

26 BATTALION

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About the electronic version

26 Battalion

Author: Norton, Frazer D.

Creation of machine-readable version: TechBooks, Inc.

Creation of digital images: TechBooks, Inc.

Conversion to TEI.2-conformant markup: TechBooks, Inc.

New Zealand Electronic Text Centre, 2004

Wellington, New Zealand

Extent: ca. 1500 kilobytes

Illustrations have been included from the original source.

About the print version

26 Battalion

Author: Norton, Frazer D.

War History Branch, Department Of Internal Affairs, 1952
Wellington, New Zealand

Source copy consulted: Defence Force Library, New Zealand

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

Encoding

Prepared for the New Zealand Electronic Text Centre as part of the Official War History project.

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.

Revisions to the electronic version

2 November 2004

Colin Doig

Added name tags around various names of people, places, and organisations.

31 August 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added link markup for project in TEI header.

11 August 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Corrected footnote number of page 489. Fixed broken link to Roll of Honour in book's contents page.

2 August 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added funding details to header.

27 July 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added missing text on page iv.

3 June 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added full TEI header.

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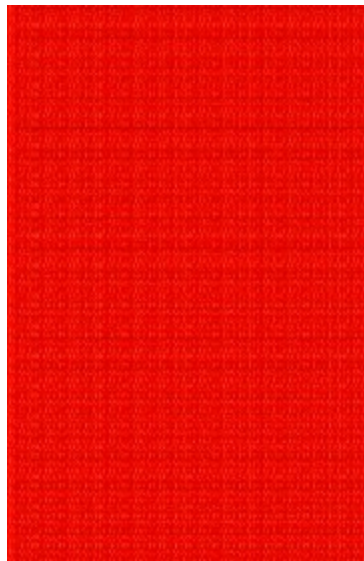
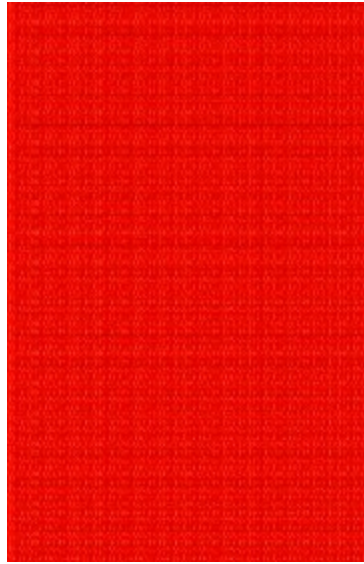
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[COVERS]



26 Battalion

by
Ernest D. Norton

WAR HISTORY BOARD
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND
1971

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26 Battalion

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[FRONTISPIECE]



26 Battalion on the wharf at Lyttelton, 27 August 1940

26 Battalion on the wharf at Lyttelton, 27 August 1940

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[TITLE PAGE]

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

Frazer D. Norton

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1952 set up,
printed and bound in new zealand

by

coulls somerville wilkie ltd.
crawford street dunedin

26 BATTALION

FOREWORD

Foreword



By Lieutenant-General the Rt. Hon. Lord Freyberg, vc, gcmg, kcb, kbe, ll d, dcl

I feel honoured to be asked to write a Foreword to the History of this fine Infantry Battalion, which served under my command in the [Middle East](#) and [Italy](#) from September 1940, when it joined the Division, until it was disbanded and drafted home from the [Florence](#) area on the 9th October 1945, after five long years of bitter fighting and great achievement.

During those years the Battalion played important roles in [Greece](#) and in the [Western Desert](#). In the battle at [Tobruk](#) in November 1941, the New Zealand 6th Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier Barrowclough, captured [Sidi Rezegh](#), where some of the hardest fighting of the war took place.

I have often been asked what I thought to be the highlight in the record of the 2 NZEF's long and honourable history. I find this difficult to decide, but I think that without any doubt the attack of the 6th and the 4th Infantry Brigades to capture the whole of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, [Belhamed](#) and Ed Duda, and to open the corridor to [Tobruk](#), was one of the greatest feats of courage and endurance of the war.

The 26th Battalion had an imposing record of achievement, and it is well told by [Mr. Frazer Norton](#), who is to be congratulated on the care which he has taken to state the facts accurately and also on the well-balanced story that he has produced. Readers will find it a worthy account of the war service of one of our finest Infantry Battalions.

Bernard Fryberg

Lieutenant-General

,
formerly General Officer Commanding
the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force
wellington

,
1
May

1952

26 BATTALION

PREFACE

Preface

Five years ago when I undertook to write the history of 26 Battalion I had practically no idea of the work involved and assumed that unit war diaries and other official records would be sufficient for my needs. Instead I found that the diaries, in particular those covering [Greece](#) and the Desert, were sketchy, impersonal and often misleading. To overcome this understandable fault an appeal for help was made to former members of the battalion. The response was very encouraging. Some sent in private diaries, letters, maps and photographs, while others offered to assist in any way possible.

Those to whom draft narratives were circulated made many comments, adding materially to the story and, more important, saving me from countless errors and omissions. I had hoped it would be possible to acknowledge the invaluable assistance given me by these men, but through the years their number has grown to such an extent that several pages would be required to list their names.

Certain of them, however, have given prodigiously of their time, and in this connection I feel I should mention Lieutenant- Colonel E. J. Thomson, ED, the chairman of the unit historical committee, Major F. W. Wilson, MBE, MC, on whom I, like many before me, placed much reliance, and also Mr. D. C. Walker and Mr. B. J. Palmer, who painstakingly corrected my narrative and offered much useful advice. All records of the [War History Branch](#) were placed at my disposal, and each and every member of the staff showed keen interest in my work and a willingness to help which was greatly appreciated.

This book has taken a long time to prepare, much longer than I ever anticipated, but it was a very absorbing task. As more information came to hand the story of each action became clearer, and it was possible to picture events as they took place and understand the hazards and problems which confronted those who took part. It was equally interesting to note the gradual development of the battalion as a fighting machine. Changes in tactics, equipment, and personnel often

came only as a result of costly setbacks. These had no apparent effect on morale.

A complete story of the battalion's activities would fill several volumes. In this book I have tried to give a full and accurate account of the most important of them. Those left out or briefly mentioned mainly concern social activities pertaining to small groups to whom the incidents are personal. I have made no attempt to comment on each action, leaving the question of military tactics to those more qualified. The book is a tribute to those who served overseas with 26 Battalion and has been written primarily for them. If each one of them can find in these pages something to link him with the story then my purpose has been gained.

Frazer D. Norton

23 August 1951

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CHAPTER 1 – IN BURNHAM AND JOURNEY OVERSEAS

CHAPTER 1

In Burnham and Journey Overseas

WHEN war began in September 1939 the military camp at [Burnham](#), 19 miles from [Christchurch](#), almost overnight emerged from obscurity to become the [South Island](#) mobilisation centre for overseas units. Carpenters, engineers, and labourers went to work and in a few short months transformed the small camp into a large training establishment. From all parts of the [South Island](#) came those who had volunteered for service overseas. They were drafted into units and trained. Early in January 1940 the [First Echelon](#) left New Zealand; four months later the [Second Echelon](#) followed. After its departure an augmented camp staff prepared for the arrival of the third contingent. In A Block, close to the administrative headquarters of the camp, officers and NCOs selected and trained to take commands in the new unit waited to receive the infantry draft.

On Wednesday 16 May the main draft of men to form the 26th Infantry Battalion arrived at [Burnham](#). They came into camp in an almost constant stream, some by rail and others by road. At A Block they were drafted into companies and directed to their new quarters—long, wooden 30-man huts adjacent to the parade ground. Only a few of the men had been in camp before. Some had served in the First World War and others in Territorial units, but for the majority this was a new venture and a drastic change from civilian life. By Friday all the names on the roll had been ticked and those missing accounted for. On Saturday it rained heavily and the new recruits stayed indoors, thankful they were not housed in the tents which dotted the fringes of the camp. Within a short time every man was equipped and in uniform. Clerk and labourer, tradesman and shop assistant stood awkwardly on the parade ground, ready to receive their introduction to army life.

Similarly in the [North Island](#) camps the 24th and 25th Battalions were being assembled, the three forming the 6th Infantry Brigade. In turn 6 Brigade, with 4 and 5 Brigades which had already left New Zealand, formed the infantry component of 2 NZ Division, under the command of [Major-General B. C. Freyberg](#), VC.

The 26th Battalion consisted of a battalion headquarters, four rifle companies, and a Headquarters Company. This was in accordance with the 1938 British war

establishment except that platoon commanders were given commissioned rank. Battalion HQ ¹ contained, in addition to the Adjutant and his staff, the Intelligence and Provost sections. The four rifle companies each consisted of three platoons and a Company HQ and were lettered A to D. Each was representative of a province: A Coy comprised [Canterbury](#) personnel, B Coy Southland, C Coy [Nelson, Marlborough](#) and [West Coast](#), and D Coy Otago. In HQ Coy, by far the largest of the five, were the specialist platoons: Signals, Anti-Aircraft, Mortars, Bren carriers, Pioneers, and Transport. To these were added the QM staff and those important people, the cooks. Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. [Page](#) ² was appointed to command the new battalion, with Maj J. M. [Samson](#) ³ as his second-in-command. Senior appointments were:

OC A Coy: [Capt T. Milliken](#)

OC B Coy: Capt H. G. McQuade

OC C Coy: [Maj N. A. Rattray](#)

OC D Coy: [Maj F. J. Brook](#)

OC HQ Coy: Capt F. W. Huggins

Adjutant: Capt W. C. T. Foley

QM: Capt. F. W. Wilson

MO: Capt W. W. Little

Padre: [Rev. J. S. Strang](#)

The battalion's training programme was strenuous. The first six weeks were spent in intensive elementary training. To the orders of their new officers and NCOs the recruits went through the routine of company parades and inspections, rifle exercises, bayonet drill, saluting, marching, PT, and all the other tedious exercises which make 'stooge' drill so distasteful to the average soldier. Route marches were held frequently, and as the days and weeks passed they became longer and tougher. Inclement weather made conditions rather unpleasant, but despite this and other discomforts the men, in their ill-fitting denims and new boots, worked and trained with enthusiasm. Before long everyone knew the parts of the rifle, Bren gun, two or

three-inch mortar, and Boys anti-tank rifle. They knew, too, how heavy any one of these weapons became towards the end of a long march.

Near the end of July individual training gave way to field exercises and range work, culminating in tactical manoeuvres around the township of Selwyn. For a start the field work consisted largely of platoon and company exercises—patrolling, movement in battle formation, taking cover and occupying defensive positions. Gradually the scope of the exercises was widened, with the specialist platoons taking a more active part. Intelligence personnel and signallers were detailed to each company and the supporting arms—mortars, carriers, etc.—were given a role in each operation. Nearly half the exercises were carried out at night under simulated battle conditions. A three-day exercise around Selwyn was very successful. It embraced much of the teaching of the past weeks and ended in a long march back to camp. Subsequently the companies set out separately on a three-weeks' trek around Banks Peninsula but were recalled before they completed it.

By August the camp itself had undergone some change. Several new buildings had been completed and roads and paths repaired. Amenities had steadily improved. The cinema was open every night, and at supper-time the troops had the choice of four recreation huts run by various religious organisations. On evenings when there was no night exercise the wet canteen, which also served hot saveloys and pies, was very popular. With a large number of troops in camp it was invariably crowded, and this meant long queues and an equally long wait between drinks. To avoid these delays some of the men returning from leave sought to elude the provosts and camp guards and bring in a personal stock of liquor. More often than not they succeeded. Night leave to [Christchurch](#) was granted to a percentage each week. Despite the hard training this leave was not sufficient to satisfy the men. Weekend leave to enable those of other districts to visit their homes was granted sparingly.

* * *

On 1 August the battalion marched out on final leave. Surprisingly few failed to return punctually, perhaps because the penalties for AWL and other offences were very severe. Rumours of the probable date of embarkation circulated the camp but when the men returned from leave they carried on training as before. On the 17th the battalion, in company with other [Third Echelon](#) troops training in [Burnham](#),

paraded through [Christchurch](#). Colonel Page led the troops past large, undemonstrative crowds to Cranmer Square, where Brig O. H. Mead, Officer Commanding Southern Military District, took the salute. After the parade was over leave was granted those who wished to stay in the city.

Two days later all leave was cancelled and everyone thought the day of departure was at hand. But leave was soon reinstated, and it was not until a week later that the troops were informed that 27 August would be their last day in New Zealand for a time. During the 26th several company parades were held. Equipment and embarkation rolls were checked and by dusk everything was ready for the morning move. That night each man paid his respects to the old life in readiness to begin a new one overseas. Some wrote letters; others celebrated the occasion at the wet canteen and the Rolleston Hotel.

A check parade was held early next morning, company commanders reporting a full muster. Shortly after nine o'clock the [South Island](#) contingent of the [Third Echelon](#) assembled on the parade ground in B Block, and from there the troops marched behind the [Burnham](#) band to the station. The train was waiting; as soon as everyone was aboard it left for [Lyttelton](#) on a non-stop run. At various places along the route, notably at [Christchurch](#) station, large crowds waved and cheered until the last carriage disappeared from sight. The train shunted alongside the troopship and embarkation began; by noon it was complete and everyone was on board. A large crowd had assembled outside the wharf barriers, and as the ship began to draw away from the jetty the gates were opened and the people surged forward. Whistles and sirens were blowing and the music of the [Burnham](#) band was drowned by the spontaneous burst of singing and cheering from those waving friends and relatives goodbye. On the ship all ranks crowded the rails. Gradually, as the ship pulled farther out into the stream, the crowd grew smaller and the cheering died away. The last link with loved ones had been broken and the thought was sobering.

The men left the rails to inspect their new quarters. The [Orcades](#), a four-year-old ship of about 23,400 tons, was not as yet converted to a troopship. Tours around the decks confirmed the original impression that as far as quarters went the voyage would be pleasant. There were eight decks, four of them promenade. The first-class accommodation, reserved for officers and nurses, was excellent. Other ranks occupied the tourist class quarters and were billeted in two, four, and eight-berth

cabins. A small overflow occupied one of the holds and during the voyage interchanged with those in the better accommodation. There were 1340 New Zealanders on board; 671 were in 26 Battalion and 268 in the two infantry reinforcement companies which had also trained at [Burnham](#). The rest were members of [6 Field Ambulance](#) and [South Island](#) personnel of others arms of the service. For a ship the size of the [Orcades](#) this was not a large contingent, and consequently there was little overcrowding.

The [Orcades](#) remained in the stream until midnight and then put to sea. Off Wellington she joined the [Mauretania](#) and the Empress of [Japan](#), which were carrying the rest of the Third Echelon. Escorted by HMS [Achilles](#), the three ships steamed across the Tasman.

From the day of sailing to the day of disembarkation ship's orders were strictly enforced. Boat drill and action stations became a regular routine and severe penalties were imposed on those who broke the blackout regulations. Some training was carried out. As the weather became hotter lectures replaced drill, physical training, and rifle exercises. Instructors were handicapped by the shortage of training pamphlets and modern weapons. 'Doc' Little ⁴ gave several lectures on hygiene, the treatment of wounds, and tropical diseases. Major [Rattray](#) ⁵ and Capt [McKergow](#) ⁶ gave several talks on the people and the conditions likely to be encountered in the [Middle East](#).

After dusk a strict blackout was maintained and no smoking was permitted on the open decks. Various forms of entertainment were available at night in addition to the usual games of cards. Two impromptu orchestras were formed, one on B Deck and the other on G Deck companionway. The ship's cinema showed films almost every night and several concerts were organised. In particular, one given by the ship's crew was excellent and was thoroughly enjoyed by the men. Card tournaments and housie-housie had their adherents, while far away from provosts and officers pontoon, crown and anchor, and sundry other games of chance were played. The ship's orderly room issued a daily news sheet and the [BBC](#) news was broadcast over the loudspeaker system. On 7 September the [Berlin](#) radio reported that the [Orcades](#) had been sunk, news that caused considerable amusement to those on board her. Meals were served by waiters in large dining halls and were

always good. Doc Little had a field day on 3 September when all ranks were vaccinated and given an anti-tetanus injection.

Washing day aboard ship was always an epic affair, all types, shapes, and sizes of multi-coloured wearing apparel fluttering from improvised clothes-lines. There was always plenty of soap in the ship's canteen; in fact there was plenty of everything, and the prices charged were reasonable. The most popular item—beer—cost only sixpence a pint bottle. Sports equipment was provided and places on each deck were reserved for games, deck tennis being popular. When the weather became hotter the ship's two swimming baths were favourite rendezvous.

Besides the entertainments provided on board there were often other items of interest. When only one day out from [Wellington](#) the troopships held firing practice. The three of them formed in line, with the [Orcades](#) in the centre, and each fired six rounds from their six-inch guns at a target towed by the [Achilles](#). The [Orcades](#) gun crew recorded the best shoot—four direct hits. On the following day Australian aircraft circled the ship and [HMAS Perth](#) replaced the [Achilles](#) as escort. The latter sailed close alongside the three troopships and the sailors lining the decks sang farewell songs. It was a memorable incident. Land was sighted about ten o'clock next morning. The men hugged the rails as the ship sailed through [Bass Strait](#) and entered the Australian Bight, where four transports escorted by [HMAS Canberra](#) joined the convoy. Two days of rough seas and cold weather followed, the [Orcades](#) rolling and pitching heavily, and then on 4 September she steamed into [Fremantle](#). The ship berthed at 11 a.m. and by 1 p.m. the troops were streaming into [Fremantle](#) and [Perth](#) on leave. An overwhelming welcome awaited the New Zealanders. Homes were thrown open to them, cars were made available, tours around the countryside arranged and meals specially prepared for the visitors. To complete the picture, the Aussie soldier with his slouch hat was on hand to take part in the festivities. The local hotels did a great trade for beer was not rationed. Most of the men were back on the ship by midnight, although the usual few failed to arrive until the early hours of the morning, all somewhat the worse for wear.

After only 24 hours in port the convoy weighed anchor and sailed up the West Australian Coast. The weather became steadily hotter and conditions below deck uncomfortably warm. Awnings were stretched across the open decks. The Equator was crossed and suitable mementoes of the occasion were given to each man. On 12

September identification discs were issued; next day HMS Colombo took over the escort duties and on the 15th the [Orcades](#) anchored in the muddy stream of [Bombay](#) harbour. In the morning she steamed through the lock to Alexander Dock and the troops prepared to disembark. Although keen to explore the city, all ranks were sorry to leave their ship. The voyage on her had been enjoyable and the crew and troops alike were sorry to part. ⁷

To the men watching from the ship's rails [Bombay](#) presented an animated scene. It was a stiflingly hot morning, and the hills surrounding the city with their green mantle of tropical growth looked cool and inviting. The wharves were a hive of activity; hundreds of natives paused to gaze at the New Zealanders as they streamed ashore and marched to the Churchgate station. Wearing drill trousers and battle-dress tunics and carrying packs and rifles without slings, the men found the five-mile march trying. At length, bathed in perspiration and footsore, they reached the station and boarded a modern, wide-gauge electric train. Fifteen minutes later they detrained at the Mahalaxshuri station. A short march brought them to the grounds of the West India Racing Club, where the battalion and reinforcements were to spend the next few days. The troops occupied fairly comfortable quarters in the club's buildings and most of the officers stayed at the Taj Mahal hotel in the city.

Two days were spent at the racecourse. On the 17th leave was granted to visit [Bombay](#). Although few had time to explore the city, everyone was impressed by the splendour of its palaces, temples and hotels, and the appalling conditions in the poorer areas. But [Bombay](#) will always be remembered for the meals supplied to the men, for they were nearly always inedible and unappetising. Most preferred to appease their hunger with fruit bought from local vendors.

Meanwhile Lt-Col Page had received advice that the battalion would leave [Bombay](#) on the 18th aboard the Orion, a sister ship to the [Orcades](#). The reinforcement companies were to remain behind to follow by another ship, and Maj [Brook](#) ⁸ was left in charge of them.

With memories of the excellent conditions on the [Orcades](#) fresh in their minds, the troops embarked on the Orion. Disillusionment awaited them. Gone were the cabins, the waiters, and the atmosphere of the [Orcades](#). In their place were hot, stuffy mess decks with hammocks slung over the meal tables, and the ship was

crowded with Australian troops—hundreds of them. The officer accommodation, on the other hand, was excellent. The Australians were disgruntled and discontented and their grievances soon had an effect on the New Zealanders. For two days after the ship put to sea meal arrangements were chaotic. Australian officers exercised little control over their men and only good work by members of the battalion prevented serious trouble; as it was, there was some fighting. At length the commissariat arrangements were placed on a workable basis and New Zealand officers saw that each mess table received its meals at the scheduled time. Another problem was the poor sanitary arrangements. The ship had been only partly converted as a troopship, but this could not excuse the dirty state of the quarters. Little could be done about the latrines or quarters except to keep them as clean as possible.

The journey past [Aden](#) through the [Red Sea](#) was uneventful. The heat was terrific as the ship steamed through the [Red Sea](#), with dry winds making conditions below deck almost unbearable. Summer dress had not been issued and only a lucky few were allowed to sleep on deck each night. There was a mild outbreak of infective enteritis, or 'Gyppo tummy' as it is more commonly known; otherwise the troops stood up very well to the change of climate and food.

Early on 29 September the Orion dropped anchor in the stream off Port Tewfik. An advanced party left the ship, but the main body did not disembark until the following day. Lighters carried the men ashore, where they boarded a train, occupying dirty, third-class carriages. After some delay the train moved off for [Maadi](#) Camp, the [2 NZEF](#) base. Although the route lay through [Cairo](#), the men were unable to catch more than a glimpse of the city. At various stops they made the acquaintance of the redoubtable Egyptian salesmen who haunt all troop trains and roam the streets of [Cairo](#). By 3 p.m. the battalion was detraining at the [Maadi](#) siding and the long journey to Egypt was over.

¹ To conserve space ranks have been abbreviated and the following Army abbreviations used in the text: HQ (Headquarters), OC (Officer Commanding), CO (Commanding Officer), Coy (Company), QM (Quartermaster), MO (Medical Officer), IO (Intelligence Officer), TO (Transport Officer), LO (Liaison Officer), 2 i/c (second-in-command), RMT (Reserve Mechanical Transport, PT (physical training), AWL (absent without

leave), RTO (Railway Traffic Officer), Tac HQ (Tactical Headquarters), OP (Observation Post), RAP (Regimental Aid Post), AFV (Armoured Fighting Vehicle), FDL (Forward Defended Locality), TCP (Traffic Control Post). Other abbreviations not as frequently used are explained in a footnote on first mention.

² Brig J. R. Page, DSO. m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Dunedin, 10 May 1908; Regular soldier: CO 26 Bn 15 May 1940–27 Nov 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941; Commandant, Northern Military District 1950–52; Adjutant-General, Army HQ, Apr 1952–.

³ Maj J. M. Samson, ED; [Blenheim](#); born Dunedin, 27 Feb 1904; company director; wounded 27 Apr 1941.

⁴ Maj W. W. Little; [Auckland](#); born Mount Serrat, 28 May 1896; medical practitioner; RMO 26 Bn Mar 1940–Aug 1941; [2 NZ Gen Hosp](#) Aug 1941–Jan 1944; SMO Advanced Base, [Italy](#), Jan–Sep 1944.

⁵ Maj N. A. Rattray, MBE; [Waimate](#); born Dunedin, 7 Nov 1896; farmer; p.w. Apr 1941.

⁶ Lt-Col J. W. McKergow; [Rangiora](#); born [Twineham](#), England, 26 May 1902; farmer; CO [20 Armd Regt](#) Jun–Dec 1943; wounded 22 Dec 1943.

⁷ The [Orcades](#) continued to transport troops until she was sunk by a U-boat off the Cape of Good Hope on 10 Oct 1942.

⁸ Maj F. J. Brook; born NZ 4 Sep 1901; school teacher; died of sickness 19 Feb 1941.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 2 – EARLY DAYS IN EGYPT

CHAPTER 2

Early Days in Egypt

FROM the siding the battalion marched a short distance to the camp. Assisted by 20 Battalion personnel, the advanced party had made preparations for the arrival of the main body but a lot remained to be done. The whole of 6 Brigade was now contained in one camp—in N Block. The first few days passed quickly. Tents were erected, slit trenches dug around or near them, and latrines built. The only wooden buildings in the area were used as cookhouses, orderly rooms, and for stores. In these first few days the men accustomed themselves to their new surroundings. The vast stretches of sandy waste and high escarpments, entirely devoid of vegetation, were strangely impressive and yet soon became monotonous. In the opposite direction this monotony was relieved by a magnificent view of the wide, fertile Nile Valley, with its stately palms and emerald green wealth of vegetation. To the north the impressive lines of the Citadel could be clearly seen, with the domes, pinnacles, and minarets of Cairo in the background. Beyond the river were the Pyramids, which in the distance resembled surprisingly closely the picture postcards of Egypt commonly seen in book-shops in New Zealand. To nearly everyone Egypt at first glance was little different from what had been expected or imagined.

Sixth Brigade remained in N Block until mid-December and the ten weeks' stay was strenuous. Summer dress—shorts and shirts—gave but little relief from the heat. On 7 October the battalion began a period of intensive training, much along the lines of that carried out in Burnham. More equipment was received but most of it was on issue only for training. Seven trucks and three motor cycles were received, plus a number of Bren guns and two-inch mortars. Later came three-inch mortars, signals equipment, mapping instruments, and several Bren carriers. This equipment enabled the specialist platoons and sections to devote more time to their particular work and allowed the battalion to function as a complete infantry unit.

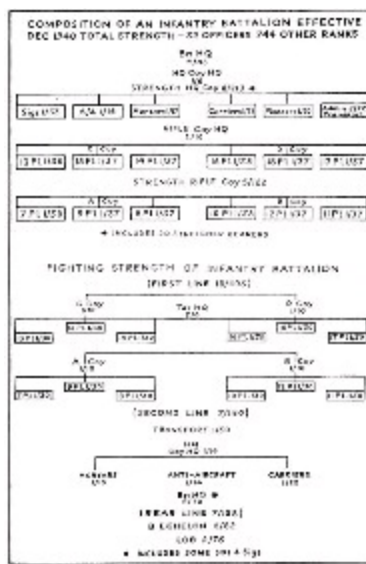
The early training was strenuous. A full syllabus had been drawn up and the companies and platoons went through the routine of rifle, bayonet and squad drill, intermingled with lectures. Many of the officers and NCOs were sent on special courses and instructors were brought in from First Echelon units. Route marches were very frequent and the troops marched long distances over the desert. On

several occasions the marches took place after dusk, and company commanders learned how easy it was to get their men lost in the desert at night. Discipline was strict and the punishment for any offence severe. Company parades were held almost every morning and were frequently followed by a battalion parade and an inspection. It behoved each soldier to keep his rifle free from dust or be prepared for some penalty.

On 27 October the reinforcement companies left behind in [Bombay](#) arrived at [Maadi](#). Their ship, the *Felix Roussel*, had been bombed as she sailed through the [Red Sea](#) and while watering at [Port Sudan](#). One of the companies was later absorbed in the battalion and brought the unit strength up to 776, an increase of 108. This was in accordance with a direction to increase platoon strengths to 38 and sections from eight to eleven men.

Early in November the training entered a new and more interesting phase, field exercises and lectures occupying the greater part of the day. Parade-ground drill was cut down to a minimum—a decision welcomed by all ranks. As in [Burnham](#), the training took the form of platoon exercises followed by company and battalion manœuvres. These manœuvres were taken very seriously, especially by the officers, and there was considerable rivalry among the companies. Lack of transport for the battalion handicapped Col Page in planning the exercises, and the troops generally had to complete a long march before an exercise could begin. For the brigade manœuvre held during the month transport was provided, lorries taking the men to within six miles of the exercise area at El Tibn Knolls.

On its return the battalion began range practice. Each company visited the battle-practice range at [Abbassia](#) and a second one close to the camp. At the former the troops had to accustom themselves to firing at snap and moving targets. The battalion



also provided guards and pickets at [Helwan](#) airfield, [Abbassia](#), and the Tura Caves. These duties were a welcome change from the normal routine at [Maadi](#).

Amenities at [Maadi](#) were better than had been expected. Meals were good; in the opinion of many they were better than at [Burnham](#). The general health was excellent although for a while dysentery, mild or otherwise, attacked nearly everyone. [Maadi](#) was growing rapidly and tents were being replaced by huts. The several recreation huts in the camp were very popular, particularly at supper-time. The NAAFI canteen was well stocked and had a plentiful supply of beer. Shafto's cinema was open every night, and although the films were often old and poorly projected there was always a crowd to see them.

Leave was granted to [Cairo](#) on a limited scale, and everyone who could took the opportunity to visit the city. They found that, like [Bombay](#), [Cairo](#) is a city of majestic and beautiful buildings and dirty, dingy slums. The New Zealand Forces Club was incomplete but the South African, British, and Australian clubs were open to troops on leave. Officers had the choice of the Turf, [Gezira](#), and [Maadi](#) clubs. There was always plenty to do and see in the city and its environs.

The only sign of the war which the unit saw during this period was a bombing raid by a single enemy plane on the night of 20 October. The air-raid sirens sounded and the men scattered in all directions, some to slit trenches. The plane dropped its bombs in the desert some distance beyond the camp, causing several casualties in a village near the railway line to [Tura](#). In the morning it was noticeable that slit trenches were being deepened.

About mid-December 6 Brigade moved to another camp about three miles from [Helwan](#), the southern terminus of the railway running through [Maadi](#) from [Cairo](#), and the location of 2 NZ General Hospital. On the 13th of the month the battalion left [Maadi](#) by lorry and on arriving in the new camp found its quarters in a dirty state. With the exception of D Coy which occupied huts, the men were in tents. The battalion remained at [Helwan](#) for nearly three months. The time was spent on guard and picket duties, field exercises and manœuvres. After the New Year other units took over the guard duties and the battalion began to receive and train with its own equipment. The training, though interesting, became increasingly more strenuous, and it left the troops with little opportunity or inclination for recreation.

[Helwan Camp](#) did not have the amenities of [Maadi](#). [Shafto's](#) ran a nightly picture show and there was a [Naafi](#), but recreation huts were in the town, three miles away. Water was laid on to the camp but the sanitary arrangements were poor. Highlight of the stay at [Helwan](#) was Christmas Day—the first of several to be spent overseas by the unit. Officers and sergeants served the meal and waited on the tables. Pork and duck were the main items on the menu and the officers served generous helpings. Beer was also served with the meal. [General Freyberg](#) and Brig [Barrowclough](#)¹ visited the mess. A large mail, including [Patriotic Fund Board](#) parcels and others from kinsfolk, was distributed. This, together with the excellent meal and the leave granted afterwards, made the day memorable.

