It is now necessary to give some indication of the enemy's general plan of attack and the measures taken by General Montgomery to meet it. Just before midnight on 30–31 August the enemy made feint attacks in the north and the centre of the line. The northern feints were easily repulsed by 9 Australian Division. In the centre, an attack against 5 Indian Division holding [Ruweisat Ridge](#) had some success but the enemy retired before a counter-attack could be mounted.

The main attack was the southern one, the enemy forces comprising 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, 90 Light Division, and 20 Italian Corps consisting of the Ariete and the Littorio Armoured Divisions. The attack was made between the left flank of the New Zealand Division and [Himeimat](#), 13 miles to the south. By midday enemy armour was through our minefields and had moved eastwards, south of Deir el Ragil. Ninetieth Light Division was to the north of the armour in the evening, and after some delay in passing the minefields, reached Deir el [Muhafid](#), four and a half miles south-east of the battalion's left flank.

Mobile troops of the British [7 Armoured Division](#), who were guarding the southern flank, fell back as planned before the enemy attack and adopted a harassing role against the flanks of the advance. A strong wind in the afternoon which raised the dust prevented the [RAF](#) from taking effective action against the

enemy columns; towards dusk, however, the conditions improved and our air forces commenced intensive attacks which continued night and day against enemy concentrations, contributing materially to the success of the British defence. Early on 1 September it could be seen that the enemy's line of advance was in the direction of [Alam Halfa](#) ridge. Repulsed in that area, he ultimately retired behind our minefields south of the New Zealand Division.

Some knowledge of these events had come to the Division and its lower formations and units, which in the meantime had to be prepared to hold their defensive positions against all-comers.

On the night following the start of the enemy attack, 31 August-1 September, the battalion sent a reconnaissance patrol under Lieutenant Norman to the east end of Deir el Angar. The only evidence of the enemy occupation detected that morning was the sound of movement. The following morning (2 September) enemy troops occupied the north side of Deir el Angar and a good deal of enemy movement was observed to the south, targets being engaged throughout the day by our artillery.

In the early afternoon 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment had a notable success, shooting down two Ju88 aircraft while a third crashed near the enemy lines, much to the delight of the New Zealanders who saw it; one aircraft crashed on a [27 Battalion](#) truck, two of the aircrew being killed and two, suffering from burns, being captured. In the enemy lines the appearance of stretchers after our artillery and machine guns had been active was an encouraging indication of effective fire. Two reconnaissance patrols from the battalion were out that night. One, led by WO I O'Kane and including two officers from the Royal West Kent Regiment, visited an area south-east of Deir el Angar and about 2500 yards south of 25 Battalion's front. No enemy was seen but vehicle pits, formerly used by 2 Rifle Brigade, showed signs of occupation by enemy mortars. The second patrol under Second-Lieutenant [Mowat](#)³³ opened fire, with Brens using tracer, on an enemy working party a hundred yards from the eastern edge of Deir el Angar. This drew fire from enemy machine guns and an anti-tank gun and the working party withdrew into the depression. The patrol was fired on, during its return journey, by mortars and artillery, the severity of the enemy reaction suggesting that the patrol's fire had been very effective.

At noon the following day (3 September) verbal orders for active operations that

night were issued by Brigadier Clifton. The New Zealand Division's role now was to harass the enemy's L of C ³⁴ and so hamper as much as possible the enemy forces operating to the east.

That night, by 10.45 p.m. 25 Battalion had guided 132 British Brigade and 26 Battalion through gaps it had cleared in its minefields; the British brigade, under command of the Division, was to attack south to the [Deir Alinda](#) depression (about three miles to the south of 25 Battalion), where it was to occupy about 2000 yards of the northern edge with 5 (NZ) Brigade on its left. To guard the right flank of 132 Brigade, 26 Battalion was to seize 1200 yards of the rear line of the British minefield extending southwards from near the east end of Deir el Angar. As diversions, 18 Battalion was to assault enemy sangars at the western end of the Deir el Angar depression, attacking, with artillery preparations, from north to south, while B Company 25 Battalion was to destroy the enemy along the northern edge of that depression. The assaulting troops of 18 and 25 Battalions were to reach the edge of the depression at 11.30 p.m.

During the afternoon a troop of enemy artillery had shelled the battalion's position on the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge and for about ten minutes a mortar bombarded C Company. All was quiet, however, as the infantry of 132 Brigade passed through the gaps in the minefields, but 26 Battalion had casualties (including its commanding officer) from heavy artillery and mortar fire which disorganised and delayed the vehicles and supporting arms of both forces. D Company, holding the left company sector west of [Alam Nayil](#) trig, was under heavy shellfire for more than an hour.

At 11 p.m. B Company, with two anti-tank guns and two sections of mortars, under Captain Weston, moved through C Company's gap in the minefield, though delayed a few minutes by the heavy shelling. It then formed up and advanced with two platoons forward, following an artillery barrage; when the barrage lifted, 300 yards from the objective, the company assaulted the enemy position. There was little opposition at first and the two leading platoons moved over the edge of the depression, encountering heavy fire from anti-tank guns, machine guns, and rifles from both flanks. Considering the position too strong for his force, Weston fired the signal to retire. The withdrawal was difficult as the enemy had put down a mortar barrage behind the company, a strong indication of his confidence, and his infantry was trying to move round the flanks. Enemy small-arms fire was encountered all the

way back to the minefield, where the gap was being heavily mortared. The company had one officer and three men wounded and twenty-eight missing.

From the enemy's action in accurately shelling and mortaring the gaps in the minefield in the darkness there seems no doubt that he had observed the clearing of the gaps in daylight and had drawn the obvious conclusion that an attack was pending.

During the retirement Corporal [Warr](#)³⁵ of B Company, although suffering from shell-blast, carried a badly wounded man, much heavier than himself, a distance of 1500 yards under heavy fire. Stopping frequently because of fatigue or to shelter from fire, Warr took over two hours to bring the man back to his lines and showed fine courage and a complete disregard for his own safety. For this feat he was awarded the Military Medal.

The attack of 18 Battalion at the western end of Deir el Angar, 1000 yards west of 25 Battalion's objective, had much more success, taking fifty-two prisoners and causing a great deal of damage. Twenty-sixth Battalion, which, it will be recalled, followed 132 Brigade, reached its objective, but one of its companies was surrounded and lost most of its men. Brigadier Clifton, who went forward to 26 Battalion and to 132 Brigade, was missing and was reported later over the German radio as a prisoner. The [132nd Brigade](#) encountered heavy fire and was held up well short of its objective. The next day all the New Zealand troops were withdrawn into the [New Zealand Box](#).

The enemy offensive in the south had failed and with slight variations his forces were withdrawn to his original positions. His losses, especially in tanks, had been heavy.

By 5 September the units of the New Zealand Division were in their former defensive positions, and though there was some expectancy amongst the troops that they would soon be relieved, a few more days were to elapse before that took place.

The enemy was still in the Deir el Angar, a constant target for our artillery. The Muhafid Depression (four and a half miles to the south-east of 25 Battalion) was now clear of the enemy and, generally, the front settled down to its former state. About 9

a.m. on the 5th, Battalion Headquarters was shelled for ten minutes and there was some general shelling of the area a little later. Enemy artillery, estimated to be one troop, was seen during the morning to be taking up a position in the western end of the Deir el Angar. To the south, in the vicinity of Deir el Munassib- [Deir Alinda](#) and the high ground beyond, there were signs of movement of enemy vehicles towards the west throughout the entire day.

Two Valentine tanks had been left on the minefield and that night a patrol under Lieutenant Hewitt was placed near Pt 93, about 3000 yards south of the battalion, to cover a salvage party from 46 Royal Tank Regiment. A reconnaissance patrol under Lieutenant [Abbott](#) ³⁶ was about 1000 yards south-west of Hewitt's patrol and heard enemy working parties. A third patrol under Sergeant Cliffe [Dawson](#) ³⁷ visited the eastern end of the Deir el Angar and heard working parties in the depression.

On the morning of the 6th a clash between six Me109s and six Hurricanes at about 2000 feet over the brigade area caused some excitement; two Messerschmitts were destroyed, one pilot being killed and another captured, while two Hurricanes were lost though the pilots were safe. The area held by the battalion was heavily shelled during the morning and again early in the afternoon, and, as always, it was some comfort to see our artillery responding briskly. Throughout the day the enemy was busy in the Deir el Angar.

The new Brigade Commander, Brigadier Gentry, took over command of 6 Brigade the following day, 7 September, a day when the enemy from the vicinity of Deir el Angar elected to shell his headquarters as well as 25 Battalion headquarters and D Company. The enemy there was showing a certain degree of aggressiveness and so was his air force, which in the evening made a dive-bombing attack by nine bombers escorted by twelve Me109Fs, directed against the battalion's position; no damage or casualties resulted. Brigadier Gentry visited the battalion that afternoon.

From intelligence reports it now seemed that the enemy was holding the whole of the [Munassib Depression](#) (four miles south of 25 Battalion) and the western end of the [Muhafid Depression](#), a couple of miles farther to the east.

The morning of the 8th was quiet though there was desultory shelling of Brigade

Headquarters in the morning and of the battalion at noon. Relief was now in sight. The [132nd Brigade](#), with a battalion of 151 Brigade, was to relieve 6 Brigade, its Brigadier and Brigade Major visiting 25 Battalion on their way to Brigade Headquarters. The commanders of the relieving battalions also visited the various battalion areas in the afternoon. Our artillery each day was active against observed targets.

Patrols from the battalion had continued their work each night. A reconnaissance patrol under Lieutenant Norman saw enemy troops, covered by two tanks, digging trenches on a line running east and west near [Deir Alinda](#) (three miles south of 25 Battalion). Another patrol under Sergeant [Cotter](#)³⁸ visited the eastern end of Deir el Angar; a working party to the south-west was heard and on moving forward the patrol was fired on and withdrew.

The following night two patrols were out but no enemy was encountered. One under Second-Lieutenant [Hoy](#)³⁹ went to Deir el Angar and the other under Second-Lieutenant [Coldwell](#)⁴⁰ reached the northern edge of [Deir el Munassib](#). The next night (8–9 September) Deir el Angar was visited by Lieutenant Matthews's patrol, which found the eastern end clear of the enemy. Working parties at [Deir Alinda](#) were heard by Second-Lieutenant Pitcairn's⁴¹ patrol, which withdrew when fired on. A third patrol that night, under WO I O'Kane, heard a working party and vehicles in the Deir el Angar.

During the morning of the 9th D Company was bombed by nine Stukas, escorted by fighters, and lost two men killed and five wounded; half an hour later Battalion Headquarters area was shelled and this continued throughout the day.

The order for the relief was received that morning and advanced parties from [8 Durham Light Infantry](#) arrived in the late afternoon. The relief was to be completed by 2 a.m. on the 10th, but an hour and a half beforehand the battalion transport was able to move off to the bivouac area, five miles east of [Alam Nayil](#). The majority of the men had to march, and after a three-hour trudge through the dust and soft sand, reached the bivouac area just before dawn.

All that day a dust-storm blew and for once was welcome, effectively concealing in the afternoon the battalion's move to the divisional rest area on the sea coast

near [Burg el Arab](#), a rough and dusty three-hour journey in MT. The beach in the new area was a delight after the strain, hard work, and dirt of the last two months, but lifesaving precautions, which included organised bathing parties and pickets with improvised equipment, were necessary. Six days' leave to [Alexandria](#) and [Cairo](#) was granted, preference being given to those who had been through the summer campaign without a break.

The battalion remained in its pleasant beach camp until 19 September, enjoying the concerts given by the brigade band and the [Kiwi Concert Party](#) though, because of the risk of air attack, it was necessary to restrict gatherings to about 400 and to provide anti-aircraft defence.

On 12 September Lieutenant-Colonel Burton, a popular figure who had commanded the battalion with distinction and under great difficulties at [Sidi Rezegh](#) after Colonel McNaught was wounded, went on leave. He had been temporarily in command for the last seven weeks, after the capture of Lieutenant-Colonel George. He was succeeded in command by Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant.⁴²

¹ Lt-Col [R. L. Hutchens](#), DSO, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Singapore](#); born [Hawera](#), 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO [27 \(MG\) Bn](#) Feb-May 1944; [26 Bn](#) May-Jun 1944; [24 Bn](#) Jun 1944–May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942; Commissioner for New Zealand in [Singapore](#), 1959–.

² Sgt [D. O. Hawkins](#); [Hamilton](#); born [Marlton](#), 17 Mar 1916; school teacher.

³ Cpl [T. S. Kotlowski](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Akaroa](#), 29 Dec 1908; public servant.

⁴ Capt [A. H. Paterson](#); [Waipawa](#); born [Gisborne](#), 12 Feb 1912; labourer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁵ Capt [E. P. Bunny](#); [Havelock North](#); born [Auckland](#), 8 Mar 1914; station manager; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁶ [Royal Horse Artillery](#).

⁷ Capt R. H. Jackman; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 6 May 1915; industrial chemist; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁸ Pte P. W. Bates; Auckland; born New Plymouth, 25 Jun 1920; journalist; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped Italy, to Switzerland, Sep 1943.

⁹ Sgt H. W. Carter; Wellington; born Wellington, 14 Feb 1914; civil servant; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁰ Pte D. B. Rapley; Auckland; born NZ 3 May 1915; branch manager.

¹¹ Capt P. F. Sharpley; Papakura Camp; born Ireland, 30 May 1914; clerk; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹² Pte J. O. Bone; Hastings; born Napier, 1 Aug 1916; insurance agent.

¹³ Cpl J. E. Broad; Wellington; born NZ 14 Sep 1912; purser; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped, Italy, Sep 1943; safe with Allied Forces Apr 1944.

¹⁴ Capt B. F. Betts; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 1 Apr 1913; warehouseman.

¹⁵ Capt R. G. Stevens, MC; born Hawera, 26 Feb 1914; farmer; wounded 22 Jul 1942; died on active service 8 Jun 1944.

¹⁶ Capt R. H. Matthews, m.i.d.; Waipukurau; born Gisborne, 22 Dec 1913; shipping clerk; wounded 22 Mar 1943.

¹⁷ Pte M. A. Fraser; Rotorua; born NZ 28 Dec 1917; grocer's assistant; twice wounded.

¹⁸ Sgt J. F. Small; Feilding; born Ashhurst, 19 Oct 1915; grocer; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

¹⁹ Capt W. H. Morton; born NZ 13 Apr 1919; timber machinist; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

²⁰ Pte I. M. McQuarrie, MM; Wellington; born Wellington, 31 Mar 1919; radiographer; p.w. 26 Mar 1943.

²¹ Lt-Col R. C. Pemberton, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Christchurch, 23 Mar 1915; engineer; OC 8 Fd Coy Dec 1942–Oct 1943; CRE a NZ Div Jul–Aug 1944; twice wounded.

²² Capt C. Weston, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born NZ 6 Mar 1914; farmer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

²³ Capt H. Macaskill, m.i.d.; born England, 16 May 1907; school teacher; wounded 22 Apr 1943.

²⁴ Lt W. S. F. Moffett; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 15 Jun 1912; fat-stock buyer; wounded 25 Apr 1943.

²⁵ Lt B. H. Budd; born NZ 17 Feb 1914; stock agent; killed in action 21 Aug 1942.

²⁶ Pte W. F. Ballinger; born NZ 28 Mar 1916; truck driver; p.w. 1 Aug 1942.

²⁷ Lt E. F. L. Kempthorne; born NZ 8 Jan 1904; farmer; died of wounds 9 Aug 1942.

²⁸ Pte K. G. Snell; Kaiangaroa Forest, Rotorua; born Otahuhu, 29 Nov 1921; carpenter; wounded and p.w. 9 Aug 1942.

²⁹ Maj S. M. Hewitt, MC; Waipukurau; born Dannevirke, 31 Oct 1916; shepherd.

³⁰ Lt-Col E. K. Norman, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Tauranga;

born Napier, 14 Sep 1916; theological student; CO 25 Bn Dec 1943-Feb 1944, Jun 1944–Apr 1945; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

³¹ Lt J. J. McCarthy; born NZ 29 Jul 1910; solicitor; killed in action 15 Aug 1942.

³² Lt A. E. Williams; born NZ 13 Nov 1901; labourer; died of wounds 30 Aug 1942.

³³ Lt R. S. Mowat; Wellington; born Shannon, 8 Feb 1911; newsroom foreman.

³⁴ Line of communication.

³⁵ Cpl L. A. Warr, MM, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 25 Mar 1920; salesman; wounded 3 Sep 1942.

³⁶ Capt L. H. Abbott; Auckland; born New Plymouth, 2 Jul 1904; warehouseman; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

³⁷ WO II C. H. Dawson, m.i.d.; Te Puna, Tauranga; born Lower Hutt 22 May 1917; clerk; wounded 22 Dec 1944.

³⁸ Sgt L. E. Cotter; born England, 27 Jul 1906; shepherd; died on active service 24 Jun 1943.

³⁹ Maj K. F. Hoy, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Wellington, 5 Sep 1911; civil servant.

⁴⁰ Lt D. G. Coldwell; Hastings; born Waipukurau, 11 May 1912; dispenser.

⁴¹ Capt J. G. Pitcairn; Auckland; born England, 22 Jun 1910; stock and station agent.

⁴² Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; Adelaide; born Ashburton, 3 Mar 1912; stock agent; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942–Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943–Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3–27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan–May 1945; 6 Bde Jun–Oct 1945; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 7 – BATTLE OF ALAMEIN

CHAPTER 7

Battle of Alamein

The New Zealand Division was now to commence training for the forthcoming offensive and moved into bivouac areas to the south of [Burg el Arab](#) by 19 September. Twenty-fifth Battalion then took part in a full-scale divisional rehearsal, held under conditions as similar as possible to the actual attack which was to be made later. After the rehearsal the battalion was engaged on general training, and with the other units of the brigade carried out a further exercise in attack in co-operation with tanks and supported by artillery.

The divisional exercise was preceded by company and battalion exercises, with considerable emphasis on night operations, and on 22–23 September by a night attack by the brigade. At its conclusion, officers and NCOs down to sergeants were addressed by [General Freyberg](#) on the lessons arising from the exercise. As he said later: 'We laid out on the ground a complete replica of the Ridge; we laid minefields and we laid it out exactly like [Miteiriya Ridge](#). We then laid survey pegs and carried out a complete rehearsal for the attack.'

On the morning of 30 September 25 Battalion took part in a ceremonial parade of 6 Brigade for inspection by General Montgomery. Decorations were presented by the General, Captain Stevens receiving the Military Cross.

A very important reorganisation in the Division occurred on 1 October, when [4 Infantry Brigade](#), then training at [Maadi](#), became 4 Armoured Brigade.

Training continued for the first three weeks of October and covered a wide field, including movements in MT by day and night, desert navigation, signals co-operation, and the digging and occupation of a brigade defensive position with all-round defence. The weather was now growing decidedly colder, jerseys being worn (by order) from 4 October in the early morning and after sunset; an extra blanket was issued four days later when there was a strong wind with occasional rain, although not sufficient to prevent a heavy sandstorm.

On the 12th 25 Battalion, with a tank regiment of 9 Armoured Brigade under command, and in conjunction with 6 Brigade Tactical Headquarters, carried out

attack practice. The following day the brigade held in daylight a repetition of a divisional night-attack exercise of 26–27 September, so that the troops could see the details of the operations. The laying of mines, Bangalore torpedoes, bayonet fighting, booby traps, anti-personnel mines, unarmed combat, and a route march filled in the next few days. In the late afternoon of 16 October a very unpleasant dust-storm arrived and put a stop to training; it was considered to be the worst experienced since the very severe one at [Amiriya](#) on 14–15 March 1941 prior to the battalion's embarkation for [Greece](#). Rain at dusk reduced the dust a little, but the wind with a little rain continued the next day, raising a rough sea which stopped all bathing.

The time was drawing very close for further fighting and Brigadier Gentry explained future operations to Commanding Officers and Intelligence Officers, using a plaster model to show the country over which the battle would take place. On the morning of 18 October Colonel Bonifant and the IO, together with other parties from the rest of the brigade, visited the front with Brigadier Gentry and staff, returning in the afternoon. Two days later Colonel Bonifant received the brigade operation order for the attack on [Miteiriya Ridge](#), the opening of the British offensive on the [Alamein](#) line, and at 7.30 p.m. the next day (21 October) the battalion moved westwards in transport along the coast road before turning inland to an area a couple of miles to the north of Alam el Onsol, six miles south-east of the [Alamein](#) railway station. Arriving there about midnight, the men dug in and camouflaged the vehicles. The front line was about ten miles to the west and the troops remained in their positions during the daylight hours; great care was taken to avoid enemy air observation, but the only enemy aircraft seen was an Me109 which passed over at a great height early in the morning.

At last light on the 22nd the A Echelon transport left for the lying-up area and was followed by the battalion on foot half an hour later. The troops reached the area, five and a half miles west of [Alamein](#) station, weary and very dusty, after a ten-mile march of four and a half hours over soft sand which tried their endurance (and temper) almost to breaking point. Once again they dug in and camouflaged their slit trenches. The forward defended localities, from which the Division would launch its attack, were about 3000 yards ahead. Before midnight 22–23 October, 6 Brigade was complete in its lying-up position

For the impending battle great efforts had been made to build up the strength of the [Eighth Army](#), the most notable improvement being the provision of 300 Sherman tanks. On the other hand, the enemy had also been reinforced and was working hard on his defences. Where the New Zealanders were to fight, the minefields were from 5000 to 9000 yards in depth. Throughout the front German units were interspersed with Italian to stiffen the morale of the latter. In strength the enemy positions somewhat resembled the positions of the 1914–18 war, with the important difference that in the latter there were no anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. To get its armour through, [Eighth Army](#) would have to make gaps by an assault against the strongly entrenched enemy.

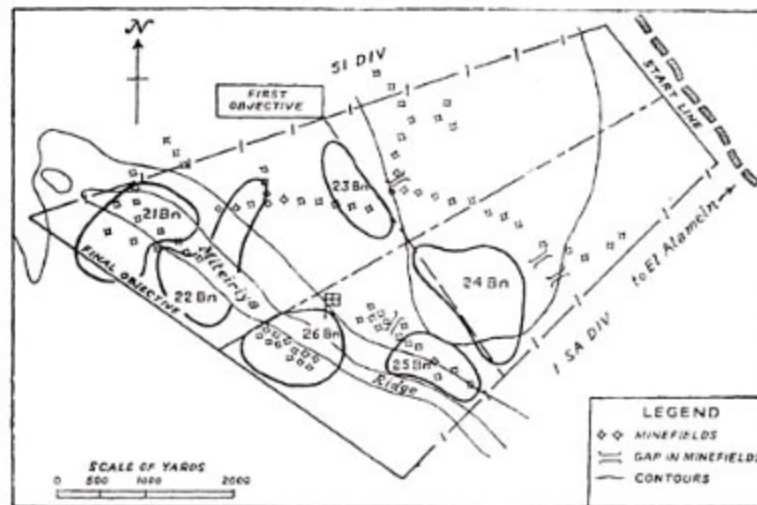
It had been decided, therefore, to attack in moonlight, the earliest feasible date being 23 October, the day before full moon. The main attack was to be made in the north, with a secondary attack in the south to pin down the enemy forces there. In the northern sector the [Miteiriya Ridge](#), a narrow feature several miles in length and about a hundred feet above sea level, and stretching from south-east to north-west, was the key to the enemy position.

The attack in the north was to be made by [30 Corps](#) using, from right to left, 9 Australian, 51 Highland, 2 New Zealand, and 1 South African Divisions. The Australian and Highland Divisions were to drive due westwards and form a northern corridor, and the New Zealand and South African Divisions were to attack in a south-westerly direction to secure the [Miteiriya Ridge](#) and establish a southern corridor through the defences. Fourth Indian Division, farther south, was to carry out a diversionary raid along [Ruweisat Ridge](#). When the corridors were formed, armoured formations were to pass through ready to meet enemy armoured counter-attack or to continue the operation to get astride the enemy communications. In any case the New Zealand Division and other infantry of [30 Corps](#), after securing the objectives, were to proceed at once, under the protection of the armour, with the methodical destruction of the enemy troops between the two corridors and, later, those on the flanks.

It was vital to the success of the whole operation that the leading armoured brigades should be right forward in their deployment area, ready to fight at first light in the morning following the attack and not be delayed or diverted by local fighting

on the way. All enemy troops, especially guns, had therefore to be thoroughly cleared from the routes and the deployment area before the arrival of the armoured brigades, also great care had to be taken to see that the vehicles of the New Zealand Division and other attacking troops did not block the armour.

The New Zealanders' main task was to capture the Miteiriya Ridge on a front of 5000 yards. The attack was to be made by 5 Brigade on the right and 6 Brigade on the left, in two phases, with 110 minutes between. In Phase I the brigades were to



5 AND 6 BRIGADE POSITIONS, DAWN 24 OCTOBER 1942

5 and 6 brigade positions, dawn 24 october 1942

attack, each with one battalion forward, to take the first objective which was 3400 yards from the start line. The second phase was to start fifty-five minutes after midnight, when the forward troops for the second objective were to cross their own start line near the first objective.

For the attack on the second objective 5 and 6 Brigades were each to leapfrog two battalions through the battalions on the first objective. Fifth Brigade would have 21 Battalion on the right and 22 Battalion on the left, and 6 Brigade 26 Battalion on the right and 25 Battalion on the left. Each of these battalions, including 25 Battalion, had one troop of six-pounders a platoon of machine guns, and a troop of [Warwickshire](#) Yeomanry under command. The tanks were to support the infantry and assist in mopping-up enemy strongpoints.

The rate of advance to the second objective was fixed at 100 yards in three

minutes, the same as for the first advance; the second objective was 1500 yards beyond the first objective.

Two companies of the [Maori Battalion](#) allotted to each brigade were kept in reserve, with the probable role of mopping-up, and the whole [Maori Battalion](#), when released from that role, was to form a reserve in the lying-up area. Twenty-third and 24th Battalions, on capturing the first objective, were to hold that position, but were to be ready to operate as reserve battalions to their brigades. On the capture of the second objective and after reorganising, the battalions concerned were to exploit success for a further 800 to 1000 yards to destroy guns and troops likely to interfere with them.

The routes forward and the 24 Battalion start line were to be marked with lights by the [Divisional Provost Company](#). In due course, as the attack progressed, units' fighting transport would be ordered forward as far as the first enemy minefield under brigade arrangements and would then be guided by unit guides.

A host of other details had to be provided for, these including signal methods and code-words, success signal (a rocket showing a large number of yellow stars) on first and final objectives, SOS signal (rocket showing three white stars with noticeable trail), infantry to tank recognition signal (red tracer fired vertically), and ground to air recognition (blue smoke, Aldis lamp letter 'G', and target landmark red smoke and Aldis lamp letter 'V').

Such, generally, was the plan for this vital attack, though before the battle it was varied in several respects.

In common with the other troops lying-up in readiness to attack, the 25th spent the daylight hours of 23 October in slit trenches which were covered with groundsheet to avoid observation from the air. It was a very trying day, with perhaps too much time for the men's thoughts to dwell on the possibilities of the coming night's attack, but at least it gave everyone a good rest after the strenuous march of the night before.

The night of the 23rd was still and clear, with a brilliant moon lighting up the landscape, and it was a great relief to the men to be able to stretch their cramped limbs and move about a little. At 9.40 p.m. the comparative calm of the night was

rudely disturbed by the crash and flash of nearly a thousand guns, which opened fire simultaneously all along the front against located enemy batteries. It was the opening of the great British offensive which had been awaited with tense expectation by friend and foe alike.

Almost all the hostile guns were silenced, for the time being, by this intense counter-battery fire which, as planned, continued for fifteen minutes, ceased, and five minutes later reopened with equal fury against the enemy forward positions when the infantry of the [Eighth Army](#) at zero hour, 10 p.m., advanced to the attack.

The gunfire was tremendous, the terrific crash and flame of the exploding shells mingling with the great thunder and flashes of the guns behind. This artillery concentration made a very deep impression on the troops and, as is always the case, it seemed that nothing could live under it. Such a result, however, can never be obtained, and the main effect is to shake and unnerve the enemy troops and keep them down in their trenches or away from their guns while the attackers behind the barrage cover the last few hundred yards. While somewhat dazed by the noise and the spectacle, the men were thrilled by this demonstration of the tremendously powerful artillery support they were to receive and they entered the attack with the greatest confidence. All artillery was under centralised control during the counter-battery fire and for seven minutes while it pounded the enemy's forward defences. The field artillery then came under the Division for the first phase of the infantry attack, while the medium artillery continued counter-battery fire.

In support of the attack the Division employed its three field regiments and six troops of 25-pounders from 1 and 10 Armoured Divisions, together with a battery of 4.5-inch guns of 69 Medium Regiment, RA, a total of 104 guns. While [4 Field Regiment](#) fired on a barrage line to help to keep the infantry on the proper line of advance, the remainder of the guns fired timed concentrations on known enemy positions in the divisional area.

The two battalions attacking the first objective—23 Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left—assembled at their start line, each with two companies of the [Maori Battalion](#) behind it, and crossing on time at 9.35 p.m. moved towards the artillery opening line 2000 yards away at the rate of 100 yards in two minutes. The infantry were able to get close to the barrage when it lifted from the foremost

enemy defences at 10.23 p.m., and then followed it as it lifted every three minutes in their advance to the first objective.

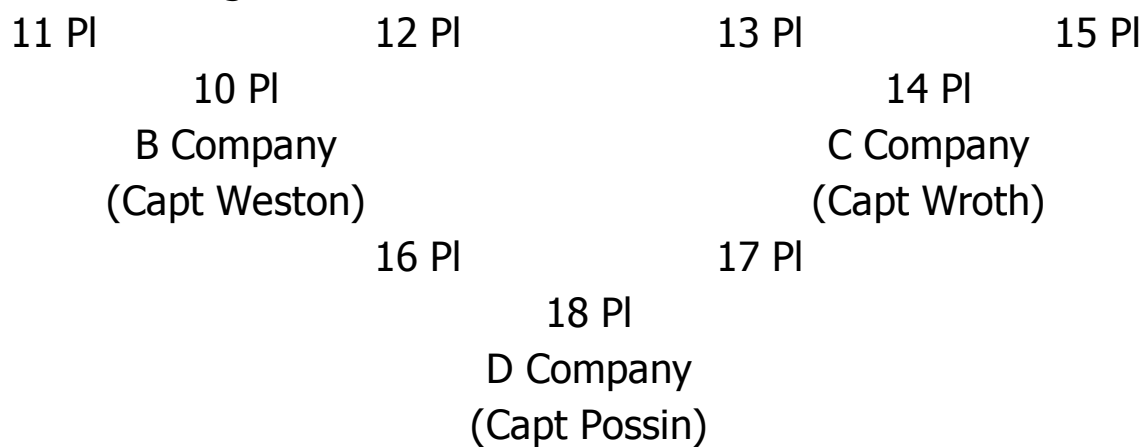
The battalions to attack the second objective—21 and 22 Battalions of 5 Brigade and 26 and 25 Battalions of 6 Brigade, in that order from right to left—left their lying-up positions at times calculated to bring them to their start line at or near the first objective in time to follow the barrage when it lifted.

Twenty-fifth Battalion (which because of the shortage of infantry had three companies only, B, C, and D) left its lying-up position at 10.50 p.m. It had about 2000 yards to go to reach the 24 Battalion start line and another 3400 yards to its own start line, where it was due to commence the attack behind the barrage at fifty-five minutes after midnight. To pass through the minefield gap just beyond the original forward defended localities, 25 Battalion narrowed its front, with C Company (Captain Wroth) leading, followed by B (Captain Weston) and D (Captain [Possin](#)¹), but did not find the blue lights which according to orders would be marking 24 Battalion's start line. Both Wroth and Weston, however, had noticed a white tape line which they agreed must have been the start line, and so, with C Company on the right, B on the left, and D in reserve, they pushed on. The companies had men detailed to pace the distance from the 24 Battalion start line, but there was now no fixed point from which to measure. Captain Wroth with C Company, the directing company, commented:

'It was difficult to know just where to expect to find the lights marking the line especially when we suddenly found ourselves enveloped in a heavy concentration of smoke. Right in the centre of this smoke the coy comdr ran direct against a Bn Provost NCO complete with light which had not been visible in the murk, the NCO being able to give explicit directions of where the other lights were placed. While the coy correctly placed itself, with 15 pl on the right, 13 on the left, and 14 in reserve, contact was established with [26 Bn](#) on our right, and whereas a moment before everyone was worried about locations, we were all set now for the big attack. Bde training a few weeks previously had proved invaluable in that the forward sections of the forward platoons knew what advancing under a barrage was and how close it was possible to keep up to the rear shells, with the result everything went according to plan and but 18 casualties were suffered, mostly from enemy shelling. After a

3840 paces advance we reached a wire marking a minefield which would appear from directions given prior to the attack to be the exact spot we were looking for as an objective. A hurried conference with B Coy Comdr who was also sure this was our objective and C Coy Comdr set fire to his success rocket, a cylindrical piece 14 inches long by 2 inches wide attached to about 4ft 6in of ½" × ½" wood which must have appeared to the enemy to be one of our secret weapons. The coy then took up a defensive layout—we had lost contact with the right neighbouring battalion during the advance and a patrol sent out to locate them contacted their Bn HQ approx 600 yds on our right flank, proving their forward elements had pushed on further than us in accordance with the layout of the enemy minefield. While returning, this patrol contacted two coys of Maoris moving up into the gap between the two battalions, and they undertook to cover the gap until first light when a fuller reconnaissance would be possible.'

Diagram Of Attack Formation 23 October 1942



B Company (Weston) had the same difficulty as C Company regarding the first start line. The company passed through the gap in the minefield, 'opening into artillery formation on the western side of the gap,' wrote Captain Weston, 'moving forward with 11 PI on the left, 12 PI on right, and 10 PI in reserve; 12 PI on right was contacting C Coy who were directing and they reported being unable to contact 26 Bn who were on their right. Consequently the attack had a tendency to drift to the right.

'After a 3000 yard advance the Coy was on the second start line passing over this at 0030 hours still not having contacted the South Africans or 26 Bn. As the Coy approached the barrage it began to lift and we followed at about 50 yds, but so far the 24th and Maoris, whom we were supposed to pass through, had not been sighted. C Coy reported that they were still unable to contact the 26th Bn and we

were unable to contact the South Africans on our left.

'Some shells were falling short causing a considerable number of casualties. Owing to the dust and smoke it was impossible to cover the front allotted to the Coy and keep contact. The attack still drifted to the right as C Coy endeavoured to contact the 26th Bn. Opposition from the enemy was slight. Single Dannert wire and booby traps were encountered. The Coy passed over several dug enemy positions, many of which were unoccupied and others showed signs of a hurried departure. Those of the enemy who were left surrendered after firing a few shots. Some were killed before having a chance to surrender. On reaching the objective at 0200 hours the Coy consolidated and dug in. No. 10 Pl passed through and exploited for about 400 yds then returned and dug in on our left rear flank. D Coy passed through later to exploit.'

D Company's part in the attack was described by Second- Lieutenant [Buchanan](#),² commanding 18 Platoon. 'For this attack D Coy was given the task of reserve coy for the Battalion and followed B and C Coys to their objectives. It was then found that the Bn was approx 400 yds to the right of their correct position. So D Coy moved over to the left to fill this gap between 25 Bn and the South Africans. While in this position the Coy came under intermittent fire from two enemy MG posts approx 600 yds forward and one on each flank. The two forward platoons (16 and 17) were sent forward to silence these guns. As a result of this local action 2-Lieut Dickson,³ 2 Sgts, and 6 ORs of D Coy were killed, also 2-Lieut [Powdrell](#),⁴ 1 Sgt, and 6 ORs were wounded, 2-Lt Powdrell later dying at ADS. In the early hours of the morning the tanks of [9 Armd Bde](#) and of [10 Corps](#) took up positions along the crest occupied by 25 Bn and engaged enemy positions and tanks. In this action 5 more ORs of D Coy were wounded.'

When his platoon commander and platoon sergeant became casualties in the attack on the machine-gun posts by 15 and 17 Platoons, Corporal [Penman](#)⁵ took over command of his platoon and, although wounded himself, was personally responsible for obtaining assistance for the wounded men. Subsequently he was awarded a bar to the Military Medal (which he won later in [Tunisia](#)) for 'his excellent leadership, devotion to duty, courage, determination, and disregard for his own safety' on [Miteiriya Ridge](#).

As indicated in these reports, 25 Battalion was about 600 yards to the right of its correct position but it was also about 800 yards short of it, having stopped on the near or eastern side of the ridge (as explained by Wroth) instead of continuing the advance to the western side to the true objective, as in fact 26 Battalion on the right had done. It was perhaps fortunate that 25 Battalion did not cross the ridge. Had it crossed it would have been in a very exposed position, with its left flank unprotected through the South Africans being unable to reach their objective, and may well have suffered severe casualties. The battalion was to be required to make another attack to place it on the objective.

By daybreak on the 24th 7 MG Platoon was in position to support 25 Battalion by indirect fire from the left flank, while 8 and 9 MG Platoons on the right between 25 and 26 Battalions helped considerably to make the brigade front secure. The situation on the New Zealand Division's front was fairly satisfactory. All of the objectives had been taken except on the left on 25 Battalion's front, but owing to delays caused by minefields very few anti-tank guns were in position. Only a few tanks of the Yeomanry had passed through into the open, but later these were withdrawn. The main concentrations of armour were still on the wrong side of the ridge and could not exploit the bridgehead which had been made in the enemy defences.

Elsewhere partial success had been achieved. The Australians had one brigade on their final objective and one brigade a thousand yards short. The Highlanders were also held up, in places well short of the objective, although 7 Black Watch was in contact with the New Zealand Division on the objective. South of the New Zealand Division [2 South African Brigade](#), on the left of 25 Battalion, did not reach the objective, which however had been secured by 3 SA Brigade on its left.

In the northern sector the armour could not get through the corridor as it was still blocked by minefields under fire from enemy strongpoints. The southern corridor through the New Zealand sector was cleared as far as [Miteiriya Ridge](#), and 9 Armoured Brigade (under the Division's command), closely followed by [8 Armoured Brigade](#), had reached the near slopes of the ridge and had some tanks forward of it, but these had heavy casualties. As the ridge itself came under artillery and anti-tank fire, the main concentrations of the armour remained behind it and engaged the

enemy at long range. On the southern flank of the [Alamein](#) line [13 Corps](#) had fulfilled its chief function of keeping the southern group of enemy armour from coming north. From the start of the offensive the Allied Air Forces gave very strong support to the ground forces.

Throughout the daylight hours of the 24th the position held by 25 Battalion was shelled from time to time and some casualties occurred. Although a great deal of enemy movement was reported, the expected enemy counter-attack did not develop, perhaps because of the array of heavy tanks close to the forward localities and the strong artillery fire. When darkness fell a patrol of twelve men from D Company moved to the south-west for 800 yards but saw no enemy, though it found an Italian 81-millimetre mortar and an anti-tank gun, both unserviceable, a small anti-aircraft gun, and some mortar ammunition; it was discovered later that the patrol had passed two well camouflaged machine-gun posts without detecting them.

The attack was resumed at 10.15 that night when 9 Armoured Brigade and the Divisional Cavalry advanced through the southern corridor, the enemy shelling and bombing the gaps in the minefield as the tanks passed through. A similar operation took place through the northern corridor. The operations were not successful. About an hour before the attack enemy bombers, attracted by a blazing truck, bombed a convoy of [8 Armoured Brigade](#) vehicles containing troops, petrol, and ammunition, which were closed up nose to tail to pass through the gap in the minefield. About twenty vehicles were set on fire and there were many casualties among the troops in them. This occurred close to 25 Battalion's forward positions, and those vehicles which were able to scatter were a real menace to the men in the slit trenches. Fortunately the battalion suffered few casualties, but all those who saw the bombing were ever afterwards most insistent that the correct distances between vehicles should be maintained at all times.

During daylight on the 25th enemy shelling by guns up to 210-millimetre (approximately 8-inch) and the bombing of guns, tanks, and transport behind the ridge were continued and caused several casualties in 25 Battalion as well as damage to a jeep, a 3-ton truck, and a two-pounder anti-tank gun. That morning C and D Companies passed back over a hundred Germans and Italians, a result of the armour's attack during the night. Throughout the day enemy tanks had been reported at various places and in the early afternoon 100 tanks, reported by [10](#)

[Armoured Division](#) to be advancing towards 25 Battalion, were shelled by the artillery.

The strong resistance to the advance of the British armour through the southern corridor indicated that it would be too costly to resume the attack there, and it had been decided to switch the offensive to the northern flank. The New Zealand Division was therefore to reorganise its position for defence. The front was a narrow one, a rarity in the experience of the Division, and so presented no difficulty. Each of the two brigades, 5th and 6th, would have two battalions forward, with the same boundaries as at present, and the tanks would be in hull-down positions on the ridge, the [Warwickshire Yeomanry](#) supporting 6 Brigade. Strong patrols, including engineers, were to be sent out to destroy enemy tanks and vehicles and to prevent damage to British ones, many of which were recoverable. Also, tanks were to probe the enemy positions to discover his strength and dispositions.

Patrols from the forward battalions of the Division reported on the night 25–26 October that enemy working parties were laying mines across the front. A patrol from 25 Battalion saw enemy tanks and a working party laying mines and engaged two mortar positions about 5000 yards forward of the ridge; a minefield in front of the left flank of the battalion was found to extend southwards from the crest of the ridge for at least 800 yards.

Early in the morning of the 26th our tanks on Miteiriya engaged enemy positions and artillery and mortars joined in. Shortly afterwards an encounter between British and enemy fighters was, as usual, watched with great interest by the men on the ground. The day, in fact, turned out to be unusually interesting. Just before noon D Company reported that enemy infantry, holding a white flag and accompanied by a tank, had approached to within a thousand yards but had gone to earth and had then been fired on by our artillery and machine guns. About the same time information was received that South African armoured cars were operating about 4000 yards south-south-east of the battalion's left flank. In the early afternoon the enemy shelled the ridge near C Company, and an hour later six enemy 800 yards forward of D Company gave signs which seemed to indicate that they wished to surrender, but they made no attempt to walk in.

That night, 26–27 October, 6 NZ Brigade and 2 SA Brigade on the left attacked

to straighten the line and gain the original objective of the attack three days before. Twenty-fifth Battalion received its orders during the afternoon of the 26th: 25 and 26 Battalions were to advance to the brigade's original objective.

With 26 Battalion on its right and South African troops on its left, 25 Battalion was to advance 800 yards, with C Company right, D centre, and B Company on the left. When the objective was secured the position was to be held with two companies forward, D Company dropping back into reserve. Success was to be exploited 200 yards ahead of the objective; each of the forward companies was to have two platoons forward and one in reserve; two six-pounder anti-tank guns and most of the two-pounders were to be well forward, and two six-pounders and the balance of the two-pounders were to be on the ridge, where the support tanks would also be in position.

The artillery barrage opened at 8 p.m. and after ten minutes began to lift forward as arranged, firing smoke before each lift.

'Arrangements were very hurried for the second attack,' said Captain Wroth, commanding C Company. 'With zero at 2000 hrs, 1945 hrs found C Coy moving back and slightly left to bring it on to the Bn start line—3 lights. No right-hand light could be found and at zero, when another terrific barrage began to fall just in front of us, contact had not been made with the troops on either flank. OC HQ Coy fortunately appeared and advised B Coy (on our left) were only a few yards away, so rather than have the barrage leave us behind, we pushed ahead, experiencing considerable difficulty with the booby-trapped minefield behind which we had sat subsequent to the first attack. We had not covered more than a quarter of the 800-yard advance, however, before prisoners began appearing in large numbers and the difficulty was to maintain momentum and the effect of the barrage and still deal with the prisoners. A man at a time was quickly detached from a section for each 20 or so prisoners but even with only a hurried search it was apparent the barrage would get away from us if we did not hurry. Instructions had been to advance 1000 yards, thus giving us an exploited area 200 yards deep but things were going so successfully Cmdr C Coy called Bn Cdr on the 18 set and advised the Coy was pushing on a little further as prisoners were still very plentiful. Another 200 yds and with the taking of prisoners the effect of the barrage [was] lost, the enemy regained heart and opened

fairly intense small-arm and mortar fire, necessitating the Coy abandoning any unnecessary attempt to get any further forward, and the order to retire was given. Withdrawing approx 400 yds a most convenient patch of sandy ground appeared, into which the Coy smartly introduced a defensive layout of slit trenches, several being recently and hastily-vacated enemy ones, including that occupied by the OC of the enemy unit.

'Casualties in this attack amounted to 15, including 2-Lt McAneny⁶ who was most unfortunate in being hit and killed by unaimed small-arms fire while consolidating. In the light of a half-moon we could see the South Africans on the left of B Coy having a grand time rounding up many prisoners, but on our right we could find no one but enemy snipers and as we found later the 26th had been held up by intensive fire.

'An interesting observation of this attack was the effective use of the 36 grenade in cleaning out covered dug-outs, full of reluctant enemy. Particularly after a complete section of a leading platoon was wiped out by a booby-trap in the initial crossing of the minefield, it was most difficult to maintain contact on a full Coy front, especially when the attack was begun with very depleted numbers—20 men comprised the Coy front, even then with very small reserves.'

For this attack D Company (Captain Possin) had 16 and 18 Platoons only, the men of 17 Platoon being in the other two platoons. After advancing 1200 paces between C and B Companies, D Company was to withdraw 600 paces and occupy the position of reserve company. The Company advanced with 18 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Buchanan) on the right and 16 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Fraser-Tytler⁷) on the left.

'No direct opposition was met with,' wrote Buchanan, 'and Italian prisoners were taken and hustled to the rear. No casualties occurred until the move back to the reserve positions when 2 Lt Fraser-Tytler and 2 ORs were wounded with mortar fire. For the rest of the night and the next day the Coy came under periodic heavy mortar fire but Capt Possin and 2 ORs wounded and 1 RAP OR were the only other casualties until the Coy was relieved by SA Bn. Total casualties for both actions:—Killed 2 Officers 8 ORs; wounded 2 Officers 21 ORs; evacuated (neurosis, etc.) 3 ORs; missing 3 ORs.'

B Company, commanded by Captain Robertshaw (vice Captain Weston, wounded on the 24th) formed up on the left of the start line with two platoons forward, 12 Platoon on the right, 11 on the left, and 10 Platoon in rear on the left flank.

'Immediately the barrage opened,' said Robertshaw, 'shorts started to fall among the company and after advancing approx 100 yds several shorts among 11 Platoon caused considerable confusion and casualties and held up the advance on the left flank. 10 and 11 Platoons rallied and again attempted to advance but enemy mortar counter-fire and booby-traps set in the minefield again caused the left flank to withdraw with several casualties. Coy HQ also suffered several casualties. Meanwhile 12 Platoon advanced under cover of the barrage and after passing through the minefield encountered several enemy A/Tk and LMG posts and sent back over a hundred prisoners. On reaching the objective the OC fired the success signal and the area was immediately very heavily mortared by the enemy, inflicting heavy casualties on 12 Platoon and wounding the Platoon Com, Lt Ward.⁸ The OC and a few survivors consolidated the position by occupying a captured enemy post. Approx one hour later a Coy of the SA Bde captured an enemy post about 100 yards to the left flank and consolidated. The Coy position was then reinforced by some of the survivors of 10 and 11 Pls.'

Fire by four enemy machine guns on the minefield gap on the crest of the ridge prevented the anti-tank guns and mortars of 25 Battalion from getting forward. One of six Sherman tanks nearby was persuaded to move to the gap to silence the machine guns and some enemy snipers. Guided by Colonel Bonifant and Major Reid⁹ (8 Field Company) through an uncleared minefield, the anti-tank guns towed by jeeps and the mortar carriers reached their positions shortly after 2 a.m. An enemy mortar with a large supply of ammunition, which was captured in front of the new forward posts, was used by the battalion against its former owners.

Shortly after 3 a.m., 27 October, lorried infantry and tanks, reported on the battalion front, and again about six hours later, enemy infantry advancing about 600 yards away, were engaged by the artillery. No attack developed. Throughout the morning all targets offering were immediately engaged by both guns and machine guns. The enemy artillery was not idle, and just before 9 a.m. Battalion

Headquarters area was heavily shelled. An enemy mortar a couple of hours later bombarded the battalion's positions and was engaged by the mortar platoon under the direction of Sergeant [Lavery](#).¹⁰ This action and the work of the mortars during the offensive is described by Sergeant [French](#):¹¹

'The Bn Mortar Pl attacked an Ite mortar hidden behind a burnt-out tank about 1000 yds away. The action continued for about two hours, and many enemy bombs dropped very close to our positions. After a while the Ites got tired of the duel and started to come in and the mortar sgt, Nelson Woods¹² from [Wellington](#), went out to collect them. A Spandau opened fire on him and he took cover. The Ites escaped but the Italian mortar was silenced....

'The [Alamein](#) attack, as far as the mortars were concerned, was a matter of being called upon at odd moments to assist the infantry or to knock out enemy mortars or gun positions. Also much assistance was given to our patrols at night by direct barrage, etc. When patrols went out with mortar support at night two mortars would go out on two carriers. These patrols would advance at night to a suitable position and wait for first light to pin-point enemy positions. The carriers would withdraw after the job had been completed.'

As was the case with each forward battalion, a section of [8 Field Company](#) with the battalion was intended to lay a minefield along the new front to give protection against the counter-attack expected at dawn. Although the officer commanding the sapper section accompanied the battalion to fix the site of the proposed minefield, heavy machine-gun and mortar fire prevented the laying of the mines.

On 27–28 October, as part of a reorganisation, 1 SA Division relieved 2 NZ Division, which (with the exception of the artillery) was withdrawn into reserve in the Alam el Onsol area south-east of the [Alamein](#) station. (The artillery was left behind to support an attack that night by 9 Australian Division farther north.)

Twenty-fifth Battalion received the warning order for the relief about noon on the 27th and later in the afternoon received orders stating that [General Freyberg](#), who though the enemy might be withdrawing, had instructed that fighting patrols from 25 and 26 Battalions were to be sent out at dusk. The patrols found little to report, though the 25 Battalion patrol captured a German and four Italians.

Shortly after midnight on 28 October the relief by the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles was completed without incident, though the two-pounder anti-tank guns were held up for a couple of hours through the relieving guns encountering soft sand. The enemy may have had some inkling of the relief as, both before and after the battalion moved, the forward localities were bombarded by mortars. Moving in MT, the troops reached Alam el Onsol, where they rested for the next two days under the command of Major Porter, Colonel Bonifant (wounded on the 24th) having been evacuated to hospital.

The battalion's casualties for the two attacks and in the period 18–29 October, as shown in the casualty lists, were: Killed—3 officers (Second-Lieutenants Dickson, McAneney and Powdrell), 23 other ranks; Died of wounds—6 other ranks; Wounded—9 officers (Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant, Captains Possin and Weston, Lieutenants Abbott, Ward, Webb, Second-Lieutenants Fraser-Tytler, Mahar and O'Connor), 115 other ranks; Prisoner-of-war—2 other ranks (1 wounded), a total of 12 officers, 146 other ranks. During that period 17 other ranks were evacuated sick; 1 officer and 8 other ranks arrived as reinforcements; and the strength of the battalion was 21 officers, 394 other ranks.

Though not known until just before Christmas, five immediate awards were made to members of the battalion for the [Miteiriya Ridge](#) operations. Colonel Bonifant was awarded the DSO, the citation stating that he commanded his battalion in the assault on [Miteiriya Ridge](#) on the night 23–24 October 'with noteworthy skill and resolution'. Although wounded in the head with a bomb splinter, he refused to leave his battalion when he heard that it would have to carry out another attack. Only when this second attack had been successfully completed and he knew that his unit would be relieved from its forward position was he willing to be evacuated. His courage throughout was outstanding. Sergeant W. K. Marshall, platoon sergeant in 12 Platoon, received the DCM; during the attack on the night 23–24 October, when his platoon commander was wounded and evacuated early in the evening, Marshall immediately took over the platoon. He continued to command it for the next eleven days. On the night 26–27 October his platoon attacked an extremely strong enemy position and captured over fifty prisoners without casualty.

Lance-Corporal [Monaghan](#),¹³ 14 Platoon, received the MM for commanding his

section with outstanding courage and complete disregard for his own personal safety throughout the offensive. Although he had received four shell-splinter wounds in his back on the morning of 27 October, he remained with his section until ordered to the RAP. After having his wounds dressed he returned to his section, although suffering great pain and unable to carry a pack.

Private [Maclean](#),¹⁴ C Company runner, was awarded the MM. During the attack on the night 23–24 October he assisted his company to consolidate quickly under very difficult conditions and very heavy enemy fire. Without orders he moved across the battalion front to locate neighbouring sub-units and to determine arcs of fire.

Private [Wrigley](#),¹⁵ Signal Platoon, who was employed as a linesman on a section of the line between rear and forward headquarters on 27 October, also received the MM. He was largely responsible for keeping the line in working order, despite mortar fire along its length, and was called on to mend frequent breaks. He also assisted wounded men returning to the RAP across the ridge.

These recitals of gallant conduct and devotion to duty illustrate the conditions under which all ranks of the battalion carried out their duties in action, and those receiving these awards, selected as they were from many others who had distinguished themselves, may be said to be representative of the gallantry and devotion to duty of the whole battalion.

From 3 p.m. on 29 October the battalion was at two hours' notice to move, and after dark the next day it moved forward by MT to relieve 2 Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, one of the battalions of 152 Brigade which was being relieved by 6 Brigade. B Company was detached to come under command of 24 Battalion and the remainder of the battalion completed the relief by midnight. The 12-mile journey was one of acute discomfort. The desert had been churned up by countless vehicles and the so-called tracks were literally rivers of the finest dust. Large numbers of vehicles were on the move, and with the tracks difficult to follow and occasional encounters with slit trenches, it was a slow, bumpy, and suffocatingly dusty ride, to the accompaniment, from 10 p.m., of a heavy artillery bombardment in support of operations by 9 Australian Division a couple of miles to the north.

The new position was a little over four miles north of that held on [Miteiriya](#)

Ridge and the foremost localities about five miles east of Tell el Eisa station. These were held by 26 Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left, with 25 Battalion in reserve two miles back, on a frontage of 1400 yards, with D Company on the right and C on the left. Sixth Brigade's task here was to hold the position for three days as a firm base for a forthcoming attack.

Spasmodic shelling and sniping were experienced in the forward positions where B Company was the reserve company of 24 Battalion. Allied aircraft were overhead most of the time but occasionally enemy aircraft got through the screen, 25 Battalion experiencing Stuka raids in the late afternoon of 31 October and after midday on 2 November. There were no casualties or damage.

On the night of the attack the forward troops were to be withdrawn sufficiently to be clear of the artillery opening line, reoccupying their positions after the reserve battalions of the attacking formations had passed through. In its brigade reserve position 25 Battalion was little affected, and its B Company had merely to stand-to while the forward companies of 24 Battalion temporarily withdrew. Captain Robertshaw, commanding B Company, gave a brief account of its experiences:

'The Company on joining the 24 Bn proceeded by MT to the forward area held by the 152 Bde and carried out the relief of the reserve company of the Camerons Bn (51 Div). The Coy Amn truck was lost in a wire entanglement and the cooks' truck on a mine on the move up. The relief was completed by 2300 hours 31 Oct.

'The days of 31 Oct and 1 Nov passed without incident, the Coy position being shelled and mortared on several occasions. At 0030 hrs 2 Nov the Coy stood-to while the forward coys of 24 Bn withdrew to get away from an artillery barrage to be laid down for an attack by the 51 Div. At 0105 hrs the attack and barrage commenced and during the night heavy fighting took place and by daylight it was found that the attack had been successful. At 1730 hrs 2 Nov the Coy received orders to march out and rejoin the Battn.'

During its attachment to 24 Battalion, B Company had had several casualties. The attack referred to by Captain Robertshaw was part of the offensive from the northern flank of the salient and was made, not by 51 Division, but by 151 Brigade of 50 Division (with the Maori Battalion under command) and 152 Brigade of 51

Division, both under command of 2 NZ Division. The start line for the attack ran north and south about 1000 yards west of the positions occupied by C and D Companies. There was a good deal of traffic through the battalion area and just to the north of it, and the several tracks that were being used were filled with the engineers' vehicles, the armour, the supporting arms and other essential transport, resembling the congestion behind [Miteiriya Ridge](#) on 23 October. Although the barrage at 1.5 a.m. was three times the weight of that given for the attack on [Miteiriya Ridge](#), the general opinion in 25 Battalion was that it was not so impressive. The attacking infantry got away to time and succeeded in capturing its final objective, but the operations of the armour beyond the infantry objective were only partially successful. Two squadrons of an armoured car regiment, the Royal Dragoons, had however achieved a notable success by getting through the bridgehead and beyond the enemy's anti-tank screen in the dawn mist; they then raided enemy communications, transport, and supply areas throughout the day, causing considerable damage and confusion, and were reported south of [El Daba](#), about 15 miles behind the enemy's lines.

If the armour went through after a successful battle with the enemy armour, 5 and 6 Brigades were to be ready to embus and, as part of the motorised New Zealand Division, to exploit success.

Further attacks were made during the night 2–3 November to get the armour to the west of the Rahman track, which ran south-south-west from Sidi Abd el Rahman through Tell el Aqqaqir and was about 9000 yards west of 25 Battalion's position; the attacks were only partly successful.

During the evening of the 2nd 6 Brigade relieved 151 Brigade at the western end of the corridor, the battalion receiving its warning order in the middle of the afternoon to relieve 8 Battalion, [Durham Light Infantry](#). Sixth Brigade's front faced west and north on two sides of the bridgehead. Twenty-fifth Battalion reached its position, about 5000 yards to the north-west, before midnight and dug in. Contact was made with 24 Battalion (which was on the right and facing north) and with 26 Battalion on the left; all three battalions and also the Maori Battalion, which was on the right of 24 Battalion and under command of 6 Brigade, were forward, 22 Battalion (of 5 Brigade) being under command as the reserve battalion.

Twenty-fifth Battalion had all three companies forward, B right, C centre, and D left, the frontage being about 500 yards, facing north-west. Attached to the battalion were one troop of 33 Battery, six medium machine guns, eight six-pounder anti-tank guns and one company of lorried infantry (both from the Rifle Brigade). The battalion's strength was very low: B Company, 3 officers, 38 other ranks, and four men from HQ Company; C Company, 2 officers, 33 other ranks, and eight from HQ Company; and D Company, 2 officers, 29 other ranks, and twenty from HQ Company.

In the morning the battalion's position was spasmodically shelled but fortunately there were no casualties. The afternoon was enlivened by the approach of a Stuka formation which was broken up by fighters and anti-aircraft fire. There was also expectation of a move that night but it was postponed till the the next day, 4 November.

The [Alamein](#) battle had in fact been won and the enemy was in full retreat, covered by an anti-tank-gun screen and rear-guards. The first indications of an enemy withdrawal came early in the morning of 3 November and the evidence increased as the day progressed. Throughout that day the enemy had held his position along the Rahman track, but an attack during the night 3–4 November by 51 Division south of Tell el Aqqaqir (about 4500 yards south-west of 25 Battalion) forced the enemy anti-tank-gun screen back to the north-west.

This opened the way for the armour of [10 Corps](#) (1, 7, and 10 Armoured Divisions) and the motorised New Zealand Division to break out to the west from the [Alamein](#) line. Tenth Corps was to swing northwards to the main road to cut off the enemy motorised forces at the bottlenecks of [Fuka](#) and [Matruh](#) while [30 Corps](#) was to maintain contact with the enemy on its front. Thirteenth Corps in the south was to clear up and destroy the enemy in its area.

The New Zealand Division could not, of course, concentrate and move as a formed body from the forward localities, but would have to move through the breach in the enemy defences in a single line of vehicles and then take up its customary desert formation. [Fuka](#) was about 60 miles away and care was taken that the Division was more or less self-contained in case the supply line was interrupted. Eight days' water and rations, 360 and 200 rounds of ammunition for each 25-pounder and medium gun respectively, and petrol for 400 miles were carried, and

arrangements were also made for supplies to be landed on beaches should that be necessary.

Shortly after midday, 4 November, the motorised New Zealand Division, with [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) and a composite regiment, the remnant of [9 Armoured Brigade](#), under command, was sent on a wide sweep to the south to operate to the east and south-east from [Sidi Ibeid](#) area (about 14 miles to the south-west) to block the tracks on the northern side of the [Qattara Depression](#). The orders were amended, however, so that on reaching [Sidi Ibeid](#) the Division would advance north-westwards to the [Fuka](#) escarpment to block the enemy retreat through the gap where the road and railway crossed the escarpment.

After passing through the enemy defences, the Division assembled two miles east of Tell el Aqqaqir, a very complicated and difficult movement as formations and units were widely separated and a good many of them were in positions on the battlefield. There was much congestion, with clouds of dust. Fortunately enemy aircraft were unable to take advantage of the wonderful target presented. Throughout the movement the armour and other troops provided a protective screen against any enemy enterprise.

Sixth Brigade moved last, after its relief by [154 Brigade](#), and reached the divisional deployment area in the evening of 4 November. The leading troops of the Division had already left the area during the afternoon and by 5 p.m., before 25 Battalion had started to move, had halted for the night in the El Agramiya area, 15 miles south of [Daba](#) and 18 miles south-west of the deployment area, leading the battalion by a little over 20 miles by the route taken.

As was to be expected, the formations of the Division were miles apart, scattered along the line of advance as darkness fell. Difficulty was experienced in guiding units into the concentration area, Very lights and radio-telephony being used to accomplish this. The move was not completed without some contact with the enemy: [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) overran an enemy position near [Sidi Ibeid](#) and captured 200 prisoners and twelve anti-tank guns; Tactical Headquarters, 2 NZ Division, came under some shellfire; 5 Brigade was twice attacked from the air without casualties and, after reaching the concentration area, its tail was attacked by some escaping Germans and Italians. About fifty casualties resulted.

Meanwhile 25 Battalion, relieved at 2 p.m. by two companies of the [Black Watch](#) and moving off in the early evening, travelled all night and halted for breakfast near the divisional concentration area. It had been a rough and dusty journey, with many delays and much digging and pushing to extricate vehicles from the many patches of soft sand. The route had been marked by the [Divisional Provost Company](#) with diamond signs on iron pickets and with green lights. These diamond signs were destined to show, at about 700 yards' intervals, the way to [Tripoli](#), 1400 miles to the west.

There were many signs of a defeated enemy in destroyed tanks, guns and vehicles, some of the last still burning, and here and there were groups of prisoners marching east, some under escort, others with large flags and no escort, but controlled by their acceptance of utter defeat. The Italians generally were rather buoyant and anxious to please, the Germans sullen. Salvage parties were busy recovering knocked-out British tanks.

Sixth Brigade had now reached the rear of the Division, having arrived shortly after the attack on the tail of 5 Brigade had taken place and being guided by a blazing ammunition vehicle. The leading formations of the Division had been held in the [Agramiya](#) area; and with the concentration more or less complete a little before dawn on the 5th, the advance towards the escarpment west of [Fuka](#) was resumed. Well dispersed in desert formation, 25 Battalion moved on about 9 a.m. until, some four hours later, the advance was held up by strong resistance from the high ground eight miles south of [Fuka](#). A minefield extending some miles to the south was reported there but on investigation was found to be at least partly dummy. A gap was made farther south and the leading troops of the Division passed through, though the enemy covered the gap with artillery fire and it was necessary to deploy the artillery to assist the passage. The approaches to the main road were strongly defended.

During the morning enemy reconnaissance aircraft had appeared and were engaged by anti-aircraft fire, and a little after midday two fighters had attacked 5 Brigade without result. Twenty-fifth Battalion was not disturbed in any way and had little knowledge of what was happening, though it could see the enemy shelling in the west and south-west early in the afternoon. [Fuka](#) lay about 12 miles to the

north-west, and the battalion, moving on again at dusk, covered another five miles before halting for the night.

At daylight next morning the Division advanced on [Baggush](#) with [9 Armoured Brigade](#) leading, followed later in the morning by 6 Brigade. Apart from a screen provided by the Divisional Cavalry for [9 Armoured Brigade](#), the remainder of the Division did not move till later in the day. Before moving, however, 6 Brigade was engaged in a small action. Just before first light, about 7 a.m., a hostile column, including four German armoured cars, a 50-millimetre gun, twenty captured 3-ton trucks, and several other vehicles, suddenly opened fire and met with immediate retaliation. Guns from 34 Anti-Tank Battery of the [Divisional Reserve Group](#), firing from their laager position, knocked out a Scammel, a tank transporter, a 3-ton truck, and a motor-cycle and side-car, and a chase by Vickers guns of 3 MG Company, two-pounders of 26 Battalion, and carriers of 25 Battalion resulted in the capture of 400 or more prisoners (mostly Italians but including about 100 Germans of 90 Light Division) and two 3-ton trucks. Fifty men of 22 Armoured Brigade who had been taken prisoner the previous evening were released and no New Zealand casualties were reported—a very satisfactory affair, which Captain Robertshaw, commanding B Company, witnessed:

‘During stand-to at first light 6-11-42 a few bursts of LMG fire and a lot of confused shouting was heard about a thousand yards to the left of the Battn lager. B Coy and Lieut Mouat's section of 2-pr A Tk guns moved 200 yards to the flank and occupied fire positions. Subsequent inquiries revealed that the noise was made by a party of Italians, who had been cut off, capturing a small English LAD unit in order to use their transport to break through. When large numbers of men were seen running and climbing on trucks and moving westward,



fire was opened, **26 Bn** doing likewise. Numbers of the enemy were killed and wounded and several of the **RASC** personnel made their escape. Some of the enemy however got away westwards. During the next three hours several bodies of the enemy came in and surrendered.'

For the move on **Baggush** **25 Battalion** was ordered to pass through the gap in the minefield 13 miles south-south-west of **Fuka**, and then proceed 22 miles on a bearing practically north-west to the top of the **Baggush** escarpment. Moving off at 10.45 a.m., the battalion passed through the minefield half an hour later, progress being very slow because of a traffic jam at the gap. Heavy rain commenced to fall early in the afternoon, just as the battalion approached the telephone line four miles south of the escarpment, and continued for the remainder of the day and throughout the night. As will be seen, this rain was to have a very important effect on the operations and for the enemy-was to be literally one of the 'fortunes of war'.

The day's journey ended at 7 p.m., eight miles south-west of **Baggush** and five miles short of the escarpment, when the battalion settled down for the night. The New Zealand Divisional Cavalry and **9 Armoured Brigade**, which had preceded **6 Brigade** and had seen no sign of the enemy at the **Baggush Box**, had been ordered to push on to the west; after difficulties due to the escarpment and the rain, they were halted, though somewhat widely dispersed, three miles south-west of Sidi Haneish and about four miles to the north of **25 Battalion**.

The remainder of the Division had spent the morning on the high ground south of **Fuka** and in the early afternoon moved off to the north-west. Much difficulty was experienced in negotiating the sodden desert which the heavy rain was rapidly transforming into a bog. The Division had instructions to see that the landing

grounds in the [Baggush](#) area and the coastal strip in the vicinity were clear of the enemy and so available to the [RAF](#); another task was to clear the enemy from between [Baggush](#) and [Charing Cross](#) (the road junction south-west of [Matruh](#) and about 30 miles north-west of 25 Battalion).

[Baggush](#) and [Sidi Haneish](#) were found to be clear and by nightfall 5 Brigade was halted, bogged down, about four miles to the south-west of 25 Battalion, while the armoured formations were generally to the west of [Sidi Haneish](#). Five miles to the west of the battalion, [7 Armoured Division](#) had during the afternoon been engaged with enemy tanks and at dusk fighting was still proceeding.

Dawn on 7 November found the desert a quagmire after all-night rain; the whole Division was bogged and so, too, were the supply vehicles some miles back. Without petrol, quite apart from the impossible state of the going, the Division could not move. It was a most unpleasant day, the frustration of the high hopes, or indeed of the certainty of cutting the enemy line of retreat, accentuating the gloomy conditions. But Private Hawkins found some humour to relieve the gloom. 'We had something to grin about,' wrote Hawkins. 'With all the trucks potentially bogged, we stood listening to the [BBC](#)-"Rommel is in full flight for the Egyptian border with the NZers in hot pursuit"'.

The bad weather also hampered the operations of the Desert [Air Force](#), but fighters patrolled the roads between [Matruh](#) and [Sidi Barrani](#) and engaged various targets, including a landing ground, a formation of dive-bombers, and a number of transport planes, and bombers continued to attack transport at night.

On 8 November the weather cleared and the battalion received its petrol and supplies. An order early in the day required 6 Brigade to attack [Matruh](#) from the west and to occupy it, but [1 Armoured Division](#) had entered the town at 9 a.m. Following 26 Battalion, 25 Battalion moved off in the morning and a little before noon formed up with the remainder of the brigade, in desert formation, before proceeding to the concentration area. Next morning, after the leading armour of the Division had passed through, the brigade headed for [Matruh](#), 25 Battalion following Brigade Headquarters, but was halted an hour later to allow other formations of the Division to pass in single file through a minefield gap. This caused a delay of about six hours, and after a short run the brigade halted for the night. During the evening the

battalion Transport Officer and eighteen men who had been missing since the night move of the 4th rejoined the battalion.

The following morning, 10 November, the minefield was crossed in single file and the Eastern Barracks in [Matruh](#) were occupied. The rest of the day was spent in settling in, cleaning up, and, of course, swimming from the very attractive beaches. There was much work to do in [Matruh](#). A great deal of cleaning up was necessary and considerable quantities of foodstuffs and other stores were salvaged. The battalion also assisted in unloading trains at the railhead and ships arriving in the small port. A little routine training, including route-marching, was carried out and reinforcements of two officers (Captain Weston and Lieutenant [Finlay](#) ¹⁶) and fifty-three other ranks, mostly men who had been evacuated to hospital, were absorbed into the unit.

From 29 October to 9 November the only casualties suffered by the battalion were 12 men wounded and 3 officers and 27 other ranks evacuated sick; reinforcements of 6 officers and 83 other ranks had been received, making the unit strength 25 officers and 435 other ranks. Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant, evacuated wounded on 28 October, rejoined the battalion on 19 November.

The Division (less 6 Brigade) had experienced little difficulty in its advance, the first real resistance being encountered at the formidable [Halfaya Pass](#), which was captured by 21 Battalion in a surprise attack before daybreak on 11 November, about 600 prisoners and many vehicles and guns being taken at a cost of one man killed and one wounded. The Division found an amazing congestion of traffic on the main road from Sidi Barrani, especially at the foot of the pass, and it was fortunate that the enemy air force was in no condition to attack it. [Menastir](#), six miles north of [Sidi Azeiz](#), was reached on 12 November. There the pursuit by the New Zealand Division ended and was continued across [Cyrenaica](#) towards [El Agheila](#) by other forces.

During the period spent at [Matruh](#) there was a good deal of uncertainty as to when the brigade would rejoin the rest of the Division which had halted at [Bardia](#), but on 20 November the brigade began to leave just after midday, with 25 Battalion, followed by 19 LAD, at the rear of the column.

The Siwa road was followed for 20 miles to a point where a telephone line from the west joined the [Siwa- Matruh](#) line. Here desert formation was adopted and the brigade column of 502 vehicles, carrying 2700 men, moved off to the west for a further 15 miles before closing to the usual close interval for the night. Next day 85 miles were covered and the night was spent near [Conference Cairn](#), 28 miles south of [Sollum](#). The divisional area near [Bardia](#) was reached the following afternoon, 25 Battalion's bivouac area being in the vicinity of Sidi Azeiz.

¹ [Maj G. A. W. Possin](#), m.i.d.; [Palmerston North](#); born [Samoa](#), 6 Jul 1914; civil servant; wounded 26 Oct 1942.

² [Lt T. C. Buchanan](#); [Waikino](#); born NZ 23 Aug 1907; motor trimmer.

³ [Lt I. R. J. Dickson](#); born [Stratford](#), 10 Apr 1909; grocer; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

⁴ 2 [Lt R. J. Powdrell](#); born NZ 1 Jan 1912; farmer; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

⁵ [Sgt W. Penman](#), MM and bar; born NZ 17 Jan 1909; printer's machinist; wounded 24 Oct 1942; killed in action 30 Nov 1943.

⁶ 2 [Lt A. I. McAneney](#); born NZ 9 Apr 1918; clerk; killed in action 26 Oct 1942.

⁷ 2 [Lt H. B. Fraser-Tytler](#); [Wanganui](#); born [Blenheim](#), 3 Feb 1919; clerk; wounded 26 Oct 1942.

⁸ [Lt R. A. Ward](#); [Hawera](#); born [Eltham](#), 18 Apr 1917; cheesemaker; wounded 26 Oct 1942.

⁹ [Lt-Col H. M. Reid](#), MC and bar, m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Auckland](#), 21 Mar 1904; civil engineer; [OC 6 Fd Coy](#) Jun-Aug 1942; [8 Fd Coy](#) Aug-Dec 1942; [NZ Forestry Gp \(UK\)](#) Jul-Oct 1943; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. 16

Dec 1942; released, Tripoli, 23 Jan 1943.

¹⁰ Sgt N. K. Laverty; born NZ 8 Oct 1917; Regular soldier; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

¹¹ Sgt T. B. French, m.i.d.; Cunninghams, Feilding; born NZ 17 Jun 1907; farmer.

¹² Cpl N. T. Wood; born New Plymouth, 26 Feb 1917; enameller; killed in action 28 Mar 1943.

¹³ Lt H. J. Monaghan, MM; Eketahuna; born Eketahuna, 24 Jul 1918; labourer; three times wounded.

¹⁴ L-Cpl J. R. Maclean, MM; Whakatane; born NZ 2 Mar 1919; bank clerk; now Rev. John Maclean.

¹⁵ S-Sgt F. R. Wrigley, MM; Wellington; born Canada, 5 Feb 1919; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

¹⁶ Maj J. Finlay, MC; Feilding; born NZ 31 Jan 1916; clerk.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 8 – ADVANCE TO TUNISIA

CHAPTER 8

Advance to Tunisia

The battalion remained in its [Sidi Azeiz](#) bivouac till 4 December, spending the interval in training, reorganisation, and recreation. No time was lost in levelling, an area for a parade and sports ground. A series of inter-unit rugby, soccer, and hockey matches was played throughout the Division; athletics, baseball, boxing, and wrestling competitions were also organised. As usual, various working parties were required and 25 Battalion sent troops to [Bardia](#) to work on the wharves and trucks to carry supplies from [Bardia](#) to [Tobruk](#). To ease the difficult supply problem captured Italian rations were issued to the battalion, an unpopular innovation because of the surfeit of macaroni.

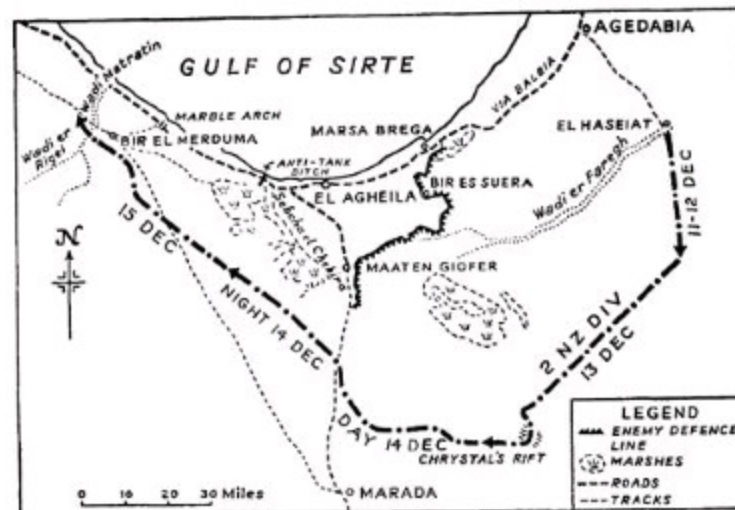
On 2 December reinforcements of one officer and 66 other ranks arrived and a rearrangement of officers took place. Major Hutchens, with Captain Weston as second-in-command, was appointed to command A Company, Captain D. A. Wilson to command B Company, Major W. R. K. [Morrison](#)¹ to command D Company, while Captain Wroth retained command of C Company.

Two days later the Division moved westwards to join other British forces concentrating opposite the enemy's Mersa Brega- [Agheila](#) position 350 miles away. Except for its tracked vehicles (which were carried in transporters along the main road) 25 Battalion travelled in the rear of 6 Brigade along the Trigh [Capuzzo](#), passing the battlefields of [Point 175](#) and [Sidi Rezegh](#) on the way to the first night's halt at [Ed Duda](#). Although there were now in the battalion few survivors of those battles, all ranks knew of the gallant conduct of their battalion in the fierce fighting which took place there almost exactly a year previously. Their pride in the battalion was tempered by recollections of the casualties, to which attention had been drawn six days before when a detachment visited the battlefield to repair the graves.

Another historic battlefield of a later campaign, [Bir Hacheim](#), where French forces had conducted a very gallant defence, was passed the following day. On the fifth day of the journey the battalion reached the vicinity of [El Haseiat](#), which lay about 50 miles east of the enemy position. The country traversed during the journey was for the greater part flat desert sparsely covered by a light scrub, which

thickened a little after the first hundred miles. The going generally was good and, except for a few showers at [Sidi Azeiz](#), the weather had been fine though the nights were cold.

The enemy position at [Agheila](#) was a strong one, with the sea on the northern and salt marshes on the southern flank,



LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

left hook at el agheila

beyond which the desert was soft, with many sand drifts. A very wide detour would be necessary to outflank the enemy. On two previous occasions, after the enemy had occupied this position at the end of long retreats, he had reacted with highly successful counter-attacks, the recollection of which imposed some degree of caution on the British forces. Since then the defences had been considerably improved, and minefields which included Teller mines and thermos bombs (the latter first encountered by New Zealand troops at [Baggush](#) in 1940, when they were dropped by aircraft) were now extensive. Four hundred and fifty miles from the nearest supply port— [Tobruk](#)—

the British forces which could be maintained in the forward area were strictly limited and the dumps of ammunition, stores, and supplies required for an offensive could not be completed before mid-December.

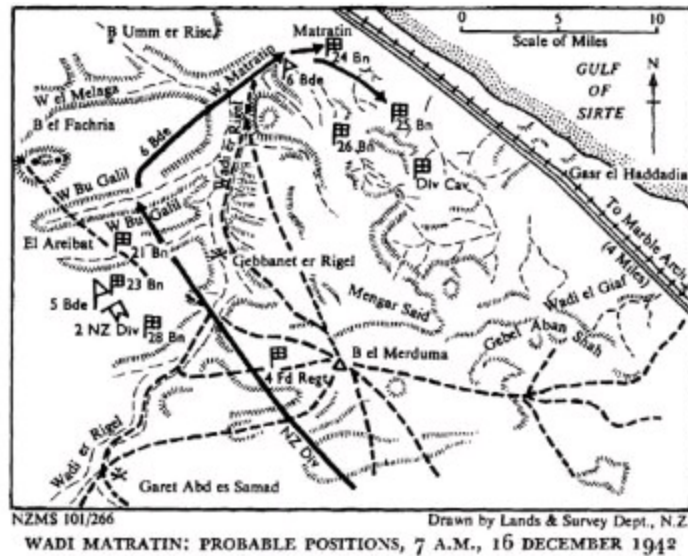
Bluff and manoeuvre on the enemy's southern flank, which General Montgomery thought might possibly frighten the enemy into country where he could be more

easily attacked, had had little effect. The Army Commander therefore decided to adopt a plan, previously discussed and studied, for destroying the enemy in his present positions. The New Zealand Division's part in this was a wide outflanking movement to the south and west, to cut the coastal road well to the west of [Agheila](#), while 51 (Highland) Division attacked the [Marsa Brega](#) locality and [7 Armoured Division](#) operated in the centre at Bir es Suera. The plan depended upon finding a suitable route for the New Zealand Division and on concealing the outflanking move.

After a reconnaissance by a patrol of [11 Hussars](#), a route was found and marked, though it required the use of bulldozers at Chrystal's Rift, a sandy depression about eight miles in length, some 80 miles south-west of [El Haseiat](#).

On 11 December the Division, with 4 Light Armoured Brigade (3 RHA, KDG, Royals, Greys, KRRC²) under command, set off southwards on the first stage of its 'left hook', to give it its popular name. Twenty-fifth Battalion was the right forward unit in 6 Brigade's desert formation and finished the first day's run of 40 miles in four and a quarter hours. The following afternoon 6 Brigade Group and 4 Light Armoured Brigade moved to the south-west ahead of the rest of the Division in order to be ready to cross Chrystal's Rift early the next day and so reduce the delay there. Rain that night laid the dust and also improved the going, enabling the Rift to be crossed with less difficulty than had been anticipated, though the rougher country and the reduction to a three-column front did impose some delay. A few miles after crossing the Rift the route turned to the west and, after another 40 miles, to the north-west. The column was now deep in the desert, 70 miles south of [El Agheila](#). There had been no sign of enemy aircraft, but a report received on the third day of the movement stated that the enemy had withdrawn from his forward positions and was being followed up by the British forces.

Before dawn on the fourth day the carriers rejoined 25 Battalion. There was a very heavy fog when the march was resumed after breakfast. 'A great sight when things cleared a bit,' wrote Corporal Wakeling, 'as a real little army was moving forward over the miles of sand; tanks, trucks, armoured cars, jeeps, ambulances, and guns of all descriptions.' From further reports it was clear that the enemy was now in full retreat. Unfortunately, the Division was unable to push right through to cut the line of retreat as in the afternoon a four-hour halt had to be made to replenish with petrol. That night the march was



wadi matratin: probable positions, 7 a.m., 16 december 1942

continued in the moonlight until 11 p.m., at which hour 25 Battalion was about 20 miles west of [Sidi Tabet](#) and 30 miles south-west of [El Agheila](#). It had been a long and tiring day and very cold after the sun went down, but the going was good. During the late evening the flash of gunfire was visible to the north-east, where 20 miles away British armour had encountered the enemy on the Giofer road, which earlier in the day the battalion had crossed 15 miles farther to the south. There had still been no sign of enemy aircraft, but [Desert Air Force](#) fighter sweeps were much in evidence now that the column was approaching the coastal area.

On the fifth day, 15 December, while the Division continued its north-westerly advance, more or less parallel to the coast, the enemy rearguard held [Marble Arch](#) and other positions to the east, covering the withdrawal of his main forces. Instead of following the original plan to get on the high ground overlooking [Marble Arch](#), the Division was diverted to Bir el Merduma with the intention of cutting the coastal road farther west. After many halts in the morning, 25 Battalion travelled steadily till 4 p.m., when 6 Brigade turned to the north to cut the road. Through an error in navigation there was some confusion throughout the Division regarding the actual position that had been reached, and it transpired that 6 Brigade was west of Wadi er Rigel instead of east of it at Bir el Merduma.

Twenty-fifth Battalion followed the leading troops of the Brigade Group northwards from ridge to ridge across broken country until dusk, when it closed up

for a night move. The brigade sent carriers off to the north-east to reconnoitre to the road, which was thought to be about four miles away. On contact being lost with these carriers, others were despatched, the brigade advancing in bounds, a mile at a time, and maintaining touch by wireless. Another error in navigation during this phase swung the force farther to the east; the country became very difficult, wadis with soft damp ground at the bottom were encountered, and with a half-moon obscured by cloud, visibility was poor. Moving 'by fits and starts', 25 Battalion at the rear followed in its place in the column as best it could, the drivers having an unenviable task and the men in the trucks a disagreeable ride. Inevitably in all units touch was lost temporarily with some of the vehicles and support weapons.

Eventually, after a further seven miles had been traversed, Colonel Bonifant and other commanding officers accompanied Brigadier Gentry on a forward reconnaissance in three carriers. On reaching a ridge about 1200 yards away the party was fired on at close range, losing the leading carrier and suffering several casualties. Twenty-fourth Battalion was ordered to attack the ridge and 25 Battalion to extend the frontage of attack to the east; after capturing the position the battalions were to dig in and get their anti-tank weapons sited before daylight. Each of the two battalions had under command a troop of anti-tank guns and a platoon of machine guns. Twenty-sixth Battalion was to be in reserve and [8 Field Company](#) was to block the coastal road and its verges with mines.

Some delay ensued while the confusion amongst the vehicles was straightened out. Twenty-fifth Battalion was off its trucks a little after midnight (15 – 16 December) and, with C and D Companies forward and B Company in reserve, moved 2000 yards almost due east and took up a position overlooking the road. At the same time 24 Battalion advanced against the ridge. There was some enemy shelling during the advance but 25 Battalion made no actual contact with the enemy. Before dawn the engineers had laid a minefield on the battalion's right flank, which was likely to be exposed to tank attack by enemy forces retiring from the east. Captain Matthews, with the battalion carriers, moved towards the coastal road and reported that the enemy in three columns was retiring westwards. Targets on the road were engaged by our artillery.

On 24 Battalion's front, to the left of 25 Battalion, it was seen, when daylight came, that a ridge 500 yards to the north obscured a view of the road which, instead

of being close to the position as expected, was over 3000 yards away. An attempt by 24 Battalion to occupy this ridge was forestalled by enemy tanks. There was also a little enemy activity on a hill to the west of Brigade Headquarters, from which the enemy would gain observation over the transport vehicles of the brigade. This situation was dealt with by the reserve battalion and the artillery.

There was little information available regarding the strength and whereabouts of enemy forces to the east of the Division, though about the time 25 Battalion moved forward to occupy its position, a concentration of enemy vehicles with tanks south-east of Merduma was reported to be moving to the south-west. This caused a stir in the Divisional Administrative Group, which had already moved back ten miles, and caused it to retire a further ten miles to the south-east. Other reports indicated that enemy armoured forces were still to the east of the Division. To meet a possible attack from that quarter, [General Freyberg](#) concentrated his tanks in readiness to push in front or to the right of the Division and arranged for 5 Brigade to reduce the very wide gap that existed between it and 6 Brigade.

Enemy columns including tanks were reported on 5 Brigade's front on the morning of 16 December. From the evidence since available it seems certain that [15 Panzer Division](#), which was to the east of 2 NZ Division, probed at various points to ascertain the dispositions of the New Zealand forces and then, moving south of 6 Brigade, escaped in a north-westerly direction, between 5 and 6 Brigades. Other enemy columns, including [21 Panzer Division](#), escaped along the coastal road.

In the early afternoon C Company had the misfortune to lose a truck in the minefield on the battalion's right flank, Lieutenant [May](#)³ and three men ([McPhillips](#),⁴ [Thompson](#),⁵ and [Woolford](#)⁶) being injured. About the same time two Germans were brought to Battalion Headquarters. Otherwise all was quiet and only an occasional enemy vehicle was passing along the coastal road in front of 25 Battalion. A little later orders were received to move back to the vehicles and rejoin the brigade en route to the Division ten miles back. Just before the vehicles moved off, a German tank was destroyed by the anti-tank guns attached to the battalion and three Germans, who had abandoned their tank but offered fight, were captured by Major Morrison of D Company. Another German was taken by C Company.

The enemy was now reported to be holding [Nofilia](#), 35 miles to the north-west,

and the following morning (17 December) the Division advanced in that direction via the desert route with the intention of passing south of the village and cutting the road beyond. As the battalion passed to the south of [Nofilia](#) along the divisional axis, [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) and the Divisional Cavalry were in action nearby and the men were interested to see men and children from some bedouin tents in the vicinity standing around, apparently wondering what it was all about. After travelling 41 miles in six hours, the battalion halted at 4.30 p.m. about eight miles south-west of [Nofilia](#).

In the meantime 5 Brigade a couple of hours earlier had passed through to the lead and had turned north to endeavour to cut the coastal road about 12 miles west of [Nofilia](#). It encountered considerable opposition from an enemy covering force and took up a position 2500 yards from the road, but was unable to cross the road itself. Sixth Brigade Group occupied positions south-west of the village to assist [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) to contain the garrison there, and two batteries of [6 Field Regiment](#) provided a screen of guns to guard the brigade against attacks by tanks. Twenty-fifth Battalion established a perimeter defence near where it had halted on the outskirts of the Brigade Group, with D Company (Major Morrison) on the right flank, C Company (Captain Wroth) in rear, and B Company (Captain Wilson) in rear of [6 Field Regiment](#). A Company (Major Hutchens) was in reserve.

During the night (17 – 18 December) further attempts by 5 Brigade to cut the road failed, and a couple of hours after daylight it was found that the enemy had gone, apparently escaping along the main road and also by a track nearer the coast. According to a captured German officer, the strength of the German garrison at [Nofilia](#) had been about 2500 men with four 88-millimetre guns, 32 anti-tank guns, and 32 tanks. Once again the enemy had escaped the trap.

The rapid clearing of various airfields and landing grounds for use by [Desert Air Force](#) fighters was again a responsibility of the New Zealand Division, a vital task as the fighters, operating from forward positions, could protect [Benghazi](#) and ease the most difficult supply problem. The airfield at Merduma was being cleared by New Zealand engineers, and when it was found that the enemy had gone from [Nofilia](#), two sections of carriers of 25 Battalion under Captain Matthews escorted [8 Field Company](#) to [Nofilia](#) airfield for a similar task, returning to the battalion the following

day.

A stage had now been reached when it was necessary for [Eighth Army](#) to pause for a time while the divisions were brought up to strength and sufficient reserves of ammunition, petrol, stores, and supplies of all kinds accumulated. For this reason a plan for the New Zealanders to seize a gap near the [Tamet](#) airfield, 100 miles to the west, was not proceeded with, and after a few days of uncertainty, which affected all units, 25 Battalion was able to settle down for a rest period until 3 January. To guard against any enemy enterprise, 5 Brigade occupied a covering position to the west of [Nofilia](#) and the Divisional Cavalry provided a screen on the divisional front.

Four days before Christmas 6 Brigade, with the exception of 24 Battalion which followed a day later, moved about 20 miles to an area astride the main road eight miles north-west of [Nofilia](#), adopting the brigade twenty-four column desert formation before digging in. Twenty-fifth Battalion was north of the road, with 26 Battalion behind and Brigade Headquarters and (later) 24 Battalion to the south of the road. It was a beautifully fine day for this change, which brought the battalion within easy reach of the coast, and all ranks looked forward to a clean-up and then, Christmas. The camp and sports grounds were improved, football was played, and a compulsory bathing parade was held, compulsory, presumably, because the weather was bitterly cold. The men did not enjoy a march to the beach in the afternoon of the 22nd. One comment read:

'Bitterly cold morning—route march to the beach at 1.30 and after two hours of plodding through mud and slush arrived at the sea wet through with perspiration and mud to our knees. A great dip in the Meddy though a bit on the chilly side. What a march home! Letters.'

The water supply situation at [Nofilia](#) was difficult as the enemy had polluted or destroyed the wells, and for a few days, until the engineers had remedied matters, the men were on a very meagre issue, the only available water coming nearly 500 miles by road from [Tobruk](#), via a supply point at [Marble Arch](#). On Christmas Eve the companies marched to the beach and had lunch there before returning to camp where, to the delight of all, a large parcel mail awaited them. Christmas Day was fine but appropriately cold for the fare to come. After a church service in the morning a sports meeting which followed was enlivened by an American pilot, who flew over

the battalion with his aircraft upside down and had the men guessing what sort of plane he was flying. The American pilots indulged in a good deal of low-flying over the New Zealanders' bivouacs: 'These Yanks will hit a man's bivvy one of these days,' wrote one man, 'as they fly so low and put the breeze up us when we don't see them coming.'

The men's Christmas dinner, the third away from home, was held at midday. Great efforts had been made to provide Christmas fare and make the day a memorable one. Excellent fresh white bread, a great luxury in the desert, was provided by the New Zealand Field Bakery, which had been brought up to [Nofilia](#). Stores for the occasion, ordered some months previously, came forward over the hundreds of miles from the [Nile Delta](#) in time to be distributed for Christmas, 25 Battalion's order for beer, cigarettes, and foodstuffs being collected two days previously. New Zealand ASC transport brought up the Christmas mail which, for the whole Division, included 60,000 parcels. A general distribution of a bottle of beer, fifty cigarettes, a National Patriotic Fund parcel (of tinned fruit, cake, and other gifts), and a rum issue was made to every man of the battalion. The dinner itself was impressive and reflected great credit on all concerned in its provision, especially the cooks, who overcame all the difficulties of cooking in the desert and prepared a splendid meal. The menu included turkey, fowl, roast pork, baked and boiled potatoes, peas, apple sauce, plum pudding with sauce, and nuts. Colonel Bonifant visited the men at their meals to wish them the season's greetings, while the officers waited on their men and had their own meal in the evening.

The men's evening meal was a very good one, the rum issue which followed it providing just the finishing touch required. Purchases from Regimental Funds and private parcels supplemented the excellent Christmas fare, which was doubly appreciated by men who for months had lived on plain desert rations, often prepared under very difficult conditions. To illustrate what a real achievement it was to bring all these Christmas supplies forward over the great distances involved, [General Freyberg](#), when speaking to one unit said: 'It would take two tons of petrol to bring three tons of beer from the Delta to [Nofilia](#)'.

Rain fell during the evening and Boxing Day was very cold. Work and training were resumed immediately. A landing ground at [Sidi Azzab](#), 40 miles to the west, had to be prepared for use and the three battalions of the brigade sent off that day

eleven officers and 300 men under Major Morrison of 25 Battalion to do a week's construction work there. 'Normal army rations for the working party were augmented by the gazelle (the N. African antelope) chased and shot by parties of soldiers in light vehicles,' commented Major Morrison. Throughout Boxing Day the monotony of the usual desert scene was broken by the advance of [7 Armoured Division](#) along the road near the battalion and the long columns of tanks, guns, and vehicles of all kinds made an impressive sight.

Training and recreation filled the last days of December. Parties of men attended the Corps school of mine-clearing and patrolling and a composite platoon represented the battalion in a film of the recent advance which was being produced at [Nofilia](#) by the New Zealand Film Unit.

Since the battalion had left [Matruh](#) on 20 November there had been few casualties: one man had died of wounds and one officer (Lieutenant May) and five other ranks had been wounded.

Sunday, the third day of the New Year, was most unpleasant. There was a gale on shore and a severe electrical storm a short distance out in the [Mediterranean](#). The few very large drops of rain which fell were insufficient to lay the dust and a cold dust-storm raged. More rain which fell in the afternoon reduced the dust but the wind and low temperatures continued to make conditions very uncomfortable. The following day was even worse, a very cold sandstorm raging as the Division concentrated to the south of [Nofilia](#) and 25 Battalion marched (on foot) to the new area, a distance of 17 miles over rough country. During the march and just after midday, General Montgomery watched the troops go by and later addressed all the officers of 6 Brigade Group; he congratulated the brigade on its part in the recent operations, gave an indication of his plans for the future, and showed the greatest confidence in the successful conclusion of the campaign.

Twenty-fifth Battalion remained in the concentration area for four days. Its carriers with full crews then joined the other carriers of the brigade, all under Captain Matthews (25 Battalion), and went back to [Nofilia](#) for carriage on transporters to the next destination, the [Tamet](#) area about 25 miles west of [Sirte](#). The same day the Divisional Cavalry, followed by 6 Brigade, led the Division off to the west by the desert route, about 30 miles from the coast, a divisional exercise

'laying out a gun line' being practised during the march. El Machina was reached at the end of the second day and there a halt was called for a day while 5 Brigade, which had been working on an airfield in the vicinity, rejoined. Special precautions were taken to avoid air observation: all vehicles were turned to the north and windscreens covered to prevent reflection of the sun, camouflage nets were used, and the usual slit trenches dug.

When the march was resumed some care was taken to prepare for the crossing of the large [Wadi Tamet](#) which lay immediately ahead. To prevent congestion the Division moved in blocks at hourly intervals, anti-aircraft guns were sited to cover the route, and fighter cover was asked for. However, no difficulty was experienced, though the sound of bombing and anti-aircraft fire to the north just before the battalion started served as a warning that precautions were necessary even in these desert wastes. The battalion's vehicles did a good deal of climbing up and down small, steep slopes, but completed the journey of 30 miles in a little less than three and a half hours.

Another heavy air raid was heard the following evening and-again the next morning, 14 January. The column was now in the vicinity of [Pilastrino](#), 30 miles south of [Buerat](#), and approaching the El Gheddahia- [Bu Ngem](#) track, beyond which was the enemy defensive line to the south-west of [Buerat](#). The carriers rejoined the battalion in the morning, and when the march was resumed in the afternoon, a flank guard of six carriers and two two-pounder anti-tank guns was placed a thousand yards out on the right flank. The men had a rough and dusty ride, which continued for three and a half hours after dark.

[Eighth Army](#) planned to drive quickly to [Tripoli](#) to secure the port as a base instead of [Benghazi](#). While 51 (Highland) Division was to advance along the coastal road, 7 Armoured Division and 2 NZ Division (on the left) were to take an inland desert route and capture airfields on the way.

The inland column was now concentrated, ready to cross the [Gheddahia- Bu Ngem](#) track in the morning (15 January), and at an early hour the Divisional Cavalry crossed the road while 6 Brigade Group in rear approached it slowly. It was a fairly quiet day for 25 Battalion, which moved at dawn when the artillery in front was in action against enemy positions, and only nine miles were covered, the men then

watching the artillery duel. A move was made early in the afternoon but was halted by a tank battle some distance ahead, a few of the very unpopular 88-millimetre high-velocity shells landing amongst the battalion's vehicles without effect. The Divisional Cavalry screen ahead of 6 Brigade had encountered an enemy infantry and anti-tank-gun screen about five miles west of the road, supported by artillery on high ground farther west. Attempts were made to turn the position from the south but the country was too rough for much progress to be made.

Late in the afternoon 25 Battalion crossed the [Bu Ngem](#) track and shortly afterwards halted for the night. C Company (Wroth) was sent forward to join the front of 26 Battalion, which was providing a defensive screen for the laager area of the Greys, Divisional Cavalry, and forward guns of the artillery; B Company (Wilson) took up a position to the rear of the Greys' B Echelon transport; and D Company was on the right flank of both battalions, forming a perimeter defence.

Enemy artillery was active against the forward troops of the Division at dusk but eased off as darkness fell. A few hours later heavy artillery fire to the north aroused the interest of the troops. This was a barrage fired by 51 (Highland) Division preparatory to a night attack in the coastal sector, 20 miles to the north of the New Zealanders.

As expected, the enemy continued his withdrawal under cover of rearguards and the advance continued steadily to the north-west, impeded to some extent by mines and rough going in various places. The next brush with the enemy occurred 30 miles farther on, near [Wadi Nfed](#), where on the 16th the leading troops were heavily shelled. During the early afternoon 25 Battalion closed to single file to cross an enemy minefield and halted for the night just as Stukas in the late afternoon attacked the forward transport, the first air attack since the column had left [Nofilia](#). At dusk the companies of the battalion advanced four and a half miles and provided a perimeter defence around the Greys' night harbour. A few bombs were heard during the night but none fell near the battalion.

By morning the enemy had again retired and was followed up as before. Rough country, mines, and demolitions on the tracks through the wadis slowed down the advance, and 7 Armoured Division, which had the right-of-way, cut across the line of advance of 6 Brigade Group. In consequence, 25 Battalion did not move till the

afternoon. The destruction of three abandoned enemy tanks by the engineers near the battalion was the only incident of interest until, when the troops were crossing [Wadi Nfed](#) in single file, the first green grass seen for some considerable time came into view. The village of [Sedada](#), situated in the wadi, was nothing more than a fort and a few scattered houses, though in this desert country it had assumed some importance as a recognisable spot frequently referred to in discussions and orders. After a very dusty journey of eight hours and 36 miles, the battalion halted for the night on a patch of ploughed land, two more abandoned enemy tanks and piles of mines with holes dug ready for them being passed on the way.

Some very stony country was passed the next day, and after crossing the [Bir Dufan- Beni Ulid](#) road, 25 Battalion was on the roughest piece of desert it had met for some time; it consisted mostly of large rocks and the column was soon held up 11 miles north of [Beni Ulid](#), no further move being made that day. Small green valleys with a few trees dotted about were to be seen occasionally and were a welcome relief from the drab desert. Exploring the country on the right flank of the battalion, a party of volunteers under Major Morrison found two hastily abandoned German armoured cars and returned with some enemy wireless equipment and weapons, including two 20- millimetre tank guns.

It had been hoped to avoid the town of [Beni Ulid](#), which was a natural bottleneck that the enemy was expected to make much more difficult by mines and demolitions. Owing to the rough nature of the surrounding country it was decided that the Division must go through the town and the engineers were concentrated on clearing the route. Sixth Brigade Group closed to within three miles of the place in the morning of 19 January in readiness to pass through, and by late afternoon one-third of the brigade was beyond the town. In the morning 25 Battalion had moved close up and, starting off again at 7 p.m. in the moonlight, went through in single file and halted for the night in desert formation 20 miles beyond. The men found [Beni Ulid](#) an impressive village, built on the eastern edge of a deep wadi and commanding a broad view over the wooded valley.

During the night 5 Brigade Group displaced 6 Brigade Group as the leading formation of the Division, which was now 30 miles south-east of [Tarhuna](#). In the following afternoon 25 Battalion moved slowly forward while the leading troops of the Division were trying to find a route down the very formidable escarpment, which

was about 1600 feet above sea level and about 1200 feet above the level of the coastal plain. Seventh Armoured Division was forcing its way down the road to the west of [Tarhuna](#), and if the escarpment elsewhere proved impassable, the New Zealand Division would have to follow, involving delay and the danger of an enemy concentration against the head of the Armoured Division as it emerged on to the plain. General Montgomery had made it very clear that the very difficult supply situation made it impossible to accept any delay in the capture of [Tripoli](#) (40 miles north-west of Tarhuna), and that if any hitch did occur it might be necessary for [Eighth Army](#) to withdraw.

There was something of the atmosphere of a race for [Tripoli](#) between 51 Division on the coast, [7 Armoured Division](#) in the centre, and the New Zealand Division on the left, while 22 Armoured Brigade, also near the coast, was well placed. A route down the escarpment, 12 miles south-west of [Tarhuna](#), was discovered, and the leading troops of 2 NZ Division entered the plain on 21 January. In a series of short moves and long halts 25 Battalion, near the rear of the Division, covered 16 miles in thirteen hours, to be within ten miles of [Tarhuna](#). There was a slight frost that night which caused ice to form on the men's groundsheets, but the morning sun soon asserted itself to the great comfort of the troops.

The battalion had another long, slow move the following day, changing early to three-column formation because of the rough ground, and then to single file to pass through [Tazzoli](#). After travelling 36 miles in fifteen hours, 25 Battalion halted for the night on the coastal plain an hour before midnight. The country traversed during the day was a little more attractive, with a dahlia-like weed and patches of grass giving some resemblance to a green landscape. A few Arabs with their donkeys added interest to the scene; small white houses were dotted among the valleys and an occasional large building, also white, could be seen on the hills. As the battalion passed through an Italian village, the men found the people quite friendly but otherwise unimpressive as they stood on the roadside and asked for cigarettes.

Next morning (23 January) 25 Battalion formed into three columns, but no move took place. On the previous day 5 Brigade had been held up by the enemy at [Azizia](#), 14 miles to the north-west, but found that the village had been vacated during the night. During the morning British troops had entered [Tripoli](#), and 5 Brigade reached

the city in the afternoon, thus completing in eighty days the desert journey of 1400 miles from [Alamein](#). While British and New Zealand troops occupied the town, [7 Armoured Division](#) continued the pursuit.

In the afternoon [General Freyberg](#) and a party of senior officers of the Division (which included Brigadier Gentry and 6 Brigade's Staff Captain) had a very narrow escape when their cars ran into a close ambush while on reconnaissance near [Bianchi](#), 25 miles south-west of [Tripoli](#). Gentry's driver was wounded while trying to turn the car, and later died, and three other men were wounded. The incident emphasised the necessity for an adequate escort for reconnaissance and other parties entering territory recently occupied by the enemy, a necessity that does not appear to have been sufficiently realised from time to time throughout the war.

The occupation of [Tripoli](#) proceeded smoothly, 5 Brigade occupying the southern of the three sectors into which the town had been divided. The civilians gave no trouble, the few who were on the streets appearing to be friendly, but most stayed indoors.

In the morning following the capture of [Tripoli](#), 25 Battalion in single column moved along the tarsealed road through [Azizia](#) to its allotted area near Giordani. For seven miles to the north of [Azizia](#) the road was lined with gum trees, presenting a very pleasant picture, and from the Italian colonies all round families were out watching the troops and, inevitably, asking for cigarettes. The cultivated belt on the [Tripoli](#) plain was a striking and very attractive contrast to the desert. By New Zealand standards the country could not be described as very fertile, but given water it would grow almost anything. Starved by months in the barren desert of the sight of green grass, trees, and the like, the men revelled in the change, and the ample supply of very fine water was the champagne of the occasion.

A tremendous afforestation scheme, covering hundreds of thousands of acres over the last decade or two, was the most outstanding feature. Everywhere, eucalyptus and pine trees had been planted annually along the roads, on vacant desert between settlements, and along boundaries. The value of trees in a treeless, sandy country was manifest. In the battalion's bivouac area the young children playing nearby and gathering round at meal times greatly interested the men after their long isolation from any form of home life, and the cooks gave the children a

little fruit salad, cottage pie, and other titbits, to their great delight.

Armed Arab bands reported to be in the vicinity were likely to be a danger to the civilian population, and on the day after its arrival the battalion as a precaution placed guards in [Bianchi](#) village and at the power station, and a mobile patrol of one section of carriers and two anti-tank guns, under Captain Matthews, moved round the area for the first two mornings.

Training was commenced at once though interrupted by three days of rain, and the various company route marches through the new countryside had more interest than usual. On 30 January a parade was held to farewell the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant, who had been appointed to command the [Divisional Cavalry Regiment](#). Excepting for a month's absence due to a wound received in the Miteiriya Ridge attack, Colonel Bonifant had commanded the battalion since 12 September last, and for his services in the [Alamein](#) operations and the pursuit had been awarded the DSO. His successor was Major [Morten](#),⁷ second-in-command of 26 Battalion, who assumed command the following day.

At the end of the month two officers and thirty-five other ranks represented 25 Battalion at the [Eighth Army](#) church parade held in [Tripoli](#) on the successful conclusion of the campaign in [Tripolitania](#). Church service was also held in the battalion lines. Casualties for January were fortunately only two wounded.

Another change of scene occurred on 2 February when 25 Battalion moved to the brigade's new area near Suani Ben Adem, 14 miles south of [Tripoli](#). It was a most pleasant camp site, situated amongst acacia, gum, and fruit trees. Here the battalion carried out smartening-up drill and then took part in a brigade parade, in preparation for a divisional review and address on 4 February by Mr Winston Churchill. At the review Mr Churchill, in the uniform of an air commodore and accompanied by high-ranking generals, addressed the troops in his own inimitable style and made a deep impression.

A few days later Lieutenant-Colonel Morten heard an address at Corps Headquarters by General Montgomery, who the following day, in the [Miramare](#) theatre in [Tripoli](#), gave another address which was attended by twenty-five of the battalion's officers. These addresses did much to instil confidence in the units of

[Eighth Army](#) and to give all ranks some understanding of the purpose underlying the operations that were about to take place.

On the 11th 6 Brigade relieved 152 Brigade in [Tripoli](#). Twenty-fifth Battalion took over the duties of 5 Camerons and was accommodated in the Law Courts building and in and around the Governor's Palace. Five guards of a total strength of 1 officer, 17 NCOs, and 51 men were mounted, two of the more interesting posts being those on the wine factory and the brewery. Referring to the local wine one man wrote: 'In [Tripoli](#) the men first made contact with the species of high explosive known colloquially as "plonk", a vicious type of red wine. Casualties were many but none fatal.'

Late the first night wharf duties were taken over in heavy rain and a high wind which caused the sea to break over the mole and made the work hazardous. Throughout the month the battalion provided guards and working parties on shore, lighters, and ships, both by day and night, the total number of men varying from 100 to 300 daily. Sudanese troops took over most of the guard duties on the second day, and 25 Battalion guards were reduced to one officer and eight men, the battalion war diary containing the entry: '... and the petrol dump guard discontinued. An officer was maintained on the wine factory.'

The working parties had a march of two miles to the docks, where they unloaded a wide variety of items including 44- gallon drums of petrol, rations, ammunition, 500-pound bombs, and medical supplies. A satirical comment on this work by 'some person or persons unknown' went the rounds of the battalion: 'The Kiwis could unload more in three months than the Regulars in twelve, but as they "acquired" more in three months than they unloaded in twelve, the score was about even.'

From 'information received' from members of the battalion it appears there was some justification for the comment. Various shifts were worked, though usually the hours were 3 p.m. to 11 or 11.30 p.m. and 11.30 p.m. to 8.30 a.m. A tragic accident occurred on 18 February when Private [Kerr](#)⁸ of C Company, whilst helping to gain control of a fire which had broken out on the wharf, was killed by a splinter from an exploding shell. There were other hazards. The [Desert Air Force](#) prevented enemy aircraft interfering with the work during daylight but at least seven air raids occurred

at night during the battalion's tour of duty. During one raid, on 24 February, the ground-floor windows of the Law Courts, where B Company and 3, 4, and 5 Platoons of HQ Company were quartered, were broken by bomb blast. Describing the air raids, Private Hawkins, who was in an annexe to the Governor's Palace, wrote:

'Some nights we would wake with the ground practically jumping under us and a noise as if all hell were let loose. It would be one of the frequent air raids and we were inside the concentric rings of guns of increasing calibre which sent up a devastating cone of fire.... With the rest of the Bn we worked on the unloading of ships—sometimes by day, more often it seemed by night and on several occasions long stretches of both. We weren't so — keen on it at night ... for raids were always in the offing and it wasn't particularly funny lying between a couple of tram lines while bombs screamed down and the guns barked thunderously and spewed shrapnel which had to come down. Nor were such raids altogether very frightening; the spectacle of it all was so big and awesome, like some super drama in relation to which one was a mere spectator. It was like that the night our lads were unloading the three bottomless holds of a Liberty ship on to lighters, in the middle of the harbour. At the forward hold, bombs and shells came up in the slings and were gingerly lowered into their lighter. Amidships, away down below, the lads packed cases and tins and bags of provisions on to the slings.... At the stern hold toiled the Aks-Aks, half the team down in the hold and half in the lighter, handling tins and 40-gal drums of petrol, with Tommies working the winches. Then it came upon us—guns and bombs, roaring planes and shrapnel plopping everywhere. Smartly out of the hold scrambled the boys and we strained our gutses out to get a heavy tarpaulin over the hatches to keep away from the petrol any stray hot bit of shrapnel. Down on the lighter the lads just sat down on the drums of benzine until it was all over, which was half-an-hour later. Night was well ended when we were told to heave to.'

The city was disappointing. The buildings were badly battered and the harbour seemed full of sunken ships. Most of the city had been destroyed and the greater part of the civil population had been evacuated. Food was unprocurable by the troops, and indeed its purchase was forbidden because there was insufficient food for civilians. There was evidence, however, of the former beauty of the city:

'The esplanade along the waterfront, lined on the landward side with ultra-modern buildings and on the seaward side by a beautiful concrete balustrade, the

road itself a double avenue of splendid palms all set in flower gardens, is easily the finest I've ever seen.'

That was the impression it made on WO II W. K. Marshall, DCM, as described in one of his letters.

Early in February a class of instruction for prospective officers and junior NCOs was formed in the battalion, under the command of Captain Wroth, Captain Norman taking over C Company in his place. On the 22nd, to prepare for the arrival of two six-pounder anti-tank guns, due about the end of the month, Captain Stevens, Lieutenant R. S. Webb, one WO, nine NCOs, and nine men were attached for a ten-days' course to 33 Anti-Tank Battery, and while there were very interested to see the famed 17-pounder anti-tank gun, the 'Pheasant', a very powerful weapon at least the equal as an anti-tank weapon of the obnoxious German 88-millimetre gun. On the 25th A Company was re-formed, six months after it had lost its identity in amalgamation with B and C Companies at the time of the [El Mreir](#) disaster. All men (with the exception of specialists) who had been in the company on the previous 21 July were automatically transferred back to it: Captain Matthews from the command of the carrier platoon was appointed to command A Company, his platoon commanders being Lieutenants [Mahar](#)⁹ and O'Connor.¹⁰ Captain [Sealy](#)¹¹ of the [Divisional Cavalry Regiment](#) (who had been appointed second-in-command of B Company on 19 December) took command of the carriers.

Early in the month Major Morten had been granted the temporary rank of lieutenant-colonel while commanding the battalion; on the 12th the Adjutant, Captain [Wylie](#),¹² left to attend a junior staff course of about nine weeks' duration, his place being taken by the IO, Second-Lieutenant Slade, who was relieved by Lieutenant Buchanan. There was also a change in medical officers, Captain McCarthy, who had been with the battalion since the middle of August 1941, being relieved on 22 February by Captain [Pearse](#).¹³ The unit's casualties during the month were two men who had died of wounds, Private Kerr on the 18th and Private [Salisbury](#)¹⁴ two days later.

¹ Col W. R. K. Morrison, DSO, m.i.d.; [Waiouru Camp](#); born NZ 23 Jan 1914; Regular soldier; twice wounded; CO 1 Bn, NZ Regt, [Malaya](#), 1957–59; Camp

Commandant, [Waiouru](#), 1960–.

² 3 [Royal Horse Artillery](#), [King's Dragoon Guards](#), [Royal Dragoons](#), [Royal Scots Greys](#), [King's Royal Rifle Corps](#).

³ Lt J. E. May; [Auckland](#); born [Wellington](#), 11 Feb 1914; accountant; wounded 16 Dec 1942.

⁴ Pte L. McPhillips; born NZ 24 Feb 1903; farmer; wounded 16 Dec 1942.

⁵ Cpl V. S. Thompson; born Houipapa, Otago, 8 Apr 1916; grocer; wounded 16 Dec 1942.

⁶ Pte R. R. Woolford; [Feilding](#); born NZ 21 Jun 1918; farmhand; wounded 16 Dec 1942.

⁷ Brig T. B. Morten, DSO, OBE, ED; [Little River](#); born [Christchurch](#), 30 Sep 1913; shepherd; CO 25 Bn Jan-Dec 1943, 4–22 Feb 1944; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁸ Pte C. H. Kerr; born [Nelson](#), 4 Feb 1915; shepherd; died on active service 18 Feb 1943.

⁹ Capt J. Mahar, m.i.d.; born NZ 31 Oct 1913; contractor.

¹⁰ Lt B. M. O'Connor; [Wellington](#); born NZ 1 Feb 1919; student wounded 21 Apr 1943.

¹¹ Capt J. R. S. Sealy; Greek Silver Cross; born Egypt, 11 Oct 1904; company secretary; wounded 22 Mar 1943.

¹² Maj G. A. Wylie, m.i.d., [Wellington](#); born [Lower Hutt](#), 12 Oct 1909; barrister and solicitor.

¹³ Lt-Col V. T. Pearce, MC, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born NZ 12 Nov 1913; medical practitioner; RMO 25 Bn Feb 1943–Jul 1944; DADMS 2 NZ Div Nov 1944–Oct 1945.

¹⁴ Pte L. A. Salisbury; born NZ 8 Mar 1919; dairy-farm worker; died of wounds 20 Feb 1943.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 9 – TUNISIA TO ITALY

CHAPTER 9

Tunisia to Italy

The enemy forces had now retired into the [Mareth](#) line, about 180 miles to the west of [Tripoli](#). This was a strongly fortified position, prepared by the French before the war as a precaution against Italian aggression, and extending from the coast north-east of [Mareth](#) for 20 miles or more in a south-westerly direction before swinging to the north into the Matmata Hills, 30 miles south-west of [Gabes](#). The main defences consisted of several independent but mutually supporting strong-points with concrete pillboxes and gun emplacements and had both natural and artificial anti-tank obstacles. The original line had been extended from the [Matmata Hills](#) for another 12 miles to the north-west across the [Tebaga Gap](#), through which a road running to the north-east gave access to [El Hamma](#) and [Gabes](#). The new works at the [Tebaga Gap](#) included prepared infantry positions with weapon pits, wire, and a short anti-tank ditch. The defences there did not appear to be highly developed and had little depth.

Fifty-first (Highland) and 7 Armoured Divisions had followed the enemy and were in contact opposite the [Mareth](#) line, the former on the right and the latter with its left on [Medenine](#). The enemy was in a difficult situation with British and American forces gradually closing in from northern [Tunisia](#) and the [Eighth Army](#) gathering strength opposite the [Mareth](#) line. In mid-February he had already, with considerable initial success, attacked the Allied forces in the north in the hope of crippling them before [Eighth Army](#) could concentrate, but the approach of the latter had forced the enemy to assume the defensive in the north and return to the [Mareth](#) line with the bulk of his armour to attack there before his opponent was ready. This attack was expected on 4 March in the [Medenine](#) area, and 2 NZ Division was ordered forward to be in position in that locality by the afternoon of 3 March.

Sixth Brigade left [Suani Ben Adem](#) for [Medenine](#), about 160 miles to the west, in the morning of 2 March. Travelling throughout the night, 25 Battalion reached [Medenine](#) the following morning. The greater part of the journey was over the asphalted coastal road which, although cratered in many places, provided easy going, but the 50 miles of road beyond Ben Gardane was badly potholed. Burnt-out vehicles, road demolitions, and marked minefields were familiar signs of the enemy's retreat. Headlights were permitted as far as [Ben Gardane](#), 25 miles west of the

Tunisia- Tripoli border. It was a tiring journey, very cold, with the men cramped for room, and it was a relief to reach the position.

The brigade was in reserve on high ground to the north-east of **Medenine**, 25 Battalion being on the left, facing west, with its left flank two miles north of the town. The frontage of 2000 yards was held by D Company (Morrison) on the right, B Company (Wilson) in the centre, and C Company (Norman) on the left; A Company (Matthews) was in reserve.

The Division's front was held by 5 Brigade, which had arrived the day before, its forward troops being about four miles to the west and south-west of **Medenine**. It was in touch with a British brigade on its right and armoured forces were patrolling to the front and on its left. As divisional reserve 6 Brigade had to be ready for a mobile, supporting, or counter-attack role, or to hold the position it occupied. In the last case its left flank was open to attack from the south and Colonel Morten concentrated there, in C Company's area, all his anti-tank guns (including his two six-pounders), with the exception of one two-pounder left with D Company and another with B Company. His reserve company was also on the left flank, about 800 yards behind C Company. Sixth Brigade mobile reserve strengthened both the left and right flanks of the battalion by preparing positions for two troops of anti-tank guns and two machine-gun platoons, but these positions were not to be occupied until so ordered.

The troops stood to arms at a quarter to six next morning (4 March). The day was beautifully fine after a chilly night that had been disturbed a little by **Desert Air Force** bombers passing overhead and by the crash of their bombs in the distance. A field of oats of two acres accommodated part of 25 Battalion, which enjoyed a fairly quiet day. In the late afternoon there was some excitement when about twenty aircraft were manoeuvring overhead and the anti-aircraft guns were very active; three aircraft were shot down and, after much argument as to their identity, it was learnt that they were German.

During the night while the companies practised night operations, fire from the artillery nearby added a realistic touch. Extensive movements of enemy tanks and transport reported by air during the day had pointed to the possibility of an attack the following day, but all remained quiet though small parties of enemy infantry,

transport, and armoured cars were seen. A projected relief of 28 (Maori) Battalion by 25 Battalion, and of the [Coldstream Guards](#) on the right of the Maoris by 24 Battalion, caused Brigadier Gentry and the two commanding officers and their staffs to make a series of reconnaissances; a few hours later officers of the [Northumberland Hussars](#) and 2 Cheshires reconnoitred 6 Brigade area in readiness to relieve the two battalions, but in the early afternoon the proposed reliefs were cancelled.

For 25 Battalion and the remainder of 6 Brigade Group in their somewhat retired positions, 6 March opened with a rumble of guns. There was considerable artillery fire to the west and south-west all day, though only two shells fell in the battalion's position, bursting near B Company without effect. There was also much air activity, including enemy dive-bombing, which had the men moving rapidly into their slit trenches throughout the day; little damage was done.

For troops holding the forward positions the picture was different. About 6 a.m. fairly heavy enemy shelling commenced and for the next hour and a half enemy transport, guns, and tanks advanced eastwards from the hills west and south-west of [Medenine](#). Orders had been issued to withhold fire until tanks were at point-blank range, and it was remarkable to see the enemy advance proceeding while the Allied guns remained silent. The attack was easily repulsed and there was no further attack that morning. In the late afternoon about 1000 enemy infantry and forty tanks advanced against Pt 270, an important tactical feature about five miles west of 25 Battalion. It was met by devastating artillery fire and repulsed with heavy casualties. Farther north, beyond the right flank of the Division, an enemy infantry attack gained some initial success which was nullified by a counter-attack. By dusk the enemy was retiring, and next morning it seemed unlikely that the attack would be renewed.

There was considerable air activity at dawn, and an Italian pilot who had been shot down landed near 25 Battalion. The church service at 10 a.m. was interrupted for a few minutes by an air raid and 'there was a real good dog-fight at noon. Plenty of air activity for the rest of the day', according to Wakeling. As no lights were to be used it was a case of 'early to bed'. Reinforcements of one officer and 112 men arriving after noon next day brought the battalion very close to its war establishment, the strengths of the companies being HQ 351, A 110, B 101, C 103, D 108. Intensive training was carried out during the next three days and the

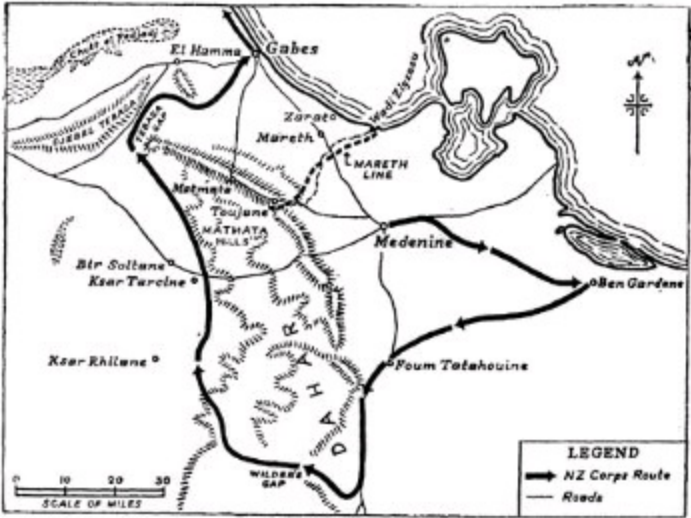
opportunity was taken to give the trucks a disruptive design to aid camouflage. All men in excess of 90 per cent of war establishment were classified as LOB and, with Major Porter and Captain Wroth, left the battalion in the afternoon of 10 March for the New Zealand Advanced Base at [Tripoli](#).

To deal with the [Mareth](#) line General Montgomery decided to attack in the coastal sector and at the same time carry out a wide turning movement around the enemy's inland flank. [New Zealand Corps](#) comprising 2 NZ Division, 8 Armoured Brigade, King's Dragoon Guards, 64 Medium Regiment, RA, and General Leclerc's (Free French) force was to undertake the turning operation.

From 11 to 17 March the various groups of New Zealand Corps (other than the French, who were some 40 miles to the south-west of [Medenine](#)) were moving by a circuitous route to an assembly area about 50 miles south-south-west of Medenine. This route ran through [Ben Gardane](#), 43 miles to the south-east, thence 70 miles to the south-west through Fom Tatahouine to [Bir Amir](#), and then about ten miles westwards to the assembly area. Sixth Brigade Group was the first to move, Brigade Headquarters leaving early on the 11th. Twenty-fifth Battalion followed a little later in the day, halting for a few hours at a staging area about 70 miles away, and then, travelling throughout the night, reached its area another 70 miles farther on a little after daybreak. It was cold and dusty in the vehicles and, as no headlights were permitted, the journey was slow and the driving difficult, with the vehicles constantly opening out and closing. The battalion had no accidents, but elsewhere in the Brigade Group one vehicle was blown up on a mine and a gun tractor and some 3-ton trucks capsized.

The orders required that all precautions were to be taken to avoid observation and identification during the move. Arrangements were made for wireless deception and silence, the fernleaf signs on vehicles were obliterated, and shoulder titles and hat badges removed. After arriving at the assembly area in the morning of 12 March vehicles were to move as little as possible during daylight, and then only at reduced speeds to avoid raising dust; no fires or lights were permitted after dusk; no tents were to be pitched and bivouacs were not to be erected before 6 p.m.; no anti-aircraft gun or weapon of any sort was to open fire upon enemy aircraft unless it dropped a bomb or opened fire.

In the late afternoon of 12 March the appearance of an enemy reconnaissance aircraft caused some anxiety. It was flying at a considerable height, estimated by some at 12,000



LEFT HOOK AT MARETH
left hook at mareth

feet, and gave no indication, such as by a change of course or height or a return flight over the area, that the force had been seen. There had been some difficulty in keeping the movement of vehicles within the assembly area at a minimum as had been ordered, and the visit of this aircraft emphasised the necessity for extreme care if surprise was to be achieved in this very important outflanking operation.

While the remainder of the [New Zealand Corps](#) was assembling, 25 Battalion continued to carry out such training as was possible under the restrictions imposed. Conferences and tactical exercises without troops were held for the officers. A plaster model of the area where operations were expected to take place was used to explain the overall plan, first to the officers and then to the senior NCOs, so that before the battalion left the area, the leaders of all ranks had been well briefed and the men had a good understanding of the impending operation. Air photographs of the enemy position at [Tebaga Gap](#) became available after a few days and were a very valuable aid to realistic discussions and planning.

On the 17th a strong, cold wind with much dust, followed by rain the next day, made conditions very unpleasant. 'Very cold and wet night. Packed ready for a move but no move. Real winter's day' read an entry in a diary. The battalion carriers

rejoined a couple of hours after midnight, titles, badges, and vehicle signs were replaced, and at dusk on 19 March 6 Brigade Group resumed the advance on the [Tebaga Gap](#). The wind had eased and the sky had cleared as 25 Battalion closed to night-visibility distance and moved off over rough, scrubby country abounding in sand drifts and wadis which gave the drivers some difficulty. The Brigade Group was following the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry and armour at the head of the Corps until the early morning, 25 Battalion halting for the night about 2 a.m. some ten miles east of [Ksar Rhilane](#) and 40 miles south of the [Tebaga Gap](#).

After breakfast, as the battalion was on its way once more, artillery fire in the distance dispelled any illusion there may have been that in these wide desert spaces the war was far away. The march continued slowly all day, over rough country at times, crossing many dry creek beds which forced the columns to converge on occasions. Towards evening American Warhawk aircraft attacked but the battalion was not involved, and after travelling about 30 miles it halted just after dark. Some distance ahead artillery in action could be seen.

Early the following morning, 21 March, Colonels Morten and [Fontaine](#)¹ (26 Battalion) accompanied Brigadier Gentry on a reconnaissance with [General Freyberg](#) of the enemy position at [Tebaga Gap](#). The Gap was a defile about four miles wide, with high hills to the south-east and north-west. The road through it gave access through [El Hamma](#) to [Gabes](#) on the coast, 30 miles to the north-west of the coastal end of the [Mareth](#) line and about the same distance from the Gap. Allied troops passing through the Gap would therefore be a grave menace to the enemy holding the [Mareth](#) position.

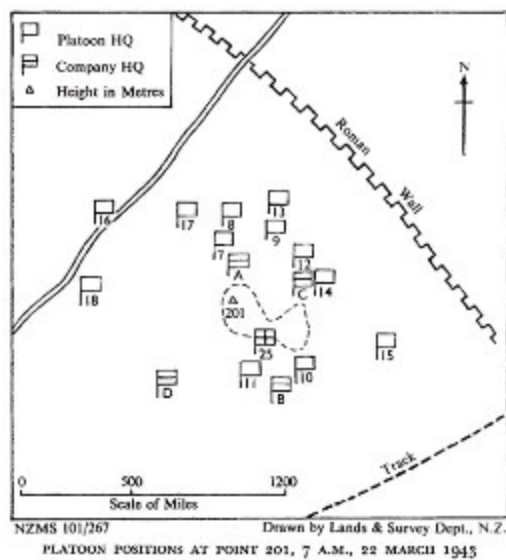
Although the difficulties of the desert approach from the south, which the [New Zealand Corps](#) had just accomplished, were commonly believed to prevent any large force appearing at the Gap, the enemy had made some preparations against such a contingency. His defences ran north-west across the Gap, following generally the line of the old Roman Wall, which the passage of centuries with their countless sand-laden winds had reduced to an archæological curiosity, a mere two-foot wall of rubble in many places. A few hundred yards in front of the wall, that is, on its south-western side, and almost in the middle of the Gap was Pt 201, a defended outpost; a minefield extended across the front and barbed-wire entanglements protected part of the defences. Further works to the north-east gave some depth to the position.

Following the reconnaissance and in accordance with his instructions to capture Pt 201, Brigadier Gentry, in the late afternoon of the 21st, issued his orders. The attack was to be made by 26 Battalion on the right and 25 Battalion on the left, the inter-battalion boundary running north and south through the centre of the objective. A start line 3500 yards from the objective was selected. On the battalions' leaving the start line at 9.30 p.m., the artillery would open fire on the enemy forward positions about a mile away, the fire remaining there for twenty-one minutes and finishing with one round of smoke per gun. The fire would then lift 300 yards and after one minute lift again, and continue on Pt 201 at the rate of one round per gun per minute as a guide for the advancing infantry.

The infantry rate of advance was to be 100 yards in one and a half minutes as far as the enemy forward positions and thereafter 100 yards in two minutes. The axis of advance to the centre of the start line would be lit with the usual provost lights, ending with two blue lights. Units not taking part in the attack were to remain where they were. A section of engineers was attached to each of the two battalions to clear lanes through the minefields, 2 Section [8 Field Company](#) being with 25 Battalion.

A slight hitch in placing the lights on the axis caused Brigadier Gentry to delay the start half an hour. Meanwhile, in the early afternoon, 25 Battalion had moved forward for two hours over a track from which the loose sand had been removed by bulldozers, and halted in desert formation while tanks and artillery were engaging the enemy. It was during this halt that the brigade order for the attack was received, and at 5.30 p.m. the battalion advanced another two miles, debussed, and marched about half a mile to its forming-up position. During the move the battalion was machine-gunned by a low-flying Ju88 but suffered no casualties or damage.

It was bright moonlight when at 10 p.m. 25 Battalion crossed the start line with two companies forward, C Company (Norman) on the right and A Company (Matthews) on the left. D Company (Morrison) was in the centre behind the leading companies, with Battalion Headquarters following and B Company (Wilson) in reserve in rear. After advancing about 1500 yards without opposition, the first three companies and Battalion Headquarters passed through the minefield and over a deep anti-tank ditch with little difficulty, though heavily laden men had some trouble



platoon positions at point 201, 7 a.m., 22 march 1943

drawn away to the right in trying to keep touch with C Company, worked their way forward to the wire entanglement and under sweeping fire cut gaps. Charging through with shouts that were heard by Brigadier Gentry 2000 yards back (and

which gave him his first indication that the attack was going well), the platoons swept through all opposition. No. 9 Platoon, in reserve, attacked several machine guns on the left flank and, after capturing about fifty prisoners, advanced up that flank.

The advance continued until it was discovered that the battalion was about 400 yards to the right of its objective. A Company then worked to the left and advanced to the top of the hill, where it encountered no opposition until, on crossing the skyline, it met spasmodic and badly controlled fire. Nos. 7 and 8 Platoons then charged forward and effectively silenced all opposition. Meanwhile 9 Platoon had worked forward and taken further machine-gun positions and prisoners, rejoining the company on the objective. A Company then moved to the forward slopes and, under considerable shellfire, dug in to the west of C Company, with 9 Platoon on the right about 300 yards north-east of the trig, 8 Platoon on the left about the same distance to the north of the trig, and 7 Platoon about 200 yards behind 8 Platoon. A few unsuspecting enemy callers and escapees were captured while the company was digging itself in. There were many prisoners and much material, including three field guns, three trucks, and many medium machine guns. A considerable quantity of rations was found and appropriated, the German bread being especially relished as a

fine change from hard biscuits.

D Company (Morrison) followed behind until the minefield was reached, when it came forward on the left of A Company. The enemy then opened fire with machine guns and 20-millimetre Bredas. The wire entanglement gave some trouble as a Bangalore torpedo failed to explode, causing delay while several gaps were cut by hand. All three platoons suffered casualties. The company then charged through the wire and attacked the first enemy positions, which were quickly overcome by the use of bayonets and grenades. No. 17 Platoon captured a Breda gun and killed the crew; 18 Platoon charged and captured a small field gun and some prisoners and then advanced half-left to cover the company and battalion left flank. There it surprised a number of the enemy near several vehicles, which it immobilised, and knocked out some machine guns, capturing a great many prisoners in deep dugouts near a couple of small hills and in a wadi. Crossing the wadi, the platoon took more machine guns and prisoners on the flat ground beyond.

During these operations 16 (Reserve) Platoon had advanced straight ahead towards the left of Pt 201, mopping up dugouts and taking prisoners. On its final objective the platoon captured four 75-millimetre field guns. Continuing its advance, 17 Platoon (on the right of 18 Platoon) advanced to the top of Pt 201 and took four 80-millimetre field guns. On the objective D Company dug in on the left flank of the battalion with A Company on its right; 17 Platoon was 400 yards north of Pt 201 in touch with 16 Platoon, 350 yards to its left, and with 8 Platoon of A Company 200 yards away to the right; 18 Platoon was 600 yards west of Pt 201. While the company was digging in Major Morrison ordered all three platoons to carry out aggressive patrolling, with most fruitful results. D Company had taken about 500 prisoners and fifteen 75-mm and 80-mm field guns for a casualty list of only nine men wounded.

The enemy positions were well sited and deeply dug and, held in strength as the number of prisoners and the capture of over 100 machine guns revealed, should have offered very stout resistance. A personal account by a man of the battalion is illuminating:

'At 2200 hours the infantry advanced expecting to encounter heavy opposition. They negotiated a deep tank trap safely but had a few casualties in a minefield

behind it. Next came a small trench whose occupants were taken prisoner with no great effort. About 300 yds further the Battalion was stopped for a rest and smoke and the idea spread that the attack was over. ... When they started again, after about 15 mins, the men went forward smoking and talking up the ridge. On the top they were surprised to find a semi-circle of perfectly sited positions unoccupied. A search was made and in deep dugouts behind they found the Italian garrison who were not prepared to show any fight. While the prisoners were being sorted more Ites showed up, totally unaware there'd been any attack. They had been in a neighbouring area visiting another unit. It was learnt from the Ites that the 19th Light Panzer were due to take over that evening but had not showed up and actually they arrived next morning, but after recce dug in some distance away ... the positions were amongst the most perfectly sited the Battalion had seen.'

B Company (Wilson), in reserve behind Battalion Headquarters, advanced ten minutes after the leading companies had crossed the start line. No so fortunate as the other companies, the company was pinned down in the minefield for fifteen minutes by enemy artillery defensive fire while the leading companies were capturing the feature just beyond. Here tragedy befell the company, all its headquarters becoming casualties through mines and its commander, Captain Wilson, being killed. After the minefield was crossed, 12 Platoon from reserve was pushed forward between C and A Companies to the crest of Pt 201 about 200 yards ahead, from which it gave covering fire to the troops attacking round the flanks. The capture of the final objective, Pt 201, was completed about 11.30 p.m. and, with the exception of 12 Platoon, B Company took up a position at the rear of the battalion on the reverse or southern slopes of the hill. Its casualties were one officer and four other ranks killed and three other ranks wounded.

The anti-tank platoon also struck trouble in the minefield, as Private Hawkins relates:

'Waiting on the starting line we all took good nips and joked and the show looked fine. Half-an-hour later it was just merry hell as well-dug-in Bredas went "glug-glug-glug-glug" and red-hot tracer shells skimmed the ground; as LMG fire sprayed the area with illuminated death; as S-mines ⁴, telemines, and mortars went off on all sides. Our model show had developed into a nightmare. The Breda shells flew lower still. Bill and Jack Gospod ⁵ appeared to be squirming around and then

laughed. I thought they were drunk. A shell, they found, had gone clean through Gossie's pack. Then someone called "Jack Lawrence ⁶ (Sgt) has been hit". We dashed to him but there was an inch hole drilled in his tin hat. Twenty yards to my right there was a flash and a bang and an S-mine collected Bill and Gos in the arms and Ray in the legs and groin. The place was absolutely lousy with them, planted amongst the young corn, and though bayonets stuck in the ground marked the presence of some, the majority were passed unobserved.

'Then suddenly it was all over. D Coy ... had worked around the flank and appeared silhouetted on the hill-top behind the enemy, whence, in the most thrilling sight of my life, they delivered a rapid and overwhelming attack on the key positions. Soon Hill 201 was in the hands of the Battalion. Support groups came up and the position was consolidated.'

The battalion's casualties during the actual attack on 21–22 March were three officers and forty-seven other ranks. One officer and ten other ranks were killed, and two officers and thirty-seven other ranks were wounded.

Twenty-fifth Battalion's position on Pt 201 was under enemy observation from the high ground, particularly that to the north-west. It was well prepared against tank attack by the siting before dawn of three 17-pounder, ten 6-pounder, and three 2-pounder anti-tank guns for all-round defence, and in addition was covered by such of the Corps artillery as had been moved within range.

As dawn broke, 6 Platoon of 2 MG Company attached to 25 Battalion, which had just dug positions on the northern slopes of Pt 201, was fired on by 47-millimetre guns situated on a ridge 1500 yards away. This caused an immediate reaction by the machine-gunners, whose heavy fire forced the enemy to retire; they also engaged enemy vehicles at long range. Later in the morning a Crusader tank on occupying the ridge destroyed one of the 47-millimetre guns and secured the surrender of about 200 Italians.

The battalion mortars were active after dawn against any targets which presented themselves; a mortar section with D Company silenced four field guns at 950 yards range, causing thirty-eight Italians to come over and surrender; anti-tank guns at 2600 yards were silenced and various machine guns were fired on. Mortars

with A Company were also engaged with machine guns and those with C Company fired on infantry in positions to their front. The machine guns and mortars were particularly valuable at this stage, when the artillery was moving forward and was required to conserve ammunition for vital tasks.

Exposed to observation as it was, 25 Battalion during the day experienced a good deal of artillery fire, suffering ten casualties, including Captain Matthews, the commander of A Company, who was wounded. The New Zealand Corps artillery responded briskly to the enemy guns and its counter-battery bombardments were very effective. Crossings over the anti-tank ditch and through the gaps in the minefield were widened and improved during the early hours to assist the advance of the armour. As early as 2.30 a.m. a squadron of Sherman tanks under command of 6 Brigade commenced to move forward through the gap behind 25 Battalion, following the carriers but ahead of the other supporting arms of the battalion. At first light an armoured regiment advanced through the obstacles and was followed by the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry. Enemy artillery was quickly in position on the high ground on both sides of the Gap, and heavy fire from 88-millimetre guns at long range and from other anti-tank guns at shorter ranges prevented the armour from pushing through and exploiting success as had been planned. Little effort appears to have been made to exploit success.

From their elevated position on Pt 201 the men of 25 Battalion had a grandstand view of all that occurred. They watched the [RAF](#) bomb and machine-gun the enemy positions and saw the first Spitfire and Hurricane tank-buster aircraft in action; this was most impressive though some of the first targets were ill-chosen. The armoured regiment and the Divisional Cavalry did not get more than 2500 yards beyond Pt 201, though they were collecting prisoners throughout the morning and were engaged at times in hull-down actions with enemy tanks, which soon appeared in increasing numbers. Several small ineffective enemy air attacks took place during the day.

At 7.30 p.m. (22 March) 6 Brigade was to take over from the armour the responsibility for the front, and by that hour the two forward battalions after dusk were to straighten the front. Twenty-fifth Battalion was to move its right flank farther to the right (or east) and swing its left forward a little. Twenty-sixth Battalion on the right was to advance level with 25 Battalion, but its right flank was to be

refused or swung back to the south-east. Except for some fighting on the right of 26 Battalion, the new front was established without difficulty, 25 Battalion moving B Company (Captain Hewitt) forward and farther west on the left flank of A Company, the foremost defended localities of the battalion being generally a little short of the Roman Wall.

Wakeling said in his diary:

'Mar 23. Stand-to at daylight as our tanks moving forward. Shelled consistently all morning as bty of our 25-pdrs moved in close behind us. Coy formed up again so went back with Capt Hewitt. Plenty of shelling off-and-on during the afternoon and the total of prisoners around the 2000 mark. Moved forward about 1000 yards at 7 and dug in.'

By the morning of 23 March the enemy had reinforced his position with tanks and infantry and was using tanks defensively to provide a screen for his guns. Early in the morning the British armour had attempted to infiltrate the enemy positions on the right or eastern flank but had met with severe artillery and anti-tank fire and had made little progress. During the morning 25 Battalion's position was bombed on three occasions by enemy aircraft and once by the [RAF](#), all with no effect. In the afternoon ground strips and smoke were used to direct the [RAF](#) to the enemy positions. The battalion 'had a large V of cut-down kerosene tins burning all night to direct 'planes, right next to us,' wrote Captain Webster (A Company). 'This was the first time the Battalion had been in charge of one of these guides and were not too happy about it as it was in full view of the Hun but he never wasted a shell on it.' Throughout the day there was considerable artillery activity on both sides, including counter-battery exchanges.

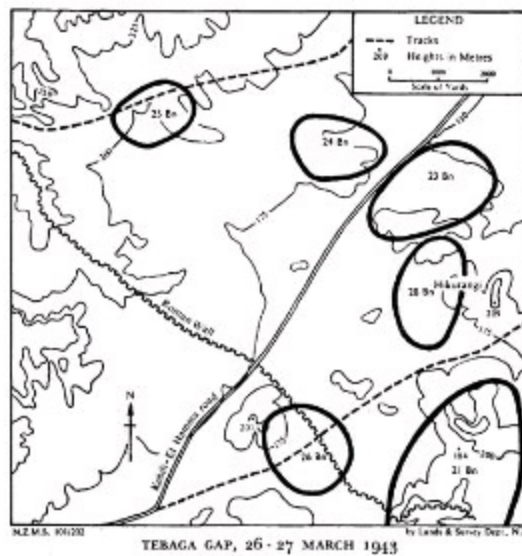
After dark 24 Battalion occupied a position on the left of 25 Battalion, extending the front along the general line of the Roman Wall to a point about 3600 yards north-west of Pt 201. The armour, which had moved over to the left flank where the ground was more suitable, advanced slowly the next morning and the artillery, concentrating on any targets that presented themselves, seemed to be gaining the ascendancy. Enemy aircraft on three occasions again dropped bombs near the battalion, again with no effect, and one aircraft was seen to be shot down. By nightfall tanks of [8 Armoured Brigade](#) had secured high ground on the left, 4000

yards north-west of the battalion's forward positions, and a Divisional Cavalry patrol was 2500 yards north of the battalion.

On the other flank a French force had infiltrated the enemy positions on the high ground south-east of 6 Brigade and was attacking the following day to link up with the right flank of the brigade. In the late afternoon of 24 March the appearance of a lorry, preceded by a motor-cycle, on the [El Hamma- Kebili](#) road, and moving steadily towards the New Zealand position, intrigued the men of 25 Battalion on the forward slopes of Pt 201. Unfortunately, as so frequently happened on such occasions, someone—this time the New Zealand machine-gunners—opened fire at a range of 2000 yards and so prevented the much closer view the expectant infantrymen had hoped to obtain. The following morning bombs were dropped at the rear of the battalion's position by an enemy fighter-bomber and during the day there was the usual shelling, which the men were beginning to find very irksome. No doubt the enemy infantry felt the same about the shelling they were receiving, probably much more so.

The enemy gave every indication of his intention to hold his positions stubbornly, as well he might in view of the danger to the [Mareth](#) line, and it was obvious that a full-scale attack would be necessary to dislodge him. The British frontal attack on the coastal sector of the line on 20–21 March had failed,

and this had caused General Montgomery to decide to hold the enemy in that sector and to make the decisive attack on the [New Zealand Corps](#) front. Headquarters [10 Corps](#) and 1 Armoured Division were ordered to reinforce that front with a view to breaking through without delay. Very heavy air support had been arranged for the operation, which was finally



tebaga gap, 26 – 27 march 1943

timed to commence at 4 p.m. on 26 March. At that hour the [New Zealand Corps](#) was to advance astride the main road for a distance of 4500 yards to the north-east of the Roman Wall; [1 Armoured Division](#) would follow up the advance and at 7.20 p.m. would pass through [New Zealand Corps](#) and concentrate beyond the Corps' objective by dark. At 11.15 p.m., on the moon rising, [1 Armoured Division](#) would advance astride the main road and capture [El Hamma](#).

Immediately the armour had passed through, [New Zealand Corps](#) would, with the greatest possible despatch, destroy the enemy in the hills on either side of the Gap so that it could rejoin the [Armoured Division](#) in the [Hamma-Gabes](#) area without delay.

The attack by [New Zealand Corps](#) was to be made on a two-brigade front, [5 Brigade](#) on the right and [6 Brigade](#) on the left, with [8 Armoured Brigade](#) superimposed over the whole front. The attack would be supported by the whole of the Corps artillery, reinforced by two field regiments and one medium regiment of [10 Corps](#). A creeping barrage was to be fired, with timed concentrations on known enemy positions and batteries. [Eighth Armoured Brigade](#) during the attack was to move in advance of the infantry and at 4 p.m. would cross the start line, which in the centre was about 600 yards north-east of the Roman Wall, followed at 4.15 p.m. by [5](#) and [6 Brigades](#).

The rate of advance to the first objective, 2000 yards from the start line, was to be 100 yards in one minute, and to the second objective (a further 2700 yards) 100

yards in two minutes. There was to be no pause on the first objective. The Divisional Cavalry in support of 6 Brigade would move north-east along the foothills on the western flank and assist in mopping up.

On the capture of the final objective 5 Brigade was to exploit along the high ground to the east while 6 Brigade completed the mopping-up of enemy pockets in the foothills to the west. Before the attack several adjustments in the dispositions of the forward troops were necessary. On the night before, 5 Brigade was to take over the existing forward defence line of 6 Brigade and was to capture Pt 184, a dominating feature on the right flank, which completely overlooked the start line.

Twenty-sixth Battalion was to be relieved by the Maori Battalion and would then take over the 25 Battalion area to the east of the road and forward of Pt 201, to 1000 yards beyond the Roman Wall. Twenty-fourth Battalion was to remain on the left flank as far as the road, with its forward line level with 26 Battalion.

Twenty-fifth Battalion, on relief by 26 Battalion, was to relieve a battalion of the Buffs on the left flank. For the operation 25 Battalion was allotted one machine-gun platoon and those anti-tank guns of 33 Anti-Tank Battery already supporting it, and was also to take over 57 Anti-Tank Battery, RA, from the Buffs.

All these preparations were to be completed in darkness and movement after dawn was to be restricted to a minimum to prevent the enemy discovering the start line dispositions. However, 25 Battalion moved over to the left flank in the early afternoon of 25 March and relieved the Buffs as arranged, a strong wind and a good deal of dust reducing enemy observation. Only light shelling was experienced during the move.

In the very early hours of the 26th, 21 Battalion was firmly established on Pt 184 and the other battalions then moved to their allotted positions, though a company of the Maori Battalion could not reach the start line by dawn and so dug in a thousand yards short of it. The tanks also moved up in darkness into wadis and behind spurs ready to advance through the infantry in the afternoon.

On 6 Brigade's front the attack was to be made by 24 Battalion. There were two objectives: one, the high ground 1000 yards ahead, and the other a wadi another

thousand yards farther on. From its position on rising ground on the left flank, 25 Battalion was to support the attack with observed fire and also assist the Divisional Cavalry in mopping up on that flank. The battalion was also to be prepared to advance to the line of the final objective on the left of 24 Battalion, a diversionary operation to widen the front of attack and so reduce concentration of fire against that battalion. It was to be supported by overhead fire from 1 MG Company, which had joined 25 Battalion the previous night.

During the many hours of daylight preceding the attack the men lay concealed in their slit trenches. The casualties since the attack on 21–22 March were one officer and twenty-two other ranks; of these, three other ranks were killed, one died of wounds, one officer (Captain Matthews, A Company) and eighteen other ranks were wounded.

The absence of any increase in the enemy artillery fire, except against the newly captured positions of 21 Battalion, was evidence of the success of the measures taken for concealment, though perhaps some credit should go to the windy and dusty conditions which reduced visibility, especially as the enemy had the wind, and therefore the dust, in his face.

Punctually at the arranged time, 3.30 p.m., the Allied air attack on enemy positions and gun emplacements began and the tanks of [8 Armoured Brigade](#) moved from their concealed positions towards the Roman Wall on their way to the start line. After half an hour's air attack the guns opened fire and the tanks, followed by carriers, crossed the start line and commenced their advance.

From their elevated positions about 3000 yards west of the left flank of the first objective, 25 Battalion saw the first wave of the fighter-bomber attack sweep low across the enemy position, shooting up everything in sight, a most impressive display. The battalion's position was also strafed, causing one casualty. Earlier in the afternoon a [United States](#) pilot had baled out of his burning aircraft and landed in the battalion area, where he was joined by another pilot on his way to the rear. One Spitfire pilot, shot down just prior to the attack, remained with the battalion for the operation; much amusement was caused later on his remarking that he would rather do ten crashes than take part in another 'ground show'.

The leading troops of the attacking battalions crossed the start line fifteen minutes after the barrage opened and followed the tanks and carriers towards the first objective. Seventeen minutes later, 25 Battalion advanced on its diversionary and mopping-up role. The battalion had two companies forward and two in support, C Company on the right supported by B Company, and A Company on the left supported by D Company.

C Company (Captain Norman) encountered heavy machine-gun and rifle fire and sent two sections forward under the covering fire of the remainder of the company. The sections advanced to an enemy position on a spur in line with the first objective of 24 Battalion and about 2000 yards out from its left flank, and, with a spirited attack with the bayonet, captured the position. The enemy immediately behind the spur retaliated, however, with small-arms fire and hand grenades and forced the sections back to take cover. From there the two sections inflicted many casualties on the enemy with rifle fire, resulting after dark in fifty men coming over and surrendering. C Company then moved up and occupied the enemy position, capturing fourteen heavy machine guns and so emphasising the great value of the operation to 24 Battalion. C Company lost four men killed and six wounded.

On the battalion's left flank, A Company (Captain Webster) had orders to advance 1000 to 2000 yards provided the enemy was not too strong. Webster had one platoon of medium machine guns, one section of mortars, and one section of carriers under command. The line of advance was roughly parallel to that of the main attack. A supporting machine gun, firing so low that it endangered the advancing men, and indeed is reported to have removed a cloth star from Lieutenant Mahar's shoulder, delayed the advance of the company until a message by runner corrected the error. A Company then crossed the start line at 4.40 p.m., about eight minutes late, supported by the fire of the machine guns and mortars, and for the first 600 yards met with little opposition excepting some machine-gun and 50-mm fire from the right flank. About 200 yards short of the objective the company encountered heavy fire. Only 8 Platoon, some men of Company Headquarters, and a few men of 7 Platoon were able to advance, and these pushed on across a wadi to a small hill beyond.

It was then discovered that the enemy had four Mark III and four Mark IV tanks

about seventy-five yards to the front. Four of these moved across the front and came round into the wadi behind the company's forward troops, thus cutting their line of retreat. Several men who were trying to get back were killed or wounded and it was then decided to stay in the position until dusk. The enemy gave the men no respite, mortaring and sniping from the front and machine-gunning from the tanks in rear. The tanks appeared to have only armour-piercing ammunition for their 75-millimetre guns since, fortunately, no high-explosive shells were fired.

The forward troops of A Company were in this serious plight when 25 Battalion's anti-tank platoon intervened. Lieutenant [Williams](#)⁷ had taken a six-pounder forward to deal with enemy machine guns in derelict tanks, and after firing on these discovered the cause of A Company's distress. The six-pounder was immediately brought into action and destroyed a Mark III tank, so discouraging the others that they kept down in the wadi to avoid the six-pounder and from there were unable to harass A Company. Lieutenant Williams had been carrying out a reconnaissance on foot, despite the heavy fire, and after dealing with some enemy machine-gun posts in derelict tanks, he fortunately noticed A Company's predicament. For his ability, courage, and leadership he was awarded the Military Cross.

At dusk the enemy tanks withdrew, and as only one third of A Company had reached the forward position and there was a large gap on the right flank, the company withdrew to its former position. It was later discovered that the anti-tank platoon allotted to A Company had been diverted to protect D Company, which had sent 18 Platoon forward to keep in touch with A Company. While A Company was held up by the low-firing machine gun, 18 Platoon had five casualties, and when that company encountered the tanks, the platoon took cover in rear. Nos. 16 and 17 Platoons of D Company had also gone forward a little but had been pinned down by machine-gun fire, coming mostly from the tanks. The company lost its commander, Major Morrison, who was wounded when the anti-tank jeep, in which he was accompanying the anti-tank officer, Lieutenant [Baker](#),⁸ was blown up on a mine, Baker being killed.

Although Pt 209, a very strongly defended feature on the right of 5 Brigade front, the objective of the [Maori Battalion](#), gave serious trouble and was not finally subdued till late in the afternoon of the following day, [1 Armoured Division](#) had passed through the forward New Zealand battalions by dusk and had then laagered

until the moon had risen, when it continued the advance towards [El Hamma](#).

After dark, when it was learnt that the main attack had been successful, 25 Battalion withdrew to the position it had left earlier in the afternoon. Patrols then sent forward discovered that the enemy had withdrawn. The casualties suffered by the battalion during the operation, though subject to some uncertainty regarding actual dates, were one officer and thirty-six other ranks: ten other ranks were killed, one officer and twenty-five other ranks were wounded, and one man was a prisoner of war.

On the morning of the 27th the battalion was under orders to be ready to move at thirty minutes' notice, but owing to enemy activity on the right flank, especially at Pt 209, the start was delayed until just before dusk. The transport was then brought forward and the battalion moved a short distance along the road to take its place in the Brigade Group towards the tail of the column, ahead of 24 Battalion and the Brigade Workshops; the head of the brigade was at the second objective of the previous day's attack, three miles north-east of the Roman Wall. No further move was made that night.

At dawn (28 March) the leading troops of the Corps resumed the advance and shortly afterwards a clash with the enemy, requiring the deployment of the artillery, resulted in the capture of about 1000 Italians. A little later the New Zealand column turned to the east to avoid the [El Hamma](#) bottleneck, where the enemy was still opposing the advance of the armour.

Fifth Brigade Group had orders to remain behind to clear up the enemy still holding out on the right flank, while 6 Brigade Group was required to wait until 8 [Armoured Brigade](#) and the New Zealand gun group had passed through. Twenty-fifth Battalion did not move till nearly noon, when the column progressed slowly over rough country. It was a tiring day, hot and dusty, with many starts and stops, though the monotony was somewhat relieved by the frequent sight of abandoned enemy guns, vehicles, and equipment of all descriptions.

In the early afternoon the brigade column was bombed by eight Ju88s, which killed seven men and wounded twenty-three others throughout the brigade; bombs fell among 25 Battalion transport, killing Corporal Wood and wounding eight others.

A couple of hours later enemy fighter-bombers attacked, fatally wounding Captain Ball,⁹ the Brigade IO.

About dusk the battalion closed to three columns to negotiate the defile across [Wadi Merteba](#), about three miles to the east of the [El Hamma](#) road, and a couple of miles farther on changed to desert formation and halted for the night. The news then received that the [Eighth Army](#) held all the strong-points of the [Mareth](#) line was at least some recompense for the trials and dangers of the past week, and hopes were high that the campaign in North Africa was nearing its end.

Early the following morning, the 29th, it was learnt that the enemy had retired from [El Hamma](#) and also from positions ahead of the [New Zealand Corps](#), which continued its advance on [Gabes](#), 15 miles to the north-east. Having completed its task at the Gap, 5 Brigade had moved by a secondary road to a position five miles south of the battalion and was also advancing on [Gabes](#), gradually converging on the divisional axis.

Twenty-fifth Battalion, which the previous night had halted some distance in rear of 6 Brigade, resumed the march at noon. It was another day of starts and stops and also of blinding dust, which was reduced a little when cultivated areas appeared. One halt was made to let General Leclerc's force through; another, of almost seven hours, was caused by the brigade changing from desert formation to column of route in order to use the road to [Gabes](#), which 5 Brigade had reached first.

On reaching the road after dark that day, 25 Battalion halted for the night and dispersed. Early next morning it formed up in nine columns, but owing to severe congestion ahead, especially in [Gabes](#), did not move till noon, when it advanced, first in three columns and then in column of route, along the road. [Gabes](#) was reached after an hour's run and, passing through the town, the troops reached a staging area a couple of miles to the north-west.

The next day the men had the luxury of a swim at the beach before the battalion again moved off to the brigade area astride the main [Gabes- El Hamma](#) road, west of [Gabes](#). The route crossed a landing ground which had been ploughed and mined, and because of delays due to cross traffic and congestion a halt was called a couple of miles past the landing ground, the march being resumed in the

morning of 1 April.

Six days were spent in the brigade area, the main activities being maintenance of vehicles, sports, swimming at the [Gabes](#) beach, and a few route marches. At times enemy bombing was heard in the distance, but on Sunday, 4 April, it came a little nearer and apparently caught a truck which could be seen burning not far away. A couple of days later bombers were over most of the night, and just before dawn a very strong barrage which continued for hours was fired against enemy aircraft over [Gabes](#).

It was a beautiful day, with scores of Allied fighter-bombers overhead, when on the 7th the battalion moved off once more. The route lay to the north and there were the usual delays due to obstacles and traffic congestion. After travelling 35 miles in thirteen hours the battalion at 10 p.m. halted at the tail of the Division, three or four miles to the north of [Wadi Akarit](#). Commenting on the day's run, Wakeling wrote:

'Off at 9. More planes overhead than I have ever seen in one day. A lot of Yankee planes about now. Kept moving until 11 p.m. over rough and dusty country and Jerry gave us a scare when he dropped a flare not far away. Chilly night and plenty of mosquitoes.'

The Wadi Akarit had been strongly held by the enemy after his retreat from the [Mareth](#) line. The forward troops of the Division had probed the position, and when it was found the enemy intended to defend it, the Division, which was being reserved for a mobile role later, was relieved on 2 April. Supported by New Zealand artillery three days later, an Indian and two British divisions secured a bridgehead through which the New Zealanders and other troops were to advance. For a time it was not possible to move the Division through, and on the morning of the 7th, 6 Brigade and [8 Armoured Brigade](#), supported by an artillery barrage and extensive air support, were to attack. However, the enemy withdrew during the night 6 – 7 April and in the morning the leading troops of the Division passed through. By nightfall, when 6 Brigade had caught up with the rear of the Division, the leading troops, including 5 Brigade, were 15 miles beyond the wadi.

The following day the battalion, with the rest of the brigade, slowly followed up

the advance, which was meeting with occasional opposition from tanks and guns of enemy rear-guards. The route was over fairly flat country with many oat crops, and after travelling 12 miles the battalion halted for the day. It was windy and dusty and there was much activity by Allied fighter-bomber squadrons, each of eighteen aircraft, a cheerful sight for the advancing troops. Evidence of the successful operations ahead was provided throughout the day by the passage of Italian prisoners, driving their own trucks back through the battalion. That night by 10 p.m. the advanced troops of the Division had reached their objective, 20 miles farther to the north near the [Sfax- Sbeitla](#) road. The day was a notable one, not only for the successful operations but also for the gaining of contact with [2 United States Corps](#) and the capture of the GOC Saharan Group, General Mannerini, and his complete staff.

Making an earlier start on 9 April and travelling for an hour before breakfast through large areas of wheat, 25 Battalion by noon had covered 29 miles and then halted for lunch. While halted the column was attacked by four Me109s which dived low and dropped a couple of bombs without effect. In mid-afternoon the battalion passed through the rest of the brigade to take the lead in place of 26 Battalion, which had been sent out to deal with enemy tanks and infantry reported on the right flank. By dusk the advanced troops of the Division were still south of the [Sfax-Sbeitla](#) road, which was held in some strength by the enemy.

Enemy aircraft could be heard overhead most of the night and the battalion seemed to be fortunate to escape casualties as there was heavy bombing all round. It was a very pleasant journey next day, with good going through cultivated country, the fields of oats sprinkled with poppies making an attractive picture, though no doubt the farmers in the battalion viewed the poppies with some distaste. In the afternoon large areas of olive trees stretched as far as the eye could see. The night was spent in an olive grove, and being the right forward battalion of the Brigade Group, 25 Battalion put out a gunline on the right flank.

The next day, Sunday, 11 April, was beautifully fine. Voluntary services were arranged by the Padre and, on an extra issue of water being made, the men washed both themselves and their clothes, which were hung on the olive trees to dry while the men remained stripped to the waist. This was the situation when orders came late in the afternoon for an unexpected and hurried move, causing a great rush to

pack and dress. The move was a short one, the halt for the night being made to the west of [La Hencha](#) after 11 miles had been covered.

Administrative difficulties were still concerning the Higher Command as [Eighth Army](#) was being maintained along the single road from [Tripoli](#), 300 miles back, and it was urgently necessary that the port of [Sfax](#), just captured, should be got into working order forthwith. The operational role of the Division probably saved 25 Battalion, amongst others, from another spell as waterside workers.

[Sousse](#), a little over 60 miles to the north, was the next objective of the New Zealand Division, which had its leading troops within 12 miles of it. It was taken without opposition in the morning of 12 April and the advance was continued towards the next target, the town of [Enfidaville](#), 25 miles farther on. That day 25 Battalion had made an early start, halting for breakfast on the way. After various halts, and accompanied only by Brigade Headquarters and 33 Anti-Tank Battery, the battalion moving on at dusk finished the day's journey of 43 miles a little before midnight near Bourdjine, 16 miles south of [Sousse](#). This night journey had been undertaken because of the congestion on the roads, which had halted the brigade for several hours. The remainder of the brigade rejoined the following morning and the column, moving at speed along the main road during the afternoon, passed through [Sousse](#) and ended the day's march of 28 miles a little before dusk. As the troops passed through [Sousse](#) and other centres they received an enthusiastic welcome, the warmth of which—so characteristic of the French—rather surprised the men.

During the day 5 Brigade had been in action against a strong enemy position near [Takrouna](#), three miles west of [Enfidaville](#), and had encountered stiff opposition which made it probable that the whole Division would have to take part. Early the following morning, 14 April, 6 Brigade was at half an hour's notice to move, and shortly afterwards 25 Battalion and 6 Field Regiment were sent forward. In a single column the battalion moved up the coastal road, adopting desert formation nine miles from [Enfidaville](#). Three miles farther on, a village was being shelled by the enemy and, halting the battalion, Colonel Morten ordered the carriers and B Company (Captain [Gaze](#) ¹⁰) to continue the advance.

The carriers reached the outskirts of [Enfidaville](#), where enemy opposition prevented further progress. Supported by tanks of [8 Armoured Brigade](#), they then

attempted an outflanking movement from the east. Meanwhile, B Company had taken up a position a little over five miles south of the town. The enemy had excellent observation to the south, and a couple of shells which landed close to the main body of the battalion led to some rapid digging and consequently better shelter from a number of shells which followed soon afterwards.

Early in the afternoon the mortars and anti-tank guns were sent forward. By dusk the carriers and tanks were 2000 yards to the north-east of [Enfidaville](#) and within a few hundred yards of the main road running north-east from the town. There they encountered enemy infantry and gun positions, covered by a minefield, and took a prisoner from III Battalion 47 PGR. ¹¹ The battalion was then ordered to advance to within 3000 yards of the town by dawn, and in the meantime to send patrols into it at midnight and at 3 a.m. After dark Battalion Headquarters with A, C, and D Companies advanced four miles to a position just ahead of B Company, where it had two companies forward, D on the right and C on the left astride the road, A Company being in support. At the times ordered reconnaissance patrols under Lieutenants Sanders and O'Connor were sent forward. Sanders's patrol saw no sign of the enemy and reported the town clear, but O'Connor's patrol found enemy posts, including a machine-gun post, and was fired on. A compressor was heard in the town.

The following morning 25 Battalion was instructed to prepare to carry out a company raid at midnight, but a few hours later this order was cancelled as a full-scale attack was thought to be necessary. That morning B Company was withdrawn to the B Echelon area, receiving en route some attention but no casualties from the enemy artillery, just a little 'hurry up', to use a popular term. The artillery of both sides was moderately active throughout the day, the New Zealand artillery engaging enemy infantry east of [Enfidaville](#) and the enemy employing counter-battery fire and accurate ranging on the road.

That night two companies of 26 Battalion were moved up on the left of 25 Battalion, linking the left of the battalion with the right of [28 Battalion](#) of 5 Brigade, which was in position to the south of [Takrouna](#). During the night there was a little ineffective enemy rifle, machine-gun and mortar fire at times against the forward posts; just before midnight a patrol of twelve men under Lieutenant [Bourke](#), ¹² sent

out to deal with the machine-gun post located the previous night, found it abandoned but was fired on by a machine gun in another position. A and D Companies each sent out two reconnaissance patrols on the flanks, one of A Company's patrols observing a small enemy patrol it was unable to attack.

The next morning (16 April) about 9 a.m. there was heavy shelling, the battalion OP receiving three direct hits. In the afternoon D Company, as well as jeeps on a reconnaissance, was also shelled. After dark a relief was to take place, troops of 50 Division taking over the coastal sector from 6 Brigade. It was a somewhat complicated relief as C Company was relieved by the [Scots Guards](#) and A and D Companies by the Grenadier Guards, while the [Coldstream Guards](#) were on the right flank. The reliefs commenced at 9 p.m. and within an hour heavy enemy artillery fire fell in front of C Company, suggesting enemy anticipation of an attack, but no further activity followed. To guard against any enemy enterprise during the relief, C Company had a patrol forward and towards the railway line on the left and D and A Companies provided protection on the flanks. A little after midnight the relief was completed and the battalion assembled by companies in the rear, calling up company transport by wireless as required and moving to an area about nine miles to the south.

The men were glad to find that the mosquitoes, which had been a real trial, were less numerous in the new area. A quiet day followed, though the artillery in front was active most of the time and many aircraft were passing overhead. Already well established in the rear, B Company did a two-hours' route march in the morning, the men being very much interested in the dozens of Arabs moving back with all their goods and chattels, sheep, goats, Jersey cows, and some grand hacks. The following day, Sunday, voluntary church services were again held, and in the afternoon, while Battalion Headquarters had a route march, the companies visited [Hergla](#) beach, ten miles away; though the beach was rocky and the water rather cold, the men enjoyed a refreshing swim. There was a fascinating spectacle in the afternoon when enemy aircraft bombed the main coastal road to the east of the battalion. All anti-aircraft guns within range, and probably many that were not, opened fire, small arms from 25 Battalion and other units in the vicinity joining in. There were many claimants of the one aircraft shot down. Although for the moment they were out of the battle, the men had a disturbed night; the atmosphere was

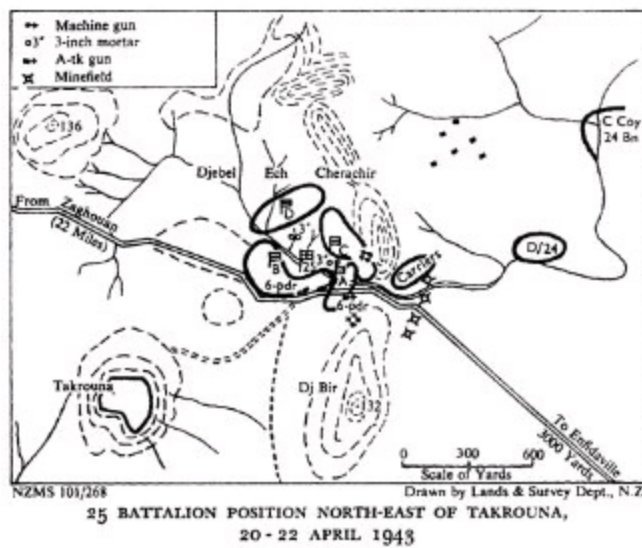
close, it was too hot to sleep, the mosquitoes were again very bad, and the troops on both sides up at the front were very noisy.

A heavy attack on the enemy's [Enfidaville- Takrouna](#) position had been planned for the following night, 19–20 April. It was to be on a two-division front, with 2 NZ Division on the right and 4 Indian Division on the left, and with 7 Armoured Division covering the open left flank. The New Zealand attack was to be on a front of about 4600 yards and of about the same depth from the start line, with 6 Brigade on the right and 5 Brigade on the left.

For 6 Brigade's attack, 26 Battalion was to be on the right and 24 Battalion on the left, with 25 Battalion in reserve. Tanks under brigade command were to support the attack and afterwards protect the flanks. About an hour and a half after the attack started at 11 p.m., 25 Battalion would occupy the area vacated by 26 Battalion, and would be supported by 33 Anti- Tank Battery, less one troop accompanying 26 Battalion. Three 3-ton trucks of 25 Battalion were to be near the Brigade Control Post north of the assembly area to take prisoners of war to the rear. Twenty-fifth Battalion's position was to be that held by 26 Battalion on the left of the battalion four days before. The battalion was not to move before midnight.

The day of the attack was quiet, with early showers, and the night cloudy with a half-moon. The barrage started to time and was an impressive sight as, an hour later, the battalion made its way to its new position, which was occupied by 2.30 a.m. The barrage had then ceased, and a little later the welcome news was received that the initial stages of 6 Brigade's attack had been successful. The battalion stood-to at 5 a.m. and the men found it very cold after lying in the slit trenches for a couple of hours with no blankets, any slight chance of sleep they might have had being dispelled by the plague of mosquitoes. Further news of the attack showed that, except for defensive fire, the attack had been unopposed, and although the battalions were not quite on the second objective, the brigade was firmly established with supporting arms dug in and one regiment of tanks well forward.

As will be seen, 25 Battalion was to be more concerned with the situation on 5 Brigade's front. The attack there had met



25 battalion position north-east of takrouna, 20 – 22 april 1943

with firm opposition in difficult country. East of [Takrouna](#), during the first phase of the operation, the [Maori Battalion](#) had been unable to reach its objective, but small parties of men later gained the summit of [Takrouna](#). West of [Takrouna](#) 21 Battalion, after severe fighting, had been withdrawn to the vicinity of the start line. In the second phase 23 Battalion had fought its way forward past the eastern edge of [Takrouna](#) to the southern slopes of Djebel ech Cherachir, almost reaching the first objective, which was about 1200 yards north of Takrouna. Behind 23 Battalion the Maoris held two important

positions: A Company occupied the southern end of Djebel Bir on the eastern outskirts of [Takrouna](#), while the enemy held the northern end of the Djebel; on the summit of [Takrouna](#) the men there had maintained their hold and were confronted by the enemy on the northern and western slopes, including a lower village a little down the northern slopes. Consequently, 23 Battalion was in an isolated position almost surrounded by the enemy.

It was now for 25 Battalion to interpose on 5 Brigade's front, as in the afternoon, having been placed under command of that brigade, Colonel Morten received orders from [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) to relieve 23 Battalion after dark. That battalion was now very low in strength. Twenty-fifth Battalion was instructed to move on foot to 24 Battalion's position, which lay to the east of 23 Battalion, and then to proceed north-westwards and effect the relief. This involved a march of about six miles.

At 7 p.m. (20 April) B Company and Battalion Headquarters went off, following 6 Brigade's axis to the [Enfidaville- Zaghouan](#) road, and thence north-west along the road to 23 Battalion's position. They were led through a minefield 1200 yards east of [Takrouna](#) by guides from 23 Battalion. The route passed through a field of oats of hip height and up a damp wadi, a great contrast with the desert. The men arrived wet with perspiration and dug in under the fire of snipers.

C, A, and D Companies followed an hour later. Bren carriers were used to carry ammunition, but except for supporting arms no other transport was used. Apart from a little shelling along the road, the relief was completed without incident before midnight. The four companies formed a perimeter defence, A Company astride the [Enfidaville- Zaghouan](#) road in the south-east sector, B Company close to the road in the south-west, D Company in the north-west, and C Company in the north-east sector, a more-or-less circular position approximately 600 yards in diameter. There was a gap of about 1000 yards between the eastern limits of C Company and the western flank of 24 Battalion, but during the night D Company of 24 Battalion took up a position about 700 yards east of 25 Battalion to cover the gap.

The battalion's mortars were sited within the perimeter and two six-pounder anti-tank guns, in positions near the road on the southern flank of A and B Companies, covered the eastern and western approaches along the road. The other anti-tank guns were sent back as the country was naturally tank proof and additional guns may well have drawn fire. The carriers were on the eastern flank just north of the road in the shelter of high ground to the north of them. During the night a good deal of activity was noticed on the top of [Takrouna](#) and it was learnt that the enemy had recaptured part of the summit.

Early the following morning 5 Platoon of 2 MG Company from the west side of [Takrouna](#) was sent up to 25 Battalion, and came under very heavy mortar and machine-gun fire while taking up a temporary position for the day. After dark one section was placed on the southern flank of A Company to cover the road to the west and also the front of C Company to the north-east; the other section, from rising ground on C Company's front, had fields of fire mainly to the west and north-west. During the day the enemy's positions were heavily shelled, particularly Pt 136, a thousand yards north-west of the battalion. The enemy artillery was also very active

and the battalion had an unpleasant time, its positions being shelled and mortared all day and snipers on the high ground, which dominated the position on all sides, presenting a constant danger. During the morning eleven of the enemy from [Djebel Bir](#), the commanding hill to the south, came in and surrendered, having evaded capture when [28 Battalion](#) took the feature the day before.

In the afternoon three Crusader tanks under battalion command came forward and had a marked effect in reducing the activities of the snipers. Further relief came in the afternoon through the capture by troops of 21 and 28 Battalions of the summit, village, and slopes of [Takrouna](#) with over 300 prisoners, thus removing mortars and snipers which had constantly harassed 25 Battalion. Although the battalion had been under fire all day its casualties were surprisingly light, one man (Private [Ashby](#) ¹³) of 12 Platoon being killed and seven, including Lieutenant O'Connor of D Company, wounded. The wounded were evacuated via a deep wadi which, after mines had been removed from it, gave a covered route via 24 Battalion.

That evening, 21 April, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) with his Brigade Major visited the battalion and, to improve its tactical position, instructed Colonel Morten to secure the rest of the Cherachir feature by a silent attack by one company, to send patrols to establish contact with 21 Battalion on [Takrouna](#), and to reconnoitre westwards along the [Zaghouan](#) road. The proposed attack was cancelled when a patrol report by Sergeant [Mendelssohn](#) ¹⁴ of C Company convinced Morten that the operation would incur many casualties. The patrol had encountered the enemy and was forced to retire with one man wounded. Patrols had already made contact with 21 Battalion on [Takrouna](#), and a patrol from B Company under Lieutenant [Ralfe](#), ¹⁵ reconnoitring for tanks 800 yards to the west along the [Zaghouan](#) road, was fired on by a machine-gun post. Another patrol, under Lieutenant Sanders of D Company, went out 1000 yards to the north-west to Pt 136 without encountering the enemy, though digging was heard there, the approaches were occupied, and the patrol was fired on.

Just before dawn the following morning (22 April) 25 Battalion fired Very lights to indicate its forward positions to the mortars and attached machine guns of 21 Battalion, which had relieved [28 Battalion](#) on [Takrouna](#). Three tanks came forward and by first light were in positions from which they could support the battalion.

The enemy had continued his intermittent shelling throughout the night and

during the day there was a considerable increase in his concentrations. Between 10 a.m. and noon the shelling was severe. The whole of 25 Battalion's position received attention and the wadi running through it was systematically searched by fire. In this period the battalion had five killed and five (including Captain Macaskill) wounded. In the afternoon the severe shelling continued but was more spasmodic. One officer of the attached machine-gun platoon was wounded by mortar fire and a Vickers gun put out of action. [Takrouna](#), to the south-west of 25 Battalion, and to a lesser extent the remainder of 5 Brigade's front, were also severely shelled throughout the day.

[Brigadier Kippenberger](#) had decided to regroup his brigade that night. Twenty-fifth Battalion was to relieve 21 Battalion on [Takrouna](#) and also was to change its dispositions elsewhere to avoid further heavy shelling next day. The positions on the low ground on the southern slopes of Cherachir, which had been taken over from 23 Battalion, were now of little value unless the crest also was held, and Colonel Morten was instructed to withdraw to fresh positions on the northern slopes of [Takrouna](#) and [Djebel Bir](#).

After dark Battalion Headquarters moved to a position on the east side of [Takrouna](#) and A and D Companies relieved 21 Battalion on that feature, A Company on the north-west slopes in a counter-attack role and D Company on the northern slopes. C Company remained in its position north of the road astride the wadi and facing generally north-west. B Company occupied positions on the north-west slopes of [Djebel Bir](#) about 300 yards north-west of Pt 132. The two six-pounder anti-tank guns remained in their positions facing east and west along the [Zaghuan](#) road and the mortars were allotted to C and D Companies. No. 4 MG Platoon relieved 5 MG Platoon and took up positions with D Company.

These arrangements were completed without incident. On the 23rd the enemy artillery was not quite so severe as before. At Battalion Headquarters two men were wounded and two trucks and a carrier damaged. Some heavy concentrations fell on the battalion's area, mostly however on the ground vacated the previous night, a matter of considerable satisfaction to the men on the higher slopes to the south. The Corps and Divisional Artillery were active on counter-battery and other tasks, amongst them the new role of indicating targets for the Allied aircraft by firing smoke on enemy gun-positions which were silent when the aircraft appeared.

The men were looking forward to relief that night. They had had a strenuous three days in a position dominated by the enemy, as some extracts from Wakeling's diary emphasise:

'Apr 21. Shower before dawn. No sleep and pretty wet in a slit trench. Shelled and sniped all the time. Told at night we are to move out and assist the Maoris. One of our worst days. Our move cancelled at 7 p.m. and a rather hectic night but had a short sleep. Fred Ashby killed in 12 PI.

'Apr 22. A filthy morning as our tanks came up near us and he gave them L. Shells flying all day and many narrow squeaks. Two men killed in 10 PI—Culshaw ¹⁶ and Scott. ¹⁷ Pulled back on to another feature after dark after burying Joe Kelleher ¹⁸ who had been killed in 12 PI. Dug in on a steep face and plenty of lightning and a little rain. No sleep and muggy and plenty of mosquitoes.

'Apr 23. Shelled out of our holes about 7.30 and moved further round as the Hun plastered us. Two of 11 PI buried in a slit trench with a direct hit bringing total killed up to 6 for three days and no chance of doing anything about these guns as his OPs still have all the advantage. Plastered on and off all day and a good sight in the afternoon as four groups of our eighteens went over Jerries' lines. We are to move out to-night. Will be rather sticky getting out and everyone's nerves at cracking point. Our heavy arty had a plane up this afternoon so hope they have done some good further back. No news of other than our own little area for four days now. Relieved by the Camerons at 8.30 but on leaving found out that one of our Sgts had been hit in a minefield and Jack and I had a rotten 5 hrs getting him fixed up and back to our ambulance. Shelled and sniped while doing so. Back to Bn at 3.30 a.m. and still in gun range. Lynn Hurst ¹⁹ wounded by a mine also.'

That night, 23 April, 5 Brigade was relieved by 152 (Highland) Brigade and 25 Battalion by the Camerons. The enemy apparently had advanced his forward positions a little and small-arms fire interfered with the relief, causing casualties and delaying the movements of various parties of both battalions. Booby traps and mines, which were still numerous in the area, were a constant danger, the battalion losing two men killed and seven wounded during the relief, which was completed just before midnight. The battalion returned to its own brigade and bivouacked in the B Echelon area. During its absence a change of brigade commanders had taken

place, Brigadier [Parkinson](#)²⁰ relieving Brigadier Gentry on 22 April.

The battalion's casualties while under command of 5 Brigade were two officers and twenty-six other ranks: eight other ranks were killed; two officers (Captain Macaskill and Lieutenant O'Connor) and eighteen other ranks were wounded.

The need for officers with the rifle companies was now acute and Colonel Morten decided to use officers from Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company. Captain Weston (HQ Company) was appointed to command A Company; Lieutenant Mahar (Quartermaster) to B Company; Lieutenants Buchanan (Intelligence Officer) and Williams (anti-tank platoon) to C Company; Lieutenants Hoy (Transport Officer) and [Robertson](#)²¹ (Mortars) to D Company.

While the relief of 25 Battalion by the Camerons was taking place, a further advance at 10 p.m., to deepen the salient held by 2 NZ Division and 56 ([London](#)) Division, had been made by 6 Brigade. Twenty-sixth Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left had made a silent advance of about 2000 yards without opposition, thus advancing the forward localities to a distance of about three miles to the north of [Enfidaville](#). Supporting arms were in position and contact had been established with 201 Guards Brigade on the right, while on the left the left rear of 24 Battalion was in touch with 51 (Highland) Division 200 yards in advance of the right flank of 25 Battalion's former position at Cherachir. The tanks were well forward.

During the 24th a few shells landed in the battalion's area and two men were wounded. Many of the men were still feeling the strain of the last few days and did not welcome the news that the battalion was again to move into the hills that night. Another advance of about 1200 yards to [Djebel Terhouna](#) and [Djebel Srafi](#) by 26 Battalion was planned for 10 p.m., a silent operation with the artillery standing by, and 25 Battalion was to occupy the rear company areas of that battalion, taking up a position facing north-west to deepen the defences.

Twenty-sixth Battalion secured [Djebel Terhouna](#) with little difficulty except for mortar and shell fire; strong opposition was met at [Djebel Srafi](#), and after severe, prolonged fighting the southern slopes were occupied but were under persistent sniping and mortar and artillery fire.

Twenty-fifth Battalion went forward at 9.30 p.m. and took up its allotted position a mile and a half east of [Takrouna](#). It had two companies forward, facing north-west on a front of 1100 yards; C Company was on the right and D on the left, with A and B Companies in support echeloned slightly to the left or south-west some 700 yards back. Each of the forward companies and B Company on the left of the support line had a six-pounder and a two-pounder anti-tank gun, while A Company on the right of B Company had two anti-tank guns on portées. The carriers were near Battalion Headquarters.

At 6 Brigade Headquarters the situation at [Djebel Srafi](#) was not clear for some time and it was decided that if the attack there had not fully succeeded, a company of 25 Battalion and 3 Royal Tank Regiment would be placed under command of 26 Battalion for a further attack. At four the following morning, Anzac Day, A Company of 25 Battalion advanced to the vicinity of 26 Battalion headquarters, a mile to the north-north-east, but a few hours later, after it was reported at dawn that [Djebel Srafi](#) had been taken, A Company rejoined the battalion. Later it was learnt that the enemy still held the northern slopes of the Djebel as well as Pt 141 north-west of it, so at 8 p.m. A Company returned to assist 26 Battalion. Again it was not employed, and before dawn next morning went back to 25 Battalion, only to go forward again five hours later. Still the company was not used, and finally at 9.30 p.m. rejoined its unit. What the men of A Company thought of this 'see-saw' has not been recorded, but no doubt they thought that marching was better than fighting.

The brigade was relieved that night, and by midnight 25 Battalion had been relieved by 2/ [5 Battalion](#) of the Queen's and went back to a rest area 15 miles south of [Enfidaville](#). Arriving there a little before dawn, the troops were quickly bedded down in company areas, awakening to a late breakfast and an easy day. The battalion reorganised and rested for the next eight days. Hot showers on the first day, bathing at the Schott Maria beach, the posting of 139 reinforcements (including four officers —Lieutenants Beattie, ²² [Berry](#), ²³ [Sargeson](#), ²⁴ and [Sutton](#) ²⁵) and an address by the Hon. F. Jones, New Zealand Minister of Defence, were the principal happenings of the period.

With the arrival of the four additional officers, some changes in appointments took place. Headquarters Company was commanded by Captain Wroth, with Captain

Webster second-in-command; the other officers of the company were Lieutenants Williams and Webb (Anti-Tank), Mowat (Mortar), Hoy (Transport), Mahar (Quartermaster), and Frost²⁶ (Carriers). Captain Weston was in command of A Company and Lieutenant Sanders second-in-command; the platoon commanders were Lieutenants Beattie and Melville.²⁷ B Company was commanded by Captain Gaze, with Lieutenant Ralfe second-in-command and Lieutenants Bourke and Finlay platoon commanders. C Company's commander was Captain Norman, second-in-command Captain Stevens, and platoon commanders Lieutenants Castelli²⁸ and Berry. D Company had Captain Hewitt commanding, Lieutenant Robertson second-in-command, and Lieutenants Sutton and Sargeson platoon commanders. The day following these appointments, Major Young²⁹ arrived to command D Company and Captain Hewitt became second-in-command of the company in place of Lieutenant Robertson, who was evacuated sick.

A little training was done along the usual lines, though one unusual feature of it was how to deal with cactus hedges as obstacles, a case of history repeating itself as the New Zealand Mounted Rifles in Palestine in the 1914–18 war had much trouble with them.

On 4 May 2 NZ Division began a move to the left flank, where that day the French 19 Corps was attacking; the Division was to support the French flank, prevent the withdrawal of enemy troops for action against the First Army, and be ready to go forward if the French attack succeeded. The following day 6 Brigade in divisional reserve moved to the vicinity of Djebibina, 15 miles to the west; 25 Battalion early in the morning travelled in column of route and, after a two-hour run, dispersed at seventy-five yards' interval in its new position. On the way the men could see Takrouna, ten miles to the north, being lightly shelled by the enemy. In the afternoon a few enemy fighter-bombers passed over but dropped no bombs near the battalion.

For the next three days 6 Brigade was in divisional reserve while the Division carried out operations in the Djebibina area. Training was resumed immediately. In the evening of 8 May the Division, with the exception of 5 Brigade Group which was to follow the next day, returned to the area south of Enfidaville. It had been a sunny day after heavy rain the night before and there was an entire absence of air activity. A powerful enemy searchlight was illuminating the roads in the forward area and the

display of flares was impressive as the battalion, leaving after dark, travelled back to its bivouac area.

The following day, 9 May, the Division was required to provide a relief for 169 Brigade, the left brigade of 56 ([London](#)) Division, which that night was to attack along the coastal sector, and 25 Battalion was directed to effect the relief. As the battalion was to take over a brigade position its supporting arms were substantially increased to two 6-pounder troops and one 17-pounder troop from 33 Anti-Tank Battery, and one machine-gun company of sixteen medium machine guns. In the afternoon Brigadier Parkinson, Colonel Morten, and other officers reconnoitred 169 Brigade's position, four miles to the north of [Enfidaville](#), and at dusk Colonel Morten and B Company went forward to take over the position, the remainder of the battalion following an hour later. As the battalion went past the artillery positions the guns were firing a heavy barrage in support of 167 Brigade of 56 Division, which in an attack that afternoon had reached its objective but was forced to retire.

Twenty-fifth Battalion completed the relief a little after midnight, taking over a front of three and a half miles. D Company was on the right, with its left forward localities 500 yards east of [Djebel Terhouna](#) and extending about 1000 yards to the north-east. A Company held the centre, with its right 1400 yards south of Terhouna and a front of about 1200 yards, while C Company extended the front about one and a half miles farther to the south-west. B Company was well forward, immediately behind the junction of A and C Companies. The powerful machine-gun support greatly strengthened this over-extended front, with one platoon on the right of D Company, one in the gap between D and A Companies, a third between A and C Companies, and the fourth in the centre of C Company's position. The sixteen anti-tank guns and the six 3-inch mortars were suitably disposed in a carefully co-ordinated defence. [Djebel Srafi](#) lay 1400 yards west of the southern flank of D Company, and the left flank of C Company, about 2000 yards east of [Takrouna](#), was facing Djebel ech Cherachir, which was 800 yards away to the west. The role of the battalion was to hold the position against a possible counter-attack, and the carrier platoon provided a mobile reserve for such a contingency. Eighth Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, was on the right of D Company.

The company positions were heavily shelled at intervals, the enemy using all

types of ammunition and many of the mortar bombs failing to explode. The New Zealand and other artillery were firing heavy concentrations over a wide front and fire from both sides continued throughout the day. During the night of the 10th, under orders from 6 Brigade, the battalion sent out three patrols to ascertain if the enemy was still in position. A patrol of four men from D Company, sent out at 9 p.m., reconnoitred buildings a mile to the south of Terhouna and found no enemy there, but the reverse slope was occupied; this patrol was repeated in the early morning with the same result. A patrol from A Company found the enemy holding Pt 141, a little to the north-west of [Djebel Srafi](#). As a result of these patrol reports French forces on the left of the battalion commenced an attack at dawn on the 11th against the high ground north and north-east of [Takrouna](#), through the position formerly held by 25 Battalion in that locality. About 10 a.m. the battalion could see French troops on the high ground one and a half miles north of [Takrouna](#) and about the same distance to the west of C Company. A patrol of three carriers under Lieutenant Frost was sent out to make contact but was forced to retire by very heavy machine-gun and mortar fire.

A reconnaissance by Colonel Morten, Captain Gaze, and Lieutenant Frost was then made to find an advanced position for B Company, the battalion's reserve, but the positions selected were under enemy observation and contact was not firmly established with the French until 9 p.m., when the reserve platoon from C Company, with supporting weapons, advanced 1500 yards to the north-west. This move of C Company's had the distinction that it was the last alteration of the Division's dispositions in an operational role in North Africa.

During the morning of the 11th two German prisoners of war were taken in C Company's area. Heavy artillery fire that morning wounded three men of A Company, and a nebelwerfer which was observed by 25 Battalion's OP was quickly dealt with by an artillery concentration. This was the first time this weapon had been encountered by the battalion, though the men had been told of it in the previous July. 'The men were engaged in peacefully sleeping, reading, etc., round their slits,' wrote one man, 'when suddenly they heard a most-terrifying moaning. For a few seconds there was a wild scramble and slit trenches finally finished up with about five deep. The sole casualties were caused this time by the undignified scramble for cover.' Throughout the war the Germans developed several nebelwerfers or rocket

launchers. These included the 150-centimetre type of six barrels which fired separately, in ten seconds, either a high-explosive rocket of 75.3 lb or a smoke one of 78 lb, with a velocity of 1120 feet per second, the respective ranges being 7330 and 7550 yards; also the 21-centimetre of five barrels which fired an HE rocket of 248 lb with a maximum range of 8600 yards. Both types were mounted on a two-wheeled carriage with a split trail.

There was also a ten-barrelled self-propelled weapon (15-centimetre Panzerwerfer 42) on a light armoured half-track vehicle, and several others, including a 30-centimetre mobile launcher of six frames firing 277 lb rockets with a maximum range of 5000 yards.

They were very noisy weapons, less accurate than artillery, and the rocket had poor fragmentation.

Heavy shelling in the afternoon killed one man of D Company and a second nebelwerfer opened fire and was shelled by the artillery. The Allied air forces were also active, and a familiar formation of light bombers known as the 'Faithful Eighteen' at least maintained its popularity through its continuous attacks upon the enemy. The enemy artillery fire, fierce in the morning and a little less so in the afternoon, appeared to have no particular purpose or plan and gave the impression that the enemy was merely getting rid of his stocks of ammunition. It was a type of fire very unpopular with those subjected to it as experience and judgment were of no value in avoiding it. This fire was answered by heavy artillery concentrations on enemy gun and infantry positions, the largest counter-battery programme staged in the North African campaign—thirty-one hostile batteries engaged in four hours—and fired by [10 Corps](#) artillery. Nebelwerfers, which seemed to be spraying the Enfidaville area indiscriminately, were treated as priority tasks and were heavily engaged.

Since early in May 18 Army Group, which had been reinforced from [Eighth Army](#), had been driving towards [Tunis](#) and [Bizerta](#) from the west. The enemy defences were pierced after fierce fighting and two armoured divisions were passed through for exploitation, reaching [Tunis](#) on the afternoon of 7 May. Here they separated, [7 Armoured Division](#) moving to the north and 6 Armoured Division driving across the base of the [Cape Bon](#) peninsula towards [Hammamet](#). At the same time 1 Armoured Division advanced towards the centre of the enemy positions opposite [Eighth Army](#),

and an infantry division linked up with the left flank of 19 French Corps.

The end of the war in North Africa was obviously near at hand. Attempts, initially without success, were made to induce the enemy to surrender unconditionally. Rumours were rife throughout the battalion, most of them false or at least premature. However, the fires and demolitions reported on all fronts and the tens of thousands of prisoners that were being taken were clear enough indications that enemy resistance was about to cease.

During the night, patrols from A and D Companies repeated the patrols of the previous night and found the enemy still holding his ground. Until seven o'clock the following morning, 12 May, an unusual silence seemed ominous as being 'the calm before the storm', and so, to some extent, it proved to be. At that hour the artillery engaged a few enemy targets, and shortly afterwards the enemy heavily shelled the company positions, continuing throughout the morning. Nebelwerfer fire was again particularly troublesome, and the heavier 21-centimetre weapon had made its appearance. One such mortar, from a position in front of the French, about 2800 yards north-west of D Company, bombarded the vicinity of 6 Brigade Headquarters and, as was to be expected, was at once engaged by [4 Field Regiment](#) (originally commanded by the Brigadier), with 25 Battalion providing observation for the guns.

The enemy artillery again seemed to be firing blindly and the Corps artillery as before replied briskly with concentrations, including one of ten rounds' gunfire against the headquarters of 90 Light Division. The New Zealand artillery took its full share in the strenuous bombarding, two field regiments during the day firing a total of over 10,000 rounds. The AFPU (a British Army Field Photographic Unit), which in the morning had arrived at 25 Battalion headquarters, was taken to a suitable position from which to photograph these artillery concentrations. Four formations of the Allied air forces, with a total of seventy-two medium bombers, repeated an attack of the previous day and made an impressive and cheering sight as they passed over or near the battalion in the middle of the afternoon.

Late in the afternoon Brigadier Parkinson discussed with Colonel Morten a proposal that 25 Battalion should attempt to collect prisoners, but it was decided not to do so until the position on the battalion's front had clarified. Elsewhere, enemy troops were surrendering in very large numbers, but the Italian [First Army](#) under

General Messe, which included German formations, still held its position, which extended from the north of [Saouaf](#) (about ten miles north-west of 25 Battalion) across the French front to the high ground north and north-west of the battalion. Further patrols from the battalion on the night of 12–13 May found Pt 141 still occupied, but there was little activity that night.

Early in the morning of the 13th four armoured cars of 56 Division, engaged in mopping-up the enemy, passed through 25 Battalion's position. Shortly afterwards prisoners arrived at the battalion in force, but it was not till about 10 a.m. that the men realised that 'the show was over'. It appeared that the Germans, who were from 90 Light Division, wished to surrender to the New Zealanders, and to 25 Battalion (which was the only New Zealand battalion in the front line when hostilities ceased) came the distinction of accepting the surrender of many of the men of that famous division, which over a lengthy period had frequently been in action against the New Zealand Division. While the Germans seemed pleased to be taken prisoner by the New Zealanders, the New Zealanders themselves 'seemingly enough', in the words of the battalion's war diary, 'felt that a long and bitter feud had at long last been written off as closed.'

The prisoners taken by the battalion numbered 64 officers and 1755 other ranks. Of these, 16 officers and 419 other ranks were Germans and the remainder, including 2 officers and 211 other ranks of the [Air Force](#), were Italians. The battalion provided transport for many Germans in addition to those included in these figures.

The battalion's casualties—one killed and four wounded—were surprisingly light considering the duration and the intensity of the enemy artillery fire. The last man killed in [Tunisia](#) was Private [Baines](#)³⁰ of D Company, while Private [Page](#)³¹ was the last man wounded.

At 2.45 p.m. on 13 May General Alexander sent a signal to Mr Churchill: 'Sir, it is my duty to report that the Tunisian campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores.'

In the afternoon 25 Battalion withdrew to the area south of [Enfidaville](#), preparatory to returning to Egypt. At dawn the following morning thirty other ranks, the leave allotment for the battalion, went to [Tunis](#) under Captains Norman and

Hewitt, and another fifteen had the same privilege the next day. Summer clothing was issued before the journey to Egypt commenced, and was a great relief from the heavier clothing. It was a pleasure to have clean clothes once more, though in many cases the bush shirts were a very bad fit. In the brief interlude of three days before commencing the journey to Egypt, the men enjoyed the swimming at the beach and the relaxation following the end of hostilities, aided by the rare luxuries of two bottles of beer for each man and an issue of goods from the canteen, both at the expense of Regimental Funds.

At the close of the campaign in North Africa the officers of 25 Battalion were:

Lieutenant-Colonel T. B. Morten

Major R. L. Hutchens

Major R. R. T. Young

Captain C. Weston

Captain G. C. Gaze

Captain R. G. Stevens

Lieutenant (T/Capt) E. K. Norman

Lieutenant (T/Capt) I. C. Webster

Lieutenant (T/Capt) N. K. Sanders

Lieutenant (T/Capt) S. M. Hewitt

Lieutenant (T/Capt) T. G. Ralfe

Lieutenant (T/Capt) I. S. Robertson

Lieutenant J. Finlay

Lieutenant J. L. Williams

Lieutenant R. S. Webb

Lieutenant T. C. Buchanan

Lieutenant J. Mahar

Lieutenant R. S. Mowat

Lieutenant K. F. Hoy

Lieutenant A. M. Sargeson

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) A. Castelli

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) G. B. Slade

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) H. E. Frost

Second-Lieutenant F. C. Irving

Second-Lieutenant V. A. Melville

Second-Lieutenant J. B. May

Attached:

Second-Lieutenant R. W. Berry

Second-Lieutenant A. J. Beattie

Second-Lieutenant A. H. Sutton

Captain V. T. Pearse, Medical Officer

[Rev. M. L. Underhill](#), Chaplain

Several awards were made to members of the battalion for services in the recent operations. They were:

DSO, Lieutenant-Colonel Morten and Major Morrison

MC, Captain Norman and Lieutenant Williams

MM, [WO II L. Hampton](#),³² Sergeant L. G. Mendelssohn, Corporal J. A. Glover, Lance-Corporal R. W. Heine and Private J. L. Leckie

Bar to MM, Lance-Sergeant W. Penman

Commander-in-Chief's commendation card, Lieutenant Frost

For services during the operations at the [Alamein](#) line in October 1942, Captain L. C. McCarthy, then the battalion's Medical Officer, was awarded the MC.

On 15 May the Division commenced the long journey to Egypt. The movement was carefully planned with easy stages of about 120 miles, the Division being divided into flights 'A' and 'B' for the journey. 'A' flight left the first day and arrived at [Maadi Camp](#) sixteen days later. 'B' flight followed on the second day. The tracked vehicles did not accompany the Division but were moved under separate arrangements, and were handed in before the departure of their units, each of the carriers being accompanied by two men of its unit.

With 6 Brigade and the New Zealand Artillery groups, a total strength of 427 officers and 6546 other ranks with 1605 vehicles, 25 Battalion started for Egypt. Halts for a complete day for vehicle maintenance and attention to routine matters were made on 19 May near [Tripoli](#) (when the men left out of battle and other men of the battalion from the New Zealand Advanced Base and [Convalescent Depot](#) rejoined) and on the 25th near [Benghazi](#). A washout at a deviation round an enemy demolition about 30 miles beyond [Misurata](#) also halted progress for a few hours on the 20th.

On the second day of the journey an A Company truck carrying 8 Platoon had the misfortune to strike a mine east of [Gabes](#) but escaped lightly with the spare driver injured in the leg. The arrangements for the march worked well, though the age and condition of the vehicles and the shortage of new tyres caused a certain amount of trouble. Nevertheless, in the whole of the two flights only thirteen vehicles were evacuated and fourteen towed in. The drivers themselves, as well as the Light Aid Detachment and the Brigade Workshop, were kept busy attending to the vehicles, the major repairs being the replacement of broken springs and attention to front hubs and gears, and all concerned deserved great credit for their

successful efforts.

The entertainment and exercising of the men were not overlooked. On 19 May during the day's halt near [Tripoli](#), Patriotic Fund parcels and a bottle of beer per man were issued; the men did a two-hours' march or organised recreation, shower baths were made available, and three hours' leave to [Tripoli](#) was granted to those who had not previously visited the town. The Kiwi Concert Party also entertained the troops. On the 22nd an early afternoon halt was made in the vicinity of [Nofilia](#), where the [Mobile Cinema Unit](#) played its part, and at a halt the next afternoon the [Cinema Unit](#) gave another entertainment; here the chaplain conducted a memorial service for those who had fallen in the Tunisian campaign.

At the full day's halt near [Benghazi](#) the [Cinema Unit](#) was again to the fore. A little before midday on the 24th the battalion halted within ten miles of the town, and half-day leave was given that day and the next to enable all the men to visit it. On the resumption of the journey, and after by-passing [Benghazi](#), the battalion passed through [Barce](#), [Derna](#), and [Tobruk](#), so that the troops could see these towns which had figured so largely in the desert campaigns. The battlefields where the battalion had been engaged naturally attracted much attention, and members of the unit who had not taken part in them had the opportunity of learning a good deal more about these historic fields.

Other matters also attracted attention; during the advance from [Alamein](#) the whole desert had appeared to be littered with abandoned enemy vehicles, weapons, and equipment, but due to the admirable work of the salvage units, these had completely disappeared. The enemy cemeteries, too, were much admired for their orderly state and layout, the unit of each soldier being designated by some piece of equipment from that unit.

The border between [Libya](#) and Egypt was crossed just before noon on the 28th and halts were made at [Buq Buq](#) that after-noon, then near [Mersa Matruh](#), and at [El Daba](#); the road then ran through the [Alamein](#) battlefields and [Amiriya](#) to the Wadi Natrun, where a halt was made on 31 May. Next day the great journey of 1900 miles in seventeen days ended at [Maadi Camp](#).

Passing through [Cairo](#), the battalion received a good welcome from the people,

and the old familiar street scenes, the Nile, the Pyramids, and the approaches to Maadi gave a touch of home-coming to its return after an absence of over fifteen months.

The vital topic of the day was the furlough scheme, under which, for the first draft, all the married men of the first three echelons and (to be selected by ballot) 70 per cent of the single men of those echelons were to be granted three months' furlough in New Zealand. There were a few exceptions, such as certain officers who for the moment could not be spared and those for whom replacements would have to be trained. The furlough party embarked at Suez on 15 June. The departure of highly trained and war experienced officers, senior and junior NCOs, and men tore a great hole which was felt in every part of the unit. It was a major task of reorganisation and training to fill the gaps and restore efficiency.

For those remaining, two weeks' service leave was granted. Drafts departed, normally at fortnightly intervals commencing on 5 June, to destinations which included Cairo, Alexandria, Sidi Bishr, and Palestine. Liberal daily leave and the use of unit transport to Cairo were also arranged.

The next four months were to be spent at Maadi, though of course this was not known at the time, and the usual routine was soon established. There were various events of interest. On 14 June troops from 25 Battalion took part in a victory march of the United Nations in Cairo. On 25 June there was a wedding of outstanding interest to the battalion when its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Morten, was married at Maadi to Sister J. K. Tyler of the New Zealand Army Nursing Service, the officiating clergyman being the former chaplain to the battalion, the Rev. M. L. Underhill,³³ who on the previous day had been appointed to the New Zealand Convalescent Depot; he was succeeded on 20 July by the Rev. H. G. Norris.³⁴

On 28 June there was a rather curious affair, involving a high degree of improbability, when at 5.30 p.m. the battalion received a warning that a parachutist attack on an airfield of unknown location was thought to be possible. One full company, consisting of one platoon from each company and commanded by Major Possin, was held in readiness at half an hour's notice and formed part of the total force of one squadron of tanks and two companies of infantry to be provided by the Division. The following afternoon advice was received that the alarm was over.

By 9 July the arrival of 150 reinforcements had brought the battalion almost to full strength and three days later training commenced in earnest. Many officers and NCOs were attending courses of instruction both within and outside the unit, and, due mainly to the furlough scheme, there were large numbers of transfers, appointments, and promotions of officers and NCOs. During June, July, and August, sixteen officers joined or rejoined, fourteen were attached to the battalion, and twenty-two (including nine on furlough but exclusive of several sent to courses of instruction) left for a variety of reasons, such as employment on divisional or brigade staffs, transfer to other units, and sickness. Seventy-seven NCOs had been promoted, some of them two or more steps in rank; fifty-five privates were appointed lance-corporals, and twenty-seven of these gained further promotion during these three months.

At the end of July and in August the companies in turn were sent off on a weekend trek of 85 miles over the desert route to the [Red Sea](#) near [Suez](#). Training, including a five-hours' route march, was carried out en route, and at the sea further training and swimming sports took place. The going was poor and the men had a very rough ride. 'The afternoon was spent in swimming, fishing by unsportsmanlike method and crab hunting,' wrote one man. 'After tea a concert was staged by some of the brighter social lights, then supper, and so to bed. Sunday being a day of rest was fully observed by all and after breakfast the water was thick with Kiwis again. Non-swimmers were given instruction. When the order was given to embus again, at 1 p.m., everyone cast a longing glance at the sea they'd enjoyed so much.' D Company did some rather strenuous hill-climbing and found loose rocks a menace. The company also experimented with ST grenades in water and reported that they had a terrific blast effect in about six feet of water; no mention was made of fishing. B Company was particularly privileged to witness, as the men lay in their beds on the beach, a spectacular display of flares by the [RAF](#). In August two picnics were arranged, one to the [Delta Barrage](#) and the other to the [Cairo](#) zoo; the arrangements were excellent.

On 14 August there was an unfortunate accident at the grenade range where D Company was training, when the explosion of a No. 69 grenade wounded Second-Lieutenant G. K. [Smith](#),³⁵ Lance-Sergeant [Curtis](#),³⁶ and Lance-Corporal [King](#).³⁷ Smith escaped lightly and returned to duty two days later.

In the middle of August [General Freyberg](#) inspected the battalion lines and then addressed the officers. Two days later he inspected a ceremonial parade of 6 Brigade and presented decorations and medals awarded for the campaigns in [Greece](#), [Crete](#), [Libya](#), and [Tunisia](#). In 25 Battalion Lieutenant-Colonel Morten received the DSO, Captain Williams the MC, and WO I Hampton, Sergeant Penman, and Sergeant Heine ³⁸ the MM. During the month the vehicles were re-camouflaged, receiving a basic coat suitable for European conditions. Rumours as to the destination of the Division were now rife, the popular selection being [Italy](#), though the [Balkans](#) were not neglected. Opinion was of course influenced by the trend of tactical training towards operations in close country, the alteration in camouflage (though it was recognised that it could be a 'blind') and the end of the campaign in [Sicily](#) pointing logically to [Italy](#).

At the beginning of September the arrival of ninety reinforcements brought the unit within nineteen of establishment, which in fact was exceeded by fourteen at the end of the month. In the middle of the month the battalion took its place in the movement of the Division to [Burg el Arab](#) on the coast, 30 miles south-west of [Alexandria](#), for divisional manoeuvres preparatory to embarkation overseas. The destination was kept secret. The movement was an unusual one involving the longest march on foot ever undertaken by the Division.

The battalion moved off in its vehicles early in the afternoon of the 15th, via [Cairo](#), [Mena](#), and the desert road to the north. It halted at the 40 Kilometre peg, where the troops had a hot meal. The vehicles proceeded another 20 kilometres, at which point the drivers and spare men were to erect the 'bivvies' for the rest of the battalion, which commenced to march at 6.25 p.m. In a little under five hours the marching troops had covered the 12½ miles to the bivouac area. Next day the march commenced at 6 p.m., and in this way the battalion reached the 180 Kilometre peg after marching 87½ miles in seven days. The vehicles then took the troops to their destination at El Imayid, 50 miles south-west of [Alexandria](#).

The men had found the continuous marching very strenuous, and the following comments from a diary are no doubt applicable to most of them:

'Sept 15. Ready to move at 2 p.m. and not looking forward to this 6-hours' route march each night for a week. Taken out to 40 Km peg and after tea at 5.30 started

off on our hike with the pipe band playing at the start line. All footsore and weary on arriving at our destination at 11.15 p.m.—our band played us in. 16th. Breakfast at 9 and slept when possible. Off again at 6 and fairly tough as feet a little tender and leg muscles pretty sore. Arrived to a tune by our band at 10.30 and all very tired and weary. 17th. All pretty stiff. On the way at 6 to another 20 Km and the band started us off. The worst night yet and most of us just made it but the band helped over the last half-mile. 18th. On the road again at 6 and not bad going for the first two hours but very tough for the last two. Making better time than was expected. 19th. Fairly tough night. Into bed as quick as numerous aches would allow. 20th. All pretty weary. On the road again at 6.20 and getting harder to keep going each night. Home once more at 10.30 and into bed very sore. 21st. Missed the last four hours march as sent to the camp site at the beach [on duty].'

On the day following the conclusion of the march the troops were given the opportunity to vote in the New Zealand general election; voting was continued throughout the day and again until noon the next day.

In the late afternoon of the 24th the battalion left for a brigade assembly area in the desert to take part in a training exercise. The men in the trucks had a very unpleasant ride over the rough and extremely dusty route and many vehicles were bogged in the loose sand. After remaining under cover during the 25th, the battalion joined in a brigade attack on a position protected by mines and wire, with the object of practising a breakthrough and then the holding of a bridgehead for the launching of an armoured brigade and gun groups. The attack was launched at 2 a.m. on the 27th under an artillery barrage and supporting fire from medium machine guns and ended at 7 a.m., the battalion returning to its camp by the early afternoon. Before the troops left the manoeuvre area [General Freyberg](#) spoke to the assembled officers, warrant officers, and non-commissioned officers and discussed the lessons of the exercise. He also told them that 'the Division was moving to [Europe](#) in the near future', and emphasised the necessity for security to prevent the enemy getting information about the Division and its movements.

Twenty-fifth Battalion now received four new six-pounder anti-tank guns in place of two-pounders, increasing the number of six-pounders in the unit to eight, much to everyone's satisfaction. All the drivers and the signal and mortar platoons had additional cause for satisfaction as they were issued with tommy guns to give

better protection against increased risks of attack in the new theatre of war whilst carrying out, as was frequently the case, their somewhat isolated duties.

Towards the end of the month an interesting lecture on the conduct of men taken prisoner and on various secret matters connected with escaping was given by an officer of the Inter- Services Branch, who strongly stressed the necessity for safeguarding the information. Several route marches of one and a half hours were carried out on the hard roads to toughen the feet, as marching on sand was of little use for this purpose, and half an hour's physical training was done each morning. Tommy-gun practices were fired on the beach by all the men who had just received these weapons, and all the other weapons in the battalion were practised with, including a new anti-tank weapon, the Piat mortar. The urgent need for an infantry weapon to deal with tanks had been emphasised in several tragic encounters, and the Piat, designed for that purpose, created much interest. As usual there was a little 'teething' trouble in that the bombs first provided had to strike right on the point in order to explode, a defect which was soon remedied. The weapon then gave the troops a good deal of confidence and proved very effective in the fighting which lay ahead; five Piat's were issued to the battalion. With operations in enclosed country in view, sniping assumed increased importance, eight sniper rifles being issued.

On 27 September all leave was stopped, New Zealand titles and badges were removed, and fernleaf signs taken off the vehicles or painted out. Truck signs were removed, the figures 62 being chalked on in their place. On 1 October a warning order to move was received and cancelled. In preparation for the voyage the battalion was organised into 'A' and 'B' parties, this being done to guard against the loss of a complete unit if a ship were sunk. 'A' Party (C and D Companies; 2, 4, and 5 Platoons; Support Company headquarters, and administrative personnel) was under Major Norman. 'B' Party (A and B Companies; Administration Company; Battalion Headquarters; 3 Platoon, less administration personnel with 'A' Party) was under Colonel Morten.

Preceded by advance parties under Second-Lieutenants [Collins](#)³⁹ and [Coddington](#)⁴⁰ the previous day, 'A' and 'B' parties, moving independently, left on 3 October for the staging areas at Ikingi Camp, [Amiriya](#). There they were accommodated in the special 'ship camp' organised for their respective ships, and

two days later during the afternoon embarked at the [Alexandria Docks](#), 'A' Party in the Reina del Pacifico and 'B' Party in the Dunottar Castle. 'B' Party was fortunate to have a wet canteen aboard and each man received two bottles of beer per night. 'A' Party had no wet canteen but fared better with canteen issues. Hammocks were provided but many men preferred to sleep on deck. The meals were good but not over-generous by New Zealand standards. Cigarettes were cheap at threepence for ten, and although on the Dunottar Castle the English beer was in lemonade bottles, it was very much appreciated, though its excessive effervescence required some ingenuity to bring it under control.

At 8 a.m. on 6 October the ships sailed, the men lining the rails for a last glimpse of Egypt and to see the surrendered ships of the Italian fleet. Later in the day a Special Order of the Day by [General Freyberg](#) announced that the Division was bound for [Italy](#), a destination expected by the great majority of the troops despite rumours of prospective landings in [Greece](#), [Yugoslavia](#), and elsewhere. Boat drill was held morning and afternoon during the brief voyage and the anti-aircraft guns of the seven escorting destroyers and the troopships carried out practices against towed targets; as additional protection against air attack, all Bren-gunners were issued with 100 rounds each



ITALY MAP No.1

of tracer, armour-piercing, and incendiary ammunition. There was a great spectacle on the second day when a convoy of thirty or more ships passed on the starboard side.

The weather was fine and the sea calm throughout the voyage. Just before dusk on the third day land was sighted and Mount [Etna](#), 10,739 feet in height, was reported to be visible. Early next morning, 9 October, the convoy sailed along the coast of [Calabria](#) towards [Taranto](#), reaching there at 8.30 a.m. The troops had breakfast, lunch rations were issued, and all stood by at half an hour's notice to disembark.