The training now was much more advanced than that carried out earlier. Each company completed a course which included tank hunting, exploitation and consolidation on an objective, concealment, village and street fighting, night patrolling, assault bridging, river crossings, and attacking over wire obstacles under artillery and mortar fire. Route marches were held regularly and each week they seemed to get longer and tougher. Nearly every exercise held during the day was also carried out after dusk. The culmination of this training was a five-day brigade manœuvre which began on 6 January. During this exercise the troops made some gruelling marches and lived and slept out in the desert. Most of the exercises practised earlier were done once more, but this time under more realistic conditions. The Divisional Cavalry acted as the tank force, and the [RAF](#) provided air cover and

acted as enemy aircraft on occasion. A feature of the exercise was the repelling of a tank-supported attack by the infantry armed only with Boys anti-tank rifles.

It was very hot during the daytime and cold after dusk. Only one blanket a man was carried, and each soldier found that the desert could be really cold. Night exercises were generally unpopular. On one night during the brigade manœuvre A Coy was ordered to dig in as part of a defensive scheme near El Tibn Knolls. Part of the company was doing this when natives from a nearby village appeared on the scene. Despite linguistic difficulties the troops gathered from the villagers' excited manner that they had begun to dig on the fringe of an old cemetery. To prove his words one of the natives began to lay open one of the graves, and it took the troops some time to convince him that they understood and were about to move away.

On the last night of the operation the [20 Battalion](#) lorries, which had carried the battalion for part of the journey to and from the manœuvre area, ran into soft sand. Hours of back-breaking work followed before they were freed, and it was a tired, weary, and dusty battalion which returned to [Helwan](#). On the whole the exercise had been a success. Mistakes had been made and corrected. All ranks were gaining knowledge of what was expected of them and confidence in their ability to do it. The success of General Wavell's army in [Libya](#) was having a pronounced effect on morale.

The rest of January and February was spent in doing compass work, gas drill, wiring, and in receiving instruction on mines, booby traps, and other specialised subjects. Route marches continued as before. New equipment arrived almost every other day and by the end of February the unit was fully equipped. Platoons were armed with Bren guns and two-inch mortars as well as rifles. Signallers had been issued with flags and telephone cable and the Mortar Platoon with four 3-inch mortars. Anti-aircraft equipment was somewhat inadequate—four Bren guns mounted on tripods. The unit transport, which arrived about the middle of February, consisted of about thirty 8, 15 and 30-cwt. trucks and a staff car for the CO. The Bren carriers which arrived about the same time gave mechanical trouble from the start. The bicycles issued to each company proved useful around camp but were found useless in the field.

During the three months at [Helwan](#) a number of changes of command had

occurred. On 19 February Maj Brook died of pneumonia and the battalion lost one of its most popular and efficient officers. Padre [Strang](#)² conducted the burial service at the British War Cemetery at Old Cairo, and over 200 members of the battalion attended as a military escort. Captain [Huggins](#)³ took over D Coy and Capt [Foley](#)⁴ HQ Coy. Lieutenant [Weston](#)⁵ became Adjutant but was replaced later by Lt L. G. [Smith](#)⁶ A number of the men had been transferred to other units, some after being regraded. The 1st Reinforcement Company had been absorbed into the unit and a second reinforcement company was training with the battalion.

By the first week of March the [Second Echelon](#) had arrived from England to complete the Division in Egypt. Everyone guessed that it would not be long before the Division moved into the field. During the last few days of February and the first week in March, all equipment was checked and deficiencies made up.⁷ The camp was beginning to assume an air of expectancy. The troops were fit, trained, and each man knew the testing time was near and was ready for it.



GREECE

¹ Maj-Gen H. E. Barrowclough, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Masterton](#), 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (Pte to Lt-Col commanding 4 Bn); wounded Messines, 1917; commanded 6 Bde 1 May 1940–21 Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in [Pacific](#) and GOC 3 NZ Div, 8 Aug 1942–20 Oct 1944.

² Rev. J. S. Strang; [Christchurch](#); born [Invercargill](#), 23 Apr 1909;

Presbyterian minister.

³ Lt-Col F. W. Huggins; born England, 29 Jan 1894; importer; died (in UK) 19 Nov 1945.

⁴ Maj W. C. T. Foley; Wellington; born Stratford, 7 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; 26 Bn 1940–41; commanded squadron 2 Tank Bn (in NZ) 1942–43; LO, Special Tank Sqn, 2 NZEF (IP) 1943; Armd Regt, 1945; 2 NZEF (Japan) 1945–46.

⁵ Maj G. C. Weston, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born New Plymouth, 18 Nov 1916; barrister and solicitor; BM 6 Bde May–Jul 1942; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; released Mar 1945.

⁶ Maj L. G. Smith, m.i.d.; born Mataura, 18 Aug 1911; accountant; died of wounds 25 Apr 1943.

⁷ At this time an infantry battalion's weapon strength was as follows:—
Platoon: 24 rifles 3 TSMGs 3 LMGs 1 pistol 1 A-tk rifle 1 2-inch mortar.
Company: 79 rifles 9 TSMGs 9 LMGs 12 pistols 4 A-tk rifles 3 2-inch mortars.
Total First Line: 320 rifles 37 TSMGs 36 LMGs 27 pistols 16 A-tk rifles
12 2-inch mortars.
Total Second Line *: 130 rifles 5 TSMGs 13 LMGs 9 pistols 9 A-tk rifles 2 3-inch mortars.

* Add also 10 Bren carriers, 4 mounting AALMGs.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 3 – GREECE

CHAPTER 3

Greece

EARLY on 6 March the battalion embussed on RMT lorries and left [Helwan](#) as part of the 6th Brigade convoy. The destination was [Amiriya](#), a transit camp near the coast and not far from [Alexandria](#). It was a monotonous all-day drive, and matters were not improved when the men found that the tented area allotted them was in a dirty, disgusting state after heavy rain. The camp's previous occupants had brought back from the [Western Desert](#) a motley collection of campaign spoils. This rubbish was littered all over the camp and several days passed before it was all cleaned up. In any case, there was little else to do. The camp contained few recreational facilities and no leave was granted to [Alexandria](#). Several short route marches helped to fill in the time. Thompson sub-machine guns were issued to the battalion, one to each section. The general unpopularity of [Amiriya](#) was increased by two blinding sandstorms which swept the area. On both occasions the sun and all landmarks were blotted out, visibility was reduced to a few feet, and those caught outside the tent lines had considerable difficulty finding their way back in the choking sand. It was almost as bad inside the tents. Candles and lanterns were lit, and when the storms subsided a layer of fine dust, inches deep, covered everything.

After these experiences everyone was glad when embarkation orders were received. The unit transport and the carriers (some under tow) were the first away. Early on the 17th they joined a brigade convoy bound for the docks at [Alexandria](#). There they were loaded on the *Koistan*, a tramp steamer with limited passenger accommodation. As soon as the loading was completed the drivers embarked, and the steamer joined a convoy bound for an undisclosed destination. The next morning the battalion followed, the troops setting out on foot towards a railway siding two miles away. In addition to normal equipment each man was carrying a base kit and bedroll. Despite orders to the contrary many were also carrying primuses, billies, food parcels, or other home comforts. Under a blistering hot sun they staggered and stumbled along the road and reached the siding sweating profusely and exhausted.

The train was waiting, and shortly afterwards it left for [Alexandria](#). By 1 p.m. the troops were on the wharf alongside a partially converted troopship, HMS *Breconshire*. Embarkation began immediately and by half past three was complete.

Mooring lines were loosed and the ship began to move up the harbour past several British and French warships lying at anchor. The bosun's whistle blew and all ranks were called to attention—a naval custom unknown to most soldiers. By 6 p.m. the Breconshire had joined the rest of the convoy and [Alexandria](#) had dropped from sight. A message from [General Freyberg](#) was read to all ranks. The Division's destination was [Greece](#), whose armies had been successfully resisting Italian aggression for some time. Although at peace with [Germany](#), the [Greek Government](#) feared that Mussolini's partner was about to extend his operations in the [Balkans](#). The New Zealanders were part of a British force diverted to [Greece](#) in response to an appeal for help.

The ship was very crowded, Australian troops outnumbering the battalion and 6 Brigade personnel on board. The holds and passageways were packed with men and the overflow stayed on deck. The crew were unable to provide regular meals but occasionally supplied hot soup or tea. All ranks were carrying three days' hard rations—fifteen ship's biscuits, three tins of bully beef, sugar and tea. Knowing the voyage would last only a few days, everyone was quite content with these arrangements. The weather was fine and the sea calm. On the 20th the snow-capped hills of [Crete](#) came into view and several destroyers were sighted in the distance. Early the next morning the news that land was in sight caused a stampede to the ship's rails. As the Breconshire moved down the stream at [Piraeus](#) to tie up, everyone strained to catch a glimpse of this new country. The town stretched back from the wharves and sheds of the waterfront up to the lower slopes of greyish hills surrounding it. The national flag of [Greece](#) seemed to be flying from every building and fishing smack.

The battalion's transport was lined up at the wharf waiting to carry packs, kitbags, and the heavier equipment to [Hymettus](#) Park on the outskirts of the city, where the brigade camp was to be established. The Koistan had berthed at [Athens](#) the previous day after an uneventful voyage. The Greek 'wharfies' worked slowly, and eventually the drivers themselves lent a hand to unload their vehicles. That night they camped at the park.

By 11 a.m. the battalion was assembled on the wharf ready to begin the 13-mile march to the new camp. Clad in battle dress, the troops set out through the port along streets lined with cheering, flag-waving civilians who seemed to have

appeared from nowhere. The road led out into a pleasant countryside green with spring growth. Along the route groups of villagers cheered and waved, while clean and tidily dressed children linked hands with the marching men and ran along with them. It was a pleasant welcome and a good omen for the future. A stop was made for lunch at a point close to the sea. Later, as the columns approached the city the crowds of watchers increased. To the troops the welcome was some compensation for a hot, uncomfortable march on a hard, bitumen road. But it was a severe blow to pride to watch a party of Australian shipmates drive past in New Zealand trucks, leaving the sound of their derisive laughter ringing in all ears.

By four o'clock the battalion had reached [Hymettus](#) to find it a carpet of green grass, cool and refreshing and very pleasant after a hot march and months of desert sand. Tents had already been erected and the men quickly settled down. There was to be no move for three days and general leave was granted. Each man was paid 500 drachmæ (18s 7d) and all except guards and pickets were soon strolling towards the main shopping area and the famous ruins beyond it. [Athens](#) had much to offer. The shops in the modern section of the city were stocked with goods of all descriptions. Bars and cafeterias did a good trade. Liquor was plentiful: cognac cost 3s a bottle and good German beer 10d. Local brands of wine and spirits—ouzo, mavrodaphne, crassi, and many others—were tried, sometimes with unexpected results. The future was uncertain and the men set out to make the most of the present. There were many hilarious parties and, in the mornings, many sore heads. [Athens](#) had other attractions. Fresh fruit was always available and the drinking water was free of chlorine. The language caused no problem, for many of the civilians spoke surprisingly good English. The activities of the German Consul and his staff caused comment and some anger. Each day the Consul drove through the park, and his staff were seen meticulously noting particulars of units as they arrived or left for the north of [Greece](#). All ranks were warned that many Germans were about the streets seeking information on troop movements.

The stay in [Athens](#) was short—too short for most of the men. Early on the morning of the 23rd the unit transport loaded with gear joined a convoy under Maj Samson bound for Northern [Greece](#).¹ The rest of the battalion was to follow by rail. It was a warm sunny morning, and in [Athens](#) a colourful youth parade was in progress. The troops prepared to march to the Rouf station about three miles away.

Base kits and all tropical gear were collected and sent to a depot in the city. A roll-call revealed some absentees and a truck was sent into the city to round them up. These men, together with some others, had been indulging themselves too freely in the local wine. When the companies formed up to march off, the drunks were lined up in the centre column so that their neighbours could support them. Near the King George Hotel, where the King of [Greece](#) was waiting to take the salute, Col Page gave the order to march to attention. Some of the centre rankers, bereft of support, 'bit the dust'.

Large crowds bade the men farewell. When the line of marching men caught up the tune 'The old red flannel drawers that Maggie wore' there was a wild outbreak of cheering, the onlookers apparently believing the song to have some national significance. It was noticeable that few of the onlookers were men of military age and that many of the women were in mourning. At the station the troops climbed into box-wagons resembling refrigeration cars. They were labelled Hommes 40, Chevaux 8, and it was generally agreed that the horses would have been decidedly more comfortable. There was some delay while the remaining winebibbers, about twenty all told, were rounded up and locked in one of the wagons, and it was 5 p.m. before the train got away. As darkness fell each man endeavoured to elbow himself a place to sleep. The frequent stoppages and the constant vibration of the steel floor denied rest to all but the hardiest sleepers. At daylight the train was passing through rugged, hilly country close to the town of [Larissa](#), an important communications centre. At the station the [Naafi](#) supplied hot tea and the men were able to buy oranges, fresh raisin bread, and sweetmeats. The journey was completed shortly after midday. The troops detrained at the [Katerine](#) station and marched along cobblestone streets, through the old ramshackle town, to a park about two miles away.

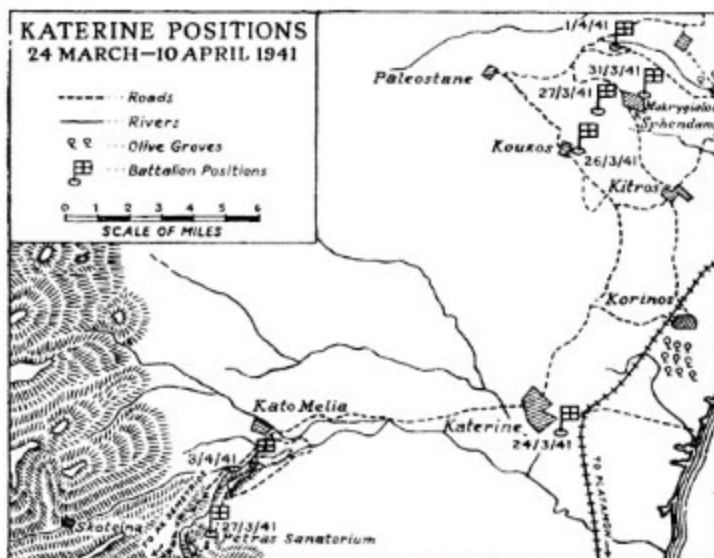
At the park company areas were allotted, and before long curious onlookers were mingling with the troops. The road party had not arrived so no tents could be erected, and the men spent the night, one of many in [Greece](#), sleeping under the stars. The air was noticeably cooler than at [Athens](#) due to the closeness of snow-clad [Mount Olympus](#). In the morning dozens of hungry Greek youngsters flocked around the camp seeking scraps of food. The villagers followed with baskets of fruit and eggs (cooked or raw) and bottles of wine. Later in the day the road party arrived. It

had made overnight stops near the towns of [Molos](#) and [Tyrnavos](#). Fine weather and the absence of mechanical troubles had made the journey a pleasant one.

* * *

The defence of Northern [Greece](#) was at this stage based on the Aliakmon line, covering the approaches to the [Servia](#) and Olympus Passes. (A forward defence line, the Metaxas line, ran parallel to the Bulgarian frontier.) The 19th Greek Division was still occupying the coastal sector to which the New Zealanders had been directed, as it had certain defence works to complete, the most important of which was a wide anti-tank ditch being dug by Greek civilian labour. In the meantime 6 Brigade was to prepare reserve positions behind the Greeks. When the latter moved forward to the Metaxas line the brigade would occupy the main defences.

Late on the morning of 26 March the battalion set out on foot towards the brigade sector. After a 13-mile march along rough, clay roads and across rugged, hilly country, the companies halted for the night near [Koukos](#), two miles south of the battalion sector. Next morning the march was completed and by noon the four companies were in position: A and B Coys forward with C in support and D in reserve. Throughout the



afternoon everyone was busy digging in, but no sooner were the defensive preparations well in hand than an order was received to move. D Coy was to return to [Katerine](#) on unit transport, proceed by rail to the [Platamon](#) tunnel area, and prepare defensive positions there. The rest of the battalion was to withdraw to the [Petras Sanatorium](#) on the forward slopes of [Mount Olympus](#) and prepare a defensive position. Both areas would eventually be taken over by 5 Brigade.

Shortly after D Coy left the battalion began retracing its steps along the road to [Koukos](#). Lorries picked up the laden men before they reached the village and carried them through to their destination. The transport reached the area just before midnight but had some difficulty negotiating the sharp bends of the steep, narrow branch road leading up to the Sanatorium. The darkness caused some confusion, but at length the companies were directed through scrub-covered country to their positions. Everyone was tired, cold, and hungry. A few, stumbling about in the dark, came across what they thought were trenches. They slept in them only to find out in the morning that the trenches were empty graves.

Everyone felt much more cheerful in the morning. The sun was shining and the discomforts of the night were soon forgotten. The Sanatorium was a large three-storied building set in pleasant surroundings. Behind it a green forest stretched up to the snow-clad mountain, and beneath the trees primroses, violets, and forget-me-nots grew in wild profusion. Squirrels peeped down from behind the branches and tortoises plodded out of the way. Down nearer the [Olympus Pass](#) road, where the ground was more open although covered with light scrub, the companies were endeavouring to erect tents. Colonel Page paid a courtesy call on the doctor in charge of the Sanatorium but found him inclined to be hostile towards his uninvited guests. Later the CO and several of his officers carried out a reconnaissance of tracks behind the camp to select defensive positions which could cover the Pass road. It was decided to widen a mule track, which ran in a southerly direction through forest towards the village of Stavros, so that supplies could be brought in to the area by truck.

For the next two days the troops, armed with picks and shovels, worked hard on the new road. By nightfall on the 30th several miles of it had been completed at the cost of many blisters. Everything had to be manhandled onto the job for the unit transport was carting metal for roads north of [Katerine](#). The Bren carriers had returned to [Koukos](#) on an anti-parachute role. Each day brought its crop of rumours: German panzer divisions were massing beyond the Bulgarian border; Axis planes would drop parachutists behind the Aliakmon line; the Yugoslavs would not resist the Nazis. Scarcely any official information was given and few in the battalion knew what was going on around them. These rumours were disturbing but were forgotten while the recently arrived mail was read and reread.

On the 30th Brig Hargest, 5 Brigade Commander, arrived at Battalion HQ, and after inspecting the area expressed his appreciation of the road work. On the following day 23 Battalion took over the sector and the troops prepared to rejoin 6 Brigade. By this time 19 Greek Division had moved forward and 6 Brigade was occupying the main line. By nightfall RMT had carried the troops to [Sphendami](#), a village two miles north-east of [Koukos](#). The night was spent in an olive grove a short distance north of the village. From Brig Barrowclough Col Page learned that the battalion would occupy a 3500-yard sector in the centre of the brigade front. There was still no indication of the enemy's intention or of the forces he would employ in an attack.

The battalion moved forward to join 24 and 25 Battalions the following morning, the companies taking up positions along ridges which overlooked the anti-tank ditch and the small stream beyond it. In the distance stretched a wide valley, across which any enemy advance from [Bulgaria](#) could be expected. The ground was hard clay as the troops soon found out. The country was very open, and because of this only essential vehicles were left in the sector. Captain [Wilson](#)² and his staff camped in a wooded area about two miles away. Most of the unit vehicles were still under brigade command and were operating from another wooded area about ten miles to the rear. In the battalion sector a start was made on the defence work soon after company positions were allotted. B Coy was stationed on high ground on the left flank with C Coy on the 'Bastion', a rounded hill in the centre, and A Coy on lower ground to the right. The 25th Battalion was on the left and the 24th on the right. Greek troops had already dug long, deep, connecting trenches after the pattern of those of the First World War. They were, in this instance, badly sited and of little use to those seeking to dodge digging new ones, though in some cases use was made of the sandbagged firing pits.

Although digging was slowed up by the hard surface, the defences were practically complete within a few days. Bren-gun pits were dug on vantage points and telephone lines laid from Battalion HQ to each company. The 'I' section mapped the area. The only passable roads being through the sectors of flanking battalions and across the front, the troops were given another roadmaking task. Concrete pipes lying out in front of the anti-tank ditch were carried back to fill in large chasms which crossed the proposed new route. Base metal was scarce but the road was open to

traffic within a week. Meanwhile several hundred Greeks, most of them civilians, continued to work on the anti-tank ditch, 20–25 feet wide and 8–10 feet deep, which ran across the front about a thousand yards from the forward platoons. Several dumps of wire were found near the ditch and the companies soon had entanglements stretching across the front, sapling stakes being used as standards. Several truckloads of this wire were sent back to D Coy at the [Platamon](#) tunnel.

This company, after debussing at [Katerine](#), had continued the journey to [Platamon](#) by rail. It was very late at night when the train reached [Platamon](#), so instead of trying to find billets the men slept in and around the small station. In the morning Capt Huggins reconnoitred a camp site at the south end of the tunnel and close to the beach. Tents were soon erected and the company was free to begin its task—the preparation of a battalion position around the tunnel and on [Castle Hill](#) above it. Impressed with the urgency of the job the troops set to and worked with a will. The ground was hard and rocky and covered with scrub, but despite inadequate tools good progress was made.

It was not all work. The village of [Platamon](#) was only about a mile from the camp, and in one or other of its six wineshops the men spent their off-duty hours. The wines were a mixture of good and bad. Fresh fish and eggs, with brown bread, could be bought at a reasonable price, and this dish was in demand at supper-time. Greek cigarettes and oranges were also procurable. Two lambs, purchased locally, proved when cooked to be nothing like their New Zealand counterpart despite the efforts of Pte G. C. Ingram, the cook. A quantity of extra rations was bought from the [Naafi](#) store at [Larissa](#) and the company enjoyed much better meals than the rest of the battalion. Captain Huggins and Lt C. D. F. Bowie organised sing-songs, and it was not uncommon for the villagers to join in and exchange song for song with their visitors.

On 6 April there was a sudden change in the situation. Germany declared war on [Greece](#) and [Yugoslavia](#). That morning in its sector north of [Sphendami](#), the battalion woke to the sound of explosions in [Salonika](#), 40 miles away. The realisation that the battle for [Greece](#) was about to begin and the appearance of enemy reconnaissance planes lent impetus to the completion of the defence work. In their sector the men of the battalion were confident of their ability to hold their own against German infantry, provided tanks were unable to get across the anti-tank ditch. For the next

two days everyone worked hard to perfect the defences. Very little news of the early fighting reached the unit but it was generally known that the enemy was using mobile forces and tanks to spearhead his attack, assisted by a large section of the [German Air Force](#). A division of parachutists was available for use if needed. Despite this knowledge all ranks were keyed up at the prospect of action. More mail had arrived and everyone was in good spirits.

Then, before breakfast on 8 April, came unexpected orders to move back again to the vicinity of [Petras Sanatorium](#). Only the carriers were to remain in the forward area. Together with a small infantry force, they were to plug the gap in the line. The news was not well received. Almost everyone, knowing little of the tactical situation, gave vent to his feelings in no uncertain terms, more particularly as the men considered their defences wellnigh impregnable. Nothing could be done about it so the troops, somewhat resentfully, packed up and prepared to leave. Colonel Page set out with an advanced party for the new area. Headquarters 6 Brigade could tell him little about either the reason for the move or the task ahead of the battalion. Later he learned that it had been decided to abandon the Aliakmon line in favour of the shorter and more easily de- fended [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line, which followed the line of the [Aliakmon River](#), [Servia Pass](#), and the [Olympus Pass](#). As a result of this decision 4 Brigade withdrew and moved to the vicinity of [Servia](#), leaving 6 Brigade temporarily on its own with only a light screen of armoured vehicles (Divisional Cavalry) between it and the enemy.

The skies clouded over during the morning and by noon it was evident that rain would soon be falling. An hour later the troops were retracing their steps towards [Katerine](#) for the second time. The rain soon began and the clay roads became very slushy. Twelve miles had been covered and it was 4.30 p.m. when lorries picked up the tired, wet, and bedraggled infantrymen and carried them through to their destination. At the time it was small compensation to know that the rain which had made the march so unpleasant had also grounded enemy aircraft. Darkness had fallen and heavy rain had set in by the time the convoy reached the Sanatorium road. Captain Wilson and his staff, who had arrived some time previously, had erected a few tents and had a hot meal waiting. As soon as the meal was over the companies dispersed to the sides of the road and the men lost no time in erecting their tents, for it was now raining more heavily.

At nine o'clock there was a stand-to. Platoon commanders rushed around making sure that their men were ready to move off in battle order at a moment's notice. Wild rumours flashed through the lines. Was this action? Everyone forgot his tiredness and wondered what might be in store. It was strongly rumoured that the battalion would relieve the Maoris in their sector forward of the [Olympus Pass](#). But time passed and nothing happened. The stand-to was relaxed. Nothing out of the ordinary happened for the rest of the night, except that the troops went to sleep in damp clothing to the continual whine of vehicles moving back over the Pass road. Outside in the rain, patrols and pickets plodded around the lines cursing the weather.

It was still raining in the morning, and there was no opportunity to dry out wet clothes for Brig Hargest had given the battalion a number of tasks. The most important was to control the constant stream of traffic moving up and down the Pass road. New Zealand vehicles were intermingled with Greek ambulances, gun limbers, and even some slow-moving steam engines. Refugees with their handcarts and small wagons were arriving in increasing numbers to complicate matters still further. Most of those not employed on this task and on picket duty were taken by transport to a position high up on the Pass, near where the Brigadier wished to site some field guns. Out came the picks and shovels and the troops began their third roadmaking task within a fortnight. Although the men worked hard on the new road, the period will be better remembered for the hectic journey back to camp each day. The road was steep and slippery with many sharp bends, and the trucks, none of which had chains, slid down inclines and skidded around corners. The troops hung on like grim death, expecting each moment to go hurtling down into the gorge far below.

Meanwhile the Germans were advancing into [Greece](#). On 9 April Salonika fell and the enemy spearheads neared the Divisional Cavalry screen. Late that night 6 Brigade was ordered to withdraw through the Pass, leaving the carriers of the three battalions behind as a delaying force. Except for the news about [Salonika](#), none of this was known at Battalion HQ. The first indication of the brigade's withdrawal was the arrival of the unit transport at the traffic control posts early on 10 April. The transport, still brigaded, continued on over the Pass and finally dispersed not far from [Dolikhe](#), where Divisional HQ was established. Later the same morning Col Page received orders to take his battalion over the Pass to a brigade concentration

area north of [Dolikhe](#).

Immediately after lunch B Echelon vehicles loaded with tents and other equipment joined the stream of westbound traffic. After a tedious journey made worse by frequent hold-ups and mishaps, the convoy reached the new camp site near Ag Demetrios. The main body set out on foot at 1.30 p.m. along a road fortunately clear of traffic, and soon afterwards turned onto a secondary road and began to climb through the Pass. No rain had fallen during the morning and the road was in good order, but the men found the 11-mile march most gruelling. Desert training had not extended to climbing mountains with full packs. It was almost dusk by the time the new camp site came into view. Rain began to fall soon afterwards and for the second time tents were pitched in the wet. Captain McKergow summed up the battalion's recent activities with these words:

He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day.

He who runs before he fights, lives to climb Olympian heights.

The first night in the new area was a miserable one. The camp was 3000 feet above sea level in desolate, scrub-covered country. Icy winds off the snow made conditions very unpleasant, especially as some of the men were without greatcoats and most of the blankets were being carried by the unit transport. An issue of Ewan's beer to all ranks did little to keep out the penetrating cold. Later that night 2 [Lt W. D. Westenra](#)³ arrived with the Carrier Platoon. They had exciting news. As part of the rearguard they had watched the approach of German armour. The anti-tank ditch had not proved a difficult obstacle, and following instructions the rearguard had withdrawn over the Pass.

The defensive line along which the New Zealanders were now in position stretched from the [Platamon](#) tunnel area on the coast inland to the [Olympus Pass](#), occupied by 5 Brigade, across to [Servia Pass](#), held by 4 Brigade. Farther west and north-west were Australian and Greek forces whose defences lay forward of the [Aliakmon River](#) on towards the Albanian border. Each sector was of necessity held by the minimum of troops. Several lines of approach were open to the Germans, who could outflank the line either by driving down the east coast and around the lower spurs of [Mount Olympus](#) or by moving between the [Aliakmon River](#) and the Pindus Range on the extreme left flank. Direct assaults could be made on the two main

passes, and parachutists could be used to disrupt supplies and communications to force a withdrawal.

Little was done on Good Friday, 11 April. Heavy rain continued for most of the day and this, together with the cold wind, made conditions very unpleasant. Greatcoats and blankets were brought from the transport park at [Domenikon](#) and everyone felt much happier, more particularly as shortly before dusk it began to snow. Next morning the countryside was enveloped in a white mantle several inches deep. A cold wind was still blowing and few moved far from the tent lines. The Carrier Platoon was again sent to Brigade HQ on an anti-paratroop role. The same day the Australian and New Zealand troops in [Greece](#) became known as [Anzac Corps](#).

As it was expected that the battalion would remain in reserve for several days, at least until the enemy attack developed, a truck was sent to [Larissa](#) on 12 April to purchase [Naafi](#) stores. Padre Strang and Capt [Thomson](#)⁴ volunteered to go. The journey lay over bad roads and was made in blinding snow and sleet, but the two officers returned with a lorry load of goods, including cigarettes, chocolate, and casks of good wine. Most of the items were paid for and the [Naafi](#) obligingly allowed credit for the rest.

Sundays were frequently to prove momentous days for 26 Battalion, and Easter Sunday 1941 was one of them. It dawned fine and sunny and all ranks took the opportunity to hang their wet clothes out to dry. Short church services were held, and everyone was settling down for another day of rest and quiet when word was received that D Coy was in [Larissa](#) waiting for transport. All available unit vehicles were unloaded and in a short time were on their way south. Relief was expressed that the company was safe for everyone knew that [Platamon](#) was now a forward area. That their fears were not unfounded was confirmed by the company's experiences. On 9 April 21 Battalion had taken over the [Platamon](#) area, and three days later Capt Huggins was ordered to board a train which was being sent down from [Katerine](#) to take the company back to the battalion. Knowing that the unit had withdrawn through the Pass and the Germans were approaching [Katerine](#), he assumed the train would take his men to [Larissa](#).