The battalion's officers on departure for [Italy](#) were:

Lieutenant-Colonel T. B. Morten, DSO, Commanding Officer

Major G. A. W. Possin, OC B Coy

Captain (T/Major) E. K. Norman, Bn second-in-command

Captain M. Handyside, OC D Coy

Captain (T/Major) I. C. Webster, OC C Coy

Captain (T/Major) P. W. Robertshaw, OC A Coy

Captain N. K. Sanders, OC HQ Coy

Lieutenant (T/Capt) S. M. Hewitt, OC Support Coy

Lieutenant (T/Capt) J. L. Webster, second-in-command B Coy

Lieutenant (T/Capt) T. G. Ralfe, second-in-command D Coy

Lieutenant (T/Capt) J. Finlay, second-in-command A Coy

Lieutenant (T/Capt) J. L. Williams, MC, second-in-command C Coy

Lieutenant (T/Capt) R. S. Webb, OC Anti-Tank Platoon

Lieutenant J. Mahar, Quartermaster

Lieutenant (T/Capt) K. F. Hoy, Adjutant

Lieutenant J. G. Coleman, D Coy

Lieutenant H. E. Frost, Carriers

Second-Lieutenant B. S. Edinger, Transport Officer

Second-Lieutenant A. H. Sutton, D Coy

Second-Lieutenant R. Easthope, Carriers

Second-Lieutenant D. J. Pocknall, Anti-Tank Officer

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) J. Groshinski, Mortars

Second-Lieutenant R. W. Berry, B Coy

Second-Lieutenant A. Norton-Taylor, B Coy

Second-Lieutenant H. G. Smith, Intelligence Officer

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) J. H. Sheild, Anti-Tank Officer

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) J. W. T. Collins, C Coy

Second-Lieutenant (T/Lieut) D. F. Muir, C Coy

Second-Lieutenant A. B. West, A Coy

Attached Officers

Lieutenant N. M. Izard, Asst IO and Signals Officer

Lieutenant H. R. Cameron, C Coy

Second-Lieutenant E. C. Coddington, A Coy

Second-Lieutenant J. Fordie, D Coy

Second-Lieutenant N. Lawson, A Coy

Second-Lieutenant A. S. McWhinnie, Mortars

Second-Lieutenant J. S. Nelson, A Coy

Second-Lieutenant N. A. Rees, B Coy

Second-Lieutenant G. K. Smith, D Coy

Captain V. T. Pearse, Regimental Medical Officer

Rev. H. G. Norris, Chaplain

¹ Col D. J. Fountaine, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Westport; born Westport, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO 20 Bn Jul-Aug 1942; 26 Bn Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jun-Oct 1944; comd NZ Adv Base Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

² Lt E. A. Riddiford; Edgehill, Martinborough; born Featherston, 19 Jun 1912; sheep-station cadet; wounded 21 Mar 1943.

³ Capt C. J. Treadwell; Pakistan; born Wellington, 10 Feb 1920; law clerk; wounded 21 Mar 1943.

⁴ Schu mines.

⁵ Pte J. C. Gospodnetich; Taumarunui; born Westport, 25 Apr 1919; dairy-factory hand; wounded 21 Mar 1943.

⁶ Sgt F. J. Lawrence; born England, 7 Nov 1917; shop assistant; killed in action 21 Mar 1943.

⁷ Maj J. L. Williams, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Jun 1908; school teacher.

⁸ Lt D. Baker; born Waimarama, 2 Nov 1916; horticulturist; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

⁹ Capt H. D. Ball; born Auckland, 20 Feb 1913; clerk; died of wounds 28 Mar 1943.

¹⁰ Capt G. C. Gaze; born NZ 10 Dec 1913; advertising salesman.

¹¹ Panzer Grenadier Regiment.

¹² Maj K. J. S. Bourke; Patea; born Patea, 29 Dec 1914; clerk.

¹³ Pte F. A. Ashby; born NZ 19 Sep 1918; labourer; killed in action 21 Apr 1943.

¹⁴ WO II L. G. Mendelssohn, MM, DSM (Gk); Hastings; born Auckland, 1 Mar 1911; builder.

¹⁵ Capt T. G. Ralfe; Nelson; born NZ 27 May 1916; law clerk.

¹⁶ Pte C. Culshaw; born Napier, 27 Sep 1915; motor driver; killed in action 22 Apr 1943.

¹⁷ Pte L. M. Scott; born NZ 14 Nov 1920; butcher; killed in action 22 Apr 1943.

¹⁸ Pte P. J. Kelleher; born Wellington, 31 Jan 1911; clerk; killed in action 22 Apr 1943.

¹⁹ S-Sgt L. G. Hurst; Wanganui; born NZ 14 Aug 1918; shop assistant; wounded 23 Apr 1943.

²⁰ Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Christchurch; born Wellington, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO 4 Fd Regt 1940–41; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; 6 Bde Apr 1943–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div (Cassino) 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun-Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1945; Commander, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

²¹ Capt I. S. Robertson; Slipper I., Whangamata; born Wellington, 19 Mar

1913; shepherd.

²² Capt A. J. Beattie; Palmerston North; born Palmerston North, 21 Sep 1912; departmental manager.

²³ Maj R. W. Berry, m.i.d.; born NZ 15 May 1917; shepherd.

²⁴ Lt A. M. Sargeson; Hawera; born Hawera, 9 Jun 1915; clerk.

²⁵ Maj A. H. Sutton; Singapore; born Masterton, 4 Feb 1921; school teacher; joined Regular Force 1949; DAA & QMG, HQ NZ Army Force, Singapore.

²⁶ Capt H. E. Frost; born NZ 1 Jun 1916; draper; died of wounds 4 Dec 1943.

²⁷ Capt V. A. Melville; Sth. America; born Wellington, 14 Jun 1917; salesman.

²⁸ Capt A. Castelli; New Plymouth; born England, 23 Jun 1918; mechanic.

²⁹ Lt-Col R. R. T. Young, DSO; England; born Wellington, 25 Jun 1902; oil company executive; CO NZ School of Instruction, Feb-Apr 1943; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1943–Jul 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; wounded 26 Dec 1943.

³⁰ Pte S. R. Baines; born NZ 19 Mar 1917; dairy farmer; killed in action 11 May 1943.

³¹ Cpl R. D. Page; Wellington; born Masterton, 15 Feb 1912; engineer; wounded 12 May 1943.

³² Lt L. Hampton, MM; born Dannevirke, 3 Aug 1918; Regular soldier; killed in action 28 Apr 1945.

³³ Rev. M. L. Underhill, m.i.d.; England; born Glasgow, 28 May 1910; Anglican minister.

³⁴ Canon H. G. Norris; Christchurch; born Temuka, 12 Nov 1911; Anglican minister; wounded Mar 1944.

³⁵ 2 Lt G. K. Smith; born Wellington, 1 Mar 1912; commercial traveller; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.

³⁶ Sgt V. V. K. Curtis; Palmerston North; born Te Kuiti, 28 Sep 1916; butcher.

³⁷ L-Cpl F. A. King; England; born England, 8 Jan 1900; labourer.

³⁸ Sgt R. W. Heine, MM; born Moutere, 26 Sep 1917; civil servant; died of wounds 14 Dec 1943.

³⁹ Maj J. W. T. Collins, m.i.d.; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 1 Mar 1913; farmer.

⁴⁰ Lt E. C. Coddington; Wallingford, Waipukurau; born Taumarunui, 3 Sep 1919; school teacher.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 10 – THE SANGRO: ORSOGNA

CHAPTER 10

The Sangro: Orsogna

No time was lost in getting the troops off the ships, 'A' Party commencing disembarkation at 9 a.m. and 'B' Party an hour or so later. The men came ashore in large barges towed by tugs and, leaving their valises, bedrolls, and bivouac tents in the care of a baggage party, marched off. Everyone was in the easy dress of shipboard life, with many wearing tennis and deck shoes, and the Italian spectators seemed astonished, as well they might, at the bedraggled appearance of the men. Any chance of concealing the identity of the troops was destroyed by a 'Tommy's' greeting of 'Hello Kiwis', and also by a query from shore to lighter as to the identity of the approaching troops being answered with 'New Zealanders from the Dunottar Castle'. It probably mattered little as the prospects of keeping such a matter secret appeared to be negligible.

The very narrow streets of [Taranto](#) were obstructed by debris from the severe bombing the town had received, necessitating marching in single file until the open country was reached. The camp site, seven miles away, was pleasantly situated in a fine grove of pine trees, green shrubs, and scrub, resembling the [Hymettus](#) camp outside [Athens](#). The swarms of mosquitoes, however, were a serious drawback and emphasised the need for anti-malarial precautions, which were strictly enforced. Gloves and veils were provided for men on pickets and similar duties and repellent cream was used generally; all ranks were required to take a mepacrine tablet daily, Sundays excluded, and water where mosquitoes could breed was drained or treated. These necessary but irksome precautions ceased, however, about a month later, on 8 November, the end of the dangerous season, when all the special equipment was withdrawn.

The preparation of an organised camp was commenced at once. No cooking utensils were immediately available and bully beef and biscuits for the first few meals made it certain that the hot meal in the evening of the second day would be appreciated. Plenty of wine was available but it was of poor quality. Back at the ship the battalion baggage party was somewhat unfortunate. Instead of merely watching the baggage being swung out by winches, the men had to manhandle everything to the trucks as the winches had broken down. This gave the party a full night of

laborious work and no food. On the arrival of the baggage in camp much thieving was revealed, nearly a quarter of the kitbags having been rifled. Boots tied on the outside of the bags had been a special target. Some retaliation against the Italian baggage lighters was rumoured to have taken place, with considerable advantage to the troops.

The surrounding country, very rocky and wooded, presented a striking picture to eyes long accustomed to the desert, and the men in their spare time took every opportunity to explore the neighbourhood. In a valley nearby an old Roman castle in ruins was discovered, the interior having a number of religious pictures painted on the walls. The sight of a number of black snakes introduced some caution into these rambles though 'the largest seen was a mere forty-two inches'. A plentiful supply of fresh fruit was available and grapes, almonds, figs, and dates were eagerly bought at very low prices. Once again the men had the somewhat confusing experience of handling strange currency—Italian lire and lire issued by the Allied military authorities—the fourth occasion for those who had served in Egypt, [Greece](#), and [Syria](#), and the fifth for those who had also visited Palestine.

The first rain experienced in [Italy](#), and indeed the first since the end of the Tunisian campaign five months ago, fell on the second day and showed the urgent need for drainage throughout the camp and the metalling of roads and tracks. The large working parties employed soon overcame the mud, and by the fourth day the camp had taken shape and was in a reasonable condition. During these activities the battalion had its first glimpse of the enemy in [Italy](#) when an enemy aircraft passed overhead at a great height.

The inevitable football ground was soon constructed. Company parades and daily route marches followed, and the training was gradually extended to include all forms of instruction and tactical exercises suited to this new theatre. Movement through wooded country at night, sniping, and camouflage, for all of which there had been little or no scope in [Africa](#), received special attention. On 25 October Colonel Morten and the company commanders attended an interesting tewt involving an attack on a walled village, Montemesola being visited to inspect the German defences there.

Leave to [Taranto](#) for 15 per cent of the strength had been granted a few days

after the battalion's arrival. The men, however, had little liking for the town. They found it very dirty and there was little or nothing to purchase. The more adventurous spirits roamed the countryside, visiting the villages scattered over a considerable area. One such village was Marino, 15 miles away; it was quaint and most attractive, untouched by war, its narrow streets paved with white stone and not a speck of dirt anywhere. It was the cleanest village seen since [Greece](#) and the people were very friendly.

In addition to the usual sports and games, a mobile cinema and the brigade band entertained the troops. C Company showed great enterprise by holding a miniature-garden competition, in which replicas of a Maori pa and the [Wellington Cenotaph](#) were skilfully reproduced. The Padre (Rev. H. G. Norris) and Captain Williams of C Company also arranged an excellent battalion concert. Entertainment of a very different kind was provided in the afternoon of 28 October when a severe electrical storm destroyed by lightning several of the barrage balloons protecting the port of [Taranto](#). Thunder, lightning, and rain continued till the early hours of the morning, and although a fairly clear day followed, another thunderstorm before dawn the next day and heavy rain throughout the ensuing night completed the soaking of the camp and everything and everybody in it. However, the drainage work carried out earlier in the month proved its worth.

The second flight of the Division which arrived at [Taranto](#) on the 22nd brought some of the battalion's vehicles, the absence of which was very inconvenient and also limited training. The first vehicles to arrive, on 30 October, were few in number but provided some very welcome mobility; they were the Brigade Signals' truck, one jeep, the RQMS's three-tonner, A Company's cooks' truck, and HQ Company Commander's pick-up, and were followed the next day by the battalion office truck.

An intensive period of close-country training occupied the first two weeks in November under conditions very similar to those in New Zealand and in distinct contrast with much of the desert training. The heavy showers of rain and the much cooler weather made the issue of battledress early in the month very welcome.

Officers, warrant officers, and NCOs of the battalion were given some insight to the situation and conditions on the Fifth and [Eighth Army](#) fronts in [Italy](#) when, on 2 November, they heard a lecture by Colonel Fountaine (26 Battalion), who had been

a member of a party taken over the battle fronts by [General Freyberg](#). The lecturer described the country, road conditions and road discipline, and the salient features along the front, and also gave an account of the recent attacks along the Adriatic front. Much of this information was passed on to the men.

Since the middle of October plans for the employment of 2 NZ Division had been altered on two or three occasions, while the forward move of the Division had been delayed by the non-arrival of its vehicles. These matters did not affect the battalion to any extent, but eventually, on Saturday, 13 November, under Major Possin, it moved off for a staging area 82 miles on the road to [Lucera](#); Colonel Morten and Major Norman had gone on ahead.

There was good scenery with many interesting villages, but the staging area was cold and bleak with no shelter and the night was bitterly cold. Next day the route traversed country planted in vegetables of all kinds and much like New Zealand. The town of [Foggia](#) (normally a busy industrial centre with a population of over 60,000), which the column passed through, had been very severely bombed and 'was in a real mess'. After passing [Lucera](#), a town of over 18,000 people, with its notable cathedral and castle, the battalion reached its bivouac area soon after midday, just before rain fell. It was rather cold and a stiff gale made conditions very unpleasant, but fortunately the advance party had already completed tracks and drains in the area.

The following two days were spent in training. Though not so rugged, the country resembled that behind [Taihape](#). As had been the case in all the countries the battalion had visited, there were no fences; the black soil was very muddy and the cross-country route marches and hill training proved rather stiff tests. Winter had set in with heavy frosts, which made the issue of woollen underwear and leather jerkins (the men's first experience of the latter) a great comfort.

The active front on the [Sangro](#), for which the battalion was heading, lay 70 air-miles away to the north-west, though it was half as far again by road. The Eighth Army, which had advanced over 300 miles since landing in the extreme south of [Italy](#) on 3 September, was approaching the river, beyond which the Germans were preparing a defensive line for the winter. On the other side of [Italy](#), the western flank, Fifth ([United States](#)) Army (which included British troops also), after landing

at [Salerno](#) on 9 September, was 70 miles beyond the [Volturno River](#), 100 miles from [Rome](#). Mountainous country between the two armies, the [Apennines](#), made co-operation and communications difficult and presented the enemy with every opportunity for efficient demolitions. The capture of [Rome](#), regarded as of high political importance, was the next main Allied objective.

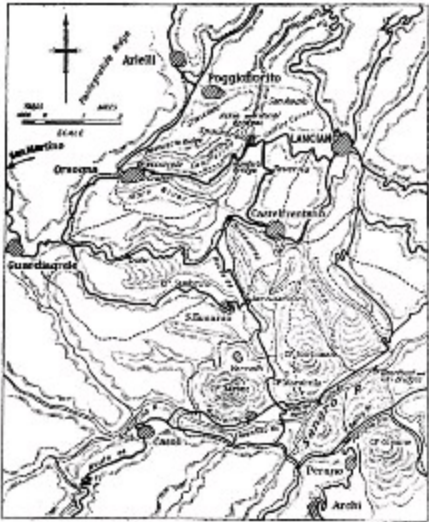
On the [Eighth Army](#) front 78 Division was advancing up the coastal sector with 8 [Indian Division](#) on its left. In the hills farther inland were 1 [Canadian Division](#) and 5 [British Division](#). General Montgomery's plan was to force the [Sangro](#) position by crossing the river near the mouth and to spread out from there. The [New Zealand Division](#), directly under [Eighth Army](#) command, was to relieve 8 [Indian Division](#) in the [Atessa](#) area, 12 miles from the Adriatic coast, and so enable that division to close on 78 Division for the coastal attack. If the attack succeeded the [New Zealand Division](#) was to advance to the north-west to [Chieti](#), 20 miles away.

By wireless silence, camouflage, and the retention of 8 [Indian Infantry Brigade](#) under [New Zealand](#) command, it was hoped to avoid disclosing the relief to the enemy. It had also been intended that all moves would be made by night but the extremely bad state of the roads made this impossible.

About half the Division had gone forward, the leading troops five days earlier, when on 17 November 25 Battalion left [Lucera](#) in rainy and very cold weather for the [Atessa](#) area. The route touched the Adriatic coast at [Termoli](#), then turned sharply inland near [Vasto](#), 17 miles up the coast. The men found the villages and their inhabitants disappointing. There was heavy traffic on the roads, and beyond [Termoli](#), where amphibious jeeps attracted the attention of the men, much delay was caused by traffic jams at the river crossings and by the steep, narrow, and tortuous mountain roads. The numerous deviations made necessary by the destruction of all bridges became almost impassable in many places because of wet weather and the very heavy traffic.

After a slow and very trying journey of sixteen hours, the battalion bivouacked about 15 miles short of [Atessa](#), where Tactical Headquarters of the Division was established. The altitude was now almost 2000 feet, the bivouac being on the eastern flank of Monte Sorbo of 3000 feet, a mile away. There was a snowcapped range a few miles off and the atmosphere was decidedly chilly.

Next day progress was again very slow. The road was exceedingly tortuous and ultimately, after five and a half hours, the battalion bivouacked alongside the road a little to the east of [Atessa](#); a particularly bad crossing over the Osento River three miles east of the town was seriously impeding traffic. During



SANGRO RIVER - ORSOGNA AREA, NOVEMBER 1943 - JANUARY 1944

sangro river – orsogna area, november 1943 – january 1944

the day's journey the men watched the enemy shelling the road in a valley below, but the fire had ceased when the battalion passed through.

Very early the following morning (19 November) 25 Battalion (less B Company detached for protective duties with the Engineers) moved with the rest of the brigade to a lying-up area north of [Atessa](#), about three miles from the [Sangro River](#). No bivouac tents were available on this occasion and the men made their own arrangements for the remainder of the night. Haystacks were a natural choice, but in one instance, through creating a huge mushroom by dragging hay from the sides of a stack, a collapse occurred, burying some men of A Company to the accompaniment of much profanity and struggling; fortunately there were no casualties.

At dusk, preceded by 26 Battalion and followed by the 24th, the battalion marched to its position on the brigade front along the [Strada Sangritana](#), a mile from the river. There it dug in with 26 Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left. The road from [Atessa](#) had proved impassable for vehicles and it was a gruelling march, especially for those who had to carry heavy weapons, ammunition, and equipment, the mortar platoon and 11 MG Platoon (which accompanied the

battalion) and the men who assisted them having the hardest tasks.

Heavy rain fell during the night and continued throughout the day, creating very muddy conditions and flooding the slit trenches. Houses and other buildings in the vicinity were taken over to shelter the troops, the Italian occupants proving very hospitable. In one house (casa) three men shared a room with a donkey, a situation offering some scope for the company wit. Where buildings were not available, bivouac tents gave some protection.

The mortar platoon, it is said, was the first to incur the displeasure of the enemy and also to learn the difficulty of emplacing its mortars in the muddy ground. Under Lieutenant [Groshinski](#), ¹ it had orders to take up positions as near the river as possible. It was difficult to find good bases to take the shock of discharge of the mortar and timber was used as a foundation. From his OP and Command Post up the biggest oak tree in the vicinity, Groshinski, with the powerful voice for which he was famed and which was heard at B Echelon a mile back, issued his orders to range the mortars, which were 150 yards from him. On fire being opened, the base plates of three of the four mortars skidded off the timber bases and the breech pieces were snapped off. The fourth mortar was gradually driven down until the sights were level with the ground. In the midst of this turmoil the enemy, who, it is claimed, would have had no difficulty in hearing the fire orders, retaliated with his own artillery, and a shell bursting under the tree brought Groshinski down in quick time and caused a speedy withdrawal of the mortars to a safer and firmer position.

Sixth Brigade's sector was the eastern half of 19 Indian Infantry Brigade's position between [Monte Marcone](#) on the right and the junction of the [Sangro](#) and [Aventino](#) rivers on the left, a frontage of about three miles. The three battalions, however, were centrally situated in a comparatively small area a little to the south-west of the junction of the [Atessa](#) road with the [Strada Sangritana](#). Active patrolling across the river had been ordered by Division and all battalions sent out patrols each night, with varying results due to difficulty in crossing the river, there being frequent changes in the depth of water and speed of the current.

Where 6 Brigade was situated the [Sangro](#) valley was two miles wide with a cultivated area of vineyards, orchards, and olive groves, the Piazzano, south of the river, and a narrow, marshy strip on the northern bank with many irrigation ditches.

Steep hills on both sides overlooked the valley, terminating in places on the northern side near the river in almost vertical cliffs. North of the cliffs the country, which was intersected by many water channels, rose sharply to a dominating ridge stretching from [Lanciano](#) on the right, through [Castelfrentano](#) to [Guardiagrele](#) on the left. The ridge varied in height from about 800 to 1500 feet above sea level, and at [Castelfrentano](#) was about 1000 feet above the river, four miles distant. Along the New Zealand front and for several miles downstream there were no bridges. The river ran in several channels separated by gravel banks, the current was rapid and the bottom stony, with boulders in places. As the considerable drainage area of the river consisted almost entirely of very steep country, terminating in the [Apennines](#) in the upper reaches, the fast run-off of any rain quickly caused a fresh in the river. Except in summer, the melting of snow in the mountains also caused a considerable variation in the depth and current.

The Germans had a strong chain of defences north of the river, with their main line along the ridge through [Lanciano](#), [Castelfrentano](#), [Guardiagrele](#), north of [Casoli](#), and thence to the south-west along Route 84. The most heavily defended positions were the south-eastern approach to [Castelfrentano](#), the road junction on Route 84 a mile and a half west of [Castelfrentano](#), and another road junction a mile east of [Guardiagrele](#), where the road to [Orsogna](#) leaves the [Castelfrentano](#)-[Guardiagrele](#) road. These positions were linked by a belt of wire along the road line, covered by machine-gun and infantry posts well dug-in and camouflaged. The two road junctions were protected by anti-tank ditches and anti-tank guns and there were weapon pits on both sides of Route 84 from the [Sangro River](#) northwards to the main ridge. The position was held in depth, up to two miles in places.

In front of the main position was an outpost line consisting mainly of machine-gun and weapon pits fairly wide apart. The north bank of the river was mined in several places. It was a formidable position, but defences depend primarily on the quality of the defenders and in this instance the defenders were [65 Division](#), a second-rate formation composed mostly of Poles and young raw troops with horse-drawn transport and poor equipment. Wide frontages were held, two regiments occupying 15 miles, with 146 Regiment opposing the New Zealanders.

The first day in the position, 20 November, was rather trying, the weather bad with mud everywhere and the Germans enjoying good observation from within a

couple of thousand yards. 'Jerry gave us a fair pasting from across the [Sangro](#),' wrote Wakeling, 'and the 24th suffered a few casualties. A long day and all to keep under cover as Jerry only about 2000 yards away. Another plaster at 4 when our guns put over a fair barrage. Patrols out at 7 p.m. Quiet night except for some Spandau and Bren shooting.'

That night it had been planned for 6 Brigade to make a silent attack, coinciding with an attack in the coastal sector and another by 19 Indian Brigade on the left, two miles beyond the New Zealand front, but because of a rise in the [Sangro](#) the operations were postponed for forty-eight hours. During this waiting period standing patrols were maintained on the south bank of the river, and when the depth of water permitted reconnoitring patrols went across. The depth varied at different points, and although the water was icy cold the men showed great determination in carrying out their tasks, sometimes wading breast-high with linked hands to help withstand the current, and occasionally swimming to find the depth or after being swept off their feet. As mountaineers and tramping clubs in New Zealand have so frequently emphasised, the men found that the crossing of a river was not lightly to be undertaken and that darkness greatly increased the difficulties and dangers.

Many of 25 Battalion's patrols were unable to cross the river, though they tried repeatedly at different points. One that succeeded was a patrol from B Company under Second-Lieutenant [Norton-Taylor](#)² which climbed the cliffs north of the river; it found that the buildings on Colle Scorticacane, a mile to the north-west of the [Sangro](#), were occupied by the enemy. It also found mines south of the river on a front of about 400 yards. There were in fact many mines in the area, and their removal required joint action by the engineers and escorting infantry detachments; the very efficient German anti-personnel S-mine was used extensively and caused much worry and many casualties. Daylight patrols were tried on the 21st by the other two battalions, under orders by [General Freyberg](#), but these were repulsed with loss, and in consequence instructions were issued that no one was to cross the river in daylight.

The following day heavy rain caused another fresh in the [Sangro](#) and the postponed attack on the coastal sector and 6 Brigade's front was again postponed for a further twenty-four hours. The attack by the Indian Brigade to the left of the

New Zealand front was not affected, as the point of attack was above the confluence of the Aventino and [Sangro](#) rivers and the latter could be crossed there.

During the night Bailey bridge and folding-boat equipment was brought forward to the river, and to mask the noise and discourage enemy patrols the artillery and machine guns along the New Zealand front were active. About three in the morning enemy shells falling near disturbed some of the men of the battalion, and a little later, when the shelling increased, a shell hit a tree within ten yards of a group of men of B Company but fortunately was a 'dud'.

Before dawn on the 23rd there was considerable liveliness when all three New Zealand field regiments and one British field regiment under New Zealand command supported the attack by Essex and Punjab battalions of 19 Indian Brigade across the river. The attack succeeded against strong opposition, though subsequent enemy counter-attacks had some temporary local success which brought the New Zealand artillery again into action. This, in turn, caused increased enemy fire against 25 Battalion's position and other parts of the New Zealand front, especially on roads, buildings and gun positions, the enemy apparently anticipating an extension of the attack.

Shortly after the start of the Indian Brigade's attack there was more heavy rain, which continued until the afternoon, causing the [Sangro](#) to rise nearly two feet. This made the operation proposed for that night quite impossible and 6 Brigade's attack, at first postponed for twenty-four hours, was cancelled and a new plan adopted. That day the first casualty in the battalion in the Italian campaign occurred, Corporal [Brunton](#)³ being wounded by a shell splinter.

From a security point of view the presence of civilians so far forward in the battle zone was a source of some anxiety, the more so as they had, until quite recently, belonged to a hostile power. That such fears had some basis was revealed by a search of the houses and other buildings in 25 Battalion's area, when one of the inhabitants who was found in possession of a transmitting set was arrested.

The following day (24 November) 5 Brigade took over the eastern half of 6 Brigade's front with one battalion and it was decided that both brigades would take part in the attack, probably on the night 26 – 27 November. For the first time in [Italy](#)

enemy aircraft appeared over the New Zealand sector, though it will be recalled that a single aircraft passed high over the New Zealand camp near [Taranto](#).

While the day of the attack was awaited there was the usual intermittent artillery fire by both sides, and when conditions permitted Allied aircraft were busy. On the 26th two flights, each of twelve Kittybombers, and seven flights each of twelve Baltimores bombed selected targets in the short space of two hours. An enemy aircraft was shot down and landed in the [Sangro](#), the crew of two being taken prisoner by 25 Battalion. The next day air action increased in beautifully fine weather. Kittybombers bombed and strafed [Casoli](#), five miles to the west, and Liberators bombed all along the main ridge in the vicinity of [San Maria](#), seven miles to the north-east.

While Allied aircraft were operating the enemy artillery fire was much reduced, though on the 25th the position held by 25 Battalion had received more than its usual quota of shells, fortunately with little damage. The New Zealand artillery was busily preparing for the forthcoming attack, blasting houses on the opposite hills and, one evening just before dusk, firing five rounds from every gun at selected targets. The machine-gunners also took part in harassing the enemy, especially on the 26th, when for two hours after 10 p.m. they concentrated on an area in the vicinity of Colle Scorticacane, where the previous day considerable movement of enemy troops and transport had been observed.

Patrolling during this period was continued as usual and on the 24th each battalion had orders to send a strong fighting patrol across the river to visit positions known to have been occupied by the enemy, and to be prepared to go further and fight to find out the state of the enemy. Although the [Sangro](#) was reported by standing patrols to have dropped a foot during the day, the current was fast. The battalion's fighting patrol of one platoon, led by Lieutenant [Coleman](#) ⁴ of D Company, was unable to cross, though a reconnaissance patrol from C Company, Lieutenant [Muir](#), ⁵ Sergeant Jim Brunton, Privates [Robin Walker](#), ⁶ 'Hongi' Menzies, ⁷ and Les [Delaney](#), ⁸ crossed a hundred yards upstream but took three hours to do so. Patrols from B Company, one on the 23rd under Second-Lieutenant [Rees](#) ⁹ and two, on the 25th and 26th, under Lieutenant Berry, could not get across the river. The other battalions also had difficulties. A 24 Battalion patrol crossed above the [Sangro-Aventino](#) junction but was unable to cross the Aventino, and 26 Battalion failed at

one point but succeeded at another.

The irrigation ditches across the river opposite the brigade were found to be almost impossible to cross and the low-lying ground was reported to be a quagmire. The only contact made with the enemy was a house opposite the right flank of the brigade, about two miles north of 25 Battalion. Despite repeated attempts, no patrols were able to cross on the evening of 25 November; the river was running high and fast after four hours' rain and the men found it impossible to stand in water of hip depth. Italian civilians who had just crossed were able to give some valuable information, especially regarding the position of minefields. Some of those which had been discovered by patrols contained mines of a type strange to them; booby-trapped mines consisting of bamboo sticks laid across a track and attached by a string to a pull-igniter and demolition charge had also been found.

On the afternoon of the 27th, the day of the long-postponed attack, Colonel Morten discussed the plan with the company commanders. He explained that the Division was to establish a bridgehead over the [Sangro](#) and later exploit to the north and west to cover the main road—Route 84—running from the vicinity of the Aventino- [Sangro](#) junction to the [Castelfrentano- Guardiagrele](#) road, five miles to the north-west.

Both 5 and 6 Brigades were attacking, with 6 Brigade on the left, and for the first time New Zealand armour was to support New Zealand troops in the attack, though the armour had had its first action when a squadron on 23 November supported the Indian Brigade's operations. Nineteenth Armoured Regiment (less one squadron) was to support 6 Brigade's attack, which was to be made with all three battalions forward, 26 Battalion on the right and 25 Battalion in the centre. Each battalion had an artillery FOO attached and a machine-gun platoon (11 Platoon for 25 Battalion) under command.

In 25 Battalion the usual boundaries between companies were dispensed with and the three attacking companies, A, C, and D, were each to capture defined features and move by specified routes. B Company (Major Possin), the battalion reserve, was to help the rest of the battalion to cross the [Sangro](#) and provide protection and guides. For the crossing the company was to place as many hand-wires as possible over the water and provide guides at both ends for its own

battalion and also for 24 Battalion, which was to use the same crossing-place. The company was also to place a strong standing patrol on the north side to protect the crossing of the two units and provide two other standing patrols: one of these was to be on the road north of the river to help A Company to form up; the other was to be in position to the west to assist D Company to get into position facing south-west for its attack on Pt 122, which lay in that direction. After A and D Companies were on their start lines, B Company was to form up in readiness to take over Pt 122 after its capture, following 24 Battalion (which was moving behind D Company) on its way to its objectives at [Taverna Nova](#) and Marabella.

In pitch darkness a little before midnight, after B Company had gone ahead to carry out its tasks, the remainder of 25 Battalion marched off via a very muddy route to the river. The Intelligence Section provided guides for each company, both



25 battalion positions, 28 november 1943

during this approach march and during the attack, to guard against loss of direction and to help to identify the objectives.

Both battalions crossed safely, though not without some difficulty, in the order A and C Companies of 25 Battalion, then 24 Battalion, and then the rest of 25 Battalion. The wires provided by B Company to aid the crossing were unequal to the strain, and a serious hitch was averted only by the fortunate discovery of another crossing nearby which did not require the use of wires. The icy-cold water, the stony bottom and the lodging of grit in the boots, the darkness and the waiting, and the

enemy bank opposite, all combined to make the wading of the river an unpleasant and somewhat eerie episode; and the firing of a Spandau during the crossing, though it caused no casualties, was startling. Many of the men discarded their clothing in order to have it dry when they reached the left bank, the thought of going into the attack and spending the cold night in soaking clothes 'having no appeal'. This mode of dress or undress for an attack naturally created some humour, even under the icy conditions, more especially in 15 Platoon when Les Delaney, after getting across, was able to produce a bottle of gin which had a buoyant effect on Roly Harwood,¹⁰ Robin Walker, Paddy Brockett,¹¹ A. J. Hoy,¹² N. McLay,¹³ and Gunderson,¹⁴ who shared it. Apparently no one suggested that the enemy may have caught the battalion with its pants down.

Forty-five minutes before zero hour (2.45 a.m. on 28 November) the battalion was in its assembly area, with its companies disposed as planned on the general line of the road 300 yards beyond the river, each flank protected by a platoon of B Company.

At zero the artillery and machine guns supporting the attack opened fire on selected targets and A and D Companies advanced under their deafening roar. The enemy defensive fire in reply was prompt, but being directed on the line of the river, fell harmlessly behind the attacking troops. The rate of advance decided upon, 100 yards in five minutes, with fifteen minutes' pause at intermediate objectives, took into account the steep and rough nature of the country to be traversed. A Company had been given the task of capturing [Castellata](#), which was on a prominent ridge dotted with farm buildings about 1000 yards to the west of the assembly position. To avoid the line of cliffs which intervened along the direct route, A Company (Major Robertshaw) advanced first to the north for about 500 yards and then to the north-west up a gully for about the same distance before turning to the south-west and climbing up to [Castellata](#). The company searched the farm buildings on the way and, with a casualty list of one killed, one died of wounds, and nine wounded, secured the objective without difficulty. For his part in this action, Major Robertshaw was awarded the Military Cross.

D Company (Major Handyside) moved straight down the road to the south-west for about 1200 yards to its first objective, Pt 122, which it occupied with no opposition. After 24 Battalion had passed through to the west on its way to [Taverna](#)

[Nova](#) and [Marabella](#), D Company advanced 1500 yards to the north-west to its second or main objective, Pt 150, which was 800 yards to the west of A Company at [Castellata](#) on the adjoining ridge. D Company secured Pt 150 with a loss of one officer (Second-Lieutenant G. K. Smith) killed and Major Handyside and twenty-one men wounded; Captain Hewitt took over command of the company.

C Company (Major Webster) followed A Company up the gully and, passing through at [Castellata](#), occupied two hilltops a little to the north-west of A Company and about 400 yards east of D Company's second objective on Pt 150. It then secured Hill 171 on the battalion's second objective, 600 yards to the north-west and about 300 yards north of D Company. The company had no casualties.

B Company (Major Possin), the last to leave the assembly area, followed the route to the south-west initially taken by D Company and 24 Battalion, and took up its position in reserve on Pt 122 which D Company had vacated. It had one casualty, a man wounded by the supporting artillery.

S-mines and booby-trapped box mines caused most of the casualties in the battalion. Twenty-three prisoners (three of them wounded), including many Poles, were captured. By daybreak the companies had secured all their objectives and the battalion, supported by its attached machine-gun platoon and covered by the artillery, was firmly established. Throughout the attack the battalion had trouble with its wireless link with Brigade and communication was not established until the final objective was reached.

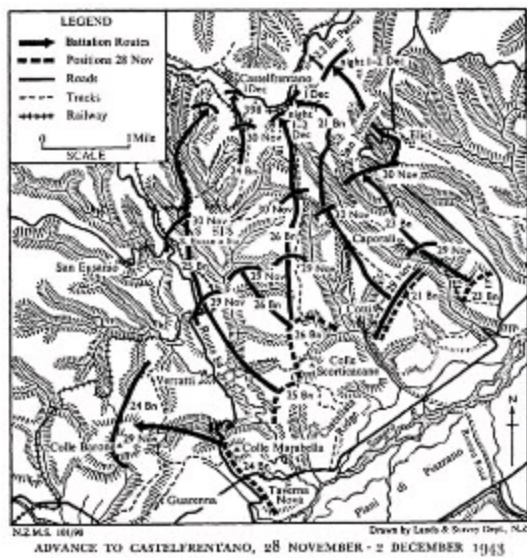
The flank battalions of the brigade and 5 Brigade to the north-east also secured their objectives (with one minor exception) with comparatively little opposition.

Though the opposition was weak, 25 Battalion had carried out its attack in the dark over steep, difficult country as planned, with skill and accuracy, the German Army Commander, Lemelsen, commenting that the attack had 'got in amazingly soon'. Down near the coast, where a small bridgehead had been secured during the second week of November and enlarged considerably by the 24th, the British attack had also made good progress towards the main ridge and was continuing.

The communications for the conveyance of ammunition, food, and other

requirements to the troops across the [Sangro](#) and for the passage of tanks, guns, and vehicles required the urgent erection of bridges. In the New Zealand sector the plan provided for two bridges, a Bailey bridge to serve 5 Brigade's front and (in the absence of sufficient Bailey bridging) a folding-boat bridge for 6 Brigade. These were to be erected on the night of 27 November, but owing to trucks running off the road in the darkness and others becoming bogged, the engineers were unable to commence the folding-boat bridge until a little before daylight the next morning. When daylight came, the enemy with his excellent observation directed accurate artillery fire on the bridge site, causing severe casualties and much damage and preventing further work until after dark. By 9.15 that night the bridge was able to take carefully regulated light traffic but no vehicles. The delay in the erection of the bridge prevented supplies being brought forward to the battalion and to some extent the men fended for themselves; pack mules were used and fifteen, loaded with ammunition and rations, were sent up in the late afternoon.

It was a beautiful day and '6 MEs paid us an early morning visit,' wrote Wakeling, 'but did little damage. 3 hit and run raids during the day and one a/c brought down just in front of us. A few shells landed on a face on our right.' The appearance of New Zealand armour in their vicinity was a welcome sight to the men, six tanks of [19 Armoured Regiment](#) appearing during the morning at Pt 171 near C Company, where they were in position to support 26 Battalion on its third objective 1200 yards to the north. These tanks had been compelled to use the Bailey bridge in 5 Brigade's sector and had been much delayed by mud and enemy shelling, a number of them being bogged beyond immediate recovery. Next day, by 9 a.m., although the approaches were a quagmire, the bridge to serve 6 Brigade was completed and seventeen tanks and about two-fifths of the battalion's support weapons were north of the river.



advance to castelfrentano, 28 november – 2 december 1943

A little after midday, 29 November, there was a lively little action about 2500 yards to the west of D Company when a company of 24 Battalion, supported by tanks and artillery, secured Barone, a high feature from which the enemy had directed fire on the [Sangro](#) bridges. Shortly afterwards two fighting patrols of 25 Battalion, each of one platoon from A and B Companies under Second-Lieutenants [Nelson](#) ¹⁵ and Norton-Taylor, advanced to the north-west a mile beyond D Company's position on Pt 150 to the bend in Route 84 where the railway from [Casoli](#) to [Castelfrentano](#) crossed it. The patrols met with no opposition, though [Nelson's](#) platoon had one casualty from an S-mine; within an hour the platoons were followed up by the remainder of their companies and, a little after dark, by six-pounder anti-tank guns. The day's casualties were two wounded, Privates [Jordan](#) ¹⁶ and [McKeeman](#). ¹⁷

During the morning and again in the afternoon, two bombing and strafing raids by six enemy aircraft were made against the forward positions and the [Sangro](#) bridges. The planes were engaged by New Zealand Bofors guns on both occasions, and in the afternoon one of the aircraft was shot down near the river close to B Company, the pilot rolling his aircraft and dropping by parachute. A little earlier an Allied aircraft crashed south of the river. The Allied air forces were not idle, engaging enemy defences and gun positions and in the morning scoring what appeared to be a hit on an ammunition dump near [Castelfrentano](#).

On the 30th the advance was continued, 6 Brigade being directed slightly to the

right away from Route 84 towards [Castelfrentano](#), which was to be attacked by 24 Battalion while New Zealand armoured units advanced up Route 84 in simulation of a main attack. In the afternoon A Company (Robertshaw) pushed on to the north for about a mile, patrolling towards Pt 150, which lay 800 yards to the east of Route 84. The leading platoon was fired on from an enemy post on the hill; another platoon came forward and by 5 p.m. the post was captured with a loss of two killed (Sergeants Penman, MM and bar, and [Peebles](#) ¹⁸). Twenty Germans of 146 Regiment, 65 Infantry Division (the same formation as that attacked two days ago) and nine light machine guns were captured. That night the remainder of A Company advanced and the position was occupied with two platoons forward, 9 on the right and 7 on the left, and 8 Platoon in reserve. To guard the left flank of A Company, D Company (Captain Hewitt) sent a patrol to [San Eusanio](#) railway station near Route 84, 800 yards south-west of Pt 150; the previous night a patrol had reported the station clear of the enemy, but it had been reoccupied and in a sharp action Corporal Davidson, ¹⁹ the patrol leader, was wounded. Preceded by another patrol under Corporal [Ward](#), ²⁰ the whole of D Company went forward in the early evening, but the enemy had gone and the company took up a position near the station.

The advance of 25 Battalion was closely supported by the tanks of B Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#), which despite the rough country were well forward by dusk. The machine-gunners supporting the battalion also found the country difficult to traverse with their heavy weapons and ammunition but the men, as they always did, stuck to their tasks and never failed in their duty to be in position with the least possible delay, ready to open fire.

During the afternoon B Company (Major Possin), in reserve in its original position on Pt 122 near the [Sangro](#), was relieved by 22 Battalion and moved nearer to Route 84 in readiness to go forward at short notice. That evening 25 Battalion, in common with the other battalions, was ordered not to advance further without permission, except for patrols, all three battalions being on an east-west line passing about a mile south of [Castelfrentano](#). The purpose of this halt was to establish, for the moment, a firm base with a series of company localities with adequate supporting weapons.

While the infantry units with their supporting tanks and machine guns were established on their firm base, the field artillery units crossed the river to positions

on the northern side. The tanks of 18 Regiment also crossed, and those of 20 Regiment were at the river bank ready to do likewise. During these movements at least one regiment of artillery was always in position ready to support the forward troops, while the heavier artillery farther back had moved forward in turn to positions vacated in the [Atessa](#) area by [6 Field Regiment](#). Other troops, delayed by traffic congestion, could not cross the river until 1 December. The battalion's casualties on 30 November were two killed, one died of wounds, and four wounded.

With the infantry closing on [Castelfrentano](#), the battle for this key point on the main ridge overlooking the [Sangro](#) valley was now imminent. In the morning of 1 December 24 Battalion had orders to attack Pt 398, a prominent hill immediately south of the town and overlooking it at close range, and then exploit success into the place. If the attack did not succeed, 6 Brigade was to mount another attack at 3.30 next morning.

At 8.45 a.m. a company of 24 Battalion, supported by another company and by artillery, mortars and machine guns, launched the attack from positions halfway up the hill, and against strong opposition and subsequent shelling and counter-attacks secured a large hotel in the town. Meanwhile, 25 Battalion consolidated its position in the [San Eusanio](#) station area, B Company coming forward up Route 84. In the afternoon C Company, with two mortar carriers and three Bren carriers under command, advanced through A Company on Pt 150 and then up rough gullies to the left of 24 Battalion. It met with no opposition, though its position 400 yards south-west of the town was a distinct threat to Route 84 west of [Castelfrentano](#).

After dark 25 Battalion closed on its forward company and occupied the next knoll about 500 yards west of it on the same ridge. Twenty-sixth Battalion was in touch with 24 Battalion's right flank and had a company close to Route 84 where it emerged on the eastern side of the town. A little farther to the east and north-east a squadron of New Zealand Divisional Cavalry was patrolling in very difficult country towards Route 84 where it ran northwards between [Castelfrentano](#) and Lanciano, so that the town was virtually under attack on three sides. The Divisional Cavalry maintained touch on its right with Indian troops who were attacking in the coastal sector. Units of 5 Brigade cemented a firm attacking front by advancing towards the plateau to the east of [Castelfrentano](#). Twenty-fifth Battalion's casualties that day

were one killed and four wounded.

In the early morning of 2 December 24 Battalion, with air support, advanced into [Castelfrentano](#) and found that the enemy had gone.

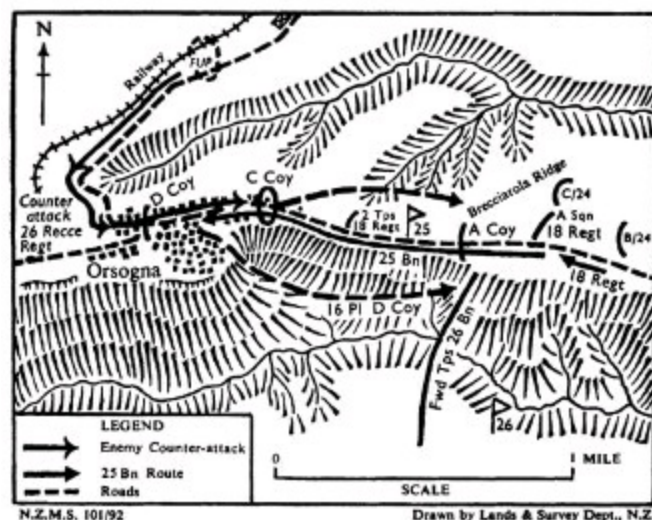
Beyond the town the Division was confronted by another very prominent ridge five miles to the north-west, which ran south-west from [Arielli](#) through [Orsogna](#) to [Guardiagrele](#). One thousand feet high at [Arielli](#), the ridge rose to 1400 feet at [Orsogna](#) and to 1500 feet at [Guardiagrele](#) and was separated from the [Castelfrentano](#) ridge by the steep valleys of the [Moro River](#), the south-east slopes of [Orsogna](#) being very precipitous. An old Roman road—termed a cart track by the Germans—gave the most direct access to [Orsogna](#) from Route 84, which it left 400 yards west of [Castelfrentano](#). This Roman road went steeply down into the deep defile of the [Moro River](#) and joined the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road 1400 yards beyond the river at a point 3000 yards from [Orsogna](#); from that point the road proceeded up the narrow and very steep-sided [Brecciarola](#) ridge into the town. There at the entrance the road was narrow, with houses closely bordering it on either side; on the left or southern side the ridge fell away from the buildings almost as a precipice while the northern side, while not quite so steep, had been heavily mined, as was later discovered. Thus access to [Orsogna](#) from the east was limited to this very narrow ridge, permitting practically no manoeuvre and greatly favouring the defence.

Orders were issued from Division for the advance to continue. Sixth Brigade was to go across country towards [Orsogna](#); 24 Battalion was to cut the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road a mile to the east of [Orsogna](#), while 25 Battalion, as a first step, was to move along Route 84 to make contact with [18 Armoured Regiment](#) and 22 Battalion which were advancing northwards up Route 84 from the [San Eusanio](#) area. On the right flank of the brigade, C Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#) was to move on [Orsogna](#) along the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road; 5 Brigade was to consolidate the position it occupied on the ridge near [Castelfrentano](#). To the left of 6 Brigade, [4 NZ Armoured Brigade](#) was to advance on [Guardiagrele](#) and [San Martino](#), two and a half miles west of [Orsogna](#).

On the afternoon of 2 December, after climbing up the steep slopes to Route 84, 25 Battalion followed the road north-west to a large bend a mile and a half from [Castelfrentano](#), where the road turned to the south-west. By 3 p.m. the companies

had taken up positions and were dug-in west of the road near the bend. About the same time 24 Battalion had reached its allotted position on the Brecciarola ridge, a mile and a half north-west of 25 Battalion. Shortly after settling into its new position, 25 Battalion despatched B Company to the vicinity of San Amoto, west of Lanciano and two and a half miles north-east of the battalion, to form a protective screen for the night for the laagered tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment which, against some opposition, had moved there from Castelfrentano. On the way B Company had a sharp clash with the enemy and captured two prisoners, one heavy mortar and four light machine guns. Prisoners taken in this area by 19 Regiment revealed the presence of 26 Panzer Division, one of the best German divisions in Italy, and it was evident that stiff fighting lay ahead.

Back at the battalion a reconnaissance of the track known as the Roman Road was made by the Transport Officer, Second-Lieutenant Edinger,²¹ and two men of the Intelligence Section to see whether it was suitable for vehicles. A working party from A Company and the anti-tank platoon, together with a covering party under Second-Lieutenant West²² of A Company, were also sent up the same route. Just before dusk, the working party was fired on from the high ground near Orsogna. A fighting patrol from the covering party was sent forward and without loss captured five of the enemy. There was only one casualty in the battalion that day, one man being wounded.



the attack on orsogna, 3 december 1943

During the evening 25 Battalion received orders to attack at dawn through

Orsogna to a ridge 2000 yards west of the town and then exploit success to San Martino, two miles farther on. In the circumstances—the difficult country and the presence of 26 Panzer Division (though possibly not known when the order was issued)—it was an optimistic order, reflecting the optimism generally felt by Eighth Army at the time. At 1.30 a.m. on 3 December, with D Company leading, followed by C Company, Battalion Headquarters, and A Company, the battalion advanced towards Orsogna via the Roman Road and the Lanciano- Orsogna road; B Company was still detached with the tanks. After an hour and three-quarters the column halted to form up, just beyond the forward positions of 24 Battalion, near which Battalion Headquarters was temporarily established. D Company (Captain Hewitt) deployed on both sides of the road and advanced slowly towards Orsogna, followed by C Company (Captain Webster) in the same formation. A Company (Major Robertshaw) in reserve dug in 1200 yards from the eastern outskirts of Orsogna. At its previous position 25 Battalion had been in telephonic communication with Brigade Headquarters but was now dependent on wireless.

Shortly after 6 a.m. at first light, D Company was on the outskirts of the town and had met with no opposition, though it had captured three Germans who had been digging a weapon pit. With 17 Platoon on the right and 18 Platoon on the left, the company advanced into the town; the two leading platoons had orders to go right through and leave to 16 Platoon the task of clearing the buildings. Good progress was made until the centre of Orsogna had been passed, when a German armoured car, which had come down the main street to the town square, opened fire from the rear on the two leading platoons. Under cover of supporting fire from the reserve platoon, 17 and 18 Platoons tried to work round to the south to engage the armoured car from that flank, but heavy fire from enemy infantry posts on both flanks forced the two platoons to take cover in the buildings.

Meanwhile a section of carriers under Sergeant O'Neill²³ had entered the eastern side of the town. O'Neill explains what happened:

'At 0610 hrs 3/12/43 my section of carriers (3) moved in support of D Coy to take the village of Orsogna. On entering the village we heard MG fire and also saw tracer going over our heads. We received orders to wipe out Spandau post in a group of houses and moved accordingly. The post on arrival, had been vacated so we then

proceeded in direction of main road through village. While [we were] moving along an anti-tank gun opened on to us and we immediately went to cover at rear of houses. Later we were joined by C Company and remained in our position. We attempted to engage Spandau post on the ridge to the right of the village with our .5 MMG but could not get any reply. At approx 1000 hrs ten enemy tanks were observed on the right ridge. Five of the tanks placed themselves in position on the ridge and the other five went around in the direction of the village. The tanks on the ridge then shelled the village and also the houses in which we were quartered. Soon after, our own artillery opened up but the shells were falling short and landed in among C Coy troops and also hit the houses. I then attempted to OP for the arty and managed to increase the range to hit on the top of the right ridge but could not get them to shift in the right direction. While on OP work I heard C Coy being warned to withdraw and soon after Spandaus opened from our left and right flanks, while the enemy tanks were shelling the road.

I rounded up all my section personnel and confirmed a report that a tank was coming down the village road towards us. The three carriers had to be abandoned with all the equipent, etc., as we could not get on to the road in time, and all the personnel came away from the village.

Shortly after, I observed enemy personnel moving amongst the houses we had vacated.'

The enemy advance into the town frustrated any attempts by 17 and 18 Platoons to withdraw and both platoons were forced to surrender. As the enemy counter-attack developed, 16 Platoon had been ordered to hold its position as supporting tanks were expected. None appeared, however, and when the German tanks approached, the seven men who were all that remained of the platoon made a dash from the building they were occupying, ran along a street under fire, and escaped down a steep slope into a gully.

From its position at the eastern edge of the town C Company had been engaging the enemy, as opportunity offered, to cover the withdrawal of D Company, but the approach of the Germans necessitated a hurried retreat down a gully on the northern side of the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road. Enemy artillery and machine guns harassed the retiring troops and the road was heavily shelled all day.

Retiring through the position held by 24 Battalion, C Company, with the remnants of D Company and the men of the section of carriers, reorganised about a mile to the east of that battalion. Early the next day, 4 December, A Company, which had continued to hold its forward position in front of 24 Battalion, also retired and, with Battalion Headquarters, joined C and D Companies. The battalion's casualties were one officer (Second-Lieutenant [Fordie](#),²⁴ D Company) and three other ranks killed; one officer (Lieutenant Coleman, D Company) and fifty-two other ranks (including eight wounded) prisoners of war; and twenty-five other ranks wounded.

Although during the attack on the previous day tanks had not appeared in support of the battalion, they had not been inactive. When, at seven in the morning, Brigadier Parkinson had learnt that 25 Battalion was in trouble, he called urgently for armoured assistance from 4 Armoured Brigade and directed a troop of C Squadron, 19 Regiment, to use its guns in support of the battalion. From the road ahead of [Castelfrentano](#) the troop fired on the enemy assembling to the north-west of C Company and on the advancing tanks; by midday medium artillery also was in action against [Orsogna](#). Two troops, each of three tanks, of A Squadron, [18 Armoured Regiment](#), in reserve about eight miles back near the Aventino River, moved up but were unable to reach 24 Battalion's position before 11 a.m., by which time C and D Companies of 25 Battalion had retired. The two troops, however, advanced up the road past A Company to within 500 yards of the outskirts of [Orsogna](#) and there fired on two German tanks which were advancing eastwards. One of these was disabled and abandoned by its crew, the other withdrew.

The remainder of A Squadron, 18 Regiment, also came forward, though some time after the two leading troops, but before reaching A Company had three tanks bogged and only two got through; these remained near A Company and fired on [Orsogna](#), forming a defensive line when at nightfall the two leading troops withdrew to that vicinity.

The field artillery of the Division had also been engaged, all the regiments after midday firing on the enemy gun positions and, together with the air force, attacking the road running north-eastwards from [Orsogna](#) to [Poggiofiorito](#) and [Ortona](#) on the coast, eight miles beyond. The enemy aircraft had also taken part, bombing and

strafing the forward positions, and the men saw more enemy machines than they had seen hitherto in [Italy](#). The Germans were not allowed, however, to escape unscathed. About ten in the morning Spitfires had intervened and a running fight took place; in mid-afternoon the New Zealand Bofors shot down one aircraft and possibly a second.

The operations of 25 Battalion on 3 December had resulted in a most unfortunate reverse which, it would seem, might well have been avoided. With no defence against tanks, the troops had little prospect of success. In a review of the operation the question arises as to whether too optimistic a view was taken in directing the battalion to attack an objective 2000 yards beyond [Orsogna](#) and then to exploit up to a further two miles. Penetration to such a depth, on a front which must necessarily have been narrow, exposed the battalion to counter-attacks from the flanks which could have been very dangerous, even if only enemy infantry was employed and our supporting battalions came forward. But with the great probability of enemy tanks being present on such a long and prominent ridge, containing both rail and road communications, the hazards were greatly increased, necessitating the presence of supporting anti-tank weapons and tanks well forward with the infantry and powerful and well-planned artillery support. If the difficulties associated with getting the artillery across the [Sangro](#) made proper artillery support impracticable, that could have been accepted, but the other requirements would then have been all the more imperative.

As regards the question of tank support, on 2 December C Squadron, [19 Armoured Regiment](#), on the right flank had already started via a secondary road (Loudon's Road) for its junction with the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road, two and a half miles to the north of [Castelfrentano](#), when [General Freyberg](#) issued orders for the squadron to advance to [Orsogna](#) and from there to push out light patrols to [Guardiagrele](#) and [San Martino](#). On its way north the squadron encountered and overcame enemy opposition, and on reaching the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road turned towards [Orsogna](#) but was stopped in the early afternoon by a blown bridge across the [Moro River](#), which it found impossible to by-pass. As already related, the squadron laagered in the vicinity for the night 2 – 3 December, under the protection of B Company, 25 Battalion, and the following morning used its guns against the enemy in and near [Orsogna](#). Had this squadron received [General Freyberg's](#) order in

time to have taken the direct route to [Orsogna](#), the same as that taken by 25 Battalion and the two troops of 18 Regiment, or had it been able to circumvent the blown bridge and move on [Orsogna](#) at dawn on the 3rd, the tank support then available for 25 Battalion may well have given the New Zealand attack a secure grip of [Orsogna](#). The remainder of 19 Regiment was in the vicinity of [Castelfrentano](#), and when it was known that C Squadron was stopped at the [Moro](#) there seems to be no reason why another squadron was not ordered forward via the Roman Road.

The absence of the support weapons of the battalion requires some explanation. Twenty-fourth Battalion, which advanced towards [Orsogna](#) early in the afternoon of the 2nd, was established on the Brecciarola ridge and dug in by 5 p.m., waiting for its support weapons, which by 10 p.m. arrived via the Roman Road. Yet 25 Battalion, which passed through 24 Battalion five hours later and then, after another three hours, attacked [Orsogna](#) only a mile away, had no support weapons. It appears that a combination of bad roads, the receipt after dark (at 10 p.m.) of the order to attack [Orsogna](#) at dawn (necessitating an approach march at night), and severe shelling of the road when daylight came prevented the support weapons from reaching the battalion. An extract from the battalion's war diary reads: '... very wintry weather resulting in D Coy being cut off in [Orsogna](#) as support weapons were unable to move through the heavy going to support the attack.'

In considering 25 Battalion's attack it must be remembered that the battalion had been deprived of B Company and so had three companies only for its extensive task. In the event this reduction in strength, though it could have been important, was of no account as in the attack only two companies were actively employed, and one of these was in a supporting role and did not enter the town.

But, important as the above considerations may be, the question of the timing of the attack was even more so. Obviously, the less time allowed a retreating enemy to organise, reinforce, and improve his next position, the greater would be the prospects of success. [Orsogna](#) could have been attacked by 24 Battalion during the afternoon of 2 December or by 25 Battalion by the late afternoon. Supporting weapons, for 24 Battalion at least, were available by 10 p.m., and for both battalions could have been at [Orsogna](#) by dawn on 3 December. The enemy was given from eight to twelve hours to prepare for the attack, and during that period may well have laid the numerous mines found in front of his position. But most unfortunately, as

was subsequently learnt, he was able to bring into the [Orsogna](#) position by midnight on 2 – 3 December the 26 Panzer Division's reconnaissance unit (the first company of which reached [Orsogna](#) at 6.30 p.m. on the 2nd), together with a company of tanks (including flame-throwers) and two 20-millimetre four-barrelled anti-aircraft guns. The intervention of this reinforcement was a natural consequence of the delay in mounting the attack.

On the morning of the 4th 24 Battalion found [Orsogna](#) strongly held and at 5 p.m. 25 Battalion moved up on the right of 24 Battalion, extending the front along the San Felice ridge to the north-east, where it was about 800 yards west of the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road. A Company was on the right and B Company (which had rejoined during the day) was on the left, each on a front of 700 yards. A night standing patrol near the fork of two rivers, 400 yards north of A Company's right flank, was established by 9 Platoon. The remnants of D Company were accommodated in a house behind 24 Battalion and 800 yards to the south-west of 25 Battalion.

During the morning of 4 December a patrol from 23 Battalion, which held a reserve position on Loudon's Road, a mile or more to the south-east, reported to 25 Battalion. It had the somewhat ambitious project of shooting-up traffic and laying mines on the [Poggiofiorito- Orsogna](#) road, two miles to the north-west. Twenty-fifth Battalion was able to steer it clear of its proposed route up the Sfasciata ridge, which was strongly held by the enemy; although it did not achieve its object the patrol had various contacts with the enemy and returned to its battalion the next morning. On the afternoon of the 4th carriers of 23 Battalion were also in touch with 25 Battalion.

C Company, temporarily situated close to the [Moro River](#) near the road bend 500 yards east of B Company, had orders to put out that night, 4 – 5 December, a strong standing patrol on the Sfasciata ridge, 700 yards to the north-west of A Company's standing patrol. To prepare the way the locality was first subjected, at 10 p.m., to heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. An hour after midnight 13 and 15 Platoons, with a line party of signallers and with snipers and intelligence personnel attached, left Company Headquarters and, moving down the bed of the [Moro River](#), formed up about 300 yards north-east of A Company's patrol. On a total frontage of 100 yards,

13 Platoon was on the right and 15 on the left. The platoons then advanced due west up the steep face towards the Sfasciata ridge for about 400 yards, when about 3.30 a.m. German flares went up followed by machine-gun, mortar, and rifle fire from steeply rising ground on the right. The two platoons advanced slowly up the slope, silencing four machine-gun posts on the way, but were finally pinned down by heavy fire from a flat-topped hill above them.

This was an hour after first contact had been made and the platoon commanders decided to withdraw. On reaching A Company both platoons were placed on the right flank, extending it for about 300 yards eastwards across the stream. The battalion's casualties on 4 December were one officer (Captain Frost, Carrier Platoon) died of wounds, and one man wounded.

On the left flank of 6 Brigade, 26 Battalion was in position below the Brecciarola ridge in the [Moro](#) valley south of 24 Battalion. There had been heavy rain on the 4th which caused a high flood in the [Sangro](#), and by the evening this had washed away the bridge on 6 Brigade's original sector and was threatening the other bridges; that night the only bridge remaining on [Eighth Army's](#) front was a 24-ton class Bailey bridge which, by 1 December, had been erected near the bridge in 5 Brigade's original sector. The northern approach had, however, been washed away in places and until 11 a.m. on the 5th, when the damage was repaired, the [Sangro](#) was impassable. This situation emphasised the grave menace such a river could be to forces established beyond it, and it was only the clearing of the weather during the night, which enabled flood waters to be dammed and the approach repaired, that on this occasion relieved a crisis.

On the morning of 5 December 3 MG Company and 10 Platoon of 4 MG Company occupied positions on the right rear of 25 Battalion, in the vicinity of Hellfire Corner, from which they could engage the enemy on the Sfasciata ridge. This was part of a plan for a full-scale attack on the enemy positions between Sfasciata and [Orsogna](#) and for harassing him on Sfasciata. There was some patrol activity by 25 Battalion that day. In the early afternoon Second-Lieutenant [Lawson](#)²⁵ of A Company took a reconnaissance patrol to investigate suspected minefields, and after dark another patrol under Sergeant [Chapman](#)²⁶ of B Company went down the [Moro](#) valley for 1200 yards to the north-east and reconnoitred the eastern side of the Sfasciata ridge but saw no sign of the enemy. About the same time Sergeant O'Neill with six carriers

established a standing patrol east of the [Moro](#) on the right flank, a little to the north-west of Hellfire Corner. As usual, observation over the enemy positions in front of the battalion was maintained by the Intelligence Section, which had an OP on the left of B Company, and on the forward slope nearby the battalion snipers on the lookout for targets intensified the close watch that was being kept. No doubt the enemy was similarly vigilant.

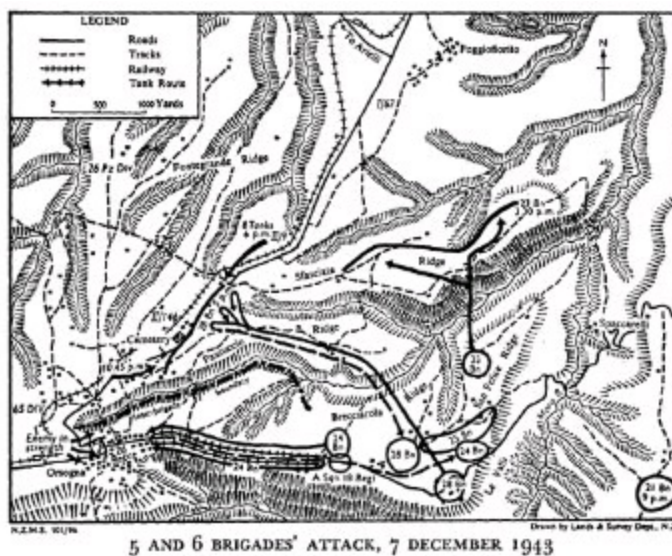
Farther afield, the right flank of 25 Battalion seemed to be well guarded. [Lanciano](#) to the east had been captured by 8 Indian Division, whose patrols, as well as detachments of the Divisional Cavalry, were around [Frisa](#), two and a half miles north-east of the battalion, while patrols from a Canadian tank regiment had established contact with the New Zealand Division near Hellfire Corner.

Road communications had been much improved by the erection on the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road of a Bailey bridge, near the blown bridge which so unfortunately had stopped the advance of New Zealand armour on the 2nd and 3rd of the month. This gave the battalion and other troops in the area a much better route, though long stretches were under enemy observation and subjected to heavy shelling at times, notably Hellfire Corner and the road running south-west from there to the new Bailey bridge; drivers and others who had to use the road and working parties maintaining it were often severely harassed. Another road was similarly treated: that part of Route 84 leading from [Castelfrentano](#) to the north-west, which 25 Battalion had used on the 1st and which was carrying heavy traffic, received so much fire that it was called 'The Mad Mile', it being the habit of drivers to traverse it at reckless speed. The new bridge enabled 25 Battalion to avoid this section of the road.

Although there had been considerable artillery fire elsewhere, the battalion received only a few mortar shells, and during the night some heavy shells burst near the road across the valley to the rear. During the afternoon the appearance of enemy fighter-bombers, harassed by anti-aircraft fire and Spitfires, created interest rather than hazards for the men on the ground. Casualties for the day were two killed (Lance-Corporals [Glynan](#) ²⁷ and [Thomson](#) ²⁸) and three wounded.

The orders for the impending attack were issued on the afternoon of 6 December. The attack was to be made in daylight on the next afternoon by 5 and 6

Brigades, 5 Brigade on the right; the **Maori Battalion** was to attack up Pascuccio spur opposite the left front of 25 Battalion, its objective being the road beyond Cemetery ridge; 23 Battalion was to attack Sfasciata ridge. In 6 Brigade 24 Battalion was to attack **Orsogna**; 25 Battalion was to hold its ground as a firm base for 5 Brigade; and 26 Battalion would serve the same purpose for 6 Brigade by coming forward and occupying 24 Battalion's position when that battalion advanced.



5 and 6 brigades' attack, 7 december 1943

That night the battalion had a patrol working down the eastern side of Sfasciata ridge as far as the river fork at the northern end. Nothing was seen of the enemy, but the patrol passed what appeared to be a machine-gun post well up on the north-eastern shoulder of the ridge. The only casualty of the day was Private L. P. **Jones**,²⁹ who died of wounds.

Although the 7th, the day of the attack, was a little clearer than the previous day, which had been showery with poor observation, the showers continued and visibility was still poor, interfering seriously with the heavy air support of thirteen squadrons of fighter-bombers which had been arranged, and the men saw only a few aircraft overhead. Before daylight Corporal **Bartlett**³⁰ and another battalion sniper occupied a forward OP in a pink house in front of B Company and were in touch with that company, the battalion mortars, and an artillery OP by No. 38 wireless set.

In the early afternoon there was much activity in the battalion's area when the two attacking battalions of 5 Brigade passed through on their way to their start lines.

At 1 p.m. a standing barrage (to be followed by a creeping barrage) by three field regiments opened, another field regiment was firing smoke, a medium battery was shelling [Orsogna](#) and the road west of it, and other artillery was engaging selected targets. A large number of machine guns, many of them only a few hundred yards behind or east of the battalion, joined in and the men found the din deafening.

The battalion also played an active part in the attack, A, B, and C Companies giving covering fire against specified sectors of the ridge in front, while the mortars bombarded the reverse slope. Half an hour after the artillery barrage commenced the battalion stood-to and continued in this state of readiness until darkness fell. Back at the RAP a number of wounded men of 23 Battalion were attended by the RMO (Captain Pearse) before evacuation to the field ambulance.

In the initial stages the attack had proceeded according to plan. Twenty-third Battalion had only about a thousand yards to go, though the country was steep, and, opposed only by shell and mortar fire, the battalion was firmly established within the hour on the base of Sfasciata ridge. Twenty-eighth Battalion also had a steep climb, including an escarpment almost sheer in places, before reaching the [Poggiofiorito-Orsogna](#) road; considerable opposition was encountered, and although the battalion succeeded in reaching the objective and in repelling repeated counter-attacks, its position was overlooked by the enemy to such an extent that it would be untenable in daylight, and the battalion was ordered to withdraw. The country was so difficult that neither battalion of 5 Brigade was able to get its support weapons forward.

On 6 Brigade front 24 Battalion, early in the attack, met with considerable artillery and mortar fire and later with machine-gun fire; S-mines also were encountered. The centre of [Orsogna](#) was reached despite considerable resistance, which included tanks. New Zealand tanks in support were stopped by craters, but after dusk were able to enter the fringe of the town. There they were again stopped by mines and strongly defended posts, including a tank skilfully placed up a side street, and subsequent efforts meeting with no success, the troops were withdrawn.

Except for the position gained on Sfasciata ridge by 23 Battalion the operation was a failure, the casualties suffered by the attacking troops being 29 killed, 93 wounded, and 35 missing; two tanks were lost. The enemy lost an unknown number of killed and wounded and fifty-four prisoners, while three tanks and one anti-tank

gun were known to have been put out of action. Twenty-fifth Battalion's casualty list was one man (Private [Ryan](#)³¹) wounded and taken prisoner.

The day following the attack was beautifully fine and there was much air activity, forty Kittybombers raiding [Orsogna](#) and the enemy defences on the ridge continuously from nine in the morning. On three occasions the enemy sent over Messerschmitts, and New Zealand Bofors anti-aircraft guns, as well as men of 25 Battalion and everyone else within range, engaged them heavily without apparent result. The battalion RAP, being established in a house as usual, naturally took a keen interest in enemy bombers, and on this particular day had the added interest of discussion with the American driver of an attached United States Army ambulance, who was found to be 'a grand guy'.

Air activity by both sides the next day (9 December) was on much the same scale as previously, and except for a few shells, which were too close to some of the men to be pleasant, it was a quiet day for the battalion. Away off to the left on the Brecciarola ridge, eight New Zealand tanks caused a violent disturbance when, to test the defences, they heavily shelled [Orsogna](#). The enemy response was lively, with heavy shelling of the vicinity of the tanks, the placing of a smoke screen round [Orsogna](#), and the advance of three tanks to the eastern edge of the town, from which place they shelled the New Zealand tanks. The New Zealand artillery and a medium regiment replied strongly and the fracas ended, when their ammunition was expended, by the withdrawal of the New Zealand tanks, one of which was damaged by a direct hit.

An attack by 5 Brigade, which was planned for the night of 10- 11 December, was cancelled in the morning as a Canadian attack in the coastal sector the previous night had met with more resistance than had been expected, although for a time, due to better progress by the Canadians, a further operation was proposed. The New Zealand Division therefore continued its policy of active patrolling in order to hold as many enemy troops as possible on the New Zealand front. In the course of these operations a force of two platoons of 23 Battalion, four six-pounder anti-tank guns, and seven tanks occupied a salient within 400 yards of the [Poggiofiorito- Orsogna](#) road, 2000 yards north-west of 25 Battalion. The same evening 25 Battalion placed a standing patrol of one platoon of fourteen men under Sergeant [Bellerby](#)³² on the base of Pascuccio ridge, where, on 4 December, 24 Battalion had placed a standing

patrol; communication was established by No.38 set and later by wire, and a defensive fire plan was arranged both for artillery and machine guns. There was one casualty ([Private Pitt](#) ³³) reported wounded during the day.

[Eighth Army](#)'s plan for the attack had been recast to provide for four divisions—1 Canadian, 8 Indian, 5 British, and 2 New Zealand—eventually to advance on the front between the Adriatic and [Orsogna](#), while another division (78 British) would hold the mountains on the left of the New Zealand Division. In the meantime, on the night 12 – 13 December, [17 Brigade](#) of 5 British Division was to come under New Zealand command and fill a gap between the left flank of [8 Indian Division](#) and the New Zealand right.

On 11 December many shells fell in 25 Battalion's position but no one was hit. On Pascuccio ridge Sergeant Bellerby's standing patrol detected an enemy OP and directed artillery fire on it. Late in the evening the men heard heavy artillery fire, and learnt later that it was a barrage fired for nearly an hour by [6 Field Regiment](#) to simulate an attack in order to draw the enemy's defensive fire and so test its strength and position. This stratagem failed as the enemy simply ignored it.

All battalions of the brigade had patrols out that night. Twenty-fifth Battalion kept its standing patrol on Pascuccio ridge, and also sent a reconnaissance patrol westwards up a gully on its south side to within 600 yards of the road and thence across the ridge. It found fresh digging there and heard the enemy working just ahead; traffic could also be heard on the road. The patrol returned without incident. The following day 14 Platoon (which was providing the standing patrol) placed a listening post 500 yards in advance, near where the patrol had been the previous night, and withdrew it an hour after midnight; an enemy working party was again heard but the nature of the work could not be ascertained. When the listening-post men returned, artillery fire was directed against the working party and nothing more was heard of it. On the same day the battalion received a very welcome reinforcement of fifty-four men from the base at [Bari](#), the strength at the time being over 200 below establishment.

The 4.2-inch mortar made its first appearance in the battalion when, on 13 December, [Sergeant Cook](#) ³⁴ of the mortar platoon obtained one at Brigade Headquarters. This was attached to the battalion, but later at Luce the Brigade

Heavy Mortar Battery was formed from the three battalions' detachments, the men being detached from their units until operations were of a more mobile character. The mortar, firing a 20-pound bomb, had the useful range of 4400 yards.

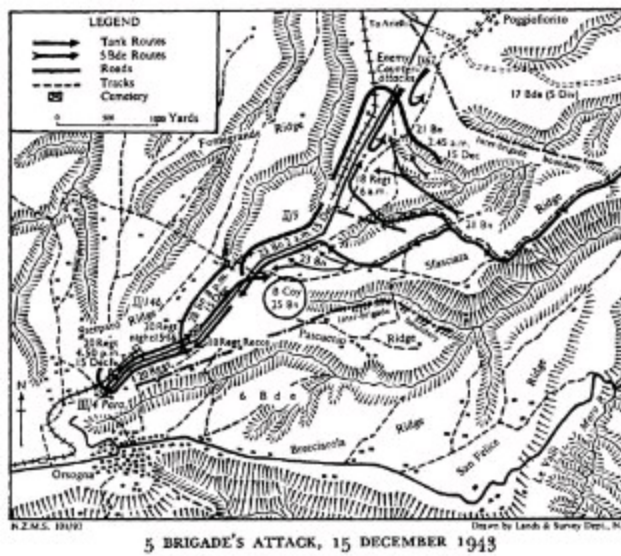
In the evening a patrol of three men led by Second-Lieutenant Rees made another reconnaissance of Pascuccio. It found no enemy on the ridge but, as on the previous night, heard a good deal of traffic moving along the road. The same night D Company moved forward a short distance to the crest of San Felice ridge on the left of B Company. The only casualty reported for the day was Private Whitaker,³⁵ wounded.

The following afternoon (14 December) Colonel Morten gave the company commanders the plan for a further advance the next day. While 5 Brigade attacked and secured positions west of the [Poggiofiorito- Orsogna](#) road, 6 Brigade was to advance and protect the left flank of that brigade; 5 Brigade's frontage would extend from a little to the north of Duncan's Road, on the right, for 2500 yards to the Cemetery on the left, 1500 yards north-east of [Orsogna](#).

Sixth Brigade's task was entrusted to 25 Battalion, which with the help of timed artillery concentrations was to occupy

Ceme- tery

ridge, near the road at the top of Pascuccio ridge; from there it was to establish contact with 23 Battalion, the left battalion of 5 Brigade, on the edge of the escarpment nearby, south of the Cemetery. Twenty-sixth Battalion was to occupy the ridge 700 yards behind or south-east of 25 Battalion. To keep enemy armour in [Orsogna](#), one troop of tanks in the cover of some cypress trees near the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road,



5 brigade's attack, 15 december 1943

1000 yards south of 25 Battalion's objective, was to fire HE shells into the town. Zero hour for the battalion's advance was 1 a.m., 15 December.

The day preceding the attack was fairly quiet, with little shelling. Three casualties were reported: Sergeant Heine, died of wounds, and Sergeant Sullivan³⁶ and Private Ludemann³⁷ wounded. In the late afternoon, in readiness to support the advance of the battalion, four 3-inch mortars laden on mules, and with a carrying party of thirty-seven men, were taken forward to the standing patrol position on Pascuccio ridge. The night was very cold and the light but intermittent rain which fell during and after the attack made conditions very unpleasant.

B Company (Major Possin) was detailed to secure the battalion's objective. At zero hour, accompanied by 11 MG Platoon, it advanced through the standing patrol's position and climbed up the Pascuccio spur towards the Cemetery, with 10 and 11 Platoons on the northern side of the spur and 12 Platoon on the southern. In the darkness the steep and slippery slopes were difficult to negotiate and progress was slow. For the first half-hour no opposition was encountered, but soon afterwards 10 Platoon in the lead, 900 yards from the objective, was halted by flanking machine-gun fire, while on the left of the company front shell and mortar fire forced 12 Platoon to take cover. This stopped the advance of the company and, as the opposition could not be overcome or evaded, the troops dug in and awaited the arrival of men of 23 Battalion, which had tanks in close support.

B Company had lost touch with Battalion Headquarters, 10 Platoon could not

find one of its sections, and 12 Platoon was disorganised and not in contact with the rest of the company. However, Company Headquarters was in touch with 26 Battalion on the ridge on its left rear, and until daylight 25 Battalion sent all instructions for B Company through that battalion.

Enemy mortar fire continued unabated, and the company called for artillery concentrations against mortars situated near the road 600 yards north of Orsogna and directed the fire. This had little effect. At 3.50 a.m. Battalion Headquarters ordered B Company to push on to the road before dawn and find 23 Battalion's left flank. By that time the company was reduced to 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Berry) and two sections of 10 Platoon, the third section having been knocked out by mortar fire, but these remnants advanced against hostile fire to within 200 yards of the road. A patrol sent forward from that position reported that the enemy was holding the line of the road in strength.

The enemy fire was intense and the platoons retired about 600 yards. At 6.15 a.m. fresh orders were received to advance again when heavy artillery supporting fire, which was being arranged, came down on the enemy positions. With this assistance 11 Platoon worked its way forward, and Sergeant Chapman, making a reconnaissance by himself, reached A Company of 23 Battalion about dawn. He found there was a gap of 500 yards between the left of 23 Battalion and B Company, too wide to be covered by the troops on the spot, and generally there was a good deal of confusion. New Zealanders and Germans were in small groups throughout the area and a continuous line could not be formed. From its position 200 yards behind 11 Platoon, 10 Platoon was ordered forward but was again halted by enemy fire. About the only bright feature in this dismal situation was the arrival about this time of a hot meal, sent up to B Company by pack mules.

After dawn 23 Battalion, whose left flank was several hundred yards too far to the right, requested that B Company should move about 400 yards to the right and to within 300 yards of the road to secure 23 Battalion's flank. Although 25 Battalion did not agree with the proposal, 6 Brigade Headquarters, to whom it was referred, ordered that B Company should be placed under command of 23 Battalion. The company then took up the position required by that unit.

During the operation Private L. G. Sinclair,³⁸ who was in charge of the RAP

detachment with the company, organised a party of stretcher-bearers and led them forward to where several wounded men requiring attention were lying on a track 700 yards beyond Company Headquarters. Under particularly heavy fire from mortars and artillery, Sinclair dressed the wounded, showing great coolness and courage, and then had them carried out. He received a well-merited Military Medal. The company's casualties, five killed and nine wounded, were taken back to the standing patrol position where the RAP had been established.

Sergeant N. K. Chapman was also awarded the Military Medal. After completing the reconnaissance already mentioned, Chapman crossed about 800 yards of unknown ground to find the Commanding Officer of 23 Battalion, who explained the situation. He then reported to B Company headquarters, his information enabling the company to complete its task.

Late in the afternoon New Zealand tanks were active, passing through the Cemetery with the object of blocking the western exit of [Orsogna](#) and then moving to the south-west towards [Guardiagrele](#). They met severe opposition from tanks and anti-tank guns and at dusk withdrew to the Cemetery, where a detachment from 23 Battalion protected their laager. At this stage, when the defence of the Cemetery seemed assured, B Company at 7 p.m. reverted to the command of 25 Battalion but remained where it was.

The operation had resulted in 5 Brigade cutting the Poggiofiorito- [Orsogna](#) road on a front of a mile and being firmly established in the position, supported by tanks well forward and by organised artillery and machine-gun defensive fire when required. These defences were tested in mid-afternoon by strong counter-attacks, and later by tanks and infantry supported by artillery and machine-gun fire; after severe fighting all attacks were repulsed with considerable loss to the enemy. It was subsequently learnt that [26 Panzer Division](#) had four battalions forward between [Poggiofiorito](#) and [Orsogna](#), but had been forced to send its only reserve battalion and its last tanks towards the coast. In the absence of tanks to meet the New Zealand attack, a strong line of anti-tank guns was established behind the forward troops and later in the day a few tanks were brought up from [Arielli](#).

After dawn next morning an attack beyond the Cemetery, arranged the previous evening, was made by 20 Armoured Regiment and [28 Battalion](#), but in the face of

severe opposition was not successful. Twenty-fifth Battalion continued to hold Pascuccio spur and still maintained its standing patrol, which although now behind the front line, was required to watch the gully between Pascuccio and Brecciarola ridges.

That day there was much air activity, in the course of which Messerschmitts before noon raided the battalion's position and American aircraft dropped a few bombs behind it, but no damage was caused. On the following morning an attempt by two platoons of 26 Battalion and two troops of 20 Armoured Regiment to enter Orsogna did not succeed, the troops being withdrawn in the late afternoon and evening. There was also some activity on both flanks but little result, and for the next few days the Division adopted a holding and patrolling policy. B Company spent most of the 17th removing mines from the head of the gully near its position on the northern side of the Pascuccio spur.

In the future, so long as circumstances permitted, 6 Brigade intended to hold its position with one battalion forward and one in support, while the third battalion would be in reserve recuperating at Castelfrentano. The battalions were to change over so that each had six days in the line and three in reserve. Twenty-sixth Battalion was the first to go back, being relieved on the night of 18 December in the forward position by 24 Battalion. At the same time the depth of the brigade's defences was increased by an improvement in 25 Battalion's dispositions on the San Felice ridge. At dusk in a heavy fog, A Company was moved from the northern slopes of the ridge, where it had remained since the 4th, into 24 Battalion's former position near the junction of the Roman Road with the Lanciano- Orsogna road. There it overlooked the Moro valley running eastwards from the vicinity of Orsogna. Company Headquarters and the platoons were all accommodated in houses with their defensive positions nearby. After completing its task of removing the mines, B Company was withdrawn to the position vacated by A Company. C and D Companies remained where they were, C Company towards the northern end of San Felice ridge and D Company about 600 yards north of A Company's new position. During the day the strength of the battalion was increased by the arrival of another fifty reinforcements. Corporal Mead, ³⁸ wounded, was the only casualty of the day.

Next day, Sunday, 19 December, was quiet. After dark 25 Battalion took over from 24 Battalion the standing patrol position on Colle Chiamato overlooking the

Moro valley, A Company being on the other side of the valley, about 800 yards to the north-east. The patrol, a platoon by night and a section by day, occupied a house on the edge of a ravine leading down to the Moro from the western end of Colle Chiamato. The other standing patrol position on Pascuccio was to be held by night only. Kittyhawks bombed and strafed Orsogna that day and the next, though a heavy bombing programme arranged for the 19th was cancelled. Another reinforcement numbering eighty men on the 20th brought the total arrivals during the last eight days up to 184. The one casualty reported that day was Private Walsh,³⁹ wounded.

B Company had a change of company commanders, Major Possin being evacuated sick and Captain Williams from the Support Company taking his place, while Captain Sanders from HQ Company went to A Company.

On the evening of the 21st it was 25 Battalion's turn to go into reserve, and on relief by 26 Battalion it moved back to Castelfrentano for three days' rest. The march of three or four miles in the dark was very unpleasant, but with the prospect of a clean-up and a rest in comparative comfort, the men made light of it, their only complaint after settling down for the night being that the New Zealand guns kept them awake for some time. From their excellent viewpoint on the ridge on Castelfrentano, the men next day enjoyed the spectacle of thirty RAF bombers attacking Orsogna and of the New Zealand artillery shelling enemy anti-aircraft positions around the town.

On 23 December further changes in the officers of the battalion occurred: Colonel Morten was evacuated sick and Major Norman took command of the battalion, with Major Robertshaw as his second-in-command; Captain Webster from B Company took command of HQ Company.

Anticipating its return to the forward area, the battalion on the 23rd had its Christmas dinner in the peace and relative comfort of its position in reserve. A very good meal was provided, as in former years, from special rations supplemented by local supplies, fruit, and beer, while the issue of a Patriotic Fund parcel to every man and a large parcel mail provided additional delicacies and enhanced the Christmas atmosphere. In traditional fashion the officers waited on their men, and Brigadier Parkinson and Major Norman visited the troops at their meals.

On 24 December a further attack on the enemy positions north-east of [Orsogna](#) was made by 5 Brigade. Some success was attained against strong opposition though, with the exception of a company of 21 Battalion across the [Arielli](#) stream, the troops did not reach the second objective and no exploitation was possible. On the right flank of the attack the position secured by 21 Battalion was very thinly held and fighting continued all day, with the enemy, a training battalion of 6 Parachute Regiment, in close proximity. It was decided to relieve 21 Battalion, and in the early afternoon of Christmas Eve 25 Battalion was ordered forward for this purpose.

The route followed was a somewhat circuitous one to the north and west. No. 11 MG Platoon accompanied the battalion but left its guns behind as it was to take over those of 3 MG Platoon in the line. About 5 p.m., just as a halt was made for the evening meal, rain fell and the going, especially along Duncan's Road, was extremely wet and muddy and the men found the march most exhausting. In addition to the very heavy packs, extra rations were carried, and with boots clogged with mud the men floundered on in the darkness almost yard by yard in single file, maintaining contact by sound and having trouble in keeping to the road.

On reaching the [Poggiofiorito- Orsogna](#) road the companies moved by various routes to their positions. Following the road for half a mile to the south-west towards [Orsogna](#), D Company (Captain Hewitt) turned off to the west and took up its position on a second ridge 1000 yards from the road, crossing two watercourses of the [Arielli](#) stream on the way. There it relieved C Company, 21 Battalion, and also B Company, 26 Battalion, on the left flank of 25 Battalion's sector, a mile and a half north-east of [Orsogna](#). A Company (Captain Sanders) went to Pt 331 on the right flank, about 1200 yards to the north-east of D Company, and B Company (Captain Williams) was in support on Pt 332 in the vicinity of the road 800 yards behind. C Company (Major Webster) supported D Company on the other flank and occupied a ridge 300 yards behind it.

By half an hour after midnight, on Christmas morning, the relief of 21 Battalion had been completed. By the time the troops had dug themselves in, it was nearing daylight, and shortly afterwards the German mortars commenced shelling the position. The situation of D Company was not very secure and the platoons were brought closer together; however, in the event of attack the company had orders to

withdraw across the [Arielli](#) stream a hundred yards or so in its rear. F Troop, 32 Anti-Tank Battery, which had been supporting 21 Battalion, had remained in position and by the morning 25 Battalion's own anti-tank guns were also ready, having been dragged up with considerable difficulty. No. 11 MG Platoon, too, was ready in the positions taken over from 3 MG Platoon.

Christmas morning was very quiet along the whole front, with just enough shelling and mortar fire to disturb the peace of the day, though Corporal [Kingsford](#) ⁴⁰ had the misfortune to be wounded. Early in the morning 6 Brigade Headquarters had moved up and taken over operational control from 5 Brigade.

No further effort was made by the New Zealanders to breach the German defences on the [Arielli- Orsogna](#) front. A skilful defence by first-class German troops and the onset of winter had stopped the offensive and made further operations unprofitable until the weather improved. About ten miles from the sea, and with an elevation of 1000 feet at [Poggiofiorito](#) and 1400 feet at [Orsogna](#), rising to peaks of 6500 to 7300 feet nine miles to the south-west, the ridge, held in part by 25 Battalion, naturally experienced severe winter weather, which made it necessary to get the men into buildings where possible; thus the forward defended localities consisted chiefly of platoon posts in farm buildings, with slit trenches in the immediate vicinity. On account of enemy observation, movement of any kind was difficult and usually had to be undertaken in darkness. The tracks and roads were in a bad state and would soon be impassable to vehicles if used to any extent. Supplies for the forward troops had to be brought up by mules, though jeeps were used to bring meals from the brick kiln in [Castelfrentano](#) as far as the [Moro River](#).

After dark on Christmas Day a battalion of a British paratroop brigade took over from 24 Battalion on Brecciarola ridge east of [Orsogna](#), the latter battalion moving back a little over a mile for a brief rest. As darkness fell the enemy artillery, mortar, and Spandau fire increased a good deal, and though some movement of German troops near the forward positions was observed, there were no further developments.

The next day German mortars were again in evidence. The weather was dull and cold, with drizzling rain. In front of 25 Battalion the Germans were seen moving about freely after 10 a.m., and it was unfortunate (though that was not the term

used by infantry observers) that the artillery fire directed against them should fall 300 yards short until corrected, when of course the opportunity had passed. It was a case, as a Maori soldier once put it, of 'If the first shell no catch the Maori, the second no chance.' During the next few hours the Vickers guns with the battalion twice broke up parties of Germans moving in the same locality, and in mid-afternoon further movement was shelled by the 4.2-inch mortars. D Company, which had good observation, was able to act as observers for all this fire, but naturally its prominent position out on a spur attracted much enemy mortar fire. This gave the company an unpleasant time and made it difficult to maintain communication with Battalion Headquarters.

At 6.30 p.m. B Company, from its support position, took over D Company's position, D Company withdrawing to B Company's position. Soon afterwards B Company placed a listening post about 400 yards to the north-west beyond the gully which extended along the front. The enemy mortar fire which had worried A Company continued throughout the night, two men being wounded. The 27th was bitterly cold, with moderately heavy rain and some hail. At 3 a.m. C Company, from its support position, sent a patrol of three men to the north-west of B Company, beyond the listening post towards a road 1100 yards away which led to the village of [Magliano](#). The patrol found that the enemy was holding the road in strength and withdrew, reaching its lines by 5.30 a.m. The listening post also withdrew by dawn with nothing to report. At daybreak the enemy position found by the patrol was heavily mortared and shelled.

Soon after midday B Company reported that about fifty of the enemy were dug in behind a house 200 yards north of the listening-post position and that snipers were active in various houses. It was a busy afternoon. Shortly after noon enemy tanks and infantry were fired on by artillery and machine guns and no further movement was reported there. An hour later enemy movement 200 yards farther away was also shelled, both by the artillery and by four tanks with C Company, which reported that the artillery fire was effective and that the four tanks had gone forward and had fired on the houses in the area, later withdrawing. Subsequently a sniper was seen in a group of houses 800 yards north-west of A Company, and the houses were shelled by the artillery after the battalion mortars had fired smoke to indicate the target. Before dusk an A Company reconnaissance patrol under Corporal

Bennett ⁴¹ crossed the Arielli stream and, climbing to the crest of the next ridge about 600 yards to the west, reached the vicinity of Pt 340 without opposition. The patrol reported the houses on the side of the hill to be unoccupied but saw two Germans on Pt 340.

To give some additional protection to B Company in its somewhat exposed position, C Company placed a standing patrol of one section in a position overlooking the Arielli stream on the northern flank of that company. Another standing patrol on the other flank of B Company was provided by 26 Battalion at the request of Major Norman. These patrols were provided only at night to guard the approaches.

Early the following day, 28 December, a German who appeared to have lost his way wandered into B Company's position and, after being challenged, was shot while trying to escape. During the night there had been intermittent and searching artillery and mortar fire against 25 Battalion's position but it was ineffective. It was again a very cold day, and though there was no rain the ominous sky seemed to threaten a fall of snow.

The cold, wet weather was causing considerable hardship to the men and the conditions in the forward posts made reliefs necessary at short intervals. The routes serving the battalion notably Duncan's Road, which had been cut up by tanks, were quagmires and no vehicles were permitted on this road without the specific approval of 6 Brigade Headquarters. Rations for the battalion, including one hot meal each day, continued to be brought forward on mules. Near Battalion Headquarters and the RAP, engineers were busy with bulldozers, and Canadian engineers farther back were blowing up damaged houses to get material for metalling the roads.

One of the many acts of kindness and service by New Zealand medical officers throughout the war was performed that morning when the battalion RMO (Captain Pearse) removed a cyst from the throat of an Italian girl.

In the afternoon enemy tanks opened heavy fire on C Company; sound bearings were taken and the artillery was called upon to silence them. Later a patrol of three men under Corporal Green ⁴² went to Pt 340, but by the time the patrol reached the place, however, the light had faded and, other than some empty weapon pits, nothing was seen. The only casualty reported on the 28th was Corporal Firth, ⁴³

wounded.

At night D Company returned to the left flank of the battalion, exchanging positions with C Company. In front and to the left of D Company, B Company's left forward section was being sniped at by a tommy gun, thought at first to be fired by mistake by men of 26 Battalion. Occasional single shots continued, and on investigation an enemy patrol was found. It was engaged by the flanking posts of B Company and by 26 Battalion's standing patrol, and the tommy gun ceased fire but resumed half an hour later. Soon afterwards a German who was captured in the vicinity said that his patrol had been dispersed by the fire from the New Zealand posts, and that two other German patrols were out; nothing was seen of these

The German patrols seemed to be showing a little more enterprise, and to assist in guarding against surprise, 600 yards of trip-wires attached to igniters were erected in front and on the flanks of the forward posts of B Company on the battalion's left flank. The following morning (29 December) there was a good deal of enemy activity at some buildings in front of the company; tanks of A Squadron, [20 Armoured Regiment](#), in support fired on the buildings, provoking enemy shelling and mortar fire; in retaliation B Company then called for artillery fire against the guns and mortars. Exchanges of this sort on a small scale, mostly against the forward positions, continued throughout the day.

Farther back the enemy fired a few airbursts, a favourite German ranging method a quarter of a century ago, the shells bursting with a very startling 'crump' and usually much black smoke. This was followed by heavy shelling and mortaring of the houses in the Battalion Headquarters area occupied by the troops, five of the buildings being hit. Fortunately, casualties were light, three men being wounded, one of whom died the next morning.

At dusk Sergeant Tulloch ⁴⁴ took out a patrol from B Company to booby-trap houses which had been the target for the New Zealand artillery earlier in the day. He gave a report on the operation:

'The patrol ... left at approx 1730 hrs. We left from Barn OP following down a track as shown by guide. After we had crossed the wadi we moved along the forward slope (enemy side) until in line with objective-when in direct line with obj. we

approached as warily as possible. When we were within about 15 yds of objective we noticed movement on our right. Unable to go further we went to ground. After a short while men were noticed coming across the horizon, about 15 to 20 men, and along the skyline, not trying to conceal themselves were another 10 or more. During this time one of the men from the party of 10 walked to the haystack and spoke in whispering voice to person apparently in slit trenches, number unknown. The party on our right patrolled their forward slope coming up in line and below where we were concealed. To my mind I would say that the horizon would be no more than 50 yds behind the haystack.

'In the gap in the hedge we had crossed there was a wire which I did not have time to investigate. It may or may not be a trip wire.'

In the circumstances there was only one course open to the patrol and that was to retire and report the situation. This was done and heavy fire from artillery, mortars, and machine guns was directed against the buildings. This brought a report from A Company, on the other flank, that two white flares 1000 yards to the north were fired by the enemy when the artillery opened fire and shortly afterwards an enemy patrol was seen. On two occasions machine-gun fire was directed on the locality where the flares had appeared, and also on the route the patrol was likely to take. This relentless harassing of the enemy was a good example of the policy adopted by the Division during the period when offensive operations on a larger scale were impracticable.

Except for a little artillery fire and an alarm at 10 p.m. when one of the igniters on the trip-wires in front of B Company exploded without apparent cause, the remainder of the night on the battalion's front was quiet. The next day was fine with good visibility, and the battalion's OPs reported a good deal of movement. The RAF was active and an observation aircraft directed artillery fire on to the various targets observed. Two men of B Company were wounded by mortar fire, the other casualties of the day being four died of wounds. During the day it was found that the houses in front of B Company were again occupied by the enemy and snipers in them were a menace. This nuisance was not to be borne unchallenged, and an observed artillery shoot was arranged, B Company first ranging on the target with smoke from 2-inch mortars. Later in the day the same area was twice bombarded, once by tanks under 26 Battalion and again at dusk by 25 Battalion mortars. The tanks scored hits on four

houses and Browning machine guns joined in. The enemy mortars replied briskly. In the evening men of the carrier platoon at last light established a standing patrol on the battalion's right flank to the right of A Company, returning at dawn; the patrol reported a minefield in the area.

That same evening Second-Lieutenant Lawson, Sergeant [Toms](#),⁴⁵ and five men of A Company explored the gully of the [Arielli](#) stream to ascertain whether it was occupied and to investigate digging that had been seen there. Crossing the gully in front of the company, the patrol climbed the ridge to the north-west for about 500 yards; it found that the ridge was held by the Germans, voices being audible just ahead, while a tank was heard moving in the vicinity. The patrol returned safely at 10 p.m.

In the centre 18 Platoon of D Company placed a listening patrol on the right of the company on top of the ridge overlooking the gully along the front, there being a gap of about 300 yards to A Company. Rain had caused poor visibility and a party of about sixty Germans, probably a working party which had lost its way, wandered right on to the patrol's position. Needless to relate, the two men of the patrol, 'Pop' Wilson⁴⁶ and 'Mac' Fitzgerald,⁴⁷ kept very still and the Germans went past without seeing them.

B Company that evening was relieved by C Company and went into battalion reserve.

Before and after daylight on the last day of the year, enemy tanks and mortars fired on the battalion's positions but there was little infantry action. C Company reported shelling after midnight but thought it was short-shooting by the supporting artillery. About a couple of hours before daylight an enemy patrol of three men fired on the left posts of the company and with the break of day the position came under mortar fire; the left company sector was in fact living up to its reputation. In the early afternoon A Company on the right flank was also bombarded by mortars, and at the same time C Company shelled by 75-millimetre guns at fairly close range.

Later in the day, towards evening, Corporal Bartlett (who had a roving commission) and another sniper, Private Harwood, crossed the gully to the north-west of C Company and visited a farmhouse 500 yards away which had been shelled

the previous day. From the house they observed other buildings in the vicinity and returned safely with the report that the area was lightly held. The weather during the day had been dull and threatening, with the leaden sky which so often presages snow, and at 8 p.m. the snow came in a violent storm which continued until morning. Three men were wounded during the day, Sergeant Falconer,⁴⁸ Privates Hubbard⁴⁹ and Ramsay.⁵⁰

The majority of the men in the rifle companies were in open slit trenches and conditions were as bad as anything experienced in Italy during the whole campaign. In the vicinity of houses slit trenches had been occupied by night only, but as these became unusable through snow and water, the houses themselves were converted into strongpoints, with shelters dug underneath and windows and doors blocked with sandbags. Where houses did not exist, fresh trenches had to be dug; many of the gunpits of the artillery supporting the battalion, as well as the mortar and machine-gun pits, were also unusable and new positions were prepared.

Many men suffered severely from exposure. One Bren-gunner from C Company had to be taken into a house at Company Headquarters to thaw his hand free from the gun barrel. In A Company several men asleep in their bivouacs were quite unaware they had been asowed in and had to be dug out by others who had much difficulty in finding their shelters. One section of mortars behind A Company had the good fortune to be in a cave and in the morning played the Good Samaritans by accommodating and assisting others less fortunate. Others also gave aid where possible. 'Jim Wilson of 8 Platoon did a great job during this cold snap,' said one man. 'The cold didn't seem to affect him as much as it did the others and he went round all the positions keeping chaps on the move— bringing them in for assistance through massage—and doing general work that others were incapable of doing. His mates said he did a marvellous job and undoubtedly saved many Kiwis from dying of cold.'

The one hot meal per day brought up on the mules was a Godsend and naturally was most eagerly awaited; unfortunately the rum issue, equally welcome, did not reach all the companies; D Company sent out two parties to collect the rum from Battalion Headquarters, but both of them found the storm too thick and severe and had to give up the attempt. Men lost their way on journeys as short as a hundred yards. Snow had covered the countryside to a depth of two feet, with drifts up to

four feet in places, and roads and tracks were almost impassable.

In these conditions active operations on a large scale were impossible, and until the worst of the winter had passed, the policy of holding fast and active patrolling was to continue. This, in combination with aggressive action by all available means against any targets presenting themselves, would perhaps prevent enemy forces being withdrawn to more active fronts and would inflict casualties; it would have a good effect on the morale of the troops, prevent stagnation, and maintain the offensive spirit.

There were no New Year celebrations for 25 Battalion though, in reversal of the usual behaviour of the human mind, the day will doubtless be remembered long after other much more pleasant such anniversaries have been forgotten. The day was spent clearing the roads and tracks, repairing and relaying telephone lines, and preparing shelters of some kind in place of those collapsed or otherwise unusable. The countryside was practically a bog, with the snow overlaying the mud which had not had time to freeze hard, and the men floundered around over their boot-tops in the mixture. Snow and sleet continued to fall until the late afternoon, hampering work and reducing to a minimum artillery fire on both sides. Apparently, at least one goodwill message was passed to the Germans: 'On New Year's Day in this area,' wrote a member of the battalion, 'the artillery put down a barrage of shells on the forward slopes that could be seen both by the Germans and ourselves, "Happy New Year Fritz", and although not every shell fell in the correct position, the wording was easily readable.'

Snow also created difficulties in the use of telephones in forward localities because of the way the voice carried in such conditions. At a C Company OP the Bren-gunner manning the post (Roly Harwood) had some trouble in convincing Lance- Corporal [Bayliss](#)⁵¹ of the Signals that it was impossible to use a telephone there because of the enemy overhearing it, but after trials under a blanket the latter agreed and Major Webster had the telephone withdrawn.

For a time the snowstorm completely disrupted signal communications. During the operations against [Orsogna](#) the signal lines laid on the ground worked well until the mule trains were used to bring up supplies. Naturally the muleteers followed the lines to lead them to the companies and platoons and nearly every night the lines

were broken, necessitating the linesmen going out to repair them. Lieutenant [Izard](#),⁵² the battalion Signal Officer, then had the lines erected on the many olive trees available, but when the snow came, the combined effect of rain, frost, and snow resulted in the lines being coated up to a thickness of four inches, which broke them. The lines came down to earth again, and when covered by a thick carpet of snow were well protected. Apart from trouble from the snow, tanks and other vehicles, as well as shellfire and bombing, also caused breaks in the lines. To avoid or reduce this, the lines as far as possible were kept clear of roads and country suitable for tanks, and ditches and stone walls were utilised to give protection.

The wireless equipment was also affected by the cold weather, the frozen snow on the aerials making contact impossible. Aerials thus affected were thawed out and set up in buildings, a method which worked well.

In the evening of New Year's Day B Company relieved A Company on the right flank at Pt 331 and held the position with only one platoon forward, the other two being well back to give greater depth to the defences. On the other flank C Company had the misfortune to suffer a casualty from short-shooting by the supporting artillery, of which a number of cases had been reported from time to time by various units. The following day saw the commencement of leave once more, but only on a very small scale, the first party of one officer and ten other ranks leaving for the New Zealand Base at [Bari](#) on the Adriatic, 150 miles to the south-east. The weather was fine but very cold after rain during the night.

After dark, on being relieved by 21 Battalion, 25 Battalion moved back to the Bailey bridge at the eastern end of Duncan's Road, and there, over a period of some hours, boarded vehicles for [Castelfrentano](#). The prospect of a few days' rest was, of course, very welcome and on arrival at the town, with the miseries of the line behind them, the men were in the mood to enjoy the magnificent view of moonlit, snow-clad mountains and valleys spread out before them. A period of rest and showers, interspersed with a church parade, mobile cinema shows, the departure of a second small leave party, and the despatch of fourteen NCOs to the Base to form a training cadre for future reinforcements, now followed for the next twelve days.

Since the battalion landed in [Italy](#) there had been many changes among the officers, twelve of whom were no longer with the unit. Colonel Morten, Major Possin

(B Company), Second-Lieutenants Sutton (D Company), D. J. Pocknall (Anti- Tank Platoon), H. G. Smith (IO), Coddington (A Company), and Nelson (A Company) had been evacuated sick; Captain Handyside (D Company) had been wounded and Captain Frost (Carriers) had died of wounds; Second-Lieutenants G. K. Smith and Fordie (D Company) were killed in action, and Lieutenant Coleman (D Company) was taken prisoner in Orsogna on 3 December. Four new officers who joined on 29 December were Second-Lieutenants J. B. May, A. G. Henricksen, R. V. Milne, and B. G. Kemp. Major I. C. Webster (OC C Company) had gone to Bari on 11 January and Lieutenant Milne⁵³ took command of the company. The appointments of several officers had also been varied from time to time.

In the Sangro- Orsogna operations the battalion's casualties, as shown in the unit lists, were: Killed, 2 officers, 17 other ranks; died of wounds, 1 officer, 8 other ranks; wounded, 1 officer, 96 other ranks; prisoners of war, 1 officer, 53 other ranks (including 9 other ranks wounded), a total of 5 officers, 174 other ranks.

The troops were not looking forward to the next tour of duty in the line with its hardships and dangers, but just as it was due they learnt with much satisfaction that the Division was to leave the sector. Grumbles and growls, short tempers and sour expressions, gave way to good humour and skylarking and a totally different outlook.

On 13 January an advance party under Major Robertshaw was sent off, and in very cold weather the battalion followed the next morning, the guns still in action against Orsogna providing an accompaniment to the march. The route passed through Lanciano, across the Sangro five miles from the mouth, thence four miles along the coast; and after covering 27 miles, the vehicles halted for the night in the Casalbordino staging area, four miles inland. The Lucera area, 87 miles farther on, along Route 16, was reached the next afternoon after an interesting journey in fine weather through a pleasant countryside. It was then known, contrary to the belief that the Division was to rest there, that it was in fact to move across Italy to the Fifth Army's front, where conditions were more favourable for winter operations. There it was to form a reserve for the Fifth Army's offensive against the Gustav Line, of which Montecassino formed one of the principal bastions.⁵⁴

At eight next morning, Sunday, 16 January, the journey was resumed on a tarsealed road which passed through the Apennines, the mountain backbone of

Italy, to Naples. During the morning sleet fell and the troops had a cold and slippery ride through Ariano Irpino, a town of 20,000 people, curiously perched on the peak of a conical-shaped hill 2650 feet above sea level; then, in good weather, the route ran down the western slopes through several interesting mountain villages. Passing through Avellino, a provincial capital of 30,000 inhabitants and possessing a monastery attractive to pilgrims, the battalion at 3.30 p.m. came out on to the flat country just to the north-east of Naples, with Mount Vesuvius ten miles to the south-west belching smoke from its summit of almost 4000 feet. After completing about 100 miles in the day, the column parked on the roadside for the night, the volcano which was erupting a little after dark naturally attracting much attention.

In bright moonlight early next morning the journey was resumed, still on a tarsealed road; 120 yards was maintained between vehicles as a precaution against air attack, the Fifth Army front at Cassino being only about 50 miles away. The route passed through a wine-growing district of which Caserta, of over 50,000 people, was the principal town, its magnificent Royal Palace attracting the keen attention of the troops. Twenty miles to the north of the town the battalion halted in the Alife area, a mile and a half west of S. Angelo d' Alife in the Volturno valley, journey's end for the time being, 250 miles from the starting point of Castelfrentano.

¹ Lt J. Groshinski; born Midhurst, Taranaki, 27 Aug 1909; farmhand; deceased.

² Capt A. Norton-Taylor; born NZ 21 Nov 1915; advertising salesman.

³ Cpl J. F. Brunton; Haumoana, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 1 Feb 1916; labourer; wounded 23 Nov 1943.

⁴ Capt J. G. Coleman; born England, 18 Sep 1910; bank clerk; p.w. 3 Dec 1943.

⁵ Maj D. F. Muir, m.i.d.; born 29 Jul 1912; journalist; deceased.

⁶ Pte R. Walker; Kaponga; born NZ 15 Oct 1915; farmhand.

⁷ Not traced.

⁸ Sgt L. S. J. Delaney; Porangahau; born Nelson, 4 Jul 1912; boot repairer.

⁹ Lt N. A. Rees; Palmerrston North; born Gisborne, 1 Mar 1919; separator expert.

¹⁰ Pte R. E. Harwood; Napier; born Hastings, 2 May 1922; shepherd.

¹¹ S-Sgt L. P. Brockett; Hastings; born Christchurch, 8 Oct 1906; framemaker.

¹² Pte A. J. Hoy; Hastings; born NZ 28 Jan 1920; shepherd.

¹³ Pte C. N. McLay; born Invercargill, 27 Dec 1915; mattress maker.

¹⁴ Pte N. D. Gunderson; Tiratu, Dannevirke; born Dannevirke, 6 Jul 1908; farm manager.

¹⁵ Lt J. S. Nelson; Wellington; born Wellington, 24 Aug 1920; bank clerk.

¹⁶ Pte R. J. Jordan; New Plymouth; born NZ 27 Apr 1922; farmhand; wounded 29 Nov 1943.

¹⁷ Pte A. A. D. McKeeman; born Palmerston North, 3 Jul 1915; butcher; wounded 29 Nov 1943.

¹⁸ Sgt W. J. Peebles; born Lyttelton, 25 May 1909; school teacher; killed in action 30 Nov 1943.

¹⁹ Lt R. L. Davidson; Hastings; born Hastings, 28 Mar 1918; draper; wounded 30 Nov 1943.

²⁰ Cpl L. M. Ward; Lincoln; born Temuka, 1 Jan 1922; exchange clerk; p.w. 3 Dec 1943.

²¹ Maj B. S. Edinger; Castlecliff; born Wanganui, 14 Dec 1920; printer; wounded 14 Dec 1944.

²² Capt A. B. West, m.i.d.; Trentham; born Hastings, 29 Nov 1916; bank clerk; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

²³ Capt R. D. O'Neill; Lower Hutt; born Palmerston North, 2 Nov 1915; drill instructor.

²⁴ 2 Lt J. Fordie; born Scotland, 7 Nov 1918; clerk; killed in action 3 Dec 1943.

²⁵ Capt N. Lawson; Wellington; born Hawera, 21 Feb 1918; steward.

²⁶ Capt N. K. Chapman, MM; Woodville; born Bluff, 5, Dec 1909; picture-theatre proprietor; wounded 15 Mar 1944.

²⁷ L-Cpl D. H. S. Glynan; born NZ 26 Apr 1921; shepherd; killed in action 5 Dec 1943.

²⁸ L-Cpl T. H. Thomson; born Christchurch, 14 Mar 1921; clerk; killed in action 5 Dec 1943.

²⁹ Pte L. P. Jones; born Stratford, 15 Feb 1922; farmhand; died of wounds 6 Dec 1943.

³⁰ Cpl A. W. Bartlett; Kimbolton; born NZ 16 Nov 1904; farmer.

³¹ Pte G. T. Ryan; Porirua; born Thames, 7 Mar 1918; cheesemaker; wounded and p.w. 7 Dec 1943.

- ³² WO I W. S. Bellerby; Martinborough; born Gisborne, 8 Dec 1904; shepherd; wounded 23 Nov 1941.
- ³³ Cpl S. N. Pitt; born Stratford, 9 Mar 1920; farm manager; wounded 10 Dec 1943; killed in action 29 Jan 1945.
- ³⁴ WO II S. R. Cook; born Gisborne, 10 Oct 1912; farmhand; died of wounds 21 Apr 1945.
- ³⁵ pte L. A. Whitaker; Dipton, Southland; born Dipton, 12 Aug 1902; engine driver; wounded 13 Dec 1943.
- ³⁶ WO II J. C. Sullivan, MM; Hastings; born Napier, 18 Jan 1914; truck driver, wounded 14 Dec 1943.
- ³⁷ Pte A. G. Ludemann; born Masterton, 2 Oct 1917; freezing worker; wounded 14 Dec 1943; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.
- ³⁸ Pte L. G. Sinclair, MM; Levin; born Cheltenham, 18 Apr 1914; slaughterman.
- ³⁸ Cpl G. D. Mead; Rakaia; born NZ 10 Feb 1912; agriculturist; wounded 18 Dec 1943; p.w. 1 Feb 1945.
- ³⁹ L-Cpl D. J. Walsh; Norsewood; born Norsewood, 4 Nov 1918; drover; wounded 19 Dec 1943.
- ⁴⁰ Cpl A. C. C. Kingsford; Lower Hutt; born Mexico, 9 Feb 1912; insurance agent; twice wounded.
- ⁴¹ L-Sgt I. H. Bennett; Auckland; born Palmerston North, 2 Aug 1922; storeman.
- ⁴² L-Sgt W. H. Green; North; born England, 2 Aug 1914; vineyard worker.

⁴³ Cpl R. M. Firth; Plimmerton; born Dannevirke, 25 May 1921; driver and shop assistant; wounded 28 Dec 1943.

⁴⁴ Sgt T. W. Tulloch, DCM; born NZ 12 Dec 1915; clerk; wounded 17 Mar 1944; deceased.

⁴⁵ Sgt S. McK. Toms; Lower Hutt; born Timaru, 6 Aug 1914; salesman; wounded 15 Mar 1944.

⁴⁶ Not traced.

⁴⁷ pte R. M. Fitzgerald; born NZ 23 Jun 1921; died of wounds 21 Mar 1944.

⁴⁸ L-Sgt A. G. Faloner; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 23 Aug 1913; shop assistant; wounded 31 Dec 1943.

⁴⁹ Cpl P. A. Hubbard; Wanganuni; born Wanganui, 5 Sep 1920; farm labourer; wounded 31 Dec 1943.

⁵⁰ Pte W. Ramsay; born Edinburgh, 1 Mar 1921; labourer; wounded 31 Dec 1943.

⁵¹ L-Sgt J. D. Bayliss; born Wellington, 20 May 1921; civil servant.

⁵² Maj N. M. Izard; Christchurch; born Wanganui, 27 Apr 1907; solicitor; now Stipendiary Magistrate.

⁵³ Maj R. V. Milne, m.i.d.; Kekerangu, Marlborough; born Christchurch, 16 Mar 1912; insurance inspector; wounded 16 Apr 1945.

⁵⁴ For this move the Division masqueraded under the name of Spadger Force, all New Zealand insignia being removed.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 11 – CASSINO

CHAPTER 11

Cassino

The battalion quickly settled down in its new area, pleasantly situated amidst olive groves and oak trees, the change of scene all the more enjoyable because of the genial sunny weather which generally prevailed during the three weeks spent there. The training was interesting and not too arduous and sport played a big part in the daily round. Weapons of course received a great deal of attention, but the main emphasis was on training for mobile warfare under the conditions likely to be met with on the new front. Demonstrations of the great fire power of all the supporting weapons were particularly impressive, especially to the many men who had recently joined the battalion. Mines were playing an increasingly important part in operations, and as engineers were not always available, the infantry were frequently called upon to remove them; No. 2 AA Platoon therefore gave a demonstration showing the best method of dealing with mines.

Tactical methods, route-marching, administration and supply problems, and the crossing of rivers in assault boats all received attention. During all this training the only untoward incident occurred on 22 January during a fire-power demonstration by the mortars when Sergeant [Reid](#)¹ of the Regimental Police was wounded. Recreation was not neglected. On alternative days trips were made to the ruined city of [Pompeii](#) at the foot of Mount Vesuvius, the parties numbering about thirty men; some excellent concerts were staged, in one of which the organisers, Padre Norris and the [YMCA](#), were assisted by a choir from a convent. The mobile cinema was particularly popular.

[General Freyberg](#) paid a visit to the area and at a ceremonial parade of 6 Brigade made an inspection, presented awards, and addressed the troops. On 23 January, the day before the General's visit, a reinforcement of 5 officers and 72 other ranks had brought the battalion to within sixty-one of its authorised establishment; these men were organised as a separate platoon and given special training before they were posted to the companies. Thus far there had been few working parties to be provided, but at the end of the month numbers of men were employed in improving the roads in the area. January closed with an excellent concert given by the Maori Concert Party. The battalion lost no time in reciprocating, its concert party

next day 'putting on a pretty good show' for the Maoris.

From 1 February the New Zealand Division once more was required to be ready for active operations and a move was expected at short notice. During this waiting period training was continued, boat drill, hill training, football, and TAB inoculations occupying the first few days.

Cassino, on the left of the **Gustav Line**, as the German defensive position across **Italy** was named, was about 25 miles to the north-west. From the Adriatic front the line stretched in a south-south-west direction over mountainous country through **Cassino** to the junction of the Rapido and **Liri** rivers, six miles to the south of the town. In the mountains 12 miles north of **Cassino** were the French, **United States** troops were opposite **Cassino**, and 10 British Corps was south of the junction of the rivers.

The **Cassino** position was extremely strong and indeed, in Italian staff exercises, had been rated as impregnable. The town was very compact, averaging 500 yards in width and 1200 yards in length from north to south, though scattered buildings extended along the roads to the north, east, and south, and up the hillside to the west. With a normal population of 19,000, the town lay on the extreme western edge of the Rapido valley between the Rapido River and the eastern shoulder of a great spur or ridge which projected from high country exceeding 3000 feet altitude, five miles to the north-west, where Monte **Cairo** of over 5400 feet was the principal feature. On the eastern side of the spur the very prominent and precipitous **Castle Hill** rose 600 feet in height within 300 yards of the main street of **Cassino**; 1000 yards to the south-west of **Castle Hill** was the famous and imposing monastery of **Montecassino**, situated on a hill of over 1600 feet, with Hangman's Hill about 260 feet lower 300 yards to the south-east. A zigzag road, of about one in fifteen gradient, from **Cassino** to the Monastery (1100 yards away in a direct line), was four and a half miles in length, emphasising the towering domination over **Cassino** enjoyed by positions on the ridge. Naturally the heights also gave the Germans perfect observation over the Rapido and **Liri** valleys and the approach routes through the hills east of the Rapido. The Rapido valley between the hills and the town, about two miles wide, was perfectly flat.

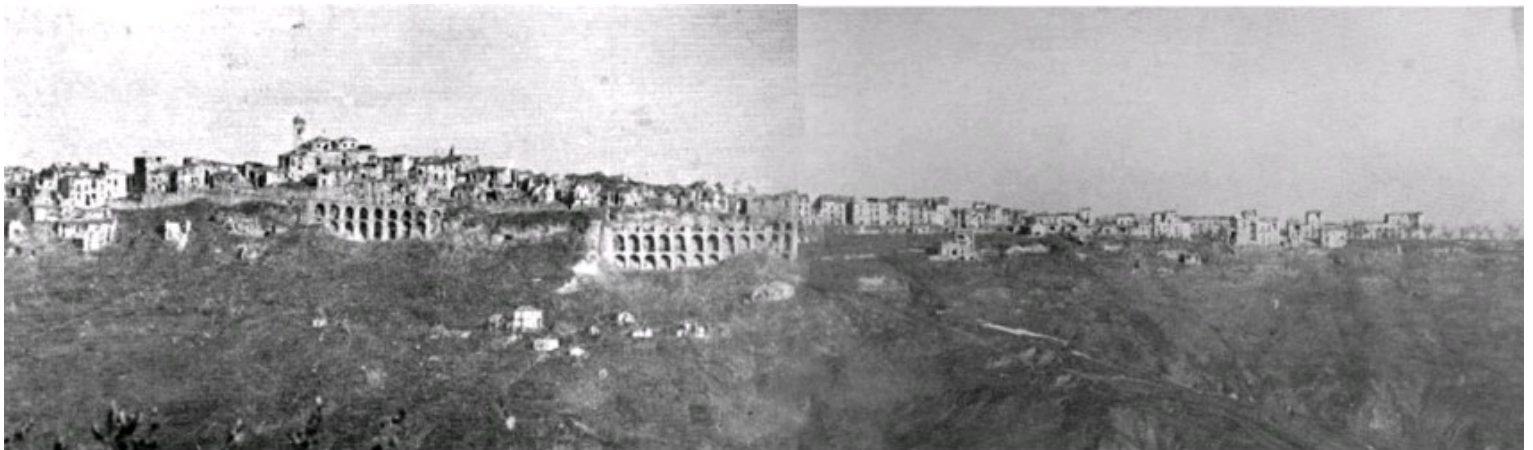


In the Maadi baths
In the Maadi baths

New Zealand troops embark at Alexandria for Italy, October 1943



New Zealand troops embark at **Alexandria** for **Italy**, October 1943



Panorama of Orsogna showing breastworks
Panorama of Orsogna showing breastworks

Looking west from Castelfrentano towards Orsogna



Looking west from **Castelfrentano** towards **Orsogna**

Clearing snow in Castelfrentano



Clearing snow in **Castelfrentano**



Aerial view of **Cassino**, taken in November 1943, showing Castle Hill in the background

Aerial view of **Cassino**, taken in November 1943, showing Castle Hill in the background



The first stick of bombs falls on Cassino, 15 March 1944

The first stick of bombs falls on [Cassino](#), 15 March 1944

Pasquale Road



Pasquale Road



The Convent, from the east

The Convent, from the east



Captain A. Norton-Taylor, Sgt Bill Nicolle and Dick Olds are welcomed to Sora

Captain A. Norton-Taylor, Sgt Bill Nicolle and Dick Olds are welcomed to Sora

Castiglione from 6 Brigade Headquarters. Monte Lignano is in the distance on the left



Castiglione from 6 Brigade Headquarters. Monte Lignano is in the distance on the left



New Zealand 'stonks' falling on German positions guarding the approach to Florence. Cerbaia is in the foreground

New Zealand 'stonks' falling on German positions guarding the approach to Florence. Cerbaia is in the foreground

Captain Sheild and Majors Webster and Finlay



Captain Sheild and Majors Webster and Finlay

Company cook-
ise at the beach,
outh of Leghorn



Company cookhouse at the beach, south of Leghorn

Mud at Rimini



Mud at Rimini

C Company cook
with Italian children



C Company cook with Italian children



B Company officers on reconnaissance at the Senio
B Company officers on reconnaissance at the Senio

RAP at staging area north of Forli. Capt P. D. Nathan is the RMO



RAP at staging area north of **Forli**. Capt P. D. Nathan is the RMO



Meal time at a platoon house on the Senio
Meal time at a platoon house on the **Senio**



B Company troops move
up towards the Senio with
their assault bridge

B Company troops move up towards the Senio with their assault bridge



The Senio stopbank, 9 April 1945
The Senio stopbank, 9 April 1945

A platoon passes through Barbiano



A platoon passes through **Barbiano**



25 Battalion infantry and tanks advance towards the Santerno
25 Battalion infantry and tanks advance towards the Santerno

Moving up to Zagonara



Moving up to Zagonara



Crossing a scissors bridge near San Giorgio

Crossing a scissors bridge near San Giorgio

Knocked-out enemy tank blocks the road near Bondeno



Knocked-out enemy tank blocks the road near Bondeno



Crossing the Po
Crossing the Po



Trieste

Trieste



Lt-Col A. S. Wilder
Lt-Col A. S. Wilder



Lt-Col G. J. McNaught
Lt-Col G. J. McNaught



Lt-Col H. G. Burtc
Lt-Col H. G. Burtc

Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant



Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant

Lt-Col T. B. Morten



Lt-Col T. B. Morten

Lt-Col E. K. Norma



Lt-Col E. K. Norma

On the night 20–21 January [Fifth Army](#), commanded by Lieutenant-General Mark Clark, United States Army, had attacked this position, with the main effort between [Cassino](#) and the Liri River, the intention being to advance westwards along Route 6 to [Rome](#), 85 miles away. The New Zealand Division was to be used as a mobile force to exploit up the [Liri](#) valley when the [United States](#) attack broke through. On the following night British and [United States](#) troops landed at [Anzio](#), 60 miles behind the German right flank.

The main assault on [Cassino](#) had little success and British and French attacks elsewhere were also held up. At [Anzio](#) strong German reinforcements confined the attacking forces to a small bridgehead, where their situation was somewhat

precarious. Further attacks by the French north of [Cassino](#) near [Monte Cairo](#) with great difficulty made small gains, and American attacks on the Monastery from the north and north-west, though reaching Point 445 about 300 yards north of the Monastery, could get no farther over the very broken ground against the strong German defences. The American attacks had gained the northern outskirts of the town but could not overcome strongpoints in the houses. The German forces, especially in the [Cassino](#) area, were of high quality and had been strongly reinforced.

Such was the situation at the beginning of February while the New Zealanders were in reserve in the [Alife](#) area waiting to move to the front. For its projected advance up the [Liri](#) valley the Division on 3 February was expanded to a temporary New Zealand Corps under [General Freyberg](#) by the addition of 4 Indian Division from the [Eighth Army](#) and a considerable increase in artillery and other arms. In addition to its exploitation role the [New Zealand Corps](#) was to be ready to assist the French and American attacks. The concentration and deployment of the Corps could not be completed before 8–9 February, and then only if the weather remained favourable.

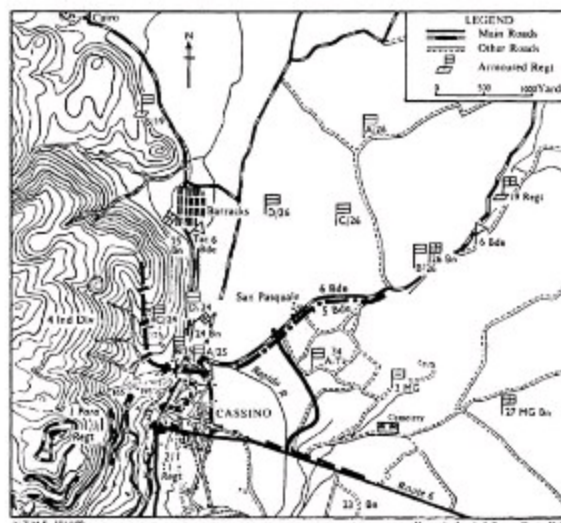
On 4–5 February, in accordance with General Clark's orders to relieve that part of 36 US Division south of Route 6, 5 NZ Brigade took over the line of the Rapido south of [Cassino](#) and made plans for an advance across the river. The remainder of the Division also moved forward to assembly positions behind the front a few miles south-east of [Cassino](#), the movement being completed by the 7th. A little before midnight on the 5th 25 Battalion, preceded by an advance party of one NCO and five men from each company under Lieutenant Muir, left for a new area, three miles to the north-west. There, with the rest of the Brigade Group in the vicinity, it was in reserve seven miles south-east of [Cassino](#). The battalion was again under command of Colonel Morten who had rejoined the day before.

The area was under observation from the lofty [Monte Cairo](#) though otherwise well masked by [Monte Trocchio](#), four miles to the north-west of the battalion, and by a lesser hill, Monte Porchia, a mile and a half away in the same direction. Moving to their company positions, the troops lost no time in digging in. The men soon realised they were back into the war as it was not long before a few German shells burst some little distance away, and the Allied artillery, including heavy American guns just behind, fired several concentrations. During the seventeen days the battalion remained in this reserve position it was shelled twice at night, suffering several

casualties, once in the evening mess queue when German 88-millimetre fire straddled the area. 'Sergeant Bill Nicholl ² [sic] who was ladelling out soup,' wrote one man, 'had his cookhouse (which was situated in a dug-out) filled with diving bodies and spilt hot food when the men decided it was the only reasonably safe place to be.'

In the next two weeks there were daily route marches and hill climbing; sporting activities included baseball against some Americans, while the [YMCA](#) mobile cinema gave several entertainments. Heavy rain on the 4th, 8th, and 11th made conditions unpleasant, but otherwise, though sometimes cold and frosty, the weather was fine. During this period the principal spectacle was the bombing on 15 February of [Montecassino](#) by waves of heavy and medium bombers, supplemented by the shelling of all known anti-aircraft positions and by bombardment with heavy and medium guns in the intervals between bombing attacks. The bombing was protracted, commencing at 9.30 a.m. and continuing for four hours; 143 Flying Fortresses and 112 Mitchell and Marauder medium bombers were engaged. In general retaliatory enemy shelling the following night the battalion was twice shelled and lost one man killed and six wounded.

The great pains taken to keep the enemy in ignorance of the transfer of the New Zealand Division from the Adriatic front were unfortunately set at naught by the loss on the night of 6–7 February of three prisoners by 21 Battalion; in consequence the wearing of badges and titles was resumed. On 7 and 14 February fifty reinforcements arrived but were sufficient only to keep the strength at the general level of about sixty below establishment. Due to postings elsewhere, sickness, and attendance at courses, there were frequent changes in officers and nine replacements arrived.



NEW ZEALAND DISPOSITIONS NORTH OF ROUTE 6, 24 FEBRUARY 1944

new zealand dispositions north of route 6, 24 february 1944

On 17 February an attack by troops of 5 Brigade against the [Cassino](#) railway station and its vicinity was repulsed, though it achieved some initial success. An attack from the north against [Montecassino](#) by [7 Indian Brigade](#) also failed. Four days later 6 Brigade relieved 133 US Regiment in [Cassino](#). Leaving in vehicles at 6.30 p.m., 25 Battalion travelled to the north-west along Route 6, which was a couple of miles from the camp, until it was two and a half miles from [Cassino](#).

Secondary roads on the northern side of Route 6, very narrow, muddy, and difficult to negotiate in the dark, were then followed to the debussing point, which was two miles north-east of the town. From there the troops marched via a very circuitous route till they reached the Caruso road, which ran between [Cassino](#) and [Cairo](#) near the ruins of a large military barracks a mile north of the town. After a short wait for American guides the companies were led to their allotted positions. A and B Companies (Major Sanders and Captain Hoy) occupied



cassino

strongpoints in fortified buildings near the gaol at the northern end of the main part of **Cassino** and were facing generally to the south. A Company's front included the gaol, where Company Headquarters was installed, and extended to the road on the edge of the town, 150 yards to the east; 7 Platoon was in a house on the left flank, 8 Platoon was with Company Headquarters in the centre, and 9 Platoon was on the right in a building almost next door to the gaol.

B Company was somewhat similarly disposed on the right of A Company, its frontage extending to the north-west for a similar distance; on its right to the north-west was C Company 24 Battalion on the southern slopes of **Point 175**, which faced **Castle Hill** directly to the south. Touch between the two battalions was maintained through a listening post of C Company 24 Battalion situated in the ravine below **Castle Hill**, 100 yards west of B Company.

The total frontage of the two battalions was some 600 yards. About 300 yards behind A and B Companies, a position astride the Caruso road was held by D Company 24 Battalion. C and D Companies (Lieutenant Milne and Major Hewitt) were in reserve some 2500 yards behind A and B Companies and about 1000 yards north-west of the barracks, the reserve companies of 24 Battalion being in the same locality. Headquarters of 25 Battalion was in a cave near the barracks. Twenty-sixth Battalion was in reserve to the north-east of **Cassino** and had three companies forward east of the barracks on a frontage of a mile, with its reserve company 1500 yards back.

Supporting weapons were soon in position. The Divisional Artillery also was in support as usual, ready to engage observed targets and to bring down defensive fire in front of the infantry posts. Twenty-fifth Battalion, and 24 Battalion likewise, took over road blocks of mines established by the Americans on the roads leading northwards out of [Cassino](#).

The position held by the battalion was unusual and unpleasant. The forward defended localities of A and B Companies were within a few yards of the enemy, whose voices and movements could be distinctly heard. The enemy in positions on [Castle Hill](#) commanded all the forward positions held by both battalions and frequently swept them with machine-gun fire. Fortunately all the posts, both in the town and on the slopes of [Point 175](#), were in buildings which had been fortified and turned into strongpoints by the Americans. Tucked-in as they were under the lee of the ridge, A and B Companies were very vulnerable to any enemy advance along the ridge, and any reverse suffered by 24 Battalion would place the two companies in a very precarious position.

The reserve positions beyond the barracks also provided no haven for the occupants. They were in full view of enemy observation posts on the slopes of [Monte Cairo](#) and were frequently and heavily shelled by mortars and artillery, especially during daylight meals when some movement was unavoidable. During the relief C and D Companies suffered three casualties. There was, however, some consolation. 'The barracks was previously an American Supply Depot,' remarked one man, 'and it did not take the 25th Battalion long to find out, as all members helped themselves to what was known as "American K Rations".'

Obviously the conditions in [Cassino](#) were especially difficult for the recent reinforcements for whom it was their introduction to warfare. The approach march over difficult roads in pitch darkness, both in the trucks and on foot, with the thunder and flashes of numerous guns all around and the whine and crash of enemy shells, was something of an ordeal even for seasoned troops. The process of occupying the various posts within the battalion position was not the comparatively clear and orderly operation of the training exercises, nor was it easy for inexperienced men to determine what was dangerous and what was not, a difficulty sometimes increased by the stupid pranks of occasional humorists who had forgotten their own ignorance

and fears in similar or easier circumstances. But danger is a great teacher and the 'rookie' soon became the veteran.

It is not only the British, apparently, who indulge in understatement, as the men of A Company will recall. 'As we trudged in through the mud-clogged fields on the dismal night of February 21st 1944, one of the boys asked the Yanks as they hurried past in the darkness "What's it like in there?". "Waal," replied one, who took time off to answer, "it's a hot old time in that old town", a reply regarded very shortly afterwards by A Company as "a gem of understatement".'

'The house occupied by 7 Platoon who took over from the Americans became known as "The Wayside Inn",' wrote one of the platoon. 'On the night of the take-over from the US tps two of their men were in such a bad way physically that they did not wish to go out in the dark and chose to make a break for it just before first light. They were however mowed down by Spandau fire as they endeavoured to make a break along the side of the Rapido river.... The smell of the corpses (in the area generally)... was something that the tps could not get used to and as it was impossible to organise burial parties, this area will always be remembered for its stench of death.'

The men found the town very badly battered and at first it was difficult to locate the enemy's forward posts. These soon made themselves evident, however. Spandau posts, some with steel turrets, were only thirty to forty yards away and enemy positions were observed in the nunnery, 120 yards south-east of the gaol, with various rifle-grenade posts nearby. The house occupied by 7 Platoon was a favourite target for enemy light mortars, and being a light type of building did not give much protection. It was soon obvious that communications would be difficult. Signal lines were cut time after time, giving the signal personnel the dangerous task of continually and at all hours searching during enemy shelling for the breaks in the lines. On one such occasion, when 7 Platoon signal lines were broken, a nightly occurrence, a repair party consisting of Corporal [Wootton](#)³ and Private [Fraser](#)⁴ was crawling along a ditch when it came face to face with a German patrol. Luckily, as the night was black, a hasty retreat was possible.

The two companies in the town were supplied at night by carrying parties, who (always running the gauntlet) worked hard and fast under cover of darkness. There

were equal difficulties farther back. The supplies were brought to the battalion by jeep, generally in darkness, but a crossroads on the route about 600 yards east of the barracks was in full view of the snowcapped heights of [Monte Cairo](#) and was continually under heavy fire. Mule teams which were being used by various units had suffered severely, as the many dead animals along the route bore witness.

On its first day in the [Cassino](#) sector 25 Battalion had a change of commanding officers, Major Norman taking over command in place of Lieutenant-Colonel Morten who was evacuated sick.

Although the attacks by 5 Brigade and 7 [Indian Brigade](#) on 17–18 February had failed and the prospects of success in future operations against the [Cassino](#) position were not bright, it was essential to pin down the enemy forces there to prevent them from intervening elsewhere. [General Freyberg](#) decided that after an overwhelming air and artillery bombardment the next attack would be made from the north within the next two or three days, provided the weather was suitable. Clear weather was essential so that the bombers could see their target; it was equally necessary that there should also be fine weather beforehand and afterwards so that the airfields should be dry enough for the heavy bombers and the ground generally, but especially the [Liri](#) valley, sufficiently firm for the tanks to operate.

Before going into [Cassino](#) the battalion had been told that, after two or three days there, the forward troops would be temporarily withdrawn while the bombing and bombardment took place; after that the battalion would again advance, with tanks, and capture the town so that the armoured forces could advance round the southern flank of [Montecassino](#) into the [Liri](#) valley.

On its first complete night in the line, 22–23 February, A Company in common with B Company experienced some shelling and mortar and machine-gun fire against the forward posts, and just before midnight it was shelled, with little effect, by self-propelled guns. Shortly after dark the battalion had lost by enemy shelling one man killed and seven wounded, the total casualties for the day being two killed and thirteen wounded. The following afternoon line communication between Battalion Headquarters and A Company was broken by shellfire and could not be re-established until after dark. Heavy rain which commenced at midday created very unpleasant conditions for the troops and made it inevitable that the impending

attack would be postponed.

The orders for the attack, which had been given the codename *dickens*, were issued on 23 February. It had been intended that before dawn the next morning the forward troops of 24 and 25 Battalions should withdraw to a safety line 1000 yards north of [Cassino](#). The bombing and bombardment would then take place, after which 25 Battalion would advance under an artillery barrage, accompanied by a squadron of Sherman tanks of 19 NZ Armoured Regiment under command, and capture that part of [Cassino](#) as far south as Route 6, a distance of 700 yards from the forward positions held by A and B Companies near the gaol; Indian troops on the higher ground to the right of 6 Brigade were as far as possible to give covering fire against the hills and higher slopes commanding the town from the west.

Twenty-sixth Battalion and the remainder of 19 Regiment would follow 25 Battalion and clear the rest of the town. Twenty-fourth Battalion was to re-occupy its former position on the high ground to provide a firm base for 25 Battalion's attack, and to be ready to assist that attack and move into [Cassino](#) after its capture. Fifth Brigade and the two machine-gun platoons in position beyond the Rapido east of the town were to support the attack with all the fire they could bring to bear.

The artillery programme in support of the attack was tremendous. It included 168 field guns and 80 medium guns of British, Indian, and New Zealand regiments, 134 American guns of 240-mm, 155-mm, and 105-mm, and 12 French guns of 155-mm, the majority directed chiefly against the comparatively small target of the town.

The air bombardment, planned on the grand scale, would be made by about 360 heavy and 200 medium bombers, which would drop about 1100 tons of bombs in a period of three and a half hours. The bombs to be dropped on the town were to be of 1000 pounds and fitted with instantaneous fuses.

As expected, the rain caused a postponement of the attack, which was put back twenty-four hours to 25 February. The ground was soon waterlogged and was more or less a morass. Next day the weather broke completely and rain fell almost continuously until 5 March, resulting in a waiting period of over three weeks before conditions improved sufficiently for the attack to be launched. For the attacking troops the delay was most unfortunate. A great strain was imposed, especially on

those in close proximity to the enemy, and casualties from enemy fire and sickness mounted daily. While no doubt the enemy, well aware that an attack was coming, also suffered strain, he had a breathing space to regroup his forces and bring up his best troops, build up reserves of ammunition and supplies, and improve the already formidable defences. Even by 9 March, when conditions had improved sufficiently, bad weather in south-east Italy prevented the heavy bombers from using the Foggia airfields, and the following day, when all was ready, a bad weather forecast caused further delay. Truly the operations were very susceptible to the effects of weather over a large area and some period of time.

There was further rain on 11 and 12 March but good drying days followed, and on the evening of the 14th it was decided that the attack would be made next morning.

During this waiting period the two forward companies of 25 Battalion in Cassino were relieved every third day by the two reserve companies, the first relief commencing on 24 February when C Company relieved A Company, losing three men wounded while moving up. The reliefs were difficult and dangerous and the platoons moved one at a time with long intervals between moves. Every day there was a good deal of enemy action, especially against the forward posts. Mortars both by day and night fired on the defences and roads, at times heavily, and were engaged by 'stonks' (pre-arranged and registered bursts of artillery fire) and by the battalion mortars. The latter with their high-angle fire were particularly suitable against targets behind buildings or on reverse slopes, though they were much disliked by the enemy and generally attracted a good deal of fire. The hostile artillery, machine guns, mortars, and snipers all took part and the Germans made free use of rifle grenades, an effective trench-warfare weapon of the 1914–18 war, where they were extensively used by the New Zealanders though very little, if at all, by the Germans, who retaliated strongly against them.

Early in the evening of its first day in the forward posts on the left flank, C Company was attacked by a fighting patrol which tried to blow in with an explosive charge a wall of a house occupied by the left platoon. The patrol was driven off by fire and a fighting patrol of an officer and ten men sent up from the reserve company was not needed. In consequence C Company was naturally very much on the alert, and on hearing enemy tracked vehicles moving in the town called for a 'stonk', which

stopped further movement. Later, a heavy gun in the centre of the town, no doubt self-propelled, shelled the forward positions, and in the early part of the night heavy fire on a nearby quarry, probably against two six-pounders and three 3-inch mortars there, broke the Signals' line communication with Battalion Headquarters. The line to Brigade Headquarters from Battalion was also giving trouble, and to avoid a road junction which was a favourite target for the German artillery, a line was laid on a different route.

The area between the barracks and the Rapido came under heavy fire at times, chiefly from mortars, and Battalion Headquarters and the reserve companies' areas were frequently shelled. The enemy fire brought immediate retaliation from the battalion mortars and the supporting artillery, which continued to harass the enemy. Bright moonlight during the evening of the 29th at first delayed the carrying parties which were taking supplies to the forward companies but rain at 10.30 p.m. removed the difficulty. Enemy snipers and machine-gun posts on [Castle Hill](#), which was less than 500 yards from the forward posts, were a distinct menace and a careful watch was rewarded by the discovery of some of the positions, which were immediately shelled. It was no duel of sniper versus sniper.

February closed with steady rain, a dreary prospect for the resumption of the attack. The cold wet weather continued into March and the conditions it created, combined with the watching and waiting, threw such a strain on the troops that the launching of an assault on the town would have been welcomed. The insanitary conditions, especially in the forward positions, caused an alarming increase in the sick rate, amounting almost to an epidemic, but it was checked by treatment and such disinfection of the area as was possible.

Another difficulty of the postponements arose through the code-word *dickens* becoming so widely known that security was endangered; those familiar with the slang use of the code-word, however, were convinced of its suitability for the proposed operation.

With the enemy in such commanding positions all approaches and roads had been accurately plotted and registered by his artillery and other weapons and the large carrying parties required each night had an unenviable and onerous task in the dark, their routes being frequently swept by artillery, mortar, and machine-gun fire.

Front-line work was deemed preferable, and indeed it was safer since the majority of the casualties suffered almost daily occurred in the reserve areas and along the supply routes. Vehicles could not approach within half a mile of the town. 'It was quite impossible to enter or come out of the town unless under darkness,' remarked one man, 'as all parties were immediately under observation from [Castle Hill](#). This also applied to ration parties and the troops in the town could assess their meal times by the rising of the moon.'

The casualties during February were six other ranks killed, and one officer (Second-Lieutenant Kemp ⁵) and forty-one other ranks wounded.

On 1 March Lieutenant-Colonel [MacDuff](#), ⁶ formerly commanding [27 MG Battalion](#), took over command of the battalion from Major Norman. Moonrise that night was at 11.40 p.m., and to avoid its dangers the usual three-day relief of the forward companies was completed before that hour, commencing at half past seven. Possibly the enemy had some inkling of it as from 9 p.m. till midnight his heavy guns fired on the barracks and their vicinity at quarter-hour intervals but caused no casualties. On 2 March 6 Brigade had a change of commanders, Brigadier Parkinson taking command of the Division in place of [Major-General Kippenberger](#), ⁷ who had been severely wounded by a mine on [Monte Trocchio](#); a former commanding officer of 25 Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant from the Divisional Cavalry, was appointed to command 6 Brigade.

The enemy continued his harassing tactics and the moon in early March was still a nuisance to the carrying parties. On the 6th, however, the men taking rations to the forward companies risked enemy observation, with the result that on the way back near the exit from the town they suffered casualties from machine-gun and mortar fire. The following day Battalion Headquarters had some casualties from two salvos fired by nebelwerfers. Captain Pearse, the battalion medical officer, was evacuated sick that day, his place being taken by Captain [Dick](#). ⁸

During the whole period preceding the attack on [Cassino](#) 25 Battalion sent out only one patrol; this was on the night 7–8 March when a route from the south end of Caruso road into [Cassino](#) on the right flank of the right company was explored. The patrol found that the route was not mined and that it provided a good approach for a company in the advance. The battalion sector was of course not suitable for normal

patrolling.

The weather on 9 March was fine but cold and with a high wind which appreciably dried the sodden ground. In the afternoon C Company on the left flank in [Cassino](#) reported movement south-east of its left platoon and asked for mortar fire which dispersed the enemy; a couple of hours later, towards dusk, the enemy was heard to the west of the previous position and was fired on by New Zealand machine guns situated eastwards of the company position. On the other flank at 11 p.m. D Company heard a working party in the gully just to the north of [Castle Hill](#), and in response to its request, 'Wadi Stonk', an artillery concentration planned to deal with that area, caused the activity to cease.

Except for the usual shelling of crossroads and machine-gun fire in the late morning, the following day was generally quiet. At 5 p.m., however, the enemy had a spectacular success when his artillery scored a direct hit on a mortar-ammunition dump situated near Caruso road about 200 yards from the barracks. This was rather unfortunate for Battalion Headquarters and various detachments in that vicinity as the ensuing conflagration aroused the enthusiasm of the enemy gunners, who for five hours shelled and mortared the road and the country nearby. The nightly carrying parties were also affected as the illumination and the danger from exploding mortar bombs delayed them till the small hours of the morning.

The next day enemy guns from the direction of [Terelle](#) to the north-north-west troubled the troops in the reserve area, B Company having eight men wounded. There was little relief in being in reserve in such an exposed locality. After dark an enemy patrol, which appeared to be trying to penetrate between the forward posts of D Company and 24 Battalion, was driven back, after suffering casualties, by mortar and small-arms fire from both battalions. A couple of hours afterwards in this somewhat disturbed night twenty-eight reinforcements reached the battalion, a rather trying time and place for men to join a unit, though no doubt some 'old hands' rejoining were amongst them and gave them confidence.

Bright moonlight was still troubling both the carrying parties and the company reliefs, which were delayed till three in the morning and completed only just before daylight broke on the 12th. Shortly after noon the reserve companies' area was again shelled, but ineffectively, from the direction of [Terelle](#). Up in front after a quiet

day A and B Companies were fired on by mortars for four hours before midnight, and as the night went by there were signs of increased enemy activity. The German was not sitting down quietly under the obvious threat of impending attack. Mortar and machine-gun fire against the battalion's forward positions was vigorously replied to by artillery defensive fire on the enemy's [Castle Hill](#) positions. Before midnight detachments of 4.2-inch mortars took up positions in 25 Battalion's sector a little to the west of Caruso road, about 900 yards behind the forward companies, a powerful support under the immediate control of 25 Battalion; ammunition expenditure was limited to twenty-four rounds for each mortar daily, though this did not apply in the event of an enemy attack or for Operation [Dickens](#). A limit of twenty-five rounds per gun for 25-pounders and twenty rounds for medium artillery had also been imposed as expected supplies had not reached [Italy](#). These quantities, however, were sufficient for harassing and were very little below the average daily expenditure.

To give some relief from the strenuous conditions the battalion was experiencing, each company in turn was to be given two days' rest at the B Echelon area about three miles east of the barracks. D Company had the good fortune to be sent first, marching out from the reserve position after dark on the 12th to the vicinity of the ADS, two miles to the north-east, and being taken on from there by RMT vehicles. As it happened the company just had time to complete its refit, clean-up and rest period before being called back to take part in the attack.

After light rain at intervals throughout the previous day, the 13th was fine with bright sunshine and perfect visibility and prospects seemed good for an early attack; but it was still a matter of wait and see. During the morning the enemy artillery registered with pink smoke a little to the north of the reserve companies' area and followed this with heavy shelling for twenty minutes, mostly on C Company and fortunately without effect. Four hours later the shelling was repeated for five minutes, and shortly afterwards the crossroads about 600 yards north-east of Battalion Headquarters—a favourite target—were shelled and mortared at frequent intervals for half an hour. The enemy mortars in a re-entrant south of [Castle Hill](#) spur had been aggressive and were fired on by the artillery, the observation of fire being carried out by A Company.

A man from the battalion Intelligence Section had been attached to the headquarters of each of the forward companies to locate enemy positions and to

become familiar with the area of attack. The lay of the ground and the jumble of wrecked buildings, combined with the proximity of the enemy, made observation difficult and these special measures were necessary. On one occasion one of these men during darkness went to a house, selected from air photographs as suitable for an OP to observe [Castle Hill](#). The house had been occupied by American troops and during the day three Italians, a man and two women, all quite young, were discovered living in the cellar. They had plenty of food, mostly American rations, but had no water. So for the rest of the day four persons shared one water bottle. With a certain amount of difficulty the Italians were persuaded to leave the house and after dark on the 13th were taken back to Battalion Headquarters. They had been living in the house for eighty days and had remained in the cellar so were unable to give any information regarding enemy positions; they had no knowledge of the tunnels which were said to exist in Castle ridge. From time to time other groups of Italian civilians had been evacuated from the town.

Early on the 14th, the day preceding the attack, light rain fell but later the day was clear and sunny. Before dawn there were sounds of enemy activity at the nunnery on the left in front of A Company and at a school on the right between [Castle Hill](#) and B Company. Using German grenade dischargers, the two companies carried out with great satisfaction lively exchanges of rifle grenades with the enemy and, fearing their stock would be exhausted, sought a further supply from Battalion Headquarters. Casualties in the battalion continued and during the first two weeks of March there were two other ranks killed, one died of wounds, and twenty-one wounded.

It was nine in the evening before the code-word dickens at last came into force, and final preparations were then made for the battle of [Cassino](#) on the morrow. It had been a long and arduous wait in unpleasant and dangerous conditions and with movement most restricted. It was also a period of steady attrition, as has been shown, the battalion casualties from 16 February to 14 March being eight killed and sixty-two wounded, while many more were evacuated sick.

Very early next morning, 15 March, Battalion Headquarters vacated its cave in favour of 24 Battalion and moved to a building 100 yards closer to the barracks. Before dawn all the forward troops, with the exception of a small covering

detachment in the quarry, moved back behind the safety bomb-line, A and B Companies at 5.30 a.m. withdrawing from [Cassino](#) to prepared positions at the foot of the hills a little beyond the barracks. The covering detachment, a Bren and an anti-tank gun crew with two tanks of [19 Armoured Regiment](#), remained in the quarry within 600 yards of the goal to act as a rearguard and to conceal the withdrawal. Fifteen minutes before the air attack was due the detachment withdrew, the tanks carrying the two gun crews with them. All heavy weapons, such as anti-tank guns, mortars, and medium machine guns were left in position, but essential parts were removed. The battalion's six-pounder anti-tank gun near the barracks remained responsible for covering Caruso road. All mines on roads leading into [Cassino](#) from the north were removed to clear the way for the subsequent advance of the tanks.

At 8.30 a.m. the first wave of heavy bombers came over and the impressive spectacle was an exhilarating sight to the waiting troops below. A huge and dense pall of smoke and dust rose over [Cassino](#) as the heavy bombs burst with a shattering roar, rendered all the more violent by the use of instantaneous fuses. The smoke and dust gradually spread well beyond the target area, and although reports from observation posts estimated that 90 per cent of the bombs first dropped were on the target, subsequent waves with vision badly obscured and poorer navigation were not so accurate. Many bombs, chiefly from the heavy bombers, dropped well wide of the mark, including several on the B Echelon area though with no ill effects there. At approximately fifteen minutes' intervals until noon, successive waves of heavy and medium aircraft continued the attack, the total weight of bombs dropped by the 338 heavy bombers and 176 medium bombers being 1140 tons. Of this total 576 tons were dropped on or near the Abbey.

The area of the bomb-target was approximately 1200 yards by 1500 yards; disregarding the special attention paid to the Abbey and the bombs dropped outside the target area, the density of the bombing was roughly one ton per three square chains (33 yds by 44 yds), and apart from the vicinity of the Abbey was probably about half that density.

The general plan for the attack, issued on 23 February, has already been referred to. The objective for 25 Battalion was the western edge of [Cassino](#) from a point 180 yards north-east of the Castle to the road junction where the southern branch of Route 6 turned southwards at the Continental Hotel, thence 500 yards to

the east along Route 6 to the convent at the crossroads. B Company on the right was to clear the western part of the town and secure the objective as far as the Continental Hotel. A Company was responsible for the remainder of the objective and for clearing the rest of the town north of Route 6. D Company was to capture the imposing and formidable Castle Hill (Point 193) and join up with the right flank of B Company, handing over [Castle Hill](#) to a unit of 4 Indian Division. C Company, with a section of engineers under command, had the task of mopping up any enemy left in [Cassino](#) north of Route 6, after which it was to occupy a reserve position behind B and A Companies.

Each of the leading companies had two troops of Sherman tanks allotted to it, 7 and 8 Troops to B Company and 5 and 6 Troops to A Company. No. 7 Troop was also required to support D Company's attack by observed fire on [Castle Hill](#). From positions south of the barracks three of the battalion mortars were to fire on the saddle west of Point 193 and on observed targets on the western side. The anti-tank platoon and two sections of carriers were to be available on call; the anti-aircraft platoon was to provide two minesweeping teams.

Half an hour before the end of the air attack 25 Battalion began to move to its forming-up position in a gully 300 yards east of the barracks. The starting line at the barracks was crossed at noon as the last of the bombers passed overhead and 'the artillery opened up a terrible barrage'. A Company (Major Sanders) led along Caruso road, followed by B Company (Captain Hoy), a troop of tanks, Battalion Headquarters, C Company (Lieutenant Milne), and D Company (Major Hewitt). As far as the town the rate of advance was 100 yards a minute and thereafter, following the barrage, 100 yards in ten minutes. A second troop of tanks moved down Parallel road, beyond the left bank of the Rapido, 200 yards from Caruso road.

As the troops advanced there was practically no enemy fire. Battalion Headquarters and the two rear companies halted while the leading companies went on. Both companies were in single file, B Company following Caruso road and A Company in the Rapido River beside the road. The river was from two to five feet in depth and very muddy. 'There were several barked shins,' said an A Company man, 'while several members fell over in the water and on two occasions had to be assisted from going under ... there were several weapons lost during the advance

and many Tommy guns had their firing mechanism temporarily disabled by water. The advance was made by hugging the right bank of the river for besides pieces of shrapnel hitting the water we were under small-arms fire from Castle Hill. During the advance up [down] river some difficulty was experienced in edging round a wounded man (Pte Aitken ⁹) and platoons became very spread out. Eventually some members were held up in the gaol by an enemy sniper and were "lost" for three days.'

Under cover of the barrage and smoke screen the companies reached the town without much difficulty, and after deploying gained their old positions level with the gaol without meeting the enemy. At this stage the two companies were in the same sectors as those taken over by them from the Americans, B Company on the right between the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#) and the gaol, and A Company on the left from the gaol eastwards. When the companies advanced a little farther they soon encountered machine-gun and rifle fire from Germans on the slopes of [Castle Hill](#) and in the ruins of buildings on the flat. It was soon evident that overwhelming and devastating as the bombing and the artillery barrage appeared to have been, they had not been able to destroy the enemy sheltered in deep dugouts and in cellars beneath collapsed buildings, though undoubtedly they had inflicted heavy casualties. [Cassino](#) was to be another example of the truth so often illustrated in the terrific bombardments of towns and field defences in the 1914–18 war, that fire would never destroy the defenders and that infantry closely following a barrage had always to be employed to that end. The optimism noticeable in all quarters as to the effect of the bombardments was rapidly dispelled as the strength of the German resistance became apparent.

By 12.50 p.m. A Company's leading platoons had advanced 100 yards to the nunnery and to the vicinity of the road junction 150 yards east of it, protected by the barrage and the thick smoke screen which covered the town, and in very difficult conditions were pressing forward. [Cassino](#) was in a state of utter destruction, every building in complete ruins and open spaces and former roadways churned up or covered by debris and badly cratered. Some streets could hardly be found, much less used. The men had a most unenviable task, scrambling over rubble, through mud and bomb craters half-full of water, and exposed to incessant rifle and machine-gun fire. A little after 1 p.m. communications between the forward companies and Battalion Headquarters were broken and the companies also lost touch with each

other in the confused jumble of the ruins. 'This was one time in the war,' observed one man, 'when [Red Cross](#) flags, arm bands, etc., were not observed and [Fred Wright](#),¹⁰ our RAP man was killed by German snipers when attending himself to a German wounded.' Major Sanders, commanding A Company, also said that stretcher-bearers, plainly visible, were shot at close range when trying to pick up wounded, several of whom had to be left lying in the open till after dark. In these circumstances Lance-Corporal Pritchard,¹¹ a medical orderly attached to the company, showed great courage in attending to many wounded lying in exposed positions and in getting them to a place of safety. For this and similar work throughout the battle he received the Military Medal.

One of B Company's tasks on the way to the objective was to clear the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#) to prepare for D Company's attack on the Castle. Fire at close range from the German posts there, however, forced the company to swing to the left towards the middle of the town, some of the men going over as far as the nunnery. By 2 p.m. the company had been unable to get farther forward than the line of the nunnery, but an hour later was again moving forward, being finally held up for the day with its forward platoon at a school about 350 yards short of the Continental Hotel.

Sergeant T. W. Tulloch, a platoon sergeant in B Company, took command when his platoon commander was wounded, though he himself was wounded by grenade splinters. Getting in touch with a nearby tank, he arranged for its support and overcame the nearest enemy strongpoint. His strength had then been reduced to twelve men and he was beyond the limit of further tank support, but with his platoon weapons alone he assaulted the next strongpoint about seventy-five yards away; this was a group of strongly fortified houses at the base of [Castle Hill](#). He and his platoon were driven back, but he then established his men in a strong position on the flank and partly neutralised the strongpoint. Until ordered by his company commander to report to the RAP, where he was evacuated, he stayed with his men; throughout the fighting his aggressive tactics and his personal example were excellent. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, commonly regarded as the equivalent for other ranks of the Distinguished Service Order.

Meanwhile the supporting tanks, 7 Troop on the right and 8 Troop on the left, had been delayed by craters on the roads before entering [Cassino](#). About 1.30 p.m. 7

Troop succeeded in reaching the southern end of Caruso road, 100 yards south-west of the gaol, but the destruction of buildings and streets had created such appalling obstacles that the troop could get no farther down the main street towards the Continental Hotel, 600 yards farther south. From the position it had reached, however, 7 Troop, which was under fire from the slopes of [Castle Hill](#), vigorously engaged the enemy posts. On the other flank 8 Troop made its way slowly over piles of rubble and around craters past the gaol and the nunnery, and shortly after 2 p.m. reached the road junction east of the latter which A Company had passed an hour or more earlier. The troop continued to move slowly forward though sometimes, to find a route, it was necessary to make a reconnaissance on foot, and on occasion the men had to clear a path with pick and shovel. According to one personal account, 'The confusion was such when the town was entered that our own tanks did not know which buildings we had occupied and at times we came under fire from them with armour-piercing shells.'

A Company had continued its advance, though slowly, towards Route 6 against determined opposition at close range and fire from [Castle Hill](#). At 2.10 p.m., when the barrage was to end, the company was still short of the objective. Enemy mortars on [Montecassino](#) and in the vicinity of the railway station, 700 yards south of the objective, were bombarding the forward troops, and half an hour later nebelwerfers were also in action. After an hour of this the enemy artillery commenced to shell the north end of [Cassino](#) with increasing severity.

The enemy opposition and the physical obstacles made movement extremely difficult. In consequence the barrage was extended until 3.30 p.m., when the right platoon of A Company succeeded in reaching the Post Office, which was situated on an extension or northern fork of Route 6 about 180 yards short of the objective on Route 6 proper. From the Post Office the platoon turned to the right, or westwards, but met with strong opposition both from the west and south and could get little farther. A Company headquarters came up to the Post Office and the left platoon, which had fewer buildings to clear, pushed through to the objective on Route 6 and entered the convent near the crossroads there. However, the Germans held part of the building and could not be dislodged, and the platoon was also in action at close range with other enemy posts. Major Sanders saw that no further advance could be made, and as the platoon in its isolated position could not be supported, he

withdrew it late in the afternoon to the Post Office. As dusk approached A Company was firmly established in that area, its right platoon about 150 yards in advance or south of the leading troops of B Company at the school.

The tanks also had made a little progress, but as they had no liaison with the infantry the situation was by no means clear to them, though they were able to give some help by engaging any enemy posts they saw. No. 8 Troop on the left, which had been advancing in the wake of A Company, had been joined on its left by 5 Troop. The latter had been stopped by craters on the road running north and south on the east side of the town 250 yards north of the convent, while 8 Troop about 3 p.m. was also blocked by craters 200 yards north of the Post Office. There it met some men of A Company who said that the enemy was holding a house at the crossroads 300 yards ahead, and also the convent at the next crossroads 100 yards farther on. Bulldozing their way to get into position, the tanks engaged the two targets, no doubt contributing to the success of the left platoon in pushing on and entering the convent a little later, as already related.

No. 7 Troop on the right had been unable to make any further progress. Tank reinforcements sent up could achieve little and supporting tanks on the left flank east of the Rapido River—which they could not cross—could do no more than heavily engage [Castle Hill](#). The tanks had made strenuous efforts to get forward to support the infantry, even to the extent of making personal reconnaissances on foot ahead of the tanks by two majors commanding squadrons (both were wounded by rifle fire), but the physical obstacles were insuperable.

C Company, which had been in reserve at the quarry, had also advanced into [Cassino](#) and about 1.30 p.m. was in position at the nunnery, where it met men of A and B Companies and also saw the tanks advancing in the vicinity. With its headquarters at the gaol, the company was in touch by wireless with Battalion Headquarters and did valuable service in relaying reports and messages from A and B Companies, providing fairly good communications until the companies moved on. It was then necessary to use runners from C Company forward and from A and B Companies back to C Company, but owing to casualties and to the runners being unable to find their way, the results were not satisfactory.

From 5.30 to 6 p.m. the artillery again fired on the final barrage line and after

that concentrated on the railway station area, from which enemy mortars had been troublesome. However, the expectation that the leading companies would then be able to reach the objective was not realised. The scene at dusk was described by Lieutenant Milne, commanding C Company:

'Consolidate was the order at dusk. In the maze positions were sought out, with men milling about, stretcher-bearers getting out the wounded, and shells falling all over the place. No supplies could be brought in but luckily each tank had carried ammunition, even primed grenades, so there was no shortage.'

To add to the desolation and to the discomfort of the tired, disillusioned, and disappointed troops, rain began to fall just after dusk and continued heavily throughout the night. With the moon obscured it was pitch-dark; movement was almost impossible. The water-filled craters made conditions hopeless and night operations simply could not be planned and carried out. No hot food could be taken up and the men, saturated and chilled, passed a miserable night.

At 4 p.m., when it was obvious that 25 Battalion was unable to take its objectives, B Company (Major [Turnbull](#)¹²) of 24 Battalion was placed under command of 25 Battalion and sent into [Cassino](#). This company had been kept on the hillside near 25 Battalion headquarters in readiness for such a role, and at 5 p.m. it moved down to the quarry and along the bed of the Rapido into the town, losing on the way one man killed and five wounded. Its task was to pass through B Company and take that company's objective. Major Turnbull had little trouble in finding B and C Companies but the ruins, darkness, and pouring rain created such obstacles that his company could not reach A Company till midnight. Turnbull established his headquarters alongside Sanders in the Post Office and his platoons took up positions along the northern branch of Route 6, the conditions making it practically impossible to organise any worthwhile operation. Enemy mortars and machine guns were still firing though not so intensely as before dusk.

Despite the conditions in [Cassino](#) the casualties of A, B, and C Companies of 25 Battalion were not severe, with eleven killed or died of wounds, twenty-nine wounded, and one wounded and missing. In the circumstances they could have been very much worse.

The operations of D Company (Major Hewitt) against Castle Hill have still to be described, and here there is a much brighter tale to tell. In the early afternoon the company was held up outside [Cassino](#) by the slow advance of A and B Companies in the town. The orders for the attack gave B Company the task of clearing the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#) so that D Company could then attack from the south-east. As B Company had been forced away from the hill into the town, Hewitt moved D Company up the slopes at the foot of [Point 175](#) (450 yards south-west of the quarry and 700 yards due north of [Castle Hill](#)) and then into the ravine between the two hills. No. 16 Platoon was sent farther to the west along the ravine to attack Point 165 (an off-shoot or lesser peak of [Castle Hill](#), about 90 feet lower and 150 yards south-west of the summit); at the same time the remainder of D Company moved round to the east of Castle Hill to where a sharp ridge led straight up to the fort at the top. Company Headquarters was established at the foot of the ridge and 17 and 18 Platoons then delayed their advance up [Castle Hill](#) to give 16 Platoon time to develop its attack from the opposite side.

About 1 p.m. 16 Platoon was at the foot of an almost sheer cliff below Point 165 and began the slow and very difficult climb. Private [McNiece](#),¹³ a Bren-gunner in No. 1 Section, describes the extraordinary events which followed:

'It was about 1300 hours when we reached the foot of Castle Hill and started to scramble up the cliff face where a goat would have had difficulty in getting up. After a very hot and hard climb we reached the shelter of a very large rock, about 100 feet from the top of the hill. Cpl [McInnes](#),¹⁴ i/c No. 1 Section, directed myself (Bren gunner) and Bill [Stockwell](#)¹⁵ (2 i/c Bren) to go out to the right and protect the pl's right flank.

'We hadn't advanced ten yds when I looked back and saw Cpl [McInnes](#) with two Jerries with their hands well in the air; they were scouts posted on the lookout to warn their HQ of our approach but we were so close on the arty barrage and the Jerries were as deep down as possible in their dugout, so that they failed to hear or see us. If they had spotted us we would never have had a chance to climb the hill face; from their position they could have quite easily picked us all off.

'As Bill and I came to the edge of the rock I noticed a concrete pillbox on the top of the hill—it was about 12 feet square with a small window two feet square and

four feet from the ground. I said to Bill "That's a likely place for a Jerry or two; what about having a look"... I raised the Bren to my hip and made for the pillbox which was about 20 yds distant. When I had covered the distance I heard Bill yell "Look out for the Spandau" and he fired past me into the window. I did not see the Spandau but made a dash for the side of the pillbox. Bill kept on firing and the Jerry withdrew the Spandau. I was now between the window and the corner of the pillbox, a distance of five feet. My first thoughts were of the three HE 36 grenades that I had on me and in a few seconds I had pulled the pin out and slipped one grenade through the window. There was a lovely explosion, dust and splinters of stone and wood came flying out of the window; a few seconds later there was a clatter at my feet and there lay a Jerry stick grenade smoking and spitting out sparks—without stopping to think I grabbed it up and flung it over the cliff— I didn't hear it go off but the boys at the rear of the platoon said it went off just below them! I immediately slipped another grenade through the window and it went off with a bang; another stick grenade came out through the window and landed just out of my reach—I fell flat on my face and hoped for the best; the seconds seemed like ages; then there was a terrific explosion. Dirt and rocks flew in all directions. I was completely obscured in the dust and Bill said to himself "Mac's had it". My head felt as if it had been bashed in and my ears rang and ached cruelly. [Note: He was evacuated to hospital on 8 April suffering with ruptured ear drums.] When the dust cleared away I was standing by the window with the Bren gun held out at arm's length pouring a stream of hot lead through the window. I then threw my last HE 36 grenade inside and stood with my back to the wall wondering what to do next.

'All the time this was happening a Spandau was firing past a corner of the pillbox and the hot lead was only missing my legs by inches. I looked down at Bill and saw him calling to the Jerries to come out. I then looked at the window and saw a [Red Cross](#) flag held out. I called on Jerry to "Camarad" and he replied "No, no, wounded". I looked through the window and saw some wounded Jerries lying on the floor. I called Bill up and covered him while he entered, then I scrambled in and covered the Jerries while Bill took their arms away. At the far end of the pillbox there was a ladder down into a huge dugout about 12 feet square and 15 feet deep. Jerries were filing up the ladder with their hands in the air. When we counted them up there were two dead, twenty-three alive, five of whom were wounded. The pillbox was a German Coy HQ of the Paras. The captain, a 21 yr old boy, was dead

and the 2i/c, a lieut, was seriously wounded. After we had disarmed them I sent them one at a time, down the hill to our officer—all this was done in a few minutes.

'In the meantime the Jerries in the Castle had come into action—mortars, rifle grenades, and bullets were flying in all directions. Cpl McInnes had stopped a burst of Spandau in the back and was dead. Gerry Marsh, ¹⁶ a boy of 21, was also killed by a Spandau and several others wounded.'

It was indeed an amazing feat and McNiece and Stockwell had well earned the Military Medals they were awarded.

After occupying Point 165 16 Platoon tried to move up the slope to the summit of [Castle Hill](#) but was pinned down by the heavy fire described by McNiece. The platoon had done well. By its skilful approach and through the resolution of McNiece and Stockwell it had achieved a brilliant success which greatly assisted, if indeed it did not actually make possible, the subsequent capture of [Castle Hill](#).

Meanwhile, about 2 p.m. on the other side of [Castle Hill](#), from the buildings at the foot of the slope east of the fort, 17 and 18 Platoons began their climb. On the right 17 Platoon went straight up the ridge while 18 Platoon followed a stone wall leading up to the fort on the south side. The houses on the lower slopes were occupied by the German snipers and machine-gunners who had been so troublesome to B Company and other troops in [Cassino](#) and the leading sections were soon engaged with them. One section of 18 Platoon used a grenade and a tommy gun against one house, killing the four occupants; pushing on, it found a man of B Company pinned down by fire from a house in front and a flank attack enabled another three Germans to be killed with the tommy gun. Continuing the climb the section passed the last houses and approached a couple of dugouts or tunnels; while endeavouring to fire down these the section leader was shot through the head by a sniper. Now reduced to three men, the section was pinned down by rifle fire on one side of its stone wall and by a Spandau on the the other and, until the rest of the platoon advanced along the wall, had to remain there for an hour or more.

At this stage 17 Platoon was in sight moving up its ridge and the advance continued with no further opposition until the top was reached. Germans were then seen running from a broken wall on the left to the shelter of a keep in the

quadrangle of the fort, a German officer being wounded by a lucky shot as he ran for cover. The two platoons occupied the broken walls, and after an exchange of fire and the throwing of grenades down a hole in a wall leading to terraces below, a German called out 'Kaput no shoot' and came up through the hole with a [Red Cross](#) flag. The German walked across to where a wounded corporal of 18 Platoon was lying and brought him in. Two more Germans, one with a Spandau, then surrendered; two dead Germans were found in the hole in the wall and three more on a terrace below where six prisoners were taken, three of them wounded. By 4.45 p.m. all resistance had ceased and the company took up defensive positions in the fort, 16 Platoon shortly afterwards coming up from Point 165.

In this well-planned action which was conducted with skill and resolution by all ranks, D Company had scored a very important success. Its casualties were six killed and sixteen wounded. The prisoners reported captured by the platoons numbered forty-seven and the Germans killed, in the various incidents related, were nine, apart from the final episode at the fort where, on rejoining the company, 16 Platoon found 'dead and wounded Germans lying everywhere'. Though there were the usual discrepancies between the number of prisoners reported by the platoons and those recorded at Brigade Headquarters, for which the explanation apart from error could be casualties en route or prisoners passing through other units, the German losses in killed, wounded, and prisoners, were undoubtedly severe.

In the early afternoon when D Company approached [Cassino](#), Major Hewitt was confronted with a difficult situation. The battalion plan required B Company to clear the enemy from the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#) close to the town so that D Company could form up there for its attack up the hill. When Hewitt found that B Company had been forced away from the base of the hill and that he could not form up there, he immediately sized up the position, formed an entirely new and very sound plan, and carried it out with skill and determination. For this operation and his subsequent fine work in [Cassino](#), Major Hewitt was awarded the Military Cross.

Just after dark when the rain set in, a cold wind blowing around D Company's elevated position gave the men a rather miserable time whilst they were awaiting relief by a unit of 4 Indian Division, especially so because they had no blankets or greatcoats and had had no food since 11 a.m. In these respects they were of course in no worse case than the troops in [Cassino](#), and in other ways they had distinct

advantages. From their lofty hilltop they had a grand view of the brilliant spectacle of bursting shells of a concentrated artillery bombardment of Hangman's Hill below the Monastery, only 1000 yards away to the south-west; they were little troubled by enemy fire; and from an undisclosed source they had an abundant supply of cigarettes.

Through poor signal communications it was some time before 25 Battalion headquarters knew of the capture of [Castle Hill](#), which is difficult to understand in view of its prominence and the ease with which the visual success signal should have been seen. Then the relieving troops, from the [Essex Regiment](#), were delayed by heavy enemy shelling and the great difficulty of negotiating the country in the dark. The Essex men reached D Company's headquarters at the foot of the ridge shortly after 8 p.m. and from there they had the stiff climb over rugged ground to the summit. The relief was not completed till just after midnight, when the platoons moved down the hill into [Cassino](#). On the way down they were met by a burst of Spandau fire and rifle grenades from the foot of the hill and forced to take cover for a time, but by daylight the company was concentrated behind B Company in the town.

The official casualty list for the day was one officer (Second- Lieutenant Blackie ¹⁷) and fourteen other ranks killed, two died of wounds, two officers (Second- Lieutenants Chapman and [Murphy](#) ¹⁸) and forty-two other ranks wounded, and one other rank wounded and missing.

Meanwhile 26 Battalion, which was to follow 25 Battalion into [Cassino](#), by 9 p.m. had two companies at the Municipal Buildings on the northern branch of Route 6. There they were in touch with A Company at the Post Office and were told of a German strongpoint west of the Botanical Gardens which had held up the advance. Until the strongpoint was dealt with the two companies took up a position along Route 6, the remaining two companies of 26 Battalion appearing some time later. About 9.30 p.m. 26 Battalion asked 25 Battalion headquarters to complete the capture of its objective so that 26 Battalion could proceed with its task of securing the railway station, the hummock to the south of it, and Baron's Castle, and also another objective 600 yards beyond.

Until after midnight and except for runners, 25 Battalion headquarters had no

communication with its companies, but then for a short time A Company got through by telephone. Major Sanders was then ordered to maintain contact with 26 Battalion on his left and to join with B Company 24 Battalion in an attack on the western edge of the town and clear the enemy from the north of Route 6, that is, from the area north of the road between the Continental Hotel and the convent.

Majors Sanders and Turnbull decided that both companies would attack astride the northern branch of Route 6, with B Company 24 Battalion on the right and A Company 25 Battalion on the left; the objective was the road on the western side of [Cassino](#) between the school held by B Company 25 Battalion and the Continental Hotel, 350 yards to the south-west. Brigadier Bonifant had ordered that the objective must be taken before dawn, but both company commanders agreed that it was hopeless to try to organise the attack in the pitch darkness and decided to attack at dawn.

At 6.15 a.m. on the 16th the two companies, assisted by 11 Platoon of B Company 26 Battalion, launched the attack. The enemy was on the alert and from the outset heavy fire was encountered. B Company 24 Battalion, which very early had three killed and seven wounded, took two prisoners from one house and with two platoons occupied another, 100 yards short of the road junction; the company was in action against parties of Germans at close range.

No. 11 Platoon of B Company 26 Battalion ran forward along the road leading to the west from the Post Office, where it was between B/24 and A/25; after covering nearly 150 yards the platoon was forced by Spandau fire to take cover. Like the other troops in the attack the men were pinned down by heavy fire from machine guns and riflemen in the ruins and, since it was then daylight, from positions on the high ground of Montecassino. Until dark the platoon stayed in its position and then rejoined its company. Its casualties were one man died of wounds and two men wounded.

Not much stronger than a platoon, A Company 25 Battalion advanced to within a hundred yards of its objective, where it was about 200 yards north of the Continental Hotel. No. 8 Platoon (Lieutenant N. Lawson) occupied the first building and made contact there with a platoon of B Company 25 Battalion under Lieutenant B. S. Edinger. A few wounded and other men of B Company 24 Battalion who had become

detached from their company were also there. No. 7 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Simpson ¹⁹) crossed the street and, wading through three feet of water from the nearby Gari River, occupied another building a little in advance of 8 Platoon. There it found itself in a somewhat unique position, as a personal account relates:

‘7 Platoon (Lt B. Simpson), 12 strong at this stage (and mostly 3 Section under Cpl J. Wootton) shared a house with the enemy for three? days, and for 36 hours lived on iron rations and cigarettes. On the second night a ration party got through with supplies of bread etc.... Unfortunately, early next morning as the platoon was preparing its first meal for two days, the enemy became extremely awkward.

‘Although the platoon had visibility from the front of the house, and some protection on the right side from 8 Platoon, the other two sides of the house were 18 inch solid stone walls with no holes or windows. While the Germans could be heard moving about on the roof and next door, nothing could be done as all exits were covered by a German strongpoint across the street in front and grenade-dropping snipers on the roof. This meant that the only doorway—that into the water-covered alleyway between 7 and 8 platoon houses—was effectively blocked.

‘With movement so restricted 7 Platoon were confined to a largely defensive role but even so accounted for a dozen or more of the enemy who were noisy or careless in their movements in front of the house at night. An attempt was made at one stage to pick a hole in one wall to provide communication with 8 Platoon but this proved impossible.

‘Back to the long awaited meal—about mid-morning as the food was being prepared, a quick aggressive Kiwi sentry lured 3 Germans into the house and so into the bag. These prisoners were not by any means arrogant or sullen. They were just plain scared—but not of us—and would not talk. After a while they were made to run the gauntlet across the alley and so handed over to 8 Platoon's care.

‘It was not long after that that the reason for a mysterious tapping in one wall, of the night before, was felt.

‘Before most of the platoon had time to eat anything, over half the ceiling and back wall were blown into the room with a noise in keeping with the damage. Yes, you're right Dig, a demolition charge had been placed high up on the back wall.

Fortunately, the platoon organized quickly, and the hole in the roof, the front of the house and the flooded alleyway were quickly covered. Attempts to rush the house were discouraged by lobbing grenades through the hole in the roof, and down into the alleyway. Meanwhile two inspired? members of the platoon managed to pick a hole in the wall and provide an escape route into 8 platoon's house. After sharing a nery day with 8 Platoon, the two platoons were ordered to withdraw that night. This was done without incident and both platoons took part in a local attack carried out by A Company.

'This episode was fairly typical of conditions in [Cassino](#) at the time. Platoons, often only a section strong, fighting well toward their objective only to be temporarily isolated. Their desired aggressive role was thus handicapped by shortage of manpower and so firepower and lack of communication to call for supporting fire.'

In common with B and D Companies, A Company during daylight had no contact with Battalion Headquarters despite strenuous efforts by linesmen and runners, who suffered several casualties. After dark supplies were taken into [Cassino](#) for all companies, a reserve ammunition dump was formed at the gaol, and the wounded and prisoners were taken out. The proposed advance by 26 Battalion that day, 16 March, was postponed, and despite sustained attempts to fight back 25 Battalion was pinned down by enemy fire. A notable success was gained, however, when in the early afternoon the convent was secured and made into a strongpoint. A tank of [19 Armoured Regiment](#) used its guns effectively to assist in the capture and by the middle of the afternoon three tanks were at the convent, greatly strengthening the general position in [Cassino](#). Throughout the day Allied aircraft had carried out thirteen attacks on the enemy gun positions, about 300 bombers dropping over 300 tons of bombs; fighter aircraft by continuous reconnaissance flights over the enemy forward areas and two-hourly visits farther back considerably reduced artillery action against [Cassino](#), prevented any ammunition or other supply during daylight, and guarded against enemy troops forming up to counter-attack. In the late afternoon the enemy made one spectacular air attack when twenty-eight Focke-Wulf fighter-bombers made a raid on the New Zealand forward area, including a Bailey bridge over the Rapido half a mile east of [Cassino](#). New Zealand Bofors engaged them heavily and apparently broke up the formation though no hits were observed. The

bombs fell over a wide area east of the Rapido, wounding three men of [28 Battalion](#) but otherwise doing no damage. As the aircraft finished their dive at the bridge they levelled out and raked [Cassino](#) with cannon and machine-gun fire before disappearing over [Montecassino](#) and towards the north.

During the evening of the 16th it was decided that after reorganising during the night 25 Battalion in the morning would continue the attempt to gain its objective, assisted by A Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#) which would concentrate at the convent. After 25 Battalion had succeeded in its task, 26 Battalion would attack the station and other objectives, while 24 Battalion would move into [Cassino](#) and capture the Colosseum area, 1000 yards south of the Continental Hotel. During the night the Indians on the right were to attack Hangman's Hill, 300 yards south-east of [Montecassino](#).

As the light failed the nebelwerfers continued firing on [Cassino](#) and were immediately countered by the artillery, a large and very satisfactory explosion and fire occurring in the target area. The nebelwerfers were quietened but at 11 p.m. opened up again, only to receive retaliatory artillery fire for nearly two hours; during the rest of the night they gave no more trouble. According to enemy documents one nebelwerfer regiment during the day lost eighty-one out of eighty-eight barrels on its establishment.

The battalion's casualties for the day were four other ranks killed, ten wounded, and one prisoner.

When dawn came on 17 March (St. Patrick's Day) troops of the Indian brigade could be seen approaching Hangman's Hill and it was learnt that during the night they had captured Point 165 (which had been reoccupied by the enemy some hours after 16 Platoon had left it), Point 202 (on the eastern slopes of Hangman's Hill and 500 yards south-west of the Continental Hotel), and had also taken but had lost Point 236 (500 yards north-west of the hotel). This success, partial though it was, was likely to be of great value to the troops attacking through [Cassino](#) as it imperilled the Germans lower down who were confronting 25 Battalion and enhanced the prospects of success in the impending attack by the three battalions of 6 Brigade.

By daylight on the 17th D Company had moved through [Cassino](#) and occupied positions in the convent and in an adjoining ruined church, the two large connected buildings on Route 6. From there it was to give covering fire in support of the attack of 26 Battalion later in the day. In 18 Platoon Private Graves ²⁰ did some excellent work. On his platoon commander being wounded Graves took command of the platoon, together with men of another platoon, and organised the position; he also arranged for stretcher-bearers and a place for the wounded. A little later, on the arrival in a tank of Lieutenant-Colonel [Richards](#), ²¹ the commander of 26 Battalion, Graves explained the situation to him and assisted the Colonel by carrying messages to the tank outside the building, though a Spandau was trained on the door. That night he also helped 26 Battalion with its wounded. He was awarded the Military Medal.

At 6.45 a.m. 25 Battalion resumed its attempt to reach the objective of the previous day, attacking to the west to secure the road running northwards from the Continental Hotel. The frontage was about 200 yards. B Company 24 Battalion was under command and 5 Troop [19 Armoured Regiment](#) in support. For fifteen minutes prior to the attack the tanks had been firing on enemy posts, and 26 Battalion and medium machine guns were to give as much covering fire as possible, especially against the enemy positions at the foot of the hill, though mist and smoke in the town made observation most difficult.

The tanks led the advance towards the Botanical Gardens, with A Company on the right and B Company 24 Battalion on the left taking advantage of all available cover. On passing the Municipal Buildings on the eastern side of the Gardens the two companies extended to cover the frontage between the two branches of Route 6. Enemy riflemen and machine-gunners fired on the advancing infantry, and while doing so some of them made good targets for the watchful men of 26 Battalion and the machine-gunners supporting the attack.

The tanks drew heavy fire and from the outset A Company— which at that time was in touch with Battalion Headquarters by line—encountered heavy shelling from the south-west and made very slow progress. Buildings were cleared one by one and a few Germans were killed and eight prisoners taken.

B Company 24 Battalion, which was under fifty strong, met strong opposition

from various directions, the poor visibility making it difficult to see the enemy positions. Very early in the attack the company had one man killed, two probably killed, and nine wounded, a quarter of its strength; one tank was bogged in the Gardens, a morass of liquid mud, and two more cast their tracks, but others closed to within twenty feet of enemy dugouts and blasted them with their 75-millimetre guns and .30 Browning machine guns, clearing the way for the infantry. In three-quarters of an hour the company had passed through the Gardens, and after crossing a small branch of the Gari River, about 150 yards east of the Continental Hotel, was, in the words of Major Turnbull, 'pinned down by the heaviest fire I have seen'. A stretch of open ground, heavily cratered and swampy and impassable to the tanks, lay between the company and the hotel, which was very strongly held, and no further advance was possible. At that time the company numbered thirty-three, and when reporting the situation to 25 Battalion Headquarters, Major Turnbull asked for a hundred men to reinforce him, explaining that with his very low strength he would be unable to hold his objective even if he captured it; he also reported that he had one tank supporting him, which was doing good work, and although most of its gun ammunition had been used, it still had plenty of machine-gun ammunition.

In reserve in the gaol area, C Company had been providing a very useful forward report centre for the battalion, with a telephone exchange to the companies. Its 13 Platoon was in the vicinity of the Botanical Gardens alongside Major Turnbull's company and was stopped by the same fire, principally machine-gun and mortar fire from a strongpoint at the Continental Hotel. The platoon had lost contact with its company, and after one NCO was killed and another wounded by sniper fire while trying to get in touch, Private [Bertie](#)²² volunteered for the task. He found C Company headquarters and then rejoined his platoon. Just before 8 a.m. Major Turnbull was able to advance a little farther but the very poor visibility was still hampering the tanks, while the hidden enemy had no difficulty in seeing the moving troops. An hour later the company was trying to get in touch with B Company 25 Battalion to get assistance in its attack. B Company 24 Battalion was then in a house a few yards on the southern side of Route 6 proper, where a sunken road from the direction of the station joined Route 6 east of the Continental Hotel. It was still in touch with 13 Platoon of C Company 25 Battalion, which was in another house a little to the east.

A Company had been unable to make any further progress and through a break in its signal line was out of touch with Battalion Headquarters. By 9.30 a.m. the smoke and dust over the town had lifted considerably, enabling the tanks to engage targets. This had the immediate effect of reducing considerably the troublesome Spandau fire and the German snipers were not having matters all their own way, being engaged by the battalion riflemen and Bren guns, singly or in combination as well as by the tanks, with a good deal of success.

Tanks and infantry were working well together by W/T, and Battalion Headquarters, which hitherto had been very much in the dark regarding the situation, was much better informed. There was still, however, a good deal of confusion in [Cassino](#). Dominated as it was to a very large degree by Spandau and rifle fire from the slopes immediately west of the town and shelled heavily and frequently by artillery and mortars, movement was hazardous. The men were under cover in cellars and ruins and the Germans, not very far away in some places, were similarly placed. With various automatic weapons and hand grenades in use and both sides very sensitive to movement and noise, silent and cautious movement was necessary, rendering communication between sections, platoons, and companies slow and uncertain. Forming-up for attack was always difficult as were co-operation, timing, and other ingredients of a successful operation. The town was in such complete ruin that the main buildings, and even streets, were often unrecognisable, maps were of little assistance, and it was a problem to give clear instructions or information regarding positions, objectives, and any other geographical matters. Added to all these drawbacks was the fact that so large a proportion of the troops was having a first, or at best a second, experience of battle.

Although not completely successful the operations of 25 Battalion and its attached and supporting troops had cleared the way sufficiently to enable 26 Battalion to pass through for its attack against the station area. At 11 a.m. on the 17th the barrage opened in preparation for that attack and an hour later the tanks moved forward under it, passing the convent shortly after midday and followed by the leading company of 26 Battalion. By 2.30 p.m. 26 Battalion had succeeded in capturing its objectives in the station area, and at that hour 24 Battalion began to move forward towards the sunken road to take up a position between 25 and 26 Battalions east of the Hotel des Roses, 200 yards south of the Continental Hotel; its

task was to clear the former hotel area and possibly seize Route 6 south of the hotel and join up with the right flank of 26 Battalion.

Prior to the advance of 24 Battalion snipers and Spandaus from the ruins and the slopes above the town were still troublesome, especially a Spandau at the foot of [Castle Hill](#). Twenty-fifth Battalion was concerned that the advance of 24 Battalion might be checked and asked for tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment to assist in dealing with the enemy posts, which would be indicated by tracer fired by B Company. The attempt failed because in the late afternoon the fading light prevented the tanks giving sufficiently close support to enable the infantry to close on the enemy. However, 24 Battalion was not interfered with as guides from B Company 25 Battalion were able to follow a covered route forward. About this time Brigadier Bonifant at a conference emphasised the importance of clearing the town and ordered 25 Battalion to deal immediately with all pockets of resistance in the town within its assigned objectives.

After dark B Company 24 Battalion in its house east of the Continental Hotel was instructed by 25 Battalion to rejoin its own unit, and 13 Platoon in the adjoining house rejoined its company. That night D Company, with the exception of 18 Platoon, withdrew from the convent and adjoining church and occupied the gaol, where some tanks and anti-tank guns in the vicinity attracted continuous enemy shelling and mortar fire during the night. Until the next morning 18 Platoon remained in the church near the convent and then moved to the Post Office, suffering casualties on the way. During the day it attended to the wounded and at dusk took both stretcher cases and walking wounded back to the collecting point at the gaol, where it rejoined D Company.

Of the remaining companies, A Company (Sanders) was at the Post Office and along the northern branch of Route 6 westwards to within a hundred yards of the road junction where the road turned southwards towards the Continental Hotel; B Company (Hoy) except for an odd detachment had been unable to get beyond the school it had reached 350 yards north-east of the Continental, where it was about 120 yards from the forward platoons of A Company; C Company with 13 Platoon on the way to rejoin was at the nunnery 100 yards south of the gaol.

Elsewhere troops of 4 Indian Division were holding Castle Hill and Hangman's

Hill, though somewhat insecurely; 26 Battalion was in occupation of the station and hummock, though low in numbers after severe fighting; 24 Battalion was trying to bridge the gap between 25 and 26 Battalions from the Botanical Gardens southwards towards the station.

Apart from artillery and mortar fire, the German resistance was centred chiefly along the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#) and [Montecassino](#) (and of course the Monastery), and in a rough triangle with the base extending from the Hotel des Roses northwards past the Continental Hotel for 200 yards and the apex about 200 yards north-east of the latter hotel. The areas were small, but the formidable obstacles and ideal cover presented by the devastated buildings and water-filled bomb craters, and the skilful and determined opposition, aided by perfect observation, made the task of overcoming the defenders very difficult. Casualties on 17 March were one died of wounds, two officers (Second-Lieutenants [Grant](#) ²³ and Morton) and sixteen other ranks wounded. The rifle company strengths were now very low; A Company had 51, B Company 49, C Company 40, and D Company 42.

For the next day, 18 March, the main task for 6 Brigade was to clear Route 6 down to the Baron's Palace (where Route 6 turned to the west to the [Liri](#) valley, 1100 yards south of the Continental Hotel), preparatory to further operations against the Monastery. Twenty-fifth Battalion was to hold its ground, clear the remainder of the town, and bring up supporting arms, ammunition, and adequate supplies. Twenty-sixth Battalion was to secure the Amphitheatre (just west of the Colosseum), and 24 Battalion had still to work down Route 6 towards the Baron's Palace. Twenty-eighth (Maori) Battalion was ready to join in the general battle.

At one in the morning two guides from D Company led C Company 24 Battalion round the top of [Castle Hill](#), whence it intended to advance to the south-east on to Route 6. The other companies of 24 Battalion were in position facing west in the vicinity of the Botanical Gardens, along the sunken road leading southwards to the station, and also at the crossroads 400 yards north of the station.

Twenty-fifth Battalion had two blocks to secure, each of about six houses. After daylight C Company, supported by tanks, advanced against an enemy strongpoint at the base of Castle Hill at a point about 200 yards south-west of the gaol. Heavy mortar and other fire from the north-west caused casualties in two unsuccessful

attacks; the first attack was made from Point 165 (south-west of [Castle Hill](#), 16 Platoon's capture on the first day) in an easterly direction down into the town. Observation was so obscured by heavy smoke and fog that the tanks were unable to engage the enemy in the houses and the infantry was pinned down by fire. It was then decided to attack from the town towards the west, but this attack failed when a change of wind at a critical moment lifted the smoke and exposed the advancing troops. Finally a third attempt was made from a ridge running to the east down [Castle Hill](#), the attack swinging round the base of the hill to the south-west. To allow the tanks to support the attack by gunfire an Indian RAP situated directly in line above the enemy position was moved elsewhere. This attack was successful, the strongpoint being taken with a loss of three killed and several wounded. Fourteen Germans were killed and three captured, curiously enough from three units, 3 Parachute Regiment, II Battalion 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, and I AA-MG Battalion. A few tower-like structures in a stone wall near the strongpoint had provided vantage points for enemy riflemen and machine-gunners to operate actively against any movement in the town below, but the capture of the strongpoint put an end to that. The battalion's casualties for the day were three killed and twelve wounded.

During this attack, in order to give covering fire to his section, Private Bertie, 13 Platoon, crawled out to an exposed rock and with his Bren gun opened fire at close range. He received a bullet wound across his head but continued firing, killing two Germans though again wounded, this time through the shoulder, but still maintained his fire on the strongpoint until the section assaulted it. Until ordered to the RAP by his platoon commander, Bertie remained in position giving flank protection to the platoon. For his gallantry and devotion to duty he was awarded the Military Medal.

Elsewhere the enemy artillery and mortars had been firing steadily into [Cassino](#), the mortar fire being very heavy at times. In the early afternoon D Company had several casualties when a mortar bomb penetrated the roof of one of its buildings. Enemy aircraft, too, were very active and late in the afternoon twenty aircraft bombed the station. Allied aircraft also were much in evidence on reconnaissance, strafing, and bombing missions.

C Company 24 Battalion, which it will be recalled had been led round the top of [Castle Hill](#) by D Company guides, had made an important advance southwards along

the lower slopes of [Montecassino](#) to the vicinity of Point 202, which had been taken by the Indian brigade on the night 16–17 March. This operation threatened from the rear the enemy positions lower down and along the western edge of [Cassino](#) and Route 6 confronting 25 Battalion and the remainder of 24 Battalion. The enemy held on to those positions stubbornly, however, and fire from a pink house 150 yards north of the Continental Hotel and from a strongpoint south-east of [Castle Hill](#) prevented C Company 24 Battalion from advancing eastwards against Route 6; it remained, nevertheless, a nuisance and a menace to the Germans below and a comforting and valuable link with the Indians somewhat precariously established on Hangman's Hill, 750 feet above them, and at Point 202. Special care had to be taken by 25 and 24 Battalions below and by all supporting arms to avoid endangering the New Zealanders and Indians on the slopes.

About midnight 18–19 March, [28 Battalion](#), which had been placed under command of 6 Brigade, moved into position west of the Municipal Buildings in readiness to assist 25 Battalion to clear up enemy posts from the slopes of [Castle Hill](#), 250 yards north of the Continental Hotel, southwards along and a little to the west of Route 6 as far as the Colosseum. At 3 a.m. the attack commenced, with A and B Companies on the right and two companies of [28 Battalion](#) on the left. Against heavy mortar fire, countered to some extent by counter-battery fire, A and B Companies made little progress and when daylight came were halted by machine-gun and rifle fire. Fire from supporting arms then helped a little but no further advance was made.

With assistance from tanks the Maoris on the left of 25 Battalion advanced against considerable resistance, a mortar barrage fired by 6 Brigade and an artillery barrage on the slopes of [Monastery Hill](#) providing covering fire. By 7 a.m. some progress had been made and in an optimistic mood the Maoris expected to be able to complete the task by dusk. The enemy was, however, firmly established at the Continental Hotel and for 150 yards on either side to the strongly-held pink house (previously mentioned) to the north, and to the vicinity of the Hotel des Roses to the south. Two enemy tanks at the Continental had been causing considerable trouble but were knocked out before dusk by tanks of [19 Armoured Regiment](#). By nightfall, although the Maoris had achieved some success and had in fact claimed the capture of 100 Germans, the enemy still held his positions.

During the night enemy artillery and mortar fire was heavy and there were signs that the enemy had been able to reinforce his forward troops, several sharp attacks being made against 24 Battalion in [Cassino](#). C Company 24 Battalion near Point 202 had maintained its position but had been under heavy fire of all kinds throughout the day and, during the attack of 25 and 28 Battalions, had been unable to advance towards Route 6 as planned.

During the morning to assist that attack, tanks had made a diversionary thrust through the hills north-west of [Cassino](#) and, despite the difficult nature of the country, had advanced to within about 900 yards of the Monastery. In the absence of infantry support the tanks were compelled to retire before the light failed. South of [Cassino](#) 26 Battalion could make no progress towards the Colosseum but was shelled all day and had beaten off counter-attacks. The situation at [Castle Hill](#) and Point 165, especially the latter, was uncertain, due to enemy attacks in the early morning of the 19th.

From prisoners taken by 25 and 28 Battalions it was learnt that 3 Parachute Regiment was responsible for the defence of [Cassino](#) and that under its command were a battalion of I Parachute Regiment, a nebelwerfer regiment, a machine-gun battalion, and an AA-MG battalion; there were seventeen to twenty flammenwerfers with ample fuel, seven or eight tanks, and the same number of self-propelled guns. No anti-tank guns were in the town as bazookas and anti-tank hand grenades were preferred for close work in the ruins. The Germans also said there were supply dumps in the town, hidden on the ground floors of buildings protected by rubble; the German companies were fifty to eighty strong.

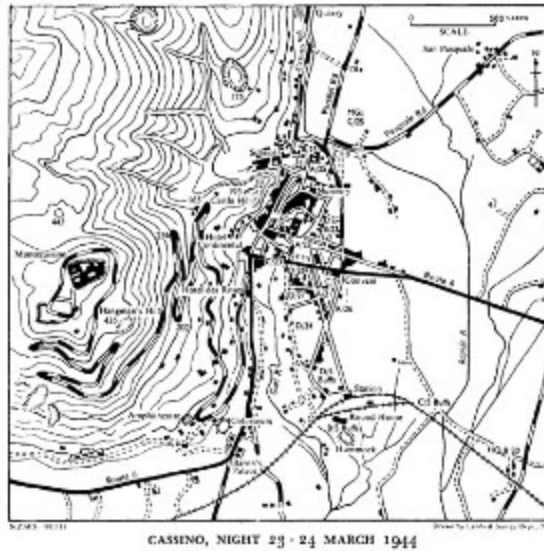
Little had been achieved on the 19th, which had cost the battalion one man killed and ten wounded, and it was apparent that the Germans were as unconquerable as ever. During the night a reorganisation was to take place. Fifth Brigade was to be responsible for Route 6 and the area to the north on the west of the Rapido; 25 and 28 Battalions were to come under command of 5 Brigade, it being intended that 25 Battalion should go into reserve in the Pasquale road area, a mile or so north-east of [Cassino](#); 6 Brigade (less 25 Battalion) was to hold the area south of Route 6 (but including the position near Point 202) as far as and inclusive of the station and hummock area.

In the very early hours of the 19th 25 Battalion headquarters was established in the vicinity of [San Pasquale](#) in the reserve area, rest areas for the companies being selected in that locality. On their relief early on the 20th by 23 Battalion, A and B Companies expected to move out but were told that because of the great increase in enemy activity it had been decided that all positions in [Cassino](#) must be held, and that 25 Battalion was to thicken up 23 Battalion's sector. However, shortly after 6 a.m. this very disappointing situation was altered to some extent; 5 Brigade gave permission for A and B Companies to leave but C Company was to remain in position, together with two companies of 23 Battalion, in the middle of [Cassino](#), 350 yards north-east of the Continental Hotel. D Company, which had gone to the rest area the previous evening and received its reinforcements there, returned at 8 a.m. to [Cassino](#) under cover of smoke and mist and occupied positions at the gaol. During the day there was much artillery fire on both sides and enemy mortar and nebelwerfer fire as usual. In the afternoon C Company made a further attempt to overcome the enemy positions at the base of [Castle Hill](#), but the attack met heavy machine-gun fire and failed. At dusk that day, 20 March, Colonel MacDuff discussed with his company commanders in [Cassino](#) the question of further operations there, and A and B Companies, which had gone out to the rest area that morning, returned to [Cassino](#) at dusk to strengthen the defences, B Company on the right flank of D Company near the gaol and A Company joining C Company near the school, about midway between the gaol and the Continental Hotel.

Early that night C Company (Milne), assisted by D Company (Hewitt), made yet another attack on the enemy [Castle Hill](#) positions but could make no headway. The artillery and other supporting arms continued their usual roles by day and night and Allied aircraft, in addition to the normal sorties, dropped supplies for the troops on Hangman's Hill. Although the day was fine enemy aircraft made only two sorties and lost two aircraft to anti-aircraft fire. No casualties were reported in 25 Battalion that day.

If the men of the battalion (and of all other units also) were feeling the strain of the severe conditions in [Cassino](#), as they certainly were, the Germans suffered similarly, as enemy reports available after the war revealed. The tactics of the New Zealand tanks in coming forward to fire on the enemy strongpoints had caused many casualties and the Germans found it impossible to bring assault and anti-tank guns

past the deep craters and rubble to deal with them. Indeed, at that stage it was touch and go whether the Germans would not vacate the town and hold a new line on the high ground beyond. The German casualties had been so heavy that the battalions of 3 Parachute Regiment,



cassino, night 23 – 24 march 1944

for instance, lost their identity and formed a single group. 'Only the toughest fighters can fight this battle,' said the German commander, who refused to receive second-line troops to relieve or assist his depleted and exhausted units. Referring to the New Zealand troops encountered in the [Cassino](#) battle, a [14 Panzer Corps](#) report said: 'The NZ soldier is physically fit and strong. He is well trained and formidable in close-range fighting and steadier than the Englishman. He does not shrink from hand-to-hand fighting. In many cases strong-points had to be wiped out to the last man as they refused to surrender.'

For the remaining eleven days in March the situation in [Cassino](#) remained practically unaltered, the battalion's casualties for these days being four killed, six died of wounds, twenty wounded, and one missing. An operation on the 22nd by two companies of 5 Brigade against enemy strongpoints on the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#) was assisted by A Company 25 Battalion but achieved little; twelve men of 25 Battalion, brought forward from B Echelon three miles away, acted as stretcher-bearers to take out wounded of 23 Battalion. There seemed little prospect of any further attack succeeding, and 2 NZ Division therefore adopted a policy of aggressive defence, using harassing fire of all descriptions, mining, wiring, and active patrolling.

In common with other units 25 Battalion every second day was to send a company out of [Cassino](#) for a two-days' rest in reserve. The battalion was given the task of forming a secondary defensive position stretching from Caruso road to Parallel road, to be held by one platoon of machine guns and the battalion's 3-inch mortars, and was to place anti-tank guns and medium machine guns between Parallel and Pasquale roads. This was done on the night 23 – 24 March. Captain Mahar, commanding the Support Company, was placed in command of the reserve position at Pasquale; the positions were heavily shelled at dawn on the 24th.

The defensive position in [Cassino](#) between the gaol and the station, a front of about a mile, was held by six New Zealand units, or parts of units, and 5 Buffs. Sixth Brigade was to relieve 5 Brigade in the town, the relief extending over three nights and commencing on the 25th. Fourth Indian Division on the right of 25 Battalion was to extend its left a little to include the gaol, while 25 Battalion would also extend its left about 200 yards to the south to the vicinity of the northern branch of Route 6 to relieve B Company 23 Battalion. Twenty-fourth Battalion would be on the left of 25 Battalion, while 22 (Motor) Battalion and 26 Battalion in that order carried the front to the south, the latter relieving the Buffs in the station area.

In the morning of the 26th memories of the [Sangro](#) and last New Year's morning were roused in the minds of many of the men by the sight of snow, light on the flat but appreciable on the hills, and giving rise to some caustic comments on 'Sunny [Italy](#)', especially by drivers who found it necessary to have a guide walking ahead of the vehicles. During the night a French Arab soldier was brought in by Lieutenant Groshinski and sent on to Brigade Headquarters, an incident of greater frequency a little later when the advance was resumed and escaped prisoners of war passed through.

For the remaining days of March there was little change in the general pattern. Various reliefs took place, an enemy patrol and later a party of about forty Germans entered 24 Battalion's front on the left of 25 Battalion but were driven off, and an enemy raid or counter-attack 1000 yards to the south of the battalion, in the station area, caused a considerable stir throughout the night and was not disposed of till after daylight.

On 1 April 5 Brigade commenced the relief of 6 Brigade, which was to be

completed over a period of three days, 25 Battalion being relieved by 21 Battalion on the first day. The relief proceeded smoothly in the order A, Support, C, B, and D Companies, and Battalion Headquarters, commencing at 7.15 p.m. and being completed by three the next morning. Moving in buses to the south-east down Route 6, the battalion was soon in its bivouac area near the main route 15 miles from [Cassino](#). The bivouacs had been erected by men from B Echelon and 'after over five weeks in the [Cassino](#) sector ... the companies were soon bedded down, thankful to be out of range of enemy guns for a while.'

In the battle of [Cassino](#) the battalion had suffered casualties numbering 6 officers and 217 other ranks. One officer and 36 other ranks were killed; 10 other ranks died of wounds; 5 officers and 170 other ranks were wounded; one man was a prisoner of war.

During the last two weeks of March these casualties were largely replaced by reinforcements of 9 officers and 105 other ranks, but because of a prior deficiency of 3 officers and 61 other ranks, the battalion was still 131 men below its establishment. (The full establishment was 35 officers and 741 other ranks.)

In fine, warm spring weather a period of relaxation and reorganisation followed, with daily leave to [Naples](#) and [Caserta](#), and leave parties to [Bari](#) and a rest camp at Quadraventi. Voluntary church parades and a Commemoration Service for the Fallen in [Cassino](#) were held and Good Friday and Easter services arranged.

Looking back at the Battle of [Cassino](#), no doubt the commanders concerned saw that the tactics adopted did not fit the conditions that were encountered. A general review of the battle is beyond the scope of a unit history, but the plan of attack, in its effect on the operations of 25 Battalion, may well be examined. Omitting the general miscalculation of the effect of the air and artillery bombardment, which has already been referred to, the battalion was confronted by tactical difficulties which might have been eased or avoided. These include the frontage of attack, the strength of the attack, the rate of advance, and the objectives.

The battalion's frontage in the attack was a mere 700 yards, and after D Company in the evening had descended from Castle Hill, the whole attack was confined to the town of [Cassino](#). This narrow frontage permitted the enemy to

concentrate the fire of the whole of his artillery and mortars from a wide arc and of all machine guns from a lesser arc against the town, an area 650 yards by 800 yards, a veritable fire trap. Also, as the slopes west of the town from [Castle Hill](#) southward to and beyond [Montecassino](#) commanded the town, enemy riflemen and light machine-gunners in that area, within ranges of from a few yards to 1500 yards or so, were all able to fire on the attackers. Even if the air and artillery bombardment had destroyed all the enemy in that area, reserves from the reverse slopes had time to come forward and reoccupy at least part of the defences, more especially in view of the very slow rate of advance adopted.

The strength of the initial attack was only one battalion (though it was to be followed by others) and one company of that battalion was employed against the important objective of [Castle Hill](#), thus reducing the infantry available to overwhelm the town below. This weakness was easily avoidable as 24 Battalion was handy and could readily have done the job with little or no detriment to that battalion's subsequent task. A quick follow-up by another battalion to pass through 25 Battalion if required might well have achieved success.

The rate of advance, 100 yards in ten minutes, only thirty feet a minute, had serious disadvantages. In a town of brick buildings with ruins of various heights which were bound to intercept some shells short of the barrage line, the advancing troops would be compelled to keep at least 100 yards from the creeping barrage, a distance which it took the men ten minutes to cover and which gave the enemy defenders that time to recover and fight, instead of a few seconds. Possibly the deciding factor in this timing was the desire to have tanks up with the leading infantry, and the tanks would require time to negotiate the debris.

Reverting to the question of the frontage of attack, it will be noticed that no attempt was made, as at [Tebaga Gap](#) on 26 March the previous year by 25 Battalion, to spread the frontage of attack and consequently the enemy fire. This could have been done, probably with great advantage in other directions, by widening the front westwards beyond [Castle Hill](#) and also extending the objective to include the area from [Montecassino](#) to the station. For the same reasons a simultaneous thrust from the east against the station area, similar to 5 Brigade's attack of 17 February, even if it were limited to a holding attack, would certainly have dispersed the enemy fire. There again a possible explanation for excluding this

might have been the necessity for the Division to be ready to undertake its pursuit role.

¹ WO I M. A. Reid; born Kimbolton, 27 Jun 1911; civil servant.

² S-Sgt W. J. Nicolle; Raumati South; born Wellington, 15 Mar 1903; storeman-clerk.

³ L-Sgt H. J. Wootton; Wellington; born NZ 5 Mar 1921; company director.

⁴ Pte I. M. Fraser; Wellington; born NZ 26 Jun 1918; factory hand; wounded 9 Mar 1944.

⁵ 2 Lt B. G. Kemp; Gisborne; born NZ 12 May 1911; sheep farmer; wounded 25 Feb 1944.

⁶ Col J. L. MacDuff, MC, m.i.d.; Nairobi; born NZ 11 Dec 1905; barrister and solicitor; CO 27 (MG) Bn Sep 1943–Feb 1944; 25 Bn Mar-Jun 1944; Adv Base, 2 NZEF, Jun-Jul 1944.

⁷ Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, Crete, May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div, 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; comd 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group (UK) Oct 1944–Sep 1945; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946–57; died Wellington, 5 May 1957.

⁸ Maj E. T. Dick; born Dunedin, 13 Feb 1918; medical student.

⁹ Cpl I. F. Aitken; Hunterville; born Waverley, 8 Oct 1910; shearer; wounded 15 Mar 1944.

¹⁰ Pte F. Wright; born Pongaroa, 5 Oct 1906; farm manager; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

- ¹¹ Cpl G. E. Pritchard, MM; Stratford; born Takapau, 25 Mar 1918; farmhand.
- ¹² Maj G. V. Turnbull; England; born England, 24 Sep 1907; farmer.
- ¹³ Cpl T. S. McNiece, MM; Hastings; born Tauranga, 27 Oct 1914; farmhand; wounded 15 Mar 1944.
- ¹⁴ Cpl P. B. McInnes; born Wellington, 15 Jan 1922; clerk; killed in action 15 Mar 1944.
- ¹⁵ L-Cpl W. B. Stockwell, MM; born NZ 25 Apr 1913; farmer.
- ¹⁶ Pte F. A. B. Marsh; born Inglewood, 10 Aug 1922; clerk; killed in action 15 Mar 1944.
- ¹⁷ 2Lt W. J. Blackie; born NZ 1 Apr 1922; clerk; killed in action 15 Mar 1944.
- ¹⁸ Lt P. M. Murphy; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 1 Jul 1916; station manager; wounded 15 Mar 1944.
- ¹⁹ Lt R. B. Simpson; born 5 Apr 1922; window dresser.
- ²⁰ 2 Lt E. H. Graves, MM; Lower Hutt; born Nelson, 15 Aug 1917; seaman.
- ²¹ Lt-Col E. E. Richards, DSO, m.i.d.; Nelson; born Kumara, 6 Dec 1915; civil servant; CO 26 Bn Dec 1943–Apr 1944.
- ²² Pte I. K. Bertie, MM; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 28 May 1921; farmhand; wounded 18 Mar 1944.
- ²³ Lt C. B. Grant; Lower Hutt; born Masterton, 4 Mar 1918; clerk; twice wounded.
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25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 12 – SAN PIETRO - TERELLE

CHAPTER 12

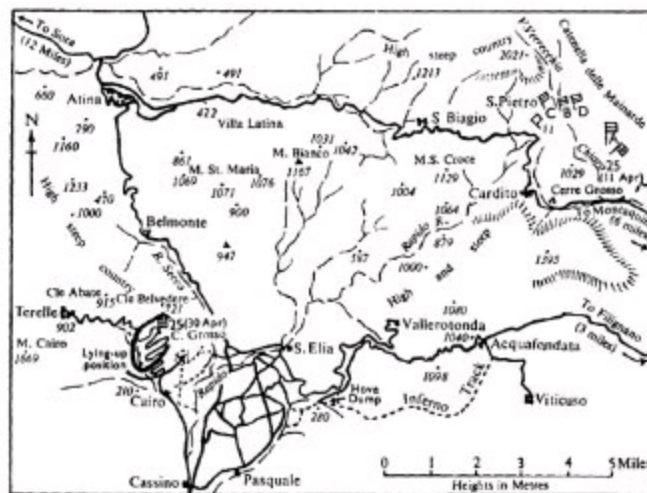
San Pietro - Terelle

On Easter Saturday, 8 April, the battalion received a warning order to relieve a Polish unit in the [San Pietro](#) sector, 11 miles north-east of [Cassino](#), and early the following day Colonel MacDuff and party left to reconnoitre the position, the company commanders and runners following in the afternoon. On Easter Monday the battalion moved off in transport, via [Venafrò](#), to a staging area at [Filignano](#), the journey of about 20 miles occupying three and a half hours. Only a short halt was made and at 9 p.m. the convoy went forward a further seven miles to a debussing point near Cerre Grosso. There the equipment and stores were loaded on to mules, an operation not without incidents both exasperating and amusing, but completed with the assistance of Indian muleteers. Led by Polish guides and followed by their laden mules (which gave a good deal of trouble on the way), the companies set off in the dark on a march of about two and a half miles along a track beside a tributary of the [Volturno](#); the easy track along the river was soon succeeded by very steep and narrow mountain tracks to positions 1300 feet above the road. This was the first mountain position the battalion had held, and heavily laden as the men were, they found the climb most exhausting. 'What a climb,' wrote Corporal Wakeling, 'and our shells whistling overhead as we crawled into a blanket. Great chaps these Poles and always smiling.'

Sixth Brigade was relieving 6 Polish Brigade and, until 15 April when 2 NZ Division assumed command, was under command of 5 Kresowa (Polish) Division; all three battalions were forward on a front of about 9000 yards facing north-west, 25 Battalion on the right, 24 Battalion in the centre, and 26 Battalion on the left. The road from [Cardito](#) to [San Biagio](#) (4000 yards west of the forward localities) ran between 25 and 24 Battalions and the upper waters of the Rapido close to its source crossed the road a mile to the front.

Twenty-fifth Battalion relieved 14 (Polish) Battalion in the [San Pietro](#) sector on a front of 2700 yards and had three companies forward and one in reserve. On the battalion's right was an Italian unit, [33 Bersaglieri](#). D Company (Major Hewitt), with its platoons about 150 yards apart, on the right of the battalion sector, was

on a small spur jutting off the Catenella delle Mainarde, a prominent ridge occupied by the Italians above and on the right. On the left below the spur was the



25 BATTALION POSITIONS AT SAN PIETRO AND TERELLE,
APRIL - MAY 1944

25 battalion positions at san pietro and terelle, april – may 1944

Rio Chiaro, a small tributary of the [Volturno](#). B Company (Major Hoy) in the centre was on a narrow ridge between the Rio Chiaro and the V1e Verrecchia, another tributary which joined the Rio Chiaro 500 yards downstream; the company had 10 Platoon forward and 12 Platoon just below the junction of the streams; 11 Platoon was detached, 1200 yards to the west of 12 Platoon, near the road on the boundary with 24 Battalion. C Company (Major Handyside) was on the left and somewhat forward of 12 Platoon; it was astride a broad ridge with its three platoons forward on a front of 350 yards. The flank companies and 11 Platoon (which was 500 yards from the left of C Company) had standing patrols watching the flanks and front and each company also established observation posts.