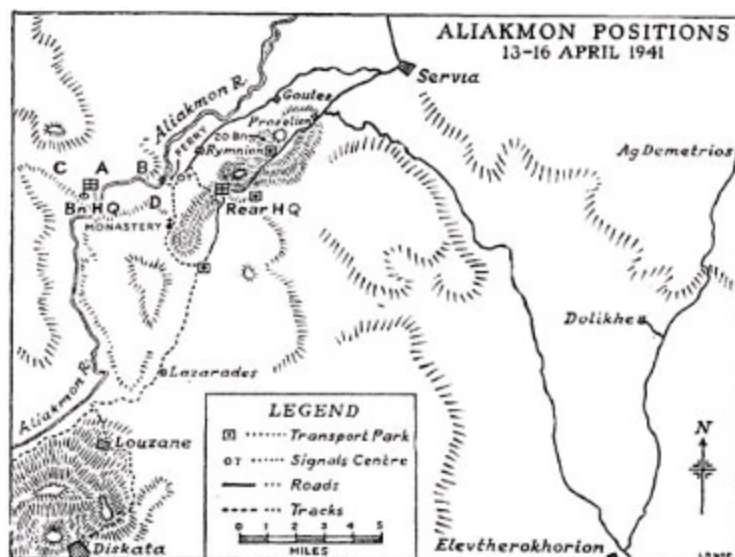
However, when the train moved off that night it headed north towards [Katerine](#).

Although somewhat alarmed there was nothing Capt Huggins could do about it. In any case he knew little of the arrangements made to get his men away. At [Katerine](#) the troops detrained and moved into an empty goods shed, glad to get out of the uncomfortable cattle trucks. It was 10 p.m. and nobody at the station knew anything about the company. The only New Zealanders in the town were Divisional Cavalry patrols who reported that the enemy was only a few miles away and could be expected to arrive at any time. A Greek general whose headquarters were a mile away confirmed this alarming news. A mistake had been made somewhere, but what was more important, the company was stranded and in danger of being captured. Fortunately the General was able to communicate with Divisional HQ, which arranged for a train to be made available to take the company back to [Larissa](#). The men, realising the seriousness of their position, were impatient to be gone, but the Greek railway officials would not be hurried and it was 2 a.m. before the train left the station. The journey was uneventful, and shortly after dawn the company was in [Larissa](#). While they waited for transport to arrive the men watched British planes from a nearby aerodrome drive off enemy raiders. The battalion vehicles reached [Larissa](#) at 4 p.m. and, as soon as the company had embussed, set out on the return journey to [Ag Demetrios](#).

Meanwhile, at [Ag Demetrios](#) events had moved swiftly. Shortly before midday [General Freyberg](#) arrived at Battalion HQ and gave orders for the battalion to move as soon as possible to [19 Australian Brigade's](#) sector west of the [Servia Pass](#). On arrival in the area the battalion would come under the command of this brigade, which was stationed forward of the [Aliakmon River](#). The General intimated that the unit's probable role would be to strengthen the Australians' right flank and shorten the gap between it and 4 NZ Brigade around [Servia](#). The RMT would carry the troops and all equipment to the new area. Colonel Page wasted no time and within an hour had set out with his company commanders to locate the Australians, leaving Maj Samson to bring on the main body.

The transport arrived and the gear and equipment dumped earlier in the day was reloaded on the trucks. This was the battalion's sixth move in 18 days, but there was surprisingly little comment from the men as they packed up ready to leave. By 2.30 p.m. they were on the lorries and the convoy headed south-west towards [Elevtherokhorion](#) and the main [Larissa- Servia](#) highway. It was quite a pleasant trip.

The sun was shining and the roads were in fair order. After the trucks turned on to the [Servia](#) road they encountered more traffic, but there was no sign



of enemy planes until the leading vehicles were on the crest of the Pass road. The convoy stopped and most of the troops debussed to watch enemy dive-bombers in action. Some admiration was expressed for their graceful performance as they dived and rolled in the blue sky—admiration which in the next few days turned to hatred. All around anti-aircraft guns were firing.

After the raid was over the journey was resumed. Instead of continuing down the road leading to [Servia](#) the convoy turned west at the crest of the Pass, stopping when about two miles beyond [Proselion](#), a village which had been a target of enemy bombers. Darkness was falling as the vehicles reached the stopping place and the men debussed. Colonel Page had not been able to find the Australians. Headquarters 4 Brigade knew they were somewhere on its left and thought they were across the river; [19 Battalion](#) HQ stationed close to [Proselion](#) could offer nothing more definite. Fourth Brigade HQ was trying to communicate with them by wireless. So while the troops were boiling the billy the Colonel went ahead with a party of officers to reconnoitre possible roles for the battalion. During his absence orders were received through 4 Brigade to occupy a temporary position overlooking [Rymnion](#), a village several miles farther west and at the foot of the hills. By this time the lorries had been unloaded and the cooks were preparing a hot meal.

Before it was ready the companies were ordered to move off. Each man was carrying, in addition to his normal equipment, extra ammunition, Bren magazines and grenades. In the darkness it was difficult to find and follow any track. After crossing a succession of scrub-covered hills, the column turned on to a track leading

down towards the river. By 3 a.m. the companies were in position and the troops had dug in. Everyone was very tired and hungry. Meanwhile, the unit transport with D Coy on board had reached the spot where the gear had been dumped, guides having redirected the company along the [Servia](#) road. Captain Huggins decided to wait for dawn before rejoining the unit as his men had had practically no sleep for over 36 hours. After an early start the company reached the [Rymnion](#) area shortly after 9 a.m., being machine-gunned from the air without loss while on the march.

* * *

Nobody in the battalion was to get much rest during 14 April or the days that followed. At dawn all positions were changed, the three companies moving out onto the slopes directly overlooking [Rymnion](#) and the river. D Coy on its arrival was directed to a reserve position. Work on the defences continued throughout the morning. Telephone cable was laid from Battalion HQ to the companies and fire plans were worked out. No. 10 Platoon was sent to occupy [Rymnion](#). It was a clear sunny morning, and from their positions the men had an excellent view of the rolling scrub-covered country which stretched north and west beyond the river to the distant mountains. Little villages dotted the valley. Those who had binoculars soon noticed enemy troops and tanks moving down from the northern passes, while at the foot of the range a level stretch of ground was being used as an advanced landing field.

Enemy aircraft in groups of twenty to thirty were flying overhead almost continually. The pilots displayed no interest in the infantry but bombed and machine-gunned road traffic and gun positions at the rear. For a while Bren gunners and riflemen alike blazed away at the enemy planes until they realised their efforts were futile. Even the fire from anti-aircraft guns in the Pass was apparently having little effect. At the transport park the gear dumped the night before had to be reloaded on unit vehicles, which were then well dispersed. No damage was suffered from the bombing. During the day Capt Wilson arrived from B Echelon with rations, having run the gauntlet of enemy air attacks as he travelled through the Pass. Meanwhile Col Page was trying to get in touch with the Australian brigade. Eventually an Artillery liaison officer was located to the rear of the battalion lines and the CO was able to speak to the Australian commander (Brig G. A. Vasey) over an 11-mile phone link. The Brigadier gave orders for the battalion to cross the river after dusk and take up a position on the right of his brigade, along a front of 3500–4000 yards.

Colonel Page returned to Battalion HQ and ordered the 'I' sergeant, Sgt Fraser,⁵ to endeavour to find a route down to the river or to [Rymnion](#) which could be used by the unit transport. Immediately after lunch the CO set out with his company commanders to look over the new sector. The party crossed the river and went to 19 Australian Brigade HQ. Here more was learned of the local position, but it was obvious that the Australians were no more conversant with the general situation than was Col Page. Brigadier Vasey painted a grim picture and was not optimistic that the [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line could be held. The position on both flanks was obscure and confusing. Fighting was going on around [Mount Olympus](#) but nothing was known of the result. On the left flank the Greek defences were very weak and might crumble at any time, allowing the Germans to sweep around and cut off the brigade's line of withdrawal. The Australians were thinly spread across their sector and their platoons were noticeably short of automatic weapons. The arrival of 26 Battalion would still leave a 4000-yard gap to the left flank of 4 Brigade. In the event of an enemy attack little artillery support could be expected, particularly during daylight when enemy bombers were overhead.

Somewhat disturbed by this news the battalion party set out to reconnoitre the new sector, which stretched from high ground back in a north-easterly direction towards the river. It was not an easy task for the country was very rugged and covered with scrub. Steep hillocks and deep ravines criss-crossed the area and no tracks or paths could be found. It was difficult for the company commanders to pinpoint their respective sectors and those of their platoons. Nevertheless, the tramping done during the afternoon enabled them to familiarise themselves with the ground leading up to their sectors, and this was of great assistance during the night move. The crossing of the river presented the greatest obstacle. A rope ferry on which one assault boat was operated by the use of pulleys was all that was available, and only three men fully equipped could cross at one time. The river at this point was about 30 feet wide, very swift flowing, and about six feet deep in the centre. Steep banks ran down from both sides. Colonel Page ascertained that sappers would be on hand after dusk to operate the ferry.

The Colonel later issued verbal orders for the night's move. At dusk companies were to move down to the ferry and cross the river immediately on arrival. C Coy,

which had farthest to go, was to lead. Every effort was to be made to get platoons into position before dawn in case enemy reconnaissance planes appeared. Unit transport was to bring down mortars, stores, cooking gear, bedrolls, and extra ammunition by the route located by the 'I' section. Only one map of the area was available; the most suitable road to [Rymnion](#) lay through [Servia](#), which at this time was being heavily attacked by enemy aircraft. Several other tracks were shown but it was not known if these could be used by vehicles.

Things did not turn out as planned. When the leading platoons reached the river after a five-mile trek down a slippery clay track and along the riverbed, they found the ferry deserted. There was nothing else to do but learn to manipulate this somewhat crazy craft. After one or two practices a few of the men became quite proficient in handling the pulley ropes and the troops began to cross the river in a slow but steady trickle. Nevertheless, the non-arrival of the sappers and the inky darkness slowed down proceedings, and the troops towards the rear had a long wait before their turn came to clamber into the boat. When it became evident that all the companies would not be able to cross before daylight, the CO ordered D Coy to remain on the southern side of the river. By dawn three companies were across. B Coy dug in on the right flank close by with A Coy farther forward on its left, C Coy was still moving towards the hilly ground on the left flank, and Tactical HQ was set up behind A Coy.

About the time the companies began their march down to the river, Maj Samson moved the unit transport along the road to Rear Battalion HQ, which had been established close to the road at the top of the clay track. Captain L. G. Smith, the Adjutant, was in charge but could give the Major little detailed information about the movements of the battalion except that the companies were crossing the river. Colonel Page himself had not returned from the afternoon reconnaissance but had stayed on the north bank. Sergeant Fraser had gone down as far as [Rymnion](#) by the [Servia](#) route and on the way back had been shelled by enemy field guns on the north bank of the river. Australians belonging to B Echelons had told him they were vacating [Servia](#) as a forerunner to a general withdrawal from the [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line. The Adjutant also reported that the area around Rear Battalion HQ had been bombed and machine-gunned several times during the day. At length it was decided to disperse the vehicles to the sides of the road and look for a safer hideout

at dawn. Early next morning a suitable place was found about two miles away and the drivers dispersed their trucks for the third time. Shortly afterwards the 'I' officer, 2 Lt Kennedy, ⁶ arrived with a message ordering the transport to bring mortars, ammunition, etc., down to the river crossing, where D Coy would carry them to the forward troops.

Since dawn enemy aircraft had been making frequent sorties over the area and Maj Samson was very anxious that they should not discover the transport park. In view of Sgt Fraser's report it seemed folly to attempt to travel through [Servia](#) to the river, and the 'I' section was ordered to make a detailed reconnaissance of other routes. Unfortunately, there was no way of communicating with Col Page except by runner, and that would take several hours. Lieutenant [Tolerton](#), ⁷ the Signals officer, had attempted to link Rear Battalion HQ and Tac HQ by phone but had run out of wire at the bottom of the clay track. He had set up his Signals Centre at this point but, like those on the hill above him, was unaware of the exact location of the troops and had received no message from them. The battalion was now divided into three almost independent groups: B Echelon near Divisional HQ at [Dolikhe](#); Rear Battalion HQ on the [Proselion](#) road, and the companies in the valley. Rear Battalion HQ had been further divided when the transport moved to its third dispersal area. Lack of direct communication between the three groups created difficulties and misunderstandings.

During the morning an Australian supply depot was found in a farmhouse not far from Capt Smith's Rear HQ. Arrangements were made to draw petrol at dusk as most of the unit's reserve stock had been used in the trip from [Larissa](#). The Supply Officer confirmed that the [Servia- Rymnion](#) road was no longer safe for traffic. He intended to supply his troops in the valley by using mules to carry rations down what was known as the Monastery track. The Monastery lay at the end of a short branch road, the turn-off being very close to the transport park, and the track led down from it. Shortly after midday a second and more urgent written message was received from Col Page: mortars and supplies were to be brought down to the river no matter how difficult or dangerous the route. On receipt of this order Capt Foley and Lt [Horrell](#) ⁸ set out to find the Monastery track and acquaint the Colonel of the latest developments. Enemy aircraft were still overhead at frequent intervals but they had not attempted to attack the battalion vehicles.

Leaving Lt Horrell to return to Rear Battalion HQ and report, Capt Foley went down the Monastery track and, after passing through D Coy and crossing the river, continued on towards Tac HQ. He overtook an almost exhausted Australian officer who was carrying an urgent order to 19 Brigade HQ to withdraw. Line communications with the brigade had broken down and the officer had already covered 16 miles at a fast pace. Captain Foley took the message from the weary Australian and delivered it to Brig Vasey, and then reported to Col Page. By this time it was late afternoon and the defences across the river were almost completed.

Throughout the day the forward companies had worked hard. As soon as they had reached their sector and been directed to their positions, the men had begun to dig in—a difficult task in such rough country. By 5 p.m. the work was completed. A thin line of defences, unprotected by armour, wire, or anti-tank devices and manned by tired, hungry men, stretched across to the river. All ranks were reconciled to spending another unpleasant night without a hot meal or blankets. Colonel Page was very concerned at the non-arrival of the mortars and the reserve supplies of ammunition. Brigadier Vasey had switched two platoons of Vickers gunners and 2/8 Australian Battalion (300 strong) across in support of the right flank, but nobody in the battalion was confident that the defences could withstand a sustained enemy attack. All day enemy planes had passed overhead unhampered and unmolested, and towards nightfall heavy gunfire could be heard in the distance.

Although expecting a frontal attack, it was felt that the real danger lay in the possibility of the brigade being encircled. Rumours that Yugoslav resistance had ended and that the Germans had broken through the Greek defences on the left flank supported this view. It was obvious from the sounds of the shelling that 4 Brigade had been engaged and that the enemy was close to the river if not already across it. Everyone expected that the next 24 hours would see an end to the waiting period.

Captain Foley's news completely changed the position. Companies were ordered to prepare to withdraw, and Col Page went to HQ [19 Australian Brigade](#). Brigadier Vasey detailed his plan of withdrawal. The Australians were already recrossing the river, and the Brigadier proposed to withdraw his men first, leaving 26 Battalion to form the rearguard covering the river crossing. He expected to have all his men

across by 11 p.m. Colonel Page was not to move his men until that time. Once across the river the battalion would be on its own until it could rejoin 6 Brigade, thought to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of [Elasson](#), about 60 miles to the south-east. No transport could be provided and the unit would have to make the best use of its own vehicles. The Brigadier confirmed that the Germans had made a serious break-through on the left flank, and there was a grave possibility that the line of withdrawal to [Elasson](#) and [Larissa](#) had been cut by enemy spearheads. Communications with the rear had broken down completely and this added to the confusion and uncertainty.

Colonel Page returned to Tac HQ and informed his company commanders of the latest developments. All gear which could not be carried was destroyed and the men settled down in the darkness to wait the order to move back. All knew that another sleepless night lay ahead of them. The wait was long and unnerving. Flares were going up all around and the noise of shelling seemed louder. At length it was eleven o'clock and the companies began moving. It was very dark, and this made the trek across the ridges and ravines much more difficult. The low scrub was particularly annoying. At the crossing a satisfactory, if precarious, footbridge had been erected by sappers with the help of D Coy, and this saved many hours' delay when time had become important.

Meanwhile Rear Battalion HQ had been expecting a message from the CO countermanding his earlier order concerning the transport. At dusk Lt Tolerton had received no word, so Maj Samson decided to send the transport along the [Servia](#) route while he followed the clay track down to the river crossing to find out what was amiss. Lieutenant [Matheson](#)⁹ was placed in charge of the convoy. 'I' personnel who knew the route were to act as guides. The trucks had not gone far before they encountered withdrawing Australian vehicles. The narrow, winding road leading down from the Pass was very congested with traffic, and near the bottom the column was halted by a road block. There was nothing else to do but turn back. Jammed nose-to-tail, with the Australian vehicles moving in the opposite direction and shells exploding close at hand, it was not an easy task to turn on the road. Fortunately only one truck was lost in the manœuvre, and that solely due to the impatience of an Australian driver who bumped a B Coy 15-cwt. over the side of the cliff. Luckily the New Zealand driver was able to jump clear. Before long the transport was back at

Rear Battalion HQ, [Matheson](#) having learned from an Australian major that a complete withdrawal to a line near [Athens](#) was in progress. This was confirmed by the volume of traffic on the [Proselion](#) road, which hampered the battalion convoy as it moved on to the transport park.

By this time Maj Samson was at the crossing, having stopped at the Signal Centre on the way. From Lt Tolerton he learned that troops were coming back across the river, although there was no word of the battalion. Realising that the transport would be needed to effect the withdrawal, the Major sent Lt Horrell, who had accompanied him, to [Rymnion](#) to turn back the unit vehicles should they succeed in getting through the Pass. The crossing was a hive of activity. Sappers were working on the footbridge and the assault boat was still in use. Colonel Page was there, and after a short discussion with him Maj Samson set out up the Monastery track with the intention of having the transport ready to ferry the troops when they reached the Monastery. It was almost dawn when he arrived at the transport park. The drivers were wakened and ordered to dump all gear apart from petrol, rations, arms and ammunition. Later some of the drivers were able to collect petrol from the nearby supply dump before the Australians spiked the tins. Sergeant [Robertson](#),¹⁰ Provost sergeant, was posted to direct the vehicles along the Monastery road.

* * *

For the troops the trek to the river was but the beginning. Ahead of the weary men lay what was to be the longest forced march of the campaign. It was also their third night without sleep and proper meals. Silently and in single file they set out along the riverbed and up the steep, winding clay track. Hour after hour the march continued. As the going became tougher anti-tank rifles, Bren tripods, and other equipment were thrown to one side. Australians, many of them unarmed, mingled with the New Zealanders, all peering into the darkness and groping forward. Aussie stretcher-bearers aroused great admiration as, six to a stretcher, they carried their patients to safety. The hourly ten-minute halts became all too short. As dawn approached almost everyone collapsed at each halt and had to be roused to start climbing again.

Finally, seven hours after they had begun the climb, the leading troops reached the Monastery. Only nine miles had been covered! It was just breaking dawn and it

seemed that the day was going to be fine. The unit vehicles, 15-cwts. for the most part, were either at the road junction or on the way there—a pitifully small number to carry over 600 men. Some of the HQ Coy vehicles, being loaded with mortars, ammunition, etc., could carry few troops. Not far away was the dumped gear—packs, bedrolls, blankets, new two-men tents, and the [Naafi](#) stores bought four days earlier. While the men rested or rummaged through the untidy heaps to recover personal possessions, the vehicles were organised in readiness to begin a shuttle service. Drivers were instructed to carry each load of men three to four miles and then return for another load. Soon afterwards, packed with troops, the trucks set out along the inland road to [Elasson](#) via the [Diskata Pass](#). Very little was known about the condition of this road. It had been used by the Australians in their withdrawal, but there was a possibility that the Germans driving down from the north-west might reach the [Diskata Pass](#) before the battalion.

Realising that the faster the battalion moved the greater its chance of escape, Col Page gave orders for those left behind to start marching. Nobody was to stop or wait for trucks to return. As each company reached the top of the track, a lucky few boarded trucks and the rest set out on foot along the road, rapidly becoming slushy. Almost miraculously, dark clouds had appeared in the sky and within a few minutes rain had begun to fall. Although the drizzle made conditions unpleasant, it also grounded the enemy aircraft which had bombed and machine-gunned the area many times the day before. The last to leave were Lt Tolerton and his signallers. By the time they had reeled in their line and set out in two trucks to catch up with the battalion, it was nearly 11 a.m. They found the troops still cheerful and still marching although spread out for miles.

The road quickly became a quagmire of squelching mud, and the easy slopes of the early part of the march had given way to steep inclines. Each group of men plodded along in the truck ruts, hopeful it would soon be their turn for a lift. Many Aussies were still on the road. Some were marching; others were sheltering out of the rain or were huddled around a small fire and a billy of tea. A shouted invitation to those on the road brought a quick response, for the troops had had no hot tea for several days. Nearly everyone was carrying a tin of bully beef, which did little to ease the pangs of hunger. The men's strenuous exertions and lack of sleep were having their effect. On the Sunday night the troops had marched to positions

overlooking [Rymnion](#); on Monday night there was the move over the river, and on Tuesday night the difficult climb up the goat track. The hours of daylight had been spent in trucks or preparing defence works. Hot meals had not been possible and rations were scarce. Now after twelve hours on the march the men were still a long way from their destination. A soup kitchen was set up in a church in one village but it closed down before many of the men reached it. One B Coy platoon found some overproof rum which, to quote one of the platoon, 'produced a glow that even the rain couldn't dampen'.

Early in the afternoon the ferry service slowed down. The road became progressively worse and the hills steeper. Several trucks became stuck in the mud and the passengers had to clamber out and lend a hand. A more serious problem was the shortage of petrol. It had been intended to fill the tanks at dusk the previous day but the move to the river prevented it. At dawn the Australians had spiked most of the petrol tins in their supply depot. Major Samson, who was marching with C Coy, had earlier sent the water cart to [Elasson](#) with a message asking for transport and petrol. At two o'clock there was no sign of any help. Consequently, drivers with their petrol gauges showing almost zero packed on as many troops as they could and set out for [Elasson](#). By 3 p.m. only a handful of vehicles was left. Some of these stalled on the steep slopes of the [Diskata Pass](#). Fortunately, one or two trucks had chains and they towed the others and some Australian lorries out of the mud.

The departure of so many vehicles meant that the troops could hope for little relief for the rest of the journey. Colonel Page had gone ahead in his car over the Pass and encountered the divisional rearguard—a squadron of the Divisional Cavalry. The battalion was safe, but this was little comfort to the line of weary men strung out for miles back down the road. By 5 p.m. most of them had reached the Divisional Cavalry screen. There was no thought of stopping and still no sign of help. Darkness fell and it was no longer possible to follow the truck ruts. Each man mechanically walked behind the one in front of him and equally as mechanically carried his rifle or automatic weapon on an aching shoulder. Tired eyes peered into the darkness and ears strained for the sound of oncoming trucks. Everyone was weary, desperately weary, but grimly determined to complete the march. The long climb up the Pass and beyond it was the hardest stretch of all. Hours passed, and it was 10 p.m.

before word was received that transport was definitely on the way. By this time most of the men were at the Divisional Cavalry headquarters near Diskata and the rest close to a small village about four miles away. The Cavalry cooks provided hot soup and earned the whole-hearted gratitude of the wet, bedraggled infantrymen.

About midnight the expected transport arrived and the troops embussed to fall asleep almost immediately. A long, uncomfortable journey followed. The road was poor, and towards the end of the journey the convoy was cut by other columns of vehicles, all moving south. The first vehicles reached their destination, the village of [Domenikon](#), about 4 a.m. and the last over four hours later. The weary passengers, half asleep, tumbled out of the trucks into the nearest barn or building and slept, regardless of their wet clothes and empty stomachs. The march was over; in the morning every man was accounted for except one driver and his truck. This truck, together with several others, had been commandeered by Australians during the withdrawal. The only other casualty was a truck which had ended up in a ditch several miles west of [Ellasson](#). Each man retained his arms and all equipment save that dumped by the transport.

B Echelon had also arrived at the village, having moved down from the [Dolikhe](#) area during the afternoon. Earlier in the day 2 Lt [Bethell](#),¹¹ the Transport Officer, had gone to Brigade HQ area to find the headquarters gone. Nobody seemed to know where it was, so Bethell went to Divisional HQ at [Dolikhe](#) to find out the brigade's new location. Meanwhile, Capt Wilson had set out to take rations through to the battalion. He reached the original debussing point on the [Proselion](#) road only to find that the battalion had gone. On his way back he visited 20 Battalion HQ. The CO of this battalion, [Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger](#),¹² was very disturbed about the sudden withdrawal of the Australian brigade and 26 Battalion. He had received no warning of it and was now left with one flank unprotected. By this time Bethell had learned that a general withdrawal was in progress and that HQ 6 Brigade was now based on [Tyrnavos](#), a town several miles south of [Ellasson](#) on the main road to [Larissa](#). As he passed through [Ellasson](#) he saw several of the battalion 15-cwts., packed with troops, on the roadside. He directed them to Brigade HQ, where officers in the party told the story of the battalion's withdrawal. The assembly of sufficient transport to bring out the unit was a difficult task and was handled by Brigade HQ. No RMT was available, and 24 and 25 Battalions were both using their own vehicles.

When the latter vehicles became free a convoy was organised and sent to Diskata. Meanwhile, Capt Wilson had returned and B Echelon had moved to [Domenikon](#), a village on a side road linking [Tyrnavos](#) and [Elasson](#), which was chosen as an assembly point for the battalion.

Misty rain continued during 17 April but there were few of the battalion interested in the weather, at least until after midday. The men awoke to find that several bags of mail and parcels had arrived. Wet clothes and sore feet were forgotten as the news from home was read and the contents of the parcels eaten. Those who only a short time before had been disgruntled and depressed now gathered around to laugh and joke. But if the home news was reassuring, that received from Brigade HQ was the reverse. The Olympus- [Aliakmon River](#) line had been abandoned and the [Anzac Corps](#) was withdrawing to the region of [Thermopylae](#), a neck in the peninsula in which lay [Athens](#). On the immediate front 24 and 25 Battalions, with artillery and anti-tank support, were covering the two roads leading south from [Elasson](#). Apart from demolitions, rearguard parties and a Divisional Cavalry screen, these two units formed the only barrier to an enemy advance on [Larissa](#). There was a possibility that enemy spearheads might drive around either flank and encircle the New Zealanders. Sixth Brigade, as the Division's rearguard, was to withdraw after dusk on the 18th.

After its recent unfortunate experiences 26 Battalion was in no state to take an active part in the brigade defence scheme. During the 17th and 18th efforts were made to remedy this.

An attempt was made to recover the gear dumped on the morning of the 16th, but the presence of enemy troops on the Diskata road forced the truck to turn back. Captain Wilson located a British supply dump not far from [Domenikon](#) and arranged to draw supplies from it. When he returned with some vehicles he found the depot unguarded and Greeks busy helping themselves. In a short time the trucks were loaded with blankets, boots, and all manner of wearing apparel. Two cookers were salvaged and used to replace others lost earlier. A large supply of tinned fruit and over a thousand bottles of beer were obtained from an Australian canteen near [Larissa](#). Ammunition was drawn from another dump. Meanwhile the troops were resting and by the morning of the 18th were feeling much refreshed and in better shape to take a more active role.

Shortly after breakfast the battalion moved out of the village to take up a position astride the [Domenikon- Elasson](#) road behind [24 Battalion](#). A shortage of picks and shovels slowed up the defence work but by midday the companies had dug in. Each man knew that the day would be a crucial one. The rain had ceased and the skies were clear. Enemy planes seemed to be everywhere. [Elasson](#) was heavily bombed, and so were some towns and villages farther south. Disturbing reports were received from Brigade HQ: enemy armoured spearheads were converging on the area from three directions. The Divisional Cavalry screen had withdrawn from the [Diskata Pass](#) and was stationed a short distance forward of [24](#) and [25 Battalions](#). The enemy was advancing down this road and also along the [Servia](#) road. The third threat was developing from the north-east, where enemy troops were advancing around the southern spurs of [Mount Olympus](#). The Carrier Platoon, which had rejoined the unit, was ordered to patrol the open ground east of Brigade HQ.

It was an anxious period. Nobody knew just where the enemy was or from what direction an attack might develop. Field guns dug in forward of the battalion were already engaging enemy targets, and everyone hoped that their fire might delay the assault long enough to enable the brigade to disengage and withdraw at dusk. Captain Wilson and his staff had already left and the rest of the battalion was ready to follow at a moment's notice. Slowly the time passed and the noise of the shelling grew louder. The order to withdraw came at 3 p.m. and with it a change of plan. Originally the battalion was to move on RMT by road direct to the village of [Molos](#), 120 miles away, while the rest of the brigade followed another route which took them through [Volos](#). The rifle companies were now to travel south from [Larissa](#) by rail. Lorries from the RMT company would carry the men to the railway siding.

Shortly before four o'clock the transport arrived, and as the troops were embussing [Col Kippenberger](#) arrived with the remnants of the 4 Brigade rearguard. This party had had little sleep for many nights, had marched across country practically the whole way from [Servia](#), and were completely done in. A stiff whisky and the Colonel settled down in the CO's car to sleep. The other members of the party climbed into one of the trucks and followed suit.

The trucks moved off shortly afterwards, travelling through [Tyrnavos](#) and along the main road to [Larissa](#). A steady pace was maintained and by five o'clock the

troops had debussed at the siding. There had been a temporary hold-up on the outskirts of the town when Stuka dive-bombers brought the column to a halt and bombed a bridge about 100 yards ahead of the leading vehicle. The bridge was not damaged, and by the time the planes turned to machine-gun the stationary vehicles and the roadside the troops were well scattered. Some of them were sheltering in a nearby cemetery. One soldier (Pte G. T. Webster) ¹³ was killed instantly by a bomb splinter. Larissa was a shambles. Burnt-out and burning trucks and fallen masonry littered the streets. Here and there lay a body roughly covered by a tarpaulin. Most of the buildings were in ruins and some were on fire. No civilians were in sight. At the crossroads in the town the provost on duty misdirected part of the convoy down the Volos road. These vehicles went some distance before finding out what had happened, but after some delay rejoined the rest of the convoy at the siding.