In reserve A Company (Major Sanders) was about 1500 yards back, with Battalion Headquarters nearby. The mortar platoon, with five 3-inch and two 4.2-inch mortars, was just behind 12 Platoon and had its OP in the vicinity. The anti-tank and carrier platoons were given an infantry role and to give depth to the position were allotted to B and D Companies. In the battalion sector were twelve medium machine guns; two, with a field of fire across the front of B and C Companies, were in the forward localities of D Company, and two more were 1200 yards back covering the lines of approach down the Rio Chiaro and V1e Verrecchia streams. On C Company's ridge there were four machine guns in pairs, 350 yards below 10 Platoon,

one pair with an arc across the two streams behind the platoon and across the left flank of D Company, and the other pair with a field of fire along the lines of the contours in the gap between C Company and 11 Platoon; this area was also covered by four machine guns placed 2500 yards back on the lower slopes of a high hill behind the centre of the battalion sector. This detailed description of the machine-gun defence shows how these weapons were sited to make best use of their long range and great fire power, using for the greater part enfilade fire in front of the infantry posts from positions protected by the infantry dispositions and by the lie of the ground.

The fronts and flanks of the various defended localities were guarded by mines and wire entanglements, and booby traps had been placed in the wire in front of D Company. It was an interesting and sound plan of defence and was almost the same as that taken over from the Poles.

Except for a few shells near the battalion RAP, which was in a building on the banks of the [Volturno](#) 1300 yards south of Battalion Headquarters, the sector proved to be fairly quiet during the eight days the battalion was to hold it. A novelty for most of the men, cuckoos were very numerous, so much so that it was rumoured that a man of 17 Platoon 'couldn't understand why they should have so many cuckoo clocks away out in the wilds.' Limited leave was continued, parties proceeding to the base at [Bari](#) and to [Campobasso](#), a town of 30,000 people situated in the [Apennines](#) 50 miles east of the battalion and about the same distance from [Naples](#).

As the enemy was on higher ground with excellent observation from vantage points nearby, the men were instructed not to move about during daylight. On several occasions at night enemy patrols and working parties were heard and were harassed by artillery fire. On the third day in the position, 13 April, in the early morning enemy movement on the main ridge north of D Company caused the companies to stand-to in case of attack, but there was no further sign of the enemy. On the afternoon of the same day an enemy patrol about 450 yards away was seen on the ridge north of 13 Platoon of the left company and dispersed when shelled. On that afternoon the battalion mortars had registered, and these various activities apparently roused the enemy as about dusk there was widespread enemy artillery and mortar fire.

Some rain fell on the 12th and 13th, making the mountain tracks very slippery and difficult for the mules and muleteers and darkness made matters worse. The rain had also brought trouble to D Company's cooks. Both C and D Companies had moved their cookhouses up the hill to their company positions and had cut recesses five feet square in the side of the hill to shelter the burners, the stores being piled outside. In the morning, after the heavy rain, D Company's cooks found that a slip had buried much of their equipment, resulting in much digging and cleaning, some picturesque language, and a 9.30 a.m. breakfast. Conditions were also difficult for the normal contact patrols and for the battalion snipers, who had been given the task of laying anti-personnel mines across a track which ran beside the Rio Chiaro stream on the left of D Company; mines were also laid in the gap between D Company and the Italians.

From information obtained from a prisoner of war captured on the 15th by 24 Battalion, it seemed that the enemy intended to attack that battalion's position. Throughout the night a state of readiness was maintained by all battalions but there was no sign of the enemy, though at 9 p.m. a false alarm came from the Italians and shortly before midnight a mine exploded on D Company's right flank, resulting in the artillery being requested to shell the locality. (The discovery of a dead rabbit a couple of days later revealed the cause of the explosion.) The following night an enemy patrol of four or five men approaching C Company's minefield on the other flank was engaged with grenades and small-arms fire; artillery fire was brought down beyond the patrol in the hope of trapping it as it withdrew, but there was no apparent result. The next night, shortly after midnight, B Company in the centre saw movement on its right front where an enemy flare was fired, but nothing further happened.

On 17 April Brigadier Parkinson and officers from 2 Parachute Brigade and 4 Parachute Battalion arrived at Battalion Headquarters to see the sector and arrange for a changeover. On that night, as an enemy patrol had interfered with the mines laid the previous night by the AA Platoon in front of C Company, an officer and three other ranks lay in wait out in front, ready to deal with any further visitors but none appeared. After a general clean-up of the position on the 18th the battalion on relief moved back during the night to a rest area on the [Volturno](#) near [Montaquila](#), about ten miles to the south-east.

The battalion found itself in very pleasant surroundings on the riverside and appropriately in real summer weather, which made the issue of shirts and shorts doubly welcome. Limited leave to [Pompeii](#), [Campobasso](#), [Santa Maria](#), and [Naples](#) was granted while those entitled to furlough in New Zealand were being assembled for the Wakatipu draft, the officers concerned being Major Hoy, Captains Berry, Webb, ¹ and [Whitlock](#), ² who left the battalion on 20 April, and Captain Mahar, who had gone three days previously. Each morning was devoted to training and the afternoons to sport, which included baseball, cricket, cross-country runs, and tabloid athletics; special attention was paid to the handling and loading of mules and to mining. During this period the battalion was in reserve and was required to be ready to move on a counter-attack role at eight hours' notice, under command of 2 (Independent) Parachute Brigade, the duty ceasing after 26 April.

On the 27th in wet and cold weather the battalion was inspected by [General Freyberg](#), who addressed the troops. Another move was pending, leave was cancelled, and the area cleaned. Twenty-six reinforcements arrived and were posted to the companies, and on the 29th the battalion left to relieve the [Maori Battalion](#) of 5 Brigade in the Belvedere sector near [Terelle](#), four miles north of [Cassino](#). Major Norman was in command, Lieutenant-Colonel MacDuff on the 22nd having gone to [Cairo](#) for a few days' leave. The move to the new sector was a difficult one. The mountainous nature of the country and the narrow and steep roads necessitated very strict traffic control and restriction to the absolute minimum of all transport vehicles in the forward area. In the afternoon the battalion moved nine miles west to the staging area at Acquafondata, beyond which no movement in daylight was permitted except for certain privileged vehicles, such as flagged jeeps carrying senior commanders and staff officers, jeeps with a special pass, signal maintenance trucks, ambulances, and motor-cycles; all windscreens of these vehicles had to be covered to avoid sun-flash. Other vehicles were marshalled at dusk near [Acquafondata](#) in proper order for despatch; no lights, with the exception of axle lights on vehicles moving east to west (i.e., towards the enemy) were allowed; from dusk to midnight traffic moved only from east to west and none was despatched after 10.30 p.m. since it would be unable to reach its destination before midnight, when traffic in the reverse direction would have commenced; nine traffic-control posts, some with telephones, were established along the routes.

Whilst awaiting its turn to move the battalion had a hot meal and at 8.30 p.m. followed the Inferno track to [Hove Dump](#), four miles to the west, descending over 2000 feet in the hour-and-a-half journey. There the troops debussed and, with guides from the Maoris, marched along Tui route to a lying-up area on the western side of the Rapido valley, four miles farther on and with the high country just ahead. The administrative and 15-cwt vehicles of A, C, and Support Companies were unloaded there while B and D Companies, leaving the remainder of the battalion, moved on to relieve two companies of the Maori Battalion. The A Echelon vehicles as a separate convoy had moved up the road into the defensive position to two unloading points, Lower Jeep Head and Upper Jeep Head, and were to assist the [Maori Battalion](#) companies back to the lying-up area. Corporal Wakeling of B Company describes the move:

'Apr 29. Off at 2 p.m.—climbed for 2 hrs up mountain roads and stopped at 4.30 p.m. for hot meal. Moved forward at 8.30 p.m. down a great gorge and started walking forward at 10 p.m. A long walk and watched our shells landing around [Cassino](#) and up near the Monastery. Stopped for the night at 12.30 a.m.

'Apr 30. Off for our positions at 8.30 p.m. What a climb! nearly two hours straight up a hill. Fairly quiet night.'

The main road forward—from [Cairo](#) to [Terelle](#)—on which the two jeepheads were situated, rose 1800 feet from the village of [Cairo](#) in the Rapido valley to an altitude of 2300 feet at the defensive position, a mere mile and a half away, though the distance by the well-graded one in eighteen road, with its numerous lengthy and very pronounced hairpin bends, was six miles. A secondary road, much more direct, ran roughly parallel to the general line of the main road 250 yards away and 200 feet below it, with a small stream—a tributary of the Rapido—running alongside, a few yards below.

The whole brigade sector was dominated by [Monte Cairo](#), over 3000 feet above and a little more than two and a half miles to the west, and to a lesser extent but at much closer range by Monte Abate and high ground near [Terelle](#) to the north and north-west. The view to the south included Montecassino, four miles distant and 600 feet lower, and the ruins of [Cassino](#) at its foot. Four thousand yards due south were the reserve positions occupied by companies of the battalion during the first

occupation of the northern outskirts of [Cassino](#).

After spending the daylight hours in the lying-up position, the Battalion Headquarters group and A Company, after an exhausting climb, moved into the position, A Company (Major Sanders) on the right with D Company (Major Hewitt) on its left. B Company (Captain Finlay) was in reserve a thousand yards back where Battalion Headquarters, the RAP, and D Company headquarters also were situated. The forward platoon of A Company was unable to take up its position until the moon set. The relief was complete by 4 a.m., when 25 Battalion assumed command of the sector, C Company (Major Handyside) remaining meanwhile in reserve in the lying-up position.

The position held by 25 Battalion faced south-west on a frontage of 800 yards and lay between 21 Battalion on the right and 33 Anti-Tank Battery (employed as infantry) on the left. Its principal feature was Point 719, the peak of a ridge jutting out to the south, about fifty feet higher than the rest of the battalion's position and enclosed on three sides by a stretch of the tortuous main road which marked approximately the line of the forward defended localities.

Both the forward companies had posts a little below the main road. No. 7 Platoon was close to the secondary road with a section beyond the stream where the road crossed it; 9 Platoon had a position sixty yards west of the main road, where it was about 250 yards to the north of 7 Platoon, but occupied it only at night, withdrawing to the reverse slope of Point 719 by daylight. No. 8 Platoon on the right of the company, where it was in touch with 21 Battalion, had a night position about 200 yards above the main road.

On the left of A Company, D Company had 17 Platoon below the main road 200 yards to the east of 7 Platoon; 16 Platoon occupied night posts only on the forward slopes of Point 719, 250 yards behind 17 Platoon; 18 Platoon had night posts on either flank of Point 719, both 16 and 18 Platoons being behind the reverse slope by day.

Though detailed as brigade reserve for the first two days, B Company remained in position behind Point 719 and had two night posts 400 yards apart on one of the transverse reaches of a hairpin bend of the main road on the left flank of the

battalion. On a bend of the road above, the anti-tank platoon maintained a permanent post. There was the usual artillery, machine-gun, and mortar support, the 4.2-inch mortars being under brigade command and, because of ammunition shortage, being limited except in an emergency to six rounds per mortar daily.

The first day in the new sector was quiet until the afternoon, when a heavy gun from the south-west shelled the area between A and D Companies; the Intelligence Officer (Lieutenant Beattie) had seen wood fires burning there and suggested that these had drawn the enemy fire. The night was not devoid of incident. Enemy positions had been observed on a spur 600 yards south-west of 7 Platoon and on the slopes to the west of 9 Platoon, and after the carrying parties to the forward platoons had withdrawn, these positions were engaged by the 3-inch mortars. A little later, shortly after midnight, the line to 7 Platoon was cut and an enemy patrol attacked a house occupied by the forward section (Corporal Gibbs³) of 7 Platoon across the stream. The enemy surrounded the house and used a demolition charge and a flame-thrower but, assisted by the supporting fire of the other two sections of the platoon and of 9 Platoon, the section beat off the attack with grenades; the battalion mortars also joined in by firing concentrations of defensive fire in the locality. The section had three men wounded. Commenting on 7 Platoon's position and A Company's sector, a member of the battalion wrote:

'A Company held a very prominent position just across the valley from the Germans and was so close in fact that it was necessary to wrap sacking around one's Hob Nail boots when moving out to Listening positions at night, for the mountain was very rocky and the least noise of footsteps brought mortar and machine-gun fire. 7 Platoon in this area had one section forward across the gully via a winding path under command of Corporal T. Gibbs with B. Souter⁴ and D. Williams,⁵ and was attacked by a German patrol who on two or three occasions endeavoured to take prisoners. In this instance D. Williams was wounded and had to be evacuated and the whole section withdrew after the enemy patrol had been driven off by the other two sections of 7 Platoon. After this incident we did not re-occupy this forward position.'

Very early in the morning of 2 May firing broke out in 21 Battalion's sector on the right of 25 Battalion, causing a warning to be sent to B Company, the brigade reserve, to be ready to intervene. A few minutes afterwards it was reported that an

enemy patrol of thirty to forty men was moving from right to left across 25 Battalion's front. At this stage B Company was placed under command of 21 Battalion and moved up to that battalion's position, D Company extending to take over the defences vacated by B Company. Colonel MacDuff then asked 6 Brigade to send C Company up from the lying-up position, and it arrived and took its place near Battalion Headquarters a couple of hours after midnight on 2 – 3 May. Twenty-fifth Battalion had lost six men wounded.

With the release of B Company from its role as brigade reserve and the arrival of C Company, Colonel MacDuff discussed with his company commanders his plans for meeting various situations; B and C Companies were to remain in battalion reserve and were to be prepared to occupy a flanking position on the right rear of the battalion, a refused flank in fact, if the battalions on that flank were forced back. Light rain which fell after dark on the 3rd was not heavy enough to hinder the carrying and mule parties. During the night 26 Battalion carried out a quiet relief of 21 Battalion on the right. The next morning there was some harassing fire by enemy artillery from the south-west and in the evening spasmodic mortar fire from the direction of [Terelle](#).

The New Zealand tanks were well forward, two troops of B Squadron 19 Regiment being situated in a bend of the road east of Point 719 near the area which contained 25 Battalion headquarters, B, C, and D Companies, and the RAP, a somewhat populous locality which during the afternoon was shelled a little. At dusk one of the tanks moved forward along the road to a position south of Point 719 and fired thirty shells at a tunnel entrance just across the Rapido stream 500 yards away and 100 yards south of 7 Platoon; no enemy movement was seen but the mouth of the tunnel was severely damaged. Curiously enough, the enemy engaged the tank with mortar fire only. After dark there was spasmodic shell and mortar fire against the battalion's positions. Shortly after midnight a heavy gun from the south-west again shelled the area and throughout the morning the shelling and mortaring continued, the battalion's mortars as opportunity offered engaging targets on the ridges to the west.

On Saturday, 6 May, the enemy began to shell [Hove Dump](#), four and a half miles to the south-east of the battalion, where the B Echelon vehicles and dumps of

ammunition and stores, including those of 25 Battalion under Captain J. G. Pitcairn, were situated. Fires were started in petrol and ammunition, causing the enemy artillery to concentrate heavily on the area. In very dangerous conditions all ranks at the Dump worked strenuously to get the vehicles clear and to a large extent succeeded, though several casualties were caused as well as considerable losses and damage. The B Echelons were moved back to [Acquafondata](#). Fortunately the jeeps, which were an almost indispensable link in the supply chain to the forward units in such mountainous country, were saved and that night the drivers reaching the battalion brought many graphic and lurid tales of their experiences. One man was killed that day.

The maintenance of the battalion was carried out almost entirely by jeeps and mules. Each night about nine o'clock jeep trains left [Acquafondata](#) and two hours later arrived at Lower Jeep Head. At that point a twenty-four hours' reserve of rations, water, and mule fodder was maintained, roped-up ready to go forward on mules after dark. A mule pack-transport company from the Mule Park near 25 Battalion's headquarters then moved down to Lower Jeep Head to load rations and water. The battalion had its own ammunition reserve in addition to its share of the brigade reserve, its dump at Upper Jeep Head near Battalion Headquarters being replenished after dark by mules.

The ensuing days followed the same familiar pattern, with enemy shell and mortar fire of varying intensity and the battalion mortars and light machine guns taking their full share in harassing the enemy. Apparently the Germans were still using the tunnel and there was some speculation as to the use that was being made of several dogs seen in that vicinity. There had been no reports that they were used on patrol, but they may have warned the Germans of patrols approaching their posts or might have been message dogs; perhaps they were merely pets. It was in this area that most of the New Zealanders saw their first fireflies; some even thought they might be the glow of cigarettes smoked by the enemy and it was stated that a man actually stalked one, convinced it was a German smoking some distance away.

C and D Companies again had their cookhouses forward and both had some trouble from shell splinters and rolling boulders; trouble of another kind was also experienced through mules killed in the vicinity being somewhat inadequately buried by the Indian muleteers. The battalion had one man wounded on the 8th and on the

following day two were killed, one by a direct hit on his sangar by a heavy shell of 210-millimetre (about 8-inch) calibre.

On 11 May the battalion was told that at 11 p.m. that night a large-scale attack by Eighth and Fifth Armies was being launched on a front from [Cassino](#) westwards to the sea, with the object of forcing a junction with the Allied forces in the [Anzio](#) beach-head and of cutting the enemy communications with [Cassino](#). The role of the New Zealand Division was to hold its ground, be ready to protect the right flank of the Polish forces attacking [Cassino](#), and make feints and demonstrations on its front.

Twenty-fifth Battalion was to be prepared to counter-attack the enemy if he attacked the Polish right flank and, in conjunction with 26 Battalion, was to fire on known enemy positions and be ready to fire mortar concentrations on ground over which the enemy was likely to advance.

During the morning there was some light shelling of the battalion's position but otherwise the day was very quiet and the men were able to enjoy the beautiful weather. At 11 p.m., however, the quietness was shattered and the darkness illuminated by a thousand guns firing a terrific barrage, the opening of the great offensive. The bombardment continued all night and from the battalion's elevated position the spectacle was an amazing one. 'All L let loose at 11 p.m.,' wrote Wakeling, 'when all our artillery opened up ... firing on the whole front right out to the coast. We had a grandstand view as we are forward of our guns at [Cassino](#). Heavy shelling up to the time we turned in—2 a.m. At daylight Monastery was obscured by smoke. Our arty active all day. Saw our Kittyhawks bombing beyond [Cassino](#). Ominous silence at dusk but only a few odd shells in our area during the night.'

About eight that morning (12 May) an enemy aircraft dropped a bomb near one of the hairpin bends of the road about 400 yards south of the battalion but no damage occurred. The enemy opposite remained very quiet and there was little shelling. In case the Germans had withdrawn and to test the strength opposite the brigade, a fighting patrol from each of the three battalions was to probe the front. On the night of the 13th a patrol of platoon strength from C Company, under Lieutenant Milne, was to reconnoitre Point 708, which was 600 yards south-west of 7 Platoon's forward posts, and if possible occupy it; supporting fire from A and D

Companies and the mortar platoon was available if required. However, at dusk Germans were seen near Point 708 and were engaged by mortars; three hours later enemy machine-gun fire from houses farther north and also to the south-west was replied to by mortar fire. Shortly afterwards the mortars were again in action when lights were seen in one of the houses. Twenty-fourth Battalion's patrol had met strong opposition, and as it was obvious that the enemy on the front was still in some strength, the patrols by 25 and 26 Battalions were cancelled.

The artillery was still bombarding the Monastery and the men watching from the battalion's position could see 'pin-points of light dancing all over the valley below'. Skyline movement or perhaps an incautious cigarette brought a few bursts of Spandau fire overhead and a greater interest by the watchers in their immediate neighbourhood. Sunday, 14 May, brought good news of the progress of the offensive, though the Monastery had not then fallen. There were also orders for the relief of the battalion and consequently, in keeping with the mantle of wild flowers which covered the countryside, an atmosphere of happy anticipation and good fellowship prevailed.

The battalion was not to escape from the sector without further casualties, however, as two men were wounded that day, and at two o'clock the following morning a few shells fell in the position, wounding another two men, one of whom subsequently died. On the 16th heavy rain fell and the thunderstorm which accompanied it completely overshadowed the bombardment of the Monastery which was still proceeding. That day one man was killed and another wounded.

Although some doubt arose as to whether the brigade relief would take place, it commenced that night starting with 24 Battalion. At seven the next morning the Polish troops advanced against the [Cassino](#) positions, and with bitter memories of its six-weeks' arduous operations in the town, 25 Battalion—the first New Zealand unit to enter [Cassino](#)—with mixed feelings looked down from its high position on the final act of the great drama of [Cassino](#), for that night the Polish and British flags flew from the stricken Monastery.

In the evening 23 Battalion passed through the battalion on its way to relieve 26 Battalion. On the following morning, 18 May, which was dull, it was possible for 21 Battalion to relieve 25 Battalion in daylight, both units thus avoiding difficult night

movement over the slippery tracks and roads, though these had been much improved by the engineers. Reaching the lying-up position in the afternoon, 25 Battalion remained there until after dark the next day, when it marched to an embussing point south of St. Elia, three miles away; at midnight the vehicles took the men to the previous rest area at [Montaquila](#), a journey of a little under six hours. The battalion's losses in the San Pietro and [Terelle](#) positions had reached a total of four killed, one died of wounds, and twenty-three wounded.

The usual rest-area routine followed, with entertainments by the [Kiwi Concert Party](#) and the cinema, and leave as before. There was some excitement one evening after a well-attended cinema show, when enemy bombing put an end to tea-making and caused trucks and troops to make a hasty dispersal, fortunately without casualties.

During the rest period the vehicles received some special attention; all were painted dark green and camouflaged; the water cans in the fixture at the rear of the jeeps and the front and rear fenders were painted white to facilitate night-driving. As an answer to the rather nasty German trick of stretching piano wire across roads and tracks at a height calculated to catch the unprotected drivers of low vehicles, vertical iron standards were fitted on the front of the jeeps, while motor-cyclists adopted a marked racing attitude to reduce their height.

Owing to the somewhat fluid situation on the front there was some delay in deciding upon the next operation for the New Zealanders. Two proposals for occupying sectors—one north of St. Elia and the other at [Monte Croce](#) which had been held by the brigade early in April—were cancelled after 25 Battalion had made the usual reconnaissances and preliminary arrangements. Finally, on 26 May the decision was made that 2 NZ Division would advance on [Atina](#), five miles north of [Terelle](#), and on [Sora](#), a further 12 miles to the north-west on Route 82, to protect the right flank of [Eighth Army](#) as it advanced. The role of 6 Brigade was to exert pressure on the enemy, follow up and dispose of rearguards, and protect the engineers in their tasks of mine removal and repair of bridges and roads.

¹ Capt R.S.Webb; Brookside, Leeston; born [Christchurch](#), 26 Nov 1916; clerk; wounded Nov 1942.

² Maj W. A. Whitlock; Hastings; born Hastings, 14 Apr 1918; journalist.

³ Cpl T.W. Gibbs; Wellington; born Kaiapoi, 7 Nov 1911; despatch clerk; wounded May 1944.

⁴ Cpl N.W. Soutar; Wellington; born NZ 18 Dec 1920; cabinetmaker; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

⁵ L-Cpl A. D. Williams; Wellington; born NZ 12 Jul 1915; warehouseman; wounded May 1944.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 13 – LIRI VALLEY

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Liri Valley

During the night of 25 – 26 May units of 5 Brigade in the Belvedere sector, where on 16 – 18 May they had relieved 6 Brigade, patrolled to the north and north-west towards [Terelle](#) and on the 26th slowly advanced northwards towards [Belmonte](#) and [Atina](#); they were instructed 'to ease forward gradually', avoiding direct attack on any enemy they encountered. [Atina](#) was five to six miles away.

Twenty-fifth Battalion in the rest area at [Montaquila](#) was about 20 road-miles from [Atina](#) and its task was to clear the road [San Biagio– Atina](#) for use as a possible main axis for the Division. From 1 p.m. on the 26th the battalion was at one hour's notice to move, and eventually, at 7.30 p.m., it started off as the spearhead of 6 Brigade Group for the [Monte Croce](#) area via [Filignano](#) and Menella, the same route as was followed on 10 April to the S. Pietro sector. Halting for the night near Menella, the battalion at 1.30 p.m. the next day resumed the march along the [Cardito–S. Biagio– Atina](#) road. A vanguard of a section of carriers, a troop of tanks of A Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment, D Company, a detachment of mortars, and an engineer reconnaissance group, accompanied by an artillery FOO and the RMO, led the advance. This party was followed by the main guard consisting of Battalion Headquarters, a machine-gun platoon, a troop of tanks, C and B Companies (each with a detachment of mortars and an anti-tank section), A Company, and a section of engineers, in that order, and accompanied by a Corps Artillery officer, an artillery liaison officer, and numerous vehicles.

Various report lines about 1200 yards apart had been selected, from each of which the vanguard was to report all clear or otherwise to the advanced guard commander (Colonel MacDuff), the main guard moving forward from one bound to the next as the vanguard progressed. This was the standard advanced guard operation along a road, which hitherto had rarely been undertaken by New Zealand units. Patrols from the vanguard explored roads and villages on the flanks to guard against surprise attacks. After the S. Pietro sector was passed, many road blocks were encountered but these gave little trouble, and the failure of the Germans to destroy two useful bridges, though demolition charges were in place, gave rise to much ribald comment on the haste of their withdrawal.



from cassino to balsorano

By 6 p.m., after an advance of six miles, the vanguard had reached the outskirts of S. Biagio, seven miles from [Atina](#), the only encounter with the enemy being with two of his mules which were added to the column. From air reports received early on 28 May it was learnt that the road ahead was badly damaged; a bridge in S. Biagio and another two and a half miles to the west had been destroyed and large road craters had been observed 1200 yards west of the town, also 700 yards east of [Atina](#), and in [Atina](#). The destruction of bridges along the side roads indicated that six villages along or near the road and [Atina](#) itself were not occupied by the enemy, and destroyed bridges and road craters along the enemy line of retreat north-west and north-east of [Atina](#) strongly confirmed that view.

Shortly after dawn on the 28th the vanguard found that the large crater west of S. Biagio, Teller mines, and a demolished bridge a mile or so farther west blocked the way for the tanks and other supporting weapons. Farther on, two damaged bridges, a blown-up culvert, and three craters blocked the road. These obstacles, it was thought, would take days to clear, and to avoid delay it was proposed that the route be abandoned in favour of that followed by 5 Brigade via [Belmonte](#); however a detour was constructed and repairs to bridges and road pushed on and the advance continued, the vanguard halting at Villa Latina, within three miles of [Atina](#).

Meanwhile 5 Brigade Group had advanced from the [Terelle](#) area and at dawn that day had passed through [Atina](#) and was advancing on [Sora](#), 11 miles to the north-west.

Held up by the demolitions, the men had ample time to enjoy splendid bathing in the Mollarino River which ran alongside the road, while the luscious cherries which abounded in the district did not escape attention. Early in the morning of the 29th Colonel MacDuff told Brigadier Parkinson by telephone that he estimated the road to [Atina](#) would take three days to clear, and a couple of hours later he was able to discuss the matter with him at Battalion Headquarters when the Brigadier arrived there with [General Freyberg](#) and the Crown Prince of [Italy](#). It was decided that there would be no change of plan.

The following day the completion of a road deviation and the erection of a Bailey bridge enabled the advance to continue, and early the next morning the battalion reached the brigade lying-up area 1200 yards east of [Atina](#). Twenty-fifth Battalion there came under direct command of 2 NZ Division and was required to send two companies with supporting arms to hold a position covering crossroads four miles to the north, so that there should be no enemy infiltration along the roads leading to [Atina](#) from that direction. A and B Companies were given the task. B Company found and taped a minefield on both sides of the crossroads and discovered that ten of the thirty mines lifted by one of its sections were booby-trapped.

Italian civilians in the area were a problem and on the morning of 1 June A Company sent back a man who appeared to be acting suspiciously. At Battalion Headquarters an Italian brought in by a Field Security NCO reported that twelve Germans were hiding in a cave; 'McLean Force' consisting of two sections of 14 Platoon was sent off immediately, guided by the Italian, but found the cave empty. Four hours later three civilians who had passed through the enemy lines were taken to Battalion Headquarters in the RAP jeep and thence sent on to Brigade Headquarters for interrogation. The battalion would shortly be in the vicinity of [Sora](#), occupied at the moment by [28 Battalion](#), and the attitude of some of the civilians was doubtful; all ranks were warned that women there were suspected of being enemy agents and that information brought in by Italians could not be accepted until tested or confirmed.

Again under command of 6 Brigade, 25 Battalion on 1 June withdrew its two forward companies on their relief by detachments of [12 Lancers](#) and advanced to

Carnello, a small village two miles south of [Sora](#). There the battalion was pleasantly situated in a shady area on the Fibreno River, which provided very cold but excellent bathing within five minutes' walk of the camp. An interesting incident that day was the passage of Allied aircraft carrying paratroops forward, but the drop took place out of sight in the hills. During the night the [Atina– Sora](#) road, two miles to the east, was shelled but the battalion was not molested.

By the morning of 3 June the leading battalions of 5 and 6 Brigades—28 and 24 Battalions—had advanced up the [Liri](#) valley north of [Sora](#) and were within 2000 yards of [Balsorano](#). The next morning 25 Battalion moved into [Sora](#), the men almost deafened by the roar of 4.5-inch and 5.5-inch batteries in action along the roadside as the column passed close by. Battalion Headquarters, C Company, and the Support Company occupied buildings in the town, B Company was in the southern outskirts, and A and D Companies 1500 yards to the north. For a couple of hours in the early afternoon the enemy shelled a knoll just outside D Company's position but otherwise the day was quiet.

Shortly after midday B Company (Major Finlay) with an interpreter and two civilian guides was sent off to deal with 150 enemy reported by civilians to be in position on high ground four miles north-west of [Sora](#); another hundred or more were said to be 1200 yards farther to the north-west. Apart from the reported strength of the enemy, B Company had no light task. The enemy positions were at an altitude of 4600 feet, involving a climb of 3500 feet in the approach march of about six miles along narrow and steep tracks. The company was expected to return on the evening of the next day. Private [Price](#)¹ of Headquarters Company, who accompanied B Company, gives an interesting account of the operation:

‘The Company left [Sora](#) about midday of June the 4th with the object of penetrating the hills to where it was suspected that scattered parties of Germans were hiding out. For this the patrol had Italian guides and muleteers and enough stores were carried to last the Coy for three days.

‘10 PI led the way with an Italian guide and one man about 100 yds in front. For the first two hours the going was fairly easy and then as the patrol entered the higher country the climbing became more difficult. The day was extremely hot and with the amount of equipment carried the climb was not as pleasant as had been

hoped. Halts were numerous and at odd occasions the Italians who were very friendly offered wine. To add to the discomfort, early in the afternoon a thunderstorm broke lasting for nearly half-an-hour and giving a great display of lightning. As a result of this all the men were drenched and the equipment sopping wet.

'A stop for a meal was made about 1830 hours and after this 11 Pl took over the lead. The track was very narrow and with the rain on it most slippery. Control over the mules became difficult and progress was delayed often on account of their going over the bank. In many cases too it was necessary to leave the track and take to the scrub to avoid being seen.

'The climb continued until 0300 hours the next morning when the lying-up area was reached. Here the men rested and got what little sleep was possible under the wet conditions. At first light a patrol under Sgt Gordon ² and led by one of the Italian guides was sent out on a recce of the area where it was suspected that the enemy were. The patrol was successful, returning with three Germans who were captured while still asleep.

'It was decided to attack at once and plans were laid accordingly. A dump was to be left at the lying-up area and only skeleton gear carried. The Coy worked round the Germans and above them with the object of cutting off their means of escape. 10 Pl was to the left and the other two platoons more to the right. All went well until the Coy was about 200 yds from the objective when a German discovered their presence and gave the alarm. Shots were fired at him and as one man the whole Coy charged forward, firing as they advanced. Within the brief space of 15 minutes the whole show was over with three Germans dead and 12 captured. As soon as the area had been cleared and the three dead buried the Coy set off back to the lying-up area to collect all the gear and the guard that had been left there. It was here that another German, this time a barber, walked into our picquet and was made prisoner. From this area another patrol was sent out to a feature where it was suspected that more Germans were hiding. After three hours the patrol returned empty handed, the birds had flown.

'After a light meal at 1800 hours the Coy set off on the track back to the Bn. As the need for concealment had passed a shorter route was taken and about 2200 hours the Coy reported into Bn after an extremely successful show.'

At the second area searched a prepared meal, personal effects, and a machine gun were found. Another area, pointed out by a shepherd, was also visited but had been abandoned. During the operation communication with the battalion was most unsatisfactory, despite a link-station left halfway between [Sora](#) and the company's lying-up position, the mountainous country proving too much for the No. 18 set used. The prisoners, who included an officer, were from 1 and 2 Companies 131 Regiment, which had been withdrawn from the Garigliano River sector south of [Cassino](#) and had arrived in the [Sora](#) area three days before. B Company's operation had been well conducted and the behaviour of the Italian guides, who co-operated to the full and took part in the engagement, was highly commended by Major Finlay. Unfortunately, the company lost several secret documents, including the code vocabulary and strip in current use, as well as the list of unit signal call-signs up to 7 June. Although it appeared most unlikely that the enemy had secured these documents, the risk could not be accepted and changes were made accordingly. The only casualty that day was one man wounded.

News that [Rome](#) had fallen the previous day reached the battalion on 5 June and, with the invasion of [Normandy](#) the following day, caused great excitement and much conjecture as to the likelihood of an early end to the war. This was followed by information, which in the circumstances seemed appropriate, that 2 NZ Division as part of [10 Corps](#) had been placed in a pursuit role; its front was to be taken over by the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, reinforced by infantry, mortars, and machine guns, together with C Company of 25 Battalion which during the evening moved four miles up the [Liri](#) valley to a position at Colle Castagno, on the eastern slopes about a mile from Route 82. The company had a short stay there, rejoining the battalion the next evening on relief by a troop of Staghounds of the Divisional Cavalry.

The following morning, 7 June, the battalion advanced several miles to the north along the [Liri](#) valley to the village of Urbura, a mile beyond [Balsorano](#), where it remained concentrated, ready to move at a few minutes' notice. There were few Italians in the place, which was shattered and very dirty, though people in increasing numbers arrived next day, many carrying furniture which had been hidden in caves in the mountains. Some of them produced letters from Allied prisoners of war stating that they had been housed, fed, and helped generally by these people. During the past week many Australian, Belgian, British, French, and South African troops who

had been prisoners of war passed through the battalion's lines.

Farther north 26 Battalion was leading the advance of 6 Brigade towards [Avezzano](#), 17 miles from [Balsorano](#), but was much impeded by demolitions, patrols reaching the town on 9 June. Meanwhile, 25 Battalion remained at Urbura and resumed training. The mobile baths had moved up and erected showers in the village square, the brigade band gave an excellent concert, there was much cherry-picking, and queues of civilians sought scraps from the cookhouses (though there was an organised distribution of flour in the district); all these gave much interest to the waiting troops.

D Company in [Balsorano](#) captured a German, as a document in the battalion's war diary relates:

'Legend has it that two D Coy men were sampling a crop of fine black cherries perched on the upper branches of a tree. One of them espied a figure he took to be an Italian dressed in the usual assortment of enemy, native, and Allied clothing, peering round some bushes nearby. He called out "Catch" and threw the man a cherry, whereupon, to the thrower's surprise, a German emerged, threw up his hands and surrendered, begging them not to fire.'

A considerable service was rendered to the inhabitants of the district by the RMO (Captain Pearse) and the RAP in giving medical attention to from seventy to a hundred people a day; escaped or released prisoners of war of course also received every attention. However, Captain Pearse was not at all pleased with the anti-malarial precautions within the battalion; in a routine report to the ADMS of the Division he commented that only thirty to forty per cent of mosquito nets were up at the time ordered. Flit guns were not used sufficiently, trucks were not sprayed, and there were many shirts with sleeves removed. The report was no credit to 25 Battalion. On the other hand the RMO reported very favourably on the excellent work done by companies in improving the general sanitation of the area. Referring to this question at a conference of senior officers, [General Freyberg](#) urged that special attention should be paid to anti-malarial precautions and told the officers that 'he would judge units on statistics of sickness to see whether or not proper precautions were being carried out'.

During its stay in the district the battalion suffered another fatal accident when on the evening of 8 June Captain R. G. Stevens, MC, the officer commanding the Support Company, was accidentally shot in the company lines and died on the way to the ADS. Six days later another accident occurred, though luckily without serious results, when fragments flew back from the target during a Piat mortar practice, slightly wounding an officer and a private.

By 11 June it had been decided that the Division would go into [Eighth Army](#) reserve and concentrate in the [Arce- Ceprano](#) area, 15 miles north-west of [Cassino](#). A battalion reconnaissance party was sent back on the 13th and was followed two days later by the battalion in artillery vehicles to an attractive wooded area near Route 6, two miles to the north-west of [Arce](#). Once again there was the usual round of entertainments and sports, the most noteworthy features being a performance by the South African concert party, a gala day and 'race meeting' organised by the units, and aquatic carnivals in the fast-flowing Liri River. Some care had to be taken in moving off the beaten tracks in the area, and especially along the river banks, because of mines and booby traps which were reported to be prevalent.

On 20 June [General Freyberg](#) told the senior officers that the Division would not be required for operations for thirty days as maintenance difficulties prevented the concentration of an additional division north of [Rome](#). In the event this period was shortened a little but the battalion enjoyed twenty-four days in its tented camp in the [Arce](#) district. The weather generally was fine though punctuated by showers and sudden thunderstorms, one of which on 25 June brought hailstones as large as marbles and threatened to flood the camp. Training was resumed, with special emphasis on co-operation with other arms, officers being interchanged for a week to gain experience in arms other than their own. Infantry officers assisted 7 Anti- Tank Regiment in training in infantry tactics and the use of infantry weapons in preparation for its employment as infantry, a role sometimes required of it, especially in country unsuitable for tanks. The nine M10s on issue to that regiment aroused much interest throughout the battalion; these were the new self-propelled anti-tank guns, 3-inch American naval guns mounted on Sherman tank chassis. Co-operation with armour received special attention, A Company attacking under tank command and, later, B Company attacking with tanks under its command.

Day leave to [Rome](#) on a percentage basis was available every five days, overnight leave not being permitted. This bar was the result of a decision made on the highest political level for diplomatic reasons, and there was also the difficulty in finding suitable accommodation in [Rome](#) for men from all the Allied forces in [Italy](#)—Americans, British, Canadians, French, Indians, Poles, and South Africans—who wished to enjoy the privilege. The battalion's allotment was eighty-five men every five days, but as the Division's allotment was exceeded the unit quotas were reduced, and a shortage of petrol caused a further reduction at the end of June. On 21 June special leave was granted for Roman Catholics—one officer and twenty other ranks—to attend a service in [Rome](#) and hear an address by His Holiness the Pope. On 23 June a New Zealand Forces Club —the Hotel Quirinale in the Via Nazionale—was opened in [Rome](#). Picnics to Lake Albano, 13 miles south-east of [Rome](#), where there were saline springs and mud baths, three days' leave at the Isle of [Ischia](#) in the Gulf of [Naples](#) (by courtesy of the [Royal Navy](#)), and visits to various other places of interest were also arranged.

As in North Africa the opportunity was taken to attend to the graves of the fallen, and parties visited the [Cassino](#) area for that purpose and, more especially, to tend the graves reported to have been disturbed by shellfire.

On 16 June Lieutenant-Colonel MacDuff left to command Advanced Base, [2 NZEF](#), and was succeeded in command of the battalion by the second-in-command, Major Norman; eight days later, Major [Neil](#) ³ of 22 (Motor) Battalion joined 25 Battalion as second-in-command.

Apart from accidents, casualties in the battalion between 26 May and 30 June were two men wounded; accidents caused the loss of one officer and one other rank killed and three other ranks injured. During this period, however, sickness was a serious factor, 8 officers and 107 other ranks being evacuated, the number of sick being unduly high in a brigade total for the three battalions of 9 officers and 223 other ranks. The main complaint was diarrhoea, possibly partly of cherry origin but chiefly fly-borne, as the area had been badly fouled by the Germans; there were a good many cases of fever (not diagnosed before evacuation) and some cases of venereal disease as well as miscellaneous ailments. The battalion had, however, commenced the month (June) with about forty men over establishment and these,

together with reinforcements, maintained the unit at full strength except in officers, who were three short.

In July training continued as usual with emphasis on route-marching and on co-operation between tanks and infantry in the attack. As part of the 'keep fit' campaign sports programmes occupied most afternoons. It was fully expected that this routine would continue for some weeks but it was not to be. On the 6th D Company was sent off to the vicinity of Lake Bolsena, 50 miles north-west of [Rome](#), for special duties. On the next day all leave was cancelled and, quite unexpectedly, the Division was ordered to move north in two days' time.

¹ Pte T. C. Price; [Wanganui](#); born [Wanganui](#), 4 Jul 1921; labourer.

² Sgt I. Gordon; [Wellington](#); born England, 15 Sep 1914; farmhand.

³ Maj A. J. Neil, MBE, ED; [Nouméa](#), [New Caledonia](#); born [Invercargill](#), 8 Jul 1909; accountant.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 14 – ADVANCE ON FLORENCE

CHAPTER 14

Advance on Florence

The unexpected order to move deprived A and B Companies of a visit to Lake Albano. It had also caught the battalion at some disadvantage because of TAB and typhus inoculations, but preparations were quickly under way, including the usual rather futile attempts to keep the movements of the Division secret; Italian civilians were well aware that the troops were leaving, indeed many farewelled them, but possibly the removal of badges and vehicle signs made the task of enemy agents in identifying the columns on the congested roads a little more difficult.

A very early start was made on 10 July when at 1.30 a.m. 25 Battalion, as part of 6 Brigade Group, departed on the first stage of the 200-mile journey to a concentration area near Lake Trasimene, 60 miles south-east of [Florence](#). The roads, though tarsealed, were rather rough where the numerous bomb-craters caused by Allied aircraft had been filled in by the Italians, and after a seven-hour journey the men were glad to halt at the staging area at [Civita Castellana](#), 30 miles beyond [Rome](#). The troops had a fleeting glimpse of [Rome](#) as the convoy passed through the outskirts of the city.

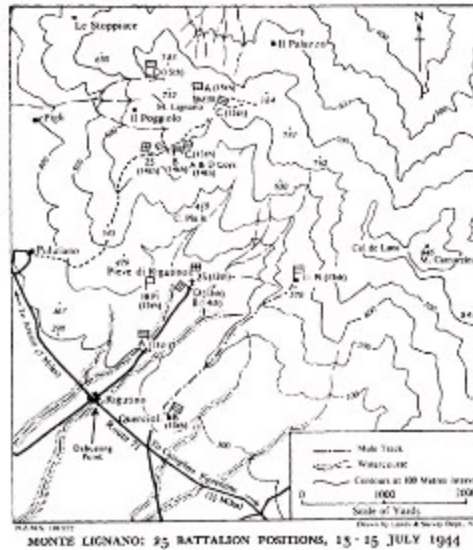
In the morning D Company rejoined, having reached Lake Bolsena at midday on the 7th, when it was learnt that its task was to furnish security guards and pickets in [Florence](#). Apparently the move of the Division had cancelled this role and the company spent a very happy three days in swimming and general recreation.

Leaving at 2.30 next morning, the battalion before midday reached its area overlooking [Lake Trasimene](#); it was a rough and dusty journey through a countryside much like New Zealand, with fences and with reapers and binders working on the farms.

The task for which the New Zealanders had been hastily summoned was to assist [13 Corps](#) in an attack on the German position at [Arezzo](#), a town about 30 miles to the north. The Division was to secure the right or eastern flank of 6 Armoured Division, which was to attack through [Arezzo](#) to the River

[Arno](#) and [Florence](#), with [4 Division](#) and 6 South African Division extending the

front to the left. South and south-east of [Arezzo](#) the Germans were holding a series of mountain peaks— M. [Lignano](#), M. Camurcina, M. Castiglion Maggio, and others



monte lignano: 25 battalion positions, 13–15 july 1944

—of between 2500 and 2800 feet in height, which gave observation for many miles to the south, west, and north. The country was very steep, rocky in many places, with a good deal of vegetation, the lower slopes carrying grape vines and olive trees with an occasional line of cypress trees, giving way to ash trees higher up.

In the afternoon of the 11th a reconnaissance party left for the position the battalion was to take over. This was a few hundred yards south-west of the crest of [Monte Lignano](#) and was held by 1 Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps. After sending the B Echelon vehicles to the brigade area about four miles back, the battalion at 7.30 p.m. on the 12th followed Route 71 until compelled to halt in the vicinity of [Castiglion Fiorentino](#), 20 miles to the north, until darkness fell, when it moved on to the debussing points near Rigutino three miles away. There thirty mules provided by Headquarters KRRC on request were loaded with the medium machine guns of 5 MG Platoon (which was under the battalion's command), ammunition, and other heavy items, and a few minutes before midnight the steep climb to the heights above commenced.

Moving up a road to the small village of Pieve di Rigutino, about a mile away, 25 Battalion headquarters occupied a rather queer house, a collection of rooms built in

an old disused church. Two miles south of Rigutino, D Company left the vehicles and, avoiding that village, which was being shelled intermittently, moved across country for a few hundred yards, following the road taken by Battalion Headquarters and halting just south of the village. For the local protection of Battalion Headquarters, 18 Platoon was sent off 500 yards to the west, well up into the hills, where it took up a position as a standing patrol near a track on the side of a ridge leading up to Monte [Lignano](#), 2400 yards to the north. The platoon occupied a house which already held no fewer than thirty-three Italians, whose numbers were considerably reduced a little later when enemy shelling in the vicinity caused a good deal of alarm.

In the meantime C Company had debussed in Rigutino and marched north-west along Route 71 for about a mile, whence it followed a track rising very steeply to the north-east for 2800 yards to the front-line position occupied by A Company 1 KRRC, which it relieved. The climb was a stiff one of 1400 feet up a very rocky mule-track and took over an hour. Fortunately, mules were available to carry the equipment, including that of a section of medium machine guns which were in position by 4 a.m. The relief was completed half an hour later. Heavy machine-gun fire delayed some of the KRRC men, and as daylight was near they took up a sheltered position till the evening. The front taken over by C Company had apparently been far from quiet.



ITALY MAP No.2

'The relieved company had been pretty badly knocked about,' said Private Shinnick ¹ of 15 Platoon [Lieutenant Trevor Collins, with Sergeant [Schofield](#) ² as

platoon sergeant], 'and twice Jerry had got amongst them with patrols while his continuous mortaring took a heavy toll, for the positions, held as they were in a thick plantation of pines, were subjected to a type of low air-burst as the falling bombs exploded on contact with branches. They had lost over 50 per cent casualties in 4 days.'

A and B Companies also followed the route taken by Battalion Headquarters, A Company taking up a position about half a mile south-west of Pieve di Rigutino and B Company occupying Quercioli village, about the same distance south of A Company. During the relief there was a good deal of shelling and mortaring but no casualties were reported. About three miles to the south-east of 25 Battalion headquarters, 26 Battalion by midnight had occupied its position on the lower slopes of Monte Maggio.

In the morning and again in the afternoon 25 Battalion headquarters and A and B Companies were shelled, the house occupied by Battalion Headquarters receiving a direct hit a little before noon and 18 Platoon's house also being hit during a heavy mortar bombardment later in the day. Shortly before midday B Company sent 11 Platoon as a standing patrol from Quercioli up a wadi to occupy a group of houses 2400 yards to the north-east of Point 570. It was a very isolated situation for such a small detachment, dominated as it was by Col de Luca and Monte Camurcina, two hilltops 500 yards apart and 1100 to 1600 yards north-east of the platoon and 300 feet higher. These hilltops were held by the enemy, who could easily have occupied the houses and so gained access to the track which led down to Quercioli. The platoon was observed, from the battalion OP, to have occupied the houses; it secured 'a lovely house', as a battalion signaller described it, and though it had met with no opposition, it had obviously been observed as later in the day it had casualties from mortar fire. The platoon was to remain in position until relieved by 24 Battalion at first light next morning, 14 July.

In C Company's position near the top of [Monte Lignano](#) the MMG section had one man killed and three wounded by enemy shelling and mortar fire, while 25 Battalion casualties during the day were one killed and one wounded. A jeep was also hit. Enemy occupation of the crest above the company was confirmed late in the day by the Bren-gunners; noticing a cave near the top, they suspected it held a

Spandau post, a suspicion that was speedily confirmed, when they fired into it with a Bren gun, by immediate retaliatory Spandau fire.

Throughout the day many Allied aircraft passed within view of the battalion, their targets being gun positions and any vehicles and troops on the move, part of the preparations for the impending offensive.

The battalion, as well as other units in the Division, was rather 'at sixes and sevens' on account of the withdrawal for furlough of the 4th Reinforcements, as indicated in extracts from the diary of Wakeling, who was one of them:

'Tues II July: 4th Reinf withdrawn for furlough. Told later that we are to move up and take over from some Tommies....

'Wed 12th: Told that the 4ths are to see no more action but will stay at B Ech till withdrawn from the Div.

'Plenty of panic as 4ths to be replaced in all jobs.'

The unexpectedly early move to the front was responsible for the very short notice of the withdrawal, which however excluded some of the single men. It is no small matter suddenly to withdraw highly experienced men, many of them in key jobs, on the eve of battle. The draft returning to New Zealand, 'Taupo' as it was named, left for Advanced Base on 20 July.

Meanwhile, on 13 July, preparations were in train for an attack by 25 Battalion on [Monte Lignano](#). In the morning Brigadier Burrows³ had walked up to Battalion Headquarters to discuss the plans, which Colonel Norman subsequently explained to the company commanders and other officers. The operation was to be a full-scale attack with strong artillery support and with two troops 17/21 Lancers and one platoon 2 MG Company under command. C Company was to take the summit of [Lignano](#) and D Company Point 650, which was 1200 yards farther on to the north-west. A Company would occupy an intermediate position on the western shoulder near the top of [Monte Lignano](#), and B Company in reserve would move up to the head of the wadi north of Battalion Headquarters to occupy the position vacated by C Company. When the objectives were taken the battalion would be relieved by 24 Battalion.

On the left of 25 Battalion [1 Guards Brigade](#) was to capture Stoppiace, 400 yards north-west of D Company's objective, and also a hill half a mile north-east of Stoppiace; this was the first phase of its offensive from the south-west against [Arezzo](#), and as a preliminary the British artillery and aircraft had for some days been active on that front.

Three New Zealand field regiments firing timed concentrations on the objectives were to support 25 Battalion. It was recognised that the precipitous nature of the country made the task of the artillery very difficult and instructions were issued to all batteries that 'care will be taken in computing correct Angle of Sight for individual guns during fire plan'. This matter assumed special significance during the attack, as will be seen. Two batteries from each of 4 and 5 Field Regiments were to engage the peak of [Monte Lignano](#) for an hour, first rapidly, then very slowly, and finally slowly, and at the same time search an area of fifty yards by a hundred yards at the peak. The third battery of [5 Field Regiment](#) was to shell the eastern slopes of [Lignano](#) and the third battery of 4 Field Regiment would engage D Company's final objective, which the other two batteries of the regiment would also engage when they had finished with [Lignano](#).

Sixth Field Regiment had targets beyond [Monte Lignano](#), 500 yards to the north, 1100 yards to the north-east, and 750 yards to the north-west (towards D Company's objective). The 4.2-inch mortars were also taking part, 6 Brigade's mortar platoon with two troops of 39 NZ Mortar Battery engaging targets on two hills 800 yards east and 1200 yards south-east of [Lignano](#) and also on [6 Field Regiment's](#) target to the north-east. A British medium battery was to support the attack by fire on two points 900 and 1200 yards to the north-east of [Lignano](#).

Zero hour was to be 1 a.m., 15 July, when the artillery concentrations would commence. Twenty-fourth Battalion was to provide carrying parties for ammunition and was to assist 25 Battalion's signallers in taking signal wire forward; it was also to furnish any additional stretcher-bearers required and establish a prisoner-of-war collecting post.

On the night 13–14 July 26 Battalion advanced its positions about a mile and a half and 24 Battalion moved into the gap between 26 and 25 Battalions, relieving 11 Platoon in its standing patrol position in the houses at Point 570. On 11 Platoon

rejoining at Quercioli, B Company at 3.45 a.m. took over D Company's position at Pieve di Rigutino, including the standing patrol west of Battalion Headquarters; the patrol was no sooner established than it received a direct hit on the house by a 75-millimetre shell, which killed three men and wounded three others.

A Company, followed by D Company, also moved forward, reaching a lying-up position near C Company an hour before sunrise; Battalion Headquarters and B Company both followed so that the battalion was concentrated well forward in the shelter of [Monte Lignano](#), ready to attack the next morning. In the absence of Colonel Norman for discussions at Brigade Headquarters the IO read out the draft orders to the company commanders, and in the afternoon on his return Norman issued his final orders, which varied only slightly from those given the previous day. A Company (Major Sanders) and C Company (Major Handyside) were to take the main feature, [Monte Lignano](#). D Company (Major Hewitt) was to pass round the western side of the peak and a little below it, capture the high ground at Point 783 (about 500 yards north-west of [Lignano](#)), and then clear the ridge running westwards to Point 650. B Company (Major Finlay) was to occupy the position vacated by C Company. Colonel Norman then took the company commanders forward to a point where the ground to be covered by the attack could be seen, and in the evening had a last-minute run over the plans with his Orders Group.

Twice in the afternoon the lying-up area was shelled, causing casualties, and further casualties occurred when mortars bombarded the position at 9.15 p.m. and again at 11.40 p.m. It seemed as if the Germans had some inkling of the impending attack, probably from the noise of vehicles, from observation, and from interceptions of telephone or wireless messages. The battalion found that an enemy wireless station, operating on the same frequency at 2 a.m. during the attack, caused such interference that it was necessary to re-net all sets at Battalion Headquarters and change the frequency. The casualties reported prior to the attack were seven killed and one officer (Second-Lieutenant de Lautour ⁴) and thirteen other ranks wounded.

At 1 a.m. on 15 July the artillery concentrations opened as planned. Forty minutes later C Company moved along the ridge leading up the slopes of [Monte Lignano](#) to get close under the artillery fire before it lifted. The visibility was much reduced by rain and the enemy artillery was shelling the jeep track and the wadi north of the previous position occupied by Battalion Headquarters; the forward

concentration of the battalion in the early morning of the 14th—a wise move—therefore avoided this fire. A Company followed C Company and then D Company passed through Battalion Headquarters' position, each company keeping ten minutes' interval from the company in front. B Company then came up and occupied C Company's position.

At 2.15 a.m. all was going well with the attack and no opposition had been encountered. C Company was mounting the slopes of [Lignano](#), with 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Trevor Collins) actually at the top at a red house reported by Collins to have mines around it. A Company had reached the foot of the slope. Twelve minutes later C Company reported that shells were falling in the vicinity of the red house and then confirmed that they were from the supporting artillery. Until the fire could be lifted further advance was hindered, but this proved difficult to arrange; direct communication between the FOOs accompanying the infantry and their respective artillery regiments could not be established because of their lack of R/T equipment in the forward position occupied by Battalion Headquarters, and the only means of communication was by the battalion sets to the artillery and L/T through to Brigade Headquarters. Three unsuccessful attempts to have the fire lifted were made by Colonel Norman, the shells continuing to fall short. Ten minutes later he asked that the concentration should be lifted 300 yards to the north, and thirteen minutes later, at 2.15 a.m., that it be lifted another 200 yards.

By this time the advancing companies were exchanging rifle and machine-gun fire with the enemy. A Company was deployed along the base of the western slopes of [Lignano](#), with 8 Platoon (Lieutenant [Liddell](#) ⁵) 300 yards to the left, 9 Platoon (Lieutenant K. J. S. Bourke) on the right, and 7 Platoon (Lieutenant N. Lawson) in reserve, preparatory to advancing up the western slope to the summit. Within a few minutes C Company again reported that shells were falling on the platoon at the red house and also on the platoon on its right, and five minutes afterwards A Company made a similar complaint, asking that the fire be lifted 500 yards to the north. At five minutes past three C Company reported the capture of its objective on [Monte Lignano](#), and ten minutes later A Company had two platoons in position there, 9 Platoon on the right and 8 Platoon on the left, 7 Platoon still being in reserve. Visible evidence of this success was soon forthcoming when nine prisoners of war from C Company arrived at Battalion Headquarters.

Enemy mortars were then active, but again the fire fell in rear of the forward companies. That fire did not trouble them, but C Company's forward platoon was much concerned with shells which at 3.25 a.m. were reported still to be falling short, and as much as two and a half hours later D Company was to have a similar experience.

In an interview two months after the action Private Shinnick of 15 Platoon C Company gave some details of his experiences and of the course of the fighting: 'The feature [M. [Lignano](#)] itself was unusual and certainly a difficult one for the artillery to play on. It was arranged that after reaching the main objective the barrage would play over it on to a further feature to be taken later. The clearance to be given us for this task was a mere 10 feet. [Note: This figure is either surmise or rumour. There is no possibility of such a clearance being accepted.]

'C Company were to be the first over the start line with 15 Platoon first out. The terrain was such that the start line could only be reached by scrambling almost on hands and knees in single file. C Coy were to take the right flank of the crest, D Coy left flank of the crest, and A Coy the crest itself, with B Coy in reserve. But it didn't work out like that.

'Just before the barrage commenced a terrific thunderstorm broke, after threatening to do so for several hours. Fortunately it finished before we started the attack. The barrage commenced at 11 p.m. [? 1 a.m.] and the first few shells landed in our positions killing several and wounding others, then eventually went over to Jerry's positions, playing there till midnight [?] when we commenced to form up. Our platoon strength was now 21, and the other platoons were little better.

'As we were moving into the position our barrage dropped again and landed down below us. It killed and wounded 2 more. Then it commenced creeping up over us and somehow we managed to withdraw 50 yards and miraculously had no further casualties though shells were bursting all around us. As it lifted we again moved, following close under the barrage.

'We safely negotiated a minefield and managed to get around the reverse side of the spur, formed up with two sections forward and one in reserve and commenced to move forward up the steep face of the main feature. It was terribly rocky and

often it was a case of helping one another over the obstacles. Most of the shells fell in front of the feature, but a few came over and landed amongst us, causing no casualties though often the blast knocked us flat to the ground.

'First opposition was from a Jerry fox-hole, but we silenced it and pressed on over the rocky terrain, until we encountered the next opposition. Another Jerry strongpoint was left in silence. On approaching the ridge of the spur we found that the barrage was still playing on it, so elected to move further to the left and occupy the main crest from where we were receiving enemy fire. We made the crest on which was a very badly shattered building [the red house] and we occupied it. The reserve section was left here while the first two sections pushed on to clear the left flank of it. However they were caught in our own barrage and shortly reduced to the numbers of two and four.

'Prisoners were now being taken but then a group of Jerries came in to consolidate their positions on the house but found us already in occupation. We wirelessly back that the position had been taken and to lift the barrage, but it continued to whittle away at what poor protection we had, and for 20 minutes we had to endure our own concentrated shellfire.

'One section passed on to the left flank and captured two MMG posts and partly cleared the way for D Coy which was coming up. As we had already occupied A Coy positions, we were left there and A Coy took over C Coy positions.

'The 10 feet artillery clearance was not enough, as 50 per cent of the shells failed to clear the crest. From the crest our own artillery flashes could be seen and you then had about 10 seconds to get under cover....'

The two forward company commanders in reports to Battalion Headquarters described the action of their companies:

'C Company left the start line at 0140 hours with two platoons forward and sections in single file,' wrote Major Handyside. 'The Company kept well up the hill and advanced for ten minutes until we were held up by our bombardment. While waiting for the barrage to lift off the lower slopes of [Lignano](#), one man was killed by shorts from our own guns. When the barrage lifted at 0200 the Company deployed and advanced quickly up the hill. First opposition was met 400 yards from the red

house but did not slow the advance. 14 Platoon on the right struck no opposition. 15 Platoon on the left killed about 6 Germans short of the red house and took prisoners at the red house, then secured the peak, and drove the enemy down the other side. The peak was still being shelled by our own Arty although word had been got back to remedy this. The peak was shelled by our own guns until 0300 hours and casualties were considerable at this stage. The Company was dug in by daylight and lines out to two platoons and back to Battalion. Throughout the attack wireless communication was excellent both with 18 and 38 sets. Camouflage jackets were worn and are considered a good thing but would be better with sleeves. Casualties on 15 July 13. Own artillery 1 killed 8 wounded. Enemy action 2 killed 2 wounded.'

Major Sanders commanding A Company had very much the same experience. 'The sky on the night 14/15 was very cloudy,' he wrote, 'and rain had fallen round midnight. Visibility was only about 50 yards. Owing to the fact that the Company could not be deployed on a start line and given a bearing to the objective, it was a very difficult matter to manoeuvre the Coy on to the objective and maintain contact in the dark. This was done by shouting to each other which must also have disclosed our whereabouts to the enemy. The approach to the objective was a fairly narrow ridge and this approach had to be used by all three companies. The Company was unable to deploy till the actual slopes of [Lignano](#) were reached. To here the Coy advanced two platoons up, each in single file about 30 yards apart, followed by Coy HQ and the reserve platoon. On reaching the slopes of Lignano No. 8 PI moved round to the left about 300 yards, turned right, and advanced up the slopes, No. 9 PI doing the same thing on their right. Very little opposition was encountered. The 2 or 3 Spandau posts were quickly silenced, and the reserve platoon (No. 7) was not committed. There was no enemy shelling on the feature till about 1000 hours the next morning from which time onwards he shelled us intermittently as did our own artillery. A Coy's casualties were 3 killed 9 wounded.'

Lieutenant Liddell, commanding 8 Platoon, also referred in his report to the difficulty of control and deployment, and added: 'PI reached objective late as C Coy leading att. was held up for some time by the arty barrage. Enemy resistance was not strong after arty stonk. Several badly-laid Teller mines encountered, trip wires attached. No casualties as wires were too slack. Spandaus still fire tracer giving away location of M.G. posts. Contrary to usual, enemy did not use flares until PI was

on objective. Enemy defences shallow but well sited. Casualties (a) Own—nil. (b) Enemy—MG post wiped out.'

Lieutenant Bourke, commanding 9 Platoon, also mentioned the delay caused by C Company being stopped by the artillery fire and said: '...and when we moved the pace became a little fast with some resultant confusion and loss of direction. German opposition was not up to standard due possibly to the heavy shelling he had experienced. Booby traps in pln. area consisted of crude trip wires on to Teller mines.'

Meanwhile D Company continued its advance, passing through A Company towards its more distant objective, and although held up for a time, reported a platoon on the objective at 4.25 a.m. and a second platoon there fifteen minutes later. No time was lost by Battalion Headquarters in establishing communication, a line being run forward to A and C Companies and an artillery FOO reaching C Company within half an hour.

Enemy counter-attack after the loss of a position was regarded as automatic and standard procedure and, despite indications, especially in higher formations, that the enemy was contemplating an early withdrawal, Colonel Norman was taking no chances: at 4.45 a.m. he asked for the tanks to come up to support the forward companies and later in the day arranged for more concentrated dispositions for the night to be adopted by those companies. The tanks came up the ridge leading to [Monte Lignano](#) from the south-west and about 6 a.m. took up a position about 500 yards west of B Company, with one tank a little closer, and within 600 yards of the summit, the rough ground preventing further progress. However, from the position they had reached, the tanks were able to deal with any enemy attack from the west and the moral effect of their presence well forward was considerable. The battalion had a good many casualties, with nine killed, two died of wounds, and twenty-seven wounded. About twenty of the enemy were killed and nineteen taken prisoner.

As day was dawning, about an hour before sunrise, which was at 5.42 a.m., all companies and Battalion Headquarters were under heavy mortar fire; this was perhaps a counter-measure against a possible further advance from 25 Battalion's sector since the Guards, having captured Stoppiace (400 yards north-west of D Company) at 4.15 a.m., had a company driven off its next objective half a mile

farther on. Early in the morning enemy guns shelling the battalion could be clearly seen, but communication from the OP to the artillery failed and at 8.30 a.m. Colonel Norman asked that dive-bombers, which were active on the Guards' front, should attack the guns.

During the attack by 25 Battalion, companies of 24 Battalion on the right had also advanced in the Monte Camurcina area about two miles south-east of [Monte Lignano](#), and 26 Battalion had moved up to [Monte Spino](#), three miles east-south-east of that point.

At various times during the day the company positions were mortared and shelled by the enemy, and between 1 p.m. and 9.40 p.m. there were no fewer than six reports of the supporting artillery shelling the forward companies, one gun in particular continuing to offend. Two men were killed. After dark a patrol from D Company established touch with the Guards on the left and returned with five prisoners, captured in the vicinity of Point 650 on the company's left flank. Fortunately the jeeps were able to bring rations, greatcoats, and one blanket per man up as far as Battalion Headquarters, very much reducing the work of carrying parties, though as Private [Peters](#) ⁶ of C Company put it, 'rations and ammo were brought up by the blood, sweat, and tears method—right up to the top of the hill from below'.

Although it was expecting a counter-attack and B Company 24 Battalion had been ordered up to come under command as a reserve, 25 Battalion had a quiet night. The German acceptance of the loss of this vital sector of the [Arezzo](#) defence system is explained in conversations between enemy commanders, available from documents captured after the war:

'We must accept the loss of M. [Lignano](#)...,' said the Chief of Staff [Tenth Army](#) in a telephone conversation with the Chief of Staff 76 Panzer Corps at 9.5 a.m. on the 15th. 'The withdrawal to the next line will take two days. A strong rearguard immediately north of [Arezzo](#) will hold on for a day....' The Army Commander then spoke to the Army Group: 'This penetration on 15 Pz Gren Div's left, which has led to the loss of [Lignano](#), was caused by a strong attack with a purely limited objective. I don't like it because the enemy shelling is so heavy down there that I don't want to mount a counter-attack, which would be very costly. On the other hand, from

Lignano the enemy can see right to Arezzo. That is a point in favour of ... [the] plan to withdraw....'

The last telephone conversation recorded on the 15th, between Army Group and 10th Army, was:

'What line will you be occupying first thing to-morrow?'

Tenth Army: 'We will have strong rearguards on our present line.... The high ground east and south-east of Arezzo must stay in our hands as long as possible as from there we can see the country SW from Arezzo....'

Thus 25 Battalion had captured the key position of the Arezzo defence system though the Germans for the moment continued to hold Monte Camurcina, two miles to the south-east, and other high ground on the New Zealand front. The following morning, however, these positions were captured in an attack at 2 a.m. by the other two battalions of 6 Brigade, the left battalion of which (24 Battalion) after first light established contact by a patrol with A Company 25 Battalion on Monte Lignano. At the same time the Guards Brigade on the left continued its advance on the high country 4000 yards to the north-west of 25 Battalion.

The only serious trouble encountered in the attack by 25 Battalion was the shellfire reported on many occasions, and from several sources, as coming from the supporting artillery. The first incident was the shelling of C Company at 9.15 a.m. on the 14th, shown in a shelling report from 25 Battalion to 6 Brigade. At that hour C Company was still in the forward position it had taken over in the early hours of the 13th from the KRRC.

The shelling report also gives other instances, between 1.45 a.m. and 10.15 p.m. on the 15th, of the shelling of A, C, and D Companies, two of them involving two companies in the same incident and some of them continuing for an hour or more, all attributed to the supporting guns. In six of the incidents—from 2.25 a.m. to 3.25 a.m. on the 15th—the shells fell near the summit of Lignano, which was the target for concentrations—code name helmieh—timed to end at 2 a.m., after which hour in accordance with the artillery plan there should have been no fire on the top of Lignano.

The guns deemed responsible were reported to be on a bearing of 155 degrees, which passed through the area occupied by the supporting artillery, and there is Private Shinnick's statement that the 'artillery flashes could be seen and you then had about 10 seconds to get under cover'. This bearing of 155 degrees, projected beyond the summit of [Monte Lignano](#), ran through one of the artillery target areas 750 yards north-west of the peak, and the particular concentration—code name *helwan*—was named by 25 Battalion as responsible for much of the trouble. From the evidence available it appears that either the guns firing the *helmieh* concentrations failed to lift at 2 a.m. in accordance with the plan, or those firing the *helwan* concentrations on targets 750 yards beyond [Lignano](#) were responsible.

Reports regarding short-shooting were not confined to 25 Battalion, as during the attack on the following night, 15–16 July, both 24 and 26 Battalions reported trouble from the supporting artillery and had it speedily rectified.

Twenty-fifth Battalion concluded its task in the [Monte Lignano](#) sector at noon on 16 July, when without further casualties it withdrew to 6 Brigade's B Echelon area; its losses in the operations were 17 other ranks killed, 4 died of wounds, and 3 officers (Lieutenant [Cameron](#),⁷ and Second-Lieutenants P. A. de Lautour and E. [Cardale](#)⁸) and 41 other ranks wounded. At a divisional conference that day [General Freyberg](#) congratulated 6 Brigade on its work in the line and said: 'I do think that the attack by 25 Battalion was a very admirable one and a very tidy one. It was a very difficult operation.'

In due course Colonel Norman was awarded the Distinguished Service Order; he had made a close and hazardous forward reconnaissance and his planning and sound leadership were largely responsible for the success of this important operation. For skilful and courageous leadership in this action, Sergeant [Leslie](#)⁹ was awarded the Military Medal.

The Division was now in Corps Reserve and the battalion spent the ensuing eight days resting and reorganising. A change of adjutants took place, Captain D. F. Muir being attached to Brigade HQ; Lieutenant A. B. West replaced him as adjutant.

In the days that followed, the Allied advance passed beyond [Arezzo](#) and secured an important bridgehead over the [Arno](#) River in readiness for the advance on

Florence. The main thrust to the **Arno** had, however, moved to the western flank and the New Zealand and 6 South African Divisions were being used there, 40 miles north-west of the **Lignano** sector. Since 21 July 5 Brigade had been advancing in that direction astride the Pesa River against stubborn resistance and was approaching the village of **San Casciano**, nine miles north of **San Donato**, where 6 Brigade was to arrive on the 24th. Fifth Brigade had orders to advance during the night 25 – 26 July and secure a line from the Pesa River, 700 yards west of **Cerbaia**, southwards for about three miles.

On the evening of the 22nd 25 Battalion arrived in the new area after a somewhat roundabout and dusty journey of about 60 miles, moving on two days later about 14 miles and on the following evening a further eight miles to the north. There the troops dug in. The enemy was a mere three miles away, his tanks and infantry opposing 5 Brigade, which was continuing its advance; at the same time a composite force of armour, engineers, and infantry on the right bank of the **Pesa** turned to the north-east along Route 2 against the enemy at S. Casciano.

The role of 6 Brigade was to pass through or behind the right flank of 5 Brigade and establish a bridgehead over the **Pesa** about four miles to the north in the vicinity of **Cerbaia**; it was then to secure a line of hills 5000 yards to the north and north-east, the last enemy defensive positions before **Florence**, which lay only four miles beyond. The objective was to be taken by 26 Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left; 25 Battalion in reserve was to have B Company in readiness to pass through 26 Battalion if that unit was held up in its advance on **Cerbaia**. Each of the two attacking battalions had a squadron of tanks, a platoon of machine guns, a troop of six-pounders, a section of 17-pounders, and a detachment of engineers, all under command.

The hour at which the leading units of 6 Brigade were to pass the right flank of 5 Brigade was to be decided by the latter brigade, being dependent upon the tactical situation in that locality, and it was not till 1.30 a.m. on the 27th that 26 Battalion advanced. Both the attacking battalions made slow progress: by 9 a.m. 26 Battalion had a company across the river south of **Cerbaia** and 24 Battalion had two companies

moving up west of the town. There was a good deal of hostile shelling and

small-arms fire and the supporting armour was delayed by mines. About midday 26 Battalion had secured the



the cerbaia sector, 28 july-6 august 1944

northern outskirts of [Cerbaia](#) and a company of 24 Battalion was west of the town on the other side of the river. In the early hours of the 28th 26 Battalion advanced to the north-east about 4000 yards but was driven back a little by counter-attacks,

supported by Tiger tanks. Twenty-fourth Battalion had also advanced and was just beyond [San Michele](#), a village 2000 yards north of [Cerbaia](#), where it was pinned down by enemy fire.

In the night 25 Battalion had advanced to [Cerbaia](#) and by 2 a.m. on the 28th had occupied the bridgehead. On the right B Company had 12 Platoon forward in Upper [Cerbaia](#), 800 yards from the river, and 10 and 11 Platoons 500 yards behind in the lower town. Major Sanders with A Company on the left sent 7 and 8 Platoons forward on either side of 12 Platoon and kept 9 Platoon in reserve in Lower [Cerbaia](#). Battalion Headquarters came up to a position west of the [Pesa](#), where it was 1500 yards south of the town. C Company was in reserve nearby with 14 Platoon detached for a day under command of the Divisional Cavalry at [Castellare](#), 900 yards north-west of [Cerbaia](#). D Company was south-west of [Cerbaia](#), where it was guarding the left flank of the brigade and was in touch with the Divisional Cavalry.

Throughout the day there was only spasmodic mortaring of Battalion Headquarters and C Company, but A and B Companies were under rather heavy mortar fire accompanied by occasional shelling. The battalion's casualties that day were two died of wounds and two wounded. During its short stay with the Divisional Cavalry at [Castellare](#), '14 Platoon had two sections sent out to clear a couple of Spandau posts which were holding up the advance', a personal account mentions. 'They did this operation in mobile form by being taken in on Div Cav Staghound vehicles', and, using the words of Dick Parker, ¹⁰ 'the old hands ensured they were on the back of this vehicle'; but when the objective was reached the Germans had retreated.

In the morning of the 28th Colonel Norman attended a conference at 26 Battalion headquarters, where a proposed attack on Points 261 and 281, hilltops 700 yards apart and forming a spur or salient from higher ground behind, was discussed. Throughout the day the progress of 24 and 26 Battalions was followed at 25 Battalion headquarters by interception of wireless messages. Further discussions took place the next day regarding an attack on 30–31 July by the battalion against the two hilltops, and it was planned that C Company would take Point 261 and D Company Point 281. Meanwhile, however, a counter-attack at [San Michele](#) against 24 Battalion had altered the situation, B Company being placed under command of that battalion to relieve its A Company, which was reported to be surrounded by enemy tanks and infantry.

At 11 p.m. B Company (Major Finlay) left [Cerbaia](#) for [Castellare](#), and on arriving there a few minutes after midnight it was ordered by 24 Battalion to attack [San Michele](#), which in fact had been heavily attacked and largely occupied by the enemy. By 2 a.m. B Company was on its start line and immediately advanced under a barrage; within the hour it had entered the village, which was found to be clear of the enemy. Nos. 10 and 11 Platoons then occupied a house at the northern end where they covered a road junction, while Company Headquarters and 12 Platoon were in the Monastery, 250 yards to the south. At that stage A Company 24 Battalion was withdrawn, and shortly afterwards B Company 24 Battalion arrived on the scene and occupied the south-west end of the village, its headquarters joining that of B Company 25 Battalion in the Monastery, from which W/T communication with 24 Battalion headquarters had been established.

At times during the day [San Michele](#) was heavily shelled and mortared and at 6 p.m. two enemy tanks were reported to be approaching 10 and 11 Platoons; artillery defensive fire was called for but the shells fell amongst the platoons and the fire was raised 800 yards to the target area. At 6.30 p.m. fighter-bombers bombed and strafed the enemy tanks, destroying one; enemy tanks were again reported, a false alarm as was subsequently discovered, but the defensive fire called for again fell on the forward platoons; the artillery was then requested to raise all D/F tasks 800 yards. It seems probable that this request should have been made when 10 and 11 Platoons were first placed in position at the northern end of the village. Twenty-fifth Battalion's casualties on the 29th were one man wounded and on the 30th three men killed.

The proposed attack by 25 Battalion, planned for that night, was indefinitely postponed, and early in the morning of the 31st, on relief by C Company 24 Battalion, B Company returned to its former position at [Cerbaia](#). During its operations the company had met with negligible opposition, apart from shelling and mortaring after the advance, and had had no casualties, but apparently it made an interesting discovery: rumour has it that 'in Michele 25 Battalion nearly went into the wholesale furrier business, as one of the houses they occupied was found, after much ingenuity, to contain a large quantity of expensive furs in a room that had been sealed by cement and water.'

July had been an expensive month in casualties for the battalion, with 21 men killed, 7 died of wounds, and 3 officers and 44 other ranks wounded. However, the strength was well maintained by reinforcements, at approximately seventy below establishment at the end of the month. Though admissions to hospital through sickness were about twenty a week, chiefly fever and diarrhoea cases, the general health of the men remained good.

On 1 August C Company from its reserve position south of [Cerbaia](#) joined A and B Companies in the town. Preparations were made for an attack that night, on the same lines as previously planned, though the scope of the operations had been enlarged from a brigade to a divisional basis. Sixth Brigade was to capture the high ground to the north-east of [San Michele](#) in three phases: in the first phase the objectives were Points 261 and 281 (as before) and Point 282, another 300 yards

farther on, which were to be captured by 25 Battalion on the right and 26 Battalion on the left; 25 Battalion was allotted Points 281 and 282. The start line extended from a bend in a wadi on the right (1500 yards south-west of Point 281) to a track on the left (900 yards south-west of Point 261). A road running to the north-east formed the axis of advance as well as the boundary between the two battalions; it was not to be used by 26 Battalion for its support weapons until 25 Battalion's weapons had gone forward.

The barrage was to open at 11 p.m. and would advance at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes, resting for sixty minutes beyond the objective. After reaching their objectives the battalions were to bring up their support weapons and prepare the positions for defence; 25 Battalion was then to be ready to advance to the next objective.

The second phase was an attack by 25 Battalion on Point 337, a hill 600 yards to the north of Point 281; it was completely covered with trees. The third phase was a continuation of the attack by 25 Battalion to Point 382, a further 600 yards to the north-east.

Additional troops placed under command were one company of 26 Battalion, one platoon of 2 MG Company, one troop of six-pounders and one section of 17-pounders from 33 Anti-Tank Battery, 6 Brigade Heavy Mortar Platoon, and a detachment of [8 Field Company](#). B Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#) was in support.

By 10 p.m. on 1 August 25 Battalion had established its headquarters in a house near a road junction 1400 yards north-east of [Cerbaia](#), where it was 700 yards south-west of the start line. An hour later the barrage opened, lifting after twenty minutes, and A Company then crossed the start line, followed at intervals by C, D, and B Companies; A, C, and D Companies each had a troop of tanks in support.

On the left of the first objective A Company took Point 282 with no opposition except for mortar fire, though half an hour after midnight a minefield across the road 200 yards south of Point 281 caused some delay. Point 281 also gave no difficulty and by 1 a.m. the company had secured both hilltops. No. 8 Platoon had an amusing experience on Point 282: supporting Sherman tanks shot up a house which the platoon was to occupy and the house was then approached with the normal

precautions, the men sweeping the windows and doors with small-arms fire. The platoon commander, Lieutenant [Mitchell](#),¹¹ and Corporal [Scandrett](#),¹² then went in to finish off the job with grenades and tommy-gun fire; groans were heard and, on investigation, a goat and two large bullocks—the total bag— were found.

At 3 a.m. C Company reported itself in position on Point 337, having captured thirty prisoners. Bound for the final objective, D Company crossed the start line as arranged at 1.30 a.m. with 18 Platoon leading, followed by Company Headquarters and 16 and 17 Platoons. There was intermittent shelling as the company advanced up the road, and half a mile from the start a shell burst close to 17 Platoon, killing the platoon commander (Second-Lieutenant [Cottam](#)¹³) and the wireless operator (Private [Kerr](#)¹⁴), and wounding another man; the 38 set was destroyed. Sergeant [Hayton](#)¹⁵ of 16 Platoon was also wounded by the same shell but remained with his platoon. Sergeant [Bruce](#)¹⁶ took over the command of 17 Platoon.

D Company continued to advance up the road until held up for an hour by C Company, which had been checked at a house a few yards north of Point 337. On resuming the advance D Company occupied Point 382 and a house on the ridge beyond, meeting with no opposition, though there were signs that the enemy had hurriedly departed. While consolidating on the south-east side of the hill 16 Platoon was bombarded with rifle grenades, but when a tank opened fire on the enemy post it soon put an end to that. Shortly afterwards Corporal [Morgan](#)¹⁷ with two men attacked a Spandau post which had opened fire from the eastern flank; they killed one man and brought back his paybook to identify his unit. By 5 a.m. D Company was firmly established on the final objective; 17 Platoon was on the right, 600 yards east of Point 382, which was held by 18 Platoon, while Company Headquarters and 16 Platoon were 300 yards south-east of the hill. B Company then came up on the left of D Company and had its three platoons on the western side of the hilltop.

During the attack the enemy pockets had resisted strongly, using phosphorus bombs. The tanks gave valuable support, especially by shooting up houses occupied by the enemy. The Divisional Cavalry kept in touch with the battalion and left a liaison officer to co-operate in crushing any resistance on the left of 24 Battalion towards S. Maria, a mile to the westward of Point 382. About 8 a.m. a fighting patrol under Second-Lieutenant [Linklater](#)¹⁸ went out on the right flank of 25 Battalion and returned after a couple of hours without encountering the enemy. While the

companies and tanks were advancing, the enemy artillery and mortars had concentrated on the road up the hill, and the corner of the road alongside the house occupied by Battalion Headquarters was under accurate fire; the tanks found it difficult to turn the corner but suffered no casualties there. After the objectives had been taken the companies came under heavy mortar fire from Point 395 near S. Maria and both it and Point 373 (1300 yards to the north), suspected OPs, were blinded by smoke. Half an hour later the situation was much easier.

An hour or so later a 17-pounder anti-tank gun, which had been placed behind a stone wall on the forward slope of Point 337, had a signal success when it knocked out with a single shot an enemy Mark IV tank which a few minutes earlier had been reported by B Company to be approaching its forward positions. Lance-Corporal [Gordon](#) ¹⁹ of 10 Platoon reports:

'On 1–2 August the attack on Pt 382 near [Cerbaia](#), B Coy 25 Bn occupied the left flank, with 10 Pl over the ridge on a forward slope guarding the road. The ground was too rocky to dig-in before daylight and the platoon was caught at first light in the open in view of the enemy and was subjected to fire from rifle grenades, Spandaus, and mortars from a house across the wadi, 300 yards away. With two men killed and three wounded and the fire increasing, the position became untenable, and I was sent back across the ridge to get a stretcher. Here I found a tank officer who was eventually persuaded to send a tank up the road over the ridge to shoot up the enemy strongpoints. This was done and nine shots completely silenced the enemy house. I returned to the platoon but found that they had returned over the ridge to positions above the road, leaving only the dead and wounded. I got an assistant and we brought three back to our casa. While there we saw a Mk IV German tank come up the road over the ridge and round the bend heading for the casa and looking for our tanks which were hidden below the bank of the road. One in a hull-down position opened fire and fired four shots which had no effect but my impression was that they missed altogether.

'The German tank, however, stopped and began to back along the road. We were watching all this from our casa, in which was also the crew of a 17-pr A Tk gun which was in the yard behind a stone wall about a chain in front but not dug in. As soon as the tank began to back out, two of this crew ran out, slapped a round into

the breach, and let her go at only 300 yards range. It required only one shot which was most spectacular. The shot hit just below the turret which was thrown about 6 feet in the air and the tank split open, then a sheet of flame enveloped the lot, followed by the explosion of ammunition.

'Later in the afternoon I had to go round the road to help evacuate some wounded and was caught by a mortar stonk and took cover in a hollow in the shelter of the burnt-out tank. When it died down I went on but later in the day the Padre and a party went to bury the German crew and one man picked up a German wallet containing 26,000 lire from the same hollow where I had been sheltering for some 20 minutes.'

Later that morning, 2 August, S. Maria was bombed by Allied dive-bombers and a couple of hours afterwards the aircraft attacked the crossroads at Pian dei Cerri, 1200 yards north-west of B and D Companies. These places were the suspected positions of the enemy mortars, or of their OPs, which earlier in the morning had been so active, and this form of retribution was viewed with much favour by the men in the forward positions.

Twenty-fifth Battalion was still to be troubled by short-shelling, both B and D Companies reporting during the afternoon that artillery concentrations they had called for were short and asking that they be raised 300 yards. Generally throughout the day the artillery harassed all observed enemy movement, and the battalion's position, as was to be expected, received similar attention from the enemy's guns and mortars. Between 8 and 9 p.m. both the forward companies experienced very heavy mortar fire, causing B Company to move some troops to the right to avoid the worst of it. Shortly after 9 p.m. the 17-pounder anti-tank gun on Point 337 was knocked out by enemy shellfire. About the same time A Company 26 Battalion occupied Point 281, one of the two features on the first objective taken by A Company 25 Battalion.

Casualties for 1 and 2 August were 2 officers (Second-Lieutenants Cottam and Jones ²⁰) and 6 other ranks killed, 1 died of wounds, and 30 wounded.

Very early the following morning, 3 August, D Company was told that a patrol from A Company would report to it to establish contact with 22 (Motor) Battalion,

which was in position on the forward slope of Point 381 on the right flank of the company, 1400 yards east of Point 382. The patrol was to fight its way through any opposition encountered, provided it was not too strong, and pay particular attention to a house on Point 321, about halfway across. The patrol encountered thick scrub and difficult gullies which made its task very trying:

'The patrol sent out by A coy on Aug 3rd to contact 22nd Motorised Battalion was commanded by Cpl H. J. Wootton with C. Hutchison ²¹ and L. 'Goodin, ²² states one account. 'No contact was made with the enemy which was most fortunate as the going was extremely hazardous, and instead of the patrol taking an hour it took four, before contact was made with 22nd Battalion, and from this patrol it was observed that the Germans had retreated before first light to a defensive position nearer Florence.'

During the morning patrols reported Pian dei Cerri, one of the dive-bombers' targets the previous morning, to be clear of the enemy. Private J. M. Shinnick of C Company, a member of one of these patrols, gave the story of its experiences. He had been on a day's leave to Rome and did not find his platoon till 2 a.m.:

'...at 4 a.m. we took up new positions and it was breaking day by the time we had settled in our freshly-dug slit trenches. Perhaps I might have had a sleep even then, but unfortunately the company commander decided that as I had been on leave and was fresh (he thought), I would be the one for the patrol.

'24 hours before, Jerry had been driven off his Pisa line positions after a 7-day slogging duel that saw the fall of, first, Cerbaia, S. Michele, and several smaller villages, and now the powers that be wanted to know just where he was and whether he still wanted fight.

'I was none too happy about the prospect and couldn't but help compare my position with that of a worm on a pin in a trout pool. The patrol consisted of two others and after I had received instructions we pushed off. We had two tanks and a platoon of Brens giving us covering fire, but ironically enough, they neither saw us go nor return. It was 7 a.m. as we worked our way down a steep gully passing several enemy slit trenches that showed signs of recent habitation. Our first objective was the village of Pian dei Cerri across the gully and some 800 yards away.

'Deep in the gully we came across a house and skirted it, but thought it best to investigate the interior. I was creeping under the window when I heard voices. I reached the door and eased my gun into position. The door was off latch and I pushed it open and bounded into the room to confront a very startled Italian and his wife. They hadn't seen an Allied soldier before and just stood gazing with open mouths until all of a sudden they both started jabbering and gesticulating and crying and laughing. From it all I gathered that Jerry had pulled out that morning. This was good news and I felt very relieved.

'Pian dei Cerri could only be reached across open country but it contained narry a living thing except a few war fowls that by some masterly cunning had avoided Jerry's cook pots.

'The second objective was some 500 yards away on a small knoll. On the way we passed another small village and here we were besieged by the family of one house. Poor old "Dad" with his three-weeks' growth was hardly much catch, but his daughter was exceedingly comely, and his vino of the best vintage.

'From here we had our first view of [Florence](#) some 4 miles away and nestling in the wide valley below us. It indeed looked beautiful still faintly haloed in a morning mist, with church spires and the outline of tall buildings rearing their architectural beauty in the sky. But somewhere between us and this city was Jerry, because now he was mortaring the hills on our right and behind us.

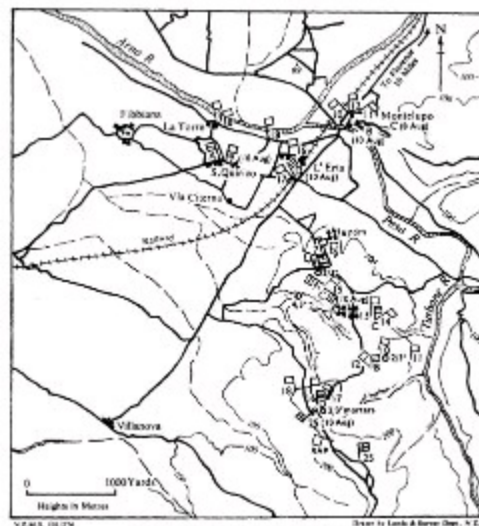
'We completed our assigned recce and decided to push further out. A highway ran in the valley below us and passed a large villa. We joined it here and were besieged by more Italians who had used the villa as a communal refuge. Nearby was a large dump of enemy mines that gave testimony of the area being well booby-trapped. We continued down the road and met no opposition though way behind, mortars were falling continuously. We estimated the enemy's positions and having learned that we were only three kilometres from [Florence](#), we set out on the return journey.

'Rather than pass through the old area being mortared, we skirted around it and checked up on the highways. Having located and pin-pointed mines and possible booby-traps, we continued back to the FDLs, after being away 2½ hours.

'Two hours later the result of our labours could be seen in the form of "Staghounds" armoured cars and trucks moving forward through Pian dei Cerri, and that afternoon we were withdrawn.'

At 11 a.m. (3 August) the battalion received a warning order stating that the Divisional Cavalry had crossed 25 Battalion's front from the left and would assume responsibility for the sector; the battalion was to withdraw to **Cerbaia**. By the late afternoon the companies were in their old positions in and near the town and found it was still under intermittent fire from enemy guns, which early in the afternoon had commenced shelling the place. The companies had no casualties but Battalion Headquarters was not so fortunate, the IO, Lieutenant J. B. M. Coombe, being killed and three men of the Intelligence Section wounded in **Cerbaia**. Battalion Headquarters itself was in the RAP building in S. Andrea, 1000 yards north of the town. The hostile guns at 6.30 p.m. were dive-bombed, obviously efficacious treatment as the shelling ceased within half an hour and a quiet night followed. Casualties on the 3rd were one officer killed and four other ranks wounded.

Next morning a warning was received to watch for mines in and around **Cerbaia** as 26 Battalion had had casualties a few hundred yards north of the companies' positions in Upper **Cerbaia**. That day one man was wounded. The battalion was not to stay long in the neighbourhood. The following day, 5 August, information was received that 2 NZ Division would relieve **8 Indian Division** in a sector about five miles to the



montelupo, 7–15 august 1944

west. On the 4th [Florence](#) had fallen and in the new sector the task was chiefly one of clearing enemy detachments and patrols from the area south of the [Arno River](#) and of finding suitable river-crossings. Casualties in the [Cerbaia](#) operations from 27 July to 6 August were 3 officers and 6 other ranks killed, 3 died of wounds, and 36 wounded.

Preceded on the 5th by the usual advance parties, the battalion next day took over its new sector, the relief of 1 Battalion Royal Fusiliers of 17 Indian Infantry Brigade being completed by 10 p.m. The dispositions were unusual, the battalion being strung out about 2000 yards along a road running north and south on a narrow ridge, with the Turbone River, a tributary of the [Pesa](#), on the east, and the headwaters of several tributaries of the [Arno](#) along the western side of the ridge. The battalion was on a one-company front, with A Company forward within 1400 yards of [Montelupo](#), a town of about 7000 people, situated in the valley of the [Arno](#) 11 miles south-west of [Florence](#). The other companies were in position at intervals of 500 to 800 yards along the road to the south, in the order C, B, and D, while Battalion Headquarters, 800 yards south-east of D Company, was 2400 yards from A Company. The ridge sloped down easily to the river at [Montelupo](#), which was 600 feet below the altitude of Battalion Headquarters, and gave good all-round observation except for the very good cover afforded by the grape-vines, fruit trees, and other vegetation which covered the countryside.

Fighting and reconnaissance patrols were sent out, both by night and day, by all companies and by Battalion Headquarters, without actual collision with the enemy, though a good deal of movement was observed; a patrol from A Company also encountered machine-gun fire from posts on both banks of the [Arno](#) 400 yards east of [La Torre](#), a village on the south bank 1200 yards west of [Montelupo](#). Civilians informed one patrol that a party of Germans, dressed as civilians, crossed the river each night to occupy houses in the vicinity of S. Quirico, 400 yards south of [La Torre](#). On the afternoon of the 8th a reconnaissance patrol from 10 Platoon had an unusual experience when it investigated a large building with a very high wall, near the river bank between [Montelupo](#) and [La Torre](#). Singing and movement were heard within and civilians said that the place was an asylum for criminal lunatics, some of whom were chained; it had a staff of 150 medical and administrative personnel and all the inmates were classed as dangerous. A patrol from 9 Platoon consisting of

Second-Lieutenant Mitchell, Sergeant [Corlett](#),²³ and Private Smith (all dressed as Italian civilians) also visited the asylum area and confirmed reports that Germans were in and around that vicinity.

Apart from a little shelling and mortar fire from both sides and occasional exchanges of rifle and machine-gun fire, the sector was quiet. The patrols made a thorough examination of all the houses and other buildings and the engineers, guarded by fighting patrols, searched the roads for mines. The opposite bank and country beyond were kept under close observation and the presence of a number of rubber boats, including several floating down the river, suggested an absence of fords.

On the night of 8 August C Company came under command of 26 Battalion on the right of the brigade sector and, crossing the Pesa River, occupied [Montelupo](#). No. 14 Platoon was in a group of houses on the north-east side of the town, 13 Platoon in a house about a hundred yards to the west, and Company Headquarters with 15 Platoon nearby was about the centre, 150 yards back. The houses occupied by 14 Platoon adjoined, forming one building, and it was necessary to burrow through the walls to establish contact.

The following day four American officers, escorted by a C Company patrol, which included Corporal [Mortleman](#),²⁴ Privates [Christensen](#),²⁵ [Moorcock](#),²⁶ [Morris](#),²⁷ [O'Malley](#),²⁸ [Player](#),²⁹ and six others, left [Montelupo](#) at 9.30 p.m. to reconnoitre for crossings over the [Arno](#) for American tanks. The party proceeded about 1200 yards to the north-east and on the way back was ambushed about 400 yards from [Montelupo](#) by a German patrol, which had crossed the river in boats and had hidden in the shelter of the embankment just below the road on the river side. The reconnaissance party was forced to take cover in a two-foot ditch on the east side of the road and returned the fire. After five minutes the enemy withdrew. The casualties were one American officer and [Moorcock](#) and [Player](#) killed, [Morris](#) died of wounds, and [Mortleman](#) and [Christensen](#) wounded. This tragic incident, while showing commendable enterprise on the part of the Germans, emphasised the importance of one of the lessons taught in patrol training, namely, never to return by the same route as the outward one if it could be avoided, and also to guard against surprise by the use of scouts and by a suitable patrol formation. In this case, the

route out was followed on the way back and the party was caught by a sudden burst of Spandau fire.

At the end of four days in the position information regarding the area south of the river and the activities of the enemy, obtained from patrols and civilians, was fairly complete, and on the evening of the 10th there was a general move forward by the battalion. C Company in [Montelupo](#) was relieved by B Company and took over the position held by A Company, which then occupied [La Torre](#) with 7 and 8 Platoons and S. Quirico with Company Headquarters and 9 Platoon; D Company headquarters and 17 Platoon moved up to the vicinity of important crossroads at l'Erta, about 1000 yards north of the position originally held by A Company. No. 16 Platoon was forward on the right and within 200 yards of the river, while 18 Platoon was on the river bank 350 yards to the left. Battalion Headquarters moved forward 800 yards and was joined in its building by the RAP. There was no enemy interference during these movements though Major Finlay, commanding B Company, had a curious experience which could have compromised the password. During a visit to each post of his company he discussed the password and challenge with one of his platoon commanders, and on his departure from the post saw a bare-footed German depart hurriedly from close by and disappear before he could be fired on. The possibilities were obvious, and on the matter being reported to Battalion Headquarters the password was changed.

In A Company's position at La Torre No. 3 Section of 7 Platoon, in a house close to the stopbank of the [Arno](#), was able on two occasions by machine-gun fire to prevent Germans crossing the river some distance down stream, the sun creating a glare on the water which made them plainly visible.

On the night of the 13th officers from an American unit arrived at Battalion Headquarters and were taken out to C and D Companies. The next day was rather lively, a good deal of enemy movement being heard in the early morning, when there was considerable Spandau fire which to a large extent was silenced by the artillery. Shortly afterwards a large enemy patrol passed up the far bank of the river and just before dawn nebelwerfer fire against D Company resulted in sharp counter-action by the supporting artillery. During the night the asylum was shelled, resulting in a request from the authorities in the institution for permission to move the inmates.

Early on the 14th the battalion learnt that the Division would be relieved that night and the following night by 85 US Division; 6 Brigade was to be relieved by 339 US Infantry Regiment and 25 Battalion (less B Company in [Montelupo](#)) by a company from that regiment, B Company being relieved separately. The relief was completed about midnight on 15–16 August and the battalion moved back to its trucks three miles south of the river en route to the rear assembly area, five miles south of [Castellina](#). Casualties in the [Montelupo](#) operations from 6 to 16 August were three killed, two died of wounds, and four wounded.

The battalion remained eleven days in the [Castellina](#) area, resting, training, absorbing reinforcements and reorganising, changing kit and replacing deficiencies, visiting places of interest, and between times enjoying the cinema and other recreation. But the 24th was by far the most notable day, though B Company, spending two days at the beach at Vada, could not take part. Mr Churchill, alias Colonel Kent, was to visit the locality, and shortly after noon, accompanied by [General Freyberg](#), he drove along the one and a half miles of road lined each side by the battalion. This was of course his third visit to the New Zealanders, the previous occasions being at [Alamein](#) and [Tripoli](#), though he also saw the [Second Echelon](#) in England, but at this date there were a great many men who had never seen him. Dressed in khaki-drill uniform with many decorations, the Prime Minister waved to the troops or gave the 'V' sign, standing in the back of the car, but he looked a very tired man and was unable to meet the various groups.

The day ended with a memorable sports meeting, 'the best ever held and the whole Battalion is unanimous in its praise for those who organized and ran the meeting', said the battalion newsletter. 'The evening concluded with the inevitable "Plonk" party to finish off one of the most pleasant days the Battalion has yet experienced.' C Company with five wins out of fourteen events came out on top, with Administrative Com-pany four wins second; A and D Companies, two wins each, third; and Support Company, one win, fifth. B Company, of course, was absent at the beach.

A Company also had two days at the beach, but the next move came before the other companies could follow suit. On the day preceding Mr Churchill's visit, orders for another secret journey across [Italy](#), this time to the Adriatic coast, had been

received and the next two days were spent in the now very familiar preparations, the final day concluding with an entertainment by the [Kiwi Concert Party](#).

¹ [Sgt J. M. Shinnick](#); Pahiatua; born Hastings, 10 May 1918; civil servant; twice wounded.

² [Sgt E. N. Schofield](#), m.i.d.; born [Masterton](#), 14 Jun 1918; farmhand; twice wounded; deceased.

³ [Brig J. T. Burrows](#), CBE, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn May 1941, Dec 1941–Jul 1942; [20 Bn](#) and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jun 1943; comd [4 Bde](#) 27–29 Jun 1942, [5 Jul-15 Aug 1942](#); [5 Bde](#) Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; [6 Bde](#) Jul–Aug 1944; Commander, Southern Military District, 1951–53; Commander K Force, 1953–54; Commander, SMD, 1955–60.

⁴ Lt [P. A. de Lautour](#); Wairoa; born [Gisborne](#), 22 Feb 1917; station manager; wounded 14 Jul 1944.

⁵ Lt [R. S. Liddell](#); [Napier](#); born [Hawera](#), 22 Aug 1916; lorry driver.

⁶ Pte [W. P. T. Peters](#); [Eltham](#); born NZ 18 Mar 1912; dairy farmer; wounded 19 Dec 1944; p.w. 9 Apr 1945.

⁷ Maj [H. R. Cameron](#); [Turakina Valley](#); born NZ 26 Jan 1909; sheep farmer.

⁸ Lt [E. Cardale](#); [Wellington](#); born NZ 16 Jan 1918; biological chemist; wounded 14 Jul 1944.

⁹ [Sgt W. R. Leslie](#), MM; [Wanganui](#); born [Matera](#), 17 Dec 1917; builder; twice wounded.

¹⁰ [Cpl R. J. Parker](#), m.i.d.; [Porirua East](#); born [Wellington](#), 2 Apr 1923; company representative; wounded 23 Sep 1944.

¹¹ Lt D. R. S. Mitchell; Wellington; born Martinborough, 8 Jul 1922; clerk.

¹² Cpl D. Scandrett, m.i.d.; Masterton; born Masterton, 10 Feb 1921; carpenter.

¹³ 2 Lt S. G. Cottam; born NZ 5 Apr 1920; carrier; killed in action 1 Aug 1944.

¹⁴ Pte S. V. Kerr; born Kaikoura, 18 Jul 1919; farmhand; killed in action 1 Aug 1944.

¹⁵ Lt T. S. D. Hayton; New Plymouth; born NZ 24 Nov 1911; company manager; wounded 1 Aug 1944.

¹⁶ S-Sgt J. W. Bruce; born NZ 29 Apr 1904; bank officer.

¹⁷ Sgt N. Morgan, MM; Marton; born Hawera, 14 Mar 1914; labourer.

¹⁸ Lt M. H. Linklater; Auckland; born NZ 15 Sep 1917; clerk.

¹⁹ L-Cpl H. C. G. Gordon; born Invercargill, 24 Jan 1909; shepherd; wounded 16 Mar 1944.

²⁰ 2 Lt J. N. Jones; born NZ 6 Nov 1908; farm labourer; killed in action 1 Aug 1944.

²¹ Pte C. J. Hutchinson; born NZ 30 Nov 1916; upholsterer.

²² Cpl L. H. Goodin; Carterton; born NZ 7 Oct 1916; farm labourer.

²³ Sgt T. D. Corlett; born NZ 20 Aug 1908; accountant.

²⁴ S-Sgt R. C. G. Mortleman; Matawai, Gisborne; born NZ 6 Aug 1905;

farmer; wounded 9 Aug 1944.

²⁵ L-Cpl R. P. Christensen; Woodville; born Napier, 22 Jun 1922; student teacher; twice wounded.

²⁶ Pte R. J. Moorcock; born Napier, 30 Jul 1922; labourer; killed in action 9 Aug 1944.

²⁷ Pte G. O. Morris; born Gisborne, 4 Mar 1919; machinist; died of wounds 9 Aug 1944.

²⁸ Pte A. J. O'Malley; born Wellington, 3 Nov 1921; apprentice.

²⁹ Pte M. A. Player; born NZ 20 Jan 1916; labourer; killed in action 9 Aug 1944.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 15 – RIMINI TO THE USO

CHAPTER 15

Rimini to the Uso

At 7.30 a.m. on 27 August 25 Battalion left the [Castellina](#) assembly area for the staging area at [Foligno](#), a little more than halfway across [Italy](#), the journey of 115 miles taking slightly over nine hours. The battalion followed the sealed highway, Route 2, through [Siena](#), Nottola, Acquaviva, Castiglione del Lago on [Lake Trasimene](#), thence on Route 71 west of the lake to Route 75 on the northern side, where on passing through Passignano and Magione it was on the historic ground where Hannibal had gained a sensational victory over the Romans under Flaminius in the Punic Wars over 2000 years before. The next places of interest were the university city of [Perugia](#), a thousand feet above the Tiber valley, and, not far from the road, [Assisi](#), the birthplace of St. Francis, and then [Foligno](#). Next day the battalion on Route 77 passed through Tolentino, Macerata, and across the Potenza River, thence along a road parallel to and 14 miles from the Adriatic coast, leading to the north-west to [Iesi](#), a journey of 90 miles completed in seven hours.

At this date the German Gothic line stretched across [Italy](#) from [Pesaro](#) on the Adriatic, about 30 miles north-west of [Iesi](#), generally in a westerly direction through the Etruscan Apennines, passing about 20 miles to the north of [Florence](#) to the coast of the Ligurian Sea at a point 15 miles south-east of [Spezia](#). The operations of Fifth and Eighth Armies hitherto had been directed chiefly against the enemy centre, but early in August it was decided that the main Allied effort would be made by [Eighth Army](#) up the Adriatic coast. The attack would be made by three corps—2 Polish, 1 Canadian, 5 British—a force of ten divisions and including 1200 tanks and about 1000 guns. The New Zealand Division was to be in Army Reserve ready for its role of exploitation as a fast-moving force.

On the western flank [Fifth Army](#) was preparing an attack north of [Florence](#), which would be launched when the enemy had weakened his forces there to meet [Eighth Army's](#) attack; in the meantime it was to do everything possible to lead the enemy to think that both armies were preparing an attack up the centre.

With the Division in Army Reserve until [Eighth Army](#) broke through, 25 Battalion could expect to remain out of battle for a week or two and concentrate on training

and administration and the general welfare of the troops. The sick rate was still causing concern. During August six officers and 140 other ranks had been evacuated sick, again well above the unit average in a brigade total of 14 officers and 317 other ranks; as usual the chief complaints were diarrhoea, fevers, and infective hepatitis. Despite this drain on the unit, considerable reinforcements had kept the battalion practically at full strength throughout the month.

Various changes had taken place during August. The RMO, Captain Pearse, who in the middle of July had been relieved by Captain Begg ¹ while he was at 4 NZ Field Hygiene Section, returned on the 25th. The Brigade Commander had also been changed, Brigadier Parkinson taking command on the 22nd from Brigadier Burrows, who took over 5 Brigade. For a variety of reasons (sickness, battle casualties, duties) ten officers left the battalion and nine joined or rejoined.

Swimming in the open sea and also in the River Esino— which was some compensation for those who had missed the two days at the beach at Vada—and rugby football were the chief recreations at [Iesi](#), supported by the excellent entertainments provided by the [YMCA Mobile Cinema](#), the [Kiwi Concert Party](#), and the brigade band. Rugby fever was at its height, more intense than usual, as the despatch of a representative team to [Britain](#) was under consideration and the battalion, in common with all other units, was doing all it could by careful selection, trial games, and a physical fitness campaign, to secure adequate representation.

A good deal of the training was related, of course, to the special tactical problems involved in an attack up the Adriatic coast. Such a campaign necessitated the crossing of the numerous rivers running down from the mountainous interior across the line of advance, which gave the enemy excellent defensive positions and the attacking troops the always difficult tactical operations of river-crossings. Much attention was therefore paid to co-operation with the engineers in bridging and the use of assault boats and rafts, demonstrations of bridging by bridge-laying tanks being given by New Zealand armoured units. Snipers practised their art on the rifle range while the companies brushed up their weapon training and received instruction from the engineers in mine recognition and lifting. Route marches, as always, were frequent.

On 2 September specially welcome reinforcements arrived, including many

officers and other ranks who had been on furlough to New Zealand and had returned to see the job finished. It was a grand reunion of old comrades and a very welcome influx of experienced soldiers.

The following day, 3 September 1944, was the fifth anniversary of the British Commonwealth's entry into the war. His Majesty the King had directed that it should be observed as a National Day of Prayer, and as was the case with other units, a special service was held by the battalion. The opportunity was taken by Padre Rowe, ² on the visit to [Iesi](#) of the Bishop of Lichfield, to have a small group of men confirmed, the local theatre being used for the service.

That morning an unfortunate accident befell [General Freyberg](#) when the aircraft which was taking him to [Eighth Army](#) Headquarters was tipped over by a gust of wind when landing. A wing crumpled and penetrated the fuselage, the General suffering a penetrating wound in his right side which was expected to incapacitate him for from six to eight weeks. Meanwhile Brigadier C. E. Weir, with the temporary rank of major-general, was appointed to command 2 NZ Division.

The battalion's officers on 3 September were:

Lieutenant-Colonel (temporary) E. K. Norman, MC

Major A. J. Neil, MBE

Major M. Handyside

Major N. K. Sanders

Major (temporary) S. M. Hewitt, MC

Captain J. L. Webster

Captain C. W. Taylor

Major (temporary) J. Finlay

Captain B. W. Thomas

Lieutenant K. J. S. Bourke

Lieutenant J. W. T. Collins

Captain (temporary) J. H. Sheild

Lieutenant N. Lawson

Lieutenant R. Easthope

Lieutenant J. B. May

Lieutenant D. J. Pocknall

Lieutenant A. G. Henricksen

Lieutenant R. S. Liddell

Lieutenant H. T. Kershaw

Captain (temporary) A. Norton-Taylor

Captain (temporary) A. B. West

Lieutenant S. G. Sidford

Second-Lieutenant P. M. Murphy

Second-Lieutenant E. F. T. Beer

Second-Lieutenant N. K. Chapman, MM

Second-Lieutenant R. D. O'Neill

Second-Lieutenant R. B. Simpson

Lieutenant (temporary) R. B. Grumitt

Second-Lieutenant M. H. Linklater

Second-Lieutenant D. R. S. Mitchell

Second-Lieutenant J. P. Dey

Second-Lieutenant G. E. Wilson

Second-Lieutenant J. L. Thomson

Attached:

Lieutenant B. A. Andrews

Lieutenant N. A. Rees

Second-Lieutenant E. C. Hansen

Second-Lieutenant B. S. Banks

Second-Lieutenant D. McLean

Captain V. T. Pearse ([NZMC](#)), RMO

Rev. H. E. Rowe, Chaplain

The offensive was making progress and by early September the front was about 40 miles up the coast from [Iesi](#); it was time, therefore, for the Division to get up closer. On the 5th Major Neil took forward an advance party, accompanied by minesweepers, and the battalion followed early next morning, timing the start so as to arrive before daybreak at a concentration area a couple of miles south of [Fano](#), 25 miles away. Strict security measures, including wireless silence, were still in force.

Training and recreation continued for the next five days. Some new equipment for the artillery attracted attention; 4 Field Regiment received six new armoured cars (Foxes) to replace its Honey tanks for OP work and a light AA battery was issued with twelve self-propelled Bofors guns. Also, for impending operations two British medium artillery regiments, one with 5.5-inch guns and the other with 4.5-inch, were to be under command of the Division. The 4.2-inch mortars added to the general interest by an attempt to add to their efficiency in mobile operations, base plates being fitted into the crew-commander's cockpit of each carrier to enable the mortar to be fired on the move. According to one account, '...this was fixed up by Div Workshop in the [Fano](#) area. To try this out the Pl (2nd-Lieut R. B. Grumitt ³) went up a hill by [Gradara](#) Castle and carried out a shoot. They fired all charges and it was

found that it wasn't successful for anything over Charge 1 —giving a max. range of over 1600 yards. The reason for this was that the recoil was punching out the floor of the carrier. This was used on the first day of the Mobile Role (23 Sep) by No. 2 Section who were firing on a range of 300 yards. The mortars were in front of the infantry during the Mobile Role and C Coy were directing behind No. 2 Section.'

Describing the organisation of the mortars, the same account said: 'The four mortar carriers travelled from Sienna to [Iesi](#) as a body and from then on the Mortar Pl moved with 25 Bn as a Pl until [Gradara](#) (12–18 Sep 1944) when they were detailed to Coys—No. 1 Sec to A Coy, No. 2 Sec to C Coy, No. 3 Sec to D Coy. Phil McGowan ⁴ (No. 1 Sec), Dan Lance ⁵ (No. 2), Bill Bavin ⁶ (No. 3). Bruce Grumitt was Pl Commander. There were 6 mortars, 2 to each section. Ammo was carried in the carriers and each carrier had a load of approx 60 bombs; 2 carriers to each section. 2 i/c Sections were Johnnie Pilbrow, ⁷ No. 1; Leo Forman, ⁸ No. 2; and Ted French, No. 3. Jimmie Cullen ⁹ was Pl Sgt.'

Late on the night of 10 September 2 NZ Division came under command of [1 Canadian Corps](#) and two days later 25 Battalion moved on about 14 miles to the vicinity of Monteluro, six miles west of [Pesaro](#), where A Squadron [20 Armoured Regiment](#), 5 Platoon 2 MG Company, M Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery, 39 Heavy Mortar Battery, and 3 Platoon [8 Field Company](#) came under command of the battalion. This was termed a 'Battalion Battle Group' and 24 Battalion was similarly reinforced, the intention being that these two battalion battle groups should be ready to lead an advance of 6 Brigade Group (which would be followed by the remainder of the Division) up Route 16 towards [Ravenna](#) (45 miles to the north-west) if such an operation became feasible. At the time fighting was proceeding near the Marano River, south-west of [Riccione](#), about eight miles away, where the New Zealand artillery regiments, 22 (Motor) Battalion, a New Zealand tank squadron, and the 17-pounders of M Troop from 25 Battalion were participating.

On 18 September, after six days in the Monteluro district, where the battalion lost one man died of wounds, 25 Battalion Group left about daylight for a forward concentration area close to the Rio Grande River, 1000 yards west of [Riccione](#), a journey of an hour and a half; the tanks and other tracked vehicles travelled separately and did not rejoin the Group until the evening. To the north-west the active front was only three and a half miles away, where troops of the Canadian

Corps were engaged near [San Martino](#), while six miles west of the battalion a British division was fighting in close proximity to the interesting little Republic of [San Marino](#) (area 38 square miles, population 14,000). As its neutrality was respected by both sides, a corridor barely six miles wide was created between it and the coast.

During the operations that night, 18–19 September, the Canadian and British forces used searchlights to create artificial moonlight and so help the advance, as had been done in North [Africa](#), but it astounded and perturbed the Germans, according to reports and recorded conversations obtained from German documents:

'Morning report, 19 Sep: 29 Pz Gren Div: ... Since 2200 hours an enormous number of searchlights has been lighting up our FDLs and the forward areas... making it most difficult to carry out moves.'

'General Herr to General Vietinghoff: "This new enemy trick of lighting up the battlefield has harassed our moves and blinded our people. We are going to try to knock out the searchlights with night fighters, 88mm and 17cm guns...."

'Chief of Staff [10 Army](#) to COS Army Group C, 1045 hours 19 Sep:

Army Gp: "How are things on 76 Pz Corps front?"

[10 Army](#): "Comparatively quiet ... but things will almost certainly flare up again.... Last night he did the weirdest thing I ever saw. He lit up the battlefield with searchlights."

Army Gp: "From the sea?"

[10 Army](#): "No, on land. He turned on a display like Party Day in Nuernburg."

Army Gp: "Really from the land, not the sea?"

[10 Army](#): "From the [Ospedaletto](#) area."

Army Gp: "Couldn't you get them any way?"

[10 Army](#): "No."

Army Gp: "They can't have been as far away as all that."

10 Army: "Anyway, we couldn't get them. I must discuss the matter with the Army CRA."

Army Gp: "They will do that again tonight."

10 Army: "I don't know what we are going to do about it. ... We may detail a few 88mm guns to deal with them. ... Couldn't we send a few aircraft over?"

Army Gp: "I'll see what I can do."

10 Army: "It is a great worry to the boys to be lighted up and blinded and not be able to do anything about it."

Army Gp: "Was that over the whole sector?"

10 Army: "Over a wide area. Mainly on 29 Pz Gren Div and 26 Pz Div."

An operation order on 18 September gave several plans to meet various situations which might arise in the offensive then under way. If the Canadian Corps attack on the [San Fortunato](#) position south-west of [Rimini](#) succeeded, 5 Brigade would pass through to establish a bridgehead over the Marecchia River west of [Rimini](#) and 6 Brigade, with 24 and 25 Battalion battle groups leading as previously described, would then pass through the bridgehead and, as the advanced guard of the Division, lead the pursuit.

If the Canadian attack failed, 5 Brigade would attack and 6 Brigade would pass through, establish the bridgehead, and then, if strong enough after that operation, push on as advanced guard; if 6 Brigade was not strong enough, 4 Armoured Brigade would pass through 6 Brigade and take up the pursuit.

These somewhat complicated possible courses of action involved Colonel Norman and many of his officers in various conferences at Divisional and Brigade Headquarters and within the Battalion Group, and required a good deal of reconnaissance by officers and other ranks. On the 20th 25 Battalion Group was warned to be ready to move at daylight next morning, 50 Self-Propelled Battery, RA, being attached in readiness to accompany it, but the move was postponed. At the same time instructions were received that the balance of the 4th Reinforcements

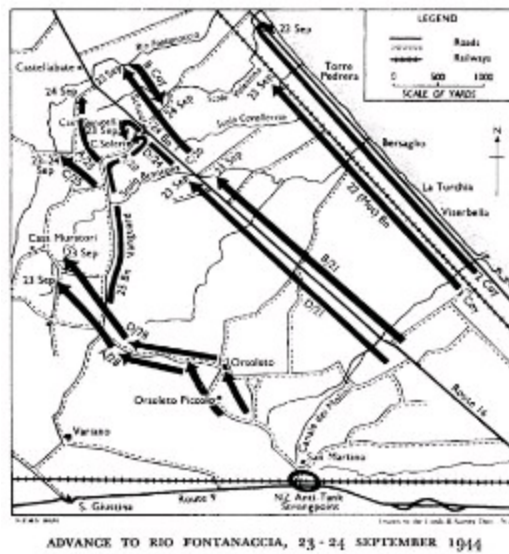
were to be withdrawn in readiness to return to New Zealand on leave; much the same sort of thing had occurred in July last before the attack on [Monte Lignano](#), though this time the impact was not so severe, since the departure of these men was expected and the arrival on 2 September of the men from New Zealand leave had made replacements much easier.

That day 5 Brigade Group had gone forward to the vicinity of the [Rimini](#) airfield and had its advanced units a mile east of the Fortunato ridge in readiness to secure the bridgehead. Two days later 25 Battalion Group with attached troops and supporting arms (including M Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery which had rejoined three days before) advanced in tactical formation covered by its advanced guard to a lying-up position immediately east of [San Fortunato](#); it was then a mile and a half south of [Rimini](#), and it halted there in a formation suitable for a tactical advance on the morrow. Two days before, the Fortunato ridge had been cleared, and early on the morning of the 21st New Zealand tanks and infantry and Greek troops had entered [Rimini](#). Greatly assisted by heavy rain on the 20th and 21st, the Germans had retreated across the [Marecchia](#) River, and by the afternoon of the 22nd the leading troops of 5 Brigade Group, against stiff opposition, had advanced a mile and a half beyond the river. That night the attack was being continued to the [Scolo Brancona](#), a further mile and a half to the north-west.

Sixth Brigade Group had orders to be ready next morning to pass through 5 Brigade Group and press on 1000 to 1600 yards beyond the Brancona to the Rio Fontanaccia. The night 22–23 September was somewhat disturbed by enemy shelling of 6 Brigade area, most of it against the artillery near [Rimini](#) and 24 Battalion Group, while 25 Battalion Group, a little farther away from the guns which seemed to have been the target, was hardly troubled.

There was an air of great expectancy throughout the battalion. At long last, after a wait of nearly a month, 'the mobile role was on. Non-stop to the Po; that was the order of the day.'

During the waiting period the training emphasised it, there was much optimistic talk amongst the men, and a lecture on [Venice](#), 100 miles away, given by a chaplain, stimulated anticipation. With the offensive emerging from the mountainous country on to the plains that stretched away beyond the horizon,



advance to rio fontanaccia, 23 – 24 september 1944

somewhat resembling the desert and thought by some to be equally good tank country, men with memories of the pursuits after [Alamein](#) and [El Agheila](#) looked forward to similar progress, with only comparatively minor rearguard actions from time to time. Optimism and even jubilation were rife.

It was with something of this spirit that at 5 a.m. on the chill grey morning of 23 September, 25 Battalion Group, with its advanced guard leading, resumed the advance. The route crossed the Fortunato ridge and thence northwards over flat, cultivated country to a wooden bridge across the [Marecchia](#) River, a couple of miles west of [Rimini](#). 'Destruction in the hilly country to the west of [Rimini](#) was terrific and dead cattle were lying everywhere.' As previously planned, 24 Battalion Group at the same time advanced up Route 16 on the right of 25 Battalion and parallel to and a mile from the coast.

Led by tanks of 2 Troop of [20 Armoured Regiment](#) (Second- Lieutenant Burland¹⁰), the vanguard of 25 Battalion Group— anti-tank guns, C and A Companies, with C on the right preceded by 2 Mortar Section, and A on the left followed by 1 Mortar Section—had reached Route 9, 500 yards north of the [Marecchia](#), and by 6.30 a.m. was crossing a railway embankment on its way to [San Martino](#) and thence to [Orsoleto](#), a mile away to the north-west. There had been no interference from the enemy though the sight and sound of very heavy shelling of the village of Savignano, in the Canadian sector seven miles north-west of the river crossing, tended to reduce some of the earlier optimism.

When its head reached the [Marecchia](#), the remainder of 25 Battalion Group—the main guard—halted to allow the vanguard time to test the situation farther ahead. Apart from occasional Spandau and rifle fire no opposition was encountered as the vanguard continued its advance for another mile and a half to the crossing of the [Scolo Brancona](#), which the leading tanks reached about 9 a.m. The tanks had somewhat outpaced the rest of the vanguard and beyond the river they took the road to the right towards Route 16 instead of that to the left, which led to the Rio Fontanaccia. This error led the tanks into German defences midway between the two rivers and on to the axis of advance of 24 Battalion, which had been held up 600 yards back; as the enemy position was within 500 yards of the vanguard's true line of advance, the enemy would no doubt have disclosed himself and, especially in view of the check to 24 Battalion, could not have been by-passed by 25 Battalion's vanguard.

A few yards up Route 16 two tanks were lost by direct hits at close range, but the third tank of the troop retired to the shelter of a house about 150 yards from the road junction, where it held its ground, together with a Bren and two mortar carriers which had followed the tanks. The commander of the leading tank, Second-Lieutenant Burland, was killed.

The sergeant in command of the mortar section, D. W. Lance, describes the action of the vanguard:

'The advance began 0400 hours on Sat 23rd when we crossed the [Marecchia](#) river and passed through Maori 28th Bn who from Intelligence reports at the time stated they could not contact the Germans.... All went well for a while after passing the forward Maori sections. We in carriers got some small-arms fire but this was not noticed by the preceding troop of tanks. At this stage the tanks must have gone astray for they came out on to the main road running north parallel to the coast. This road was the line of advance of [24 Bn](#). It was at this point ... that the two tanks ... were lost. They were knocked out at point-blank range a few yards up the main road. One of the crew of one tank and the remaining and last tank of the troop managed to get back along a side road to a house about 150 yards from the corner. All the vanguard (the remaining tank, Bren carriers and our two mortar carriers) consolidated at this house.... This happened about 1000 hours....It appeared as if we

had penetrated some distance into the enemy lines as there were Germans everywhere. All movement of our whole column had ceased. OC C Coy Major Handyside (who was badly wounded the following day) eventually got part of a pl of infantry up to us. The enemy tried to do some reforming but did not attack in strength. Our mortars, also Brens, had some excellent shooting at 160 – 200 yards. The range was so short we had to run the carriers on to logs to fire the mortars at the right elevation. I would point out we had for this move mounted the mortars in the cockpit of the carriers and they were used like this that day. Later in the day a platoon of 24 Battalion joined up with us and it was only then that we fully realised we had veered on to their line of advance.... In the evening A Coy (Major Webster ¹¹) came up and took positions in front and we (C Coy) went over to the left where we had a comparatively open flank with little or no support.'

The enemy kept the vanguard under considerable mortar, Spandau, and gun fire, C Company, which was in six RMT vehicles, being forced off the road into the cover of nearby houses south of the [Scolo Brancona](#); two of the trucks were damaged. Troops of the Divisional Cavalry on the same route with orders to exploit to the Uso River, three miles ahead, lost an armoured car. The engineers with 25 Battalion, 3 Platoon of [8 Field Company](#), had a White scout-car and its contents destroyed by a direct hit from an enemy mortar, losing two men killed and others wounded. A second scout-car containing the platoon wireless was abandoned till nightfall, enemy mortars and snipers forcing the platoon to take cover till after midday.

At 9.30 a.m. under instructions from 6 Brigade, Colonel Norman ordered the main guard to concentrate across the [Marecchia](#) and then went forward in a tank to see the situation for himself. He found that the platoons of C Company had occupied houses close to the Brancona crossing, with Company Headquarters a little in rear, and had sent out a patrol (Lance- Corporal Dick Parker, and Privates Joe Gilmour, ¹² Bert Meier, ¹³ Ron Lucas, ¹⁴ Goodwin, ¹⁵ and Hugh Robertson ¹⁶) to probe to the north and north-west. In addition to the enemy opposing the vanguard near Route 16, enemy troops were reported on the Rio Fontanaccia, 800 yards west of the Brancona crossing. For some hours the axis of advance of 25 Battalion Group and the area generally was kept under fire by enemy guns, believed to be self-propelled, and by mortars, the fire being particularly brisk for an hour and a half about midday.

Spandaus and snipers were also active.

As a counter-measure 25 Battalion mortars engaged various targets and the self-propelled 105s of the attached 50 Battery, RA, as well as the New Zealand field artillery units, were very busy. An enemy SP gun on a road 500 yards west of the Fontanaccia was spotted by an artillery FOO and engaged with a 'murder' concentration from his own guns; it was also engaged by a troop of the Divisional Cavalry from a position a couple of hundred yards south of C Company's headquarters. Enemy nebelwerfers had also opened fire but most of the bombs fell on vacant ground east of 25 Battalion.

The enemy was obviously in some strength on the Fontanaccia as, farther south, advances by the Divisional Cavalry and by the Canadians were stopped by heavy fire. On the right, 24 Battalion Group, which at 11.30 a.m. had resumed its advance, was held up a few hundred yards short of the Fontanaccia. Meanwhile on 25 Battalion's front the mainguard had been concentrated before noon in an area across the [Marecchia](#) and at 2.45 p.m. Colonel Norman, on forward reconnaissance, was called back to meet Brigadier Parkinson, who had come forward with orders for a further advance by 24 and 25 Battalions to the north-west to the Fontanaccia, while [28 Battalion](#) moved round the left flank.

At 4.20 p.m. Colonel Norman at an orders group conference explained the plan. A and C Companies were to advance to the river, A Company (Major Webster) on the right and C Company (Major Handyside) on the left; D Company (Captain Thomas ¹⁷) was to move up from the mainguard to a position behind C Company, while B Company (Major Finlay) remained where it was near [San Martino](#). Two 3-inch mortars were attached to each of the three forward companies and anti-tank guns were to cover the lateral roads on the axis of advance. Two troops of tanks were to accompany the infantry, and the artillery, if required, was to provide defensive fire across the Fontanaccia while the FOO would engage observed targets. A little later it was decided that [28 Battalion](#) was not to take part and that 25 Battalion would swing farther to the left.

At 6.30 p.m. the advance commenced and a few minutes later Colonel Norman was informed that the Divisional Cavalry on the left was in touch with the Canadians 400 yards south-west of [Orsoleto](#) and was advancing to the north-west. A Company,

which as its objective had the Fontanaccia from Route 16 on the right to the road-crossing over the river 900 yards to the south-west, advanced with its supporting tanks from the forward positions held by C Company, and for nearly an hour had little difficulty. It then encountered Spandau fire, which for a time held it up, but this was soon overcome and by 8.35 p.m. the company was moving up the lateral road running northwards parallel to and about 300 yards from the river, clearing the houses as it went. On reaching Casa Ripa, 500 yards from the right of the objective, the leading sections were halted by very heavy machine-gun fire. Major Webster then sent a patrol under Corporal Cameron ¹⁸ to the river, but enemy fire which caused four casualties forced it to withdraw; another patrol went out but was stopped by heavy Spandau fire. 'An amusing incident occurred to Pte John McAvoy ¹⁹ during this attack,' it is related. 'He had become a little separated from the rest of his platoon, when on jumping into a ditch, he was confronted by two Jerries, both armed with rifles. Mac only had his rifle and his thinking ran along the lines of "If I shoot one of them the other one will shoot me while I'm reloading". Apparently the Jerries thought the same as they kept their rifles trained on him. McAvoy called on the Germans to surrender but they also in turn gave him the same opportunity to surrender to them. A stalemate developed, both keeping the other covered, but fortunately for McAvoy Jack Cuff ²⁰ of 14 Pl came along and was able to help Mac take in two prisoners.'

As A Company could make no further progress, Colonel Norman at 10.15 p.m. asked for artillery defensive fire, stonks 'Jack' and 'Kitty', which were prearranged concentrations on the west side of the Fontanaccia, 400 yards north-west of the right flank of the objective. While the guns were firing Major Webster told Battalion Headquarters that, as an enemy tank was believed to be on the main road, he did not wish to move farther up the lateral road towards it; he was told to stay in his present position and supporting tanks took up positions with the infantry platoons.

Meanwhile C Company had withdrawn its forward troops to the neighbourhood of the Brancona crossing and, together with its tanks, advanced towards the Fontanaccia, its objective stretching from the left of A Company, where it was responsible for the road crossing the river, to a point about 400 yards north of the crossroads at Casa Raggi, a frontage of 1300 yards. For forty-five minutes the advance went well. The company was then halted by Spandau fire, but not for long

and the advance was soon resumed; about 8.15 p.m. the men dug in within 150 yards of the river and also, together with the supporting tanks, occupied suitable houses in the vicinity. Company Headquarters was established about 600 yards back, near the Brancona crossing. The company had suffered casualties, the whole of 14 Platoon's No. 5 Section under Lance-Corporal R. J. Parker having been wounded by enemy grenades.

At this stage D Company (Captain Thomas) had completed its move forward from the main guard and was in position south of the Brancona, with its headquarters at [San Giovanni](#) in Perareto. Shortly before midnight, 23 – 24 September, a 17-pounder from 31 Anti-Tank Battery arrived at Battalion Headquarters and was sent up to support A and C Companies. Two M10s (tank-destroyers) from the same battery took up positions 700 and 900 yards east of the secondary road crossing the Fontanaccia, where on the lateral road running from Route 16 to the Brancona crossing they guarded the gap between 24 and 25 Battalions. The 105s of the attached 50 Battery had a successful day, knocking out a gun near the Uso River, a couple of thousand yards west of the Fontanaccia, and a nebelwerfer 1400 yards south-west of the left flank of C Company's objective, as well as carrying out numerous shoots on other targets. Casualties reported in the battalion on the 23rd were one killed, one died of wounds, and sixteen wounded.

Shortly after midnight A and C Companies were connected by L/T with Battalion Headquarters, always a welcome state of affairs to the Commanding Officer, the company commanders, and not least to the runners. It was early in use by A Company to ask that stonk 'Jack' be lifted 100 yards beyond where it was placed a couple of hours earlier. Snipers were causing a good deal of trouble, C Company in the very early hours reporting that its forward posts close to the river near its right flank were being fired on from the left. Spandaus of course were in evidence, as always, and, stated one account, 'Cpl Ted Saunders' ²¹ 6 Section was pinned down in a cornfield by Spandau fire and spent a considerable time lying on their stomachs feeling the cornstalks falling on their backs as they were chopped off by Spandau bullets'. A Company also had sniper trouble and was advised by Colonel Norman to use its tanks at first light 'to eliminate them'.

Reports continued to come in and evidence was piling up that the enemy intended to contest the river crossing in such strength that to dislodge him a

deliberate attack with strong artillery support would be necessary. A little after midnight 25 Battalion had been informed that, according to an intercepted message, there were enemy Hornet SP guns at Casa Portico, 1100 yards north-west of A Company's existing right flank, a position that was shelled, five rounds per gun, by the New Zealand artillery. About an hour later C Company reported a stationary enemy tank about 200 yards ahead, which it could not engage until it knew the positions reached by the Canadians. About dawn enemy tanks 500 yards west of the Fontanaccia, opposite the junction of A and C Companies, were engaged by SP guns and the field artillery; half an hour later the New Zealand tanks asked that a second 'stonk' be fired on the same target.

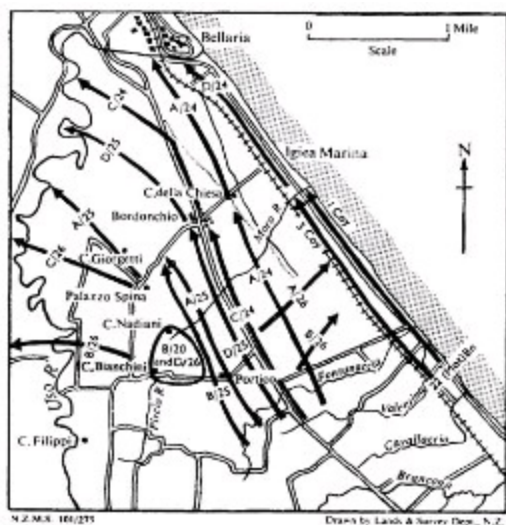
Meanwhile, A Company had been trying to secure the remainder of its objective and at 8.20 a.m. was able to report that 7 Platoon was 100 yards from Route 16, from which it was separated by two enemy-held houses; patrols had been sent out to deal with the houses, and enemy on the west bank of the river were being engaged by the company's SP gun and mortars. The tanks with A Company reported that there was an enemy SP gun in the vicinity.

A little earlier in the morning Captain B. W. Thomas (D Company) sent to Battalion Headquarters a message he had received from Major Webster:

'A Coy approx 200 yds short of river with open ground between them and the river—ground covered by enemy Spandau fire. This morning a Spandau opened up from a house on their left front. This was shot up by tanks and a section went in. The Spandau opened up again and was once more fired on by the tanks after which the section took the house. Further fire was then encountered from the next house about 100 yds away. Enemy in strength across river are being engaged by mortars and SP guns. Major Webster asks for arty on the far bank. He is trying to contact C Coy.'

To deal with snipers on C Company's front 17 Platoon (Lieutenant Easthope ²²) at first light left D Company and moved down to the vicinity of Casa Raggi, 400 yards east of the left flank of C Company's objective; the platoon then turned to the north and, moving in single file and more or less parallel to the Fontanaccia for about 800 yards, reached C Company's left platoon; from there it turned to the left towards the river and for 600 yards followed a ditch downstream. At that point, 200 yards north

of the boundary between A and C Companies, 17 Platoon was fired on by a Spandau 'at six yards range', suffering two casualties and withdrawing thirty yards upstream. Leaving Sergeant Harrison ²³ in command, Easthope went back to C Company's platoon in rear to report the position to D Company, which sent 16 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant N. A. Rees) up to him. With the aid of one of C Company's tanks 16 Platoon advanced to mop up a supposed enemy outpost, but the tank was soon knocked out and set on fire by a bazooka and the platoon then joined 17 Platoon in the ditch. An attempt to outflank the enemy post from the east was met by overwhelming fire from six Spandaus and the two platoons, fortunate to escape disaster, withdrew to D Company, the total casualties being one missing believed killed, one wounded and missing, and several wounded. By 1.15 p.m. the platoons were back with their company, 17 Platoon having been away for about seven hours.



FROM THE FONTANACCIA TO THE USO, 24 - 26 SEPTEMBER 1944

from the fontanaccia to the uso, 24 – 26 september 1944

In their forward positions the tanks with A and C Companies were very vulnerable in daylight to fire from enemy SP guns and tanks, which made full use of the excellent cover from view provided by the foliage of the vineyards. C Company's tank had been lost about nine in the morning, and an hour later Major Handyside was severely wounded when his Honey tank was also hit by a bazooka. Early in the afternoon two tanks of A Company were lost, one by a direct hit from an SP gun and the other ditched when trying to avoid a similar fate, resulting in the company asking for an M10 to be brought up.

During the morning (24 September) it was decided that in the evening 6 Brigade

would launch an attack, supported by a barrage, with 24 Battalion Group on the right and 25 Battalion Group on the left; the brigade objective was a lateral road which crossed Route 16 at [Bordonchio](#), 2600 yards north-west of the Fontanaccia, the boundary between the two battalions being Route 16, for which 24 Battalion was responsible. Twenty-fifth Battalion's objective ran from Route 16 south-west along the lateral road to Palazzo Spina, a frontage of a thousand yards. The barrage was to open at 7.40 p.m. on the road held by A and C Companies, which with their tanks were required at 7 p.m. to withdraw clear of it to a start line selected by the battalion. The barrage would advance at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes.

In addition to the New Zealand artillery, two Canadian field regiments and a British medium regiment would support the attack and Canadian artillery would fire on counter-battery tasks, air observation being provided. Sixth Brigade Group also had, under command, 41 AA Battery and B Sub-battery of 39 Heavy Mortar Battery. Bofors of 14 Light AA Regiment were to mark the flanks and centre line of attack by firing tracer in bursts of three rounds every two minutes from 8 p.m. to the end of the barrage or limit of range.

To guard the exposed left flank Headquarters 20 Armoured Regiment and B Squadron (the reserve squadron of 6 Brigade, A and C Squadrons being with 25 and 24 Battalions respectively) and one company of 26 Battalion were to move across and be responsible for the protection of that flank under arrangements to be made with 25 Battalion. Using its own resources, which it will be recalled included 3 Platoon of [8 Field Company](#), NZE, 25 Battalion Group was to prepare a track for tanks west of Route 16 while 24 Battalion Group would do likewise on the eastern side.

On the right of 24 Battalion, 22 (Motor) Battalion was attacking on a one-company front along the narrow coastal strip. West of the Fontanaccia, but about 1300 yards to the south-west of C Company, Canadian troops were advancing, and if they made good progress would, of course, secure 25 Battalion's left flank; the Canadians had been observed in that area during the morning of the 24th, and about the same time a force of infantry with tanks in strength, believed to be Canadian, was reported only 500 yards south-west of C Company.

The Germans on the New Zealand front were old antagonists — I Parachute

Division of [Cassino](#) fame. At noon a prisoner from one of its units was brought in to 25 Battalion headquarters. Extracts from that division's report of 24 September on the fighting of 23 – 24 September included references to 25 Battalion's attack:

'Morning Report: During the night the enemy infantry and tanks attacked again and again both on our left [east of Route 16] and west of the Via Adriatic [Route 16]. A penetration in the centre was sealed off. 8 enemy tanks destroyed by close-range weapons during the night. Heavy HF [harassing fire] on rear areas.

'Interim Report: The penetration at Castellabate [by [24 Bn](#)] was eliminated by 1 Para Regt's local reserves and the situation restored. During the morning the enemy continued his attacks on either side of the Via Adriatic, but was driven off.

'Evening Report: The enemy attacked with great stubbornness throughout the afternoon. His thrusts were mainly in Battalion strength, supported by 6 – 12 tanks. All attacks were beaten back with heavy loss to both sides. 13 enemy tanks destroyed. During the last 36 hours the division has beaten off 27 attacks in battalion strength. It is still holding a continuous line. [Note: New Zealand tank losses during the morning and afternoon were five, including one Honey tank, but the number 13 could also include Canadian losses.]'

Throughout the afternoon enemy guns and mortars, as well as snipers and Spandaus, mainly from positions west of the Fontanaccia, continued to harass the battalion and were vigorously replied to by all weapons. The field artillery was called upon for defensive fire on numerous targets: on an area 450 yards in width 200 yards across the river west of A Company; on an enemy SP gun at the junction of the lateral road with Route 16, close to A Company's right flank; on nebelwerfer positions 1500 yards and 2600 yards west of the boundary between A and C Companies, the farther one in a bend of the Uso River; on SP guns at Palazzo Spina on the left of 25 Battalion's objective for that night, and also near a road junction 900 yards north of A Company's right flank; and on machine guns and infantry close to a road junction about 650 yards west of the river opposite A Company. It was a considerable list of observed enemy positions and weapons; no doubt there were many which were not observed, and much of the defence observed was mobile; and it emphasised the potential threat to 25 Battalion's left flank when it advanced later in the day.

The battalion's casualties on the Fontanaccia front, reported on 23 – 24 September, were eight other ranks killed, four died of wounds, four officers and nineteen other ranks wounded, and two wounded and prisoners of war. The wounded officers were Major Handyside, Lieutenant Grumitt, Second-Lieutenants Dey ²⁴ and Hansen. ²⁵ This was the third time that Major Handyside had been wounded. In the attacks on Monte [Lignano](#) in July and before [Florence](#) at the beginning of August he had shown great skill, determination, and courageous leadership. During this last attack, when the vanguard was checked on the [Scolo Brancona](#), Major Handyside carried out a personal reconnaissance which greatly assisted subsequent operations and handled his company with skill and judgment. For these services he was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

After a reconnaissance by the IO (Lieutenant R. S. Liddell) in the late afternoon of the 24th, Colonel Norman at 7.15 p.m. moved his Tactical Headquarters forward to the vicinity of the area occupied by C Company the previous morning near the road crossing of the Brancona, and twenty-five minutes later the barrage opened. The leading companies of 25 Battalion then moved up to their start line, D Company on the right with Route 16 as its right boundary, A Company in the centre, and B Company on the left; C Company was in reserve.

The first report on the progress of the attack came from A Company at 8.39 p.m. reporting all well; nine minutes later a second message reported one signaller lost and two wounded, and a third six minutes afterwards that the company was still advancing; it was still going well at 9 p.m. One of the wounded, Corporal McManaway, ²⁶ carried on all night.

It was very disturbing that no information came from D and B Companies, but just before 9 p.m. the escort to a prisoner said that both companies were across the Fontanaccia and were meeting some opposition from machine guns.

At 9.15 p.m. A Company reported that it was across the lateral road 700 yards beyond the river, near a house called Portico where that afternoon SP guns had been reported. There were still no reports from D and B Companies, nor was A Company in touch with either, though ten minutes later another message from A Company brought the very welcome news that B Company was moving forward on the left flank; B Company headquarters, including Major Finlay, actually moved in front of A

Company's advancing platoons and 'was shot up; Coy SM Anderson ²⁷ lost a finger'.

Both with its frequent reports and its progress, A Company continued to be a model of perfection and at five minutes past ten was within 400 yards of its objective. There was little opposition on its part of the front, but on its left B Company, with which it was in touch, had only fifteen men left to continue the advance. The first news from D Company reached Colonel Norman a few minutes later when the escorts to two prisoners brought in from that company reported that their company had by-passed enemy machine guns, some of which were still firing in its rear. These were probably the guns which B Company 24 Battalion had reported were firing at it from 25 Battalion's sector as it moved up Route 16, mopping-up behind its left front company. About 10.30 p.m. A Company reported the rather startling experience of having an enemy tank passing across its rear, an occurrence not, however, peculiar to A Company as D Company and two companies of 24 Battalion had somewhat similar experiences.

Though there was no report from D Company until 11 p.m., it had in fact made a very rapid and successful advance, reaching its objective at 10.20 p.m. when A Company was still about 300 yards away. D Company placed two of its platoons in two houses north of the lateral road at [Bordonchio](#) and one platoon south of the road. At 11 p.m. A Company arrived on the objective midway between [Bordonchio](#) and Palazzo Spina, but it was over an hour later when Battalion Headquarters was able to get in touch with B Company by W/T and learn that it was not able to reach its objective because of enemy opposition. During the attack when part of B Company crossed A Company's front, 3 Section of 7 Platoon became detached from the rest of A Company, to be launched on a night of high adventure, as related by the section commander, Corporal J. Wootton:

'3 Section consisted of Caldwell, ²⁸ Edlin, ²⁹ Fraser, Murray, Bromley, Wootton. We kept on advancing and around about midnight captured a German Private who was strolling up one side of the hedge of grape vines. Continuing we approached a two-storey house just back from a cross-road. After investigating, and it was found to be empty, pickets were immediately posted, and this had only been concluded when footsteps were heard running across the cobble yard. Up to the door rushed a German who immediately had a Tommy gun thrust in his stomach and invited inside.

'Very shortly after, this form of German approach was repeated, and by about 4 o'clock in the morning 3 Section had 17 prisoners and when first light arrived it was certainly very welcome, as we felt a little outnumbered. Included in this bag was a German doctor, whose medical kit was handed to 7 Platoon's RAP man, D. Rudman.

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'At first light Corporal Wootton and Pte Edlin set out to ascertain exactly what our position was, and fortunately this reconnaissance brought us into contact with Captain Taylor³¹ who had the carriers. The position was explained to him and the transfer of the Germans was made about 7 a.m. in the morning.

'The whole episode was created by the fact that the house we occupied was a German Company's Headquarters.'

B Company headquarters had the misfortune to be out of contact with all its platoons, and on its arrival at A Company's headquarters a couple of hours after midnight, Major Finlay asked Major Webster for assistance in capturing a house on B Company's objective; Webster detailed 8 Platoon for the task, and with two tanks in support the platoon moved to the south-west along the lateral road, shot up the Palazzo Spina on the extreme left, and captured it without loss.

After the barrage for the attack had ended at 10.35 p.m., some of the batteries had been instructed to continue firing at a very slow rate to assist neighbouring troops; other batteries, as requested about 11 p.m. by Colonel Norman, began harassing fire on enemy positions, including the nebelwerfers observed in the afternoon west of 25 Battalion towards the Uso River. About midnight Norman also arranged for the 105s of 24 SP Battery with his battalion to begin counter-battery fire. Shortly after midnight the supporting artillery ceased fire on the final line of the barrage.

During the attack the supporting arms of the Battalion Group had some difficulty in getting forward; a few minutes before 10 p.m. they were passing 25 Battalion Tactical Headquarters at the Brancona and about forty minutes afterwards A Company had reported 'our tanks are moving up'. A few minutes after that the tanks reported they were held up, and it was 11 p.m. before they reached the crossing over the Fontanaccia west of the junction of the positions held by A and C

Companies that afternoon. Although the tanks reported the crossing a good one, none had crossed within the next half-hour, a bulldozer being asked for. The crossing was then negotiated with little difficulty, and with the help of a bridge-layer tank the next watercourse—the Rio Pircio, 1900 yards farther on and 900 yards from the objective—was crossed. An engineer reconnaissance party in a Honey tank, which had been exploring a route for the tanks, had reached the companies on the objective by 1.45 a.m., the first tanks arriving fifteen minutes later. Two tanks of 1 Troop 20 Regiment joined A Company, two of 3 Troop went to the aid of B Company, and one tank of 4 Troop joined D Company, these being all the tanks which had completed the advance.

It had been a very successful attack for 25 Battalion Group though there had been some tense and exciting episodes. Corporal Reynolds,³² commanding 7 Section of 18 Platoon of D Company, on the right near Route 16, gives an interesting account of the action:

‘From the commencement of the barrage the enemy small-arms fired constantly on fixed-line crossfire. Our first encounter with the enemy was at the river Fontanaccia, where they were dug in in large numbers. Clearing these positions both sides had casualties, the section killing a large number of Germans. Our strength now was down to 5 men. We then advanced around a house immediately in front from where we struck further opposition from dug in positions and three Tiger tanks which were sheltering behind the house. Our Piat being with Platoon HQ we could only stand and watch the tanks pull out and go down Route 16 towards [Bordonchio](#). The section continued mopping up round the house and later rejoined the platoon, to continue the attack. The Paratroopers as usual proved tough opposition. Before reaching [Bordonchio](#) we ran into numerous pockets of opposition dug in on the open ground. On questioning prisoners next morning we discovered that the enemy was in the middle of a change over when the attack started, hence the large numbers.... at first light we had a heavy mortar stonk laid down on our positions at the crossroads but did not receive any casualties....’

A few incidents between the end of the attack and first light caused Corporal Reynolds to conclude that the enemy was taken completely by surprise:

‘...a German ration truck came to the crossroads and after disposing of the driver

we found it contained hot boxes of steaming rabbit and poultry along with a ration of black bread; needless to say the section did not eat bully beef for breakfast, thanks to Jerry. A doctor and his orderly came from the same direction a few minutes later and one of the platoon ... captured the doctor and we were supplied with medical attention on the spot, together with means of transport for our heavier items of platoon equipment. At first light an elderly soldier with horse and buggy drove down the road with mail for the troops ... and two of our prisoners had mail from home within hours of being captured.'

Truly an orgy of highway robbery with considerable profit to Reynolds and his men and some chivalry displayed by captors and captured. The above account gives some indication —though a very modest one, as the following citation will show—of the excellent work of Reynolds and his section. He was awarded the Military Medal, his citation stating, *inter alia*:

'He led his section with great dash up to the river line, disposing of all opposition on the way. He then led his section around a house immediately in front and found his way obstructed by a group of twenty or more Germans. Immediately Reynolds charged in, killing eight, wounding several others, and sending back two prisoners. The section continued to advance and was scattered by a Tiger tank crashing through to the road. Reynolds was very nearly run down but collected his section and led them back to regain contact with the platoon. Shortly after, an enemy machine-gunner opened up on the section on his left. Cpl Reynolds, once again showing great courage and resource, dashed through at the risk of his own life and silenced the machine-gunner....'

Corporal N. Morgan, platoon sergeant of 16 Platoon, was able to give a little more information regarding the operations of D Company. He said that after leaving the start line his platoon advanced a few hundred yards before it came upon the enemy positions—quite strongly dug-in positions in a ditch behind a house and supported by infantry and tanks. No. 18 Platoon went to the right of the house and 16 Platoon, with 17 Platoon on its left, moved to the left, through a hedge and across a track. Two enemy MG posts were knocked out and, as their tanks moved off, the paratroopers surrendered. The company had been ordered to move on quickly after breaking through the paratroops' position. While continuing the advance 'we found ourselves amongst enemy tanks who were retreating through the fields

towards roadways, and along roadways to rear positions’.

On the way to its objective, ‘a house across a parallel road ¼ mile to the left of [Bordonchio](#)’, the platoon came across an MG post (on the edge of a wheat field) which was firing on a small party of men moving along the road. Morgan took his section forward and disposed of the enemy post. While digging in around the house, the men could hear the enemy guns, less than half a mile ahead, pulling out under fire from our artillery. Morgan received the Military Medal for his services in this action. The citation says that he ‘jumped into the ditch [where opposition was first encountered] and by firing at the Spandau nests in his immediate vicinity and rolling grenades into dugouts, so disorganised the defence that the platoon reached and cleaned up the position without loss to itself. Shortly afterwards, as the platoon was continuing its advance, word came back of a Mk IV tank on the right front. Cpl Morgan investigated and found a Tiger tank on the left front as well. The Tiger swung towards the Mk IV and then moved into the Platoon. Cpl Morgan attacked the Tiger with smoke grenades. The tank, which had been firing with its machine guns, made off, sparks trailing from its rear. This tank was later found abandoned. Due to his action the Platoon was able to continue its advance....’

The task of succouring the wounded is an urgent and difficult one. The Medical Officer must necessarily stay at his RAP since, if he went forward, he could rarely, in the circumstances, do more than the stretcher-bearers, while there would be the risk of losing his services through his becoming a casualty; also, in his absence from the RAP many wounded might have been brought there. The site of the RAP is chosen with care. It should be on the best route from the front, as centrally situated as possible, and readily accessible to ambulances or other vehicles for evacuating the wounded. It should, where possible, offer security from enemy fire and from the weather. For reasons of the general morale of the unit as well as of humanity, it is imperative that the wounded be promptly and efficiently attended to, and in this connection 25 Battalion was well served both by its medical officers and by other ranks who tended the wounded. In this attack the driver of the RAP jeep (Private S. J. Copeland ³³) received a Military Medal for his services, a very well-earned distinction, as his citation shows:

‘During the advance Private Copeland made many trips throughout the night to

exposed positions over the Battalion area, under heavy artillery, mortar, and machine-gun fire, collecting and bringing back wounded to the RAP. Throughout the following two days after the Battalion had consolidated and was suffering casualties, Pte Copeland continually went forward to the Coys under heavy artillery and mortar fire to bring back the wounded from the forward areas....'

On the right of 25 Battalion the attack was almost equally successful. By daybreak 24 Battalion had consolidated its position about 200 yards short of its objective and was awaiting the arrival of its tanks before advancing further. On the narrow strip between 24 Battalion and the coast, however, 22 (Motor) Battalion had made little progress, though soon after midday it had come forward in line with 24 Battalion, which in the meantime had advanced to its objective.

On the left, D Company 26 Battalion and its accompanying armour—which were responsible for the protection of the left flank—had by 3 a.m. occupied three positions, each with a platoon of infantry and a troop of tanks, at Casa Nadiani 700 yards south-south-east of the left of 25 Battalion's objective, at Casa Bianchini 500 yards farther to the south, and at a reserve position east of the latter between Portico and Route 16. About dawn enemy infantry and tanks in the vicinity launched an attack and were repulsed; about the same time two sections of 25 Battalion carriers coming down a track from the front toward these flank positions were fired on without effect by an enemy bazooka, but another carrier following the sections was hit at a range of about ten yards, the driver being badly shaken but otherwise unhurt. The carriers pointed out one house as the probable position of the bazooka and one of the tanks fired three rounds of AP shot into it, but, as an infantry section later discovered, the house was empty, the bazooka having been fired from a trench at the side of the road.

Farther to the south Canadian troops, west of the positions A and C Companies had occupied prior to the attack, were moving in a westerly direction towards the Uso River, against spirited opposition.

C Company (Captain Taylor), 25 Battalion's reserve, had not been called upon to move forward, but shortly after midnight, on the tanks reporting a threat to the left flank during the attack, the company was ordered to stand-to; no further action was required.

The battalion's casualties on the night 24 – 25 September were four other ranks killed, one died of wounds, one officer (Lieutenant R. Easthope) and forty-eight other ranks wounded, and one prisoner of war. The battalion had taken forty-eight prisoners, forty of them parachutists.

As related by Corporal Reynolds, D Company had some interesting and rather profitable incidents after arriving on the objective, and Captain Thomas, reporting to Battalion Headquarters shortly after midnight, mentions others:

'Since arrival have shot up two trucks, one petrol, one full of mines. In all, killed or wounded about forty enemy, prisoners two. Two Tiger or Panther tanks are milling about on our line of advance. One has driven off north of [Bordonchio](#).'

During the morning of the 25th there was only light shelling of the battalion's positions. A good deal of enemy movement was observed, however. B Company about dawn called for defensive fire—stonk 'Lock'—400 yards west of Palazzo Spina, and two hours later enemy tanks were seen a mile farther south; half an hour later a large concentration of tanks was seen 600 yards north of D Company. The tanks were dealt with by 'stonks'.

That morning one of the supporting anti-tank guns behind the battalion's forward positions had the unpleasant and maddening experience of being bombed by a Spitfire, fortunately escaping casualties though vehicles were damaged; perhaps the men's feelings were somewhat soothed by their realisation that the pilot's keen spotting and accurate aim were normally employed against the Germans. A later explanation rather upset this view: 'Apparently two planes had "hang-ups" (bombs which did not release over the target but fell off on the way back).'

An hour before noon the SP 105s with the battalion were having fine practice chasing with their fire enemy troops who were in houses on the road running north-west from Palazzo Spina. Driven from house to house, the enemy displayed a white flag from one of the houses and B Company sent out a patrol to investigate; half an hour later the patrol engaged enemy infantry and returned with five prisoners. In the afternoon the battalion's position was again shelled spasmodically but, with the exception of a little mopping-up by D Company, assisted by a platoon from C

Company, and bridge-repairing by the engineers, there was little activity.

Information from civilian refugees and the sound of demolitions ahead indicated an imminent enemy withdrawal beyond the Uso River, and after a visit in mid-afternoon to D Company's positions, Colonel Norman at 5.30 p.m. instructed D Company to endeavour to move up Route 16; this was to conform with the left flank of 24 Battalion, which at 1 p.m. had sent patrols forward, preparatory to advancing its front, if that proved feasible. However, on hearing that these patrols had not been able to advance beyond 300 yards, Colonel Norman advised Captain Thomas to proceed with caution. Heavy rain had fallen, and as Thomas thought this might prevent the movement of his supporting tanks, he decided he would not move D Company forward till first light next morning, 26 September.

On the evening of the 25th, according to German documents, the advances of the New Zealanders and the Canadians had caused the German commanders much anxiety and had absorbed all the troops allotted to the first line of defence. The German policy at the time was to have about two-fifths of the strength in the FDLs and three-fifths in the second line, which was up to 2000 yards back; the troops in the second line were not regarded as reserves as they were in the rear portion of the main defensive zone. The Parachute Division's casualties on the 24th were stated to be 16 killed, 41 wounded, and 67 missing, and on the 25th 19 killed, 42 wounded, and 89 missing. On that day (25th) 25 Battalion had one man (Private [Sattler](#)³⁴ captured, and in a conversation with Field-Marshal Kesselring, Colonel-General von Vietinghoff said: 'To-day we took a prisoner-of-war from 6 NZ Div. We don't know whether he was under command of [2 NZ Div](#), or whether 6 NZ Div has come over from Egypt'. Obviously Sattler had not only avoided giving worthwhile information to the enemy but had also succeeded in misleading him in a way which may have had an important effect on the course of the battle. There was, of course, no '6 NZ Div' in [Italy](#), though from mid-1942 the title was given to the troops in [Maadi Camp](#) with the object of misleading the enemy regarding New Zealand formations in the [Middle East](#).

Pushing forward patrols at first light on the 26th as planned, D Company found that the country as far as the [Uso](#) was clear of the enemy and Captain Thomas ordered the company forward. At 6.22 a.m. this was reported to the CO, who instructed A Company to get in touch with D and go forward with it. The battalion's

right boundary was the road running north-west from [Bordonchio](#) to the river, 2000 yards away, and the left boundary a parallel road from Palazzo Spina. After discussing the position with Brigadier Parkinson, who had arrived at Battalion Headquarters about that time, Colonel Norman went up to his forward companies and found that D Company had already reached the [Uso](#) at the river bend on the battalion's right boundary.

The other companies were immediately ordered to advance to the river, C Company from its reserve position being instructed to fan out, after crossing the Rio Pircio on Route 16, and watch the left flank. New positions were selected for the supporting arms, defensive fire tasks were lifted beyond the [Uso](#), and Battalion Tactical Headquarters advanced about 2000 yards, alongside Route 16 near Castellabate. About forty minutes after the new headquarters was occupied a wounded German was found under a haystack there; this started an immediate 'witch hunt', a party being detailed to search the area, but without result.

D Company soon had a patrol across the [Uso](#), reporting at 11.15 a.m. that it had found one crossing passable, two feet deep and twenty-four feet wide; up to 300 yards beyond the river the patrol saw no sign of the enemy. An engineer officer was immediately sent forward to examine the crossing. As on the previous day, D Company had shown commendable thrust and Captain Thomas quick and sound decision, and on this occasion he was able to maintain communication by W/T with Battalion Headquarters. He was instructed to consolidate and await the supporting arms. On the other hand A Company was slow to move, informing Battalion Headquarters, five hours after it had received the order, that it was advancing at 12.30 p.m., a delay which left D Company exposed. It seems that owing to three signallers of A Company headquarters having been wounded in the previous night's attack, the order went astray, a serious lapse which it is strange Battalion Headquarters did not notice. Colonel Norman ordered A Company immediately to move forward to support D Company but it was not until 2.20 p.m. that the company reported itself on the [Uso](#).

Shortly after midday D Company reported that there was a good crossing where the road on the right flank reached the river but it required bulldozing; a machine gun 300 yards south-west of the crossing was also reported and an immediate

'stonk' asked for. Half an hour later a further message reached Battalion Headquarters from D Company, this time a tragic one saying that the company commander, Captain Thomas, had been killed by a sniper while reconnoitring the tank crossing with the engineer officer. It was a severe blow to the company—and also to the battalion—to lose a commander who had shown such excellent judgment and dash and had achieved such striking success in the operation. Lieutenant Bruce Andrews³⁵ immediately took over command until the arrival that evening of the company second-in-command, Captain K. J. S. Bourke. In the afternoon 18 Platoon made another sortie over the Uso River; this was met with Spandau fire, and with two men wounded—one critically—the platoon withdrew to its original position a little to the east of the right bank.

In this important reconnaissance of the [Uso](#) crossings Private Schultz³⁶ did some fine work. Going forward as a scout, on his own initiative, he found a covered route for his platoon to the river bank and then again went forward, reconnoitred a crossing, and crossed the river. On [Monte Lignano](#) in July Schultz had displayed similar skill and daring in reconnaissance, and although suffering severely from the effects of blast he continually assisted in the evacuation of the wounded under heavy shell and mortar fire. These services earned him a well-deserved Military Medal.

In the meantime other units were directed to get on to the Uso River line as soon as possible, the Divisional Cavalry being ordered to cross and advance northwards down the western bank. On the left of 25 Battalion, where the left flank-guard was in position, 26 Battalion was to move through its D Company and the supporting armour, cross the river, and advance to the next objective, the Fiumicino River, about 3500 yards to the north-west.

On the other flank a company of 24 Battalion shortly after 11 a.m. had reached the [Uso](#), and early in the afternoon that battalion was firmly established there.

Charged with the duty of watching the left flank, C Company during the afternoon reported that its headquarters and two platoons were in the large Palazzo Spina on the left of the previous objective and the third platoon was on its outskirts. The very weak B Company was with C Company. Throughout the afternoon the battalion's positions received a good deal of attention from enemy artillery and mortars, and snipers were also troublesome. Harassing tasks were fired in retaliation

by the supporting artillery, and the medium machine guns also engaged enemy positions and communications.

With two troops operating in 25 Battalion's territory, the Divisional Cavalry had reported that the [Uso](#) on A Company's front was impassable for vehicles, and Colonel Norman discussed the question of bridging the river with engineer and tank officers, including the commander of a Churchill Ark bridging tank. An hour later when the Brigadier arrived the possibility of crossing the [Uso](#) that night was considered, 6 Brigade having received orders to establish a firm bridgehead over the river in readiness for an advance to the Fiumicino River at first light next morning (27 September).

The CO at once gave a verbal warning to all concerned that the battalion some time after last light that night would attack across the [Uso](#). On the right of 25 Battalion 3 Greek Mountain Brigade was to replace 24 Battalion, which would go into reserve at [Bordonchio](#); on the left, 26 Battalion, which already had orders to advance to the [Fiumicino](#), had platoons across the [Uso](#) and would move on to the Fosso Vena, a ditch about 1000 yards beyond the river. Twenty-fifth Battalion's casualties on 26 September were one officer killed and one officer (Lieutenant [Sidford](#)³⁷) and nine other ranks wounded.

¹ [Maj N. C. Begg](#), m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 13 Apr 1916; medical practitioner.

² [Rev. H. E. Rowe](#), ED; Linton Military Camp; born Reefton, 12 Jun 1914; Anglican minister.

³ [Lt R. B. Grumitt](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Wanganui](#), 13 Aug 1916; bank clerk; wounded 24 Sep 1944.

⁴ [Lt P. J. McGowan](#); born NZ 25 Sep 1909; booking manager; wounded 4 Jan 1945.

⁵ [L-Sgt D. W. Lance](#); [Waverley](#); born [Feilding](#), 31 Dec 1904; farmer; wounded 21 Oct 1944.

⁶ Lt E. R. Bavin; Wellington; born Fiji, 27 Apr 1907; sales manager; wounded 25 Feb 1945.

⁷ S-Sgt J. O. R. Pilbrow; Lower Hutt; born Marton, 18 Jan 1914; carpenter; twice wounded.

⁸ Sgt L. D. Forman; Wanganui; born Stratford, 13 Aug 1917; truck driver; wounded 9 Jan 1945.

⁹ S-Sgt J. W. McK. Cullen; Feilding; born Scotland, 12 Aug 1919; labourer; wounded 7 Mar 1944.

¹⁰ 2 Lt J. D. Burland; born NZ 13 Oct 1921; survey chainman; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

¹¹ Maj J. L. Webster, m.i.d.; born NZ 24 Dec 1912; agent; wounded 4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 20 Dec 1944.

¹² L-Cpl J. Gilmour; Whangamomona, Taranaki; born Gisborne, 6 Apr 1921; dairy farmer.

¹³ Pte A. J. Meier; Waitara; born NZ 25 Jul 1922; labourer; wounded 20 Dec 1944.

¹⁴ Pte R. A. Lucas; Cambridge; born NZ 12 Jan 1922; farmhand.

¹⁵ Cpl E. H. Goodwin; born England, 9 Sep 1915; lorry driver; twice wounded.

¹⁶ Pte H. J. McG. Robertson; Puha, Gisborne; born Gisborne, 19 Apr 1916; ploughman; wounded 21 Dec 1944.

¹⁷ Capt B. W. Thomas; born Marton, 30 Jun 1914; research chemist; killed in action 26 Sep 1944.

¹⁸ Cpl H. Cameron; Waimata Valley, Gisborne; born Gisborne, 22 Dec 1917; shepherd; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

¹⁹ Pte J. F. McAvoy; Blue Creek, Martinborough; born Pongaroa, 29 May 1923; farmer.

²⁰ Pte C. M. Cuff; born Stratford, 2 Dec 1922; shop assistant; killed in action 26 Jan 1945.

²¹ Cpl E. K. Saunders; Makaraka, Gisborne; born NZ 10 Sep 1914; labourer; three times wounded.

²² Capt R. Easthope; Napier; born Masterton, 9 Nov 1921; salesman; wounded 24 Sep 1944.

²³ Lt D. W. Harrison; Napier; born Timaru, 13 Apr 1911; clerk; twice wounded.

²⁴ Lt J. P. Dey; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 14 May 1904; company secretary; wounded 24 Sep 1944.

²⁵ Capt E. C. Hansen; Wellington; born Havelock North, 6 Apr 1916; clerk; wounded 24 Sep 1944.

²⁶ L-Sgt V. T. McManaway, MM; born Stratford, 31 Dec 1920; fisherman; wounded 24 Sep 1944; died 29 May 1956.

²⁷ S-Sgt J. D. Anderson, m.i.d.; born Napier, 17 Jul 1918; driver; wounded 25 Sep 1944.

²⁸ Cpl I. W. Caldwell; Lower Hutt; born Wanganui, 3 Dec 1921; apprentice carpenter.

²⁹ Pte K. G. Edlin; Petone; born Petone, 21 Aug 1921; apprentice painter.

³⁰ L-Cpl M. R. Rudman; Lower Hutt; born NZ 4 Jul 1914; machinist; wounded 25 Sep 1944.

³¹ Maj C. W. Taylor, ED; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 19 Jan 1912; clerk; twice wounded.

³² 2 Lt G. A. Reynolds, MM; Gore; born Oxford, 1 Nov 1922; cabinet-maker; wounded 15 Jul 1944.

³³ Pte S. J. Copeland, MM; Midhurst, Taranaki; born England, 20 May 1922; mechanic.

³⁴ Pte F. H. Sattler; New Plymouth; born New Plymouth, 29 Oct 1922; letter carrier; wounded and p.w. 25 Sep 1944.)

³⁵ Capt B. A. Andrews; Auckland; born Wellington, 5 Mar 1922; accountant.

³⁶ L-Cpl T. J. Schultz, MM; born NZ 21 Oct 1916; frmand; killed in action 19 Dec 1944.

³⁷ Lt S. G. Sidford; born Wellington, 15 Jun 1914; tea-taster; wounded 26 Sep 1944; killed in action 20 Dec 1944.

25 BATTALION

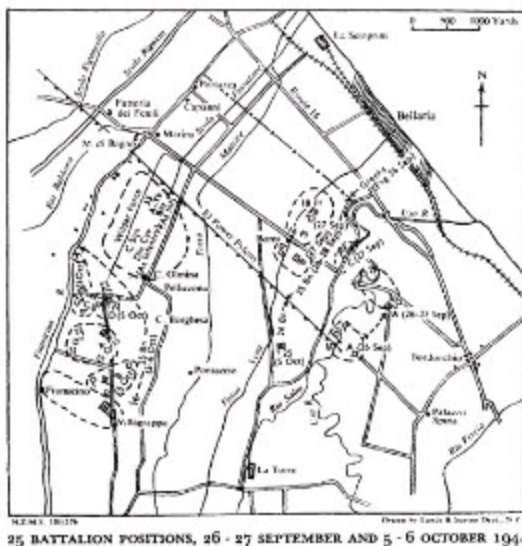
CHAPTER 16 – USO TO THE SAVIO

CHAPTER 16

Usa to the Savio

At

7 p.m. on 26 September at the usual orders group conference Colonel Norman gave orders for that night's operation. As soon as an engineers' reconnaissance party was ready, D Company would establish a bridgehead over the Usa River and the engineers would decide whether a bridge was practicable. If it was, B Company would cross and the bridge would be erected, after which the armour, screened by C Company and followed by the other supporting arms, would also cross. Three companies—D right, B centre, C left—would then



25 battalion positions, 26 – 27 september and 5 – 6 october 1944

advance to the first objective, a lateral road about 300 yards beyond the river. To provide a firm base for the attack, A Company, in reserve, would move downstream to the position on the east bank vacated by D Company.

Supporting fire as usual was to be provided by the artillery, and while the bridge was being constructed the harassing fire would have the additional purpose of drowning the noise of the bulldozer preparing the site and approaches. The 39th Heavy Mortar Battery was also taking part, bombarding an area beyond the Fosso Vena. In view of the uncertainty as to whether tanks would be able to cross the Usa on 25 Battalion's front, A Squadron of 20 Regiment informed Colonel Norman that if

its tanks could not cross, B Squadron tanks would use the 26 Battalion crossing on the left and send support down the west bank to 25 Battalion.

About 9.35 p.m. the engineers were at the ford and D Company (Captain Bourke) crossed and established the bridgehead. Shortly before 11 p.m. C Company (Captain Taylor) moved down to the vicinity of the ford, ready to advance with the armour when it arrived. About midnight, to get the tanks across, the engineers decided to use the Ark bridging tank, and an hour later, when it seemed that the bridge was nearly ready, B and D Companies were ordered to advance to the final objective for the night, the Fosso Vena. After another forty minutes the bridge was completed and tanks commenced to cross, the engineers reporting that provided there was no rain the bridge was suitable for wheeled traffic also.

D Company made good progress and, encountering no opposition, was on the objective and digging in by 2.30 a.m. It had no contact with B Company (Captain Clay¹), but an hour later a patrol of two men sent out to find it was in touch with the company's right flank, still some distance from the objective. Shortly after 3 a.m. the tanks had reached D Company, C Company advancing with them as far as the first objective (the lateral road), where some time before dawn it had occupied positions about the right centre. About 4 a.m. D Company asked for stonk 'Bait', which was defensive fire on a line varying from 600 yards in front of its position on the final objective to within 400 yards on the left; no doubt this assisted B Company, which half an hour later reported it was almost on the objective and would reorganise at first light. A few minutes afterwards D Company was in touch with both B and C Companies. The presence of a good many civilians, especially in the casas during these night attacks, was an embarrassment to the attacking troops as it was difficult at times to distinguish them from the Germans; any movement in front of the advancing men or in buildings they were investigating was almost certain to draw instant fire, as delay might well prove fatal. The situation of the civilians was hardly to be envied.

Brigadier Parkinson, who at daybreak was at 25 Battalion headquarters, told Colonel Norman that the Divisional Cavalry was to pass through and reconnoitre the ground beyond the Fosso Vena and that the companies of the battalion should rest, naturally a very welcome instruction to troops who had had a strenuous four days. He said that 26 Battalion on the left was also on the Fosso Vena.

During the morning it was decided that 24 Battalion would pass through 25 Battalion that day (27 September), taking over the latter's supporting arms, and advance towards the [Fiumicino River](#),² the Greeks also advancing on its right and 26 Battalion on its left. To carry on the advance 5 Brigade at first light on the 28th was to pass through 6 Brigade, which would then be in reserve.

Illustrating the great importance of sending back captured enemy documents (instead of 'souveniring' them), gratifying news was received by 25 Battalion from 6 Brigade that captured documents sent in by the battalion during the [Bordonchio](#) attack had been of great value in breaking the enemy corps' code, the value of which requires no emphasis.

During the morning, while the battalion was enjoying its rest, two Divisional Cavalry patrols, which were to reconnoitre the ground ahead, were in the battalion area, one near the power line on the left and the other near the centre of the position between the two objectives; neither patrol was able to go beyond the Fosso Vena. Patrols from B Company sent forward shortly after midday met with no opposition; an hour later D Company 24 Battalion passed through the company, and within the hour A Company of that battalion advanced through D Company on its way towards the Fiumicino River. Late in the afternoon 25 Battalion was told it was to remain in position; its losses that day were four killed and three wounded.

During the night (27 – 28 September) units of 5 Brigade passed through 25 Battalion to take over the front as planned, and the battalion, with further losses of one killed and one wounded, withdrew in the morning into reserve at Palazzo Spina and near Route 16, 400 yards north of Castellabate. In the afternoon a cold easterly gale with heavy rain, which was to continue for the next twelve hours, made conditions very unpleasant, though fortunately the troops were in houses and with the help of the rum issue were able to congratulate themselves on an opportune relief. Another casualty occurred next day, Corporal [Dustow](#)³ being wounded.

The casualties of the German I Parachute Division had been severe, according to German reports, amounting for the period 13–30 September to 183 killed, 567 wounded, and 389 missing; its front varied from one and three-quarter miles on the 13th to two and three-quarter miles between 15 and 21 September, and two to two

and a half miles thereafter.

In the reserve area 25 Battalion followed the usual out-of-the-line routine, resting, reorganising, and enjoying a little leave. The lessons of the recent fighting were closely considered and discussed at a conference with the company commanders, and during the last week of September a change in the system of returning long-service men to New Zealand also occupied their attention. The balance of the 4th Reinforcements was due to be returned, and under the new system the furlough scheme was abolished and a replacement scheme substituted; under it, men on completing their leave in New Zealand would not be returned to [2 NZEF](#) but would be subject to manpower direction into essential industry in New Zealand.

On 1 October there was a change in the battalion; Major A. J. Neil, who had held the appointment of second-in-command since 24 June, was posted to Advanced Base, Major Finlay of B Company taking his place and Captain Clay relieving Major Finlay. At the end of September, 25 Battalion with a strength of 27 officers and 598 other ranks was 5 officers and 139 other ranks below establishment. Its battle casualties—all in the eight days 23 – 30 September—were 1 officer and 17 other ranks killed, 6 died of wounds, and 6 officers and 83 other ranks wounded (two of whom were captured), and 1 prisoner of war, a total of 7 officers and 107 other ranks. The sick rate during the month was again heavy, the evacuations being 1 officer and 166 other ranks in a brigade total of 10 officers and 374 other ranks. The battalion's share of the reinforcements of 16 officers and 382 ranks received during the month by the brigade did little more than maintain the strength at the existing level.

Early in October some reorganisation within the Division took place. Trouble had already been experienced with soft ground which would be worsened by the approaching winter, and this, together with the more-or-less positional warfare of the moment, made it advisable in the forward battle zone to reduce the proportion of tanks to infantry; the two armoured regiments under command of 5 and 6 Brigades reverted to the command of 4 Armoured Brigade and one armoured regiment only was allotted for the support of the whole of the divisional sector. Part of 5 Brigade's front was held by 22 Motorised Battalion and it was arranged to relieve this unit by a special force termed '[Wilder Force](#)' (named after Lieutenant-

Colonel Wilder ⁴ of the Divisional Cavalry) which would come under command of 6 Brigade when, on the night 5 – 6 October, it relieved 5 Brigade. [Wilder Force](#) was made up of two infantry companies formed from the Divisional Cavalry, one infantry company from 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, and one platoon of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion.

On 2 October heavy rain set in, making it certain that cross-country going would continue to be difficult. The battalion was not molested by the enemy, though that night and again on the late afternoon of the 3rd a heavy-calibre gun shelled adjacent areas.

On 4 October the CO was informed that on the evening of the following day 25 Battalion was to take over 21 Battalion's position on the Fiumicino River and hold it until an assault, the date of which was dependent upon the weather, was made across the river. Under command of 25 Battalion were one platoon of medium machine guns, two troops of Mios, one troop of six-pounders, one platoon of [8 Field Company](#), and A Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#); and in support, one battery of 24 (SP) Regiment, RA, and half of 39 NZ Heavy Mortar Battery.

The 5th was overcast and showery but apart from vehicles experiencing some trouble with the slippery ground, the relief was effected without difficulty by 11 p.m. The battalion's position on the [Fiumicino](#) had a frontage of 1600 yards and was about two miles south-west of the position it had held on the Fosso Vena. The immediate neighbours were C Squadron Divisional Cavalry (part of [Wilder Force](#)) on the right and the Irish Regiment of [Canada](#) on the left. Twenty-fifth Battalion had two companies forward close to the river, C on the right and A on the left. D Company was astride a lateral road at a sharp bend 200 yards behind C Company and B Company was also astride the lateral road on the other flank on the left rear of A Company, immediately north of Villagrappa, covering a gap between A Company and the Irish Regiment.

The battalion had been told that a dummy barrage was to be fired at 4 a.m. and the companies were to report on the enemy's reaction to it. Throughout the night there was harassing fire from both sides, the battalion having one man wounded. Soon after occupying its position C Company asked for the harassing fire to be raised 100 yards as shells were falling on its side of the river, perilously close to its forward

posts. Shortly afterwards a concentration, 'Skate', fired on the west bank opposite A Company, was on the target, the company asking twenty-five minutes later for it to be repeated. Shortly after midnight D Company gave the bearing of an 88-millimetre gun firing on to its position from a north-westerly direction, C Company a few minutes afterwards similarly reporting a heavy-calibre gun bearing due north-west. In the very early morning nebelwerfers also were firing on three separate bearings between north-west and south-west.

The dummy barrage brought a strong reaction from the enemy, all companies reporting that he replied with heavy artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire. Along the banks of the river C Company also experienced heavy Spandau fire, 'Skate' being again ordered about 5 a.m. as well as harassing fire from the medium machine guns.

Soon after daybreak on the 6th Brigadier Parkinson at Battalion Headquarters outlined the plan for the assault across the [Fiumicino](#), which was to be carried out by 24 and 26 Battalions with 25 Battalion in reserve; the battalion's primary task was to move forward in rear of 26 Battalion and reinforce the right flank, 500 yards beyond the river, but otherwise it was to act as required by the tactical situation. No date was fixed for the attack as on the flanks of the Division some of the formations taking part were bogged down by the wet ground.

It was arranged that companies of 24 and 26 Battalions that night would relieve A and D Companies, which then were to retire to the east of the Fosso Matrice, a ditch or stream about a mile to their rear. The two companies of [Wilder Force](#) on the right of 25 Battalion were similarly to be relieved. The two attacking battalions, together with B and C Companies of 25 Battalion, would be concentrated in readiness west of the Fosso Matrice.

That day, 6 October, Battalion Headquarters was a busy place, with many visitors and numerous reports of enemy activity. Amongst the callers were a tank commander reporting on road and ground conditions, the results of tests over the heavy ground, and the tank support that was feasible; an officer from the 4.2-inch mortar detachment and another from 39 Heavy Mortar Battery; a Mr McGuire from the South African Air Force joining the battalion 'to study the infantry', according to a message from Brigade Headquarters; the brigade staff captain and the brigade liaison officer; officers from A Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#); others from the Irish

Regi ment of [Canada](#); the commanding officers of 24 and 26 Battalions who, with Colonel Norman, then went to Brigade Headquarters; officers of the engineers to ask for a protective detachment; and finally the headquarters of 24 Battalion arriving at dusk in readiness for the advance.

The enemy activity after daybreak that day included a heavy gun shelling A Company; a nebelwerfer reported by C Company; four to six guns firing, reported on two occasions by C Company; a nebelwerfer reported by B Company; two mortars, a heavy gun, and a sniper firing on C Company, which asked for a 3-inch mortar 'stonk' against them. In most cases compass bearings of the enemy weapons were given and were passed on to the artillery. Another dummy barrage, fired at 7.30 p.m. on the Greek front (two miles north-east of 25 Battalion), provoked no visible enemy reaction on the battalion's front. Two patrols were out in the evening; at 6.30 p.m. an A Company patrol of three men led by Sergeant Pike ⁵ reconnoitred a route to the river by which to take an engineer party later in the night but was stopped sixty yards from the bank by Spandau fire and could advance no further; half an hour later a patrol from 13 Platoon under Corporal [Smith](#) ⁶ a little further downstream fared better when, with no interference, it patrolled about 250 yards of the eastern bank. Corporal Smith crossed the river opposite his company's left flank and reported it to be a foot deep and fourteen feet wide, slow-flowing with a firm mud bottom, banks four feet high and bordered by embankments twenty feet wide and twelve feet high, set back about twenty feet from the river banks. On the patrol's return journey shortly before 8 p.m., a Spandau from the vicinity of the place where Smith had crossed fired over the heads of the men.

Heavy rain during the night 6 – 7 October made the roads and tracks very difficult for vehicles, and on the Canadian front impossible for armour, causing the attack to be postponed to the evening of the 8th. By 11 p.m. on the 6th A and D Companies were relieved as planned, 8 Platoon reporting four casualties during the relief; it was necessary to have 'stonks' fired so that the casualties could be brought out by the RAP jeep, which was promptly on the scene. Casualties on 6 – 7 October were one killed, one died of wounds, and eleven wounded. Enemy fire was also troublesome in C Company's sector; shortly before midnight the company called for stonks 'Croquet' and 'Lacrosse', fired across the river opposite the position, and just after midnight it was requested that 'Croquet' should be lifted 200 yards.

On the 7th there was much activity by the artillery of both sides and in the early morning enemy shells landed very close to Battalion Headquarters. Shortly after noon C Company headquarters had the misfortune to be hit twice by the supporting guns and asked that stonk 'Lacrosse' be lifted 800 yards; the company asked that the RAP jeep be sent up as it had one man killed and nine wounded. In the evening C Company was still having trouble with its artillery, asking that 'Lacrosse' be lifted another 500 yards and reporting that 'Skate' had fallen short. There seemed to be something radically wrong at the guns; presumably the messages from C Company were reaching the artillery (they are recorded in 25 Battalion's almost minute-to-minute war diary) and the frequent calls both for the concentrations and for the lifts would have kept the batteries very much on the alert. It is noticeable that 'Skate' was on target for the first three calls on the night 6 – 7 October yet was short on the evening of the 7th; with the ground in such soft condition, which could have caused trouble, the gunners would certainly have been exercising great care.

However, the relief that night ended C Company's difficulties so far as short-shooting was concerned. At 8 p.m. B Company, on relief by 24 Battalion, had moved back to its concentration area. The enemy was still very active in front of C Company, which was to be relieved by A Company 24 Battalion, and further defensive fire was called for; Colonel Norman also directed the medium machine guns to bring down fire in front of C Company during the relief, and twenty minutes later, shortly after 9 p.m., instructed the 3-inch mortars and the machine guns to fire in front of the relieving company, which had reported that it was being attacked; the relief of C Company was completed about 10 p.m.

On the following day (8 October), when torrential rain fell, various alterations to the plan of attack were made and 25 Battalion's role then became the support of 24 Battalion instead of 26 Battalion. In the afternoon the operation was postponed to the 10th. On the following afternoon the Canadians took over the position, and late in the afternoon 25 Battalion (less C Company which had already gone out) moved back to the road alongside the Uso River and from there travelled by RMT vehicles to the coastal strip near the mouth of the Fontanaccia. There was only one casualty that day, one man dying of wounds.

After two days in the new area B and C Companies occupied houses in [Viserba](#),

three miles to the south near Route 16, A and D Companies remaining where they were, while Battalion Headquarters occupied houses a little to the north of the mouth of the [Scolo Brancona](#). For the next five days the usual out-of-the-line routine followed, enlivened a little on the 14th by a warning to look out for possible enemy landings, a sabotage party having recently caused damage in [Rimini](#); no such enterprises disturbed the battalion.

On 16 October at a conference of brigade commanders held at 5 Brigade's headquarters and attended by battalion and other unit commanders (an opportunity missed by enemy aircraft to send a wave of promotion throughout the Division), a review of the general situation was given. The enemy appeared to be withdrawing to a main line of resistance east of [Cesena](#) (a town seven miles west of the [Fiumicino](#)) and the River [Pisciatiello](#); on 11 October 5 Brigade had crossed the [Fiumicino](#) a little to the south of the position 25 Battalion had held there, and was advancing to the north-west towards [Ruffio](#) on the [Pisciatiello](#), about three miles east of [Cesena](#).

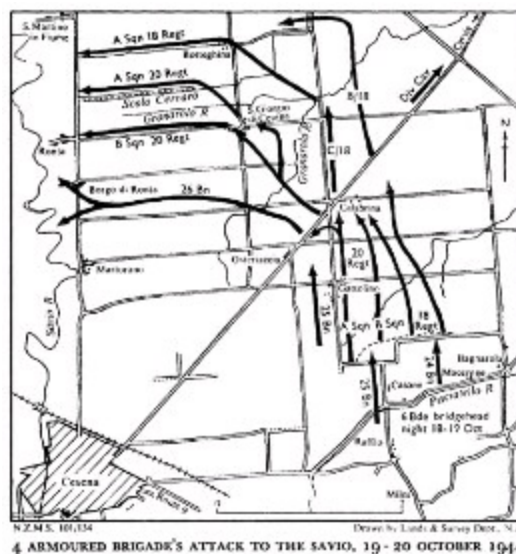
Alternative plans were explained. Depending upon the situation at 5 p.m. on 16 October, 4 Armoured Brigade would pass through 5 Brigade with two squadrons and 22 (Motor) Battalion and exploit to the west; 6 Brigade would follow up and support the armour. If that plan was not feasible, 6 Brigade would relieve 5 Brigade and continue the advance.

Shortly after 11 a.m. the next day, 25 Battalion left for an assembly area about a mile west of the Fiumicino River, an hour's journey. There the troops were dispersed for four hours while the position to be taken over from 23 Battalion, five miles to the north-west, was reconnoitred. Trucks then took the battalion to crossroads about halfway there and the companies marched on to their positions, with A and D Companies forward and C and D in reserve. A Company had 7 Platoon forward at [Ruffio](#), 650 yards south of the [Pisciatiello](#), and Company Headquarters and 9 Platoon together 500 yards back, with 8 Platoon 200 yards to their right. D Company was 800 yards south of A Company, with the river a mile away to the north-west and west; B and C Companies were more-or-less adjoining D Company on the south-east and south; Battalion Headquarters was 300 yards farther to the south-east. The battalion was really on a one-company front, facing north and stretching about a mile and a half from 7 Platoon to Battalion Headquarters. By 6.45

p.m. the companies were in position, A and D Companies each having a troop of tanks close up and Mios available on call. Twenty-fourth Battalion was on the right and on the left Canadian troops were advancing north-west with the intention of crossing the river at 8.30 that night.

A busy period followed, especially for A Company which had patrols out getting in touch with the flanking units and crossing the river to report on the state of the road beyond the bridge, which of course had been destroyed. Well before daylight 8 Platoon was brought forward to the vicinity of the bridge to protect an engineer reconnaissance party and to take up a position there. The river at that point was fifty feet wide and the banks fifteen feet high, but the water did not appear to be deep. It had been reported that for about two miles on either side of the bridge the river bank was mined but patrols saw no sign of mines.

Shortly before midnight 17 – 18 October it was learnt that the Canadians had succeeded in crossing the [Pisciarello](#) in strength 2400 yards south-west of A Company, and that on the other flank 24 Battalion was within 300 yards of the river. At 3.25 a.m. 25 Battalion received orders to move companies to the river and attempt to cross. With such a narrow front there was no room for more than one company, and under instructions from Colonel Norman A Company sent a second platoon forward; D Company was also warned to be ready to move up later on the right of A Company.



4 armoured brigade's attack to the savio, 19 – 20 october 1944

There was little enemy activity, though a couple of hours before daylight A Company was harassed by a nebelwerfer and asked the artillery to deal with it; when the light strengthened men of 8 Platoon saw enemy troops in a house on the opposite bank and sniped one of them. According to the engineers a sixty-foot Bailey bridge would be required to cross the river at the broken bridge, though a quick crossing could be made by using an armoured bulldozer and an Ark bridge. About dawn D Company had sent 17 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant R. D. (Pat) O'Neill) to Casa Potini on the right of A Company and within 300 yards of the river; by 9 a.m. the remainder of D Company had moved to that locality. Half an hour later A Company moved its third platoon to the river, where it then had 8 Platoon at the bridge, 9 Platoon on the right, and 7 Platoon on the left, a frontage of about 500 yards; Company Headquarters was 300 yards behind 9 Platoon.

During the day the enemy artillery directed harassing fire on the forward areas, the battalion's positions being spasmodically shelled and mortared. At two in the afternoon Colonel Norman gave instructions for that night, 18 – 19 October. Twenty-fifth Battalion was to secure a bridgehead over the [Pisciatello](#) and pass part of 4 Armoured Brigade and 22 Battalion through it. With 24 Battalion on its right, 25 Battalion would then advance on a two-company front, D Company on the right and A Company on the left; B Company would cross the river behind A Company and guard the left flank, while C Company was to protect the engineers working on the bridge site.

At 11 p.m. under a barrage the advance would commence from the Scola Olca, a ditch 400 yards south of the river. B Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#), which was to support 25 Battalion, would cross the bridge and at first light would be up with the infantry; the Ark bridge would be ready by 2.30 a.m. The battalion's objective was a road and ditch on a frontage of 1100 yards and was 1300 yards north of the river. On the left the Canadians had two troops of armour across and were also exploiting to the north-east from Ponte della [Pietra](#), a mile south-west of A Company.

Throughout the day, to keep the enemy on edge, the battalion mortars from the vicinity of [Ruffio](#) carried out a good deal of harassing fire; when the attack started they were to fire a creeping barrage with the artillery to thicken up the fire, the first time in [Italy](#) that the mortars would be working to an artillery programme in a

barrage. They were not to cross the river till the following day, 19 October. The task of the medium machine guns was to provide harassing fire on the roads, especially the crossroads on the flanks of the two battalions.

As planned, at 11 p.m. the barrage opened and the advance commenced. Only slight opposition was encountered, though on the start line 16 and 17 Platoons (Second-Lieutenants [Beer](#)⁷ and O'Neill) almost immediately suffered casualties from the enemy counter-barrage, and about 1.20 a.m. D Company reported it was on the objective. Before reaching the river A Company had two men wounded but had little difficulty in reaching its objective, where it was in position by 2 a.m. In the meantime C Company occupied a position to cover the engineers at the bridge, reporting four casualties and the capture of six enemy, amended later to four killed and thirteen wounded; mines in the vicinity of the river were reported to have caused several casualties. Responsible for left-flank protection, B Company at 2.15 a.m. was in position a few hundred yards south-west of A Company.

Naturally the companies were anxious to have their supporting tanks and other arms forward; the tanks had moved up near the river in readiness to cross and had reported that the work on the bridge was progressing well and that possibly vehicles could cross then. By 3.25 a.m. the bridge was ready and the armour moving forward, reaching A and D Companies about 4.30 a.m., together with some of the SP guns and 4.2-inch mortar OPs. The going on the road leading to the bridge was satisfactory for the tanks, but with heavy rain just before 4 a.m. was bad for wheeled vehicles, and the anti-tank guns were told not to cross the river. They were on the move at the time, about an hour before daybreak, and were held up by the mud on a detour round a big demolition in the road at [Ruffio](#); they were moved clear of the road and instructed to stay there in the meantime.

The Ark bridge over the [Pisciatello](#) was sinking and C Company was directed to tell the tanks to be ready to help each other across the bridge; at that time fifty-six tanks of 20 Armoured Regiment were passing 25 Battalion Tactical Headquarters on their way to the river. Shortly afterwards B Company in its position 900 yards north-west of the bridge was told that its tanks were held up by a crater in the road about 400 yards east of the company.

The Germans opposing 25 Battalion at the bridge area were 3 Company of I

Battalion 67 Panzer Grenadier Regiment; two prisoners who had been sent in by C Company said they were from Alsace-Lorraine and that at 6 p.m. the previous day the Germans had withdrawn several kilometres from the river; they thought a counter-attack might possibly take place at first light, in about two hours' time, but a later interrogation of the prisoners showed that the warning had no foundation.

The bulk of the armour of 4 Armoured Brigade, which was to pass through 25 Battalion, was to have crossed the river by a scissors bridge on 24 Battalion's front and by the Ark bridge in 25 Battalion's sector. Owing to the soft bottom the scissors bridge was rendered unusable by the first and only tank to cross, thus concentrating the armour on the Ark bridge, with consequent delay in the passage of the two regiments concerned; a 40 ft Bailey bridge was being erected in place of the scissors. Meanwhile 24 Battalion on the right of 25 Battalion was deprived of its armour and, if necessary, part of the armour with the latter would be sent to 24 Battalion, whose squadron was being diverted to the Ark bridge and crossed it about 6 a.m. The main body of armour followed and by 7.20 a.m. one regiment was formed up behind 25 Battalion's forward localities, the second regiment crossing over the bridge in 24 Battalion's sector and about an hour later assembling behind that battalion. The delay caused by the bad going and the trouble with the bridges had prevented the armour from thrusting forward from the bridgehead at first light as had been planned.

Shortly after daybreak, when signalling the dispositions of A Company, the tanks reported that while crossing the river A Company had lost its Slidex rule. This instrument was a type of sliding rule on which was the key to the code of the day, and very often inside the case was the key to a week's or a fortnight's codes.

'The loss of this was naturally of a serious nature,' wrote one man, who went on to give the very interesting sequel. 'A and B Companies were given an objective about 2000 yards over the river and German parties were by-passed in houses en route. B Company followed up behind, mopping up these strays, and one of the prisoners who was captured had in his possession the missing Slidex. Had the Slidex been sent back to the enemy HQ it may have caused considerable trouble'— another example, in reverse, of the value of sending back, with all speed, captured enemy documents and material.

About 7.30 a.m. it was decided that 25 Battalion was to await orders before moving forward; the demolition at [Ruffio](#) would be passable in an hour or so and metalling was proceeding. Up to daybreak the casualties reported to 25 Battalion headquarters were four killed and seventeen wounded. A little after nine twelve prisoners arrived from B Company, which reported that 1200 yards west of the bridge 11 Platoon was in touch with the Canadians. Early that morning Captain Webster had sent in a report on the operations of A Company:

'We consolidated at 0200 hours in positions I showed you yesterday. Only two wounded just before reaching river, Pte Dalzell ⁸ and Pte [Ryan](#), ⁹ both Mine personnel.

'9 PI was engaged from a casa just before we reached first objective, and their return fire killed one and wounded one. 7 PI then took 9 prisoners. Tanks, S.P. and 4.2 O.Ps reached here at 0435 hours and were in position before first light. Since then S.P. and 4.2 have been stonking to our left.

'At approx 0720 hours [20 Regt](#) arrived and pushed off across country towards next lateral road. At 0700 hrs a big blow was set off at cross-roads 634089 [850 yards west of A Company and a mile north-west of the bridge]. We immediately engaged area with 4.2 and S.Ps. At 0735 a further 2 blows at 633093 [400 yards farther north] and 634104 [a further 1100 yards north]. So far we are unable to make contact with you over the 18 [set]. Have made contact with Baker and Dog [B and D Companies]. No return shelling round here for a change. Regards.'

The three demolitions reported by Captain Webster were at crossroads on a road running north and south a couple of hundred yards west of A Company, the road passing through [Osteriaccia](#) which lay 600 yards north of the last demolition.

At 9.50 a.m. 4 Armoured Brigade issued orders for the armoured attack, the first of four objectives being part of the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road between [Osteriaccia](#) and [Calabrina](#) (1000 yards north-east of [Osteriaccia](#)), and a section of a secondary road running eastwards from the [Calabrina](#) crossroads; this was part of the German 'Doris' defence line, to which the enemy had retired during the night. Further objectives for the armour were two branches of the Rio [Granarolo](#) and the Savio River beyond. The conditions were not particularly suitable for the tanks; a good deal of rain had fallen

but the weather had cleared just in time before the going became impossible; the country was 'quite flat farmland, dotted with casas and trees and criss-crossed with narrow lanes. Though by no means ideal tank country it seemed the best we were ever likely to encounter in this country and the tanks were anxious to make the most of it'.¹⁰ As [General Freyberg](#) noted in his diary:

'Country forward is difficult—small fields and big hedges and no fields of fire.... Unless you check each crossroad it is impossible to know where you are. If we had had to do this in wet weather it would have taken a long time.'

East of [Osteriaccia](#) the armoured units encountered a good deal of machine-gun, artillery and mortar fire, while soft ground and the numerous deep ditches across the line of advance were causing trouble, but by 11 a.m. the leading troops were 300 yards south-east of [Calabrina](#); 1000 yards south-west of them [Osteriaccia](#) was still in enemy hands.

At this stage 4 Armoured Brigade was ordered to push on to its second objective, the southern branch of the Rio [Granarolo](#), and then on to the third objective. Sixth Brigade was directed to advance to the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road, where in the [Calabrina](#) area 24 Battalion was to occupy an all-round defensive position while 25 Battalion was to hold [Osteriaccia](#); 26 Battalion was to be in reserve at [Macerone](#), a little over two miles to the south-east. Fifth Brigade was to send two battalions to the northern side of the [Pisciatello](#).

At 11.30 a.m. 25 Battalion received orders to advance on [Osteriaccia](#), which was 2000 yards north-west of its foremost localities. Starting an hour later, B Company with one troop of tanks led the advance, followed fifteen minutes later by C Company and then by A and D Companies. B and C Companies were to hold the village; A Company was to occupy a position 300 yards south-west of them, and D Company would occupy i. Casetti, 800 yards north-east of [Osteriaccia](#); this operation would place the battalion on a frontage of 1100 yards, facing generally north-west towards the Savio River though organised for all-round defence. B and C Companies each had two anti-tank guns and the artillery OPs were with them; the Mios accompanied A and D Companies.

For a time the advance met with little resistance. At 2.20 p.m. B Company

encountered snipers, so called, which the tanks dealt with, but half an hour later, when about 400 yards south-east of the objective, the company was held up by heavy mortar and machine-gun fire. The tanks engaged the enemy, who was thought to be retiring, which in fact he was but only from the outskirts into the village. Shortly afterwards the company commander, Captain Clay, was wounded and was evacuated by the RAP jeep; the company suffered several other casualties, including all the NCOs of one platoon. Despite the covering fire of the tanks, B Company was unable to advance as any movement was met by heavy shellfire, which apparently was directed from an OP in [Osteriaccia](#). During these operations Private Doig ¹¹ distinguished himself by assisting the wounded, making three trips across country to get back as many as possible to the RAP, and also by giving Company Headquarters information as to the dispositions of the platoons; he received an immediate award of the MM.

C Company's line of advance was somewhat eastward of that adopted by B Company. The company had several casualties from enemy artillery fire when passing a demolition which had held up its supporting tanks, and moved farther to the east to the vicinity of Gattolino, 1000 yards south-east of B Company. Company Headquarters and two platoons were in Gattolino and the third platoon 400 yards to the north-west on a lateral road, where it was 350 yards south of B Company. A Company was 600 yards south of C, and D Company farther to the south with an advanced platoon within 400 yards of A Company.

At 4 p.m. B Company's objective, the village of [Osteriaccia](#), was still held by the Germans and the company's positions were being heavily shelled. Over the whole front the enemy's reaction to the daylight advance had been vigorous, the forward areas being liberally shelled and mortared. Just about dusk, therefore, it was decided that the companies would dig in where they were.

On being wounded, Captain Clay reported B Company's situation when brought in to Battalion Headquarters and said that the fire from the supporting guns had been very effective; Lieutenant B. A. Andrews had taken command of the company. Late in the afternoon Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens, commanding 24 Battalion, came over to Battalion Headquarters and reported that his forward positions were east of C Company, his left flank being within 400 yards of Gattolino. Half an hour later the tanks and 22 (Motor) Battalion took over 24 Battalion's front, though that battalion

remained in position. Twenty-sixth Battalion was on the same general line east of 24 Battalion.

Colonel Norman was told that aircraft would be over during the night and that from 7 a.m. fighter planes would be in the air, on call at half-hour intervals. The battalion's casualties on 18 – 19 October were 1 officer (Second-Lieutenant [Bark](#)¹²) and 11 other ranks killed, and 3 officers (Captain M. H. A. Clay, Lieutenant H. R. Martin, DCM, Second-Lieutenant E. F. T. Beer) and 31 other ranks wounded.

During the evening enemy shelling and mortaring was heavy at times, continually cutting a signal line that was being laid from the battalion to 22 Battalion on the right. On the other flank contact was to be made at two in the morning with a Canadian patrol, 350 yards west of C Company; that company reported that it could not find the patrol, nor did it know anything about an earlier report from 6 Brigade that the Canadians were in touch with the left flank of the battalion.

[Osteriaccia](#) (known to some of the troops in the area as 'Huntermville', since Sergeant Mick Hunter¹³ took the first patrol into it) was reported by B Company to be clear of enemy troops, and a little after 8.30 a.m. the company moved into the village. From 10 a.m. 25 Battalion was in brigade reserve, and an hour later Battalion Headquarters moved up to C Company's headquarters at Gattolino, C Company having occupied the southern end of [Osteriaccia](#). During the morning B Squadron [20 Armoured Regiment](#) left the battalion and was replaced by C Squadron, which however in the afternoon passed over to 5 Brigade.

At 1.30 p.m. fresh orders came by telephone, [Colonel Fairbrother](#)¹⁴ (26 Battalion) being with Colonel Norman at 25 Battalion's headquarters at the time. Instead of continuing its advance to the north, 6 Brigade was to wheel to the left, 26 Battalion turning westwards through 25 Battalion and advancing to the Savio River, 4000 yards away. When 26 Battalion had reached a north-south road 2300 yards west of [Osteriaccia](#), 25 Battalion was to occupy a position, facing west, on the [Rio Granarolo](#), 1300 yards west of the village; then, when 26 Battalion had reached the [Savio](#), it would replace that battalion on the north-south road. Twenty-fourth Battalion was in brigade reserve.

While B and C Companies continued to hold [Osteriaccia](#), the two rear companies

of the battalion at about 3 p.m. moved to the north of them; D Company took up a position two or three hundred yards north of the village, while A Company went on another thousand yards to where the road crossed the Rio [Granarolo](#), both companies facing west in readiness for the advance in that direction. During these movements all ranks were placed somewhat on the alert by an interesting message from Brigade Headquarters that 'Captain Lardie, dressed in British uniform and passing himself off as an I.O., may attempt to pass through our lines and if so is to be detained'. However, nothing was seen of him.

A few minutes after 5 p.m. when 26 Battalion was within 500 yards of the [Savio](#), Brigadier Parkinson instructed Colonel Norman to move at first light in the morning. During the evening D Company asked for a despatch rider to be sent to collect enemy maps found in the house occupied by its headquarters, an obvious recognition of the possible necessity for urgent examination by higher formations. The only casualty of the day was one man wounded.

The following morning, 21 October, A and D Companies advanced to the west in the wake of 26 Battalion, halting at another lateral road about 800 yards short of that previously selected and taking up their positions on the right and left boundaries of the brigade sector with a gap between them of 1100 yards; A Company was on the right. Battalion Headquarters moved up to a central position 700 yards behind; B Company left the village and occupied the position on the Rio [Granarolo](#), C Company remaining in [Osteriaccia](#).

Returning about 10 a.m. from Brigade Headquarters, the CO told the company commanders that on the following night 6 Brigade was to be relieved by the Canadians; before then, however, the brigade was to occupy a position on the [Savio](#) on a three-battalion front of 5600 yards, with 26 Battalion in its present position on the left, 24 Battalion in the centre, and 25 Battalion on the right; on relief the brigade would go back to a rest area near [Fabriano](#), south-west of [Iesi](#), to which on 22 October the Division (with the exception of the artillery field regiments) was being withdrawn.

Twenty-fifth Battalion's position on the [Savio](#) had a frontage of 1600 yards and was about four miles north-west of Osteriaccia; 22 (Motor) Battalion would be on the right. About noon Colonel Norman and his company commanders visited 18

Armoured Regiment, which was operating in the area the battalion was to occupy. At that hour the tanks were meeting opposition at Borgo Marinon, a couple of hundred yards north of the right flank of the position and were dealing with it.

Early in the afternoon A Company left for the new sector, followed by D Company and then B Company. By 3.20 p.m. A Company was in position on the right, and half an hour later D Company had taken up its position on the other flank, C Company occupying the centre shortly afterwards. B Company was in reserve 800 yards behind A Company. The situation was quiet. On its left front D Company found a place where the river could be crossed and asked for anti-tank guns to be sent up, and also to be informed regarding the defensive-fire tasks arranged on its front. Soon after this, Colonel [Ferguson](#)¹⁵ of [18 Armoured Regiment](#) called in at Battalion Headquarters and said that tank crews who had been to the river on foot had found that the crossing reported by D Company was not negotiable by tanks.

The battalion was no sooner established in its new position than representatives from the Canadians arrived to make a reconnaissance before taking over. During the afternoon there had been little enemy activity, the first report coming at 5.30 p.m. from A Company which had come under long-range small-arms fire from the north. Civilians told D Company that two nights ago enemy tanks had retired across the river, and the next night five tanks and fifty infantry followed, blowing the bridge after them; they also said the river was mined and the houses on the other side booby-trapped. Enemy mortaring caused two casualties in D Company, a civilian also being wounded.

At 8 p.m. that night, 21 – 22 October, the Canadians on the left of 6 Brigade were attacking under a barrage to secure a bridgehead over the [Savio](#). The New Zealand Division was to co-operate in various ways, including support from the artillery, medium machine guns, and mortars, and feint attacks by 4 and 6 Brigades in which all available weapons, including tanks, were to be used. As was to be expected, during the night the enemy guns and mortars were very active and the companies sent in numerous flash bearings. About 9.45 p.m. the house occupied by 25 Battalion Tactical Headquarters was hit by two shells which caused two casualties, the total for the day being five wounded. Most of the fire was directed, of course, against the Canadian sector on the left, but there was some activity opposite the battalion. Just before daybreak, as an enemy tank was thought to be

approaching, D Company called for defensive fire; Colonel Norman arranged for the medium artillery to shell a house across the river opposite the company front. Shortly afterwards, A Company heard a tank, and about 7.30 a.m. opposite D Company there was considerable movement on the other side of the river and enemy mortar fire was falling there, obviously directed against the advancing Canadians.

During the morning guides were sent to bring up the relieving Canadians, the [Cape Breton Highlanders](#), and by 3 p.m. the relief was complete, the battalion moving back to an area near the Pisciatello River. An interesting account of the period is given by a member of the battalion:

'The last few days had been spent in leap-frogging—getting up on to the [Savio](#)—jacking up the Battalion in a respectable line for the change-over with the Canadians. The change-over was done at very short notice and even before the Bn reached the [Savio](#) everyone was very tired, having been on the move and in action for about five days. Sometimes during this period the men had slept without blankets, food was short, and the 2 i/cs were able to struggle up at irregular intervals with rations and supplies. The Ites helped out with some very good pears and potatoes and the foraging spirit was well to the fore. Not a day passed without one or two Coy Comm conferences, followed by recces and further conferences. [On being relieved]— At first it was thought that transport would be at Bn HQ about a mile and a half away. At the last minute troops were told that no transport was available here and that they would have to walk to a village called [Osteriaccia](#) about 8 – 10 miles away [actually five and a half miles by road for the furthest troops, A and B Coys]. The roads were narrow, it had been raining off and on for the last two days, and the mud was deep. The Canadians had started to come up, our Bns had started to move out, and transport and vehicles of all kinds blocked the roads, struggling through the mud. The troops marching back were forced to the side of the road and sometimes right off it. This made marching conditions unpleasant and by the time Osteriaccia was reached 3½ hours later, everyone had "had it". The last straw was when they found no transport waiting for them. This finally arrived and the Bn moved off to a lying-up area.

'As we finally got under way the next day there was a large sign erected by the

Canadians, who thought the Kiwis were leaving the country, that they "were very pleased to have met us and worked with us".'

Any hopes of being homeward bound that may have been raised by that sign did not last long—"we were back in the line again in a few weeks".

Just before noon next day, 23 October, 25 Battalion left for [Iesi](#), the village it had occupied on 28 August on arriving in the Adriatic sector. As the road to its destination, [Fabriano](#), was not fit for wheeled vehicles, the troops stayed in houses in [Iesi](#) until the morning of the 25th, when the column departed for the rest area, 20 miles to the south-west. There, at Castelraimondo near [Fabriano](#), together with 24 and 26 Battalions, the troops occupied partially completed Italian barracks.

The total casualties since the end of September were 1 officer and 12 other ranks killed, 3 died of wounds, and 3 officers and 50 other ranks wounded. One unusual casualty was a man with phosphorus burns.

Shorn of detail, a 'Summary of the month's activities' signed by the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant R. S. Liddell, gives a bald account of the month's operations:

'For the greater part of the month the Bn has been in action, with odd periods of a few days rest. Each time the Bn went back into the line advances were made and its contribution to the 8th Army's successes were considerable. On the 5th of the month the Bn relieved the 21 NZ Bn who occupied positions on the banks of the Rubicone. The following morning a dummy barrage was put down to test the defences of the enemy. The Germans replied in no uncertain manner and laid down a heavy concentration of shells, mortars, and machine-gun fire, and it was clear he intended to defend this position. On the 7th the Bn passed to reserve and moved back a short distance, still well within mortar range. The weather at this time did not favour military operations and an attack to be made by 24 and 26 Bns on the night of the 8th had to be postponed. The next day the Bn was relieved by the Royal Canadian Dragoons and moved back to a residential area.

'On the 17th the Bn once again moved back to relieve the 23rd Bn who had pushed as far as the [Pisciarello](#). At this stage the Bn was on a company front with A Coy in the lead. The next night the Bn attacked across the river successfully although the bridge put across in the [24 Bn](#) area collapsed and all the supporting arms and

the tanks had to use the one in 25's area. In this action the Bn advanced 1000 yds secured all objectives and took upwards of 60 POW.

'The following afternoon the Bn moved forward to test the defences and got as far as Osteriaccia where B Coy were held up by snipers. The next day B Coy occupied Osteriaccia without opposition and a few hours later C Coy moved into the southern part of the town.

'Pursuing the enemy the Bn advanced 6000 yds to reach the banks of the Savio. About 24 hrs later the Bn was relieved by the Cape Breton Highlanders. The next day the Bn began the march back to the rest and training area.'

Since the battalion's transfer to the Adriatic front there had been a considerable turnover of the officers of the unit. Of those shown in the list of 3 September, sixteen were no longer with the unit. These were: Majors Neil, Handyside, Sanders and Hewitt, Captains Thomas and Sheild, Lieutenants Lawson, Rees, Easthope, Sidford and Grumitt, Second-Lieutenants Dey, Hansen, Banks, McLean and Beer. The only officers additional to those shown in the 3 September list who were with the battalion at the end of October were Lieutenant A. J. Beattie, Second-Lieutenant Jackson,¹⁶ and Lieutenant H. R. Martin (attached), who brought the number of officers up to twenty-five, compared with thirty-eight in the September list. The RMO (Pearse) and the chaplain (Rowe) were still with the battalion.

Some observations and suggestions by Captain Bourke, commanding D Company, arising from the recent operations are of interest:

- (Too much local movement on objective. Digging in should be most immediate a) even if only temporary measure pending further shift to link up with neighbours. Pln commanders should have almost full control in respect of quick digging in, without delay caused by coy commander coming forward to reconnoitre.
- (Clearing houses. (1) 2 Secs deployed in area of house for protection searching b) troops and closing of escape routes. (2) A period of listening—as close as possible to house. (3) Third sec move fwd to search, two men making for best entrance remainder covering openings as they move fwd. (4) First man enters house on hands and knees and followed by second man going from room to room in bounds (i.e., as for scouts). (5) Use of rocks thrown into room as a ruse to make enemy move. 36 Grenades too valuable to be used on possibly empty rooms.
- River crossings—Recce etc. (1) Keep away from recognised crossings unless

essential. (2) If necessary to approach river crossing (recognised) recon party not to use obvious approach but preferably to move along river bed covered by fire from own bank. (3) Engineer or officer recon not to be made till recon party is firm on enemy side.

Dealing with Tiger Tanks at night. Use of phosphorus grenades recommended. Point of impact grating below right rear of turret where air intake is situated.

17 Pdrs A/Tk Support. Should be well up preferably in coy area to deal with Tigers using covered approaches. Must be dealt with before tank reaches infantry. Close country necessitates their forward position. A/Tk defence must be thicker than used before in more open country.

Defence of houses. Defence of houses now major question as both sides use extensively. Enemy however has time to prepare such strong points by bolstering up walls, digging shelters, etc.

Our defence—no more than one sec and PI HQ in house (unless substantial bldg) 2 and 3 secs in slit trenches as far as possible clear of house, while still being in position to defend it. A whole platoon in house invites heavy casualties from conc. shelling or from direct shooting-up by tank. Houses now only possible O.P. positions and therefore must expect conc. shelling if position static for any length of time.

Observations and suggestions by pln commanders as had little battle experience.

K. J. Bourke Capt O.C. D Coy

Tactical questions such as these were to receive close attention in discussions, courses of instruction, and other training in the weeks that were to be spent out of battle.

¹ Maj M. H. A. Clay, m.i.d.; born Wanganui, 27 Mar 1919; bank officer; wounded 19 Oct 1944.

² Also named Rubicone

³ Sgt E. J. Dustow; Auckland; born Dannevirke, 18 Feb 1921; shepherd; twice wounded.

⁴ Lt-Col N. P. Wilder, DSO; Waipurau; born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO 2 NZ Div Cav 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

⁵ Lt W. G. Pike, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Wellington, 2 Dec 1923; costing clerk; joined Regular Force 1947.

⁶ WO II A. A. F. Smith, MM; Pukehou; born Dannevirke, 16 Apr 1911; farm manger; wounded 27 Feb 1944.

⁷ Capt E. F. T. Beer; Tauranga; born Wellington, 4 Dec 1918; journalist; wounded 19 Oct 1944.

⁸ L-Cpl L. W. S. Dalzell; born Christchurch, 15 Jul 1922; grocer's assistant; died of wounds 30 Nov 1944.

⁹ Pte G. W. Ryan; Gisborne; born NZ 16 Nov 1921; carpenter's apprentice; wounded 19 Oct 1944.

¹⁰ One More River, Army Board campaign survey.

¹¹ 2 Lt G. A. Diog, MM; Christchurch; born Greymouth, 10 May 1909; bank clerk.

¹² 2 Lt J. G. Bark; born Aust., 5 Sep 1911; school teacher; killed in action 19 Oct 1944.

¹³ WO II A. E. F. Hunter; Hawera; born Inglewood, 12 Mar 1922; labourer.

¹⁴ Brig M. C. Fairbrother, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23 and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr-Dec 1943; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd

Adv Base, 2 NZEF, Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

¹⁵ Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC, ED; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Apr 1912; warehouseman; OC 7 Fd Coy May 1941; CO 18 Armd Regt Dec 1943–Jan 1944; 20 Regt Jan–May 1944; 18 Regt Jul 1944–Feb 1945; wounded 6 Dec 1943.

¹⁶ Lt E. R. C. Jackson; Wellington; born NZ 6 Feb 1907; land agent; wounded 22 Feb 1944.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 17 – THE SENIO

CHAPTER 17

The Senio

The last few days of October were spent in settling in to the camp and improving the accommodation by covering the open windows, constructing beds, and installing heating; the muddy tracks and roads were gradually improved though bad weather during the first few days had turned the whole area into a quagmire; and with a very pleasant countryside, friendly and hospitable people, and the improvements in the buildings—unfinished barracks intended for Allied prisoners of war—the battalion was soon comfortable. [Castelraimondo](#) is situated in a narrow valley in the eastern foothills of the Apennines, and though it was refreshing to be in a countryside peaceful and untouched by war, the weather was unkind, bleak and cold, with a good deal of heavy rain, dull weather, and wintry winds. It was, of course, late in the year, the first snow falling on 10 November. There was little of interest in the immediate neighbourhood and, especially after dark, the state of the roads and tracks discouraged movement on foot. Leave to [Rome](#), [Florence](#) (where a new New Zealand club was available), and to the 6 Brigade rest camp at [Perugia](#) was available, though the allotment was not sufficient to satisfy all demands; a pleasant feature of the camp at [Perugia](#), which was in a disused wing of the university, was the employment of civilian labour to free the men of all menial tasks.