It was soon apparent that the train journey was going to be no ordinary one. The station had been badly damaged. All types of carriages and wagons, including some with Red Cross markings, had been smashed. Several lines were cut by bomb craters. This was the first time the troops had seen the havoc which could be wrought by air power and consequently all were keen to get away before the bombers reappeared. Greek officials had abandoned the line on the 16th and the assembly of the train had been entrusted to sappers from 19 NZ Army Troops Company. Two of them, Les Smith ¹⁴ and 'Hoot' Gibson, ¹⁵ had volunteered to drive the train south, and they were busy getting everything ready. Gradually a motley collection of carriages and wagons was assembled. The engine had obviously seen better days. The overhead system had broken down and water for the engine had to be carried in petrol cans.

Three hours passed before the sappers were ready to move off. In the interim the troops had found a stock of tinned fruit and beer. In stores across the road there was fresh bread, a commodity not seen for some time. While these discoveries were being made, an electrifying rumour that the Germans had entered the outskirts of the town spread through the station yards. Although false, it did have the effect of speeding up the move. Soon after eight o'clock the last train from Larissa headed south towards Lamia. The destination was Kephissokhori, over a hundred miles away. Exactly where it was nobody knew. Major Samson was put in charge of the rail party, Col Page electing to travel with the unit transport which had been waiting at

the siding. Both parties had eventful journeys before they reached [Molos](#) and Capt Wilson's hideout.

The transport column travelled right through the night to reach [Molos](#) about two o'clock the following afternoon, 19 April. Darkness had overtaken the convoy as it headed towards [Pharsala](#). The road was fairly free of traffic, and it was decided to travel with lights on as the enemy was doing no night flying. However, the trucks had not gone more than 20 miles before the head of the column caught up with a slow-moving convoy travelling without lights. When spoken to about using lights the [RASC](#) major in charge quoted regulations and angrily threatened to shoot out those of the battalion vehicles. There was no way of passing the British trucks and the slower rate of progress had to be accepted.

Some difficulty was experienced in [Pharsala](#) in finding the south road, and through this delay the battalion column was able to give the British convoy the slip. Excellent progress was maintained until the trucks reached the foot of the Domokos Pass, north of [Lamia](#). Bomb craters on the road ahead were holding up about eight miles of closely packed traffic. Everyone was impatient to be gone before daylight, but at dawn there was no sign of movement. Enemy planes made their expected appearance and, although none of the unit vehicles was damaged, several trucks at the head of the column were set on fire and destroyed. Just as the enemy planes turned to leave, three Hurricanes appeared. Before an excited and enthusiastic audience they shot down two Stukas in as many minutes. All along the roadside Bren guns were firing and there was great jubilation when a third Stuka crashed in flames.

About 10 a.m. the columns began to move but at only a crawling pace. Three hours later as the battalion vehicles neared the top of the Pass, five more fighters appeared. The trucks stopped, and everyone dashed into the nearby fields only to find that the aircraft were friendly. An enemy reconnaissance plane was shot down. The troops re-embussed, much cheered by the morning's activities. At [Molos](#) the CO was directed to Capt Wilson's camp, several miles east of the town.

The advanced party, which had arrived about midnight, had also been subjected to air attacks and had suffered casualties. After leaving [Domenikon](#), the twelve vehicles which formed the convoy continued through [Larissa](#) without stopping, having passed the now deserted Australian canteen with some reluctance. No sooner

had they cleared the town than it was heavily bombed. The road traffic did not escape unscathed, and shortly afterwards the battalion suffered its first casualties, Pte J. Young¹⁶ being killed and Pte H. D. Tod¹⁷ mortally wounded. Enemy pilots were giving the troops little opportunity to dive to shelter and were machine-gunning the roads, ditches and fields, as well as the stationary vehicles.

By the middle of the afternoon the road was jammed with vehicles, nose-to-tail in two lines as far as the eye could see. It was a splendid target which the enemy did not neglect. Each truck hit or damaged caused delay; many were pushed into the deep ditches which ran parallel to the road. As darkness fell the twelve drivers heaved a sigh of relief. The rest of the journey was uneventful, and soon after midnight the party reached Molos. At the crossroads was the familiar figure of Capt Barrington,¹⁸ Staff Captain 6 Brigade, and he directed Capt Wilson to the new area. After parking the lorries close up against a cliff face out of sight of enemy planes, everyone settled down to sleep amongst the olive groves.

* * *

Colonel Page on his arrival was more concerned about the rail party than with lost sleep. Divisional HQ advised that transport to carry the rifle companies from Kephissokhori to Molos, a distance of over 40 miles, could not be made available for another twenty-four hours. As the companies in all likelihood had reached their destination, Lt Tolerton was sent to advise Maj Samson of the delay. The troops were to set out on foot along the road to Molos so that the transport on its arrival could complete the transfer during the hours of darkness. However, the rail party was still many miles from Kephissokhori. At the outset the orders given Maj Samson and the sapper train crew had been brief and uninformative, as could be expected from such an impromptu arrangement. The two sappers had not been over the line before nor did they know if it was still open. The engine was a different type from any they had driven before, and only sufficient fuel and water could be taken on to last 60 miles. The engine had no braking system and the only means of stopping the train was by flashing a torch signal to personnel operating the brake vans near the end of the train. It is probable that had the sappers been aware of what lay ahead they would never have attempted the journey. As it was each new danger was met and countered as it came along, and by dint of common sense and skill the journey was brought to a successful conclusion. Most of the time the troops cramped in

uncomfortable wagons were unaware of the dangers so narrowly averted.

Initially the four companies packed into 14 carriages which were as uncomfortable as they were crowded. For a start all went well. At the little station of Doxara the train shuddered to a stop beside a derelict engine and took on water and fuel. It was nine o'clock, and from this time onwards the dangers of the journey increased. The pitch-black darkness made it impossible to see the track ahead, and on numerous occasions the engine crashed into rolling stock abandoned on the line. These were either cleared from the line or shunted off at the nearest



Recruits en route to the Burnham train, May 1940

Recruits en route to the [Burnham train](#), May 1940

Farewell march through Christchurch, 17 August 1940



Farewell march through [Christchurch](#), 17 August 1940



Company lines, Maadi Camp, September 1940

Company lines, Maadi Camp, September 1940



26 Battalion on one of its frequent route marches at Helwan —
Lt-Col J. R. Page and Brigadier H. E. Barrowclough are leading

26 Battalion on one of its frequent route marches at Helwan — Lt-Col J. R. Page and Brigadier H. E. Barrowclough are leading

siding. As a precaution against sabotage, it was eventually decided to examine each bridge and tunnel—and there were many—before the train crossed or travelled through it. This slowed up progress considerably, and at each stop Greek soldiers boarded the train. There was no room in the wagons so they climbed on the roofs, lay on the axles under the train, or clung anywhere they could gain a foothold. To Dunedinites it was not unlike the five o'clock crush on the Rattray Street cable car.

At the Demerli Junction the train crashed into a stationary engine and five carriages. Although there was plenty of noise, surprisingly little damage was done. Within half an hour the obstruction had been pushed onto a siding and the [Larissa](#)

train was beginning the long climb over the Domokos Pass. The gradient was steep and the speed of the engine gradually dropped until, half-way up a particularly steep pinch, it shuddered to a stop. All brakes were quickly applied. It was obvious that the engine would never reach the crest of the Pass pulling such a load, so the New Zealanders were crammed into the first nine wagons and the Greeks induced to move into the rear five, two of which were in one of the many tunnels. The sappers built up steam and the rear five wagons were quietly uncoupled. The ruse succeeded and the train slowly moved up the gradient, leaving the unauthorised Greek passengers behind. Unfortunately, two of the brake vans had had to be left behind to hold the abandoned wagons and the train was now without sufficient brakes.

This was quickly evident as the train began to travel down the reverse slope of the Pass. Within a few minutes the engine and wagons were swaying perilously as they swept through tunnels and across viaducts, gathering speed all the time. At the risk of blowing the cylinder heads and wrecking the train, steam was slowly reversed through the engine. To the intense relief of those in the cab this dangerous measure succeeded. Shortly after daylight the train came out of a tunnel to run into a set of driving wheels which saboteurs had placed lengthwise on the track. The train swayed dangerously but, by using steam judiciously, Gibson was able to stop the engine before it left the track. The obstruction was cleared and the journey continued at a fast pace, but without further incident, to [Lamia](#).

The train stopped at the marshalling yards and Maj Samson went on to the station to find out what could be done about a new engine and brake vans. Greek officials still on duty were adamant that no train could move south without a Greek crew who understood the signals system. A British RTO who was present promised to help. An hour passed and nothing happened. Meanwhile the troops had detrained. In the station a train was being assembled to carry a battalion of [Cypriots](#) and some Australians, and the British officer in charge agreed to the [Larissa](#) wagons being attached to it. The sappers shunted the wagons on and the troops entrained again, but the train had moved only a few yards before the air-raid siren sounded. The New Zealanders needed no urging. Those who could were racing for the fields. The bombs fell in and around the station, doing considerable damage. No New Zealanders were hit, but several of the Australians who remained in their carriages were killed. Three wagons were damaged beyond repair and, worse still, the railway

line was cut behind and in front of the new engine.

The sappers had no alternative but to try to make up a new train on another line from the undamaged rolling stock in the station. It was obviously going to be a long job, so the troops were sent a mile down the line away from the danger of further air attacks. Slowly the two sappers and Lt Horrell, who had been called in to help, cleared another section of the line and a second train was assembled. A new engine was the problem. The sappers felt it was courting trouble to continue with the [Larissa](#) engine. Every engine in the yard was examined but each had some mechanical fault. The language difficulty was a great handicap, and the stationmaster, very agitated about the New Zealanders' high-handed action, made himself a general nuisance. At length, when it had been reluctantly decided to use the [Larissa](#) engine, another arrived with an Australian at the controls. It was quickly coupled on to the head of the train and the [Cypriots](#) and Australians climbed on board. This was a signal for hundreds of Greek soldiers to rush the wagons but they were kept back by deftly wielded rifle butts. A Greek crew, followed by the gesticulating stationmaster, climbed into the cab of the engine and stood over the throttle. Failing to see any reason for further delay, Lt Horrell drew his revolver. The stationmaster was unceremoniously dumped out of the cab and the Greek crew persuaded to open the throttle.

Once started the Greeks were unwilling to stop, and further 'moral persuasion' was required before the train pulled up alongside the fields of corn and poppies where the troops had been resting. There was only one more incident of note before the train reached [Kephissokhori](#). Shortly after picking up the troops, an oncoming train was sighted on the line. A collision seemed imminent but was avoided by the other train backing onto a siding. (This was probably why the stationmaster was making so much fuss.) At 9.30 p.m. the train reached Kephissokhori. Stiff and weary, the troops detrained. The 130-mile journey had taken over a day and everyone was glad it was finished.

Lieutenant Tolerton was at the station when the train arrived and he passed his message to Maj Samson. The rest of the night was spent out in the open about two miles from the village. It was a cold, unpleasant night and few of the men had other than groundsheets to keep them warm. Some who had had visions of more comfortable billets in the village protested, but their murmurs were silenced next

morning when enemy planes heavily bombed the station and the village. Terrified civilians fled into the open countryside. The British RTO stationed in the locality was very helpful. Not only did he provide rations, but he was also largely responsible for the arrival of [RASC](#) transport from a nearby camp. These vehicles, ten in all, reached the camp site about 9 a.m. and C and D Coys embussed and set out for [Molos](#), arriving there about eight hours later, after frequent stoppages. Enemy aircraft several times attacked traffic on the road and there were further delays while wrecked and damaged vehicles were cleared away. Stationary and jammed close together, the columns of traffic were excellent targets, and considering the intensity of the air assault the two companies escaped lightly. Two men were wounded and one truck was damaged.

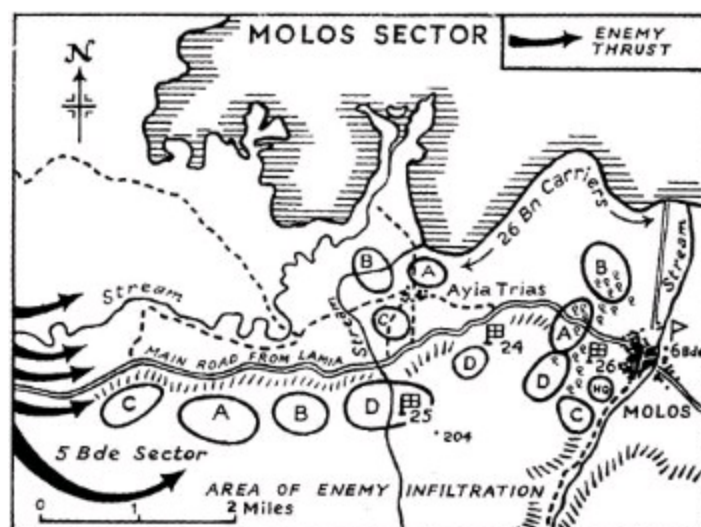
Enemy aircraft hovered around [Kephissokhori](#) for most of the day and A and B Coys kept under cover. During the morning Capt Wilson arrived from [Molos](#) with hot stew, which unfortunately had been so long in the containers that few could eat it. At dusk the two companies set out on foot along the road to [Molos](#). A brisk pace was set, and three hours passed before oncoming transport met them. The troops embussed and several hours later reached Battalion HQ. The rest of the night was spent sleeping in olive groves nearby.

A lot had happened during the two days the road party had been in the area. Enemy bombers had been over and three men had been killed. As rations were short, Capt Wilson set out with several trucks on a foraging expedition to a large supply dump at [Lamia](#). The risks of such a journey in daylight were counter-balanced by the good supply of rations, chiefly tinned food, brought back. Shortly after C and D Coys arrived at [Molos](#), Col Page received orders from Divisional HQ to move his battalion to [Cape Knimis](#) and patrol the beaches. It was thought that the enemy might attempt sea landings in order to outflank the [Thermopylae](#) defences. By 8.30 p.m. the two rifle companies were in position and Battalion HQ had been set up near the village of [Longos](#). Before dawn next morning the remainder of 6 Brigade arrived and with it the Carrier Platoon. For the first time for several days the battalion was reassembled, and nobody was more relieved than was the Colonel.

On 21 April 6 Brigade took over the coastal sector of the [Thermopylae](#) line. The day was fine and enemy air attacks began soon after dawn. No fires could be lit and

consequently no hot meals or tea could be prepared. The troops were ordered to keep under cover as much as possible, and no casualties were suffered. After breakfast a reconnaissance was made of the [Cape Knimis](#) area with a view to moving A and B Coys into position after dusk. Later in the day the battalion was ordered to take up a reserve position in the 6 Brigade sector west of [Molos](#). At this stage the [Anzac Corps](#) had withdrawn from Northern [Greece](#) to man a defensive line across the isthmus, 6 Australian Division on the left, covering the Brailos Pass, and the New Zealanders on the right, extending inland from the coast opposite [Molos](#). Fifth Brigade was deployed in hilly country with 6 Brigade on its right. Fourth Brigade was in reserve. The infantry had in support the divisional field and anti-tank artillery, plus several batteries of British medium field and anti-tank guns.

A hasty reconnaissance of the new sector and a visit to Brigade HQ revealed that the battalion's role would be twofold: to give left rear protection to [25 Battalion](#), deployed in undulating country south of the main [Lamia- Molos](#) road, and to provide coastwatching patrols. Unit transport carried the companies forward. C and D Coys embussed just before dusk and were in position before 8.30 p.m. The rest of the battalion was considerably delayed by traffic congestion and it was 3 a.m. before it reached the sector. During this move there was a



POSITIONS 21-24 APRIL 1941

Positions 21-24 April 1941

strong rumour that a large force of British troops, plus several squadrons of fighters and bombers, had landed in [Greece](#) and that the Germans were in full retreat. Although the news raised flagging spirits and made the move forward to

[Molos](#) more understandable, it was far from the truth. The Corps Commander was preparing to evacuate [Greece](#) and the Germans were closely following the withdrawal.

Unaware of this the troops spent the following day (22 April) digging in and preparing the defences. B Coy with two sections of carriers had taken over the coastwatching. A Coy was inland on its left with C Coy in reserve. D Coy was on the left of the main road behind [25 Battalion](#). Telephone cable was run out from Battalion HQ to each of the companies and a platoon of machine-gunners (No. [3 Coy, 27 MG Battalion](#)) was deployed in close support. Enemy aircraft were very active and restricted movement to some extent, but did not prevent most of the work being completed by nightfall. The presence of a number of field guns nearby was viewed with some apprehension, but the enemy aircraft did not spot them and bombed areas to the rear. Just before dusk eight fighters strafed the battalion's lines but nobody was hit. Brigadier Barrowclough was now aware that the Anzac Corps was evacuating [Greece](#) and that 6 Brigade would form the rearguard at [Molos](#). Fourth Brigade had already moved back to [Kriekouki](#) to take up a defensive position covering the plains north of [Athens](#), and 5 Brigade was to withdraw behind this screen after dusk and embark from the beaches near the capital. Sixth Brigade, with artillery and other supporting arms under command, was to remain in position a further 48 hours. On the left [6 Australian Division](#) would also withdraw.

Little of this was known to the troops. After dusk they watched the lights of oncoming vehicles moving over the Domokos Pass towards [Lamia](#). The enemy vehicles continued to move forward until engaged by field artillery. Next morning, Wednesday the 23rd, the rank and file learned with some consternation that 5 Brigade had withdrawn during the night leaving only a small rearguard force, the [Hart Detachment](#). Later in the morning 6 Brigade Operation Order No. 5 was received at Battalion HQ. It detailed the plan for the withdrawal of the Division and 6 Brigade's part in it. It was expected that the enemy would be in a position to attack by the afternoon of the 24th, but it was hoped the brigade, with the full support of the Divisional Artillery, could hold out until dusk. The 26th Battalion would remain in position until the forward battalions withdrew and would provide the rearguard party. The latter was to consist of one rifle company, the Carrier Platoon, one troop of anti-tank guns and one of 25- pounders. All surplus ammunition, field

guns, mortars, etc., were to be destroyed.

During the day the enemy intensified his air attacks and it became dangerous to move about in the open. Several times the battalion sector was bombed and strafed but without damage. The 25-pounders were now firing and this indicated the presence of enemy ground troops. At dusk the shelling ceased and the night passed uneventfully. The Hart Detachment was withdrawn to Brigade HQ, leaving the left flank of [25 Battalion](#) unprotected. Early on the 24th the enemy stepped up his air assault and movement of even small parties became risky. Fighters and bombers were overhead practically all the time, but the troops were more concerned about the possibility of a tank attack. Everyone knew that the next few hours might see the brigade heavily engaged. Field and anti-tank guns were firing at a much increased rate and it was evident something was afoot. From Battalion HQ came a message to prepare to meet a tank-supported infantry attack. As the morning wore on the tempo of the artillery fire increased and the air attacks became more vicious. The rattle of machine-gun fire left no doubt that the enemy was not far away.

As had been expected the enemy attempted a frontal attack. Tanks and motor cyclists had approached along the main road but were forced to retire after suffering heavy casualties from artillery and machine-gun fire. Shortly afterwards [25 Battalion](#) reported that enemy infantry were infiltrating into the hills north-west of its sector. This exposed left flank was causing some concern, for as soon as the enemy became aware it was undefended it would only be a matter of time before his forces circled around behind 6 Brigade and cut the line of withdrawal. The most likely approach route to accomplish this was by a narrow valley stretching down from the hills to [Molos](#). The 26th Battalion was ordered to cover the valley entrance, and Col Page moved C and HQ Coys around to the left rear of D Coy. The carriers of 25 and 26 Battalions were sent up onto a nearby hill feature, which not only gave excellent observation over the brigade sector but also of the narrow valley. Although there was some enemy shelling both these tasks were carried out without loss.

In the meantime the left of [25 Battalion](#) was being heavily attacked. For a while it seemed that the Germans would achieve a break-through, but by nightfall the battalion had recovered most of the lost ground. The enemy disengaged at dusk—much to the relief of the defenders. In 26 Battalion's sector the men had waited about expecting to see tanks come lumbering towards them at any minute. Tension

had been high as the noise of battle grew louder. Little news of what was happening had been received at Battalion HQ and the troops could only surmise. Although the enemy had disengaged, a lot remained to be done before the battalion was safe. The forward battalions moved back and the supporting arms began to wreck their guns. Before long the battalion was on its own. Everyone was packed and anxiously awaiting the arrival of transport.

About 9 p.m. troop-carrying vehicles arrived at the transport park near [Molos](#) and the withdrawal began. The men embussed quickly, keen to leave before the enemy realised that only a few hundred infantrymen stood in his way. Silence reigned except for the purring of motors as drivers waited for the order to move. C Coy was the last to embus, and shortly after eleven o'clock the convoy moved out, leaving B Coy behind, with Col Page, as the rearguard company. The main convoy soon caught up with the long stream of southbound traffic bent on reaching safety before dawn and the appearance of enemy aircraft. After the trucks passed another rearguard party at [Cape Knimis](#), side lights were permitted and the speed increased. *Atalante* was left behind; later headlights were turned on. By daybreak on the 25th the convoy had passed through 4 Brigade's positions, and the trucks were turning into a densely wooded valley south of [Thebes](#) where the rest of 6 Brigade was sheltering.

A little later Col Page and the rearguard party arrived. After the main body left this party had had an anxious wait in the darkness until word was received that all convoys had passed the control point near [Cape Knimis](#). Towards the end of its wait each minute had seemed like an hour. Flares were going up all around, some only a few hundred yards away, and it was clear the enemy thought a withdrawal was in progress. The silence was eerie. Now and again an owl would hoot and this uncanny sound only heightened the tension. Just before 1 a.m. Col Page gave the signal for the last trucks to move off. The small convoy sped along a road deserted except for burnt-out and abandoned vehicles, until it finally linked up with the rest of the unit.

The brigade remained under cover for the rest of the day. As enemy planes were frequently overhead, no hot meals could be cooked. Fortunately the RMT lorries were carrying a good stock of tinned rations which the drivers freely distributed. Everyone was tired and slept most of the day in readiness for another

sleepless night ahead. Many of the men were suffering from some form of dysentery caused mainly by the ill-balanced diet of the past week. It was Anzac Day, and all ranks were hoping it would see their departure from [Greece](#). Their hopes were soon dashed. Soon after his arrival from [Molos](#), Col Page attended a conference at Brigade HQ and learned that 6 Brigade would cover the withdrawal of 5 Brigade from the [Marathon](#) beaches near [Athens](#).

The CO accompanied Brig Barrowclough and the other battalion commanders on a reconnaissance of a suitable position for this role. On the way south the party encountered [General Freyberg](#), who advised that the plans had been changed. Sixth Brigade was to move south at dusk, cross the [Corinth Canal](#), and halt in a suitable lying-up area a few miles south of it. The GOC indicated that the brigade would now embark from a beach somewhere in Southern [Greece](#). Brigadier Barrowclough sent the battalion commanders ahead to locate a suitable lying-up area while he returned to the brigade to organise the 80-mile night move.

This change of plan meant that the brigade would require further rations. Captain Wilson was detailed to take two trucks and draw some from the huge supply dump at the [Athens](#) racecourse. After he left another order was received. Sixth Brigade was to endeavour to reach [Tripolis](#) during the night. This town lay about 80 miles south of [Corinth](#), and the brigade was to take up a position covering the roads leading into it. No reason was given for the change or any information as to the whereabouts of the enemy. In view of the length of the journey a start was made immediately after dusk. Headlights were used most of the way, but this did not prevent frequent hold-ups caused by traffic congestion and breakdowns. One unpleasant spot which few of the battalion will forget was passed fairly early in the night. About 80 Argentina mules lay dead on the side of the road. Their military value had ended many days before when enemy planes had machine-gunned them. The stench was terrific and lingered in the nostrils for many miles. [Corinth](#) had received a heavy pounding from the air during the afternoon and was ablaze as the columns turned south over the canal bridge. A few miles beyond the city Col Page was picked up, and the convoy carried on to stop before daylight in the hills near the little village of [Miloi](#). [Tripolis](#) was about 30 miles away.

Captain Wilson, sent to [Athens](#) racecourse the previous day, caught up with the battalion as the trucks turned off the road. The party had had an eventful time. The

daylight journey through to [Athens](#) had been exciting, but the enemy aircraft failed to cause damage to either men or vehicles. At the supply depot Greek police were vainly trying to restrain civilians from looting the stores. Rifles and revolvers were being freely used; bullets were flying in all directions but nobody seemed to be getting hurt. The spectacle would have been rather amusing had the men not had to load up and get away as soon as possible. It was obvious the police were not going to be able to hold the people back much longer. By 9 p.m. a good assortment of rations, including chocolate and some rum, had been collected and the party headed towards the crossroads to wait for the battalion to pass on its way to [Corinth](#). Unfortunately civilians misdirected the party, which ended up on a blind road miles from the rendezvous. When the vehicles eventually reached the crossroads the battalion was a long way ahead, and the two drivers increased speed to catch up. A little later they encountered masses of Greek troops and had to slow down. Once across the [Corinth Canal](#) speed was increased again and the next 50 miles were done in quick time.

* * *

[Tripolis](#) was a large town set in the centre of a wide plain where roads from the north, south, east, and west converged. Before Brig Barrowclough could deploy his troops to cover these roads, an alarming message was received that enemy parachute troops had been dropped a few miles south of the [Corinth Canal](#). Fourth Brigade was to cross the canal after dusk, and if the enemy gained control of the bridge before then there was a grave danger that the brigade would be cut off. Colonel Page was ordered to send two companies back to [Corinth](#) to keep the bridge open another twenty-four hours. By acting swiftly the companies might be able to achieve their purpose before the enemy was properly established. The message was received at 10.30 a.m., and within half an hour the first company was on its way, the second following soon afterwards. Colonel Page waited only long enough to make arrangements for the rest of the battalion to follow before he too left.

It was a gloriously fine day and enemy pilots soon spotted the trucks. Company commanders had been ordered to disregard normal air precautions and to stop only if enemy aircraft made direct attacks. Spotters standing on the running-boards of trucks found it very difficult to sight the aircraft in the bright sunlight, and the troops

were forced to dive hurriedly for shelter on a number of occasions. At length Capt Milliken,¹⁹ A Coy commander, decided too much time was being wasted, and he ordered the drivers not to stop unless absolutely forced to do so. D Coy, in the meantime, was held up by punctures and minor repairs, the results of machine-gunning. A little later, when the company was on the move again and passing through a small village, one truck was hit and set on fire. Persistent enemy attacks had also forced A Coy to stop about a mile farther on. The leading truck had crossed a small bridge and had been about to climb a narrow defile when four Stukas attacked. The troops dashed to shelter—some under a road culvert and others along the creek bed. Corinth was still five miles away. Suddenly and unexpectedly German helmets were seen bobbing up and down in the defile.

The stentorian voice of Capt Milliken warned the men of the new danger. The enemy came into view. A volley of shots and it was all over. A small enemy scouting party was rounded up. Ten Allied soldiers were freed and they confirmed the presence of a large number of parachutists in the neighbourhood. Colonel Page arrived and took command. Enemy planes again returned to the attack, and this time they killed a transport NCO (Cpl J. F. Don).²⁰ Later, as the platoons extended along the bed of the gully and began to climb the ridge, suspicious movement was seen on their left. Lieutenant Westenra, who had come up in the only serviceable carrier, was sent across to investigate. He found a crowd of Greek civilians who, terrified by the outburst of firing, were seeking to escape into the hills but were frightened of drawing fire on themselves. In the meantime D Coy had arrived and was deploying on the right of the road. A truck bearing Maori Battalion markings came through the defile. It was driven by a German; he was promptly killed and the large Nazi flag on the bonnet souvenired.

Under the direction of the CO the two companies moved forward to the crest of the ridge and engaged the parachutists with Brens and rifles. Enemy aircraft returned again and again to the attack as if determined to prevent the troops from crossing the ridge. As the hours passed the situation became more serious. There appeared to be no possibility of reaching Corinth, and the companies held such a short line that the enemy could easily outflank them, particularly after dusk. News of the situation at Corinth arrived in an unexpected manner. Lieutenant Beale,²¹ 4 Brigade Intelligence Officer, was seen approaching the ridge, having made his way

through the enemy lines. He reported that [Corinth](#) bridge had been blown during the morning. In view of the importance of his news a 15-cwt. truck was made available to carry him to Divisional HQ.

There was now no necessity for the companies to remain in position and the order was given to disengage and move back to the trucks. Major [Brooke](#),²² Brigade Major 6 Brigade, who arrived about this time, brought fresh instructions. The two companies were to withdraw to a position astride the main road, north of the port of [Nauplion](#), to cover the embarkation of a large number of troops and some New Zealand nurses. By midnight the port would be clear and the companies were to return to the 6 Brigade area near [Milo](#). There were now not enough trucks to carry the troops. Two had been badly damaged and a third lent to Lt Beale. Fortunately Lt Matheson arrived at dusk with more 15-cwts. and the convoy was soon heading south towards the port. The trucks picked up many British and Australian troops who were cheerfully but wearily making their way south. Some time later the companies took up a position in the hills north of the port and remained there until midnight.

The rest of the battalion had moved up during the afternoon to the little village of Ano Fikhtia, about twenty miles north of [Milo](#). Enemy aircraft had given the convoy little peace until it dispersed near the village. No news was received from the forward companies and at midnight Maj Samson, acting on instructions from Brigade HQ, gave orders for the troops to embus and the convoy set out back along the road to [Tripolis](#). A small party was left behind to link up with the forward companies if and when they came through. About an hour later they arrived, and in the darkness the small party was nearly missed and left behind. Both convoys continued past [Milo](#) and by daybreak had linked up and were dispersed under cover a few miles north of [Tripolis](#). The rest of the brigade had also withdrawn south during the night, following reports of a threat to [Tripolis](#) by enemy forces moving down the western road.

Twenty-one casualties, including four killed, had been suffered during the day. Two later died of wounds. Most of these had resulted from a direct hit on the D Coy truck which had been set on fire in the race to [Corinth](#). Few of the passengers had had a chance to dive out of the vehicle when the enemy plane attacked. Of those on board, the majority were wounded. Three who were not, Privates [Struthers](#),²³ [Morrison](#),²⁴ and [Delaney](#),²⁵ immediately began dragging the wounded off the blazing truck to the safety of a nearby culvert, despite continued air attacks and the

dangers of exploding ammunition. By their efforts the lives of twelve men were saved. Later, when the action was over, 2 Lt Bethell took the wounded in two trucks to a Greek hospital in [Tripolis](#).

Sunday, 27 April, was not a day of rest. Enemy planes were overhead early in the morning but few men were astir to watch them. Early in the morning it was learned that the Germans were moving south much more rapidly than had been expected, and it was decided to accelerate the withdrawal to the embarkation beach at [Monemvasia](#). The 24th and 25th Battalions were astride the western and northern approaches to [Tripolis](#) and were likely to be engaged by enemy spearheads before dusk. To clear the road for a rapid move south by these two units after dark, 26 Battalion was ordered shortly before midday to set out in daylight. The men, remembering their experiences of the day before, were not enthusiastic and saw no sense in tempting providence any further.

Nothing could be done about it, and when the time came to leave everyone was there. Lieutenant Matheson was sent ahead with two truckloads of men to fill in any road craters that might delay the main body. They found nothing of consequence and, like everyone else, soon became more concerned about their own safety. The convoy, widely dispersed, had not gone many miles before enemy reconnaissance planes spotted it. As had been feared, fighters and bombers were soon ranging up and down the column, strafing and bombing, but surprisingly enough causing few casualties and little damage. Everyone became adept at diving out of the trucks the moment spotters standing on the running-boards gave warning. These mad rushes had their humorous moments. On one occasion two men dived headlong into some blackberry bushes. They had little difficulty getting in, but judging from the sounds coming from the unfortunate pair, getting out was very painful. Another time several men from one truck finished up in a ditch half full of muddy water.

Despite the many stoppages drivers were maintaining an excellent speed. Shortly after leaving [Tripolis](#) the convoy climbed up into hilly country along a narrow, winding road, through [Sparta](#) and south towards [Monemvasia](#). Much of the ground was very fertile and in places cornfields, orange groves, and vineyards stretched as far as the eye could see. Everywhere the Greeks turned out to wave and cheer and press gifts on the troops, although they must have known their visitors were about

to leave them to their fate. To tired, hungry, unshaven and dusty soldiers this spontaneous outburst of feeling was a cheering and yet a moving sight. As darkness fell the vehicles began to turn into a wooded area about ten miles from the Monemvasia beaches. The occupants tumbled out, each truckload with a different story to tell of narrow escapes and dangers averted. Nearly every truck was spattered with bullet holes. Some had been so badly damaged that they were abandoned, the passengers climbing on to another. The drivers had shown great skill in completing the 80-mile journey—some had driven part of the way on flat tires—in such good time.

But the journey was over and everyone was glad of it. The rest was up to the Navy. All ranks settled down in the cool grass beneath the trees and slept. During the early hours of the morning the rest of 6 Brigade arrived, and at daybreak enemy reconnaissance planes passed overhead diligently searching for the missing New Zealanders. The day was perfect with scarcely a cloud in the sky. The wooded valley was an ideal spot for a picnic. In such peaceful surroundings the war seemed far away. But at various headquarters plans for the embarkation were being discussed and finalised. Scouting parties were sent along the coast in search of more small boats to carry the troops out to the warships when they arrived. By tea-time everyone had shaved and washed in readiness for the sea voyage. The cooks provided an excellent meal which was capped by an issue of rum—the first of the campaign. The warships were expected to arrive before midnight and dry rations for use on board were distributed.

At eight o'clock the battalion embussed and travelled down the narrow, winding road to the little seaside village. From there the troops marched down to the beach. Drivers drained the oil from their trucks and ran the engines until they seized, and then they followed the troops. It was a sad end for the transport which had served the battalion so well. Down on the beach all eyes had turned towards the open sea, but the darkness was impenetrable. An anxious wait followed until finally at eleven o'clock the first small craft were sighted nosing their way into shallow water. More followed and soon the embarkation was in full swing. The battalion was the second unit to leave and the troops boarded one or other of the four warships—the cruiser *Ajax* and the destroyers *Isis*, *Griffin*, and *Falcon*. The sailors appeared to regard embarkations as part of their daily routine. Soon after 3 a.m. everyone was aboard

and the ships lost no time in putting out to sea and heading for Crete.

On each warship the troops were packed in wherever there was room. The majority remained on deck, where they received a salt-water bath each time their ship lifted her nose out of a deep swell. With traditional hospitality the Navy provided hot cocoa. It was only a short voyage, and by 9 a.m. the warships had reached [Suda Bay](#) in [Crete](#) and the battalion was transshipping to other vessels. The greater part boarded either the [Thurland Castle](#) or the [Kingston](#). These two transports formed part of a large convoy which sailed soon after the re-loading was completed. On board each vessel the troops were packed like sardines with no regard for comfort or meals. Each soldier, whether Australian, British or New Zealander, sorted out a place for himself, and it ill behoved him to leave it for any length of time. In any case, movement on board was practically impossible. On occasions hot tea was available in the galleys, but not everyone had containers nor was it always possible to get there in time. Each soldier was carrying dry rations and with these he had to be satisfied. Everyone was too thankful for his narrow escape and too weary to worry much about the conditions. Fortunately for those on deck the weather remained fine.

The voyage was uneventful apart from two incidents. Late on the first night E-boats attacked the convoy, but the destroyer escorts drove them off before any damage was done. The explosion of depth charges not far away rocked the ships and woke most of those sleeping. In the morning more warships joined the convoy. Later enemy aircraft appeared overhead but they, too, were soon driven off. Finally, early on 2 May, 46 days after leaving it, the troops set foot on Egyptian soil again. The convoy steamed into [Port Said](#), and at the wharf Mrs. Chapman and other [YMCA](#) helpers were waiting with hot tea and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of cakes, chocolate, and cigarettes. The

Lunch on tent bales,
Katerine — this group
includes Capt F. W.
Wilson (left) and Lt
W. D. Westenra (right)



Lunch on tent bales, **Katerine**—this group Includes Capt F. W. Wilson (left) and Lt V. D. Westenra (right)



Petras Sanatorium, below Olympus Pass

Petras Sanatorium, below Olympus Pass



Climbing up the Monastery track from the Aliakmon River to the Pass road

Climbing up the Monastery track from the [Aliakmon River](#) to the Pass road



One of the many enforced stops in the train journey from Larissa to Kephissokhori

One of the many enforced stops in the train journey from [Larissa](#) to [Kephissokhori](#)

battalion reassembled and marched to a siding where a typical Egyptian troop train was waiting to carry it to new quarters.

The campaign in [Greece](#) was over. The battalion's casualties totalled 76. Eleven men were killed, four died of wounds, and 42 were wounded. Ten of the wounded, together with twelve hospital cases and seven others were taken prisoner. Nearly all the casualties were the result of the enemy air attacks in the later stages of the withdrawal. To those who had come overseas to fight it had been a disappointing campaign in many respects. During its 39 days in [Greece](#) the battalion had stayed overnight in 18 different localities. On no fewer than nine occasions defensive positions had been prepared, but each time the enemy approached the order came

to withdraw. These frequent moves and the paucity of information circulating down to the troops had caused general discontent. This was a complaint common throughout the army at this time but which was rectified as the war progressed. In the meantime, everyone was pleased to be back in Egypt, away from enemy dive-bombers and free from the tension of not knowing what was going to happen next.

¹ Main appointments at 21 Mar were:

CO: Lt-Col J. R. Page

2 i/c: Maj J. M. Samson

Adj: Capt L. G. Smith

QM: Capt F. W. Wilson

MO: Capt W. W. Little

Padre: Rev. J. S. Strang

TO: 2 Lt R. Bethell

IO: 2 Lt A. B. Kennedy

A Coy Comd: Capt T. Milliken

B Coy Comd: Capt H. G. McQuade

C Coy Comd: Capt J. W. McKergow

D Coy Comd: Capt F. W. Huggins

HQ Coy Comd: Capt W. C. T. Foley

Signals: 2 Lt W. Tolerton

Carriers: 2 Lt W. D. Westenra

² Maj F. W. Wilson, MBE, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Greendale, 11 Sep 1896; building superintendent; Canterbury Regt 1915–19; QM 26 Bn Feb 1940–Jun 1943.

³ Lt W. D. Westenra; born Christchurch, 8 Jan 1911; farm manager; died of wounds 29 Nov 1941.

⁴ Lt-Col E. J. Thomson, ED; Wellington; born Dunedin, 5 Feb 1910; business manager; DAAG HQ NZ Troops in Egypt 1944–45.

⁵ Sgt J. E. Fraser; Ashburton; born Oamaru, 9 Mar 1899; school teacher; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released Apr 1945.

⁶ Capt A. B. Kennedy; Kaiapoi; born Australia, 28 Apr 1906; motor driver; wounded 27 Apr 1941.

⁷ Capt W. M. Tolerton; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 11 Aug 1917; warehouseman; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released Apr 1945.

⁸ Maj H. J. H. Horrell; Dunedin; born Mandeville, 4 Oct 1907; clerk; twice wounded.

⁹ Capt J. E. Matheson; Pahiatua; born Middlemarch, 7 Apr 1905; solicitor.

¹⁰ WO I J. H. B. Robertson; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 27 Jan 1908; master butcher; wounded 26 Apr 1941.

¹¹ Capt R. Bethell, MBE, m.i.d.; Culverden; born Christchurch, 17 Oct 1905; sheepfarmer.

¹² Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Dec 1941; commanded 10 Inf Bde, Crete, May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div 30 Apr–14 May 1943 and 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

¹³ Pte G. T. Webster; born England, 12 Jan 1918; carpenter; killed in action (3.30 p.m.) 18 Apr 1941.

¹⁴ Spr L. L. Smith; Palmerston South; born NZ 5 Dec 1911; lorry driver; p.w. May 1941; released May 1945.

¹⁵ Spr R. C. Gibson; born England, 16 Mar 1906; engine driver.

¹⁶ Pte J. Young; born Scotland, 17 Sep 1905; labourer; killed in action (12.30 p.m.) 18 Apr 1941.

¹⁷ Pte H. D. Tod; born Seacliff, 18 Jan 1918; storekeeper; died of wounds 28 Apr 1941.

¹⁸ Brig B. Barrington, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d. (2); Wellington; born Marton, 2 Oct 1907; Army officer, NZTS; SC and BM 6 Inf Bde 1941–42; DAQMG 2 NZ Div, 1942; AA & QMG 1942–44; DA & QMG NZ Corps 9 Feb–27 Mar 1944.

¹⁹ Maj T. Milliken, m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1896; solicitor; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

²⁰ Cpl J. F. Don; born England, 22 Dec 1918; storeman driver; killed in action 26 Apr 1941.

²¹ Maj J. H. Beale, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born England, 3 Apr 1912; salesman.

²² Col J. I. Brooke, OBE, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Waiouru Military Camp; born Dunedin, 20 Nov 1897; Regular soldier; BM 6 Inf Bde, 1940–41; GSO 1 3 NZ Div 1942–44; Camp Commandant Waiouru, 1951–.

²³ Pte H. E. Struthers, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 19 Oct 1917; musterer; twice wounded; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

²⁴ L-Cpl A. R. Morrison, MM, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Gisborne, 12 Aug 1916; shop assistant; wounded and p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released Apr 1945.

²⁵ Sgt F. O. Delaney, m.i.d.; Blenheim; born Nelson, 29 Aug 1917; farmer; wounded Nov 1942.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 4 – THE CANAL ZONE

CHAPTER 4

The Canal Zone

ALONGSIDE the battalion train was another loaded with [Naafi](#) stores, mainly beer. This was too much of a temptation to the troops, who quickly transferred case after case into their own carriages before anyone in authority could stop them. Expecting the battalion would have to meet the bill, officers saw the beer was evenly distributed. Soon afterwards the train moved off for Qassasin, where transport was waiting to carry the men to the huge El Tahag transit camp. Companies were directed to tented areas and straw palliasses and clean blankets were issued. Everyone was wearing the filthily dirty battle dress which they had slept in and worn constantly for over six weeks, and there was a concerted rush on the shower-house.

Four days elapsed before the unit moved to more permanent quarters. During this period Greek currency was collected and changed for piastres and each man was given ten shillings to replace personal gear lost in [Greece](#). The [Naafi](#) store near the lines was run by a bunch of cheeky Egyptians, and after some trouble over change and prices it was wrecked. After this a marked improvement was shown in other [Naafi](#) establishments in the camp. It was extremely hot during the day, particularly in battle dress and after the cooler conditions experienced in [Greece](#). Everyone was still pretty weary and many men were suffering from some form of dysentery. On 6 May the battalion returned to [Helwan](#), travelling by rail from Qassasin and moving into a tented area in the south-west corner of the camp.

Back in more familiar surroundings the men quickly settled down to normal camp routine. Mail and parcels which had accumulated during the later stages of the Greek campaign were distributed. A start was made with re-equipping the unit. Summer dress was issued for the heat was terrific, often exceeding 110 degrees in the shade. In the messrooms sweat poured off the troops as they ate and butter melted away at an alarming rate. Training was confined to short route marches, section exercises, and lectures on the recent campaign. Many of the men were under medical treatment at the RAP and others had been sent to hospital. Reboardings and subsequent re-gradings forced quite a number to leave the battalion for less rigorous duties. The Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser, arrived at [Helwan](#) on the 18th and congratulated the battalion on its showing in

[Greece](#). Amongst the men genuine disappointment was felt that 6 Brigade had not been chosen to serve in [Crete](#) alongside the rest of the Division. Various reasons were given for the return of the brigade to Egypt, but these did not lessen the interest shown in the battle for the island. Almost everyone had friends or relatives amongst the defenders.

On 28 May the battalion, in company with the rest of 6 Brigade, left [Helwan](#) for the Canal Zone to take up a mobile defensive role with the purpose of opposing any enemy paratroop attacks. It was thought that the Germans might attempt to seize the [Suez Canal](#) by this means. Positions were to be taken up on the western side of the Canal. The battalion was ordered to move to [Spinney Wood](#), a small tented camp close to the town of [Ismailia](#), from which, using borrowed transport, it could speedily move to any threatened area.

The rail journey from [Helwan](#) was uneventful, and a short march from the station at [Ismailia](#) brought the battalion to its new quarters. The camp, previously occupied by Free French troops, was in a dirty and disgusting state. It took several days to clean up the mess, dig trenches around the tents, and improve the almost non-existent sanitary facilities. Fortunately water was laid on and fresh-water showers were always available. Swimming parties were taken to the Canal. The heat was very trying. During the next fortnight there were a few route marches, which invariably left everyone exhausted and in a lather of sweat. Various methods of dealing with paratroop landings were practised. The battle for [Crete](#) was over and the danger of an airborne attack on the [Suez Canal](#) was thought considerable. However, the greater part of the time was spent working with picks and shovels preparing defences around two nearby aerodromes—not a very acceptable task in hot weather.

The camp contained few amenities for entertainment. Company canteens and the [YMCA](#) stocked a wide range of goods. The beer supply, although better than expected, was never enough to meet the demand. Patriotic Fund parcels which arrived about this time served to supplement the hard rations, but the fresh fruit and vegetables of [Maadi](#) and [Helwan](#) were sorely missed. The Padre organised lending libraries within companies to while away the evenings. Very little leave was granted. A six-day leave scheme to [Cairo](#) or [Alexandria](#), which had been started at [Helwan](#), was continued but only small parties were permitted to leave each week. Troops

visiting [Ismailia](#) had to carry rifles and bandoliers in case of a surprise enemy attack. This town with its white, cool-looking homes and tropical gardens was in direct contrast to its surroundings. Two clubs, the [YMCA](#) and the Blue Kettle Club, the latter run by the ladies of [Ismailia](#), were popular.

On 13 June the battalion moved to another camp at [Geneifa](#), from which it was better able to carry out its role in the brigade defence scheme and continue with its immediate task of preparing aerodrome defences. Unlike [Spinney Wood](#), [Geneifa](#) camp covered a huge area stretching for miles around the Great [Bitter Lake](#). Besides New Zealanders it contained thousands of troops of other nationalities, including Free French, [Cypriots](#), British, Australians, Indians, [Palestinians](#), Greeks and Italians. The last were prisoners of war living in a large compound not far from the lines, and a party from the battalion detailed to strengthen the wire around it found them a happy and contented lot. Models of famous buildings made from sand and shells with crude instruments were amazing proof of their craftsmanship.

The battalion was again under canvas. Tent floors consisted of a layer of fine sand, and as the lightest of winds was sufficient to stir this up everything was continually covered with dust. The cooks had the same problem to contend with and each meal served contained a quota of sand, the quantity depending on the strength of the wind. Flies, too, were very troublesome and there seemed to be no way of combating them. The water supply was poor and only at infrequent intervals were showers available. Those who went for a swim in the [Great Bitter Lake](#) found the water warm and salty and the shells on the sea bed very sharp. Cuts from these shells often caused poisoned feet. Although over a hundred men were evacuated to hospital during June and July the general health of the troops was good. Most of the sickness was of a minor nature and was caused by the extreme heat or dysentery. Ninety-four reinforcements were posted to the battalion and a number of changes made in unit appointments. Captain McKergow was transferred to 20 Battalion and Capt Thomson given command of C Company. 'Doc' Little and Padre Scott ¹ were both transferred and were replaced by Capt [Jennings](#) ² and Father [Kingan](#). ³

In addition to its task at the aerodromes and prisoner-of-war camp, the battalion dug air-raid shelters around 19 British General Hospital. These duties left little opportunity for organised training. Leave continued much as before, except that

on 18 July the first party of about eighty men left to spend a week at the Port Fayid rest camp. Others followed later. Despite the sand and the flies [Geneifa](#) supplied better amenities than [Spinney Wood](#). Fresh fruit and vegetables reappeared on the menu and there were several Naafis in the vicinity. Air letter cards were introduced and proved very popular. Shafto ran a very dilapidated theatre near the lines, and one evening an English concert party, the Melody Makers, gave an excellent performance. Officers and NCOs attended two lectures at [Moascar](#) by [General Freyberg](#) and Brigadier [Miles](#),⁴ the CRA, on the lessons of [Greece](#) and Crete. Both campaigns were discussed in some detail and an indication given of the future development and role of the Division.

* * *

Towards the end of July arrangements were made for the battalion to change places with [25 Battalion](#), stationed 32 miles away at the Kitchener Barracks, [Moascar](#). At 3.30 a.m. on 30 July the troops set out along a hard bitumen road on a two-day march to the barracks. By 10 a.m. they had reached the half-way point, and the rest of the day was spent bathing in the Canal or nursing sore feet under the shade of nearby trees. Another early start was made next morning and the journey was completed before midday. The Brigade band led the sweating men over the last mile. The barracks were much different from the quarters at [Geneifa](#). Platoons occupied roomy buildings with tiled floors and electric light. Straw-filled palliasses were issued. Sanitary and messing arrangements were good and cold showers were always available. The duties were much the same as at [Geneifa](#). Working parties were sent daily to the nearby aerodrome, 54 British General Hospital, the wharves at El Kirsh, and later to ordnance depots.

At this juncture enemy bombers were raiding the Canal Zone almost every night. Several times while the battalion was there [Moascar](#) and nearby aerodromes were bombed. The night of 4–5 August is one that few men of B Coy will forget. Enemy bombers came over in force and heavily bombed the town and its environs. The raid lasted nearly two hours, during which time all ranks lay hopefully in their slit trenches. No New Zealanders were hit but a British unit in a nearby tented area suffered some casualties. After the 'all clear' sounded, B Coy was sent into the town with picks and shovels. In the dim light of the approaching dawn fires seemed to be blazing everywhere. The town and townspeople presented a pitiful sight. Frightened

natives whimpered in the doorways as the troops went to work in the hope of rescuing some of those buried under the ruins. An old man was brought out minus his legs. Three small children were uncovered, all dead. In one house the only living thing found was a duck. Each time a body was brought out the watching crowd surged forward, moaning and wailing. Over a hundred had been killed and many more injured. About 8.30 a.m. the Company QM arrived with a breakfast of bacon and tomatoes but few of B Coy wanted it.

Nine days later there was another heavy raid on the area. This time the bombers concentrated more on military establishments. The railway station was badly knocked about, a supply train going up in flames. Parts of the camp received direct hits and the theatre, the officers' mess, and several supply stores were damaged. The nearby aerodrome, hospital, and convalescent depot were also damaged. The British were again unlucky, a bomb landing in their lines. The duty company had a hectic time cleaning up and trying to restore some semblance of order in the town.

About the middle of August 5 Brigade relieved 6 Brigade of its duties. The 23rd Battalion arrived in [Moascar](#) on the 16th, and late that night 26 Battalion entrained for [Helwan](#). Over eight hours later the train reached its destination and the men, stiff and tired, marched from the siding to their old quarters. A surprise awaited them. Huts had replaced most of the tents and the amenities and entertainment facilities of the camp had been improved. Training began almost immediately. During the early stages while the battalion was short of equipment and without transport, there were many long route marches and plenty of squad drill. Almost every day new equipment arrived. The Mortar Platoon was increased in size and equipped with six 3-inch mortars. Motor cycles were issued to specialist sections and Company HQs. The two-inch mortar became standard equipment for platoons. New Bren carriers arrived and No. 18 wireless sets were issued. Last of all came the unit transport—new 15-cwts. and three-tonners, nearly all of American manufacture.

After the first fortnight small-scale exercises were introduced into the training syllabus. These were increased in size and scope as the days went by. On 26 August [General Freyberg](#) inspected the battalion, and after this date comprehensive exercises using transport were carried out. Considerable emphasis was placed on a

new method of travelling over desert country— desert formation—the purpose of which was to provide tactical formation while on the move. The sight of a brigade moving across country in this formation was truly magnificent. An exercise frequently carried out at this time involved the move of a company or battalion in desert formation by day or night towards an objective. The trucks would stop and the infantry would advance on foot with air, tank, artillery and mortar support.

Not every evening was spent on night exercises. The troops were able to enjoy performances by several concert parties or attend the nightly shows at the Pall Mall cinema. Everyone realised that the training carried out over the past weeks had been to fit the battalion for a more active role. During the second week in September advice was received that 6 Brigade would return to the Canal Zone and take part in divisional exercises. An advanced party under Capt Wilson left for the new area and took over from 20 Battalion only to learn that plans had been changed. The Division was now to concentrate at Baggush, about 150 miles east of the Egypt- Libya frontier.

When the news of the change of plan reached Battalion HQ everyone was certain that the future role of the Division would be bound up in a desert campaign. The assembly area was already known to New Zealanders as Baggush Box, or more commonly as the Box. It was a fortress area on the sea coast and included the Sidi Haneish railway siding. The battalion left Helwan by train on the morning of the 18th. The journey occupied a full day, a stop being made at Amiriya for a hot meal. Everyone was glad to leave the dirty, smelly carriages with their hard seats and floors. Trucks carried the troops from Sidi Haneish to Baggush, each vehicle stirring up thick clouds of yellow dust which permeated everything. The unit transport column had already reached the battalion sector, which lay in the north-east corner of the Box close to the sea.

Company areas were allotted—C, D, and HQ Coys near the beach, B Coy inland, and A Coy on a hill about a mile away and not far from 24 Battalion. Everywhere there was sand; but the ground was by no means level, easy-sloped wadis stretching up from the beach to sharply defined ridges. A small oasis of palms and a few stunted bushes were the only vegetation in the area. Elements of an Indian division had previously occupied the sector and had dug numerous deep dugouts, many of which were reoccupied by the men. By morning they were aware that the dugouts

abounded with lice. The first task of the battalion was the same as that of all other units in the area, namely to take every precaution against enemy air observation. So the battalion went underground.

Before long the Box was an amazing sight. Thousands of New Zealanders were encamped within an area which from the air appeared to be just another part of the desert. From ground level the effect was almost as good. Here and there were a few funnels and mounds. The only blot on the landscape was the latrine which, open to the four winds of heaven and crowning some barren ridge, defied all schemes to drive it underground. Orderly rooms, cookhouses, and stores were all dug in below the level of the sand so that the area resembled a gigantic rabbit warren. As one soldier put it to his little daughter:

In a burrow like a bunny, father has his little lair,
Sleeps and eats and reads and lazes, sometimes coming up for air,
Puts his head beneath a trickle when he wants to have a wash,
Bumping other bunnies 'cos there's something of a squash.

Despite a shortage of timber all sorts of doors and barricades were erected to keep out the innumerable flies and the fine dust swept up by the gentle sea breezes. Galvanised iron was very popular although makeshifts of truck covers and bivouac tents were common. Some of the dugouts boasted all sorts of conveniences, ranging from kerosene lamps and candles, fireplaces and special air ventilators to draught eliminators. Meals were good, but as they had to be eaten out in the open, sand and flies often got mixed up with the food. Water had to be carted from some distance away and for this reason was rationed to two water bottles full a day. Frequent bathing in the nearby surf solved the problem of personal washing.

From a training point of view the area was ideal, for field exercises could now be carried out under battle conditions. Once the troops had settled down these exercises were carried out nearly every day or night. Each one was repeated until Col Page was satisfied it was done correctly. This principle alone made the training gruelling and often boring. Considerable attention was paid to the movement of battalions and brigades in desert formation. Sometimes the long columns of vehicles spread out over the horizon would manœuvre in the desert for several days repeating and repeating one exercise—the approach march by desert navigation and

assault of an enemy fortified position. This was hard on the men travelling in the backs of the trucks. Twenty to each vehicle, they had to stand hanging on to straps for hours on end, all the while breathing in choking yellow dust. Hard rations, bully beef and biscuits, plus a small quota of water, was the fare. As the Colonel announced in one of his lectures, these were the conditions under which the battalion would have to fight.

Towards the end of October the intensive training period ended, lectures and short route marches taking its place. Groups of officers paid short visits to the front to gain knowledge of conditions there. All equipment was checked over and battle dress reissued. Ammunition, grenades, and emergency rations were issued to each platoon and the troops realised their days in the area were numbered. In the meantime, under the guidance of Father Kingan, football came into prominence. With South Africans camped nearby it was inevitable that challenges would be made and accepted. The battalion team, one of the best ever fielded by the unit, excelled itself and defeated the South Africans. Later a Divisional team played the Springboks and also won, to the great delight of about 5000 vociferous New Zealand supporters.

¹ [Rev. H. S. Scott](#); [Te Awamutu](#); born [Onehunga](#), 21 Sep 1907; Presbyterian minister; wounded 3 Dec 1943.

² [Capt G. C. Jennings](#); [Wellington](#); born [Invercargill](#), 21 Jun 1913; medical practitioner; RMO 26 Bn Aug–Nov 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; repatriated Apr 1943.

³ [Rev. Fr. J. L. Kingan](#), MC, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Tai Tapu Canterbury](#), 16 Sep 1901; Roman Catholic priest; wounded 27 Feb 1944.

⁴ [Brig R. Miles](#), CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born [Springston](#), 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Field Artillery 1914–19; Commander Royal New Zealand Artillery, 1940–41; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped 29 Mar 1943; died in [Spain](#) on way to [United Kingdom](#), Oct 1943.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 5 – THE SECOND LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

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The Second Libyan Campaign

WHILE the New Zealanders were fighting in Greece and Crete the tables had been turned in the Western Desert. German troops under General Rommel landed in North Africa in February and March, and by April Axis forces were again at the frontier of Egypt. But Tobruk still held out and its garrison sharply repulsed all attacks. The Germans and Italians built a 25-mile chain of forts running inland from Sollum at the frontier and then turned their attention to Tobruk. During the summer and autumn they built up their forces in readiness to launch a major attack about the middle of November.

Meanwhile, the forces in Egypt were being strengthened. In spite of the long sea route the British build-up was quicker than that of the Axis, which lost many ships in the short crossing to Tripoli. Although broadly aware of the enemy's intention, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, continued with preparations for an offensive to conquer Libya. In September the Eighth Army was formed under the command of General Sir Alan Cunningham. A month later the garrison at Tobruk was strengthened and the Australian troops there relieved. It was planned that the Eighth Army would attack early in November. General Cunningham expected his force to have greater mobility than the enemy and to outnumber him in tanks, guns, and men. On the other hand the Axis Commander was expected to have more aircraft at his disposal and his force was equipped with superior tanks and anti-tank guns. The date of the British offensive was finally fixed as 18 November, the Eighth Army hoping to destroy the enemy armour at the outset and then overrun his infantry. The Axis assault on Tobruk, planned to begin on 23 November, had been forestalled by five days.

General Cunningham divided his force into three groups: 30 Corps, containing armoured units and motorised infantry; 13 Corps, largely motorised infantry, of which 2 NZ Division formed a part; and the Oasis Group. Thirtieth Corps was to seek out and destroy the enemy armour regrouping in Cyrenaica and then relieve Tobruk, leaving 13 Corps to capture the frontier posts and, if necessary, follow the armour later. The Oasis Group, small and very mobile, was to thrust deep into enemy territory to capture oases, threatening the enemy's western exit from Cyrenaica.

Each of the three groups would have to cover large tracts of desert devoid of any form of sustenance except for meagre supplies of water. For this reason the maintenance of adequate supplies was essential to the success of the offensive. Within the Division elaborate and detailed arrangements were made to ensure that nothing would be lacking on this score. Although [General Freyberg](#) was strongly opposed to the splitting up of his Division, there was a possibility that the brigades would have to be separately employed. Sixth Brigade had been made self-sufficient in supply and medical services.

At [Baggush](#) everyone knew that the Division was being trained for a desert campaign. Rumours had been circulating in the unit concerning the probable date of the assault and the battalion's part in it. By early November there was an air of expectancy throughout the camp although there was little to go on. Nothing had been said, but the men knew that the next move would not be just another manœuvre. They had seen the road and railway choked with traffic taking forward guns, tanks, supplies and every other type of equipment. The sight was most impressive. The RAF was very much in evidence, and this did more than any words could to instil confidence.

Just before midday on the 11th came the first definite news—the Division would be moving into action within a few days. This news flashed through the camp, and as the men filed past the cookhouses, dixies in hand, there was a noticeable change in their bearing. Nearly everyone was excited, but all were very confident. That day the company canteens sold poppies—it was Armistice Day. At 7.30 p.m. Col Page called his officers together. ¹ He could give them little detailed information of what was planned, but there was plenty to be discussed and decided before the battalion could be considered ready for offensive action so far from its base. Captain Wilson was left with the heavy task of making all the arrangements concerning supplies—those to be carried by the men themselves and those to be collected en route. Adequate transport was another important factor to be considered and Col Page's instructions were: 'All transport will, if necessary, be able to get to [Benghazi](#)—no vehicle will be abandoned in the event of a breakdown; it must be towed.' Then came the news that certain officers and men would be left behind as LOBs ² When the names were announced there was mutual disappointment. Next morning when the names of all who were to be left behind were posted, the disappointment felt

was more pronounced. Many and varied were the excuses given by those trying to get a chance to go with the battalion. They tried in vain, however, and under the command of Maj [McQuade](#),³ 64 officers and other ranks remained in the [Baggush](#) camp until the campaign was over.