The battalion had come out of the [Savio](#) position 8 officers and 134 other ranks under establishment, very much the same as at the end of September; the number evacuated sick, still rather high in comparison with the other two battalions of the brigade though showing an improvement, was 1 officer and 110 other ranks; and its share of the reinforcement of 13 officers and 503 men, which reached the brigade in October, was barely sufficient to replace its losses. The health of the unit was normal except for a marked increase in skin infections (especially boils), while the wet and cold weather was causing trouble to those with any history of rheumatic and similar complaints.

Training, which included two route marches and two night exercises of two hours' duration each week, was otherwise confined to the mornings, the afternoons being devoted to sports which covered a wide field—boxing (including tuition), tennis, quoits, basketball, soccer, and rugby—the last named terminating in a divisional

competition of keen interest. A 'Real Live Donkey Derby' was held at [San Severino](#), a few miles away, by D Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, 25 Battalion on invitation attending in force and helping considerably to swell the 100-lire 'tote'; 6 Brigade Band enlivened the occasion, as also did a wet canteen (no glasses provided), and the outing was most enjoyable.

But the grim business of war was not forgotten. Apart from the subjects already referred to, the main features in the training were a seven-days' course in mines and booby traps (for eight men per company); a battalion NCOs' course; a lecture for officers on the interrogation of prisoners of war; instruction for the Intelligence Section in the German Army, current affairs, interpretation of air photographs, the Slidex, compass, map-reading, road reconnaissance and reports; range zeroing and practices for all weapons (Bren, Tommy gun, Piat, rifle); use of flame-throwers; field works, demolitions, and tactical exercises; and instruction for mortar, signal, carrier, and anti-tank platoons in their various equipments.

On 19 November at a conference of commanding officers, Brigadier Parkinson said that in the European theatre there was a possibility of the enemy being defeated before the spring; in [Italy](#), to prevent the withdrawal of troops for service elsewhere, it was the intention to exert the utmost pressure against the enemy.

After a warning order and a postponement of six days the battalion at 1 a.m. on 25 November left for a divisional concentration area near [Cesena](#). Arriving there at 9 a.m. after a fast journey, the battalion was directed to [Forli](#), 12 miles to the north-west, where at the eastern side of the city the troops occupied houses and flats, mostly in good condition and fairly comfortable. The city's peacetime population was 65,000 and its chief industries the manufacture of silk and ironwork; it housed large numbers of Allied troops.

The weather was cold, the winds from the Alps (130 miles to the north) being particularly frigid, and the discovery of a large stove factory with considerable stocks seemed especially fortunate; in many of the billets to the great comfort of the troops, stoves soon made their appearance, some with their stove-pipes at strange angles which apparently did not affect their efficiency; the battalion records do not disclose the source of the fuel.

That morning 2 NZ Division had come under command of 5 Corps and on the afternoon of the following day (26 November) was to relieve 4 British Division on the Lamone River, just to the east of Faenza, a town on Route 9 eight miles north-west of Forli. Fifth Brigade was to hold the right sector and 6 Brigade the left (on a one-battalion front) with 46 British Division on its left. Twenty-sixth Battalion took over 6 Brigade's front of 800 yards between the Rimini- Bologna railway and Route 9, the other three battalions of the Brigade—24, 25, and Divisional Cavalry Battalions—remaining in Forli in reserve; the RMT vehicles which had brought the troops forward from the rest area remained under command.

Heavy rain for the next two days made conditions miserable, even in the town. The discovery of cinemas, ENSA shows, and three canteens, however, did much to counter-balance the bad weather, though all were so popular that queues were necessary. On the 28th improved weather pleased the troops but also suited the enemy aircraft, which at 5 p.m. raided the town, dropping three bombs which caused no casualties. On the 27th training had been resumed with the ubiquitous route march separately by companies. During the month changes continued as usual; on the 11th Major Kedgley ¹ took command of B Company and on the 17th Captain J. W. T. Collins, on evacuation to hospital, was relieved in command of HQ Company by Captain M. H. A. Clay; Major C. S. Wroth, a former company commander in the battalion, vacated the appointment of Brigade Major at Brigade Headquarters to command D Company.

There had also been changes in the infantry brigades of the Division, which had temporarily been increased to four battalions, 6 Brigade securing the Divisional Cavalry Battalion (already referred to above); this was caused chiefly by the nature of the country requiring the employment of more infantry and limiting the scope of armoured and reconnaissance vehicles. The war establishment of the battalion had also been altered from 642 to 737 other ranks, the number of officers remaining at thirty-two; by the end of the month the increase had almost been effected. Another change was the transfer of the battalion's medical officer, Captain V. T. Pearse, to Divisional Headquarters and his replacement by Lieutenant Nathan. ² Captain Pearse had served the battalion with distinction for nearly two years, taking part in all its campaigns, and was awarded the Military Cross, the citation (in part) reading:

`...in such actions as [Takrouna](#) May 1943, the crossing of the [Sangro](#) Nov 1943, the Battle of [Cassino](#) March 1944, he won the respect of all he came in contact with for his skill as RMO and devotion to duty under dangerous and trying conditions.

`In Sept 1944, during the advance north from [Rimini](#), Capt Pearse maintained a small RAP with the fwd troops while the action was still mobile. When a set piece attack became necessary on the night 24/25 Sept 1944, he established his RAP on the inf start line and in spite of intense enemy shelling, with total disregard for his own safety, attended to the wounded immediately.

`On Sept 26th, 1944, when the Bn crossed the Uso River, he again moved his RAP fwd to the troops in spite of heavy hostile shelling.

`During subsequent actions when the Bn moved up to the Rubicone and later crossed the Pisciatello River on the night 18/19 Oct 1944, Capt Pearse always moved his RAP as far fwd as the state of the roads would allow.

`His cheerful disposition, total disregard of his own danger, and knowledge of human nature has always been an inspiration to all in contact with him, and his skill as a Medical Officer has done much to lessen the extent of casualties suffered by his unit.'

Only one casualty—Lance-Corporal Dalzell, died of wounds, on the 30th—was reported in November. The sick rate for the month was still above the average, 1 officer and 111 other ranks having been evacuated in a brigade total (for four battalions) of 11 officers and 307 other ranks. Reinforcements reaching 6 Brigade in November were considerable—38 officers and 926 other ranks—creating quite a problem in assimilation and training for the units.

During the first two weeks of December the battalions in reserve were able to concentrate on training, in which in view of the nature of the country special attention was paid to river-crossing. This was practised on a branch of the Lamone River, the Montone, near Brigade Headquarters about four miles from the front, using assault boats, kapok bridges, and Mae West life-jackets; demonstrations of bridge-launching by tanks and of Weasels and Wasp flame-throwers were also given, and on the 5th Colonel Norman discussed the new weapons and establishments

introduced since the last operations, such as the two-pounder Squeeze gun, the Wasp and Lifebuoy flame-throwers, and the four-battalion brigade. He also explained a proposal to form a special task-force of 6 Brigade to exploit through a bridgehead at [Faenza](#) and force a crossing of the [Senio River](#) three miles beyond; this operation was to take place after the high ground south-west of Route 9 had been captured by 46 Division, which on 3 – 4 December had forced a crossing over the [Lamone](#) south-west of [Faenza](#). The task force, to be commanded by Brigadier Parkinson and named 'Parkinson Force', was to consist of 6 Brigade, 20 Armoured Regiment (with a troop of Crocodile flame-throwers from 51 Royal Tanks), 1 RHA, 33 Anti-Tank Battery, half 34 Mortar Battery, 8 Field Company, bridging detachments and equipment, 3 MG Company, a Field Ambulance company, Provost detachment, and a couple of miscellaneous detachments. A somewhat similar group was formed by 5 Brigade and a powerful artillery group organised under the CRA, Brigadier [Queree](#).³ In the event Parkinson Force was not required.

Twenty-fifth Battalion and the other two reserve battalions were to be ready to advance through [Faenza](#) on the south side of Route 9 and thence to the [Senio](#), possibly on 9 December but dependent upon the success of flanking formations. These tentative plans necessitated numerous discussions and a conference of the company commanders and the commanders of the supporting arms; as the battalion diarist put it, 'if nothing could be finalised until the situation clarified, it was of value however, in that it enabled the reps of the various arms to meet and discuss problems over the odd glass of excellent Vermouth donated by a one-time Fascist merchant of [Forli'](#).

The enemy in [Faenza](#) was resisting strongly and there seemed little prospect of an early advance through the town. The bridgehead over the [Lamone](#) secured by 46 Division had been held against heavy counter-attacks and that division had been relieved by 10 Indian and 2 NZ Divisions (less 6 Brigade), 5 Brigade having moved from its position on the right of the Division's front to relieve a British brigade in the bridgehead. Sixth Brigade, which had held the sector from Route 9 for 2500 yards to the north-east, was side-stepped to the south-west with its right on Route 9 and its left adjoining 5 Brigade's sector, the Division thus straddling the Lamone River south-west of [Faenza](#). At this date (10 December) 6 Brigade front was held by the Divisional Cavalry Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left, 25 and 26

Battalions being in reserve in [Forli](#).

On the evening of the 12th Colonel Norman gave details of future operations. On the night of the 14th 5 Brigade was to advance on [Celle](#), a small village two miles west of [Faenza](#), while at the same time [10 Indian Division](#) and Polish troops farther to the left were also to attack; 6 Brigade was to be ready to pass through 5 Brigade, but prior to the attack 25 Battalion was to send two companies across the [Lamone](#) to take over the [Maori Battalion's](#) positions on the right flank of 5 Brigade.

At 2 a.m. on 14 December 25 Battalion (less B and D Companies) moved in vehicles from [Forli](#) to Marzeno, four miles south of [Faenza](#). Severe traffic congestion on the secondary roads stopped the vehicles there and the troops marched to an assembly area about two miles south-west of the town, where they were within 1500 yards of the [Lamone](#). In the afternoon the other two companies arrived from [Forli](#) and at dusk A and C Companies left to relieve the Maoris, who were near the crossroads just north of the river. [Celle](#), 5 Brigade's objective, lay about a mile and a half north-west of the crossroads. Shortly after dark the relief was completed with little difficulty, though a platoon of A Company lost touch for a time and the positions were being heavily shelled and mortared.

The CO had explained that when 5 Brigade attacked, the position held by 25 Battalion would become a key one and a likely objective for enemy counter-attacks. Certainly the position was important. Five roads from various points of the compass met there and a railway running to the south-west from [Faenza](#) passed through this communications centre, offering an attractive artillery target; while [Faenza](#) itself, its outskirts a mile to the north-east, with an active garrison and good observation from its high buildings and towers, could well be a menace.



FAENZA (LORDS) 25 BATTALION POSITION, 15-22 DECEMBER 1944
AND 6 BRIGADE'S ATTACK, 19-20 DECEMBER

faenza sector: 25 battalion positions, 15 – 22 december 1944, and 6 brigade's attack, 19–20 december

Except to the south-west and west, where spurs of easy gradients projected from the high hills beyond, the country was flat and covered with an intricate pattern of very narrow rectangular strips of cultivation, with grape vines predominating; there were numerous roads, tracks, and ditches, and a great many houses dotted the landscape.

C Company (Major Taylor) occupied houses in the two angles formed by two roads converging from [Faenza](#) and by the railway which also converged on one of the roads. A Company (Major Webster), also in houses, stretched to the north-west from the vicinity of a sharp bend in the river on its right to another road junction within 150 yards of C Company, the two companies facing [Faenza](#) on a frontage of a thousand yards. The siting of anti-tank guns in the enclosed country was difficult but Colonel Norman insisted they be west of the river. A site covering the road running south-east from [Celle](#) was therefore selected, 700 yards west of C Company on rising ground and close to a building from which some command was obtained over the roads from [Faenza](#) and over the countryside to the north. Battalion Headquarters was situated near the road about 400 yards north of Hunter's bridge, a Bailey bridge spanning the [Lamone](#) 1500 yards south-west of the crossroads.

At 11 p.m. that night (14 December) the barrage for the attack by 5 Brigade commenced; it opened on an initial frontage of 800 yards, only 400 yards to the north of C Company, and both companies immediately came under small-arms fire

and some heavy mortaring, chiefly from [Faenza](#). With the attack under way there was little artillery support available but the battalion mortars briskly retaliated. Tanks of A Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment were on their way to the companies, which about midnight were still under heavy fire and, as enemy movement had been heard in front, were making frequent requests for artillery defensive fire and tank support. Three hours later the house occupied by C Company headquarters was badly damaged by shellfire and had to be vacated, the headquarters sharing 15 Platoon's house; its Slidex had been destroyed. Slowed down by demolitions, the supporting tanks were making slow progress but by 3 a.m. were at the crossroads, and after constant efforts Colonel Norman had succeeded in arranging for three artillery 'stonks' for thirty minutes, one along the roads skirting the western outskirts of [Faenza](#), another on three crossroads, and the third on the two roads leading to the companies' positions.

About 4 a.m. C Company reported that enemy infantry was close to its forward posts and that it was occupying only three of the five positions it originally held. About that time a 20 Regiment tank visited the company's area but could not find the infantry; tanks had reached A Company and, continuing their efforts, eventually established touch with C Company. The companies were fortunate to have survived the night with only four casualties, one died of wounds and three wounded.

As the tanks ([18 Armoured Regiment](#)) supporting 5 Brigade's attack were held up by a demolition 800 yards south-west of C Company, Brigadier Parkinson just before dawn asked whether it was possible for 25 Battalion's reserve tanks to get forward to la Morte, at a track and ditch crossing 400 yards north of C Company. The tank commander thought this to be impossible, but under cover of smoke to blind the very active enemy artillery observers in [Faenza](#), a troop was sent forward to reconnoitre. A couple of hours later the Brigadier instructed Colonel Norman that A Squadron tanks with a scissors bridge were to attempt to cross the ditch 300 yards west of la Morte to help [28 Battalion](#), which had already repulsed one counter-attack; shortly afterwards the 17-pounder Sherman tank with the forward troops was knocked out. Machine-gun fire directed at A Company from its right remained unexplained but ceased after inquiries were made, the culprit naturally enough preferring to remain quiet after discovering his error. Meanwhile and throughout the morning the battalion mortars had been busy, firing concentrations on request in

front of C Company. Twenty-fifth Battalion was without an artillery FOO, but at 10 a.m. one arrived from [6 Field Regiment](#) after having been held up for six hours on the congested roads.

After all these various happenings, incidental to most tactical operations, and with the success of 5 Brigade's attack, which had secured the greater part of its objective, the situation on 25 Battalion's front was comparatively quiet. In the afternoon it was decided that B and D Companies, still back in reserve east of the river, were that evening to relieve two companies of the [Maori Battalion](#) which were in position on the ditch running westwards from la Morte. B Company (Major J. Finlay⁴) was to be on the right and D Company (Captain J. H. [Sheild](#)⁵) on the left, the frontage being 800 yards. On the telephone later in the day, Brigadier Parkinson gave further details of what was intended; 5 and 6 Brigades (6 Brigade on the right) were to advance to the north-west on the [Senio River](#), the boundary between the two brigades being Route 9, for which 6 Brigade was to be responsible; 24 Battalion was to cross the [Lamone](#) and come up on the right of 25 Battalion, and with the railway as the boundary between them both battalions would then advance on the [Senio](#), followed by 26 Battalion.

By 9.15 p.m. that evening (15 December) B and D Companies were in position on the la Morte ditch, the relief accomplished without difficulty though some of the houses, selected in advance, were found to be uninhabitable and others were chosen. From [28 Battalion](#) D Company collected two prisoners. The bad roads and heavy traffic congestion caused much difficulty and delay in bringing up the rations, but ultimately, by 3 a.m., all the jeeps reached the companies; it was a praiseworthy effort on the part of the drivers but was only in keeping with the high standard they maintained in supplying the front-line troops.

The enemy view of the operations of 14–15 December is shown in the following extracts from Field-Marshal Kesselring's report to Supreme Headquarters in [Germany](#):

` 15 Dec. After an hour's tremendous barrage the enemy attacked in great strength on a narrow front south-west of [Faenza](#) after midnight. During the day he extended the attacking front and kept up his heavy artillery and air support. Confused fighting lasted throughout the day... During the afternoon the enemy

brought up reinforcements and attacked again with his main weight immediately SW of [Faenza](#). After bitter fighting his most easterly attacking group succeeded in crossing the [Via Emilia](#) [Route 9]. The westerly attacking group pushed forward to just south of [Casale](#), well back in our main defence zone, where the attack was sealed off and halted.... In the afternoon the attack spread further ... and to the western outskirts of [Faenza](#). There our men fought with the utmost stubbornness for every foot of ground, but the enemy penetrated our positions after his artillery and aircraft had smashed our heavy weapons and strong points.... By midday the enemy advancing along the road to [Casale](#) from the road junction west of [Faenza](#), had taken [Celle](#) and pushed NW from there. A counter-attack pushed the enemy back to [Celle](#) and halted his attack. During the afternoon the enemy brought up fresh troops and formed up again, still under cover of terrific shellfire and air attacks. He then launched another attack in two groups with tank support. The easterly group thrust north from [Celle](#) and crossed the [Via Emilia](#) NE of [Celle](#), while the westerly group pushed to 1 km south of [Casale](#). Our last available troops pushed the enemy spearheads back and halted the attacks after bitter fighting. Attacks on [Faenza](#) from the SW did not penetrate our positions until after they had been repeated over and over again.... By throwing in every available man we were able to form a continuous line NW of [Faenza](#) and prevent the enemy from pushing along the [Via Emilia](#) into the town from the NW. 26 Pz Div, whose main body is on the southern outskirts of [Faenza](#), is in a grave situation....'

The report continued on 16 December: 'Today the enemy continued his offensive with the aim of breaking through to the [Via Emilia](#) on a wide front.... During the day he extended his attacks to the sector east of [Faenza](#).... The Pz Grenadiers of 26 Pz Div, fighting with determination ..., defended the southern outskirts of [Faenza](#) against attacks from three sides. ... Today, thanks to excellent defence by all arms, the Tenth Army once more prevented a break-through and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy....

'Heavy attacks against 305 Div's centre led to ... the enemy's pushing forward to the [Senio](#) in the afternoon. Attempts to widen the breach to the east and west were foiled. 90 Pz Gren Div's battle groups east of the [Senio](#) were attacked during the afternoon by strong enemy forces with tank support and after stubborn fighting, in which both sides lost heavily, were pushed back over the river.... 26 Pz Div: The

enemy pushed in strength towards the [Via Emilia](#) from [Celle](#) and south of it, and thrust north and north-east across the road. Our battle groups, supported by tanks, offered stubborn resistance, and prevented the enemy from advancing any farther. The enemy attacked [Faenza](#) from the NW, SW, and south, but the defenders withstood the assault all morning. This afternoon the enemy broke into the western part of the town, where violent house-to-house and street fighting is now in progress.'

Meanwhile, a couple of hours before dawn on the 16th, Brigadier Parkinson telephoned to ask for information as to the whereabouts of the enemy and said that 25 Battalion would probably be required to advance that morning. The enemy had been very quiet during the night and an attempt on A Company's front to draw fire had failed; it was the general opinion that the enemy had withdrawn. On passing this information to the Brigadier shortly before dawn, Colonel Norman was directed to move A and C Companies north-eastwards along the two roads towards [Faenza](#). On 5 Brigade front patrols were being sent out, to be followed up in force unless there was heavy opposition.

By 7.30 a.m. C Company (Major Taylor) had occupied houses immediately to its front while A Company (Major Webster) had attacked the first house ahead, capturing three Germans. Shortly afterwards, B Company (Major Finlay) from its ditch near la Morte was ordered to patrol to [Pogliano](#), a group of houses 500 yards to the north-east, and to be ready to occupy it; at the same time D Company (Captain Sheild) on its left had similar orders to patrol forward as far as a road junction and buildings at Casa Gazzolo, 1000 yards to the north of the ditch, and to be prepared to follow up.

On these cautious probes succeeding, B and D Companies at 9.35 a.m. were directed to take another step forward, this time 800 to 1000 yards on to Route 9, which they were to hold, with B on the right and D on the left, as a firm base while the tanks moved through. At that time A and C Companies had advanced 1100 yards towards [Faenza](#) and were consolidating a position near the cemetery, where later they were to be relieved by [Gurkhas](#). About noon 25 Battalion Tactical Headquarters moved forward 1500 yards to the house vacated by B Company, and soon afterwards B and D Companies were in position on the general line of Route 9; the other two companies were firmly established near [Faenza](#) though a tank going to the support

of A Company had been blown up on a mine; C Company had taken one prisoner.

Early in the afternoon the tanks moved forward via [Celle](#) (the rather roundabout route selected for vehicles to avoid interference from [Faenza](#)) in support of B and D Companies on Route 9, one troop to each company. About 4 p.m. A and C Companies were relieved by the [Gurkhas](#) and moved up behind B and D Companies, which an hour later were ordered to move on towards the [Senio](#), 2000 yards to the north-west of D Company. As Colonel Norman explained to Majors Webster and Taylor after their companies had come across from [Faenza](#), D Company on reaching the [Senio](#) was to explore possible crossing-places as it was intended to cross the river, if possible, the following night; in the meantime A and C Companies were to rest.

B and D Companies made rather slow progress towards the river. B Company encountered small-arms fire and, the now far-too-familiar complaint, reported that some of the shells from the supporting artillery were falling short. As the two companies advanced there was heavy shelling back near 25 Battalion Tactical Headquarters where, a little later in the evening, the medium machine guns and mortars were taking up positions. Shortly before 10.30 p.m. Major Finlay sent a message to Battalion Headquarters:

'Have run into a lot of SA fire. Position rather confused as we occupy small ditches about 25 yds apart. Now intend to move towards the house from which we have been fired on rather vigorously three times.'

A member of B Company has contributed a graphic account of his experiences in the attack:

"B Company will advance to the [Senio](#)—Jerry has dropped back to a new line on the [Senio](#). The advance will be a silent advance of 2000 yards under artificial moonlight.... D Company will be on the left. No opposition is expected but every soldier will be on the alert." How often had information similar to the above tactical move been conveyed to the common infantry soldier and how often did that "dropped right back" story and "no opposition" cry portray a hair-raising night? The silent advance this night was no exception.

`B Company under Major Jack Finlay left the start line in open formation two platoons forward, Company HQs behind & one platoon in reserve. The railway line was the right boundary. The ground to be covered was flat but across the line of advance every 30 yds ran endless rows of grapevines. The whole area was illuminated by the light of searchlights burning on fixed lines which served as direction indicators and moonlight.

`The advance had not been under way very long before Jerry put in an appearance on the left flank & D Company could be heard exchanging small arms fire and grenades. B Company soon encountered opposition & after a short exchange on the left the two platoon front was reduced to one platoon No. 12 forward and the advance continued until more opposition was met. Major Finlay ordered 12 Platoon to put one section forward and the Company to advance behind this probe.

`The advance continued by leaps and bounds—that is, an advance from one grape vine to the next 30 – 40 yds—a short wait and listen then another bound. The searchlights illuminated the ground extensively and the dung heaps scattered on the ground in small mounds glittered with an uncanny reflection. “Halt Achtung” the dung heap challenged me and it was soon apparent just why the heaps were shining as only a Jerry steel helmet could. I yelled “Look out Jerry” emptied my drum type magazine from my Tommy Gun and hit the ground. Jerry reciprocated from 15 yds with grenades & automatic fire and the ground vibrated from his reply. We had come across a large German patrol.

“Fix bayonets & we will charge the bastards” ordered Major Finlay. No man had a bayonet—old hands supporting automatic weapons—so up and into them charged eight men firing as they went. It must have been a good show but Jerry had scurried across our front to the railway line. A burst of tracer from a machine gun from this direction stopped the advance temporarily.

`A massive 3 story house loomed up ahead and machine gun fire mortars and shelling peppered the area. The section of men charged forward and captured the house with slight resistance—Jerry getting away by seconds. This house was to become our HQ for the next two days—days of heavy and uninterrupted shelling.

`Private Olsen ⁶ ([Wanganui](#)) was killed in this advance. Corporal Doug Meades

slightly wounded (7 holes through his trousers), [Mulholland](#)⁷ a bullet lodged in his Bren magazine, Hunter a hole in his water bottle, and Copeland a bullet in his Tommy magazine. A "quiet" advance.

'A counter attack later in the night was repulsed but two or three bazooka shots in the casa did receive a reply from Tiger Davidson who launched a grenade from inside and well back from the window on the second floor. Privates Archer⁸ and [Lee](#)⁹ at the window were not amused when the grenade hit the top of the window and fell back into the room to explode at their rear. Three men in the room plus one grenade and no casualties!!

'Just a quiet night—Jerry has dropped back to the [Senio](#) or perhaps he meant to.'

Yes, throughout the war there were many such quiet nights but at least, as the B Company man has stated, they had been warned: 'but every soldier will be on the alert'. The company killed a number of enemy in the house and captured a prisoner.

Meanwhile D Company was advancing slowly but at midnight was held up at a lateral road a mile from the river by heavy resistance from enemy posts and from a house, [Bastia Nuova](#), 200 yards to its front, and asked for support. Within an hour a troop of tanks sent via Route 9 had arrived, but Captain Sheild told Colonel Norman by telephone that even with tanks he thought further progress impossible. He was instructed to consolidate on the line of the lateral road and establish contact with B Company, which was close to the road where it crossed the railway.

To cover the front of the two companies, artillery defensive fire tasks were arranged and the battalion mortars had moved into position alongside Route 9, about 1000 yards south-east of D Company. By 3 a.m., despite heavy enemy shelling and mortar fire, the front was firmly established. The men of D Company saw many enemy in and around [Bastia Nuova](#) and killed one by sniping.

The casualties during the night 16–17 December were four wounded.

A man of 5 Section, 17 Platoon, of D Company, who previously had never been under fire, tells of his experiences in this advance, and gives a picture of the 'ups and downs' in an operation of this nature which must revive memories in the minds of

many members of the battalion.

`I feel I could relate quite a full story of the attacks along the [Senio](#) river from [Faenza](#) just before Xmas 1944. It was my first time in action and, believe me, it has left quite clear memories. I had then been in D Coy 25 Bn about a fortnight so it gave me time to learn the ways of a fighting soldier and to chum up with my fellow men, which later I found was a big thing.

`It was on the morning of the 14th Dec that we received the long-awaited orders to pack up. In the afternoon we were crammed into trucks and set sail in the direction of [Faenza](#). Someone remarked that it was in the wrong direction, but the rest seemed very silent under the brims of their tin hats, so I just followed suit. We turned off Route 9 a few miles out of [Forli](#) and took to a very rough, shell-battered side road. It had been raining heavily and we soon had to abandon our waggons and take to the hoof. Our Ptn Commander, [Ken Hamilton](#),¹⁰ sent back orders to keep well spread out and I soon found the reason why, when an odd shell or two landed a few hundred yards to our rear, which gave me the feeling to get a wriggle on. It was dusk when we reached our casa for the night and it once again came on to rain. We then had a spot of trouble in locating the coy jeep, which was loaded with our blankets and rations, and I landed the job of trotting down to the turn-off 500 yds away to wait for it. All I got was wet feet and told I'd get used to it after a fortnight or so. The jeep turned up at 10 o'clock and we were all very thankful for a feed.

`At 11 the [5th Brigade](#) put in an attack under a barrage, along a valley which we were overlooking. In the morning we packed our blankets, etc, while Ken Hamilton was away at an "O" Group. On his return he gave us the news of our next move, which was to relieve the Maoris. We started out after lunch and by nightfall we were waiting in a barn for the rest of the Coy to come up when a whopper landed just outside, nearly wrecking our flimsy shelter. I made a dive for the floor, but landed on someone else, as I was no competition against the old hands at making for cover. After that incident my name was called and I soon found that I had landed the Piat, such as all new men. Slinging this over my shoulder we set out up the muddy slope and I soon began to pant with my 32-pound weapon. When we reached the top it seemed twice that weight and I had "had it". We still pushed forward and it was an effort to keep up. We passed the casa where we were meant to stop, as the night was dark and we had to retrace our steps to locate our destination. I had just taken

off my pack when the order came out for a section to go forward to a listening post for the night. I was just unlucky enough for it to be our section with Cpl Kev Cleaver¹¹ in charge. We no sooner got on to the road when over came a half-dozen mortars and all hands went into the drain in an instant. It was then that one Pte "X" couldn't take it and cleared out back to the casa. (We didn't see him again until later when he got 12 months for his crime.) At the post we had to dig slitties. I remember being told twice not to whisper so loudly. Later it came on to rain again and our slitties gathered about six inches of water in the bottom. Still we stood in it and froze till dawn. It was impossible to sleep in the hour off [sentry], so I just had to dig quietly to keep warm. At short intervals Jerry was sending over mortars and rockets. At first light we were pleased to return to the platoon, thinking of a good sleep, only to hear we had to push on in a daylight advance to Route 9, which we carried out without resistance and taking one prisoner. At times I was left a little alone and felt helpless with my Piat. It didn't take me long to dive at the odd glass of vino, offered by Italian civilians at various casas. Our destination was a house containing an Italian woman who was in an obviously pregnant condition. She did quite a lot for us in the way of meals and fruit. (A few days later we heard that the woman had been presented with twins in the thick of a mortar stonk and our support coy was there to assist.)

That night we had to cross Route 9 and make a silent drive to the river against the 90th Light. Ted¹² was nasty and kept on popping over all the mortars he could. We got across the road all right and were lined up nicely, ready to advance, when there was a hiss and all hands hit the ground. I went down so hard that my tin hat took some skin off my nose, but no thoughts were there. Hell let loose all in one minute and we were in the centre of it. I thought all my birthdays had come in one. Luckily the ground was soft and there was little shrap [shell-splinters, commonly called shrapnel]. They were landing all round us and I kept thinking the next one must be mine. I seemed to be the only one left and yet we all got through, except for a scratch here and there. Pogo Hagerty¹³ was the lucky one. He couldn't get down low on account of his wireless but a nice sized lump of shrapnel went right through it. When that was over I just couldn't speak for a while. It was a cold night but I hadn't lost so much sweat for a long time.

We pushed on and passed one empty casa but the next contained roughly 15

Teds with a few Spandaus. I was following Joe Milne ¹⁴ and we got lost from our ptn, lying in the mud under a grapevine, letting strip all we could. I was now promoted to Bren gunner No. 1, as all new men. I was happy all at once to get a few away and must have been a bit anxious as Joe remarked "Don't use all that—ammo, we may need some later". After a time we heard a voice screaming "Where the hell are Hope ¹⁵ and Milne?" It was our section leader Kev Cleaver. We retired to our reserve position. The house occupied by Ted was strongly held and he was using numerous rifle grenades along with his Spandaus, so we were ordered to return to the casa we had previously cleared. Jerry was awake to this and pelted us once more with his various sized mortars. We needed tank support so Lieut Hamilton and the runner went to contact same. In the meantime, Howard Hughes, ¹⁶ our Ptn Sgt was questioning the one prisoner we had just taken. When our officer returned he informed us that the tanks could not get up till morning and that we were to shelter in a house back on Route 9. He also told us, while getting there to make full use of the ditch running alongside the road, but I didn't need to be told that. We remained there for a couple of days and we made the best of all the sleep we could get in between the noise of bursting shells. B Coy were on our right and they got hell for these two days. I thought I had experienced the ins and outs of battle, but didn't realize there was worse in store, when the big attack came off along the [Senio](#) on the 21st December ¹⁷ under a barrage with its shorts and many casualties, along with many other things I had not witnessed, but that is another story.'

On the previous evening, 16 December, 24 Battalion had taken up its position on the right of 25 Battalion, between the railway and Route 9, immediately north-west of [Faenza](#). [Gurkhas](#) and the Divisional Cavalry Battalion on the right or east of 24 Battalion were on the northern outskirts of the town. From there British and Canadian troops extended the front along the Lamone River to the north-east for the next eight miles and from thence were across the river to beyond Route 16 and seven miles north-west of [Ravenna](#), the objective in 'the mobile role' of September last, which had been taken by the Canadians only eleven days before.

On the other flank, from [Faenza](#) the line extended to the south-west into the high country, where ten miles away troops of the Eighth and Fifth Armies were in contact.

During the night 16–17 December C Company of 24 Battalion had advanced to the north-west on the right of 25 Battalion and had captured a group of houses at **Pasotta**, 200 yards north of B Company 25 Battalion. By the morning of the 17th **Faenza** had been cleared of the enemy, removing a considerable nuisance and greatly easing the very difficult supply problem since additional bridges could now be built and other roads brought into use.

Early in the afternoon 24 and 25 Battalions were to have continued the advance towards the **Senio**, but the appearance of the enemy in some strength on the right of B Company caused a postponement and artillery and machine-gun fire was called for. This quietened the enemy, but he was still seen in front of D Company and 25 Battalion was instructed to stand fast until 24 Battalion came up on the right. Heavy enemy shelling and mortar fire had caused several casualties in B Company and a tank had been disabled; as the whole company was in one house, Colonel Norman directed that outposts be placed in other houses nearby. Sent out after the light failed, a patrol from D Company visited a house 300 yards to its front, finding it unoccupied and badly damaged, and reported that a Spandau in a house 400 yards farther west was firing on fixed lines.

A lull in enemy activity about 9 p.m. proved to be only temporary as soon afterwards increased Spandau fire caused B Company to stand-to; for the next three hours the two forward companies were under heavy fire from Spandaus and artillery, the companies calling for several artillery tasks to be fired. A few minutes after midnight the enemy shelling extended to Battalion Tactical Headquarters and continued against the forward companies, B Company's house receiving many hits. About 4 a.m., except for machine guns firing on fixed lines, the front was fairly quiet, but within the hour and until 8 a.m. it flared up again with heavy mortar and machine-gun fire along the whole front; several defensive fire tasks were fired in reply by the supporting artillery. An expected counter-attack did not take place but the enemy was seen; with a burst of Bren fire at long range, Private Lee of 12 Platoon wounded several of a party of Germans, of whom two of the wounded and one other surrendered.

Despite observed shoots by artillery and tanks and a 'murder' shoot on three enemy machine-gun positions at the next railway crossing (700 yards to the north-

west but still 800 yards east of the river), the hostile fire continued throughout the day. Tactical Headquarters was twice hit by an enemy SP gun of fairly large calibre, and as the heavy fire continued along the front, the CO, through the artillery liaison officer at Brigade Headquarters, called up an air OP. B Company, still under heavy fire, was sending in flash and sound bearings and calling for more artillery support; it had had a second tank knocked out but without casualties to the crew.

About 6 p.m. that evening (18 December) Colonel Norman told A and C Company commanders (Majors Webster and Taylor) that the enemy strength on 25 Battalion front was estimated to be about 1100; the banks of the [Senio](#) were known to be mined, and the enemy policy seemed to be to hold every house until forced out. He said that instead of an advance to the north-west as at present, a full-scale attack was to be made the following night in a north-easterly direction by two battalions of 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade (under command of 2 NZ Division) on the right and by the three battalions of 6 Brigade on the left, the [Senio](#) being the left boundary. The battalion's casualties during the 17th and 18th were two died of wounds and five wounded.

The front, which was very rowdy until midnight, was quiet afterwards but about 9.30 a.m., during shelling of Battalion Tactical Headquarters, the house was twice hit and a tank outside was also hit. Shortly before noon, under orders from Brigadier Parkinson, Colonel Norman instructed B Company to send a patrol to two houses 1000 yards to the north-east where a road crossed the [Scolo Contrigo](#); if no enemy was encountered a patrol was then to be sent along the road in the direction of the river to a road junction 800 yards north-west of the two houses. The patrol (under Corporal [Tutty](#)¹⁸) went out but almost at once was fired on by Spandaus; it then attempted to patrol towards the river but was again fired on, by two enemy posts, and withdrew. Meanwhile, before noon orders were issued for the attack to the north-east. There would be three companies forward, A Company on the right, D in the centre, and C on the left; B Company, in reserve, would follow, mopping up behind them.

The start line for 25 and 26 Battalions was an extraordinary one: whereas the [Gurkhas](#) and 24 Battalion on the right started off parallel to the railway and so at right angles to the axis of advance, the start line of 25 Battalion, from the left of A Company, bent back to the west at an angle of thirty degrees for a distance of 1100

yards before resuming its initial direction, i.e., to the north-west. This was done so as to include in the barrage enemy posts on or south of the railway in front of 25 and 26 Battalions. In consequence the 25 Battalion companies had varying distances to advance, A Company having 2600 yards, D 2800 yards, and C 3400 yards.

To avoid the barrage, which would open on the line of B Company's position, the forward companies would retire to an assembly line; as soon as the road was opened behind the infantry advance, the tanks were to move up to the companies on the objective; after supporting the attack for the first 1500 yards (where the artillery was to pause for some time) the battalion mortars at the first opportunity were to move forward. On the left of 6 Brigade the forward troops of 5 Brigade would support the attack by fire of all arms against targets on the left bank of the [Senio](#); this was especially necessary as, although at the start line the river was 1600 yards to the west of 25 Battalion's left flank, it converged at the objective (nearly two miles to the north-east on that flank) to within a couple of hundred yards of the left of C Company.

The barrage was to open at 9 p.m. and, after ten minutes, advance at the rate of 100 yards in six minutes to the pause line, where it would halt from 10.40 p.m. to 11.16 p.m., then advancing to the final barrage line, which it would reach thirty-four minutes after midnight 19–20 December. After a further sixteen minutes there it would cease. In addition to the barrage the medium artillery would open on selected targets, but five minutes after zero two-thirds of the batteries would switch to counter-battery tasks. To aid direction the Bofors were to fire three rounds of tracer per two minutes along the brigade and battalion boundaries, but would fire ten rounds' rapid fire to indicate that the barrage was lifting from the opening line; and again, both when the pause in the barrage began and when it ended, repeating the ten rounds when the barrage reached its final line.

One company of machine guns was to fire on the roads parallel with the line of advance and two companies were to concentrate on harassing and defensive fire on 6 Brigade's open left flank across the [Senio](#). From the conclusion of the attack the artillery would be ready to fire prearranged DF ¹⁹ tasks, of which there were to be thirteen, all with code-names, on 6 Brigade's front.

The inter-battalion boundary on the left of 25 Battalion between C Company and

26 Battalion was the main road running north-east from Route 9 to [Felisio](#), more or less parallel to the [Senio](#). The right boundary between A Company and 24 Battalion was an arbitrary line, with few distinctive features, parallel with the left boundary and 1200 yards from it.

The infantry was to make certain that all opposition on the way was cleared up; it was not to by-pass strongpoints. While the engineers were making the roads passable for vehicles by removing mines and dealing with craters and other obstacles, they would be protected by a platoon from B Company. The tanks of 25 Battalion had priority over the roads, then those of 26 Battalion, and after that the other supporting arms of 25 Battalion.

By 8.45 p.m. on the 19th B Company (Major Finlay) had withdrawn to its assembly area about 1000 yards to the east, where it was just behind A Company's position on the start line; fifteen minutes later the barrage opened. From the start of the advance at 9.10 p.m. Battalion Headquarters received several messages from C Company (Major Taylor) saying that the artillery barrage was falling short; Taylor was told to keep the company under cover until the barrage moved on, and he then reported that because of casualties the company must be regrouped before the advance could be resumed. In these difficult circumstances Corporal [Grenville](#)²⁰ of 15 Platoon showed great skill and coolness when he took command of the remnants of the platoon, rallied the men, and led them forward in a successful attack against two strongpoints; he was seriously wounded while leading an attack against a third position, but nevertheless assisted one of his badly wounded men back to the RAP. In the Pisciattello River operations he had also distinguished himself and his award of a Military Medal was well-earned. An intercepted message from 26 Battalion to 6 Brigade confirmed that C Company was having trouble; later, [Colonel Fairbrother](#) (26 Battalion) told Colonel Norman that from his headquarters near the start line he had seen C Company on the railway crossing encounter a very heavy enemy concentration which had caused many casualties. 'Under Major Taylor (armed with a walking stick),' wrote a member of the battalion, 'C Company finished up by continuing the attack with only forty men. A number of the casualties came when a phosphorus grenade carried by one of the men was hit by a shell splinter and ignited.'

The other two companies, A and D, were making good progress. Three lateral roads 800 yards apart and bearing the familiar codenames of Dalgety, [Levin](#), and Loan, had been selected as bounds or intermediate objectives, the objective 600 yards beyond 'Loan' being named 'Feilding'. A and D Companies reached 'Dalgety' within the hour; delayed by its disorganisation at the railway crossing, C Company was instructed to push on as soon as possible, and reached 'Dalgety' about an hour after A and D Companies, which continued to advance, A Company reporting the capture of six prisoners.

About 11 p.m. the tanks reported that the road and railway crossing on the battalion's left boundary was impassable and an engineer officer was sent to investigate it. At this time the battalions on the flanks were advancing according to plan, and thirty minutes later D Company (Captain Sheild) was at '[Levin](#)', closely followed by the engineer road-reconnaissance party. A few minutes later A Company was held up by Spandau fire but, overcoming it, advanced steadily and was soon in touch with D Company which was still making progress. C Company was then 400 yards from '[Levin](#)' and had taken eight prisoners.

Shortly before 1 a.m. A and D Companies passed the third bound, 'Loan'. They still had 500 yards to go to reach the final objective, and as the artillery pause 450 yards beyond it was about to end, Colonel Norman asked that it continue for twenty minutes to cover the approach of the two companies, which shortly afterwards were on the position. Some 1300 yards back, C Company was then passing '[Levin](#)', and although delayed by having to clear a number of houses and by anti-personnel mines at 'Loan', reached the final objective about an hour and a half later.

There was urgent need to get the supporting arms forward, and the engineer parties were deciding which route for tanks could be opened the soonest when B Company reported that tanks could get past the demolition on the battalion's left flank at '[Levin](#)'. D Company then reported the track passable and by 4 a.m. the tanks were moving forward, and an hour later were with the three forward companies. A Company had given a warning that there were mines at the crossroads on the objective in the right centre of the battalion's position; some hours later it was found that the crossroads had been prepared for demolition and the engineers were asked to remove the explosives. The other supporting arms were on their way

up, and soon after first light the anti-tank guns were sited and one regiment of artillery was firing harassing tasks on the battalion's front, pending the arrival of an air OP an hour or so later.

Except for the disaster to C Company the attack had gone very well indeed, the casualties reported up to 7.30 a.m. on the 20th being: A Company, 1 officer, 1 other rank killed; C Company, 2 other ranks killed, 2 officers and 31 other ranks wounded, 6 other ranks missing; D Company, 1 other rank killed, 9 other ranks wounded. Many of the missing were expected to come in. The battalion had taken fifty-four prisoners, many of whom were still with the forward companies, as were many of the wounded—the RAP vehicle had been damaged and jeeps were being collected to bring them in.

The units on both flanks had reached their objectives, and farther afield the attack had also gone well.

A German report on the fighting in the [Faenza](#) area, written by [29 Panzer Grenadier Division](#), was incorporated in a pamphlet on 'Preparation for Defensive Campaign in 1945', issued by the Commander-in-Chief South-West (Kesselring). The extracts which follow refer to the fighting between 16–20 December:

'Situation: On 16 Dec 1944 15 Pz Gren Regt ... held a narrow bridgehead forward of the [Senio R](#), with its front running SW-NE. The Via Emilia [Route 9] formed one flank. The FDLs had been formed by 26 Pz Div during withdrawal following enemy penetration and were not strongly dug out. The bridgehead consisted of cultivated land, with trees and groups of farm buildings. The ground was wet under the surface and digging was possible only to a limited extent.

'Between 16 and 18 December the enemy launched a series of raids in pl or coy strength, mainly by night but also in the daytime. All these were beaten back, and considerable casualties were inflicted on the enemy by counter-thrusts and carefully planned concentrations by our light and heavy infantry weapons and artillery. The enemy obviously gained the impression from this that the bridgehead must be strongly held.

'On 18 Dec, shortly before nightfall, the troops in the b/h beat off another raid, knocking out 2 tanks with Bazookas. That night the div. adopted a new grouping in

great depth. By the morning of 19 Dec the majority of 15 Pz Gren Regt was in new defensive positions on the west bank of the [Senio](#), with battle outposts in about bn strength left in the b/h, accompanied by an arty OP. The orders given to these battle outposts were to cover and screen the adoption of the new positions in depth; to keep up plenty of activity and vigorous fire and deceive the enemy into thinking the b/h was held in strength; and to make a fighting withdrawal by groups over the [Senio](#) if attacked by a superior force.

`19 Dec was a quiet day but at 2100 hours a heavy barrage opened up on $\frac{3}{4}$ of the division's sector.... Until 2300 hours the barrage was spread over a wide, deep area but at that time it concentrated on the spots where the enemy intended to penetrate.... Simultaneously the enemy charged the battle outpost line, using assault groups in coy strength followed by tanks.... The battle outposts offered stubborn resistance, but the night was so pitch black that the enemy was able to penetrate the line and attack the coy HQ and Bn HQ while the forward outposts were still reporting "No sign of the enemy yet". The heavy shellfire cut all the telephone lines very soon, and the wireless communication failed about midnight, so that from 0100 hrs on, it was impossible to coordinate the operations of the outposts. Each outpost was therefore forced to act on its own initiative.... After many adventures, including some magnificent feats of valour by individuals, the greater part of the outpost garrisons succeeded in making its way back through the curtain of fire and our minefields to the FDLs west of the [Senio](#) by midday on 20 Dec. Early that morning several of our forward outposts could still be heard firing their MGs although completely cut off. They must have continued to fight against overwhelming odds until their amm ran out.

`Enemy Tactics: The New Zealanders do not send out small recce patrols as we do ... their recce patrols were almost all raiding patrols of at least a pl, and sometimes as much as a coy. All members of these patrols were armed with machine pistols and hand grenades. They are well-known specialists in the use of these weapons.... The NZers have a great preference for night patrolling, mainly in cold blood with no preliminary bombardment. On the few occasions when they patrol by day they put strong covering parties out on the flanks to protect the advance with fire. Tanks are also brought right up to the front line to cover the patrols. If the patrols are fired on, they are immediately screened with smoke, under cover of

which they either withdraw or work their way closer in.... The enemy very seldom attacks positions frontally but always tries to take them from the flank or rear. During its advance the patrol remains closely concentrated.

'Defence: The NZers base their defence mainly on houses, which they very quickly convert to strongpoints for all-round defence. Dug-outs are made under the house floors, and cellar windows or anything of that nature are used as fire slits, or else the enemy makes new ones. Protective posts are sited outside the houses among the groups of buildings. The enemy allows our patrols to come to close range and then opens a concentrated fire on them with machine pistols. Snipers have been met in the upper stories of houses and in trees. These are particularly unpleasant when our patrols are not expecting to be fired on.

'Tactics during a major attack: [After referring to the usual barrage, the report continued:] The enemy laid a thick curtain of fire down along the [Senio](#) between our outposts and FDLs, probably to prevent reserves from crossing the river eastwards and to prevent the troops in the bridgehead from withdrawing over the river.... During the preliminary bombardment our own arty was not engaged.... on the whole our div and Corps arty was not methodically shelled. It was therefore able to bring the whole weight of its fire to bear on the enemy unhampered. Since 22 Dec our guns have been shelled more and more, which leads to the conclusion that in future attacks the enemy will pay more attention to counter-battery fire....

'Conclusions for our future tactics: Against the NZers the troops must be particularly alert at night. Not more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the men in the front line must be asleep at once... A system of alarm signals and the increase of the supply of flares to infantry companies will make defence by night much easier. Mines with trip wires have proved most useful in the protection of strongpoints.'

Many other matters were referred to in these 'conclusions'. The machine pistol 'is the ideal night weapon.... Increased use of weapons and improvement in shooting have proved most advantageous for an active defensive policy.... It is a good idea to partially demolish the houses and give them a ruined appearance ... providing extra cover from fire and keeping the enemy aircraft away.... The Bazooka has proved invaluable in engaging strongpoints in houses, tanks, and infantry. ... It is necessary to construct a large number of dummy positions containing something that will

"make a bang"... Wireless intercepts ... have at times enabled the division to appreciate attacks in advance and find out where the enemy was assembling.... The form of fighting which the infantry must master in defence is the raid by the fighting patrol. During the night 19–20 Dec, old soldiers showed remarkable skill in fighting their way out and bringing their weapons back with them. New chums, on the other hand, had their morale smashed by the barrage.... All commanders must take special care of their new chums and urge them on.... their example must always be there to help the new chums. It has again been proved that defence on flat ground, under present conditions, is easier and less costly than in hills.... Our success in this action was due to the adoption of positions in depth on the night 18–19 Dec, to the splendid defensive conduct of 15 Pz Gren Regt, and to the good co-operation between all arms. All these made the enemy decide to launch a set-piece attack against the bridgehead, which wasted an enormous amount of ammunition.'

About daylight Colonel Norman was instructed to move troops forward as soon as possible to the bridge crossing the [Senio](#) at [Felisio](#), a mile and a half to the north. A Company was given the task and was directed to send a patrol to the junction of three roads 1100 yards to the north, and if it was unopposed, to occupy a position there and then advance to the bridge. About an hour later D Company reported that when A Company's patrol was halfway to the road junction it was pinned down by Spandau fire from the vicinity of a wine factory 500 yards east of the junction. Shortly afterwards the patrol returned, having lost an officer and two other ranks wounded and not brought in, and three other ranks missing; the two wounded men came in later and reported that the officer, Lieutenant S. G. Sidford of 9 Platoon, had died and that Private [Culver](#) ²¹ was wounded and missing. Sergeant Pike took command of the platoon.

A little later in the morning Major Webster was severely wounded by a mortar bomb; he was evacuated but died very soon afterwards, a sad and serious loss of a very experienced and efficient officer. On his way forward to take over command of A Company Captain A. Norton-Taylor saw Colonel Norman, who had just returned to Battalion Headquarters after visiting the forward companies, and was given the situation regarding the patrol and an outline of proposed operations.

In the meantime a party of engineers who were on their way to A Company to remove the explosives from the prepared demolition at the crossroads had met with

disaster. A little before noon an anti-tank vehicle came in with three wounded, including a corporal who reported that the party of engineers, seven in number, in a White scout-car had missed the turn-off to the south-east at [La Palazza](#) crossroads and had gone on another 500 yards to the north-east to the vicinity of Casa Galanuna; there they were fired on at very short range from the roadside ditch. It was thought that five of the men who jumped out of the car on the side opposite the enemy were captured; one man escaped with the corporal but the Slidex and marked maps had been left in the car. It was an unfortunate episode.

At 3 p.m. Colonel Norman, in discussing the situation with Brigadier Parkinson, said that the artillery and tank fire against the enemy posts had produced heavy enemy defensive fire; the enemy was still in some strength, and as his men were tired he thought a further advance in daylight was out of the question. He favoured a night advance. Late in the afternoon Brigadier Parkinson telephoned to say that the intention that night was to harass the enemy and stop any crossing of the [Senio](#); the men were to get as much rest as possible. The Brigadier finished with 'a pat on the back'—'The Army Commander sends his congratulations on a successful attack'.

A gap on the left flank between C Company and 26 Battalion gave some concern as the [Senio](#) on that flank was still held by the enemy, 200 yards away. Twenty-sixth Battalion was facing the [Senio](#) to the north-west and its right or northern flank was at the crossroads where its 12 Platoon was situated, about 400 yards from the left of C Company. As 26 Battalion was unable to fill the gap, Colonel Norman at 6 p.m. decided that a standing patrol of fifteen men from D Company (in the centre) was to take up a position about 100 yards south-west of the left post of C Company. No difficulty was experienced in doing this.

On the battalion front the early part of the night was comparatively quiet though many flash-bearings of enemy guns were received from companies and passed on. A Company (Captain Norton-Taylor) picked up a prisoner and sent him in; he proved to be a Pole who had deserted from [278 Division](#). At 1 a.m. (21 December) on D Company reporting it was being attacked, artillery DF tasks and MMG fire were called for and the attack did not develop. All was quiet for a time but by 6 a.m. the three forward companies had asked for DF tasks because of harassing fire at various times during the night from enemy machine guns and mortars. D Company's standing

patrol in a house on the left of C Company saw no enemy movement but had one man killed by shellfire.

At 8 a.m. on A Company's front SP guns were active and Norton-Taylor, when reporting them, asked that the wine factory east of the triple road-junction (900 yards north-east of C Company), which was an enemy strongpoint, should be dealt with by the medium artillery. An hour and a half later this was done, both A and D Companies reporting that the shoot was a very good one and asking that it be lifted 200 yards. A big gun across the [Senio](#) firing on the company areas damaged C Company headquarters' house, apparently a retaliatory shelling; during the morning and early afternoon several DF tasks were called for and special attention was paid to the wine-factory area.

The hostile artillery fire was almost continuous up to 9 p.m. and C Company's house was again hit and badly damaged. 'Stonks' fired into the factory area appeared to be very successful, scoring several direct hits after dark which caused a number of civilians to evacuate the factory and come into the battalion's lines. The casualties on the 21st were one killed and three wounded. Visiting the companies after dark, Colonel Norman arranged for B Company, in reserve, to send a patrol of seven men to [Casa Galanuna](#) about midnight to investigate the derelict White scout-car in which the engineers had been ambushed; if the patrol struck trouble it was to fire tracer, which would call down artillery fire in its support. A Company was also to send out a patrol to the factory area to look for the three men missing from its patrol and to investigate a reported enemy minefield.

For the next few hours there was a good deal of enemy shelling and shortly after midnight (21 – 22 December) A Company heard loud explosions resembling demolitions. About two hours later a carrier crew stationed with the company sent in a report that there had been heavy mortaring which had put the company's 48 set out of action, a mortar bomb passing through a window and causing three casualties. B Company's patrol to [Casa Galanuna](#), which had gone out a little after midnight, returned within the hour. It consisted of eight men led by Corporal [Robinson](#)²² and had approached the casa from the direction of the river, passing through trees and adjoining haystacks. From there a German was seen in the doorway of the house. 'At this stage,' the corporal reported, 'I looked round to see the disposition of my force and beheld behind me at about four feet two Germans

with slung Schmiesers. Two of us shot immediately, one dropped and the other staggered away. We then moved back as per route in.... White Scout car was seen about 25 yds from house but was not investigated.' The patrol had no casualties.

After 2 a.m. the night was fairly quiet. Shortly after daylight A Company's patrol to the factory returned after being away an hour; it had been unsuccessful. During the morning C Company attracted the attention of Spandaus from across the river when, with a Browning, it attempted to set fire to some haystacks 500 yards in front; the Spandaus were ineffective and one stack was set on fire, a mine exploding in the blaze. After daylight fighter-bombers, always a welcome ally, were available on call but there was no occasion to use them.

Shortly after midday the CO was instructed to extend his front at last light to the south-east so as to take over 24 Battalion's sector, and by 10 p.m. the relief had been completed, 24 Battalion moving back to billets in [Forli](#). To effect the relief A Company from the right of 25 Battalion's position moved over about 600 yards to the right and relieved 24 Battalion's left company; B Company from reserve was sent about a mile to the east and north-east to relieve the right company; D Company, from the centre of 25 Battalion's original position, had to move only its headquarters 250 yards and 17 Platoon 100 yards to its right to cover the front vacated by A Company. Both A and D Companies had standing patrols about 400 yards in front of the FDLs; B Company had 11 Platoon in a rather advanced position at Casa Spagnola, a group of three houses near a right-angle of the Scolo Contrigo on the general line of the standing patrols and out on the right flank; Battalion Headquarters took over 24 Battalion's headquarters a little over a mile to the north-east where it was 2000 yards from the FDLs. The casualties for the day were six wounded.

Soon after the relief was completed a patrol from the [London](#) Irish on the right visited B Company, and on instructions from Brigade 25 Battalion within a few hours laid a direct signal line to that battalion. Except for the usual Spandau fire the night was fairly quiet. Light snow falling at 9 a.m. (23 December) inevitably raised thoughts of a White Christmas which, as the battalion was to remain in the line, it was not likely to enjoy.

In the afternoon Brigadier Parkinson came to Battalion Headquarters and gave

Colonel Norman details of an attack to the river bank the following night by 26 Battalion, assisted by mortar fire from 25 Battalion. On visiting 26 Battalion to arrange matters the mortar officer was told that the attack had been put forward to 6.45 in the morning (24 December). At 10.45 p.m. C Company, which had been prevented by the open country from getting a patrol during daylight to the stopbank at the river, sent a reconnaissance patrol there and it was found that the weapon pits on the near side were not occupied. An hour later another patrol visited the river at a sharp bend 200 yards upstream, with the same result. This bend was on the right flank of 26 Battalion's attack, and at two in the morning Colonel Fairbrother (26 Battalion) arranged with Colonel Norman for C Company to provide a guide for a section from 26 Battalion which would place a standing patrol at the bend.

It was breaking daylight on Christmas Eve when the battalion mortars joined in the opening of the barrage supporting 26 Battalion's attack, to which the enemy along the whole front reacted strongly. During the morning a warning was received of a possible relief on the night 26 – 27 December by the Divisional Cavalry Battalion, officers of that unit arriving to reconnoitre. However, the relief did not eventuate though it was twice postponed, at twenty-four-hour intervals, to 28 – 29 December, when 24 Battalion took over the sector. During the intervening days the river bank was frequently patrolled to gather information regarding the very large stopbanks, the depth and width of the water, and the nature of the bottom. The defences were strengthened by reinforcing the houses with sandbags and by constructing weapon pits in their vicinity.

In the circumstances little could be done about Christmas Day, but just before midnight on Christmas Eve greetings were exchanged with the neighbouring London Irish, and about noon on Christmas Day Brigadier Parkinson and Colonel Norman visited the companies to wish all ranks the season's compliments. Very complete arrangements had, however, been made for proper celebrations later.

The day was exceptionally quiet, with very little enemy movement seen or heard, in effect a Christmas truce, with no fire until the early morning of the 26th. The proposed relief that evening was cancelled during the morning when a relief the following night by a battalion of 56 Division was substituted. At dusk 26 Battalion informed 25 Battalion that that evening it was sending out no patrols as it had

arranged a large harassing-fire programme; a fighter cover was also operating that night. The enemy reaction was strong. Flares were sent up along the whole battalion front, Spandaus fired steadily on fixed lines, and there was heavy enemy artillery and mortar defensive fire. C Company was heavily shelled and mortared, and just after midnight (26 – 27 December) Major Taylor asked that 26 Battalion be discouraged from arranging a repetition of its HF tasks, a request acceded to by [Colonel Fairbrother](#).

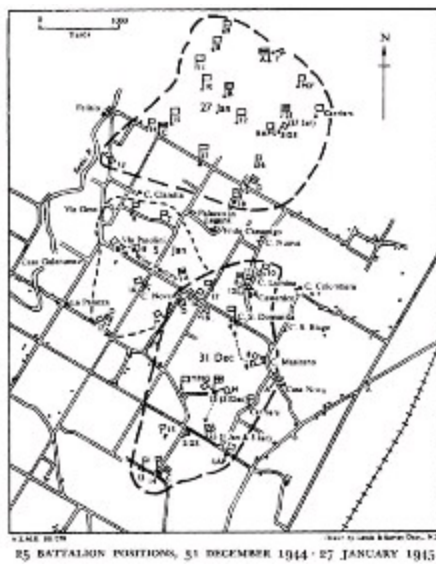
On the morning of the 27th Allied aircraft dropped bombs within 100 yards of C Company's forward posts, which lost no time in reporting the matter; the company had had quite sufficient disturbance during the night and was in no mood to tolerate a continuance by its friends. The second postponement of the relief was notified about noon and in the afternoon a signal from Brigade stated that that night the Divisional Cavalry Battalion would relieve 26 Battalion, and that the following night a battalion of 56 ([London](#)) Division would relieve 25 Battalion. But much shuffling and changing of boundaries on a higher level was going on, and eight hours later another message said that 24 Battalion would relieve 25 Battalion though the date was not changed, which was all that mattered to 25 Battalion.

In the evening the discovery of a case of measles in the mortar platoon headquarters caused some stir, the RMO asking that only the most necessary visits should be made to the house concerned; subsequent weekly medical reports do not reveal any spread of the disease. The night was rather disturbed by a good deal of noise in the enemy lines: shouting and movement, a horse and cart, and digging were heard and much confusion seemed to follow machine-gun fire against the localities concerned, the supporting artillery also joining in. On the right of A Company 10 Platoon of B Company reported through that company that a German patrol was moving around near it, A Company adding that a good deal of machine-gun fire was being exchanged. There were, however, no further developments. In the morning arrangements for the relief were completed with 24 Battalion and by 7.30 p.m. 25 Battalion was on its way back to billets in [Forli](#).

The following day, 29 December, was spent in celebrating Christmas on the same lines as its four predecessors overseas and with the same free enjoyment. It was, however, to be a very brief respite as two days hence the battalion was to relieve two companies of the [London Irish](#) in the line. The only casualty during the

past week was one man died of wounds, the last casualty in 1944. Before the battalion moved forward various appointments were made. Captain Clay was appointed to command A Company with Captain Norton-Taylor as second-in-command; Lieutenant Henricksen ²³ became second-in-command B Company; in D Company Captain Bourke was to be the company commander and Lieutenant H. R. Cameron his second-in-command; Captain Sheild was transferred from D Company to command HQ Company with Lieutenant A. J. Beattie as second-in-command. During this short interlude notes on the last campaign were prepared by the companies for study and discussion and re-equipping and reorganising were rapidly completed. During the month the casualties were 3 officers killed and 2 wounded, 12 other ranks killed and 74 wounded. The battalion's strength had been well maintained, being 60 other ranks under its establishment of 32 officers and 737 other ranks. The sick rate for the month was again rather higher than the average for the four battalions, the evacuations for sickness being 7 officers and 85 other ranks in a brigade total of 15 officers and 267 other ranks.

On the evening of 31 December, after what seemed to be a very short three days, the battalion moved up to [Faenza](#) and, leaving C and D Companies there meanwhile, completed by midnight the relief of two companies of the [London Irish](#). The new positions were about 800 yards north-east of those taken over nine days ago from 24 Battalion; B Company was at Cassanico (1500 yards east of the Pasolini wine factory), with its 10 Platoon 300 yards to the north at C. Lumina and A Company about C. Masirano (1000 yards south of B Company). The [London Irish](#) was still in position on the right. Twenty-fourth Battalion was on the left and the previous night (30–31 December) had advanced its right companies a thousand yards to the north-east. On the following night it attempted, with little



25 battalion positions, 31 december 1944 – 27 january 1945

success against strong opposition, to swing to the north-west towards the [Senio](#). On the right the [London Irish](#) was having trouble with C. Nuova, 400 yards north of B Company's 10 Platoon, and wished to shell it, to which Major Finlay agreed. Twenty-fifth Battalion also co-operated by arranging an indirect shoot by tanks both on C. Nuova and on Fondo Cassanigo²⁴ (800 yards north-west of Cassanico), some of the fire falling short and requiring correction.

That night the dispositions of 24 and 25 Battalions were rearranged; each battalion was to have two companies forward, with one in immediate reserve and one farther back. D Company 25 Battalion from [Faenza](#) was to take over the sector held by the two right companies (C and D) of 24 Battalion, and C Company 25 Battalion was also to come forward and occupy a reserve position in the rear area behind Battalion Headquarters. These changes were completed soon after dark on New Year's Day, D Company (Captain Bourke) being 600 yards east of C. Nova (where it was 600 yards south-west of B Company) while C Company was about a mile and a half back. During the afternoon A Company (Captain Clay) with 9 Platoon had occupied C. Domenica (500 yards south of B Company), the remainder of the company holding positions on or near the road for a distance of 700 yards to the south-east. The first casualty in the New Year was Private [Daysh](#),²⁵ wounded.

Throughout the night there was much mortar fire and 'stonks' fired in retaliation had a good effect. About dawn nebelwerfers opened up, followed by an SP gun which the air OP dealt with. An unpleasant weapon, though inaccurate, was the

enemy rocket gun which fired rockets with a startling blast effect over a radius of about 100 yards, but with few splinters; this bore the formidable name of 'Raketenpanzerbuchse 54', or more commonly the 'Ofenrohr' (stovepipe) or 'Panzerschreck' (tank terror), and was similar to the United States bazooka with an effective range of about 130 yards. That morning they were used against 25 Battalion's position and no time was lost in pinpointing their positions, which were then engaged by the mortars of 24 Battalion, itself also under rocket fire.

About 4 p.m. reports from civilians to the [London Irish](#) on the right (whose patrols had reached the crossroads 800 yards north-east of 10 Platoon) indicated that about three hours earlier the enemy had withdrawn. By 7.30 p.m. B Company had sent 12 Platoon from Cassanico to C. Nuova (700 yards to the north) and within a couple of hours had 11 Platoon, also from Cassanico, in Fondo Cassanigo where a German from 1/922 Battalion of [278 Division](#) was captured; 11 Platoon was 600 yards west of 12 Platoon and 800 yards north-west of the rest of B Company. Before midnight tanks and anti-tank guns had reached these forward platoons. The village of [Cassanigo](#), 1500 yards north-east of 11 Platoon's position at F. [Cassanigo](#), was reported by civilians to harbour several enemy tanks, and it was suggested as a suitable air target in the morning. The civilians were giving very valuable information regarding the enemy, including his dispositions and movements and the position of minefields in the areas just ahead; they also reported the presence of three Germans with a telephone in a house 700 yards north of 11 Platoon. Before midday next morning (3 January) [Cassanigo](#) was bombed as suggested, D Company reporting the bombing to be good and the strafing excellent.

By mid-afternoon a section of 11 Platoon from F. [Cassanigo](#) had occupied Palazzo in Laguna at the road junction 400 yards north-west of its platoon, where there were two tanks of 20 Armoured Regiment. The crossroads north-east of 12 Platoon were firmly held by the [London Irish](#) whose patrols had been reinforced by a company and a troop of tanks. During the afternoon plans for an attack by [7 Armoured Brigade](#) and 167 Infantry Brigade were discussed; the troops were to form up in 25 Battalion's area and leave the FDLs at 7.15 the following morning, 4 January, for an objective two miles to the north-east, a road running from S. [Severo](#) near the [Senio](#) on the left to S. Andrea on the railway 3000 yards to the south-east.

The [London Irish](#) were forming up round B Company and asked Major Finlay to

withdraw his troops from C. Nuova, F. [Cassanigo](#), and Palazzo in Laguna to make room for its command post, RAP, and details. In consequence 12 Platoon moved 800 yards to the south-east to C. Colombara, 10 Platoon in C. Lumina shared its house with the [London Irish](#), and the remainder of 11 Platoon in F. [Cassanigo](#) moved forward to join its section at Palazzo in Laguna. The British attack made good progress and by the evening had secured the objective. Prisoners taken by the [London Irish](#) were reaching 25 Battalion in some numbers, and B Company with fifty-two of them asked for instructions as to their disposal; eventually they were returned to the [London Irish](#). Twenty-fifth Battalion had three men wounded that day.

The next morning (5 January), after a night disturbed by a heavy bombardment by rockets and following a decision that 6 Brigade would turn to the left to face the [Senio](#), A and D Companies were instructed that they would relieve C and B Companies of 24 Battalion that night. The brigade was to have a two-battalion front, each battalion with two companies forward. On the right A Company (Captain Clay) relieved C Company 24 Battalion, with 9 Platoon 400 yards north of the wine factory and 7 Platoon 400 yards east of 9 Platoon; 8 Platoon was in the factory area and Company Headquarters 800 yards to the south-east, close to the position to be occupied by C Company. On the left D Company (Captain Bourke) had 18 Platoon near the wine factory close to 8 Platoon and 17 Platoon on the left of the company sector near the crossroads taken over on 22 December from A Company; 16 Platoon was at C. Nova about 500 yards south of the factory; Company Headquarters was close to 17 Platoon. Each platoon of these two forward companies (other than 8 Platoon) had a strong standing patrol in position some distance from the remainder of the platoon; that of 9 Platoon was 200 yards to the west at Villa Gessi, 7 Platoon 450 yards to the north-west of C. Claretta (which would be taken over later by the [London Irish](#)), 18 Platoon in a building 200 yards south-west of it, 16 Platoon 300 yards to the south-west, and 17 Platoon near D Company headquarters. A Company 24 Battalion adjoined D Company.

The front held by the battalion from C. Claretta to the left flank near the crossroads was a mile in extent. C Company came up from reserve and occupied the positions vacated by D Company, while B Company fell back 1000 yards to the south to some of A Company's former positions at C. Masirano; its 12 Platoon, however,

remained at C. Colombara, where it was 1000 yards north-east of the rest of the company.

The medium machine guns and the battalion mortars took up new positions farther to the north and the anti-tank guns moved as necessary to cover the FDLs. By 7.30 p.m. the rearrangement consequent upon the change of front had been completed. During the relief there had been some Spandau fire and later in the night enemy mortars, which from across the river opposite 7 and 9 Platoons had been causing trouble, were on two occasions heavily engaged by the artillery and the battalion mortars. Casualties that day were two wounded.

In the morning D Company's minesweepers cleared the road between 16 Platoon at C. Nova and the crossroads 200 yards to the north-east and lifted fifty-six mines, many of them booby-trapped; at the crossroads they found a demolition eighteen feet wide and ten feet deep which could not be negotiated till filled with rubble. After dark on the 6th, as arranged, the [London Irish](#) relieved 7 Platoon's standing patrol at C. Claretta and asked that, as the patrol was rather isolated from the rest of its company, A Company should keep in touch with it.

All along the front, from the Canadian right north of [Ravenna](#) to the foothills south of Route 9, the troops of the [Eighth Army](#) had reached the [Senio River](#), the enemy's foremost main defence line south of the River Po, though the enemy still held the eastern stopbank in many places. Until the winter had passed an active defence was to be maintained along that line and when the weather improved offensive operations would be resumed. In the forward area there were many civilians, and in their own interests and for reasons of security and accommodation they were evacuated, together with large numbers of cattle and other animals, following a census on 7 January in which the companies of the battalion played a part.

In the afternoon of the following day another change of dispositions took place. From its reserve position at C. Masirano B Company advanced about two miles and relieved a company of the [London Irish](#) within 700 yards south-east of the [Felisio](#) bridge. Except for Company HQ and 7 Platoon, A Company remained in position; 7 Platoon went to C. Claretta, where formerly it had had a standing patrol, and Company HQ moved 800 yards to the right flank to the house vacated by 7 Platoon.

D Company was relieved by a company of 26 Battalion and returned to the position it had occupied on 1 December east of C. Nova, displacing C Company which moved 1600 yards to the north-east on the right flank behind B Company. Battalion Headquarters went to C. Lumina, about a mile to the north-east, where it was centrally situated behind the companies. The first casualty for four days occurred on the 9th when two men were wounded.

The usual detailed reports of enemy movements, noise, and other activities incidental to static warfare continued to be sent in by the companies each day. The artillery and mortars of both sides were active and little movement was observed, though in the early hours of the 10th B Company reported an enemy patrol near 12 Platoon. On that day the battalion was relieved by the Divisional Cavalry Battalion and in the evening returned to billets in [Forli](#). For the next six days normal out-of-the-line routine followed, and then on the 17th the battalion moved to [Faenza](#), where it was responsible for the defence of the town. After four days there it relieved the Divisional Cavalry Battalion in the sector near [Felisio](#), occupying the same positions as were previously held but with a general post of the companies. C Company (Major Taylor) took over the right forward position previously held by B Company; D Company (Major Bourke—recently promoted) went on the left flank in place of A Company (Major Clay—also recently promoted), which took over C Company's former support position on the right; while B Company (Major Finlay) took up a similar position on the left behind D Company. Except for C Company, which waited for darkness, the relief was completed by 4 p.m.

The next five days followed the normal pattern. A good deal of enemy movement from time to time was heard on the other side of the [Senio](#) and two patrols on the near side were dispersed by the battalion mortars. Self-propelled guns and rockets were used against the battalion's positions, D Company's headquarters on the 21st being bombarded with 7.5-inch rockets containing propaganda pamphlets. In the afternoon of the 23rd an 88-millimetre SP gun scored a direct hit on C Company's headquarters, one man being wounded, the only casualty in the past fortnight. These high-velocity guns firing down the road running south-east from [Felisio](#) were a great annoyance to C and A Companies, the two companies which straddled the road, particularly so as after firing they speedily moved off to avoid retaliatory fire. It was thought that in [Felisio](#) the enemy used a ramp which the gun

mounted in order to clear the near stopbank and fire on the houses in the battalion sector; consequently, the supporting artillery, tank guns, and mortars were laid on to the suspected ramp in readiness to fire when the SP gun opened.

During this period a programme of wiring was pushed on to protect the standing patrols and platoon positions, except in C Company's sector which was too exposed to Spandau fire; anti-personnel mines and trip flares were used there instead. At 4.30 in the morning of the 23rd there was a flare-up when the forward companies engaged the near bank of the [Senio](#) farther to the north to assist an attack by 2/5 Queens, which used Wasp flame-throwers. There was, however, no enemy reaction against 25 Battalion and the attack did not succeed.

On the 26th a further readjustment of the front took place, to be completed the following day. Twenty-fourth Battalion on the left of 25 Battalion was to be relieved by 26 Battalion, whose sector was to be extended to the north to include the area held by D Company, the left company of 25 Battalion. Twenty-fifth Battalion was also to extend its sector by moving its right boundary about 1500 yards to the right, the two reserve companies, A and B, relieving two companies of the [London Irish](#). As a first step, D Company during the afternoon of the 26th was relieved by B Company 26 Battalion, which meanwhile came under command of 25 Battalion; on relief D Company moved back to a staging area a mile and a half to the south-east near C. Masirano, and on the following afternoon moved into the reserve position then vacated by A Company. After dark on the 27th A and B Companies relieved the [London Irish](#) companies, with A Company on the right. C Company on the left of B Company remained in its position opposite [Felisio](#); Battalion Headquarters moved 2000 yards to the north to a position behind B Company and the carriers, mortars, signals, and RAP moved to the same general area.

The enemy SP guns, especially from [Felisio](#), were still a menace, and to cope with them extra ammunition was allotted to the artillery and a 17-pounder tank was sited near 17 Platoon on the [Felisio](#)-S. Andrea road, 1300 yards south-east of [Felisio](#). Another move against these guns was a bombardment of [Felisio](#) in the afternoon of the 28th by 7.2-inch guns; according to a detailed round-by-round report from C Company, forty-seven rounds were fired with good results, apart from a depressingly large percentage of defective rounds; three shells hit the church where an enemy OP was situated, four landed on the stopbank, seven hit houses, seventeen were close

to church and houses, and sixteen failed to explode though three of these hit houses.

There was, however, no slackening in the fire of enemy SP guns, C Company reporting early the following morning that about thirty shells fell in its area; about 10 a.m. 9 Platoon on the extreme right of the battalion sector had one killed and six wounded when a shell hit its house. Casualties were mounting, with one man wounded on the 23rd (the first casualty in two weeks), one killed on the 25th, and two killed and one wounded on the 26th; the casualties that morning (29 January) included Lieutenant [Hynes](#),²⁶ wounded.

After dark patrols were out as usual, investigating the stop-bank to learn the position of enemy posts, minefields, and wiring, examining houses, and setting trip-flares. Night patrolling is an eerie and dangerous job at any time, but these patrols had to contend with frozen ground and the snow remaining from a six-inch fall three days previously, which made silent movement impossible. That night, under orders from Colonel Norman, Major Clay moved 7 Platoon from reserve near Company Headquarters to C. Ghetti, 350 yards to the north-east of 9 Platoon, relieving a platoon of 47 Reconnaissance Battalion and increasing the battalion's frontage to about 2200 yards.

In the early hours of the 30th SP guns harassing the battalion were engaged by all available support weapons, apparently with little effect despite the special measures taken to cope with them, as they resumed firing an hour or so later; together with nebelwerfer and rocket guns they were again active that night, but in the daylight hours most of the enemy fire came from medium artillery and mortars. As soon as the light failed D Company from reserve relieved C Company on the left of the battalion, the two companies changing places.

While the many standing patrols employed in the [Senio](#) sector, in their stationary role, were not so vulnerable or conspicuous as the reconnaissance and fighting patrols, they also had an onerous task, as the following personal account indicates:

'B Company had a forward patrol dug in on a sunken road 300 yards from the Stop Bank of the [Senio](#) which closed a gap on the left flank of B Company. At night

15 men occupied this position 300 yards away from the support of the remainder of the Company and at first light three men were left there until supplemented again at night by a full patrol. Telephone communication was maintained with Company HQ.

'On the morning of the 30th the main patrol had no sooner returned to Company when the noise of an enemy patrol approaching was heard. Privates Archer, Copeland, and Davidson called for urgent mortar & machine gun support but as ammunition at the period was severely rationed only limited support followed.

'The approach of a Jerry "patrol" in snow clothes through the grapevines leading from the stopbank to the dug-out in unknown strength was a bit hair-raising but Archer's challenge "Halt Achtung" caused two deserters at 10 feet carrying a huge white flag perhaps greater consternation than the fears of the forward patrol.

'Private Copeland returned to HQ with these deserters and was fortunate to get there without being observed from the Stop Bank.'

The two deserters were from [278 Division](#). Questioned at Brigade Headquarters the Germans, who were MT drivers from the workshops, said their company had fifty men, nine light machine guns, and machine pistols, with one heavy machine gun and an 81-centimetre mortar in support; the company had a frontage of 350 metres and with the companies on the flanks was holding the west stopbank, but each company had two sections, each of five or six men, on the east bank, one man in each section being armed with a bazooka. The prisoners gave the position of company headquarters (in a dugout under a house) and divisional headquarters, also the probable positions of battalion and regimental headquarters. A 10.5-centimetre gun was camouflaged in a house which they indicated. They said morale was low, particularly amongst recent reinforcements who had had little infantry experience, and that many would surrender if they got the chance. Their senior officers did not expect a British offensive until the weather improved a month hence.

On the 31st Brigadier Parkinson decided that 25 and 26 Battalions would each endeavour to get a platoon established on the near bank of the [Senio](#), and in the afternoon Colonel Norman instructed Major Finlay to arrange an attempt at 6 p.m. that evening; if the task was found to be impossible the platoon was to inflict as many casualties as possible and withdraw. The flanks were to be secured by fire

from A and D Companies, the two flanking companies. The artillery and 4.2-inch mortars would be in support, the former to fire on C. Zachini, a group of houses 350 yards west of the platoon's objective.

At 6.15 p.m. while the battalion area was being heavily shelled and mortared, 12 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Wilson](#)²⁷ and Sergeant [Powell](#)²⁸) was moving forward from B Company headquarters. Passing through 11 Platoon on the company's right flank, it advanced to the stopbank where it overcame slight opposition, taking four prisoners, and by 7.30 p.m. was firmly established. Except for small-arms fire from the flanks everything was quiet. The platoon reported several casualties and asked for ammunition, which a carrying party under Company Sergeant-Major [Williams](#)²⁹ took forward, bringing back the wounded and the prisoners. This initial success was followed by disaster. An excellent report by the platoon commander gives a detailed account of the action, of which only extracts can be given here:

'The last 100 yds was across open snow,' wrote Second-Lieutenant Wilson, 'with no cover where we tripped two flares but no fire was called down. The final stage of our advance was aided by effective fire from our tanks into the stopbank on our flanks.... Considerable confusion was apparent (on the left flank) among the enemy who apparently believed us in greater force. Positions and weapons were abandoned, 4 POWs were taken with no opposition while others of the enemy ... dived into the river or made off to the left.... Leaving the section to guard prisoners I took L/Cpl [Copeland](#)³⁰ to the river bank and engaged with TSMG fire and 36 grenades, the disorganised enemy, some of whom were still in the river. 3 at least of the enemy were killed. No fire was returned. In the meantime the remainder of the platoon had opened effective fire right along our positions. 8 Sec's Bren gun was engaged by Spandaus from across the river and by a gun firing along the stopbank from our right rear.... Throughout the 15–16 hours we occupied these positions, enemy arty and mortar fire was extremely heavy with occasional relief. Our position on the stopbank was difficult to hit. It was apparent that the enemy was consistently dropping his range on the advice of forward troops.... Eventually he reduced his range to such an extent that one heavy mortar "hate" dropped among his own troops with some effect if the groans and outcries were an indication of casualties. The nebelwerfer was later produced but fired two bombs only and these landed in

the river in front of our positions ... our 3" mortars responded well to all requests and made enemy movements over the flat between the river and west stopbank, already covered by our small-arms, extremely hazardous....

`Owing to the nature of the bank with its fold halfway down, 36 grenades were found to be the only effective weapon against troops between the river and our positions and it was necessary to hold the grenade in hand with lever off for 2 seconds before rolling it down the bank, otherwise it fell into the river. The enemy, however, soon ... commenced to cross the river to our right and left. Darkness made visibility poor.... To the right the bend in the stopbank obscured fire and the enemy could cross unhindered except by mortar fire.

`The difficulties of our position were very obvious at this stage. It was apparent that the enemy could cross in large numbers and attack from either flank. Positions to our right on the stopbank would enfilade us from our right rear. I did not foresee that he would later occupy [Gallegati](#) [a group of buildings 150 yards east of the river] in strength and so cover our rear.... The expenditure of amn was considerable and had to be restricted.... Communications were improved when Major Finlay brought up a telephone and two lines. These lines were very soon cut in many places by enemy arty fire. The 38 set received a direct hit from a stick grenade, and the only communication by this means thereafter was with an enemy set which continued to order us in English to surrender. From midnight onwards the enemy attacked intermittently with small arms and grenades from the right flank and from in front....

`I had expected heavy sniping by day but had anticipated wrongly that the frontal attacks would cease. Instead, before first light a strong force attacked from the front and both flanks with stick and rifle grenades which were employed with great accuracy. The only weapon of much use to us was 36 grenades of which we threw between 150 and 180 in our period on the bank. With daylight the enemy moved most effectively. From Gallegati and the stopbank to our right and from across the river he kept up persistent sniping and spasmodic bursts of Spandau while a large party operated with grenades from both flanks and in front. 8 Sec was most heavily engaged and ran out of amn which was not unexpected as this section had been almost continuously engaged at close range for 8-10 hrs. This, however, ... allowed infiltration of our positions. The enemy operated with much daring and

worked right up to our central positions, suffering considerable casualties in so doing. He seemed to possess an unending supply of stick grenades and it was common during the last two hours to see up to two dozen in the air above us at the same time. We sustained several casualties from these.

'By 9.30 a.m. 1 Feb my position was this:— Amn, practically nil; Comn, with Coy—nil; within the pl comm was difficult. The number of casualties had made gaps in the line and it was difficult to pass messages along the pl; Casualties, Sgt Powell, Neal,³¹ Walker,³² Kelly,³³ Cpl Laphorn,³⁴, Small,³⁵ had all been wounded but could not be evacuated nor could they be treated as the RAP bag had been destroyed by a grenade. Schwass³⁶ had been killed. Appreciation. I believed the positions could be held with amn ... it was hard to see how it could be brought up in daylight. I believed a total evacuation ... impossible owing to the sealing of our lines of withdrawal from the right flank and from Gallegati. Furthermore the enemy immediately in front of us would mount the bank and open fire.... However under smoke a partial evacuation might be possible.... I sent out Cpl Laphorn and Cpl Giorgi³⁷ at minute intervals to ask for smoke to cover our withdrawal.... Preparations were made to thin out when the smoke arrived.

'By 10.30 a.m. our fire had almost totally ceased owing to lack of amn. Between 10.30 and 11 a.m. the enemy, sensing the position, charged the bank and took our positions.... It is some consolation to record the enemy's known casualties. ... I can record definitely that 11 of the enemy were killed, 15 wounded, and 4 were taken prisoner [These were all actually seen by 2 Lt Wilson]. Others of my pl claim to have seen further dead, especially in front of 8 Sec but these I did not see for myself. It is possible that 40 – 50 casualties were inflicted on the enemy. That his cas were comparatively heavy is largely due to the courageous and aggressive manner in which he attacked. 12 Pl conducted itself well and I could have asked no more from it than was performed.... [Commendation of L-Cpl Copeland (killed) and Cpl Laphorn (wounded) followed]. After the action had concluded, I was able to see within a 500 yard radius of my positions at least 500 – 800 enemy troops. My NCOs place the figure higher. These lined the stopbank to either flank, the west stopbank and the river area. The frontal attacking party I put at 80 to 100. This last party and many others were dressed immaculately in uniform and boots that did not speak of a long tenure of the positions. A minority were clad in duty snow suits or dirty uniforms.

From this I calculated that the enemy had been alarmed by the move and had expected it to be a prelude to a larger attack and had consequently reinforced heavily.'

Privates Morgan ³⁸ and Jacobsen ³⁹ of 12 Platoon, who, after capture, escaped from a camp near the Austrian border and rejoined the battalion on 8 May, gave a very good and detailed account of their experiences both in the action and later when prisoners of war, their observations agreeing with those of Second-Lieutenant Wilson. Of him, they wrote: 'Mr Wilson, the Pl Comdr, had by this time been wounded twice and had acted in a very gallant manner throughout, constantly exposing himself to danger, whilst encouraging and leading his men.' They were taken about 15 miles back and at 10 next morning 'the interrogation of the prisoners began in earnest. Each man was questioned singly and then put into a different room. The German officer was at first very polite, offering cigarettes and told the men to make themselves comfortable. Most of the questions concerned the composition of the 8th Army, the dispositions of the divisions in the line, and of those out resting. He had a complete list of all the Div signs, both British and American. The men were not allowed to speak either to the Pl officer or the Sgt and Sgt Powell was roughly treated when he refused to answer questions and was put into solitary confinement with no food or water. Fortunately a hole was made in the wall and the necessary food was passed in to him. ... Again questions were put, this time with an effort to locate 46 Br Div ... believed to be in Greece. For fully ten minutes questions were fired on the strengths of the Divs in Italy.... His patience became less with continued refusal to answer questions, and he ended up by throwing paper about and generally acting like a spoilt child.... one of the questions was on the alleged shooting of German PWs by the Maoris at Faenza'.

The battalion's casualties on 31 January-1 February were two other ranks killed, one died of wounds, ten wounded, one officer (Second-Lieutenant Wilson) and three other ranks wounded and missing, and nineteen missing. Wilson was wounded both on 31 January and 1 February, while Lance- Corporal Harding, ⁴⁰ who had been wounded on 17 December, was again wounded on 1 February. With the exception of Private Powdrell, ⁴¹ those wounded and those wounded and missing later rejoined the Allied Forces.

For his fine leadership, devotion to duty, and personal courage, Second-

Lieutenant Wilson was awarded the Military Cross, extracts from the citation reading.

'Soon after the attack started trip flares were set off by the members of the platoon, resulting in the Platoon being immediately engaged by the enemy, with SA fire at short range. 2nd- Lieut Wilson without any regard for his personal safety went from section to section and reorganized his method of approach to the stopbank and successfully drove the enemy from the pl's objectives....2nd-Lieut Wilson then took a number of the pl fwd on to the slope of the stopbank and engaged the fleeing enemy.... During the whole period ... the pl area was heavily stonked by enemy arty and mortar fire, but this did not deter the pl comdr from moving around from section to section, organizing fire plans for each one, during which time the enemy was at close quarters.... Throughout the action 2/Lt Wilson led his pl with skill, determination, and without any thought for his personal safety.'

The commander of B Company (Major Jack Finlay), who had served continuously with the battalion since [Alamein](#) and had commanded the company with distinction since [Cassino](#), also showed skill and courage in this operation. He was subsequently awarded the Military Cross, the citation, when referring to the attack on the stopbank, stating inter alia, 'when one of his platoons became heavily involved with the enemy Major Finlay walked fwd across open ground, under heavy small-arms fire, to inspect the position; over a long period this officer's devotion to duty, disregard of danger, and continued cheerfulness have been an inspiration to all with whom he has come in contact.'

In reviewing the operation of 12 Platoon one cannot escape the conclusion that it had no prospects of success. As a raid to take prisoners, inflict casualties, and obtain information regard- ing the river, stopbanks, and enemy dispositions, there is no doubt it would have succeeded, provided the platoon withdrew before the enemy could counter-attack in any strength. The stopbank was about 400 yards in advance of the battalion's foremost posts and, with the second stopbank and the river between, formed a formidable and important enemy line of defence, proof against tank attack until bridged; the stopbanks afforded cover from view and from low-trajectory fire as well as facilitating the construction of secure dugouts for local reserves. No. 12 Platoon was required to hold 150 yards of the near stopbank, thus exposing the sections to defeat in detail, especially at night, though had the platoon

been concentrated it still would have been overpowered but might have had a better chance of withdrawing.

On the left 26 Battalion had a similar task and met much the same reception; it adopted different methods, however, sending only one section to the stopbank and withdrawing it, with difficulty, at 8.45 p.m. when the severe enemy reaction showed there was no hope of success.

Apart from the events of the early hours of the 1st, the first four days of February differed little from the previous days in the sector, the only casualties being one killed and one wounded on the 3rd. On relief by 24 Battalion on the evening of the 4th, 25 Battalion returned to [Faenza](#) where it spent the following five days. Returning to the line on the 10th, the battalion occupied 26 Battalion's sector between C. Claretta and La Palazza, the dispositions being much the same as those of 5 January, though the companies were differently placed. A Company was on the right north of the wine factory and C Company on the left at [La Palazza](#). D Company headquarters and 17 Platoon were close behind C Company, but 16 Platoon at C. Nova was 800 yards away to the north-east and 18 Platoon at the wine factory 1100 yards north of Company Headquarters. B Company, 600 yards east of 16 Platoon, held the same position as that occupied by D Company on 1 January, and Battalion Headquarters was at C. Lumina, which it had previously occupied on 21 January.

Once more, for the next fourteen days, it was the familiar round of static warfare, with harassing fire of all natures from both sides and a small but constant toll of casualties of one killed and twelve wounded. Of the effect of the enemy rockets, Lance-Corporal ('Stonk') Parker writes:

'I came down off picquet from the upstairs window and had just had time to stretch out when we heard the eerie noise of the rockets winding up. The majority of the chaps moved down into the "refugio" which had been well prepared [inside the house] by previous occupiers of the casa but before we could get clear of our room the rocket hit us with a devastating crash, the like of which I'd not heard before. It completely demolished the house with the exception of the front and back walls and the room occupied by Jim [Slim] Galvin,⁴² Ted Schearer,⁴³ and myself. The refugio was completely buried but withstood the shock of the rocket and the weight of the rubble which showered down on it. Those not buried by the falling debris set to work

to dig the other chaps out, Wilf Couper⁴⁴ and Vic Armstrong⁴⁵ doing great work. It was in this incident that Wally Everett⁴⁶ was killed. A 13 Platoon chap Fred Langston later told me that when he looked over and saw the pile of rubble he could not credit how any of 14 Platoon could possibly be left alive.'

During this period in the line there were few enemy patrols and none from the battalion. One patrol in snow clothing approached D Company and was driven off by 3-inch mortar fire, and another, near a standing patrol of A Company, was engaged by artillery and small-arms fire and left one dead. Opposite the right flank of the battalion and also a little farther to the right in front of 24 Battalion, there seemed to be quite a jovial group of Germans; one evening there were 'sounds of a Jerry party enjoying a spot of vino; at nine one morning 7 Platoon heard a working party making a lot of noise and singing "Lili Marlene"; and a little before noon on another occasion, men of A Company heard 'Joyful sounds of music' which entertained the company. The Germans could have had little occasion to be joyful; they may have been using a gramophone to dissipate the gloom.

The snipers with the companies were ever on the alert and on three successive days accounted for a German, one of whom was in a Spandau post where on the fourth day a tank secured a fourth victim. On 19 February, about 8.30 p.m., 8 Platoon was startled when a trip-flare went up; it was first thought to have been caused by a rabbit but the whole company stood-to for ten minutes before it was confirmed that a rabbit was indeed the culprit. Two days later, just before dawn—always a 'touchy' time in the line—D Company had a 'shrapnel' mine exploded, investigation showing that a cat was the cause. It was not the first time in the experience of the battalion that animals had sounded the alarm.

On the 13th and again on the 17th, the 7.2-inch guns demolished enemy houses across the river, the enemy replying three days later with artillery and mortars, securing direct hits on several houses. C Company seemed to have rather bad luck with its houses, 14 Platoon receiving two direct hits from rockets on the 12th, and 13 and 15 Platoons having their house twice hit on the 20th by medium artillery. On the latter date one of A Company's platoons, No. 8, had the chimney of its house damaged by a mortar bomb. An unfortunate accident with a grenade on the morning of 13 February swelled the casualties already mentioned when B Company had one

man killed, one died of wounds, and two wounded.

On the evening of 24 February the battalion was relieved by 24 Battalion and went back to new billets in [Faenza](#). It had discovered at least one asset in the sector it had left; to quote a member of the unit: 'A lot of olive oil was discovered, and as it was very valuable much of it was taken out each night by the Jeeps that brought the evening meal to the forward position.' In the week ending 24 February fifteen officers who had previously served with 3 NZ Division in the [Pacific](#) (one major, one captain and thirteen lieutenants) joined 25 Battalion as 'attached officers'. For the next nine days normal out-of-the-line routine followed, during which, on 1 and 5 March, Polish advance parties arrived to inspect billets and reconnoitre positions; the New Zealand Division was to be relieved for a month's training, not for a rest, as was made very clear by higher authority.

Preceded by the usual advance party, the battalion on the 6th left for [San Severino](#), a small town about nine miles from [Castelraimondo](#), where the battalion had spent most of last November. For the whole period there the weather was perfect, the population very friendly and the billets splendid. 'During the rest and training period at [San Severino](#),' wrote one man, 'the battalion was allotted the luxury of private houses and large comfortable buildings. This was the first time the Bn had had the opportunity of good living.' No one would deny that it was well-earned.

Training was commenced immediately and covered a wide field, with emphasis on the mechanics and tactics of river-crossing. There was the usual round of sports and other entertainments, including a donkey derby arranged by 26 Battalion and attended by many men of 25 Battalion. Following company and battalion rehearsals, a brigade ceremonial parade was held on 16 March at the football field at [Castelraimondo](#), where [General Freyberg](#) inspected the brigade and presented decorations and awards. 'For [General Freyberg](#)'s parade all badges of rank had to be worn,' wrote one participant, 'and many were the privates of the various platoons who were surprised at the 1-cpls and cpls of other platoons in their own company'.

Unexpectedly, on the 29th orders were received for a return to the line, and two days later at 6.30 p.m. the battalion set out on the journey, reaching the B Echelon area near [Forli](#) at 2.30 a.m. on 1 April, an appropriate date many thought. By 9.30

that night the battalion relieved troops of 78 British Division on the [Senio](#) near [Granarolo](#), about two miles to the north-east of the sector it had last held. To deceive the enemy, 78 Division flashes—a yellow battleaxe—were sewn on the battle dress and care was exercised with the telephone and wireless, the latter to be used only in case of extreme necessity. A and B Companies occupied the forward positions on the stopbank and C and D Companies were a mile and a half back near [Granarolo](#). Preparations were soon to be put in train for a major attack across the river.

The nominal roll of the officers of the battalion at the end of March showed a number of changes:

Bn HQ

[Lt-Col E. K. Norman, MC](#), Commanding Officer

Capt (T/Maj) J. Finlay, Second-in-Command

Lt B. A. Andrews, Adjutant

2 [Lt D. R. S. Mitchell, IO](#)

Adm Coy

Lt D. J. Pocknall, OC

2 [Lt J. L. Thomson](#), Sigs Offr (1 PI)

2 Lt (T/Lt) E. R. C. Jackson, QM (6 PI)

Lt E. F. T. Beer, Tpt Offr (6 PI)

Sp Coy

Lt (T/Capt) A. Norton-Taylor, OC

2 Lt G. W. Stephenson, MG Offr (2 PI)

[Lt R. B. Simpson](#), Mortar Offr (3 PI)

Lt N. K. Chapman, MM, A-Tk Offr (5 PI)

A Coy

Lt (T/Maj) J. H. Sheild, OC

Lt W. M. King, Second-in-Comd (actg)

*Capt I. T. Galloway, 7 PI

* Lt R. J. Evans, 8 PI

* Lt D. Halley, 9 PI

* Lt A. F. Pyne, Spare

B Coy

*Maj F. L. H. Davis, OC

Lt (T/Capt) A. G. Henricksen, Second-in-Comd

* Lt J. Murphy, 10 PI

* Lt A. G. Massey, 11 PI

* Lt F. H. Cushing, 12 PI

2 Lt D. W. Harrison, Spare (Sports Offr)

2 Lt G. L. Joyce, Spare

C Coy

Lt (T/Capt) R. V. Milne, OC

Lt (T/Capt) J. B. May, Second-in-Comd

* Lt E. J. Smith, 13 PI

* Capt W. D. Leuchars, 14 PI

* Lt K. D. Rankin, 15 Pl

2 Lt L. Hampton, MM, Spare

D Coy

Lt (T/Maj) H. R. Cameron, OC

*Lt (T/Capt) R. W. Berry, Second-in-Comd

* Lt W. F. Saunders, 16 Pl

* Lt A. J. Ryan, 17 Pl

* Lt W. M. Spedding, 18 Pl

2 Lt D. H. G. Hawkins, Spare

Lt (T/Capt) A. B. West, NZ Roll

Lt (T/Capt) D. F. Muir, IO, 6 Bde HQ

Lt E. C. Hansen, OC 6 Bde Def Pl

Lt R. D. O'Neill, LO, 6 Bde HQ

Attached:

Capt P. D. Nathan, NZMC, RMO

Rev. H. E. Rowe, Chaplain

¹ Maj E. G. Kedgley; Wellington; born Auckland, 28 Apr 1911; school teacher; wounded and p.w. 28 Jun 1942; escaped, Italy, Sep 1943; regained Allied lines Feb 1944.

² Maj P. D. Nathan; London; born NZ 3 Mar 1920; medical student.

³ Brig R. C. Queree, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; London; born Christchurch, 28 Jun

1909; Regular soldier; Brigade Major, NZ Arty, Oct 1940–Jun 1941; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun-Aug 1941, Jan-Jun 1942; CO 4 Fd Regt Jun-Aug 1942; GSO I 2 NZ Div Sep 1942–Jun 1944; BGS NZ Corps 9 Feb-27 Mar 1944; CO 5 Fd Regt Jun-Aug 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Aug 1944–Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, 1948–50; Adjutant-General 1954–56; Vice-Chief of the General Staff 1956–60; Senior Army Liaison Officer, London.

⁴ Vice Major Kedgley, appointed Bn 2 i/c, 10 Dec.

⁵ Maj J. H. Sheild, m.i.d.; born NZ 23 Jul 1912; farmer; wounded 11 Apr 1945.

⁶ Pte H. N. Olsen; born Gisborne, 2 Jul 1921; grocer; died of wounds 17 Dec 1944.

⁷ L-Cpl B. M. Mulholland; born Hastings, 3 Jul 1921; farmhand.

⁸ Sgt P. M. Archer; Wellington; born Wellington, 19 Sep 1922; audit clerk.

⁹ Pte A. J. Lee; Haumoana; born Hastings, 14 Nov 1920; farmhand; wounded 3 Dec 1943.

¹⁰ Lt K. A. Hamilton; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 12 Oct 1913; accountant.

¹¹ L-Sgt K. J. Cleaver; New Plymouth; born Eltham, 6 Feb 1920; labourer; wounded 10 May 1943.

¹² Tedesci, Italian for 'German'.

¹³ Pte C. E. Haggerty; born NZ 12 Mar 1908; labourer.

¹⁴ Pte A. A. Milne; born NZ 21 May 1913; labourer; deceased.

¹⁵ Cpl M. R. Hope; Haumoana; born Hastings, 9 Feb 1923; orchard worker.

¹⁶ Sgt H. W. Hughes; Pukengahu, Stratford; born NZ 18 Oct 1914; school teacher.

¹⁷ 19 Dec is no doubt intended.

¹⁸ Lt R. Tutty, m.i.d.; Palmerston North; born 14 Dec 1922; van driver.

¹⁹ Defensive fire.

²⁰ Cpl A. Grenville, MM; born NZ 23 Sep 1911; school teacher; wounded 20 Dec 1944.

²¹ Pte R. J. Culver; born NZ 27 Sep 1922; clerk; died of wounds while p.w. 24 Dec 1944.

²² L-Sgt J. S. Robinson; born Wanganui, 29 Sep 1921; cabinetmaker; wounded 2 Aug 1944.

²³ Lt A. G. Henricksen; Pukehinau, Pongaroa; born Foxton, 30 Dec 1919; shepherd.

²⁴ Fondo, farm or estate.

²⁵ Pte L. A. Daysh; Carterton; born Carterton, 2 Aug 1913; farmer; wounded 1 Jan 1945.

²⁶ Capt T. C. Hynes; Palmerston North; born Inglewood, 30 Sep 1915; Regular soldier; wounded 29 Jan 1945.

²⁷ Capt G. E. Wilson, MC; Sydney; born Palmerston North, 8 Nov 1914; school teacher; wounded and p.w. 1 Feb 1945.

²⁸ Sgt T. J. Powell; Hawera; born Stratford, 15 May 1921; shop assistant;

wounded 3 Dec 1943; wounded and p.w. 1 Feb 1945.

²⁹ WO II J. H. Williams; Masterton; born Lawrence, 21 Dec 1919; farmhand.

³⁰ L-Cpl W.H. Copeland; born NZ 14 May 1922; shop assistant; killed in action 1 Feb 1945.

³¹ Pte A. R. Neal; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 16 Aug 1922; panelbeater; wounded 26 Sep 1944; wounded and p.w. 1 Feb 1945.

³² Pte D. R. Walker; Ashhurst; born Woodville, 21 Mar 1918; farmer; wounded and p.w. 1 Feb 1945.

³³ Pte L. J. Kelly; Te Rehunga, Dannevirke; born NZ 9 Jul 1919; farmhand; wounded and p.w. 1 Feb 1945.

³⁴ L-Sgt W. H. Laphorn; Temuka; born NZ 26 May 1920; farmer; twice wounded.

³⁵ Pte E. A. Small; Wanganui; born New Plymouth, 1 Nov 1909; carpenter; wounded 2 May 1944; wounded and p.w. 1 Feb 1945.

³⁶ Pte C. D. B. Schwass; born NZ 28 Jun 1922; farmhand; killed in action 1 Feb 1945.

³⁷ Cpl R. V. Giorgi; Hastings; born Palmerston North, 24 Apr 1907; clothier.

³⁸ Pte L. Le C. Morgan; Feilding; born Masterton, 4 Apr 1922; carpenter; wounded 30 Jul 1944; p.w. 1 Feb 1945; escaped Apr 1945.

³⁹ Pte E. F. Jacobsen; Wellington; born Blenheim, 25 Oct 1922; compositor; p.w. 1 Feb 1945; escaped Apr 1945.

⁴⁰ Cpl E. B. Harding; born Napier, 1 Jun 1912; clerk; twice wounded.

⁴¹ Pte J. H. Powdrell; born Hastings, 11 Oct 1910; company manager; killed in action 1 Feb 1945.

⁴² Cpl J. P. Galvin; Horopito; born 27 Sep 1923; labourer; wounded 19 Dec 1944.

⁴³ Pte J. E. Scherer; born NZ 24 May 1918; dairy farmer; wounded 26 Jan 1945; killed in action 10 Apr 1945.

⁴⁴ Cpl W. G. Couper; Raurimu; born Taumarunui, 3 Nov 1922; farmhand

⁴⁵ Pte V. D. Armstrong; Alton, Patea; born NZ 1 Aug 1922; farmhand; wounded 7 Oct 1944.

⁴⁶ Pte W. E. Everett; born Motueka, 21 Dec 1904; storekeeper; killed in action 12 Feb 1945.

* Denotes attached officers.

25 BATTALION

CHAPTER 18 – THE SENIO TO TRIESTE

CHAPTER 18

The Senio to Trieste

Casualties in the new sector commenced almost at once, a sergeant and two privates being wounded on 1 April in the fighting which took place to secure full control of the near stopbank. An early incident was the approach at 5 a.m. on the 2nd of seven unsuspecting Germans to one of the posts on the stopbank that had been captured the previous night by the British troops, who had persuaded its occupants to surrender. On 25 Battalion taking over, a tunnel was dug through the bank by four men of A Company, who occupied the deserted enemy post at the end of the tunnel. The approaching Germans were attacked with grenades and small-arms fire, losing three wounded and one prisoner. Later, under a [Red Cross](#) flag, four enemy stretcher-bearers crossed the river to remove a German lying out of sight of the post; they were met by some of the A Company men from the post (still wearing 78 Division flashes) who talked with them in Italian and in English. The Germans shared some German cigarettes while bandaging their badly wounded man and were almost persuaded to desert. However, they quarrelled among themselves and departed, taking the wounded man with them. While all this was going on the enterprising section commander inspected the river, his report leading to an immediate visit by the IO (Second-Lieutenant Mitchell) who was able to go through the tunnel and view the opposite stopbank; he found the river to be about fifteen feet wide, the actual riverbank six to ten feet above the water level, and the stopbanks steep but climbable.

On being questioned at Brigade Headquarters the prisoner captured earlier said he was one of a party of seven sent to relieve the post and did not know their men had deserted; the party had had three men wounded who escaped with the rest; he came from 5 Company, which was dug-in in four bunkers in the opposite bank and was only twenty-five strong; morale was low. The prisoner had been with the company for only seven days. He did not know of any mines on the bank as the men moved round quite freely. Barbed wire had arrived at his company the previous night but he did not think there was any on the river side of the eastern stopbank. He gave the meaning of enemy signal flares: Three red—enemy attacking, take post; one green—no contact with enemy, all quiet; white flares—for illumination only.

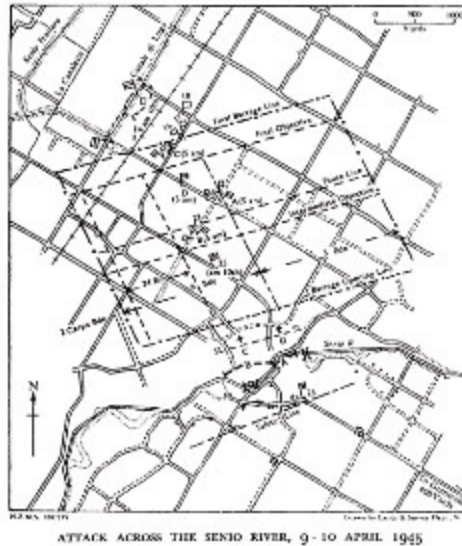
During the afternoon B Company (Major [Davis](#)¹) on the left of the sector had one man killed by a sniper; two men were wounded and, despite the usual harassing tactics of the enemy artillery, mortars, Spandaus, and small arms, these were the only casualties in the brigade that day. On the second day in the position another prisoner was secured, a deserter who swam the river and surrendered to 10 Platoon. He was a Pole, a naturalised German, who said another Pole had come with him but was drowned crossing the river below the weir near the boundary between A and B Companies. Possibly these deserters were influenced by propaganda records played the previous night by 24 Battalion, which was holding the sector on the left. At first light on the 4th a similar broadcast was made in 25 Battalion's area.