During the 12th and the morning of the 13th the preparations for the move were completed. In the meantime the rest of the Division departed. Early on the afternoon of the 13th the troops of 6 Brigade embussed on RMT, and soon after the long brigade convoy—918 vehicles all told—was on its way. The lorries were rather crowded. Each carried a stock of bully beef, tea, biscuit and cheese rations. The men, after their experiences on manœuvres, had all filled their water bottles. Spirits were high. From the trucks came the sound of singing. The convoy continued along the [Siwa](#) road. South of [Matruh](#) it turned westward and travelled a mile or so across the desert. The brigade then moved into desert formation and laagered for the night. By this time it was 10 p.m. During the afternoon the battalion had halted for a short while close to 2 NZ General Hospital near [Mersa Matruh](#). Captain Little was at the roadside, and he went along the line of trucks bidding everyone the best of luck, obviously disappointed that he was not accompanying the battalion.

There was no move on the 14th, but early next morning the Division, for the first time in its history, moved off as a complete formation. It was a magnificent and unforgettable sight—some 3000 vehicles of all types, widely dispersed and moving slowly westward, windshields flashing in the sunlight and little tufts of dust rising here and there. [Royal Air Force](#) planes hovered overhead. Nearly sixty miles had been covered by nightfall when the Division halted, each brigade closing in so that vehicles were only a few yards apart. The cooks, travelling at the rear of the column, prepared a hot meal. Pickets were posted and the men settled down for the night in shallow trenches, cold in spite of blankets and greatcoats.

The Division was now south of [Sidi Barrani](#), and to avoid detection from the air the remainder of the approach march was completed under cover of darkness. It extended over three nights. Before dawn each morning the brigades opened out into normal desert formation, a manœuvre that sometimes took several hours. A start was made about 5 p.m. on the 16th, the long columns of vehicles heading steadily westward across the desert, occasionally delayed by soft patches of sand. A stop was made at midnight and the men tumbled out of the trucks to sleep until morning.

Similar progress was made the following night, the Division halting close to the frontier. A vivid display of lightning during the night fooled nearly everyone, until the complete absence of sound convinced the men it was not a land or naval bombardment. The flashes were low down on the horizon in the direction of the frontier forts.

Long before dawn on 18 November hundreds of tanks and thousands of vehicles of [30 Corps](#) began moving westward. By 9 a.m. they were in [Libya](#) and driving towards [Tobruk](#). The offensive had begun! The New Zealanders, still east of the Wire, felt no excitement, for until the tank battle started they could only wait and wonder. In the battalion bivouac area the troops read mail and kicked a football about. After dark the Division crossed the frontier. The battalion columns reached it about eleven o'clock and before dawn halted several miles south of [Sidi Omar](#). The vehicles were widely dispersed and the troops dug in. Gunfire could be heard, and every now and again flashes could be seen to the north and west of the staging area. Little happened in the divisional area during the 19th. About 4.30 p.m. 6 Brigade moved to a position about nine miles south-west of [Sidi Omar](#). On reaching the new area the columns closed in and the battalions took up defensive positions. In the morning normal desert formation was resumed and all ranks settled down to await further orders. The Division was now poised ready to move off, and everyone was anxiously awaiting news of the tank battle farther west.

Early reports of the fighting indicated that [30 Corps](#) was making satisfactory progress towards [Tobruk](#). Closer at hand 4 Indian Division had swept around to cut off the frontier forts running south-west from [Halfaya Pass](#). Air activity increased considerably during the 20th, and in the staging area precautions were taken to meet the possibility of attack. Colonel Page sent the Carrier Platoon to patrol the ground east of the battalion. The party exchanged greetings with some Indian troops and picked up the pilot of a crashed Hurricane but saw no sign of the enemy.

During the night and early morning further reports of the armoured battle were received at Divisional HQ. Despite stiffening opposition and heavy casualties, the tanks of [30 Corps](#) had penetrated to an area just south-west of [Tobruk](#). The time seemed to have arrived for [2 NZ Division](#) to carry out its role of isolating and possibly capturing the remaining frontier positions. This task had fallen to 4 and 5 Brigades,

which were to swing north-east and attack [Sidi Azeiz](#), [Sollum](#), [Capuzzo](#) and [Bardia](#). Sixth Brigade, in reserve, was to move north to straddle the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), a track leading westward to pass south of [Tobruk](#). This advance would bring the brigade close to Bir el Hariga and not far from [Sidi Azeiz](#), where Divisional HQ was to be established. Orders for the move were received at Battalion HQ shortly before midday.

At 1 p.m. 6 Brigade moved off in desert formation and two hours later reached the divisional start point. A short halt and the columns set out in the wake of 4 and 5 Brigades. Progress was fairly slow, with frequent short stops. During one of these in the late afternoon, the troops were interested spectators of an artillery duel between Indian gunners and Italians defending Libyan Omar. When shells began to land near the columns of stationary vehicles it was a different story, and no time was wasted in getting out of range. The advance was continued after dark and drivers were soon in trouble. Driving without lights in inky darkness, they ran into a waterlogged section of the desert. Before long almost every vehicle was bogged down. To lighten the load and help push the trucks on to firmer ground, the troops debussed. The Carrier Platoon did a great job, ranging up and down the columns pulling truck after truck out of the mud. Some were so badly bogged they had to be dug out—a task left to the sleepy infantrymen. To the latter it seemed hours before they embussed and were on the way again. All semblance of formation had been lost in the confusion and a coating of mud had been added to the grime and dust on each man.

It was after midnight by this time, and as the going was still very heavy the Brigade Commander decided to halt and continue the march at first light. The battalion vehicles reached the stopping place about 2 a.m. and resumed normal formation. Advance elements of the brigade had captured a German LAD ⁴ unit comprising about 30 men and six trucks. In the morning the captured vehicles were found to be British, apparently captured in [Greece](#), reconditioned, and sent to [Libya](#). One HQ Coy driver claimed that one of the trucks, an English half-ton Ford, was the one he had left in [Greece](#). Shortly before 10 a.m. the battalion reached the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) and moved forward to halt in desert formation alongside [25 Battalion](#) at the head of the Brigade Group. The need for wide dispersal was soon made apparent. Before A Coy had debussed, an enemy plane dived directly towards one of the vehicles. The occupants tumbled out of the truck and scattered in all directions.

Fortunately the plane was only a reconnaissance one and did not open fire. Later, as the troops were digging in more planes appeared, but they also made no attempt to attack.

Meanwhile, the forward brigades had succeeded in isolating the frontier outposts and capturing many prisoners. The position there was reasonably secure, and 6 Brigade was ordered to proceed with the second phase of its role. This involved a 30- mile advance west along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) to [Bir el Chleta](#) and



north to [Gambut](#). Thirtieth Corps in its thrust westward had passed south of these places, both of which were believed to be occupied by the enemy. Under command of the brigade were 6 Field Regiment NZA, 33 Battery of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, 8 Field Company NZE, 6 Field Ambulance, and a squadron of Valentine tanks (8 Royal Tank Regiment, [1 Army Tank Brigade](#)).

Little of this news reached the troops, who were told to be ready to move at midday. The slow-moving tanks caused some delay and it was after 2 p.m. before the columns began to move westward. The tanks, out in front, cautiously probed forward while carriers and anti-tank guns covered the flanks. Progress was slow, with frequent stops. Gunfire was heard to the north-west. The brigade had not gone far when a disturbing report arrived which subsequently changed the course of events. Hitherto it had been thought that the tank battle was going well, but an LO from 30 Corps HQ painted a very different picture. The British [7 Armoured Division](#) had suffered very heavy losses in tanks and its [Support Group](#) on [Sidi Rezegh](#), 15 miles beyond [Bir el Chleta](#), was virtually surrounded and in a desperate plight. Fifth South African Brigade, which was to have come up from the south towards it, could make little progress. The [Tobruk](#) garrison, which had succeeded in breaking through the

inner ring of the cordon around it, had encountered much stronger opposition than had been expected. Although reluctant to separate his brigades, [General Freyberg](#) gave orders for 6 Brigade to move post-haste to relieve the [Support Group](#).

Now under command of [30 Corps](#), 6 Brigade moved slowly westward. Despite the urgency of the situation it could not increase its rate of advance, for the tanks could only travel eight miles in the hour. After dusk progress was further delayed while the columns negotiated a minefield. At 8.15 p.m. the brigade halted for a hot meal and a rest. This was a welcome break for the tank crews who had been almost continuously on the move for many hours. While the troops slept supplies were brought forward and the tanks refuelled. Brigadier Barrowclough planned to resume the advance at 3 a.m. and, by swinging south of [Bir el Chleta](#) to avoid engagements in that area, hoped to reach [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment early in the morning.

Half asleep and shivering with the cold, the troops embussed again at 3 a.m. The trucks moved off, turning south on to an escarpment with the object of bypassing [Bir el Chleta](#). It was very dark and drivers found it difficult to maintain contact. As a result the rate of advance was slow. Just as dawn was breaking, the columns stopped while further reconnaissance was carried out. In the dim light the troops debussed and began looking around for suitable places to dig their slit trenches. Cooking gear was unloaded and the cooks began setting up their burners. Accompanied by Lt Westenra, Col Page set out in a carrier to locate [25 Battalion HQ](#).

Not long after he left the silence was broken by a sudden burst of machine-gun fire. Within a few minutes bullets were flying in all directions. The cooks, like everyone else, dived for shelter. In the murky light it was difficult to tell what was happening but it appeared that the brigade had laagered around an enemy force. Colonel Page had been the first to notice something amiss. As the carrier moved towards [25 Battalion](#) he saw what appeared to be a tank and a staff car on his right. Closer investigation revealed they were enemy. The CO opened fire with a Bren gun, and a German officer, leaning head and shoulders out of the tank hatch, threw his arms in the air and flopped over the side in spectacular fashion.

As the light grew stronger 25-pounders and anti-tank guns opened fire on a group of armoured vehicles, cars, and lorries laagered between the two battalions. Enemy troops were milling around, obviously confused by the sudden change of

events. B Coy, which was nearest to them, was having a good time, shooting at anything in sight. Several of the enemy vehicles attempted to run the gauntlet of fire and escape. Some succeeded, but the majority remained immobile.

Almost as suddenly as it had begun the shooting ceased. About 200 Germans, hands high in the air, came running towards the troops. The booty was considerable and some valuable documents were found, including the enemy code list of the day. Through an error in navigation in the early hours of the morning the Brigade Group had swung back on its original line of advance, the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). As a result it had stumbled on part of the headquarters of the [Afrika Korps](#), laagered at Bir el Chleta.

Anxious to reach [Point 175](#) without further delay, the Brigade Commander gave orders for the advance westwards to continue. In the meantime [25 Battalion](#) had become involved in a sharp skirmish with an enemy force north of it, but was able to disengage without difficulty. By 9.30 a.m. the brigade was again moving west along the escarpment south of the road. Captain Wesley's ⁵ men (B Coy) were feeling very pleased with themselves. It had been their first taste of action and the results were very satisfactory. Most of them were carrying souvenirs of some sort.

An hour after setting out along the escarpment the columns halted in the Wadi esc Sciomar, a long and fairly narrow depression about three miles east of Pt 175. The troops debussed and began digging in, although they knew their stay would be short. Not far away was a solitary fig bush which looked out of place in the open desert. A Coy captured a prisoner, quite unexpectedly. A motor cyclist was seen approaching the wadi from the south. He was recognised as a German, and when he was only about 100 yards away the platoons opened fire, wounding him and shattering the tank of his motor cycle.

Sixth Brigade Group was now on its own, 50 miles from the Division. Ahead lay a big task, for the situation at [Sidi Rezegh](#) was worse than had been feared. The Support Group of 7 Armoured Division had been defeated and the remnants had withdrawn to the south, leaving the enemy in control of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) feature. In this region the desert was dominated by three well-defined escarpments, 70–100 feet high and facing the sea. These escarpments, each 20–30 miles long, were of great tactical value for the observation, command and opportunities of concealment which they gave. The one in the north ran westward through [Ed Dbana](#), [Zaafran](#), and

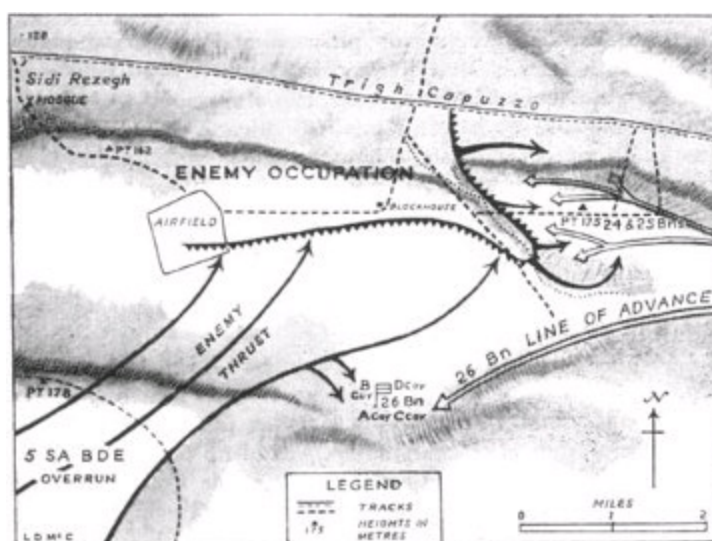
Belhamed to Ed Duda, towards which the Tobruk garrison was fighting its way. The central or Sidi Rezegh escarpment, continuing past Pt 175, the highest ground on the east end of the feature, skirted the northern edge of a landing field and ended about 3500 yards south of Ed Duda. Over a mile from the western end was perched the tiny mosque of Sidi Rezegh, and at this point the escarpment commanded the vital bottleneck through which ran Trigh Capuzzo and the Axis-built road bypassing Tobruk. Two or three miles to the south ran another escarpment, on part of which was 5 South African Brigade.

The Sidi Rezegh escarpment rose sharply from the north with few approaches for vehicles. The wide, rocky crest was scattered with boulders, and it fell gently towards the south across desert covered thinly with small rushes and dry, prickly scrub. The escarpment face was cut by wadis and ravines, some of which stretched across the flat towards the north. It appeared that 6 Brigade Group would have to retake Sidi Rezegh with only limited armoured support, as it was doubtful if the South Africans could provide effective help. While 26 Battalion moved south-west to make contact with the South Africans, 25 Battalion with tank support was to attack and capture Pt 175; 24 Battalion was to be in reserve.

* * *

After only a short stay in the Wadi esc Sciomar, the battalion moved off on a south-westerly course to make contact with 5 South African Brigade. Under command were 30 Field Battery, with eight 25-pounders, and L Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery, with four two-pounder anti-tank guns. The columns travelled about five miles before the South African transport was seen laagered on higher ground about a mile away. Colonel Page gave the order to halt and the troops debussed. Not long afterwards they began digging in in sand-covered rock. It was difficult to get down more than six to nine inches, and stones and rubble were piled around the edges of the trenches to give better protection. The CO deployed his companies in the form of a square, with Battalion HQ, supporting arms, and transport in the centre and to the north. A Coy faced south-west, B Coy north-west, C Coy south-east, and D Coy north-east. In each company sector two platoons held forward positions with the third in reserve about 50 yards in rear. The supporting arms were placed to face north-south and west, the most likely directions from which attack could be expected. The Carrier Platoon was ordered to patrol the ground between the battalion and Pt 175.

After midday the CO left to establish contact with the South Africans. When he reached their headquarters he was informed that a tank-supported attack was expected at any time. Reconnaissance had shown that the enemy was organising a large striking force behind the southern escarpment. The supporting arms with the brigade were not strong enough to break up this concentration. Long-range guns had already started several fires in the South African sector and the tempo of the enemy shelling was steadily increasing. Somewhat perturbed by this news Col Page returned to his headquarters. Some time later the Carrier Platoon arrived back with 20 prisoners from a German recovery unit who had been captured while repairing some broken-down vehicles not far away. Lieutenant Westenra brought news of 25 Battalion's attack on Pt 175. Supported by the Valentines, the infantry were making steady progress against heavy opposition.



General situation at 5 p.m. 23 November

During the early part of the afternoon 5 South African Brigade was very heavily shelled. From the battalion sector it was difficult to see what was happening. As the shells exploded they threw up clouds of dust and smoke. Thin columns of black smoke rose above the dust into the sky. The South African artillery was retaliating vigorously. Nevertheless the enemy force, which consisted of over a hundred tanks supported by infantry, drew nearer. The artillery and tank duel reached a climax about 3.30 p.m. and the brigade was heavily engaged in close fighting. Guns were firing at close range and fires were blazing in all directions. At first it seemed that

the South Africans were holding their own, but slowly and relentlessly the enemy pressed on. Ambulances and transport came racing over the open ground to pass through the battalion and on out of shelling range. They were followed by part of a British field battery and more vehicles.

By this time shells were landing in the battalion sector at an increasing rate and the New Zealand 25-pounders were replying. With some dismay the troops watched enemy tanks—and there seemed no end to them—fight their way through the South African Brigade, rounding up prisoners and quelling stubborn points of resistance. One by one the South African field guns were knocked out. Just when the battle appeared to be over, the remnants of 22 British Armoured Brigade charged in from the south and engaged the enemy armour at close range. Both sides lost heavily in the ensuing brief fight, the remaining British tanks being forced to withdraw. (The severity of the fighting and the splendid resistance by the South Africans and British are clearly established by German reports of this action. Rommel committed the best part of three armoured divisions and lost heavily in tanks and infantry.)

At this stage Col Page could have ordered a withdrawal. The enemy was shelling the battalion area more heavily and his tanks and infantry were forming up as if to continue their advance northward. The battalion was in no position to withstand a tank-supported attack. However, the Colonel decided to stand firm. The men of 30 Battery and L Troop 33 Battery were ready for the task ahead. For some time they had been engaging the enemy at long range, and when resistance ceased in 5 South African Brigade's sector they turned their attention to targets closer at hand. Their fire struck amongst the enemy's thin-skinned vehicles and knocked out several tanks. Colonel Page, a gunner himself in earlier days, was moving the guns around and farther forward so that they could do the greatest possible damage and so delay the attack on his battalion.

The enemy retaliated, and a heavy volume of fire from tanks, field guns, and mortars was directed on the position. Machine guns sited on higher ground to the south-west opened fire and swept the area with an almost continuous hail of bullets. This made no apparent difference to the gunners, few of whom had been able to dig in their guns. They continued to load and fire as fast as they could, winning the admiration of all around them. Casualties began to mount. Several men in A and B Coys were killed or wounded by flying splinters. The Colonel's batman was killed in

the trench he had dug for the CO. Several trucks were damaged and set on fire,' and Capt Wilson was ordered to take the bulk of the transport back to Wadi esc Sciomar where Brigade HQ had been established. The drivers lost no time in complying with this order and the convoy reached the wadi without difficulty. This left the battalion with insufficient vehicles to effect a sudden withdrawal, but the Colonel hoped to hold on until dusk and then disengage under cover of darkness.

Shortly before dusk enemy infantry were seen moving down from the high ground south-west of the battalion, heading north along the shallow wadis and folds which divided the two escarpments. As they crossed in front of A and B Coys the forward platoons opened fire, inflicting casualties. It appeared that the enemy was going to attack from the west with the setting sun behind him. The troops prepared to meet the blow. From each company carrying parties raced across the uneven ground through heavy fire to collect ammunition from the small reserve at Battalion HQ. Colonel Page ordered the field guns to pull back to the rear. This they did, and from their new positions continued to fire with evident success.

The withdrawal of the guns and the difficulty of inter-company and platoon communications nearly caused a catastrophe. A and B Coy officers thought a general withdrawal was taking place and began to move back. On seeing this the Colonel dashed forward and, although the shelling was very heavy at the time, rallied his men. Within a short time they were back in their shallow trenches. Almost immediately afterwards A Coy was heavily engaged by machine-gun fire and enemy infantry began to approach. Steady fire from the three platoons checked their advance. Nevertheless, in the failing light the enemy seemed to be getting nearer. C and D Coys, together with part of HQ Coy, were ordered to abandon their positions and withdraw under the command of Maj Mathewson.⁶ As they moved off a burst of machine-gun fire struck a crowded truck. Corporal [Berry](#),⁷ a very popular and capable NCO, was wounded in the chest and subsequently died.

Dusk fell and the shelling eased off. B Coy could hear the Germans moving about not far away and Capt Wesley was given permission to charge them. With the same dash he had shown on the football field as a Rugby All Black, this officer led his men forward. In the poor light it was impossible to see the enemy, but with bayonets fixed and yelling as they ran the company followed their commander. The

ground was rough and uneven, and twice the men were on the skyline. On the last dash Capt Wesley, who had been wounded during the afternoon and again early in the charge, received a burst in the chest and was killed instantly. Several hundred yards had been covered with still no sign of the enemy. Panting breathlessly, the men lay on the ground awaiting the order to charge again. It was dark by this time and the enemy was lighting up the area with flares. Seconds that seemed like hours passed, and then came the whispered order, 'Make your way back to the trucks.'

The company had lost ten men, seven of whom had been killed. In addition, 12 Platoon was missing. Everyone was anxious to be gone. A Coy was already embussing and moving out. Before he left 2 Lt Rutherford,⁸ 10 Platoon commander, took a small party back to the scene of the charge to collect the two wounded men left behind and bring out Wesley's body. There were not enough trucks, but eventually everyone clambered on something—a truck, artillery limber, or anti-tank portéc. Drivers were impatient to be gone for enemy machine guns were still spraying the area with bullets. Some trucks had flat tires, but the men hung on grimly as they moved over shell holes and on towards Brigade HQ. Colonel Page remained behind with the Carrier Platoon to cover the withdrawal. As the last vehicles left the area the carriers ranged up and down-the front with guns blazing. Satisfied that the battalion was well clear, the Colonel gave them the order to withdraw.

By midnight the battalion was reassembled near Brigade HQ. The troops dug in and settled down. Some were without blankets, greatcoats and personal gear, which had been lost when platoon trucks had been hit during the afternoon. A number of the vehicles brought back by Capt Wilson had been commandeered for use as ambulances to carry wounded back across the frontier. Casualties had been surprisingly low. Eleven men had been killed and eight wounded. No. 12 Platoon was still missing and Doctor Jennings, who had gone forward late in the afternoon to attend to wounded in A and B Coys, had not returned.

The situation on Pt 175 had changed considerably since Lt Westenra's early report. The 25th Battalion had succeeded in capturing the greater part of the feature but was troubled by fire from an enemy strongpoint farther west along the escarpment. When the Valentines went forward to deal with this most of them were knocked out. Later the enemy counter-attacked. The 15th Panzer Division, which had

taken part in the assault on 5 South African Brigade, attacked from the south and other troops from the west. The New Zealand infantry fought hard to retain their grip on the hill and suffered very heavy casualties. The 24th Battalion was ordered forward, and two companies went to the assistance of [25 Battalion](#). They, too, lost heavily but the position was held, and shortly after dusk the enemy attacks ceased. The 26th Battalion was ordered to take up a reserve position before dawn in a wadi just east of Pt 175. At 3.30 a.m. the troops embussed and were in their new position long before daylight.

The fierce struggle of the previous day and the defeat of 7 Armoured Division and 5 South African Brigade had placed 6 Brigade in a serious position. A numerically weak two-battalion force, commanded by Lt-Col [Shuttleworth](#),⁹ held Pt 175 with 26 Battalion in the wadi nearby. After overwhelming the South Africans and attacking Pt 175, the victorious but battered 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions had laagered for the night not far from the New Zealanders. With practically no armoured support, 6 Brigade was in no position to withstand a heavy tank attack. But, with victory in his grasp, the Axis Commander chose to send his armour east to the Egyptian frontier, leaving the New Zealanders still in the field. During the 24th the two Panzer divisions passed south of Pt 175 and headed east towards Sidi [Omar](#).

So, quite unexpectedly, Monday the 24th was a quiet day for the battalion, with only desultory shelling disturbing the peace. A large-calibre gun, known as 'Belching Bertha', fired several salvos which caused casualties to D Coy. Two men were killed and four wounded. Lieutenant Nidd,¹⁰ 16 Platoon commander, was wounded and Sgt [Dodds](#)¹¹ took over his command. The wadi was littered with abandoned equipment: burnt-out and damaged trucks lying at grotesque angles, gaunt, blackened hulks which had once been tanks, guns with the dead still lying around them. Here and there was a rifle, a Bren, or a spandau. Other equipment, most of it personal gear left behind by the enemy, lay in untidy heaps all around. Those who had already spent one cold night without blankets and greatcoats were soon rummaging amongst this gear in the hope of finding something of use. Captain Wilson had some spare blankets but not enough to meet the demand. Unfortunately, later in the day the RMT which had brought the battalion from [Baggush](#) was sent east to collect supplies. With it went most of the blankets, extra water supplies, and other gear belonging to the men. At the time it was thought the trucks would not be

away for long and few bothered to off-load their gear. More important still, the battalion was now left with insufficient transport to make an emergency move.

During the day the missing personnel returned. Doctor Jennings and the RAP sergeant arrived on foot. Returning to Wadi esc Sciomar the previous evening, they had driven into a minefield guarded by enemy troops. Forced to abandon the ambulance they set out on foot and, after a long and roundabout journey, managed to escape capture. No. 12 Platoon also arrived back. Its commander, Lt [Ryder](#),¹² had not heard the order to withdraw during the bayonet charge and he returned to the battalion area to find everyone gone. Eventually the platoon reached the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) east of Wadi esc Sciomar, where other New Zealand troops were encountered. Late in the afternoon after the enemy shelling had ceased a large convoy was seen approaching from the south-west. It was led by enemy armoured vehicles, but as soon as the 25-pounders opened fire they made off. The convoy continued on towards the battalion, and when they came closer the trucks were seen to be British. They proved to be a convoy of wounded South Africans and Tommies. The enemy had insufficient medical supplies to attend to them and had sent them back.

About the same time 4 Brigade was seen advancing west beyond the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). The troops climbed on to the escarpment to watch. Travelling in desert formation with its tanks and carriers out in front, the brigade made a grand sight and a very welcome one. Aware of the serious position on [Sidi Rezegh](#) but not knowing that the German armour was moving towards the frontier, [General Freyberg](#) had decided to move westward, join up with 6 Brigade, and continue the advance on [Tobruk](#). A battalion of 5 Brigade, the 21st, was ordered to join 6 Brigade at Pt 175. Fourth Brigade was to push westward through [Gambut](#) along the northern escarpment, while Divisional HQ followed along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). Fifth Brigade was to follow when relieved at [Bardia](#) and [Sollum](#) by 4 Indian Division.

By dusk on the 24th 4 Brigade had drawn level with Pt 175. That night plans were drawn up to continue the advance to bring both brigades within striking distance of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#). Although 6 Brigade held Pt 175, it was unable to occupy the western slopes because they were under observation from a blockhouse, a prominent stone building near the edge of the escarpment about two miles away. Fire from this area had already caused casualties to the brigade. East of

the blockhouse a wadi cut through the escarpment, the possession of which was of some value to the enemy for it sheltered troublesome snipers and offered an alternative route to bypass Sidi Rezegh.

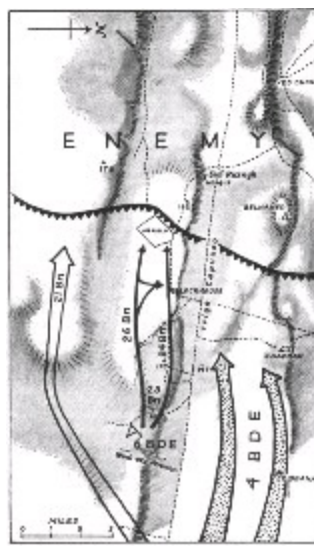
Orders for the advance were received at Battalion HQ about midnight. Colonel Page called his company commanders together and detailed the plan. The 21st Battalion was to move along the southern escarpment while 24 and 26 Battalions advanced along the central one and consolidated in the vicinity of the landing ground about five miles away. Strong opposition was not expected although it was believed that 24 Battalion, advancing along the crest of the escarpment and on the right of 26 Battalion, might meet trouble in the vicinity of the blockhouse. The operation was to begin at 5 a.m., and it was hoped that both units would reach their objective by dawn. The 25th Battalion was to follow later. Colonel Page's plan was simple. C and D Coys were to lead off on foot from a start line south of the battalion's reserve position, and would be followed by the other two rifle companies with Battalion HQ in the centre. C Coy, on the right, would pass south of the blockhouse. Except for the 25-pounders, the supporting arms were to accompany the infantry. Arrangements were made for 30 Battery to give supporting fire should it be required. The unit transport and B Echelon were not to move until the companies were firmly established on their objective. One 15-cwt. truck provided by HQ Coy was to travel between C and D Coys to give the mileage.

After a hasty breakfast of bully beef and biscuits, platoons formed up in the darkness and set out for the start line. Shortly after five o'clock C and D Coys moved off, with the others following close behind. It was very cold and everyone was warmly clad. As the men moved forward there was little noise save for the quiet curses of those who stumbled over desert scrub and the clink of loose equipment. Colonel Page had left his headquarters and was travelling on the left of 14 Platoon and maintaining contact with D Coy. No opposition was encountered until almost daylight, when the leading platoons came under machine-gun fire from the blockhouse and enemy positions farther west. One C Coy man was hit but the advance was not seriously delayed. The need for silence was gone, and each of the forward companies appeared to be trying to outdo the other in warcries and curses. The Colonel set a fine example. He had come without his steel helmet and seemed quite unconcerned by the fire. Shortly after daylight the two companies reached the

eastern edge of the landing field and began to dig in.

B Coy, following behind C Coy on the right flank, also came under fire from the blockhouse. It was obvious that the landing ground positions would be untenable as long as the enemy held this area. The 24th Battalion was held up and even at this juncture was attacking for the third time, with the artillery giving close support. Colonel Page decided to assist by attacking from the flank. After a few ranging shots the mortars fired several smoke shells into the building, causing the enemy to vacate it and run to prepared positions along the escarpment. Under cover of this smoke and continued supporting fire from mortars, machine guns and carriers, two sections from 10 Platoon and two from No. 11 moved forward. It was a
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advance, with two sections giving supporting fire while the third ran forward and the carriers worked around on the flank. As the men neared their objective they came under heavy machine-gun and anti-tank fire which brought the attack to a standstill. The mortars increased their fire and a small party of Germans stood up with their hands in the air. The carriers went forward to collect them but came under heavy fire from anti-tank guns sited nearer the blockhouse. Several of the vehicles were damaged on mines but the remainder continued up the slope. Meanwhile, the forward sections and the rest of B Coy had been pouring a heavy volume of small-arms fire into the enemy positions. Probably under the impression that he was surrounded the enemy surrendered. Everyone was amazed at the number of prisoners—over 200 were taken at a



The Advance to the Airfield—situation at 2 p.m. 25 November

cost to the battalion of four killed and eight wounded. Unfortunately, amongst the killed were two officers—Lt Westenra, the Carrier officer, who died of wounds, and [2 Lt J. R. Upton](#),¹³ 11 Platoon commander. Several others had lucky escapes. One soldier had a bullet penetrate his steel helmet without wounding him. Another bullet knocked 2 Lt Rutherford's pipe from his mouth, taking two teeth with it. The 24th Battalion's losses were more severe, for the enemy had directed heavy fire on its attacking companies.

The action over, the battalion deployed on its objective with [24 Battalion](#) linking up on the right flank. There was little cover and the ground was hard and stony. The leading companies moved farther across the landing ground and dug in under fire from enemy mortars, machine guns, and field guns north-west and west of the sector. About a thousand yards away four or five enemy tanks, using derelict British tanks as cover, were protecting the withdrawal of infantry to transport laagered in a wadi below. Artillery FOOs¹⁴ had not come forward with the battalion and an easy target was missed. The trucks were milling around in hopeless confusion; mortar fire was directed onto them but no apparent damage was done. Later a small car raced across the front several hundred yards away. Good shooting by the forward platoons of D Coy, Nos. 17 and 18, brought it to a stop. Three figures jumped out and lay prostrate, whereupon several of the men ran out to collect them. Two German doctors and a batman were brought into the lines, while another soldier drove back the car, flat tires and all. Captain Jennings subsequently used it in place of the one he had lost.

The landing ground was littered with the wreckage of German and Italian planes, burnt-out and abandoned tanks, a few trucks and some field guns—the results of the desperate battle of 20–23 November. Nearby was a barrack room, and in it lay the personal gear of Italian troops who had plainly vacated the area in a great hurry. Those of the battalion who had lost their own gear managed to salvage something from the wreckage. A fatigue party set about burying the dead. Most of them were Italians or British gunners from 60 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery.

Meanwhile, contact had been made with [30 Field Battery](#), which was still back near Pt 175, and artillery fire was directed on the enemy trucks and tanks, causing them to disperse in a hurry. Unfortunately at this juncture [6 Field Regiment](#) was short of ammunition, otherwise much heavier casualties would have been inflicted. Later in the morning the unit transport arrived at the landing ground and was widely dispersed. The operation had been successful. Both 24 and 26 Battalions were firmly established in the vicinity of the landing ground and 4 Brigade, on the north side of the escarpment, had drawn level again in the afternoon. The 21st Battalion had moved along the southern escarpment and was holding a position about four miles south-west of the battalion.

During the afternoon hostile shelling and mortaring became much heavier, indicating that the enemy was holding the western end of the escarpment in some strength. The Mortar Platoon again gave good service and succeeded in reducing the enemy mortar fire. About three o'clock the Anti-Aircraft Platoon opened fire on an enemy reconnaissance plane, but the fire was ineffective for the pilot leisurely finished his task and then flew off. About twenty minutes later the battalion sector was heavily shelled and mortared. Direct hits were scored on a number of trenches and five men were killed and several others wounded, C and HQ Coys faring worst. Towards dusk [RAF](#) bombers and fighters passed overhead, heading west. It was a most welcome sight for they caused an immediate slackening in the enemy fire.

After dusk a conference of battalion commanders was held at Brigade HQ to discuss plans for a divisional attack to capture the whole of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, [Belhamed](#) and [Ed Duda](#), and open a corridor to [Tobruk](#). Fourth Brigade was to capture [Belhamed](#) and the [Tobruk](#) garrison would attack Ed Duda from the north-west. The task in front of 6 Brigade was formidable. First the escarpment had

to be cleared. This represented an advance of about four miles, and there was every reason to believe that the enemy was strongly entrenched on the crest of the escarpment and in the many wadis which ran into it. Until this stage [20 Battalion](#), the left flank battalion of 4 Brigade, had been clearing some of these wadis, but in this attack they became the responsibility of 6 Brigade. The second objective was [Ed Duda](#). The Brigade Commander had no information about the strength or composition of the enemy forces which might be encountered in this second advance.

A complicated attack of this nature requires careful planning, but as it was scheduled to begin about 9 p.m. little time was left for that purpose. The assault was to be made in two phases. The 24th and 25th Battalions, under the command of Lt-Col Shuttleworth, were to carry out Phase One and attack and clear the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. With this well under way Phase Two would begin with 21 and 26 Battalions, under the command of Lt-Col Page, advancing on [Ed Duda](#). Except for small concentrations to give direction, no artillery support could be given.

The 21st and 26th Battalions were several miles apart, and this was Col Page's main problem in planning Phase Two. It was essential that the two should unite and reach the final objective under cover of darkness. The 24th and 25th Battalions intended to rendezvous at the blockhouse and drive westward along the crest of the escarpment and the lower slopes. At length the Colonel decided that 26 Battalion should follow the 24th along the crest and rendezvous with [21 Battalion](#) at a point south of the mosque, that battalion moving by direct route from its position on the southern escarpment. The 48th Battery NZA and a battery from 65 Field Regiment RA were to accompany 26 Battalion.

For this attack Maj Mathewson assumed temporary command of the battalion. Two other changes in command had been made necessary through casualties. Captain [Gatenby](#)¹⁵ of C Coy had taken over B Coy, and 2 Lt Rutherford now commanded the Carrier Platoon. Four platoons were commanded by NCOs: two in B Coy and one each in C and D Coys. The acting CO was faced with the almost impossible task of preparing a plan of action and getting his men and the supporting arms to the blockhouse within the prescribed time. Both troops and vehicles were widely dispersed across the landing ground, and although enemy shelling had practically ceased it was very dark. The battalion was to form up and move off from

the landing ground in two columns, one containing the rifle companies and the other the supporting arms and the transport. At the blockhouse, which was chosen as a convenient point for a start line, the infantry were to deploy and advance along the crest of the escarpment in the wake of [24 Battalion](#). B and C Coys were to lead, and on advice of the success of Phase One were to turn down into the wadis and advance north-west towards [Ed Duda](#). The 21st Battalion would link up with the 26th in the vicinity of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque and advance alongside it.

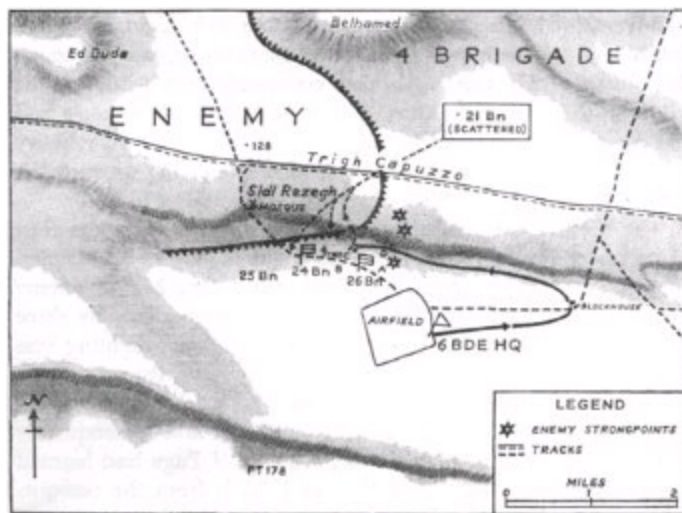
Brigadier Barrowclough's hopes of launching the attack at 9 p.m. were doomed to failure as Phase One did not begin until two hours later. About this time the battalion began moving towards the blockhouse. Major Mathewson with his Tactical HQ was leading. A thick ground mist limited visibility to a few yards and progress was very slow, much slower than had been expected. Shortly after midnight the infantry column reached the blockhouse and the companies began to deploy across the crest of the escarpment. Company commanders were talking and checking direction on Maj Mathewson when there was a loud explosion. A light truck which had been following Tac HQ had struck a mine. The driver was fatally injured and Maj Mathewson badly wounded.

Major Milliken came forward and took command, 2 Lt [Lamb](#)¹⁶ being left in charge of A Coy. After some delay, caused chiefly by the darkness and the difficulty of maintaining contact, the companies moved into position ready to continue the advance. The troubles of Tac HQ were not over. The British anti-tank battery had not arrived and a fruitless search was made for it. The guns of the field battery had got mixed up with the transport column and this caused further delay. The rest of the supporting arms were slow in arriving and the Adjutant set out in search of them. After some difficulty he brought them forward. Meanwhile B and C Coys had begun to move along the escarpment, the men picking their way over rough ground and around huge boulders. Colonel Page, who had remained close at hand throughout the night and had assisted in the reorganisation at the blockhouse, was directing the advance. He was in wireless communication with Brigade HQ and the other battalions. Colonel Shuttleworth's group had not reached its objective but was advancing against very heavy opposition. The 21st Battalion was already moving towards the rendezvous.

The leading companies had gone over two miles when they came under fire from the front and right flank. This indicated that the battalions ahead had bypassed a number of enemy posts and were not as far forward as thought earlier. By three o'clock the platoons were close to [24 Battalion](#). Fighting was going on all around, and heavy fire forced the troops to seek cover after several men had been hit. Colonel Shuttleworth's battalions were obviously heavily engaged and consequently somewhat disorganised. In the meantime Col Page had learned that [24 Battalion](#) was still a thousand yards from the mosque. Enemy opposition had been stronger than had been expected and heavy losses had been suffered. In view of this the line was being stabilised. At 4 a.m. the situation had not improved, and the Brigade Commander cancelled Phase Two because of the impossibility of reaching [Ed Duda](#) before daylight. Unfortunately this news could not be passed on to [21 Battalion](#), which was approaching the mosque from the south. The wireless link failed and patrols were unable to locate the battalion.

Colonel Page resumed command of [26 Battalion](#) and in the darkness moved his companies into positions on the right of [24 Battalion](#). C and D Coys were holding the forward positions on the escarpment and their front faced north and north-west. The troops began to dig in. Deep trenches were out of the question for the escarpment was almost solid rock. Instead the men hewed out holes about six inches deep and built low walls around the edges with stones. At daylight the enemy subjected the area to concentrated and prolonged shelling and mortaring. Shells and mortar bombs exploded in all directions.

Snipers and machine guns on higher ground harassed all movement. Many of the shallow holes dug during the early hours



POSITIONS ON MORNING 26 NOVEMBER SHOWING LINE OF ADVANCE OF PREVIOUS NIGHT

Positions on morning 26 November showing line of advance of previous night

of the morning had to be vacated. Some were under enemy observation and others were badly sited. Digging new ones was nerve-wracking work. The enemy still held the high ground to the west and his OPs there were able to direct accurate fire on the hapless infantry. Not far away an 18-pounder troop (M Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery) was engaging the enemy despite the heavy shelling of its positions. Because of the shortage of ammunition the 25-pounders were not doing much firing. The unit transport which was up close to the troops was an obvious target, and soon after dawn the CO ordered Capt [Bowie](#)¹⁷ to take it back into a wadi near the landing field.

All four companies were in very exposed positions. D Coy on the right had dug in on the crest of the escarpment with its right-hand platoon overlooking the northern slopes of it. From this company the line ran back on an angle to C Coy on the southern slopes. A Coy was behind D and B Coy was to the left rear. The wadis which ran up into the escarpment offered cover only from machine-gunning and snipers. Although the whole sector was under heavy fire, D Coy was perhaps in the worst position. An enemy pocket bypassed during the night lay to its right rear and any movement towards it drew mortar and machine-gun fire.

The morning passed with the men crouching in their shallow holes hoping the next shells or bombs would come no nearer. There was little comfort in the knowledge that about one in every ten shells which landed would be a dud. The 24th and 25th Battalions were in no better position. The weakened 25th Battalion still

held its position about a mile south-east of the mosque; 24 Battalion east of it had suffered heavily and some of its positions overlapped those of 26 Battalion. From early morning survivors of 21 Battalion had been arriving in the battalion sector from the northern slopes of the escarpment. They told the story of their unit's misadventures. Believing the escarpment had been captured, 21 Battalion had headed for the mosque but when close to it ran into heavy opposition. The troops fought their way through the enemy lines, but at daylight had to fight their way back again. In doing so the battalion became scattered. One company reached 24 Battalion and the others were scattered in the short wadis on the north side of the escarpment. One large group led by the CO, Lt-Col Allen,¹⁸ was sheltering in a wadi north of C Coy.

The news from other fronts was a mixture of good and bad. Fourth Brigade had captured Belhamed after a hard fight and the Tobruk garrison had pushed south-east to Ed Duda. Enemy armour had thrust into Egypt and, ranging across the frontier, had disrupted divisional supply columns. This was already having a serious effect in the struggle outside Tobruk. Artillery regiments in particular were very short of ammunition. So far 5 Brigade had not been seriously affected by the enemy threat.

On learning of Col Allen's predicament Col Page took immediate steps to assist the beleaguered party. C Coy was ordered to advance over the escarpment and cover its withdrawal. Captain Thomson was given no time for preparation. Mortars were already laying smoke over the area and on the right flank Vickers gunners were waiting to give covering fire. The Company Commander yelled to his men to charge. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons heard the order and sprang to their feet. In the face of heavy mortar and machine-gun fire they ran up the slope, across the crest of the escarpment into the wadi, and up another slope. Many were hit and more casualties were suffered as the enemy intensified his mortar fire. When the two platoons attempted to move over the slope they ran into heavy machine-gun fire which forced them back. Captain Thomson decided to go no farther, particularly as the 21st Battalion remnants and some 24 Battalion wounded were now able to withdraw to the lines. No. 13 Platoon joined the rest of the company. The Platoon Commander had not heard the shouted order to charge and it was some time before he realised what was happening.

The withdrawal was made under extremely difficult conditions and the

evacuation of the wounded took several hours. Stretcher-bearers and their helpers did a magnificent job, exposed to continuous mortar and shell fire. Carriers and trucks carried the wounded back to [24 Battalion RAP](#), Doctor Jennings being forward with the troops. Although the attack had enabled Col Allen's party to withdraw, C Coy had suffered heavily. Five men had been killed and 17 wounded. Captain Thomson lost a second platoon commander and six NCOs. The company reoccupied its former position, the 21st Battalion remnants remaining with it.

Later in the day D Coy attempted to reduce the enemy pocket at the rear of its position. No. 17 Platoon (2 Lt Clubb) ¹⁹ attempted to capture the post with mortar support but ran into heavy machine-gun fire and was forced to withdraw. Subsequently No. 18 Platoon (2 Lt Tizard) ²⁰ joined No. 17, and the two platoons made a determined effort to reach the enemy position, the approaches to which were cut by several shallow wadis. Although given excellent support by the Mortar Platoon, the attackers could make little progress and suffered serious casualties as they attempted to cross the wadis. The strongly constructed pillboxes seen in the area and the volume of fire indicated that the post was no mere pocket. Eventually the two platoons withdrew to their original positions. The task of evacuating the nine wounded from the exposed slopes to the RAP took over three hours and was completed under heavy fire. A third attempt to capture this strongpoint was abandoned when it was learned that another night attack was to be made.

Colonel Page was advised of this attack at a brigade conference held out in the open desert during the afternoon. Each officer lay flat on his stomach with maps spread out in front of him, for the slightest movement brought down enemy fire. The Brigade Commander had decided the escarpment must be captured at all costs if the battle to raise the siege of [Tobruk](#) was to succeed. The decision was a difficult one in view of the heavy losses already suffered by the brigade and the known strength of the enemy defenders. Battalion commanders reported that their men were very tired. Lack of sleep and the strain of constant enemy fire was telling on all ranks. Many of the platoons were in very exposed positions and were suffering casualties. Colonel Page reported that he had lost six officers and over 80 other ranks since the start of the campaign, and another day in the present positions would increase this total considerably.

In contrast to that of the previous night, Brig Barrowclough's plan was simple. The battered remnants of 21 and 25 Battalions were to withdraw, the 21st to Pt 175 and the 25th to the blockhouse. At 11 p.m. 24 and 26 Battalions would attack, the former driving west along the crest of the escarpment, with 26 Battalion on its right moving through the short wadis on the north side. Their objective was the high ground around the mosque, the possession of which would give the brigade observation over the western end of the escarpment and the valley about [Ed Duda](#). It was not to be expected that the enemy would relinquish his hold on the escarpment without a hard struggle. His infantry were likely to be on or near the crest of the escarpment and his machine guns, mortars, and anti-tank guns in the wadis, but in view of the probable close fighting no support of any kind could be given.

Back with the battalion Col Page called his company commanders together to discuss the plan. A thousand yards away an anti-tank gun was trying to hit the carrier on which the CO was sitting. The other officers, more discreet, were huddled down on the ground. The battalion was to form up on the crest of the escarpment and, with A and B Coys leading, move west along it for a distance of about 1200 yards. The leading platoons would then move down into the wadis and continue west another 1100 yards. Tactical HQ and the other two companies would follow close behind. All communication was to be by wireless. Captain Tolerton was to set up a Rear HQ at the forming-up position and maintain the link between Brigade HQ and Col Page. Company commanders were given compass bearings to assist them to get into position. Some HQ Coy personnel were to be drafted into the companies to build up the strength of platoons which had already suffered heavy losses. The going was likely to be difficult, and the CO impressed on his company commanders the necessity for all platoon commanders knowing what was the objective. Success would bring the battalion into line with the mosque.

The news of the attack was well received by the men who, although extremely tired, knew that they could expect no peace until the escarpment was wholly captured. In any case, moving about was better than shivering all night in shallow holes. After dusk, when the enemy shelling and mortaring had eased off, Capt Wilson arrived with hot stew and a supply of water. The hot meal put new heart into the men about to embark on the next phase of the battle for the [Sidi Rezegh](#)

escarpment.

* * *

A few minutes after eleven o'clock the troops rose from their shallow trenches and moved quietly along the crest of the escarpment towards [24 Battalion](#). It was a pitch-black night and platoons had to travel in close formation to maintain contact. The enemy's reaction was swift and sudden. It came as the men moved over the crest into the wadis. Flares bathed the whole area in light and the air was soon filled with tracer. As the leading companies formed up and prepared to continue the advance, enemy mortars and anti-tank guns opened fire at close range. Grenades burst amongst the lines of closely packed infantry. The troops, forgetting their tiredness, were not to be gainsaid. They pressed on regardless of the heavy fire and those falling about them and engaged the enemy at close quarters with grenades, rifle, and bayonet. The fighting was severe but the issue was never in doubt. The Italian defenders (9th Bersaglieri Regiment), together with some Germans, fought well. They were shown no mercy and gave none in return.

The first wadi was cleared and officers and NCOs rallied their men to charge the next. Major Milliken's stentorian voice could be heard above the noise of battle urging his men on. A fusillade of shell and shot met the two companies as they crossed the next ridge. Small groups of men made concerted rushes on the enemy firing pits, and one by one they were wiped out. Many individual acts of heroism and bravery passed almost unnoticed in the heat of battle. There seemed no end to the wadis. No sooner had one been cleared than another loomed up ahead. From it came machine-gun and anti-tank gun fire by which the Italians sought to stave off the assault. Some confusion was inevitable. Sections became scattered, but the initial impetus of the assault was maintained until the objective was reached.

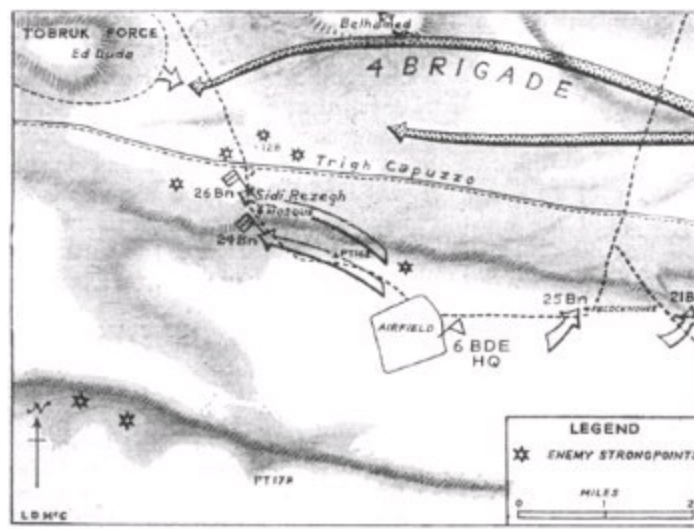
Both companies had suffered heavy losses. Nearly twenty men had been killed and many others severely wounded. Major Milliken's voice was silent. Early in the fighting A Coy HQ had walked right into a machine-gun post. The Company Commander and half his staff had been killed. Second-Lieutenant Lamb had taken over command and he and Capt Gatenby (OC B Coy) began reorganising the forward platoons along the line of the objective. It was not an easy task. Fighting was going on all around as isolated pockets of resistance were cleaned out. Other enemy

positions lay close at hand, and from these and some farther west came heavy machine-gun, mortar, and shell fire. The troops began to dig in. Behind them C and D Coys were also consolidating. The former had had to deal with a number of enemy posts bypassed during the advance but had escaped with only light casualties. D Coy on the right had encountered little opposition. Nos. 16 and 18 Platoons were in position but the reserve platoon was missing.

Tactical HQ had suffered a similar fate to A Coy HQ. Colonel Page was badly wounded and about half the headquarters personnel became casualties. This had happened shortly after the attack began, and Tac HQ as such had ceased to function. The two officers left, 2 Lt [Kearney](#),²¹ Signals Officer, and 2 Lt [Pierson](#),²² IO, endeavoured to restore some measure of control. Wireless communication with the companies and Rear HQ had unaccountably broken down. Kearney went ahead with his wireless operator to find out what was happening and Pierson returned with Col Page and the stretcher-bearers to Rear HQ. By this means they hoped to establish a direct wireless link from Capt Tolerton to the forward companies.

They did not succeed. The fighting was still going on when Kearney reached the forward area, and in the darkness and confusion he went too far. Realising his mistake he came back to the lines, only to be bayoneted in the leg by an excited soldier. To make matters worse the wireless operator was killed by machine-gun fire and the set damaged. In the meantime the IO had reached Rear HQ where he learned that, due to static and jamming, wireless communication with Brigade HQ and the companies was practically impossible. As a result he went forward again on foot to make personal contact with each company. He found A, B, and C Coys in close touch with one another. The troops had dug in but were being subjected to very heavy mortar and shell fire, the severity of which led company commanders to believe the enemy was preparing to counter-attack. There was no sign of [24 Battalion](#). In view of this they had decided to withdraw to the crest of the escarpment at first light.

By 4.30 a.m. (27 November) the three companies were back on the escarpment, where they dug in on the right rear of [24](#)



SIDI REZEGH, DAWN 27 NOVEMBER
Sidi Rezegh, dawn 27 November

Battalion which was still heavily engaged. Enemy shelling eased off and in their holes the troops waited for the dawn, knowing that further fighting lay ahead of them. Stragglers drifted up from the wadis—tired, cold and hungry, but triumphant. Captain [Walden](#)²³ arrived at Rear HQ to take command of the battalion. His company (D) was still down in the wadis, unaware the others had moved back. The missing reserve platoon had been traced. Through no fault of his own the platoon commander, 2 Lt Clubb, had followed a wrong compass bearing. The platoon had come under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire, and in an effort to circumvent it Clubb had led his men around to the right only to find he was surrounded. Without stopping to think, the ten men who formed the platoon rushed the enemy, killing several and capturing another twelve. While conducting these back towards the escarpment the platoon was surrounded by a much larger enemy force and was forced

to surrender. Clubb and two others managed to escape after spending several hours in the enemy lines.

The expected enemy counter-attack did not eventuate. The 24th Battalion was heavily engaged at first light and the enemy withdrew from the area in some confusion. D Coy moved forward and took up a position north of the mosque and on the right of [24 Battalion](#). It was bitterly cold and a damp mist enshrouded the area. Firing had ceased except for the occasional ping of a sniper's bullet. The scene at dawn is best described in an account written by one of the platoon commanders:

[Sidi Rezegh](#) on that cold morning of Thursday, 27 November 1941, could never be forgotten. I knelt beside two men, gave one a cigarette and a drink from a water bottle. His right shoulder and arm were gone. He said of the still form beside him, 'Cover my mate, sir. He's just died.' He followed soon after. I remember thinking of an article by Quentin Reynolds which he titled 'The Wounded Don't Cry.' Here and there was a bayonet stuck in the ground. A steel helmet on the butt marked a casualty. Everywhere stretcher-bearers strained under their loads, keeping the trucks busy as they came up one after another. Amid the prostrate, khaki-clad figures were many wearing the blue uniform of [Italy](#)—I wanted to be sick. Padre Watson ²⁴ was a grand sight, doing all that was humanly possible. It started to drizzle. I looked for some of my platoon. I found... He would not need the trousers of his delight, those with the 26-inch bottoms—his legs were gone. We carried him to the RAP. There the Doc was hard at work. An injection put my lad to sleep. Not far away the first rays of the sun caught the domed mosque—a temple amid a bloody carnage.

An extract from Brig Barrowclough's report on this action reads as follows:

My recce at daylight of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) position showed how stubborn had been the fighting there.... The enemy forces comprised a number of Germans and troops of the 9th Bersaglieri Regiment. Both were plentifully supplied with machine guns and anti-tank guns, and it was clear that our troops had had to advance right to the muzzles of these guns before their crews were despatched and the guns silenced. There was an enormous number of dead and wounded all over the battlefield. A significant feature was the sight of many men who had been hit by the solid shot of anti-tank guns fired at point-blank range. These projectiles had torn large portions of flesh from their unfortunate victims and it would be hard to imagine a more heavily contested battlefield. The Bersaglieri Regiment had fought with much greater determination than is usually found amongst Italians, and the number of their dead and the position in which they lay showed they had kept their guns in action to the last. It was against such opposition that the exhausted and sadly depleted ranks of 24 and 26 Battalions had fought their way to victory— and their victory was complete.

The [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment had been captured—captured by the courage and determination of troops who fought against heavy odds. Officers and NCOs had set a

splendid example and the men had followed them unflinchingly. The importance of this hard-won ground, in particular the high feature south of the mosque, was the commanding view gained over the surrounding desert—north to [Belhamed](#), northwest to [Ed Duda](#), west to [El Adem](#), and south to the southern escarpment. The Division was now in control of the two northern escarpments. Some of the low ground between them had not been cleared, but [19 Battalion](#) had attacked towards [Ed Duda](#) during the night and had linked up with the [Tobruk](#) garrison. Although enemy troops were close at hand, the corridor was open and the main purpose of the divisional attack had been accomplished.

The price paid for victory was high: [26 Battalion](#) had lost 84 men—23 killed and 61 evacuated wounded; ²⁵ [24 Battalion](#) had lost heavily too. Many of the wounded had terrible injuries which left them maimed for life. Some had lain on the battlefield for many hours, undiscovered and in great agony. Nine of the battalion's wounded subsequently died. Stretcher-bearers and RAP personnel worked unceasingly through the night and into the morning. At dawn trucks and carriers came forward as far as they could to assist with the evacuation of wounded. Captain Wilson brought up a hot meal and took back a load of wounded men. On the escarpment and in the wadis Padre Watson and Mr. [Gray](#) ²⁶ of the [YMCA](#) moved among the prone figures, distributing cigarettes, chocolate, and a word of cheer. At the RAP near the landing ground Capt Jennings and his staff worked without respite for many hours. Friend and foe were treated alike and everything possible was done to ease their suffering.

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Although the Division now held the two escarpments dominating the corridor to [Tobruk](#), it was unable because of heavy losses to occupy the southern escarpment. The enemy was quick to take advantage of this and early on the 27th returned to this area. Not long afterwards his artillery began shelling [Sidi Rezegh](#). Another enemy force lay between the central escarpment and [El Adem](#). At the frontier the situation had deteriorated still further. During the morning of the 27th HQ 5 Brigade was overwhelmed at [Sidi Azeiz](#) by an enemy armoured column, and only a determined stand by the battalions of that brigade saved them from a similar fate. The enemy armour then turned westward in response to a plea for help from the German commander of the forces about [Tobruk](#).

Completely unaware of this, Brig Barrowclough went ahead with plans to defend [Sidi Rezegh](#) against attacks from the west, north-west, and north. He was not unduly perturbed about the threat to his southern flank as 1 South African Brigade was reported to be moving towards that escarpment. The 24th and 26th Battalions were ordered to extend west to cover a wider front. The move, which was made about four o'clock in the afternoon, left the battalion in positions overlooking the mosque and the [Ed Duda](#) valley along a front facing roughly north and north-west. Major [Mantell-Harding](#),²⁷ who had come from 24 Battalion to command the unit, placed B and D Coys forward. The supporting arms were sited in positions to give all-round protection. Sixth Brigade was at this stage extended along a seven-to-eight mile front with [21 Battalion](#) at Pt 175, [25 Battalion](#) at the blockhouse, and the two battalions around the mosque.

The troops dug in. Enemy shelling had not been heavy during the morning but it increased late in the afternoon. A cold wind made conditions rather unpleasant. Some of the men were wearing clothing discarded by the Italians in their withdrawal. During the afternoon the last of the dwindling stock of ammunition was distributed. This problem had been made acute by the loss of several ammunition carriers and trucks during the heavy shelling of the previous days.

The strongpoint which D Coy had attacked on the 26th was still causing trouble. Snipers operating from this area had already killed several men and were harassing traffic moving to and fro from Brigade HQ and B Echelon to the forward troops. Brigadier Barrowclough gave orders for it to be captured; Maj Mantell-Harding, not knowing the strength of the enemy position, detailed 7 Platoon for the task. One carrier and a detachment of mortars were to give covering fire. The Platoon Commander, 2 Lt [Nottle](#),²⁸ made a rapid reconnaissance and decided to attack from the west while the carrier moved around from the south. The mortars were to fire smoke and high explosive.

The platoon manœuvred into position and then attacked. Almost immediately it came under machine-gun, mortar and anti-tank fire, which became heavier as the troops ran over the uneven ground and neared the enemy. Some of the men were hit, but the rest carried on until pinned down by strong small-arms fire within a hundred yards of their objective. For nearly an hour the men hugged the ground

while bullets passed over their heads and bombs exploded all around. 2 Lt Nottle realised that the enemy strongpoint was no machine-gun post but an extensive chain of defences. The platoon had already passed several concreted dugouts and gunpits. The Platoon Commander decided to withdraw. Taking advantage of any lull in the firing, the men raced back towards their start point. The evacuation of the wounded was a more difficult problem but was safely completed with the aid of the Bren carrier. The latter came under heavy fire as it approached the area and on each trip was chased along the escarpment by anti-tank shells.