As 'tit for tat', presumably, and with some ingenuity but vast misjudgment, the following day the Germans made their contribution to the entertainment of the troops by firing shells containing propaganda pamphlets; one of these was entitled 'Onward Christian Soldiers. Selected, Illustrated, and Printed by "Comrades of the Other Side"', which somewhat cleverly appealed to all the emotions. Other pamphlets contained illustrations showing the chivalry and kindness of the Germans in their treatment of Allied prisoners in hospital and elsewhere.

Casualties continued at a low rate, one man being wounded on the 3rd, two on the 4th, one on the 5th, one killed on the 6th and two wounded on the 7th, a total since occupying the sector seven days before of two killed and eleven wounded.

On the 7th, shortly after Colonel Norman had left for a conference at [Divisional Headquarters](#), an Allied fighter-bomber accidentally dropped a bomb near Battalion Headquarters; fortunately it failed to explode and the unwelcome visitor was removed by a bomb-disposal squad. On the CO's return he gave instructions for the attack across the [Senio](#). He explained that [Eighth Army](#) was attacking on a front of over 20 miles from Lake Comacchio near the Adriatic coast (where the operation had already commenced) to the south of Route 9. With 78 British Division on its right and Polish troops on the left, the New Zealand Division was to attack on a two-brigade front of 4500 yards with 5 Brigade on the right and 6 Brigade on the left. The operation was to be divided into four phases, commencing with an assault on the [Senio](#) line and terminating in an assault-crossing of the [Santerno River](#), four miles to the north-west.

Colonel Norman then described the tremendous support, far exceeding that at [Alamein](#) and [Cassino](#), which would be afforded the infantry. A very heavy preliminary bombardment by seventeen regiments of artillery was to take place between 1.50 p.m. and 7.20 p.m. on D-day against the country between the two



attack across the senio river, 9 – 10 april 1945

rivers, and also beyond the [Santerno](#) over a strip a mile wide, the average frontage of the bombarded area being five miles. During the first ninety minutes no less than 2000 tons of fragmentation bombs would be dropped by over a thousand heavy, medium, and fighter-bombers, the last-named attacking the strip west of the [Santerno](#) and the others the area between the [Santerno](#) and the Canale di [Lugo](#), two miles east of it.

An alternating gun attack, air bombing, and enfilade harassing fire would follow for the ensuing four hours, four ten-minute gaps being left between the gun attacks and the enfilade fire to allow the close-support fighter-bombers to attack the enemy positions on the [Senio](#), against which the enfilade fire would also be directed in its turn. The enemy would thus become accustomed to this rhythm and so be susceptible to surprise infantry attack.

At 7.20 p.m., at the conclusion of the artillery and air operations, a proportion of smoke being fired during the last three minutes, the far bank of the [Senio](#) was to be subjected for two minutes to an intense flaming attack by Wasp and Crocodile flame-throwers. The artillery would then reopen on a line west of the river and in

conformity with the irregular shape of the river line, and the infantry assault would commence. Lifting at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes, the artillery fire would continue to conform to the shape of the river line until at 8.5 p.m. it reached the barrage opening line, a straight line 600 yards from the river, measured from its intersection with the inter-brigade boundary.

Dwelling five minutes on the opening line, the barrage would continue its advance at its initial rate. As the infantry would be using the very irregular river line as its first start line, the artillery by conforming to the shape of it when it opened fire would ensure that the fire would not precede the infantry by more than 400 yards; the pause on the straight opening line would enable the whole of the forward infantry to form up parallel to that line.

Artificial moonlight was to be provided by searchlights to light up the battlefield and more especially the river crossings, where the troops would be using assault boats and kapok assault bridges. For the first phase 6 Brigade intended to attack with 25 Battalion on the right, 24 on the left, and 26 in reserve. Under command of 25 Battalion would be B Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment, half a 17-pounder troop of 33 Anti-Tank Battery, four Wasps of 38 Irish Infantry Brigade, two Wasps of 26 Battalion, and two Crocodiles of 51 Royal Tanks. Twenty-fourth Battalion was to be similarly strengthened, while 26 Battalion in reserve would have C Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment. The Divisional Reserve was the newly formed 9 NZ Infantry Brigade consisting of Divisional Cavalry Battalion, 22 Battalion and [27 Battalion](#).

Subject to the weather being suitable for the air attack, Monday, 9 April, had been selected as D-day, and as the day dawned the cloudless sky made it certain there would be no repetition of the [Cassino](#) delays. Right on time at 1.50 p.m. the first wave of heavy bombers passed overhead in the bright sunshine and, guided by a bomb-line of smoke shells placed in the sky by the 3.7-inch AA guns, opened the air attack with their fragmentation bombs. To the waiting troops who, wherever possible, had secured vantage points from which to view the spectacle, the sight and sound were most impressive, and as larger formations took part 'the sound of the bombing became a distant roar, starting faintly, rising to a crescendo, and gradually dying away'.

By 3 p.m. the forward troops had withdrawn to a safety line 600 yards from the

river, and twenty minutes later the first gun attack started, followed in turn by the attack of the close-support bombers and the enfilade artillery fire against the river positions. This sequence continued for the following four hours. It was a striking demonstration of superb planning and performance and of the development of immense offensive power.

At 7 p.m. the Crocodiles, Wasps, and the leading infantry with its boats and kapok bridges were formed up within 200 yards of the river ready for the assault. Just as the last rounds of the guns burst on the enemy forward positions and the flame-throwers and infantry advanced, fighter-bombers appeared and in the strange silence following the hours of bombardment made a dummy attack at low level, designed to keep the enemy's heads down till the attack crossed the river. A few moments later the first flame-throwers sent out a spurt of flame and then the whole front seemed to burst into lanes of fire.

Conforming to the general plan, 25 Battalion had sent a platoon from each of C and D Companies with the Wasps and Crocodiles to cover the crossing of the attacking companies. By 7.22 p.m. these were in position on the stopbank and a minute or so later the leading companies, A on the right and B on the left, passed through and crossed the river. These companies were to take up a position forming a bridgehead on a frontage of 900 yards across a bend of the [Senio](#). There was practically no opposition and within a few minutes the companies secured the objective. Thirty-nine prisoners sent back reached Battalion Headquarters within twenty minutes of the opening of the attack, and within the hour B Company reported that it had another twenty.

In the meantime C and D Companies had moved forward, D on the right and C on the left, and by 7.45 p.m. were in position behind A and B Companies ready to move through them; from a start line 300 yards beyond the leading companies, D and C Companies were to secure the second objective 2400 yards to the north-west. At five minutes past eight the barrage opened, and following it closely against negligible opposition the two companies by midnight had secured the objective and prepared it for all-round defence. A and B Companies followed up and occupied a position on the line of a road about 700 yards behind the objective of the leading companies; Battalion Headquarters also moved forward, crossing the river during the morning of the 10th and occupying a house 300 yards behind B Company, with the

RAP 250 yards farther back, both on the [San Severo- Barbiano](#) road.

During the advance the companies had encountered intermittent shelling, and a little before midnight A Company (Major Sheild), when nearing its supporting position, was having some trouble with Spandau fire. Enemy tanks seemed to be roaming about, apparently aimlessly, B Company (Major Davis) being held up by one shortly after 10 p.m. and by two more half an hour later; at that hour six Tiger tanks had also been reported by the Poles to be at Casa Testi, a mile to the south-west of the battalion's left boundary. Despite the artificial moonlight the visibility at times because of smoke and dust was extremely bad, B Company twice commenting on it, once as nil and two minutes later as two yards! At that time, shortly after 10 p.m., one of the company's sections engaged an enemy tank with a Piat and disabled it; a second tank was by-passed. C Company (Major Milne) also heard tanks moving near it and about 11 p.m., on asking whether the supporting tanks were across the river, was told that they were not. Soon afterwards a tank heard ahead of the company seemed to be moving away.

The line of advance crossed roads, ditches, and hedges at an angle, generally of about 45 degrees, and as always in such circumstances maintenance of direction was difficult. As a result A Company on reaching its objective was too far to the right and Major Sheild 'side-slipped' it to the correct position. The situation on the flanks was satisfactory; on the right 28 Battalion was almost level with D Company (Major Cameron) though it was encountering opposition, and on the left 24 Battalion had secured its objectives.

About 3 a.m. 24 Battalion reported that enemy tanks in [Barbiano](#), 400 yards west of 25 Battalion, had moved off in the direction of [Lugo](#), a course which crossed 25 Battalion's sector. However, they caused no trouble, though about an hour later C Company heard them moving across its front. All these reports of tanks gave rise to several inquiries by the companies regarding the progress of the supporting tanks and anti-tank weapons; the bridging of the [Senio](#) was not easy and was being pressed on with all despatch by the engineers, the first tanks crossing shortly after 3 a.m. and reaching the companies about daylight. The bridging operations had been hampered by the numerous mines in the vicinity, one of which disabled a bulldozer and so rendered a scissors bridge unusable. The approaches had required a good

deal of work, including the repair of a culvert, and enemy artillery and mortars were ranging on the area. Similar difficulties were being experienced with a bridge on 24 Battalion's front, and it was arranged that the supporting arms of that battalion should use 25 Battalion's bridge.

Although enemy resistance had been slight, the night provided some exciting and doubtful situations; a member of 14 Platoon describes the experiences of his platoon:

'About 500 yards from the objective the platoon ran across a group of houses and after clearing the group the sections headed for the crossroads, the order being 4, 5, and 6 sections. Cpl Galvin and Pte McAvoy were walking ahead of the sections armed with Tommy guns, when out of the misty darkness came the sound of men moving down the road towards us. We stopped and a voice barked out the single word "Deutche" and instantly Stonk [L-Cpl Parker] replied "Ja Ja". These prisoners were handed back to 5 Sec and 6 Sec took the lead from 4 and arrived at the crossroads without any more trouble. No sooner had we arrived ... than we were horrified to hear the sound of a tank (or tanks as it later turned out to be) milling around up the road to the left. The Platoon immediately took cover in the drain along the road but were commanded to withdraw by Capt Leuchars.² We fell back 100 yards down the road and the majority of the platoon commenced to dig in in an adjacent paddock, with the exception of Cpl (Slim) Galvin, L/Cpl (Stonk) Parker, Ptes McAvoy and Fred Wills.³ Fred was the Piat mortar man and proposed to set up his mortar on the road to take a crack at the tank as it went past at a distance of 50 to 75 yards. Capt Leuchars was approached by the two corporals and while Cpl Galvin was asking permission, L/Cpl Parker picked up the Piat from the road and with Mac and Fred took up a position on the corners of the crossroads, Mac being on the left-hand side of the road with a Tommy and Stonk and Fred on the right-hand side with the Piat and a Tommy. After a wait of a couple of minutes the first two 88 SP guns came out of the mist nose to tail followed by a Tiger tank. For a few tense moments we thought they were going to spin round the corner but to our relief they passed straight by within 3 feet of us. When the Tiger had passed us about two yards L/Cpl Parker squeezed the trigger of the Piat but to our amazement nothing happened. He squeezed again and still nothing happened. He suddenly realized the safety catch was still applied but Pte Wills reached over and released it. By that time the tanks

had disappeared in the mist so L/Cpl Parker picked up the Piat and went charging down the road after them. As soon as he caught sight of the rear of the end tank he got down and let a shot go, which hit the Tiger and put it out of action. Pte McAvoy in the meantime decided to find out what was going on and ran down the road in time to see a shower of sparks as the Piat bomb hit the tank. Neither waited to fire another shot "just to make sure" but picked up the Piat and retreated as fast as their legs would carry them to the corner, where they picked up Pte Wills and returned to the platoon where everyone was wondering what was going on. L/Cpl Parker, incidentally, still says he didn't feel the weight of the Piat on their 150 yard sprint back to the platoon.'

Lance-Sergeant [Begley](#)⁴ who was with the left forward platoon of his company had a very similar experience. After the company had consolidated his platoon was ordered to exploit to the left; it encountered a Panther tank which rushed and overran the platoon. With his Piat gunner Sergeant Begley chased the tank up a road and at a range of eight yards secured three direct hits, forcing it into the ditch; the Germans were taken prisoner by a neighbouring unit. Begley's prompt action no doubt saved the platoon from many casualties. He was awarded the Military Medal.

On the lighter side of the war was a report before midnight 9–10 April from the stretcher-bearers that they had found an enemy company headquarters with candles still burning, 'much loot, many blankets, but alas no transport for same'; the timing of another message, one from Brigade Headquarters (when the companies were halfway to the second objective) caused some amusement; it read: 'Div Sign NZ Titles Badges will be brought into use ... 78 British Inf Div patches will be removed', the degree of priority being given as 'Important'. It is only fair to add, however, that the message also included an order to cease the use of a certain code-word on messages, which probably was important.

Signal communication throughout the operation was good, except for the failure after the first hour of D Company's 48 set, and even in that case C Company maintained some contact with that company through 38 sets. An hour before midnight 24 Battalion on the left lost touch with its forward companies and asked if 25 Battalion companies could get in touch with them, which they were unable to do; apparently it was only a temporary interruption. Until daylight, when a new set arrived, D Company continued to maintain communication through C Company. For 9

April the casualties reported in 25 Battalion were one killed and Lieutenant [Cushing](#)⁵ and three men wounded.

Shortly before 1 a.m. on the 10th an interesting signal came from Brigade HQ:

'PW reports casualties heavy, lot of tanks and SP guns in area. Intention of enemy was to counter-attack with these on to river. Intends to hold canal [Canale di [Lugo](#)] before falling back on to next river. BM observes that enemy may not be able to stage effective c/attack owing to hy losses of personnel.'

The next objective was the Canale di [Lugo](#) and the forward companies were anxious to push on, C Company reporting the capture of six horses and three trailers (also ammunition and wire dump) and asking permission to operate as 'cavalry'; the answer was 'No'. The company also reported that '24 Bn had pinched their Teds', or in other words 'stolen their

Germans'. Colonel Norman had been told by the Brigade Major that there had been stiff fighting on the right flank and that there was to be no move before 8 a.m. and then only on instructions. However, both Major Milne and Major Cameron (D Company) were satisfied that the canal could be reached without difficulty, and on Brigadier Parkinson arriving at Battalion Headquarters it was arranged that the advance would be made without artillery support. Fifth Brigade on the right was informed and was asked that the [Maori Battalion](#) be warned 'not to shoot us up'. The companies were instructed



6 BRIGADE'S ADVANCE FROM THE SENIO, 9 - 27 APRIL 1945

6 brigade's advance from the senio, 9 – 27 april 1945

that the tanks must accompany them, and moving forward shortly after 8 a.m. they were established in the new positions with tank and anti-tank support in a little over an hour. Light mortar fire was the only opposition encountered.

Very unfortunately, on the resumption of the artillery and air attack that morning against the [Santerno](#) positions, fragmentation bombs from the aircraft caused severe casualties in C and D Companies, reported as seventeen in each company. The target for the bombers was the mile-wide strip beyond the [Santerno](#), two and a half miles north-west of the companies on the [Lugo Canal](#) which had been selected as the bomb-line. Apart from some mechanical fault in the bomb-dropping apparatus or accidental operation of it, the most likely explanation of this tragedy seems to be that the bomb-line was mistaken for the target by some aircraft.

About noon Battalion Headquarters had again moved forward and orders were then issued for the next advance. Both 5 and 6 Brigades were to move up to the [Santerno](#), 25 and 24 Battalions continuing to lead 6 Brigade. Colonel Norman instructed C and D Companies to advance with their armour to the [Scolo Tratturo](#), 900 yards away, and hold that position; the tanks would then cross and, followed by A and B Companies, advance towards the river; C and D Companies would be the battalion reserve.

Despite the shock of the accidental bombing C and D Companies moved off at 1 p.m., the appointed time, proceeding by bounds of about 400 yards. Each with its own troop of armour, the two companies were on the [Tratturo](#) by 3.30 p.m. On the way C Company reported two abandoned field guns ahead, only to find when reaching them that they were wooden dummies, sometimes an effective ruse, especially if used with flash apparatus and in conjunction with guns in the locality. The opposition was slight, and a little after 5 p.m. A and B Companies passed through and continued the advance. About 8 p.m. a thousand yards from the [Santerno](#) the leading companies halted and consolidated their positions, with the supporting arms in position and L/T communication established throughout the battalion. On the right troops of 5 Brigade were almost level and 24 Battalion was in line on the left. During the night it was learnt from intercepts that the enemy was manning the far bank of the river, against which the mortars then carried out harassing fire; apparently this provoked the enemy, whose artillery just before

daybreak showed increased activity. This fire wounded Major Sheild and Captain Galloway⁶ took over command of A Company.

Looking for a crossing, patrols from A and B Companies reached the [Santerno](#) during the early hours of the 11th, the two reserve companies following at dawn; by 7 a.m. the battalion was in position at the river, D Company from reserve moving up behind A Company to guard the right flank. Tanks and anti-tank guns were in position. On the left 24 Battalion had the forward platoons of its two leading companies across the river. Shortly after reaching its objective B Company (Major Davis) came under heavy mortar fire and on request was supported by the medium machine guns. It was not long before the mortar fire spread to A Company, but both companies crossed the river and occupied positions on the left bank.

On the battalion's front the river had been straightened to eliminate a large loop about 900 yards to the north-west and a smaller loop immediately north-east of it. This latter was to be the battalion's next objective, and preparatory to an advance later in the day Colonel Norman brought field and medium artillery into action against this former riverbed. 'Stonks' by the field artillery were also directed on the enemy mortar positions, some of the shells falling a little too close to B Company; there was little room to spare between the target and the company so the 3-inch mortars took over the task from the guns.

By mid-morning enemy artillery from the north-west was briskly shelling the battalion and was engaged by the medium counter-battery artillery; an enemy OP, reported by B Company to be in a church 2000 yards to the north, and a gun to the north-west (probably an SP gun seen a little earlier by the company), provided additional targets. The company commanders were told that all the artillery was engaged on counter-battery tasks and that they must report the type of any enemy gun in action and its approximate position. It had also been arranged that [Massa Lombarda](#), a small town 3000 yards to the north-west, should be attacked by rocket-firing Typhoons.

At 1 p.m. Brigadier Parkinson instructed Colonel Norman to secure the smaller loop of the old riverbed; 24 Battalion was to take the larger one. Bridges were being built over the Santerno, one on the battalion's front, and the anti-tank guns and the armour were to cross as soon as possible. At 2 p.m. 5 Brigade on the right was firing

a barrage in support of a local attack and A Company was to take advantage of it, if possible, and occupy the small loop. Suspected tanks about 700 yards beyond the loop were to be bombed from the air.

A Company had no difficulty in securing its objective and at 4 p.m. was in touch with troops of 5 Brigade, which about 500 yards downstream had a Bailey bridge nearing completion. Late in the afternoon B Company moved up on the left of A Company and D Company had two platoons across the river to protect the engineers building the battalion's bridge. On his return from a brigade conference Colonel Norman told the company commanders that 17 Indian Brigade had crossed the [Santerno](#) on the right and that the enemy was disorganised; [28 Battalion](#) had taken many prisoners and the artillery had knocked out two tanks; another Bailey bridge was being erected during the night on the right of the battalion and an Ark bridge was also being provided; the Poles on the left of 6 Brigade were attacking that night and [United States](#) forces farther left the following day, 12 April.

The CO also gave details of a further advance to be made by the battalion but enemy counter-attacks that evening caused a change of plan. At 9.20 p.m. 5 Brigade on the right was counter-attacked and ten minutes later 24 Battalion on the left was also attacked, losing some of its forward positions. The companies of 25 Battalion were ordered to stand firm on the river and heavy defensive fire and 'stonks' by the supporting medium and field artillery and mortars were brought down along the front. On the left B Company suffered some casualties when Spandaus opened fire from a gully on its left, and C Company in reserve was ordered to stand-to, ready to go to the scene; medium machine guns gave immediate assistance by firing on the Spandaus in the gully and the tanks from the near bank also opened fire. After an hour the situation eased and C Company stood down.

In these active periods the maintenance of signal communications is highly important in order to direct fire as the changing situations require, and the company signallers have an onerous and dangerous task repairing lines and working their wireless sets under fire in exposed situations. One of these signallers, Corporal McManaway of A Company, had shown great zeal in repairing lines during the occupation of the stopbank, and later, during the enemy counter-attack, although much exposed and using a high and conspicuous aerial, he maintained touch with Battalion Headquarters and called down counter-battery fire to subdue the enemy

fire. He was awarded a well-deserved Military Medal.

The battalion's casualties thus far were 5 other ranks killed, 1 officer (Captain Leuchars) and 19 other ranks wounded, and 1 missing, on the 10th; and 5 other ranks killed, 2 died of wounds, and 1 officer (Major Sheild) and 18 other ranks wounded on 11 April. (The missing man later made contact with Allied forces.)

During the night tanks were heard moving about and there was a little mortar and machine-gun fire. In the early hours an enemy SP gun was rather troublesome, B Company at one time receiving a shell every two minutes, and the artillery was asked to deal with it. Before daylight anti-tank guns were in position across the river, but the tanks had difficulties with the bridges and tracks and joined the companies later in the morning. About 8 a.m. 24 Battalion recovered its positions, assisted for half an hour by supporting fire from A Company.

At 10 a.m. (12 April) Colonel Norman said there would be no move for some time, and at a conference which included all supporting arms the situation was described. The Maoris on the right had fought their way forward and, a thousand yards to the right of 25 Battalion, were about a mile beyond the river. Twenty-sixth Battalion with a squadron of armour would pass through the rear of 28 (Maori) Battalion and, proceeding in front of 25 Battalion, effect a junction with 24 Battalion. Both 26 and 24 Battalions, together with 28 Battalion on the right, would then advance, leaving 25 Battalion as brigade reserve. The Poles were to move closer to the brigade's left boundary; some of their troops had crossed the [Santerno](#) in an attack the previous evening. As brigade reserve 25 Battalion had the task of securing the left flank during the advance which, it was expected, would outstrip the Poles; during the afternoon C and D Companies occupied the large loop which had been held by 24 and 26 Battalions.

At 3 p.m. the barrage opened and later in the day it was learnt that the attack had been successful. While it was in progress the enemy artillery, apparently searching for gun positions, heavily shelled 25 Battalion headquarters; a truck of 20 Armoured Regiment nearby and a cookhouse were set on fire, all telephone lines were cut, and there were several slight casualties, the total losses that day being Lieutenant [Pyne](#)⁷ and four other ranks wounded. Air reports at 5 p.m. stated that the roads were full of retreating enemy guns and horse-drawn vehicles. At 2 a.m. the

following day, again behind a barrage, the advance was resumed; 25 Battalion followed on, concentrating during the morning in a position of readiness in the artillery area just to the east of [Massa Lombarda](#).

By first light that morning the leading troops of the brigade had reached the Canale dei [Molini](#), 5000 yards beyond the [Santerno](#) and within the same distance of the main objective, the [Sillaro River](#). At 7 a.m. the advance was continued and during the morning, in order to relieve 5 Brigade, the 6 Brigade front was side-stepped to the right; to achieve this 24 Battalion moved over behind and went up on the right of 26 Battalion while 9 Brigade came up on the left. Some opposition was encountered from Tiger tanks and SP guns, which were countered by artillery concentrations, but by nightfall the advanced troops were about 2000 yards from the Sillaro.

That evening (13 April) Brigadier Parkinson explained that during the afternoon a determined enemy was holding a bridgehead west of the Sillaro, his anti-tank guns and tanks holding off the attacking armour and infantry during daylight. At two in the morning of the 14th the enemy forward positions would be bombarded for half an hour and 24 and 26 Battalions would then attack under a barrage, on a front of 800 yards, to secure the far bank of the Sillaro. Twenty-fifth Battalion was given the task of protecting the right flank of the brigade and at first light would move into position there.

The attack was successful against slight opposition, though the enemy was in some strength along a lateral road about 800 yards west of the river. Moving off at 6 a.m., 25 Battalion took up its positions along the [Massa Lombarda-Sillaro](#) road, facing north-east; C Company was on the left about 1200 yards from the river and D, A, and B Companies extended the front to the south-east for about 3000 yards to within 2500 yards of [Massa Lombarda](#). Throughout the morning all forward positions on the Sillaro were under heavy mortar and shell fire and were harassed by small-arms fire from enemy positions on the stopbank beyond the right flank; AP and HE shells⁸ fired into the stopbank had a quietening effect on the enemy posts there.

The next attack was planned to take place that night at 9 p.m. under a barrage, on a two-brigade front, 6 Brigade on the right and 9 Brigade on the left. On 6 Brigade's front 25 Battalion was to be on the right and 26 Battalion on the left, the

objective being a road 2000 yards north-west of the Sillaro. At 5 p.m., however, the attack was cancelled and 25 Battalion by midnight relieved 24 Battalion, which left one company guarding a ford on the right flank and took over 25 Battalion's duties on that flank.

Twenty-fifth Battalion had two companies on the stopbank, C on the right and D on the left, with A Company close up in rear and B Company in reserve farther back, about 1000 yards from the river. After reaching its new position B Company had the misfortune to lose its commander, Major Davis, who was wounded; Lieutenant Bruce Andrews, commanding 10 Platoon, took command of the company until the arrival of Captain A. Norton-Taylor from the Support Company. About midnight a detachment with scout cars from the 12th Lancers, who were approaching the Sillaro on the right of the battalion, made contact with 12 Platoon, thus removing any anxiety regarding that flank.

At first light the movement of vehicles, thought to be SP guns, was heard by the two forward companies. Spandaus were numerous and active but observation was hampered by fog, though C Company caught sight of a tank which moved off when engaged by a Piat. During the morning enemy activity was considerable and artillery fire was frequently called for by C and D Companies, and also by D Company 24 Battalion at the ford, the artillery and aircraft engaging enemy tanks and SP guns with marked effect. On several occasions tanks were heard a few hundred yards away in front of C Company, and at 11 a.m. the Air LO reported three about 500 yards north-west of the company and moving away to the north-west; just before noon a regimental 'stonk' by twenty-four guns was fired against the tanks and an hour and a half later four Mustangs attacked the same locality. Despite these activities Germans sun-bathing on the river bank 1200 yards to the north were seen by the FOO at C Company and a few rounds from the artillery soon removed them. That morning the signallers were kept busy maintaining communications, the lines to A, C, and D Companies and also to D Company 24 Battalion being cut from time to time by the enemy fire.

Returning from a brigade conference at 2.45 p.m. (15 April) Colonel Norman briefed his orders group:

'Attack tonight—we will have 104 more guns in support tonight than we would

have had, had we attacked last night. Opposing en. formations I/992, II/993, of 278 Div. Barrage opens at 2100 hrs. Tps are to be dug in before first light owing to open nature of country. Barrage will be fired by seven field regts. Sappers at moment on river trying to put in two assault crossings—if successful tanks will be able to travel with infantry almost to objective. Three Bailey bridges to go in on Bde front. Three M los will move with tanks. 24 Bn will pass through bridgehead and watch right flank. Bde will attack with 26 left 25 right. Bearing of advance 296½ M.'

To create the impression that the attack was on a broader front, Bofors were to fire well to the right and left of the front of attack; to the right of 25 Battalion 12 Lancers and an armoured regiment under command of 5 Brigade were to fire a deceptive programme; on the left the Poles were asked to spread the effect of the barrage. According to information obtained by 6 Brigade Headquarters, the enemy was said to be hungry, having had very little food for two days, a rather cheerful item for the attackers—other, perhaps, than any Maoris amongst them. ⁹

In the evening Battalion Headquarters moved up to A Company's headquarters where it would be better able to control the attack. At 9 p.m. the barrage opened, and thirty-five minutes later D Company on the left reached the first bound about 700 yards from the river, C Company (with a little farther to go) arriving a few minutes later. Soon afterwards enemy infantry in strongpoints and trenches, and supported by tanks, was encountered. While the two leading companies were dealing with the infantry to their front, enemy tanks came in behind them from the left. They were at first mistaken for the supporting tanks, causing A Company to send a misleading message to Battalion Headquarters. On being engaged with Piats the enemy tanks moved off, circling round to the left and ultimately opposing the attack on the final objective. There they caused some casualties, including almost the whole of C Company headquarters. Major Milne, the company commander, was wounded. During this engagement D Company claimed two tanks, A Company one, and C Company 'probably two which had not moved off after being engaged with Piats.'

With a wrist wound, Major Milne remained with the company until relieved by Captain R. W. Berry six hours later. Re-forming meanwhile under Lieutenant Rankin ¹⁰ (15 Platoon), C Company had 15 Platoon on the objective about midnight but had lost contact with the other two platoons, which however arrived about an hour later.

D Company (Major Cameron) was also on the objective and had sent patrols forward about 400 yards to the next bound, where a little later C Company also had some detachments. A Company had closely followed the two leading companies and occupied a position about 300 yards behind them; B Company also had moved and an hour before midnight was in position 1000 yards beyond the Sillaro. Prisoners were coming through in some numbers, nine (including a sergeant-major who could speak English) arriving at Battalion Headquarters in the very early hours of the 16th. Shortly after that, two C Company men on their way back to arrange for stretcher-bearers and stretchers to be sent up reported that they had encountered a disabled enemy scout car armed with machine guns; the crew refused to surrender and were firing red tracer into the air. A and B Companies were instructed to wipe out the scout car.

At about 1.30 a.m., D Company 24 Battalion, guarding the right flank, had called for artillery defensive fire and also for 'stonks' from 25 Battalion's mortars and reported that the enemy was in strength on that flank; B Company, in reserve, was instructed to watch the situation. There was a distinct possibility of the enemy cutting in behind the companies and attacking Battalion Headquarters and everyone there had orders to be armed. Later evidence showed the danger to have been very real as a counter-attack had been broken up by the heavy defensive fire called for. The counter-attack had in fact pushed D Company 24 Battalion off the stopbank, and the Ark bridge which was being put in position there was stolen by the enemy, it being last seen heading north with the tail and arms dragging on the ground. About the same hour a further incident was the capture outside 25 Battalion Command Post of two Germans by the Intelligence Officer, Second-Lieutenant Mitchell.

C Company, which had overrun the two enemy dummy guns six days ago, reported the capture of a howitzer, a real one this time, which was partly blocking the road between 13 and 15 Platoons, and asked that the tanks be informed. Before 3 a.m. the tanks were moving forward, and after various delays the two troops for the forward companies were close behind them an hour and a half later; by 5 a.m. A Company had its tanks and, except for two tanks for B Company which were held up at the bridge, all tanks were with their companies by first light.

For outstanding work in this night operation three NCOs were awarded the

Military Medal. Corporal Curry's ¹¹ section was pinned down by heavy fire and he showed great gallantry in dashing forward and attacking two SP guns moving across the front carrying men on top. Though wounded, he captured a German but was subsequently captured while escorting prisoners to the rear to get his wound dressed. He escaped at Rasa and rejoined the battalion. On the Sillaro stopbank Sergeant A. A. F. Smith went to the assistance of a neighbouring platoon sergeant who was wounded while carrying ammunition forward to his platoon. Smith crossed the river and climbed the stopbank to reach him, dressed his wounds, and after assisting him to safety returned and carried the ammunition forward to the platoon. The third NCO, Sergeant [Mitchinson](#), ¹² who was with the leading platoon of his company, also encountered SP guns; these were behind some houses, and Mitchinson under small-arms fire dashed forward with the Piat and, at very short range, scored three direct hits on an SP gun which burst into flames. Its crew then fired on him but he killed three of them with his tommy gun. This action cleared the way for the platoon and greatly helped the company to the objective.

The evacuation of the casualties (by 6 a.m. seventeen had been reported) gave some difficulty and throughout the early hours the parties of stretcher-bearers provided by B Company did excellent work. Shortly after 6 a.m. Brigadier Parkinson at 25 Battalion Tactical Headquarters congratulated Colonel Norman on the successful operation. He said that the battalion would probably push on again in an exploitation role at 7 a.m., and shortly after that hour the advance was continued. C and D Companies were still in the lead, with the other two companies following up from time to time, moving from bound to bound as before, under orders from Battalion Headquarters; at times the companies were delayed on the bounds in order to conform with the movements of troops on the flanks; the mortars were similarly and admirably controlled.

The immediate objective was the [Scolo Sillaro](#), a small canal or ditch nearly three miles north-west of the [Sillaro River](#); shortly after midday both forward companies reported they had reached it, only to discover soon afterwards that they were on a somewhat similar ditch about 500 yards short of the objective. Some opposition from Spandaus had been encountered and a nebelwerfer and a tank had fired on C Company, but enemy movement, including horses and carts, indicated that the enemy had resumed his withdrawal. About noon C Company had one of its

tanks disabled; about the same time an enemy tank moving across the front was a popular target, B Squadron engaging it and reporting, 'Smoke used by enemy, everyone is having a go at enemy tank'. The air OP was asked to spot and engage enemy tanks and within seven minutes this had been done; an enemy tank was also engaged by the bombers.

By 12.30 p.m. both C and D Companies were on the Scolo Sillaro, D Company having been delayed by three enemy tanks which had retired when smoke was used. Shortly afterwards 26 Battalion came up on the left of D Company. As all bridges over the Scolo had been destroyed, tanks were unable to cross and Colonel Norman told Major Cameron (D Company) 'to establish a bridgehead and then have lunch'. Twenty-sixth Battalion also was unable to cross, but in under an hour D Company had occupied its bridgehead to cover the construction of a fascine crossing (and in between times had lunch) and by 4 p.m. the tanks were able to use it.

A fourth military medal was won in the daylight operation. As D Company advanced over the very flat open country, Corporal Cook's ¹³ platoon came under heavy Spandau and rifle-grenade fire from enemy who were dug in round a house about 100 yards away. With the rest of the platoon giving covering fire, Cook led his section to the attack; four men were wounded but Cook pressed home the attack, the section killing four and capturing ten Germans, together with the grenade cup-dischargers and three Spandaus.

In the meantime A and B Companies had also advanced and were directed to take up positions to guard the right flank, both being in position by mid-afternoon. Brigadier Parkinson then told Colonel Norman that 5 Brigade would pass through that night, and that until then 6 Brigade would press on. Shortly after 4 p.m. C and D Companies followed the tanks towards the next bound, about 800 yards ahead, and after securing it moved on again to the next objective, a ditch 700 yards farther on, where they were established by dusk. On the left 26 Battalion was up in line but on the other flank the leading troops were some 1400 yards back. A patrol from C Company, which had made a reconnaissance beyond the next bound, reported that a ditch there about twelve feet wide and nine feet deep could be crossed at a selected point if a bulldozer and fascines were used.

About 9.30 p.m. (16 April) the relieving troops of 23 Battalion passed through

and 25 Battalion, remaining where it was for the night, became brigade reserve. Next morning the companies were withdrawn about two miles to the vicinity of Battalion Headquarters near B Company, which remained in its positions.

Thus had come to an end the last attack in which the battalion was to be engaged. Since the attack began on 9 April at the [Senio River](#) 25 Battalion had advanced 14 miles, inflicted many casualties and captured (as reported) 68 prisoners at a cost of 14 killed, 3 died of wounds, and 6 officers and 69 other ranks wounded; one man was missing.

The days 17–18 April were spent in resting and reorganising and Colonel Norman took advantage of the lull to issue a new list of appointments, made necessary by casualties to officers:

Bn HQ

[Lt-Col E. K. Norman, DSO, MC](#), Commanding Officer

Lt B. A. Andrews, Adjutant

2 Lt [D. R. S. Mitchell](#), Intelligence Officer

Capt P. D. Nathan, [NZMC](#), Medical Officer

Rev. R. R. Clark, Chaplain

Adm Coy

Lt (T/Capt) D. J. Pocknall, Officer Commanding

2 Lt [J. L. Thomson](#), Signals Officer (1 PI)

2 Lt (T/Lt) E. R. C. Jackson, Quartermaster

2 Lt D. H. G. Hawkins, Transport Officer

Sp Coy

Lt (T/Capt) A. Norton-Taylor, Officer Commanding

2 Lt G. W. Stephenson, Machine-gun Officer (2 Pl)

Lt R. B. Simpson, Mortar Officer (3 Pl)

2 Lt L. Hampton, MM, Anti-Tank Officer (5 Pl)

A Coy

Capt I. T. Galloway, Officer Commanding

Lt T. C. Hynes, Second-in-Command

Lt W. M. King, 7 Platoon

Lt R. J. Evans, 8 Platoon

Lt D. Halley, 9 Platoon

2 Lt D. W. Harrison, 12 Platoon

B Coy

Lt (T/Capt) R. W. Berry, Officer Commanding

Lt (T/Capt) A. G. Henricksen, Second-in-Command

Lt J. Murphy, 10 Platoon

Lt A. G. Massey, 11 Platoon

C Coy

Maj J. W. T. Collins, Officer Commanding

Lt E. F. T. Beer, Second-in-Command

Lt E. J. Smith, 13 Platoon

Lt K. D. Rankin, 15 Platoon

2 Lt P. G. Fulton, 14 Platoon

Capt (T/Maj) H. R. Cameron, Officer Commanding

Lt N. K. Chapman, MM, Second-in-Command

Lt W. F. Saunders, 16 Platoon

Lt A. J. Ryan, 17 Platoon

2 Lt G. L. Joyce, 18 Platoon

On the night of 19–20 April an attack similar to that delivered at the [Senio](#) was launched against the [Gaiana Canal](#) by 9 Brigade, 43 Gurkha Brigade (under 2 NZ Division) and [12 Lancers](#) (also under the Division), the flame-throwers of 25 Battalion participating. Against stiffening opposition (which included [4 Parachute Division](#)) the attack was successful in establishing a bridgehead, the flame-throwers being particularly effective. Prisoners were captured from five companies of parachutists, who fought well and had stronger artillery and mortar support than their predecessors. Two bridges across the Gaiana had been captured intact.

During the night 5 and 6 Brigades were to take over the front, 6 Brigade with 24 Battalion on the right, 26 on the left, and 25 Battalion in reserve guarding the left flank as the advance proceeded, or 'Hemstitching the flank' as 26 Battalion rather aptly described it. In the afternoon 25 Battalion moved up to the Gaiana and before midnight, following 26 Battalion when it advanced, took up its position near the left flank. Conforming to the advance of the Division, 25 Battalion followed up throughout the night and by 2 p.m. on the 20th the leading units were on the Idice River, ten miles beyond the Sillaro. The battalion had one casualty reported that day, Lance-Corporal [Boyens](#)¹⁴ being wounded.

Next morning 25 Battalion crossed the [Idice](#), continuing its following-up role. Another casualty was reported, [WO II S. R. Cook](#) dying of wounds. The following day the battalion spent much of its time in the vehicles as the advance rolled on in pursuit of the enemy, with whom touch had been lost until in the evening he was again encountered at the village of San Giorgio, ten miles beyond the [Idice](#). In its position on the left flank of the Division 25 Battalion had a quiet night.

In the morning the battalion had the great misfortune to lose its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Norman, who at an early hour was wounded while on a tour of the companies when his jeep ran over a mine; the driver was also wounded and a signaller suffered from blast and shock. Colonel Norman had taken over command, temporarily, at [Castelfrentano](#) on 23 December 1943, and with the exception of eighteen days in the following February (when Colonel Morten reassumed command) and about three and a half months between March and June 1944 (when Colonel MacDuff was appointed), had commanded the battalion thereafter. His term was exceeded, and that slightly, only by the original commander, Lieutenant-Colonel A. S. Wilder. Colonel Norman's very fine service in command in many difficult operations and over such a lengthy period had been recognised by the award of his two decorations, the DSO and MC.

Major Barnett, MC, ¹⁵ second-in-command of 26 Battalion, took over command and a quarter of an hour after his arrival 25 Battalion (again in its vehicles) at 8.45 a.m. continued the pursuit. Along the route, and especially at the village of S. Pietro in [Casale](#), the people gave the troops a most enthusiastic welcome with 'much viva-ing and flower throwing'. After a run of eight miles the battalion halted for ten hours at the Reno River, where demolitions had caused delay. The River Po was only ten miles away, and as the area between the rivers was thought likely to contain pro-Fascists, special care of weapons was taken and officers carried their pistols.

After dark the battalion began to cross a Bailey bridge which had been erected over the [Reno](#), and at the head of 6 Brigade moved to a position in the vicinity of S. Agostino, a mile north of the river. Casualties for the day were Colonel Norman wounded, one died of wounds, and two wounded. Starting next morning (24 April) with 25 Battalion still leading, the column reached the village of [Bondeno](#), three miles from the Po; near the village a damaged enemy tank blocked the road for a time and there were many signs of a demoralised enemy retreat. Enemy equipment of all kinds was strewn along the roads and many prisoners passed back along the column.

There had been much enemy propaganda and rumours were rife that the formidable water barrier of the Po would be very strongly defended, and that it could be crossed only at the expense of severe casualties. That remained to be seen but,

from the quantity of abandoned equipment, it was obvious that the river had proved a very awkward obstacle for the retreating Germans. Harassed as they were by vastly superior air forces and facing the converging attacks of the Eighth and Fifth Armies, as well as a good deal of hostility from partisans in their rear, the Germans were in grave peril and did well to avoid complete disaster.

After a halt of several hours at [Bondeno](#) while a bridge was being completed, the battalion moved into positions on the south bank of the Po, where it was on the left of 23 Battalion. On a front of about a mile the companies were disposed at a sharp elbow a mile and a half south of [Ficarolo](#), where a north-south reach of the river turned to the east; A Company was on the right, then C, B, and D Companies. Soon after its arrival the battalion came under light artillery fire and one of B Company's tanks received a direct hit, the company suffering several casualties. A church tower on the other side of the river at [Ficarolo](#), a suspected OP, was bombarded by the tanks without causing any noticeable damage, 'though no doubt discouraging the OP', as the diarist put it.

Colonel Barnett had told the company commanders that possibly 25 Battalion would be required to make a crossing of the river and reconnaissance parties for that operation had preceded the unit. However, about 5 p.m. a report from 5 Brigade stated that 21 Battalion patrols in assault boats had crossed without opposition. Several plans for crossing the Po had been discussed, including a divisional attack under a barrage, but in view of the latest developments the policy for the night was reconnaissance and peaceful penetration if possible. The equipment available for the crossing included Fantails, Stormboats, DUKWs, and one Class 40 raft to take tanks and support weapons into the bridgehead.

Before nightfall a small patrol of B Company had crossed the river and by midnight (24 – 25 April) 7 Platoon of A Company and part of B Company had occupied a small island opposite the front, negotiating a fairly strong current and meeting no opposition; a member of 7 Platoon describes an incident during the operation:

'Lieut King ¹⁶ cdg 7 Pl was in one rubber boat, Sergeant Wootton was in another, and Cpl Caldwell caused amusement, although not at the time, by falling out of his rubber boat about twenty yards from the shore. A return trip was made

back across the Po by Sgt Wootton and Cpl Caldwell to enable a fresh set of clothes to be obtained from Headquarters.'

During the early morning of Anzac Day 25 Battalion established a bridgehead across the river; there was no sign of the enemy. The supporting arms were ferried across and the advance was resumed. On the right 5 Brigade had been equally successful. By 9.30 a.m. A and B Companies were in position at [Ficarolo](#) and C and D Companies were still crossing the river. Within half an hour anti-tank guns were with the forward companies and shortly afterwards the whole battalion was safely across the river. Both on a one-company front, 25 Battalion with 24 Battalion on its right then advanced about three miles to the village of Salara, C Company leading, followed by D, B, and A Companies. Two prisoners were captured and two bridges near the village were secured intact. The next move came immediately, 25 Battalion being directed through Sariano to [Trecenta](#), three miles to the north-west, the objective being two bridges over the canalised Tartaro and Maestra rivers. Snipers in the village offered some resistance, but with the assistance of the 12th Lancers (which was providing a screen ahead of the infantry) were soon cleared out.

By about 10 p.m. the Tartaro bridge was secured against some resistance which resulted in Lieutenant King being killed; a member of the platoon describes the operation:

'A Company arrived at the stopbank of the river on the northern side of the town late in the afternoon and immediately occupied a house on the stopbank. A bridge in the immediate foreground was still intact but it was thought to be mined. After much discussion regarding the best way to cross it was left to 7 Platoon of A Company and at about 9 or 10 in the evening this Platoon endeavoured, under the leadership of Lieut King, to cross in single file. Just as Lieut King reached the other end he was shot by a German infantryman and had to be dragged back immediately by members who were following right behind him. It was from this incident that he later died and the Platoon was taken over by Sergeant Wootton for approximately a week until Lieut T. Clark ¹⁷ was posted to same.'

A Company occupied positions on the stopbank and the other companies were close up around a large building which had been an enemy depot. The Maestra was still held by the enemy, and with the sanction of Brigade Headquarters Colonel

Barnett halted for the night. The casualties in the last two days were one killed and two wounded on the 24th and Lieutenant King killed on the 25th.

About midnight the medium artillery and 4.2-inch mortars harassed the banks of the Maestra and at 4 a.m. a patrol from D Company found that the enemy had gone. During the advance in the morning craters and obstacles constructed of felled trees at various places caused some delay and the enemy was next encountered five miles farther on near Badia Polesine, a town on the [Adige](#), the next considerable river. Artillery was brought into action and the town occupied without casualties, the companies taking up positions along the south or right bank of the river, which was wide and deep with a fast current. Many prisoners were taken from a great variety of units, 'a very mixed bag'. Writing of this area a member of the battalion said: 'It was around the town of [Badia](#) that the Bn discovered large quantities of sugar and it was not uncommon to see bags tied to tanks, trucks, and any other type of vehicle, and the ingenuity certainly proved worth-while as the black market value of sugar was £1 for a pound.'

At 9 p.m. that day (26 April) 25 Battalion crossed the [Adige](#) in assault boats, the only opposition being machine-gun and light-mortar fire from the left bank after the leading troops had crossed. By midnight a bridgehead about 3000 yards deep had been established, with C Company on the right and D on the left. B Company (which lost one man as a prisoner of war after crossing the river) was to be ready to exploit success and A Company was in reserve. Twenty-fourth Battalion was on the right and 5 Brigade farther to the right. The crossing of the [Adige](#) has been described by a man in D Company:

'While we were pulling straw from a haystack to make our beds, Jeff Joyce, ¹⁸ our platoon commander, came back from a conference with Major Cameron, the Coy Commander, with the news that we were to cross the river in assault boats at 8.30 p.m. We lined up on the bank with tanks in support. At a given time two sections from each platoon rushed the boats into the river in the manner we had been taught at San Severino. We reached the far side without trouble. We were proceeding up the bank as previously arranged when a Spandau opened from a bank above our heads. Grenades were thrown and the Tommy gunners opened up. The Spandau crew made a run for it. We reached our objective, a house by a road 500 yards ahead, without any more trouble. As things were very quiet we took the chance to

get some rest, placing a guard at each end of the house.

`Just before the first guard was due to be relieved, Wally Page,¹⁹ one of the sentries, challenged three persons who were advancing towards him; they turned out to be Jerries who opened fire on him. He returned the fire with his Tommy-gun. On hearing the shots the remainder of the platoon awoke and rushed to the stand-to positions. Jeff Joyce, who had fallen in the river on the way across, and dressed only in his underpants, quickly organized a patrol of four men to see if they could contact the escaping Jerries.... We questioned the Italians but could find no trace of them.... Later on in the day Jeff Joyce, Tiger Atkin,²⁰ Ray Upson,²¹ and myself went out on a recce patrol and spotted a church tower ... and decided to investigate as we thought there was sure to be a village in the vicinity.... We noticed there were no civilians about, which was very unusual. On reaching the square we saw the civilians assembled and evidently awaiting the arrival of their liberators. When they caught sight of us they started cheering and throwing flowers at us. A few shots were fired into the air by Partisans. After we had been kissed by whiskered old gents and young girls, we were pushed to the town hall where they turned on Vermouth and Cognac, toasting everyone from King George to Peter Fraser.

`Later we were taken to the chief Partisan's house for a meal....I might add that we returned to that same village the next day and the same people charged us 650 lire for one litre of Vermouth.'

At 6.30 in the morning of the 27th Brigadier Parkinson came to Battalion Headquarters and complimented the battalion 'on a fine show'. He said 9 Brigade and the Gurkhas would pass through during the day and that 25 Battalion would follow 9 Brigade later. There was news that the partisans had risen and that the large cities of Milan, Genoa, and most of Turin were in their hands; they were also active nearer at hand and everywhere were awaiting the opportunity to harass the Germans. Already on the New Zealand line of advance they had prevented the destruction of several bridges.

The steep stopbanks of the Adige made it difficult to get the supporting arms across, and the steady rain which commenced at 3 a.m. made matters worse. The engineers had been working almost to exhaustion point in bridging the rivers and dealing with numerous demolitions and other obstacles and were badly in need of

assistance. A Company was detailed for the purpose. By 10 a.m., when he was satisfied that the enemy had gone and that a sufficient proportion of supporting weapons had crossed the river, Brigadier Parkinson gave instructions that the comfort of the troops, in the form chiefly of blankets and rations, was to take precedence and the battalion settled down to enjoy prepared meals and such rest as time permitted.

Armed civilians were appearing in the area occupied by the battalion, many without papers, and B Company asked for instructions regarding them. Captain Berry was told to disarm all those who did not possess satisfactory identity papers. Shortly after midday, under orders from Brigade, the battalion organised a 'flying column', consisting of two jeeps with nine infantrymen, the FOO (Captain [Smythe](#)²²) and his jeep, the anti-tank officer (Lieutenant L. Hampton) and gun crew with a six-pounder gun towed by a jeep, and two tanks, Lieutenant Hampton being in command. This detachment was to reconnoitre bridges on the Val Nuova and Scolo (about 4000 yards to the north-west), report on the state of the roads, and if the bridges were intact to see how far it could go. It was to move by bounds, reporting at each bound in the usual way.

Leaving at 2.35 p.m. and moving along the roads, Hampton's detachment half an hour later reached the bridge over the Scolo; though the bridge was intact it had been prepared for demolition, so the detonators were removed from the charges and the detachment moved on. In another half-hour a house 3000 yards north of the bridge was found to be occupied by the enemy; the place was captured and thirteen prisoners taken at a cost of one man killed. At a road junction a few hundred yards farther on another five prisoners were captured. The force came under scattered small-arms fire and occupied a position on the road to the west of the house. About 6 p.m. four armoured cars of the 12th Lancers arrived.

The detachment then split into two groups, one under Captain [Smythe](#) of one tank, two armoured cars, and three jeeps, and the other under Lieutenant Hampton of one tank, two armoured cars, and one jeep. After [Smythe's](#) party had moved forward a few hundred yards a tank was bogged and had to be pulled out while an armoured car from a flank gave covering fire against enemy infantry. At that stage Battalion Headquarters ordered the column to withdraw.

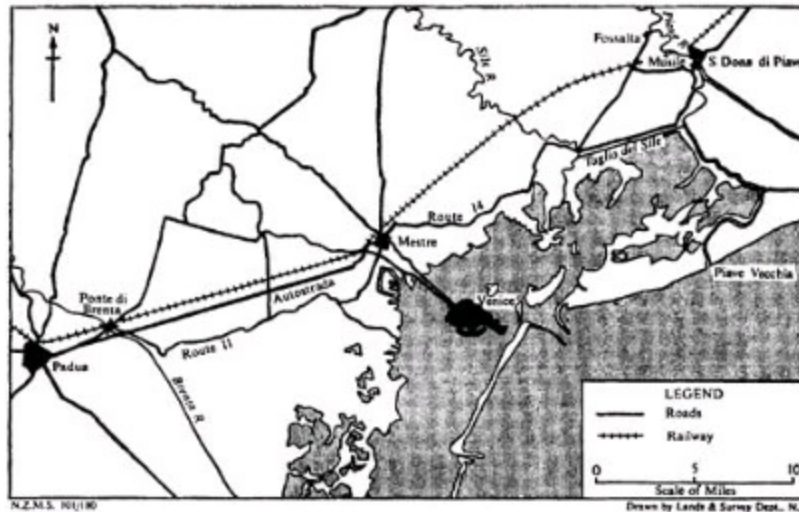
Meanwhile Hampton's party had moved down a road to the south-east to investigate a house a thousand yards away; an account of this reconnaissance is given by Private [Hewson](#): ²³

'The jeep was about fifty yards ahead of the tank when enemy opened up. The members of the jeep baled out and some were hit. Lieut Hampton was hit ... and died ... next morning. Cpl Hawker ²⁴ died in the ditch about one hour after being hit. Pte Hewson was hit in the wrist and was bandaged by the Italians. Lieut Hampton had been carried in and bandaged by the enemy. (Pte Hewson does not know what happened to the others.) The Germans wore blue uniforms. Their officer gave Pte Hewson a cigarette and tried to question him in Italian but he did not answer. There seemed to be about 150 of them and all but 10 left the vicinity at dusk, taking the jeep. The others left on horseback and bicycles later. The Italians were very good to him and tried to contact some of our troops but could not. He walked out in the morning and met [12 Lancers](#) a mile and a half from the battalion's position.'

Corporal [Rentoul](#) ²⁵ also succeeded in getting back to the battalion. When he saw that the position was hopeless he decided to make the attempt, and with great difficulty and coolness and by crawling along drains and concealing himself in a culvert for some hours, he eluded the enemy and brought valuable information back to the unit. Earlier in the month on the night before the attack across the [Senio](#) he laid and fired two Bangalore torpedoes to cut wire and blow mines on the bank of the river, and also blew gaps in the bank to give Wasps and Crocodiles a field of fire. For these services he was awarded the Military Medal.

When Colonel Barnett heard of the first encounter with the enemy he instructed the column to stay where it was as a detachment of the 12th Lancers was being sent up and 9 Brigade would shortly pass through. Two hours elapsed with no sign of either, and Hampton then reported that the column could advance to the next bound without assistance. He was told to advance with care and watch for [27 Battalion](#) following up. At 6.40 p.m. when the column again advanced and was stopped almost immediately by enemy fire, Colonel Barnett ordered the withdrawal, but Hampton's patrol could not be found and the enemy was seen around the house he had gone to investigate. It was then a little after 7 p.m. and a tank and a company of [27 Battalion](#) had reached the scene. When two hours later Hampton and his patrol were

still missing, Colonel Barnett instructed [Smythe](#) to take command and return. [Smythe](#) handed twenty prisoners to B Company and about 9.30 p.m. reported to Battalion Headquarters. Next morning the 12th Lancers had one man of the patrol at the RAP and a little later at the scene of the encounter found a survivor and three dead. The casualties were Lieutenant Hampton, Lance-Corporal Hawker, and Privates [Betty](#) ²⁶ and [Brown](#) ²⁷ killed, Privates [McGillivray](#) ²⁸ and Hewson wounded.



FROM PADUA TO THE PIAVE
from padua to the piave

Contact with the enemy had been lost, and on the evening of the 28th 25 Battalion left for the brigade concentration area at [Masi](#), moving on throughout the night via [Este](#) on Route 10 and [Monselice](#) on Route 16 to Mezzavia, where the column halted for four hours. Lunch was taken on the southern outskirts of [Padua](#) and the battalion then passed through the city to the accompaniment of a heavy thunderstorm and much 'viva-ing'; the route then took a more easterly direction on the way to [Mestre](#), 20 miles farther on, passing the south-easterly turn-off to [Venice](#), five miles distant, just before entering [Mestre](#). A triumphal passage through the town followed, and after another nine miles the battalion halted for the night at [Altino](#), a village near the northern end of the Laguna Veneta, eight miles north-east of [Venice](#) though double that distance by road.

A bridge over the Piave River on the battalion's route, ten miles ahead, was being repaired and there was to be no move for at least thirty-six hours. The delay was welcome for several reasons but chiefly because it gave some of the men an opportunity to visit [Venice](#), though the city had been cleared of the enemy only on

the previous night. The men were required to be back by 6.30 p.m.

With the end of the war in [Italy](#) virtually in sight there was naturally much conjecture regarding the future movements of the Division. Rumours were rife, amongst them one that it would be employed as a labour corps restoring harbour installations in [Trieste](#) to enable an army directed on [Austria](#) to pass through that port, and that the Division would form part of that army.

Although 9 Brigade was still in the lead and 6 Brigade was in [Divisional Reserve](#), the disturbed conditions required precautions to be taken, and before resuming the journey on 1 May the battalion was warned to have flank guards at all times as during the night [5 Field Park Company](#) had been attacked. That day the battalion spent several hours at the [Piave](#) before crossing in heavy rain at 6 p.m., bound for a brigade concentration area at [Monfalcone](#), east of the [Isonzo](#) River. Due to the slippery and cratered roads there were many delays as well as congestion at the numerous bridges. The large Tagliamento River 25 miles beyond the [Piave](#) was crossed without difficulty, but at the next river, the Stella four miles away, the battalion was forced upstream for five miles in order to cross. With heavy rain falling the night was spent at Arlis on the opposite bank. At dawn as the march was resumed there was mist but no rain. While 24 Battalion was sent to the island of [Grado](#) to collect prisoners, 26 Battalion was directed to [Gorizia](#), where 25 Battalion with half a squadron of 18 Armoured Regiment was to join it in a show of strength through the town. Timing its march to suit the programme, 25 Battalion following Route 55 reached [Gorizia](#) at 5 p.m. During the march through the streets the people gave the troops a most enthusiastic welcome, but the political situation there was very confused and in the meantime there was to be no fraternising.

As a brief summary of the situation it may be said that Marshal Tito with Yugoslav and Italian partisans had entered [Gorizia](#), causing the Chetniks (Yugoslav Royalist partisans who had been driven out of [Yugoslavia](#) by Communist forces under Tito) to withdraw to the hills west of the town. Some fighting had occurred and it seemed likely to break out afresh at any moment. Noisy bands of demonstrators had paraded the streets singing, shouting slogans, and waving flags and banners. Yugoslav Communist bands carrying red, blue, and white flags with the red star prominent in the centre were shouting 'Death to the Fascists. Death to the Italians.

Long live Tito. Viva Stalin. Viva the Allies'. Parties of Italians answered them with 'Gorizia for the Italians. Viva America. Viva England' and carried the red, white, and green flag of Italy. Both factions carried the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes.

It was a tense and dangerous situation, one for solution on the highest political level. Early on the 3rd it was arranged that in the meantime, with the exception of the immediate vicinity of Trieste, all territory east of the Isonzo River (which passed along the western edge of Gorizia) was to be controlled by Tito.

The German armies in Italy had surrendered on 2 May. It was an occasion on which, in normal circumstances, enthusiasm would have mounted to great heights, but the dangerous and disappointing local situation acted as a pall to depress everyone's spirits. Plans were prepared to meet any situation which might arise and a firm stand was to be taken, but cordial relations were to be cultivated by games, such as soccer and rugby, race meetings, a friendly demeanour, and particularly by avoiding any untoward incidents.

During the afternoon of 3 May troops of 56 Division relieved both New Zealand battalions in Gorizia and 25 Battalion retraced its steps to the vicinity of Monfalcone near Route 14. There it remained next day with plans uncertain. That evening, on returning from a conference at Brigade Headquarters, Colonel Barnett gave a survey of the situation in which he said that the continuation of the war for 2 NZ Division was highly improbable and that it was for the New Zealand and British Governments to arrange for the next move of the Division. Meanwhile the Division would see that the line of communications remained open; it would be completely neutral but alert and ready to move at any time; good relations were to be fostered with Tito's forces; Tito's women were to be out of bounds to all troops; there was to be no leave in the meantime; a transit camp was to be started near Venice and possibly a club there.

Later in the evening the company commanders were told that the battalion was on three hours' notice to occupy a defensive position at Sgonico, 14 miles to the south-east, where it would be four miles north of Trieste with 24 and 26 Battalions a further one to three miles to the north. A warning was given that the telephone was 'insecure' and had probably been tapped. Men were to carry ammunition and arms and always be in pairs; the line of communication would be patrolled by Honeys and

Wasps.

Next morning A Company provided an officer and twenty other ranks for twenty-four hours' guard duty on the divisional prisoner-of-war cage, and in the afternoon the battalion moved over to the rear of its [Sgonico](#) position, where in the village of S. Pelagio it settled in to a billeting area. The new area was a good one, about 700 feet above sea level and two miles from the coast, with a splendid panoramic view over the Adriatic. On the other hand there was no electric light in the village and the rather luke-warm attitude of the inhabitants was a little discouraging.

On 7 May the announcement of the end of hostilities in [Europe](#) was celebrated by the battalion 'with the assistance of a beer issue and flare pistols'. The 'fly in the ointment', however, apart from the depressing local atmosphere, was the prospect of continuing the war against [Japan](#). Meanwhile the usual round continued. Seventy-six reinforcements brought new faces into the unit and reasonably recent news from home. Thanksgiving services were held and the companies in turn visited the beach for a day. Rest camps, recreations, and entertainments were soon organised; soccer football occupied a more prominent position than usual as it was played, and played very well indeed, by the Yugoslavs, whose teams turned out much better dressed than the New Zealand teams and were more skilful.

Throughout, the battalion remained fully operational as the situation was still unstable and a good deal of gossip was reaching the men regarding clashes with the Yugoslavs. Naturally much interest was taken in the [BBC](#) broadcasts of the situation in [Trieste](#).

On the morning of the 22nd Colonel Barnett issued orders that the battalion by last light was to occupy the [Sgonico](#) position. Moving by a separate route, tanks would get out to as many of the companies as the steep ground would permit and normal artillery support would be available, liaison officers being provided by [6 Field Regiment](#) and a medium regiment. A high degree of alertness was to be maintained throughout the battalion, though the men were to be made as comfortable as possible. Before 8 p.m. the companies were in position. The area consisted of very stony hills covered with small scrub, and C Company in particular had a long, hard climb up a very bad track; tanks could not join it till noon the following day but were able to reach the other companies before midnight.

That vigilance was still necessary was emphasised on the 24th by information from Brigade that a local Yugoslav commander had requested [United States](#) troops at Tarnova, 16 miles to the north, to withdraw. The battalion was instructed that any such request was to be politely refused and that its positions were to be maintained by any action necessary if force was used against it; the Fourth Yugoslav Army had been informed of that instruction. There had been Yugoslav interference with Allied movements and various measures were adopted to meet any eventuality.

At 9.40 p.m. that evening a display of fireworks over [Trieste](#) aroused considerable interest and speculation. It was explained, however, that the display was in celebration of Tito's birthday. The following morning while making a reconnaissance Colonel Barnett was arrested by Yugoslav troops and taken towards their headquarters. However, the escort was bluffed and left on the side of the road while their captive returned to the security of his battalion headquarters. On the 29th precautions were relaxed a little and it was intended to withdraw two companies from the hills, but this was cancelled by a decision that 6 Brigade was to relieve 9 Brigade in [Trieste](#). Early in the afternoon of 1 June 25 Battalion relieved 22 Battalion in the north-western quarter of the city. [Trieste](#) was hilly and bore some resemblance to [Wellington](#), the battalion being on the lower western slopes with the main docks 700 yards to the west and large railway yards between. The battalion diary describes the situation:

'New quarters were excellent, A, D, and Supt Coys living in hotels, the men sleeping in beds; bathrooms, etc., and meals cooked and served by hotel staffs. C and B Coys were in blocks of flats—living comfortably and well looked after by the civilians. Bn HQ was installed in a series of villas in a select suburb overlooking the city.

'All tps carried arms at all times when outside billets during the first part of the month and guards and piquets kept the men fairly busy for the most part. Though at many times outbreaks of violence were expected, there was little real trouble and tps got on extremely well with all shades of the local population. Dances were held frequently in all coy areas, cinemas gave nightly screenings, operas were put on twice weekly, and concerts both popular and symphonic were put on regularly.

'As much sport as possible was played, there being coy and pl games of cricket

whenever grounds were available, and basketball was played daily. Swimming, water polo, athletics, and rowing were also popular.'

In fact, a soldier's paradise. The diary continues:

'All tps assisted in reporting on the movements and locations of JUG tps and, later in the month, of the [Guardia di Popoli](#) [the local [Home Guard](#)]. The JUGS evacuated the city, except for a token force under comd [13 Corps](#), on 11–12 June, this token force being finally ordered to a concentration area outside the city on 19 June. Few incidents occurred and there was no serious trouble. After the evacuation our tps occ and guarded certain Vital Points in the Bn area. On 24 June the [Guardia di Popoli](#) were paraded and disbanded by 55 Area Comd. Though it had been thought there would be more than reluctance on their part, the [Guardia di Popoli](#) paraded fairly willingly. There were no incidents and the Bn collected much amn and many arms which were taken to a central dump. Own tps occupied many places vacated and guarded them until searched by CMP and FSS.

'Leave throughout June was good—to Venice Club, Lido Rest Camp, Alpine Leave Centre, and, towards the end of June, four-day "Swanning" Tours to Northern [Italy](#), each trip going by two 3-tonners, 2 offrs and 30 men, most tours going to Milan, Lakes Como and Garda, and Swiss Border. The 7th Rfts left the unit while in [Trieste](#), en route for [Bari](#) and eventually New Zealand. Many gaps were noticeable in the unit and new appointments followed.'

As usual there had been a good many changes in the officers and their appointments since the last list was issued (in April).

Bn HQ

[Lt-Col A. W. Barnett](#), MC, Commanding Officer

[Maj J. W. T. Collins](#), Second-in-Command

[Lt R. J. Evans](#), acting Adjutant

Capt P. D. Nathan, RMO

Rev. H. E. Rowe, Chaplain

Adm Coy

Capt D. J. Pocknall, Officer Commanding

Lt J. L. Thomson, Signals Officer (1 Pl)

Lt D. Halley, Quartermaster

2 Lt D. W. Harrison, Transport Officer

Sp Coy

Capt A. G. Henricksen, Officer Commanding

Lt R. B. Simpson, Mortar Officer (3 Pl)

2 Lt D. R. S. Mitchell, Anti-Tank Officer (5 Pl)

A Coy

Maj I. T. Galloway, Officer Commanding

Capt T. C. Hynes, Second-in-Command

2 Lt A. G. Clark, 7 Platoon

Lt A. F. Pyne, 9 Platoon

B Coy

Maj D. F. Muir, Officer Commanding

Capt W. D. Leuchars, Second-in-Command

Lt J. Murphy, 10 Platoon

Lt A. G. Massey, 11 Platoon

Lt K. D. Rankin, 12 Platoon

C Coy

Maj R. V. Milne, Officer Commanding

Capt R. Easthope, Second-in-Command

Lt E. J. Smith, 13 Platoon

2 Lt K. T. Brislane, 14 Platoon

D Coy

Maj H. R. Cameron, Officer Commanding

Capt N. K. Chapman, MM, Second-in-Command

Lt W. F. Saunders, 16 Platoon

Lt A. J. Ryan, 17 Platoon

2 Lt J. W. Coppell, 18 Platoon

Attached 6 Infantry Brigade Headquarters:

Lt G. W. Stephenson, Intelligence Officer

Lt R. D. O'Neill, Liaison Officer

Lt E. C. Hansen, Defence Platoon

Until 7 July the battalion remained in [Trieste](#); it was then relieved by 21 Battalion and the following day occupied a bivouac area in the vicinity of Padriciano, three miles east of the city. It was one of the best areas the battalion had occupied in [Italy](#), being heavily wooded with numerous clearings for the tents and bivouacs. Parades and company training occupied the mornings and sports and athletics the afternoons. On the whole, leave was generous, and as so many of the friends made in [Trieste](#) invaded the area, it was decided to make Sundays visiting days from 1 p.m. to 8.30 p.m.

On 26 July the battalion departed for [Lake Trasimene](#), which it had skirted on 27 August last on its way to the Adriatic coast; the 300-mile journey was done in four

stages, overnight stops being made at [Mestre](#), [Bologna](#), and [Fabriano](#) (preceded by a midday halt at [Fano](#) for lunch and most enjoyable swimming), and finally in the vicinity of Panicarola on the south-west shore of the lake. Though there were plenty of trees to provide shade the area was extremely dry and water was scarce, the nearest water-point being 16 miles away. Routine proceeded as before, with the usual recreations, and after the first ten days a very enjoyable rest camp was opened at the [Mondolfo](#) airfield at [Senigallia](#) on the Adriatic coast; B and C Companies and a proportion of HQ Company proceeded there on the 12th for a period of eight days, after which the remainder of the battalion had its turn.

The great event of the month, of course, and indeed in some respects of the whole war for New Zealanders, was the surrender of [Japan](#), the dramatic news of which reached the battalion on 14 August. It came as a complete surprise and caused great excitement and satisfaction, removing the former unpleasant prospect of further participation in war in another theatre, and on this great occasion there were no local complications as in the [Trieste](#) area to mar the splendid news. It was celebrated in a thanksgiving service for the whole of 6 Brigade on 19 August when Brigadier I. L. Bonifant, who had succeeded Brigadier Parkinson on 26 June, read the lesson.

The disintegration of 25 Battalion had commenced on 5 August when men from the 8th Reinforcements departed for [Bari](#) and New Zealand, those absent on leave following four days later. Demobilisation was to be carried out by reinforcements, those with the longest service being repatriated first, but the acute shortage of shipping, which was world-wide, was to cause a good deal of delay and some disappointment and irritation amongst the troops. The next draft, from the 9th Reinforcements, did not leave till 26 September. Meanwhile there was much to interest everyone. Sports of all kinds took a major place in the life of the unit; on various levels, from companies to division, there were cricket matches, sports meetings and trials, and a 6 Brigade novelty meeting; a divisional rugby team to tour England was selected, 25 Battalion's representatives in it being Major Finlay, Lieutenant Rankin, and Second-Lieutenant Kjestrup,²⁹ who left the unit on 7 September. Lieutenant Murphy,³⁰ Sergeant [Stevens](#),³¹ and Private P. Archer qualified to attend the Army rifle meeting at [Udine](#) on 16 September and Sergeant Gribben³² also attended.

The weather on the whole was good. Towards the end of August heavy rain fell for a few hours, much to the benefit of the parched countryside which had had none for several months. The next break in the weather was not so welcome, a severe thunderstorm on 6 September producing hail as large as pigeon eggs which stripped the trees of their leaves, carpeting the whole area with a green mantle; four days later a further fall of rain was experienced and, with the arrival of autumn, the nights were chilly.

An interesting development in October was the United Kingdom leave scheme; on the 2nd A Company left for Bordighera on the Riviera, about 15 miles east of Nice, to prepare a transit camp from which the leave drafts would proceed overland through [France](#). On the 15th the first party of 2 officers and 35 other ranks left the battalion, and thereafter drafts proceeded at weekly intervals, though a storm in the Channel delayed the third draft for four days. On the departure of A Company the remainder of the battalion was reorganised into HQ and Nos. 1 and 2 Companies; further attrition was soon to follow. On the 15th 100 men who were to join J Force for the occupation of [Japan](#) went across to 22 and 27 Battalions, where similar detachments were being concentrated; 25 Battalion then again reorganised into HQ and No. 2 Company, but toward the end of the month these two were amalgamated.

On 7 October the remnants of the battalion had moved to [Florence](#), where it was accommodated in barracks previously occupied by 54 Rest Centre and known later as the Arno Camp. Parties continued to visit various places of interest, one under Captain Chapman travelling to the [Sangro](#), 200 miles 'as the crow flies'; another attended a memorial service at [Cassino](#); others again went to [Rome](#).

Colonel Barnett, the last of the ten commanding officers of the battalion, terminated his service with 25 Battalion on 19 October when he was posted to Brigade Headquarters as temporary commander, an appointment he filled till 1 December. Major Muir was appointed to command what was left of the unit, and towards the end of October there was a further shrinkage when the transport and 'Q' services of battalions were brigaded. With regular drafts on leave to the United Kingdom and guard duties at [Foligno](#) and at the Fiat works in [Florence](#), the battalion in camp was a mere skeleton and its end was near. Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, was observed throughout the camp by two minutes' silence at 11 a.m. and

voluntary church services were held. The last formal parade was on 16 November when a brigade parade was inspected by [General Freyberg](#), who thanked the troops for their services and said farewell.

On 27 November the married men of the 10th Reinforcements left for [Bari](#), and on 2 December 1945, 25 Battalion was disbanded.

¹ [Lt-Col F. L. H. Davis](#), m.i.d.; born [Feilding](#), 23 Jan 1909; Regular soldier; served [2 NZEF](#), [Egypt](#), 1940–41, 1945; CO 29 Bn, 3 NZ Div, 1943–44; wounded 15 Apr 1945; deceased.

² [Capt W. D. Leuchars](#); [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 8 Aug 1920; warehouseman; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

³ [Pte F. T. Wills](#); [Patea](#); born NZ 14 Aug 1920; labourer.

⁴ [Sgt P. J. Begley](#), MM; [Hastings](#); born [Hastings](#), 19 Dec 1916; butter maker; wounded 11 Apr 1945.

⁵ [Lt F. H. Cushing](#); [Dannevirke](#); born [Napier](#), 6 Feb 1913; grocer; wounded 9 Apr 1945.

⁶ [Col I. T. Galloway](#), OBE, ED; [Raumati](#); born [Wellington](#), 25 Dec 1919; school teacher; comd 4 NZ Armd Bde ([Territorial Force](#)), 1959–.

⁷ [Lt A. F. Pyne](#); [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 15 Dec 1919; clerk; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

⁸ Armour-piercing and high explosive.

⁹ Maori warriors in tribal wars preferred their enemies to be fighting fit.

¹⁰ [Lt K. D. Rankin](#); [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 6 Feb 1921; salesman.

¹¹ Sgt F. F. Curry, MM; Wellington; born Christchurch, 16 Oct 1921; law clerk; wounded and p.w. 15 Apr 1945; escaped 25 Apr 1945; Lt, 1 Wgtn Regt (Territorial Force).

¹² Sgt N. H. Mitchinson, MM; Raetihi; born Wellington, 20 Jan 1922; farm labourer; wounded 28 Nov 1943.

¹³ Sgt S. R. Cook, MM; Hawera; born NZ 12 Nov 1922; truck driver; wounded 22 Mar 1944.

¹⁴ L-Cpl V. W. Boyens; Palmerston North; born Pahiatua, 10 Jan 1923; grocer; wounded 20 Apr 1945; served J Force, 1946–48; joined Regular Force 1948; 1 NZ Regt, Malaya, 1957–59.

¹⁵ Lt-Col A. W. Barnett, MC; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 13 Oct 1913; draper; CO 25 Bn Apr-Oct 1945; comd (temp) 6 Bde 19 Oct-1 Dec 1945; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

¹⁶ Lt W. M. King; born NZ 31 Oct 1922; farmer; killed in action 25 Apr 1945.

¹⁷ Lt A. G. Clark, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 20 Dec 1920; optical mechanic.

¹⁸ Lt G. L. Joyce; Christchurch; born Timaru, 31 Mar 1920; bank officer.

¹⁹ Pte W. C. W. Page; Hastings; born Hastings, 13 Aug 1921; signwriter.

²⁰ Cpl R. A. Atkins; born NZ 16 Apr 1918; factory hand; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

²¹ Sgt R. A. Upson; New Plymouth; born NZ 10 Apr 1921; farmer.

²² Capt E. R. Smythe, MC; Invercargill; born Christchurch, 21 Aug 1916; warehouseman.

²³ Pte E. W. Hewson; Lower Hutt; born Petone, 17 Nov 1920; packer; wounded 27 Apr 1945

²⁴ L-Cpl M. Hawker; born NZ 3 Jul 1918; labourer; killed in action 27 Apr 1945.

²⁵ Cpl J. L. Rentoul, MM; Auckland; born Wellington, 9 Jun 1922; apprentice tinsmith

²⁶ Pte E. L. Betty; born Foxton, 27 Aug 1923; textile worker; killed in action 27 Apr 1945

²⁷ Pte L. P. Brown; born Frasertown, 24 Oct 1922; storeman; killed in action 27 Apr 1945.

²⁸ Pte D. J. McGillivray; Wangaehu, Masterton; born Masterton, 20 Oct 1923; farmer; wounded 27 Apr 1945.

²⁹ 2 Lt C. C. Kjestrup; Awakino; born NZ 23 Nov 1921; farmhand.

³⁰ Lt. J. Murphy; Fairlie; born Pleasant Point, 23 Nov 1917; school teacher.

³¹ Sgt B. W. Stevens; Gisborne; born NZ 2 Aug 1921; musterer; wounded 2 Aug 1944.

³² WOI S. J. Gribben; Hastings; born Gisborne, 12 Apr 1920; school teacher; wounded 3 Aug 1944.

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ROLL OF HONOUR

Roll of Honour

killed in action

Capt J. H. Birch	22 July 1942
Capt W. H. Roberts	23 November 1941
Capt B. W. Thomas	26 September 1944
Capt D. A. Wilson	21 March 1943
Lt J. B. M. Coombe	3 August 1944
Lt L. Hampton, MM	28 April 1945
Lt W. M. King	25 April 1945
Lt J. J. McCarthy	15 August 1942
Lt G. J. B. Morris	23 November 1941
Lt S. G. Sidford	20 December 1944
Lt J. P. Tredray	23 November 1941
2 Lt J. G. Bark	19 October 1944
2 Lt W. J. Blackie	15 March 1944
2 Lt B. H. Budd	21 August 1942
2 Lt A. W. Clark	24 April 1941
2 Lt S. G. Cottam	1 August 1944
2 Lt I. R. J. Dickson	24 October 1942
2 Lt J. Fordie	3 December 1943
2 Lt C. J. Harper-Parsonson	19 December 1944
2 Lt P. de V. Holt	23 November 1941
2 Lt J. N. Jones	1 August 1944
2 Lt A. I. McAneney	26 October 1942
2 Lt G. K. Smith	28 November 1943
WO II R. H. Bell	26 November 1941
WO II S. E. Pearson	27 September 1944
Sgt W. G. Austin	3 September 1942
Sgt H. C. Blackburn	23 November 1941
Sgt R. Brown-Bayliss	23 November 1941
Sgt L. T. Connor	22 July 1942
Sgt J. Dixon	22 July 1942

Sgt M. Easthope	15 April 1945
Sgt C. C. Graham	23 November 1941
Sgt R. L. Howard	27 September 1944
Sgt N. K. Laverty	26 March 1943
Sgt F. J. Lawrence	21 March 1943
Sgt L. X. Le Vaillant	21 March 1943
Sgt T. M. Okey	18 October 1944
Sgt W. J. Peebles	30 November 1943
Sgt W. Penman, MM and Bar	30 November 1943
Sgt S. S. Rabone	24 September 1944
Sgt T. L. Radford	24 April 1945
Sgt N. T. Satterthwaite	15 December 1943
Sgt A. W. Small	24 October 1942
Sgt D. A. Ward	3 December 1943
L-Sgt W. R. Busby	23 November 1941
L-Sgt D. R. Cleveland	8 July 1942
L-Sgt J. R. J. Dixey	23 November 1941
L-Sgt B. A. Ellis	24 October 1942
L-Sgt R. W. McGlashan	24 October 1942
L-Sgt C. J. Ritchie	26 November 1941
L-Sgt H. W. Ritchie	18 March 1944
L-Sgt J. E. Templer	24 October 1942
Cpl W. C. Allan	23 November 1941
Cpl F. Beamsley	23 November 1941
Cpl A. H. Charteris	23 November 1941
Cpl R. W. Common, MM, m.i.d.	23 November 1941
Cpl T. Conwell	15 July 1944
Cpl W. R. Cunningham	24 October 1942
Cpl R. N. Fairley	24 April 1941
Cpl H. E. Goodland	26 November 1941
Cpl H. Gordon	19 October 1944
Cpl B. Halidone	30 July 1944
Cpl F. G. Hattaway	24 April 1941
Cpl H. L. Jordan	21 March 1944
Cpl J. S. Kershaw	24 September 1944
Cpl E. G. Lansdown	21 March 1943
Cpl P. B. McInnes	15 March 1944

Cpl A. R. McKinnon	27 October 1942
Cpl W. F. O'Grady	19 October 1944
Cpl K. M. Pearce	21 March 1943
Cpl W. Pine	23 November 1941
Cpl K. E. Power	24 October 1942
Cpl I. F. A. Quin	23 November 1941
Cpl R. E. Stott	26 March 1943
Cpl R. Q. Smith	22 February 1944
Cpl T. M. Smith	23 November 1941
Cpl A. H. Tongs	15 March 1944
Cpl J. R. Walker	23 November 1941
Cpl N. T. Wood	28 March 1943
L-Cpl J. P. Anderson	2 August 1944
L-Cpl A. McK. Black	23 November 1941
L-Cpl E. W. Cameron	15 July 1944
L-Cpl J. S. Carter	25 February 1944
L-Cpl W. H. Copeland	1 February 1945
L-Cpl L. Fitt	1 December 1941
L-Cpl D. H. S. Glynan	5 December 1943
L-Cpl R. Goodall	23 October 1942
L-Cpl A. W. Harwood	14 July 1944
L-Cpl M. Hawker	27 April 1945
L-Cpl T. C. J. Herbert	19 December 1944
L-Cpl C. A. G. Horner	22 July 1942
L-Cpl A. F. Howe	15 March 1944
L-Cpl G. C. Johnston	25 November 1941
L-Cpl R. J. Knight	11 April 1945
L-Cpl R. C. McCarthy	25 October 1942
L-Cpl A. A. MacAulay	23 November 1941
L-Cpl J. Olliver	25 February 1944
L-Cpl F. G. S. Penlington	26 November 1941
L-Cpl E. C. Perry	23 November 1941
L-Cpl S. N. Pitt	29 January 1945
L-Cpl J. A. Reed	21 March 1943
L-Cpl E. H. Richardson	22 July 1942
L-Cpl T. J. Schultz, MM	19 December 1944
L-Cpl E. H. Smith	14 July 1944

L-Cpl T. H. Thomson	5 December 1943
L-Cpl J. Watson	19 October 1944
L-Cpl E. J. Weddell	19 October 1944
L-Cpl W. C. Weenink	15 March 1944
Pte J. R. C. Angus	23 November 1941
Pte J. H. Archer	23 November 1941
Pte C. Armit	13 July 1944
Pte F. A. Ashby	21 April 1943
Pte J. A. Baillie	23 November 1941
Pte T. Baillie	15 March 1944
Pte S. R. Baines	11 May 1943
Pte W. C. Ball	19 December 1944
Pte J. T. Bannerman	28 November 1943
Pte L. O. Barrett	6 April 1945
Pte J. C. Bartholomew	23 November 1941
Pte R. M. Bayley	19 December 1944
Pte E. R. Baylis	9 April 1945
Pte J. H. Beattie	23 November 1941
Pte R. F. Beattie	31 July 1944
Pte D. J. Beaufort	11 April 1945
Pte W. A. Bennett	23 November 1941
Pte H. K. Benseman	23 November 1941
Pte E. L. Betty	27 April 1945
Pte H. P. Black	23 November 1941
Pte R. B. Boden	23 November 1941
Pte H. W. Boniface	19 December 1944
Pte P. M. Bourke	23 November 1941
Pte R. M. Boyd	3 September 1942
Pte W. E. Boyd	8 July 1942
Pte A. G. Bremner	23 November 1941
Pte M. Brennan	21 March 1944
Pte P. C. Brien	15 April 1945
Pte J. S. Brighthouse	24 May 1941
Pte C. L. Bright	23 November 1941
Pte G. S. W. Brook	15 March 1944
Pte T. M. Brooker	10 April 1945
Pte G. Brown	15 April 1945

Pte L. P. Brown	27 April 1945
Pte M. P. Brunton	26 March 1943
Pte J. H. Bullen	25 September 1944
Pte L. D. Burckett	24 October 1942
Pte B. A. Burgess	22 March 1943
Pte J. L. Burns	26 October 1942
Pte A. J. Burt	22 July 1942
Pte J. M. Butt	27 November 1941
Pte J. S. Buxton	25 November 1941
Pte C. Cameron	April 1941
Pte M. Campbell	20 July 1942
Pte J. A. Carson	15 March 1944
Pte M. A. Chamberlain	22 July 1942
Pte B. A. Chanel	19 October 1944
Pte H. C. Charet	21 March 1943
Pte P. E. Chisholm	15 July 1944
Pte R. D. Claridge	23 November 1941
Pte D. Clayton	25 November 1941
Pte J. L. E. Clifford	23 November 1941
Pte W. S. Clyma	1 December 1941
Pte J. R. Coles	11 April 1945
Pte A. L. Cook	24 October 1942
Pte J. O. Cook	26 October 1942
Pte B. J. Cooke	25 November 1941
Pte A. F. Costain	22 July 1942
Pte A. Cotton	19 October 1944
Pte A. J. V. Coventry	1 December 1941
Pte V. O. B. Cripps-Collans	15 March 1944
Pte C. M. Cuff	26 January 1945
Pte C. Culshaw	22 April 1943
Pte A. J. Cunningham	25 February 1944
Pte C. R. Cutforth	23 November 1941
Pte G. H. Dauphin	23 November 1941
Pte R. E. Davies	28 November 1943
Pte K. A. Desmond	26 January 1945
Pte S. H. Eddy	11 April 1945
Pte D. Elliott	1 September 1942

Pte N. C. Ellis	23 November 1941
Pte R. Ellis	18 October 1944
Pte W. E. Everett	12 February 1945
Pte E. Farr	10 April 1945
Pte L. G. Field	23 November 1941
Pte N. H. Flavell	26 October 1942
Pte C. R. Flaws	25 September 1944
Pte J. Fletcher	24 September 1944
Pte L. J. Fletcher	26 March 1943
Pte F. Flood	23 November 1941
Pte M. R. Flynn	23 November 1941
Pte C. R. Fothergill	7 October 1944
Pte A. E. Francis	3 September 1942
Pte B. N. Franklin	25 November 1941
Pte A. I. Gerken	18 March 1944
Pte S. McK. Gestro	22 July 1942
Pte K. Gibb	15 July 1944
Pte J. D. Gibson	25 November 1941
Pte H. G. Gordon	25 November 1941
Pte W. Graham	23 November 1941
Pte J. Granville	27 November 1941
Pte G. A. Gray	23 November 1941
Pte M. Greenstreet	April 1941
Pte A. J. Gregory	23 November 1941
Pte A. J. Griffin	25 March 1943
Pte G. A. Guilford	15 August 1944
Pte G. Guilliard	23 November 1941
Pte P. T. Haisman	23 November 1941
Pte J. A. T. Hall	2 August 1944
Pte T. J. Hallett	15 December 1943
Pte W. A. Hancox	23 November 1941
Pte L. P. Hands	24 September 1944
Pte K. V. Hansen	16 March 1944
Pte P. A. G. Harper	23 November 1941
Pte H. G. Harris	23 November 1941
Pte J. T. Harvey	21 March 1944
Pte C. S. Harwood	22 July 1942

Pte J. R. Hastie	23 November 1941
Pte R. D. Hayward	6 March 1944
Pte E. Hearfield	16 March 1944
Pte N. J. Henderson	15 December 1943
Pte J. D. Henry	24 April 1941
Pte R. E. Hewison	19 October 1944
Pte P. J. Hodgson	15 March 1944
Pte J. B. Hogan	23 November 1941
Pte C. H. G. Howell	23 November 1941
Pte B. C. Hudson	23 November 1941
Pte D. R. Hunter	22 July 1942
Pte G. J. R. Hunter	23 November 1941
Pte S. L. Hyde	3 December 1943
Pte E. D. Hyland	25 November 1941
Pte A. M. Innes-Jones	23 November 1941
Pte N. L. Instone	2 August 1944
Pte M. C. Jenkins	3 September 1942
Pte M. Jenner	10 April 1945
Pte J. R. Jeromson	23 November 1941
Pte W. C. W. Johnston	23 April 1943
Pte B. T. Jones	25 September 1944
Pte T. J. Jones	22 July 1942
Pte A. F. Jordan	10 April 1945
Pte P. J. Kelleher	22 April 1943
Pte H. A. Kennedy	24 April 1941
Pte S. V. Kerr	1 August 1944
Pte J. Keystone	15 March 1944
Pte W. R. C. Kirby	9 May 1944
Pte A. D. Kirk	21 March 1944
Pte N. J. Lamont	3 September 1942
Pte D. H. Langdon	21 March 1943
Pte H. Larwood	22 July 1942
Pte W. M. Law	April 1941
Pte C. S. Lawrence, m.i.d.	20 December 1944
Pte A. W. Leary	24 October 1942
Pte R. M. Lehndorf	24 September 1944

Pte F. R. Leighton	23 November 1941
Pte A. J. Lockwood	2 August 1944
Pte R. B. Lovett	21 March 1943
Pte A. G. Lowe	15 July 1944
Pte A. G. Ludemann	16 March 1944
Pte L. A. Lynch	25 November 1941
Pte G. F. Lyons	23 November 1941
Pte H. McAllister	9 September 1942
Pte L. I. McDermott	23 October 1942
Pte R. R. E. McDonald	23 February 1944
Pte E. J. McGrath	26 November 1941
Pte F. H. McIvor	23 November 1941
Pte H. J. McKenzie	18 October 1944
Pte E. McKinley	15 July 1944
Pte G. McK. McLauchlan	23 November 1941
Pte A. McLaughlin	23 April 1943
Pte W. McLellan	26 October 1942
Pte A. D. L. MacPherson	14 July 1944
Pte J. M. Mahon	19 December 1944
Pte F. A. B. Marsh	15 March 1944
Pte A. J. Martin	24 September 1944
Pte B. M. Martin	16 February 1944
Pte D. H. Mayes	27 September 1944
Pte G. W. Mazengarb	6 September 1942
Pte W. M. Michie	26 March 1943
Pte C. L. R. Milne	22 April 1943
Pte B. C. Minett	27 November 1941
Pte J. W. Moisey	25 November 1941
Pte R. J. Moorcock	9 August 1944
Pte P. G. Moore	23 November 1941
Pte R. J. Moore	19 October 1944
Pte L. R. Morris	23 November 1941
Pte A. G. W. Moss	23 October 1942
Pte I. Moss	24 April 1941
Pte W. J. Mulhane	22 July 1942
Pte H. B. Mundt	16 May 1944
Pte H. M. Munt	23 November 1941

Pte B. A. Neale	4 September 1942
Pte E. C. Nemes	22 July 1942
Pte J. F. Nelson	24 October 1942
Pte L. E. Nelson	26 March 1943
Pte I. M. Newlands	26 November 1941
Pte R. S. Nicholl	28 November 1943
Pte C. G. Nicholls	15 July 1944
Pte K. P. O'Dwyer	26 March 1943
Pte A. Oliver	14 July 1944
Pte R. T. Ormerod	21 March 1944
Pte T. K. Orr	15 March 1944
Pte F. G. Palmer	23 November 1941
Pte J. Palmer	April 1941
Pte C. G. Parker	23 September 1944
Pte M. Parker	23 November 1941
Pte N. M. Parker	1 December 1943
Pte W. K. Parsons	24 October 1942
Pte T. G. Phillips	25 October 1942
Pte M. A. Player	9 August 1944
Pte J. H. Powdrell	1 February 1945
Pte N. W. H. Pulford	3 September 1942
Pte S. Purcell	24 October 1942
Pte H. T. Putt	9 September 1942
Pte C. W. Rayner	19 December 1944
Pte N. K. S. Rayner	25 September 1944
Pte W. N. Rayner	25 November 1941
Pte J. E. Reardon	15 December 1943
Pte H. G. Richards	2 April 1945
Pte G. W. Richardson	24 April 1941
Pte R. T. Rose	12 March 1944
Pte C. W. Roy	24 September 1944
Pte S. J. Rzoska	3 December 1943
Pte T. W. Sampson	23 November 1941
Pte A. K. Sangster	15 March 1944
Pte J. E. Scherer	10 April 1945
Pte C. D. B. Schwass	1 February 1945
Pte A. C. Scott	23 November 1941

Pte L. M. Scott	22 April 1943
Pte W. D. Scott	23 November 1941
Pte J. Scullin	6 May 1944
Pte A. A. Semmens	25 November 1941
Pte W. L. Shepard	23 November 1941
Pte P. D. Shiels	19 March 1944
Pte R. M. Shirriffs	11 April 1945
Pte F. S. Shutler	15 March 1944
Pte C. R. Simmonds	25 January 1945
Pte D. McG. Smart	23 November 1941
Pte A. H. Smith	28 November 1943
Pte F. L. Smith	3 September 1942
Pte F. W. A. Smith	23 November 1941
Pte O. J. Smith	25 April 1941
Pte R. Smith	25 November 1941
Pte V. R. Smith	24 April 1941
Pte W. Smith	14 July 1944
Pte L. V. Staples	2 August 1944
Pte J. H. Stephen	23 March 1943
Pte W. H. M. Stevenson	3 September 1942
Pte F. G. Stone	21 March 1943
Pte R. E. Stowe	26 March 1943
Pte J. P. Stratford	15 July 1944
Pte L. A. Strong	3 February 1945
Pte W. H. Stroud	27 September 1944
Pte L. E. C. Suff	23 November 1941
Pte R. G. Suiter	23 November 1941
Pte F. J. Sullivan	2 January 1942
Pte A. Symons	23 November 1941
Pte F. Tansey	28 September 1944
Pte R. T. Thomas	23 November 1941
Pte J. R. Thompson	21 March 1943
Pte L. H. Thompson	25 November 1941
Pte G. M. Tosh	14 July 1942
Pte R. W. Tubby	26 March 1943
Pte C. H. Twigg	22 April 1943
Pte P. G. Valentine	15 December 1943

Pte T. A. Waigth	21 December 1944
Pte A. C. Walker	26 November 1941
Pte M. E. Walker	23 November 1941
Pte O. C. Watkins	18 March 1944
Pte E. B. Whyborn	26 March 1943
Pte E. J. Wickens	25 November 1941
Pte A. A. Wilkie	30 August 1942
Pte G. R. Williams	15 March 1944
Pte P. J. Williams	14 July 1944
Pte B. G. Willis	23 November 1941
Pte J. T. Wilson	23 November 1941
Pte W. J. Wilson	24 May 1941
Pte E. M. Wold	23 November 1941
Pte J. A. M. Woods	15 July 1944
Pte E. J. Workman	9 May 1944
Pte G. A. Workman	14 July 1944
Pte F. Wright	16 March 1944
Pte J. R. Wright	24 October 1942
Pte H. M. Wylie	23 November 1941
	died of wounds
Maj J. L. Webster	20 December 1944
Capt H. E. Frost	4 December 1943
Lt E. F. L. Kempthorne	9 August 1942
Lt A. E. Williams	30 August 1942
2 Lt R. J. Powdrell	24 October 1942
WO II S. R. Cook	21 April 1945
S-Sgt W. T. Marshall	27 November 1941
Sgt H. K. Amner, Greek Medal	13 June 1943
Sgt S. H. Crowhurst, m.i.d.	1 December 1941
Sgt R. W. Heine, MM	14 December 1943
Sgt J. H. Herbert	26 October 1942
Sgt L. D. Monkley	24 April 1941
Cpl T. L. Blair	15 March 1944
Cpl R. J. Cleverdon	29 March 1943
Cpl T. C. Harker	26 October 1942
Cpl A. A. Mills	22 July 1942
Cpl G. Roy	28 March 1944

L-Cpl L. W. S. Dalzell	30 November 1944
L-Cpl H. J. Elliot	21 May 1941
L-Cpl E. B. Schahill	31 January 1945
L-Cpl T. H. Tanner	25 March 1944
Pte G. W. Arlidge	5 December 1941
Pte W. J. Armstrong	29 July 1942
Pte W. M. Baker	14 December 1944
Pte P. K. Bale	23 March 1944
Pte G. Barron	24 October 1942
Pte E. J. Batten	19 May 1941
Pte C. G. Biddle	11 April 1945
Pte D. M. Blair	2 May 1941
Pte J. W. Bowman	7 October 1944
Pte W. A. Bristow	11 April 1945
Pte R. R. Brown	23 November 1941
Pte R. MacF. Cameron	24 March 1944
Pte C. S. Corson	23 September 1944
Pte B. L. Cripps	14 December 1941
Pte P. G. Davidson	16 April 1945
Pte D. B. Dodunski	16 January 1942
Pte E. H. Easton	22 March 1943
Pte M. G. Fitzgerald	28 July 1944
Pte R. M. Fitzgerald	21 March 1944
Pte A. J. Floyd	22 July 1942
Pte H. B. Gamlin	23 November 1941
Pte R. H. Higgins	30 December 1943
Pte T. E. Hurley	10 September 1942
Pte W. H. Inglis	17 March 1944
Pte B. B. Johnston	30 November 1943
Pte H. K. Johnston	18 December 1944
Pte R. A. Johnstone	2 August 1944
Pte L. P. Jones	6 December 1943
Pte C. W. Jury	17 July 1944
Pte J. M. Kilgarriff	15 May 1941
Pte W. King	4 September 1942
Pte G. J. Laing	15 March 1944
Pte H. J. Linklater	19 December 1944

Pte N. G. Loye	30 March 1944
Pte J. H. McChesney	30 December 1943
Pte M. F. Marshment	23 April 1945
Pte P. J. Maxey	29 December 1944
Pte G. D. Mercer	15 May 1944
Pte O. W. Mickell	18 July 1944
Pte A. O. Miners	4 September 1942
Pte G. O. Morris	9 August 1944
Pte W. D. O'Keeffe	15 July 1944
Pte H. N. Olsen	17 December 1944
Pte N. B. Osborne	30 December 1943
Pte V. E. Overend	12 August 1944
Pte T. K. Paul	28 November 1943
Pte A. J. Quinn	27 October 1942
Pte G. M. Raines	25 September 1944
Pte G. F. Richardson	11 March 1944
Pte L. A. Salisbury	20 February 1943
Pte P. J. Silvester	28 March 1943
Pte S. J. Sim	1 December 1942
Pte E. G. Smith	16 September 1944
Pte V. H. N. Sodersten	9 October 1944
Pte J. A. Spencer	6 November 1942
Pte G. Spooner	23 November 1941
Pte A. J. Taggart	3 December 1941
Pte W. F. Tidswell	24 November 1941
Pte R. G. Tolhurst	4 October 1944
Pte A. O. Toseland	27 October 1942
Pte W. H. Wallace	21 August 1942
Pte J. E. White	24 November 1941
Pte A. W. Whyte	20 July 1944
Pte K. N. Williams	15 July 1944
Pte R. V. Willoughby	3 September 1942
Pte O. Wilson	27 November 1941
Pte T. Woods	6 September 1942

killed or died while prisoners of war

Sgt J. M. Telford	17 August 1942
L-Sgt P. Swan	17 August 1942

Cpl J. A. Nicholson	17 August 1942
Cpl J. D. Troy	14 May 1942
L-Cpl R. B. McCann	12 July 1941
L-Cpl M. C. Moore	17 May 1942
L-Cpl E. G. Morris	17 August 1942
Pte G. Burgess	23 October 1942
Pte J. T. Clark	24 April 1944
Pte A. A. Compton	9 December 1941
Pte H. C. Cox	9 December 1941
Pte G. Creighton	6 August 1942
Pte R. J. Culver	24 December 1944
Pte J. T. Cunningham	9 December 1941
Pte W. C. Derbidge	9 December 1941
Pte P. J. Fake	21 December 1941
Pte C. C. Lambert	9 December 1941
Pte A. H. Lee	17 August 1942
Pte J. McConachy	17 August 1942
Pte L. G. McCracken	17 August 1942
Pte W. D. McLachlan	17 August 1942
Pte W. A. McLean	9 December 1941
Pte G. A. McLeod	17 August 1942
Pte H. L. Major	17 August 1942
Pte G. G. D. Mangos	17 August 1942
Pte N. C. Neale	27 September 1942
Pte K. B. Neilson	17 August 1942
Pte V. A. Nicholson	9 December 1941
Pte G. Page	17 August 1942
Pte K. W. Papps	17 August 1942
Pte G. F. Paton	17 August 1942
Pte A. J. Patterson	17 August 1942
Pte R. A. Pedley	1 April 1945
Pte D. R. Pharazyn	17 August 1942
Pte M. E. Pumfrey	29 August 1942
Pte V. C. Rand	17 August 1942
Pte J. F. Robertson	17 August 1942
Pte A. J. Robinson	17 August 1942
Pte H. Robinson	9 December 1941

Pte P. N. Rodgers	17 August 1942
Pte O. T. Rowe	17 August 1942
Pte A. F. Sargisson	17 August 1942
Pte C. Seymour	17 August 1942
Pte J. F. Sherry	17 August 1942
Pte J. U. Smith	17 August 1942
Pte H. Speake	17 August 1942
Pte G. G. Spooner	9 December 1941
Pte D. E. Stanley	17 August 1942
Pte C. A. Stantiall	17 August 1942
Pte A. R. Stead	17 August 1942
Pte A. H. J. Stewart	17 August 1942
Pte J. M. Taylor	17 August 1942
Pte P. E. Taylor	22 August 1942
Pte W. A. Theyers	17 August 1942
Pte E. G. Thompson	22 October 1943
Pte D. A. Tibbles	17 August 1942
Pte L. N. Truman	17 August 1942
Pte W. G. Vellenoweth	10 April 1944
Pte D. J. Watt	17 August 1942
Pte R. H. Watts	17 August 1942
Pte R. M. Wildbore	9 December 1941
Pte W. H. Wooldridge	9 December 1941
	died on active service
Capt R. G. Stevens, MC	8 June 1944
Lt B. R. Henderson	22 March 1942
2 Lt J. Q. McWilliam	21 July 1944
Sgt L. E. Cotter	24 June 1943
L-Cpl R. K. Voice	23 October 1943
Pte R. J. K. Armstrong	11 November 1943
Pte R. B. Backman	3 June 1944
Pte E. T. S. Callender	11 November 1943
Pte A. G. Castle	14 February 1945
Pte E. J. Donaldson	13 February 1945
Pte C. T. Hayes	9 October 1943
Pte C. Hodson	2 May 1942
Pte C. H. Kerr	18 February 1943

Pte D. MacD. Lange	14 April 1945
Pte M. S. Leitch	1 December 1940
Pte W. H. McCallum	22 October 1943
Pte I. G. Neale	11 July 1941
Pte J. A. N. Pay	13 February 1945
Pte H. O. Saunders	30 January 1941
Pte W. H. Schultz	2 August 1941
Pte L. H. Sweetman	1 October 1942

25 BATTALION

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Summary of Casualties

	Killed or Died of Wounds		Wounded		Prisoners of War		Died while Prisoners of War		Died on Active Service		total
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	ORs	Offrs	ORs		
Greece	1	16	4	8 *	8	143					180
Crete	—	3	—	2	—	—					5
Libya, 1941	4	116	7	133	6	136					402
Egypt, 1942	8	70	13	201	13	175					480
Tripolitania and Tunisia	1	38	7	124	—	1					171
Italy	14	198	29	703	1	57					1002
							62				62
								3		18	21
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	28	441	60	1171	28	512	62	3	18	2323	

Included in the prisoners of war are 1 officer and 91 other ranks who were wounded when captured.

* Forty-seven wounded other ranks were taken prisoner and are included in that column.

25 BATTALION

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Honours and Awards

bar to distinguished service order

Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO

distinguished service order

Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant

Lt-Col G. J. McNaught, ED

Lt-Col T. B. Morten

Lt-Col E. K. Norman, MC

Maj M. Handyside

Maj W. R. K. Morrison

member of the order of the british empire

Capt W. J. Heslop

military cross

Maj J. Finlay

Maj S. M. Hewitt

Maj V. T. Pearse ([NZMC](#) attached)

Maj P. W. Robertshaw

Capt L. C. McCarthy ([NZMC](#) attached)

Capt M. J. Mason

Capt E. K. Norman

Lt R. G. Stevens

Lt J. L. Williams

2 Lt G. E. Wilson

2 Lt C. H. Cathie

distinguished conduct medal

Sgt W. K. Marshall

Sgt H. R. Martin

Sgt T. W. Tulloch

L-Cpl W. T. W. Kerr

bar to military medal

L-Sgt W. Penman, MM

military medal

WO II L. Hampton

Sgt N. K. Chapman

Sgt W. R. Leslie

Sgt N. H. Mitchinson

Sgt L. G. Mendelssohn

Sgt A. A. F. Smith

Sgt J. C. Sullivan

L-Sgt P. J. Begley

L-Sgt W. Penman

Cpl S. R. Cook

Cpl F. F. Curry

Cpl J. A. Glover

Cpl E. H. Graves

Cpl A. Grenville

Cpl V. T. McManaway

Cpl T. S. McNiece

Cpl N. Morgan

Cpl J. L. Rentoul

Cpl G. A. Reynolds

Cpl L. A. Warr

L-Cpl R. W. Heine

L-Cpl H. J. Monaghan

L-Cpl G. E. Pritchard

Pte I. K. Bertle

Pte R. W. Common

Pte S. J. Copeland

Pte G. A. Doig

Pte J. B. Kinder

Pte J. L. Leckie

Pte J. R. Maclean

Pte I. M. McQuarrie

Pte T. J. Schultz

Pte L. G. Sinclair

Pte W. B. Stockwell

Pte F. R. Wrigley

united states legion of merit

Lt-Col E. K. Norman, DSO, MC

greek medal for outstanding services

Sgt H. K. Amner

Sgt L. G. Mendelssohn, MM

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COMMANDING OFFICERS

Commanding Officers

Lt-Col A. S. Wilder	15 May 1940–9 Sep 1941
Lt-Col G. J. McNaught	9 Sep 1941–23 Nov 1941
Maj H. G. Burton	23 Nov 1941–5 Dec 1941
Lt-Col C. D. A. George	5 Dec 1941–22 Jul 1942
Lt-Col H. G. Burton	22 Jul 1942–12 Sep 1942
Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant	12 Sep 1942–28 Oct 1942
Maj J. C. Porter	28 Oct 1942–19 Nov 1942
Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant	19 Nov 1942–31 Jan 1943
Lt-Col T. B. Morten	31 Jan 1943–23 Dec 1943
Maj E. K. Norman	23 Dec 1943–4 Feb 1944
Lt-Col T. B. Morten	4 Feb 1944–22 Feb 1944
Maj E. K. Norman	22 Feb 1944–1 Mar 1944
Lt-Col J. L. MacDuff	1 Mar 1944–16 Jun 1944
Lt-Col E. K. Norman	16 Jun 1944–23 Apr 1945
Lt-Col A. W. Barnett	23 Apr 1945–19 Oct 1945

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25 BATTALION

[BACKMATTER]

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Editor-in-Chief [M. C. Fairbrother](#), cbe, dso, ed

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the author: [Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Puttick](#), KCB, DSO and bar, Greek Military Cross, United States Legion of Merit, went overseas with the [First Echelon, 2 NZEF](#), in January 1940 as Brigadier commanding [4 Infantry Brigade](#). After service in Egypt and [Greece](#) and in command of the New Zealand Division in [Crete](#), he was promoted Major-General in August 1941 and appointed Chief of the General Staff in New Zealand, vice Major-General Duigan, retired. On Japan's entry into the war and mobilisation of the New Zealand Forces, he held the additional appointment of General Officer Commanding with the rank of Lieutenant-General.

In the 1914–18 War, after initial service in the Waitaki Boys' High School Defence Cadets and as a subaltern in the 15th ([North Auckland](#)) and 5th ([Wellington](#)) Regiments, he joined the Samoa Expeditionary Force (August 1914) in the rank of captain, and in 1915 the 1st Battalion, New Zealand Rifle Brigade, commanding a company near Mersa Matruh in December 1915–February 1916 against the [Senussi](#). Proceeding to [France](#) in April 1916 on the staff of 2nd NZ Infantry Brigade, he returned to the Rifle Brigade as Second-in-Command 4th Battalion in the Battle of the [Somme](#) (1916) and commanded the battalion at the battles of Messines and [Passchendaele](#) (1917); he later commanded the 3rd Battalion at the 2nd [Somme](#) (March 1918), where he was severely wounded. He returned to New Zealand in December 1918 after some months in command of the NZRB Training Depot in England.

Joining the New Zealand Regular Forces in 1919, he commanded in February 1920 a small expedition to [Fiji](#) in aid of the civil power there. In 1946 he retired after commanding the New Zealand Contingent in the Victory March in [London](#).