The mortar detachment had given the platoon close support, not only during the initial stages of the attack but also during the withdrawal. Sergeant McIntosh,²⁹ the Mortar sergeant, stood up in a carrier to gain better observation, although by doing so he attracted fire on himself. An unusual incident occurred while this attack was in progress. There was a heavy fall of rain which pelted down with such force that everyone was soon soaked. Not one platoon weapon would fire. Breeches and bolts were already covered with fine sand which the rain turned to cement. The enemy was in a similar position for all small-arms fire ceased, only the mortars and anti-tank guns continuing to fire. In some instances it took half an hour to get the gun mechanisms working again.

At dusk enemy shelling ceased, to recommence at irregular intervals throughout the night. For the first time since the 20th the troops were free to enjoy a night's sleep. Company QMs brought forward a hot meal, but this did little to warm the men who, soaked by the rain, had nothing to protect them against the penetrating cold wind. Socks unchanged for nearly a fortnight and wet with sweat and rain, caused feet to swell and become numb. Despite their weariness most of the men worked with picks and shovels for long periods in an effort to keep warm. Everyone cursed those responsible for sending off the RMT and the extra blankets.

Early next morning (28 November) it was evident that the enemy force on the southern escarpment had been considerably strengthened. First South African Brigade had not arrived as hoped, and the position of 6 Brigade was fast becoming serious, particularly in view of its long front and the shortage of ammunition. Little could be done about it. Fourth Brigade advised that it would be clearing up some isolated enemy pockets between the two brigades during the afternoon. Brigadier Barrowclough at an early morning conference decided that another attempt should

be made to clean up the enemy strongpoint east of 26 Battalion, this time with artillery support.

During the morning two enemy columns raced across the low ground between the battalion and the southern escarpment. The first, a large convoy of troop-carrying vehicles, appeared about nine o'clock. It came from the south-east and everyone cheered up, thinking it was the South Africans. Binoculars were turned on the convov but a carrier reconnaissance proved it to be hostile. Disappointment was written on all faces when the news was made known. Not long afterwards a second convoy appeared. This also proved to be hostile for it turned off to join the first, now dispersed along the southern escarpment south-west of the battalion. Both columns would have been easy targets for the 25-pounders had they not been reserving their ammunition for 4 Brigade's attack.

By midday it was apparent that the enemy was building up a large force behind the southern escarpment. The troops on [Sidi Rezegh](#) were being subjected to a heavy and almost continuous bombardment from large-calibre guns. At 2 p.m. 24 Battalion reported an enemy column about three to four miles to the west. About the same time 4 Brigade began its attack and the 25-pounders opened fire. Down near the landing ground Capt Bowie was keeping his trucks on the move to dodge the shelling. He was quick to realise that it was a series of concentrations, and largely because of this no losses were suffered. B Echelon also spent an uncomfortable afternoon but the cooks provided the usual hot meal at dusk. Meanwhile, 2 Lt Nottle had been ordered to take Nos. 7 and 8 Platoons and make another attack on the strongpoint. None of the 22 men was very keen about the attack but the promise of support from 29 Battery put matters in a better light. Early in the day Nottle made a thorough reconnaissance before deciding to circle around the post and attack this time from the east. He planned to move off at 2 p.m. At this time the artillery was fully engaged in assisting 4 Brigade and the assault was delayed an hour. The two platoons moved along the escarpment and circled around the strongpoint.

While waiting for the 25-pounders to open fire, the platoons had a bird's-eye view of the cleaning-up operations south of [Belhamed](#). Tanks, carriers, and infantry moved across the wadis. Ahead of them were large clouds of dust raised by the shells. The sight of Germans with their hands in the air put new life into the assault

party, which turned to move into the fray itself. The 29th Battery fired shell after shell into the enemy fortification. The infantrymen advanced and, when still 400 yards from it, were surprised to see only 50 yards away several Germans with their hands in the air. Other groups of the enemy followed suit in quick succession. Without a shot being fired by the infantry the strongpoint was captured. Prisoners totalled 157, and over twenty New Zealanders (from [24 Battalion](#)) were released. The artillery fire had apparently convinced the enemy that a full-scale attack was impending and had induced him to surrender.

During the morning Lt-Col Allen's body was found. He had been missing since the night of the 27th and had apparently run into fire from the strongpoint as he moved along the escarpment from Pt 175.

Somewhat embarrassed by the numbers of the enemy, 2 Lt Nottle and his men escorted them down the slope towards the landing field, intending to hand them over to Brigade HQ. At this juncture Brigade HQ was preparing to move across to the north side of the escarpment and Nottle was ordered to return to the strongpoint and mount guard over the prisoners until relief could be arranged. The Brigade Commander informed the party that [24 Battalion](#) had been under attack and had suffered further losses but the situation had since improved. In 26 Battalion 2 Lt Lamb had been mortally wounded, and in the meantime 2 Lt [Potts](#)³⁰ was acting commander of A Coy. The two platoons and their prisoners remained in the strongpoint until about midday on the 29th, when a party of sappers arrived to demolish the fortifications. These extended over an area of several thousand square yards and were all dug out of solid rock. Within the perimeter were numerous weapon pits with concreted sleeping quarters, deep caverns, a number of anti-tank guns (including an 88-millimetre), three wireless sets, mortars, machine guns, and small arms of all descriptions. Most of the dugouts were roofed in, and from the strongpoint the enemy commanded good observation over the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) to [Belhamed](#) and south past the landing field to the southern escarpment.

Shortly after the two platoons left to attack the strongpoint, the rest of the battalion and [24 Battalion](#) were subjected to
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Diving out of trucks on the road south of Corinth — the 'spotter' in the foreground gives warning of aircraft

Diving out of trucks on the road south of Corinth—the 'spotter' in the foreground gives warning of aircraft



More air attacks on the way to Monemvasia

More air attacks on the way to Monemvasia



The evacuation from Greece — on the *Thurland Castle*
between Crete and Alexandria

The evacuation from **Greece**—on the **Thurland Castle** between **Crete** and **Alexandria**



Dugout at Baggush — all the others in the photograph are concealed

Dugout at **Baggush**—all the others in the photograph are concealed

creasingly

heavy shellfire, which pinned the troops on the escarpment to their trenches and enabled enemy infantry and tanks to converge on **Sidi Rezegh**. About 2.30 p.m. motorised infantry and tanks were seen approaching from the west. The forward companies of 26 Battalion engaged the enemy with small-arms fire as his trucks neared the sector. The 24th Battalion was under very heavy shellfire at this time and seemed powerless to stop the enemy's approach. When only a short distance away the enemy debussed and continued to advance on foot. Brigade HQ was informed that an attack was imminent, but unfortunately at this time the artillery regiments were assisting 4 Brigade and the Brigade Commander was forced to rely on the few

British tanks under his command. The 26th Battalion was sited to cover the northern and north-western fronts, and any attempt to resite the companies under such heavy fire would have resulted in heavy casualties. The already precarious situation was made worse by the appearance of enemy tanks in some wadis south-east of the sector.

The enemy gunfire slackened off. Then came a startling report that the two forward companies of 24 Battalion had been captured, apparently by a ruse. This reduced 24 Battalion to little more than a hundred men, and Nos. 13 and 18 Platoons were sent forward by the CO to help fill the gap. Strangely enough, just when everyone thought the game was about up, the enemy disengaged. A small enemy party which made a half-hearted attack from the south-east was beaten off. Three British tanks arrived late on the scene and, before anyone could get to them, opened fire on the 24th and 26th Battalions' RAP. Padre Watson went out, at no little risk, and explained to the tank commander what was happening. Unfortunately, several of the wounded in the RAP had been killed. As darkness fell the enemy withdrew, leaving a relieved 6 Brigade in peace. B Echelon had suffered nine casualties during the heavy shelling. The rifle companies had escaped fairly lightly, four men being killed, including one officer.

Fourth Brigade had succeeded in clearing the ground between the two escarpments, taking over 600 prisoners. This removed any threat to 6 Brigade from the north, and during the night the brigade positions were reorganised. The remnants of 24 Battalion, with the two platoons from 26 Battalion, remained in position covering the western and south-western approaches to the mosque. The 26th Battalion extended east along the crest and lower slopes of the escarpment a distance of about 1200 yards to Pt 162. It was a wide front to cover with so few men and such little support. A and B Coys occupied the lower ground west of the landing field, with C Coy on high ground behind them. Their front faced south and south-west. D Coy dug in close to Pt 162 and faced south-east. Brigade HQ, B Echelon, and the transport all left the landing ground during the night and moved across to the northern side of the escarpment. To strengthen the thin line of infantry stretched along the 10,000-yard front from Pt 175 to west of the mosque, the Brigade Commander brought in 8 Field Company NZE to act as infantry. The company took up a position about midway between 25 Battalion at the blockhouse and the

strongpoint captured by 2 Lt Nottle.

It was another cold night, and again the men were unable to sleep because of it. All ranks were dog-tired and rather dispirited. Since the 27th everything seemed to have gone wrong. Water was very short and there was scarcely any ammunition. To the west, south and east were enemy forces which appeared able to attack at will. The presence of many enemy tanks was viewed with concern for the brigade had only a few two-pounders and 18-pounders to deal with them. It was plain that the enemy armoured columns had returned from their thrust into Egypt and were only waiting their chance to counter-attack the troops holding the 'corridor' to [Tobruk](#). It seemed that the hard fighting of the last few days had gone for nothing. But each man, tired as he was, was grimly determined that the enemy would not regain the escarpment without a hard fight. Throughout the night flares were going up along the southern escarpment and everyone hoped that this might mean the South Africans had arrived.

It was a gloomy picture. The only bright spots were the absence of enemy fighters and bombers and the regular arrival of hot meals. Morning and night, despite the shelling, the QM vehicles arrived with the hot-boxes, and carrying parties from each company would go back to collect the food. Few of the men realised the difficulties faced by Capt Wilson and his staff in collecting the rations in the first place. With only a signalled map reference to guide him, the QM or his assistant, WO II [Cross](#),³¹ would lead a small convoy out into the desert to find the supply column. Frequently the convoy encountered enemy AFVs and had to make a run for it. On other occasions the supply column was driven off its course by enemy action and the QM had to scout around to find it. After the enemy armour returned from its thrust into Egypt, the collection of supplies became increasingly difficult, but the men seldom went without a meal, notwithstanding the severity of the shelling.

At dawn on the 29th all eyes turned to the south-east but there was no sign of friendly troops. Instead, over came the enemy shells, and all ranks crouched in their new trenches. Shortly afterwards a large convoy of about 300 vehicles escorted by tanks and AFVs was seen approaching from the east. The men turned to face this new threat. This looked like the final battle. As the 25-pounders opened fire the column was recognised as a supply column. At the head of it, standing in a battered staff car, was Col [Clifton](#),³² who had guided the convoy through the enemy cordon

to the Division. Chased by enemy shells, the long column of trucks crossed the escarpment to a safer harbour on the north side. The arrival of food, water, and ammunition cheered everyone up, although the brigade's position was still serious. During the morning [21 Battalion](#) captured General von Ravenstein, Commander [21 Panzer Division](#), who was under the mistaken impression that Pt 175 was in German hands. Documents found in his staff car included the enemy order of battle and gave a clear indication of how he intended to drive the New Zealanders from the two escarpments. Despite this knowledge both New Zealand brigades could only sit and hope for the best.

Throughout the morning hostile shelling forced the troops to remain under cover. Twice enemy infantry and tanks attempted to approach the battalion from the south, but each time artillery fire drove them back. The position was much the same on other fronts. The 21st Battalion was threatened and later engaged by an enemy column. The 25th Battalion and the sappers reported threatening moves by the enemy. West of [24 Battalion](#) and [4 Brigade](#), enemy columns assembled and began to move across the front, being engaged by the 25-pounders. Enemy reconnaissance planes appeared overhead and the shelling increased. After midday a tank battle developed west of [Ed Duda](#). Smoke and dust hid the contestants from view. South-west of the battalion a large transport plane was delivering supplies to the enemy force on the southern escarpment. Enemy transport and AFVs again approached the sector, this time from the south-west, but the 25-pounders again drove them back.

The tank battle west of [Ed Duda](#) raged all afternoon, and it was clear that the enemy was holding back his assault on the escarpment until a decision was reached in this battle. Nevertheless a constant pressure was maintained on [4](#) and [6 Brigades](#) throughout the rest of the afternoon. To the men it was good to hear the 25-pounders firing again and to know they could expect closer support now that the ammunition supplies were better. In turn the artillerymen found they had so many targets that it was impossible to engage them all. Shortly before dusk enemy tanks in the wadis south-east of [D Coy](#) began to move north. They were immediately engaged by the artillery and one tank was knocked out, the others withdrawing rapidly to the south.

At dusk the situation was unchanged. The enemy attack had been staved off

and another fairly quiet night followed. Grave news came from Brigade HQ. Part of [Ed Duda](#) had been recaptured by the enemy and, worst of all, Pt 175 had been lost. The 21st Battalion had been overrun by tanks which had approached the feature openly displaying British recognition signals. The enemy now had observation over the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment and, to a certain extent, over 4 Brigade's sector too. Everything depended on the South Africans, who were ordered to move direct on Pt 175 and recapture the feature.

Sunday, 30 November, dawned fine and sunny. The troops on the escarpment felt that this day would see the crisis, which could hardly be delayed much longer. Patrols from 25 Battalion reported Pt 175 in enemy hands. The South Africans had not arrived. The tank battle of the previous afternoon had gone against the British but [Ed Duda](#) had been retaken during the night. Everyone hoped that before it was too late an order to withdraw would be received, but from Divisional HQ came a message to hold on—the corridor must be kept open. Captain Wilson brought up a hot breakfast—bully-beef stew, porridge and hot tea—the last meal of consequence for some time.

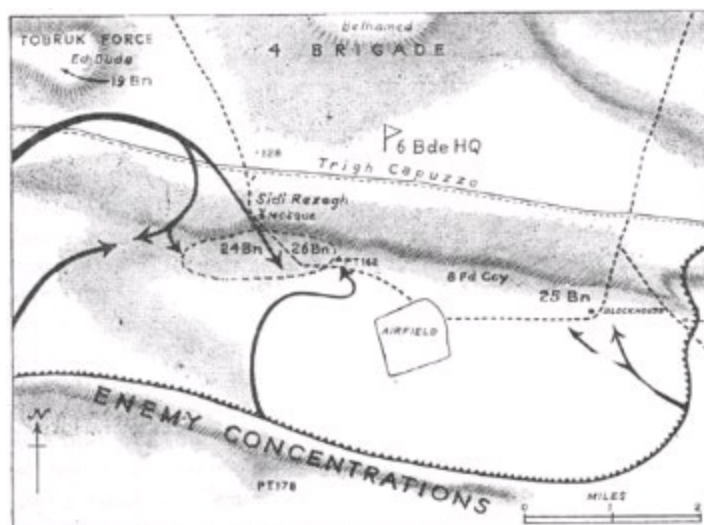
About 9 a.m. a large concentration of tanks and vehicles was seen on the southern escarpment some distance south-east of D Coy. It was wildly hoped this might be the South Africans, but reconnaissance patrols reported it as hostile. The artillery opened fire and the enemy withdrew in some confusion, leaving several burning trucks behind. At 10 a.m. about thirty tanks moved rapidly across the southern front, apparently trying to join the enemy force on the western end of the southern escarpment. Several times they attempted to approach [Sidi Rezegh](#) but were driven back by artillery fire. Before long the New Zealand gunners had more targets than they could handle. Concentrations of tanks, guns, and infantry could be seen in almost every direction. Tanks and infantry were reported south of the blockhouse. East of them was the [Ariete Division](#), which had been shelled at 9 a.m. Closer at hand the enemy was moving reinforcements onto Pt 175. South of the battalion was a number of tanks, while west of these on the southern escarpment was the concentration of tanks, guns, and lorried infantry seen the previous day. West and north-west of [24 Battalion](#) were other enemy concentrations. Fourth Brigade at [Ed Duda](#), [Zaafan](#), and [Belhamed](#) was also menaced by converging enemy forces.

At 10.30 a.m. the enemy began the longest and heaviest shelling of the battle. For over five hours enemy gunners plastered the western end of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) feature. The troops lost interest in the 25-pounders and their targets, for it was too dangerous to lift a head above the level of a slit trench. The enemy was using long-range guns which the New Zealand artillery could not reach. A pall of smoke and dust covered the escarpment. All ranks knew that this shelling was but the prelude to an attack, and they knew, too, that nothing could be done about it. The only ones on their feet were a few signallers, vainly endeavouring to maintain line communications with Brigade HQ and [24 Battalion](#), and one or two stretcher-bearers attending to wounded. Amongst the stretcher-bearers was Pte [Harvey](#).³³ This soldier, who had already done a magnificent job during the night attacks and throughout the periods of heavy shelling, carried four wounded A Coy men back to safety during the early part of the afternoon. He did this unaided and won the admiration of all. The few remaining carriers moved to and from the RAP to the edge of the escarpment to assist with the evacuation. Many of the men were suffering from minor wounds which they did not consider serious enough to warrant attention. 2 Lt Rutherford, who had been twice wounded, did not leave his carriers until Maj Mantell-Harding ordered his evacuation. (He was subsequently sent to [Tobruk](#) and was drowned when a ship carrying wounded troops was torpedoed and sunk leaving the port.)

By three o'clock the shelling had become very severe. A large-calibre gun was firing and its shells left huge craters in the rocky ground. Eight men had been killed and seven others wounded. Strain was written on every face. One soldier who had been blown out of his trench during the morning suddenly went berserk. The men on the higher ground watched with dismay enemy tanks converging on the sector. Infantry were crossing down the southern escarpment and moving northward through the wadis. The 25-pounders had practically ceased firing. They were short of ammunition and, in any case, were fully occupied dealing with threats from the west. One by one the anti-tank guns were knocked out. Two more sent up by Brigade HQ suffered a similar fate after they had fired a few shots.

Slowly and inexorably the enemy drew nearer. The tanks— there were about fifty of them—separated into two groups. One group circled around to the north and moved south-east down

the Ed Duda valley, while the other and much smaller group moved east between the two escarpments and approached from the south-east. Enemy infantry moved in from the south. As they neared the sector and crossed the ridges the tanks opened



SIDI REZEGH LOST, DUSK 30 NOVEMBER

fire. The infantry could not retaliate although the Mortar Platoon continued to fire. It was the end. Firing as they came, the enemy armour breasted the escarpment and fanned out across the lower ground. The 24th Battalion was overrun, then A and B Coys of 26 Battalion. A few men made a break and escaped. No. 8 Platoon, commanded by [Sgt Robertson](#),³⁴ escaped almost intact. Only 20 minutes remained before it would be dark. Captain Tolerton wirelessly contacted Brigade HQ as he had done before and asked permission to withdraw while it was still possible, but the orders remained 'Hold on!' As he spoke the enemy tanks approaching from the south-east came over a nearby ridge and the Adjutant told the Brigade Commander it

was all over. Quickly and efficiently the Germans rounded up their prisoners and marched them off to a nearby collection point. It was a bitter end for those who had fought so hard and so well. As they began their long march to the prisoner-of-war cages the 25-pounders began firing again, and to add insult to injury the New Zealanders had to walk through this fire.

From their vantage points on the crest of the escarpment C and D Coys had

watched the rest of the battalion being captured, powerless to do anything about it. The tanks and enemy infantry brought heavy fire to bear on both companies, and under cover of it began to approach the crest of the escarpment while others moved east along the lower slopes. The two company commanders decided to withdraw while there was still time and they had the failing light to help them. The remnants of the two companies—there were fewer than eighty left—ran back along the escarpment out of sight of the enemy. Captain Walden had decided to try to link up with the sappers who were stationed east of the strongpoint and with them form a line to protect Brigade HQ. While this party moved east along the escarpment two other groups, one led by [Sgt Robertson](#) and the other by Lt Matheson, Mortar officer, were also trying to find their way to Brigade HQ in the darkness. The latter group eventually linked up with C and D Coys at the strongpoint. Captain Walden had gone on with Capt Thomson and Sgt Dodds to try to find the sappers, of whose location all three had only a vague idea. 2 Lt Clubb was left in charge of the two companies with orders to withdraw north across the escarpment if approached by enemy armour. Enemy shelling had almost ceased and considerable movement of tracked vehicles could be heard.

Led by Sgt Dodds, who thought he knew the way, the two company commanders continued along the escarpment but ran into and were captured by the 33rd Reconnaissance Regiment ([15 Panzer Division](#)). The enemy continued to move east and a short while afterwards ran into two-pounder fire. Yelling loudly the sappers, whose position the Germans had bumped into, charged the enemy. An ammunition truck was hit and set on fire, and in the confusion the two New Zealand officers and the sergeant escaped to Brigade HQ. Meanwhile enemy AFVs had approached the strongpoint, and 2 Lt Clubb immediately led his party north across the escarpment and after some difficulty located Brigade HQ and the vehicle park.

The remnants of the two battalions took up a position covering 6 Brigade HQ and the transport park. It was an all-in effort, with the B Echelons occupying defensive positions. The troops dug in close to the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) and settled down to await the dawn and possible further enemy attacks. Over to the west a long line of unkempt, unshaven, and very weary men was marching off to captivity. The thoughts of those still left to fight were with them, knowing their pride and missing their company. Nine officers and 217 other ranks, 18 of them wounded, were lost to

the battalion as prisoners of war. The fighting strength of the unit had been reduced by three-quarters: 449 casualties had been suffered, including 89 who had been killed or who subsequently died of wounds. This was a tragic loss to the battalion in its first severe action. Only six officers remained of the 25 who had set out from [Baggush](#) with such high hopes. Casualties amongst the NCOs had been equally heavy.

* * *

The withdrawal to Brigade HQ had given the men a temporary sense of security. This was dispelled early on 1 December. Shortly before dawn it was evident that the enemy intended to press his advantage and drive a wedge through the [Tobruk](#) corridor. Nobody had had much sleep, but when Capt Walden was ordered to occupy fresh positions overlooking the Trigh [Capuzzo](#) the men moved quickly into position. The 25th Battalion and the 8th Field Company NZE were still holding their positions on the escarpment. The men had not finished digging in before enemy guns on the escarpment began to shell the area. Farther west the position was much more serious. At dawn 19 Battalion at [Ed Duda](#) had to beat off a tank attack. Shortly afterwards 20 Battalion on [Belhamed](#) reported tanks moving on it from the direction of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment and also from the north. A second force of tanks and lorried infantry moved north from [Sidi Rezegh](#) towards [Belhamed](#) spur. The enemy attack developed quickly and broke first on 6 Brigade's



Morning, 1 December

Advanced Dressing Station, the gun positions of 6 Field Regiment, and the Division's Battle HQ on the slopes of the spur. The New Zealand gunners fired furiously at the advancing enemy but the guns were knocked out one by one. A heavy pall of smoke covered the battlefield, but not before the men of the battalion had seen an unknown gunner firing a 25- pounder on his own until a direct hit knocked it out. A dark shape was tossed high into the air.

As the enemy swung around on the western flank of 6 Brigade he was engaged by whatever weapons could be brought to bear against him. Damaged Valentine tanks were manned and remained in action until they ran out of ammunition. Enemy fire on the sector increased considerably and several trucks were set on fire. The situation became worse. Despite almost super- human efforts by the artillery, the enemy could not be kept at bay. The 20th Battalion was overrun and [18 Battalion](#) was forced to withdraw west against the [Tobruk](#) perimeter. Discouraged by the accurate 25-pounder fire and the few remaining tanks, the enemy did not press his attack towards [Zaafran](#) and 4 Brigade HQ, but swung around on 6 Brigade. Tanks and infantry launched a heavy attack and it seemed certain that 6 Brigade was going to suffer the same fate as the others. Shells were bursting all around the troops and many of the vehicles were on fire. Just when everything seemed to be lost a large force of tanks swept down from the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. Should they be enemy, the war was over for 6 Brigade.

As the tanks came nearer shells burst around them and British pennants were seen flying from the aerials. They came forward to 6 Brigade HQ and the enemy began to withdraw. As one man, the troops ran forward to join the armour and chase the departing enemy. The spontaneous accord with which riflemen, drivers, cooks, and clerks urged the armour to attack with them was infectious. Brigadier Barrowclough was affected. He pointed out to the British commander that there were only about thirty enemy tanks and that the German infantry appeared to be demoralised and ready to surrender. His men were ready— indeed eager—to go forward. The British commander, however, had definite orders to cover the withdrawal of the New Zealanders and not get involved in an offensive action with the enemy. His force was a composite one and included remnants of 22 British Armoured Brigade.

Preparations were made to depart. There was no shortage of vehicles. Captain Bowie and the drivers had done an excellent job keeping the unit transport intact and roadworthy. Numerous springs had been broken, but the drivers kept their trucks going with whatever they could improvise. The troops embussed and, under the direction of the tanks, moved south-east up the wadi between the blockhouse and Pt 175. As the leading trucks came out of the wadi onto the escarpment they ran into very heavy fire from enemy positions east of them. One truck was set on fire, and under cover of the smoke from it the rest turned back. The columns hugged the north side of the escarpment until they were past Pt 175, and then turned north towards [Zaafran](#) where the rest of the Division was assembling. By mid-afternoon the remnants of 6 Brigade were safe behind the screen of tanks and artillery.

The enemy followed but made only half-hearted attempts to penetrate the defences. These attacks were beaten back by tank and artillery fire. Plans were made to continue the withdrawal. The Division intended to break through the enemy cordon and drive east towards the Egyptian frontier. It was expected that the columns would have to fight their way through enemy mobile columns known to be operating east of [Zaafran](#). After dusk the columns formed up with 6 Brigade at the rear. About 7 p.m. the battalion vehicles moved off and the long convoy headed south-east towards the frontier. Before dawn the Division was laagered behind British armoured units not far from [Bir Gibni](#). No opposition had been encountered. Shortly afterwards about sixty Italian prisoners, who had been left behind at [Zaafran](#) because of the shortage of transport, arrived. They had repaired an Italian truck, apparently preferring to remain prisoners of war to rejoining their units.

The Division was now out of the danger zone and for the next three days continued to move east, retracing its steps along the path it had travelled less than three weeks before. Here and there were signs of the recent fighting—wrecked planes, derelict tanks, abandoned trucks, bullet-riddled ambulances, and a few solitary graves. The columns crossed the Egyptian border, and at four o'clock on the afternoon of 4 December the battalion reached its old quarters at [Baggush](#). Major McQuade and the 63 LOBs were there to welcome the men back.

It was not a happy homecoming. The sight of so many empty dugouts brought back only too vividly the loss of so many friends who had left [Baggush](#) with such high

hopes. Those who returned were tired and unshaven. They had fought against heavy odds and had stood firm when fortune was against them. Many good comrades had been killed or captured, but those who were left knew that, given equal support, they were a match for the enemy. They knew, too, that they were the nucleus of a new battalion which would fight again.

¹ Appointments at commencement of Libyan campaign:

CO: Lt-Col J. R. Page

2 i/c: Maj B. J. Mathewson

Adj: Capt W. Tolerton

QM: Capt F. W. Wilson

MO: Capt G. C. Jennings

IO: Lt C. W. J. Pierson

Carriers: Lt W. D. Westenra

OC A Coy: Maj T. Milliken

OC B Coy: Capt A. W. Wesney

OC C Coy: Capt E. J. Thomson

OC D Coy: Capt E. F. Walden

OC HQ Coy: Capt C. D. F. Bowie

Signals: 2 Lt R. Kearney

Mortars: Lt J. E. Matheson

² Left out of battle.

³ Maj H. G. McQuade; Oamaru; born Oamaru, 11 Aug 1907; clerk.

⁴ Light Aid Detachment.

⁵ Capt A. W. Wesley; born Invercargill, 1 Feb 1915; clerk; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁶ Maj B. J. Mathewson, ED; Westport; born Westport, 18 Apr 1905; company manager; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁷ Cpl J. B. Berry; born Timaru, 28 Jul 1906; carrier; died of wounds 25 Nov 1941.

⁸ 2 Lt F. D. Rutherford; born Christchurch, 25 Feb 1912; labourer; drowned 5 Dec 1941.

⁹ Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth, DSO, m.i.d.; born Wakefield, 19 Jan 1907; Regular soldier; CO 24 Bn 23 Jan 1940–30 Nov 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; died in UK, 15 May 1945.

¹⁰ Capt W. T. Nidd; Wellington; born Wellington, 17 Feb 1914; clerk; wounded 24 Nov 1941.

¹¹ Capt G. M. Dodds, DCM; Mosgiel; born North Taieri, 29 Dec 1910; bricklayer.

¹² Lt W. G. Ryder; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 12 Feb 1914; civil servant; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 29 Apr 1945.

¹³ 2 Lt J. R. Upton; born Ashburton, 3 Oct 1907; seed cleaning contractor; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

¹⁴ Forward Observation Officers.

¹⁵ Capt C. Gatenby, MBE; Nelson; born England, 5 Feb 1912; orchardist; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; escaped Sep 1943; wounded Anzio, 5 Feb 1944.

¹⁶ 2 Lt F. G. S. Lamb; born Methven, 22 Feb 1918; clerk; died of wounds 28

Nov 1941.

¹⁷ Maj C. D. F. Bowie; Mosgiel; born Wairoa, 13 Jul 1910; master plumber.

¹⁸ Lt-Col J. M. Allen, m.i.d.; born Cheadle, England, 3 Aug 1901; farmer; Member of Parliament 1938–41; CO 21 Bn 17 May–27 Nov 1941; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

¹⁹ Capt F. C. Clubb, MC; born Liverpool, 27 Apr 1917; medical student; died on active service 7 Mar 1944.

²⁰ Capt W. R. Tizard; Wellington; born NZ 6 Sep 1912; clerk; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 29 Apr 1945.

²¹ Capt R. Kearney; Wellington; born Dunedin, 10 Apr 1913; tram conductor; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 29 Apr 1945.

²² Capt C. W. J. Pierson; Napier; born Kumara, 15 Aug 1903; draughtsman; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 29 Apr 1945.

²³ Maj E. F. Walden, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 16 Feb 1911; brewer; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; released 28 Mar 1945.

²⁴ Rev. K. J. Watson, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 18 Apr 1904; Presbyterian minister; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

²⁵ Many with minor wounds were not evacuated.

²⁶ Mr. G. Gray, MBE; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 26 May 1918; mercer; YMCA Secretary, 2 NZEF; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

²⁷ Maj A. C. W. Mantell-Harding, ED; Wellington; born Christchurch, 28 Oct 1896; solicitor; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 28 Mar 1945.

²⁸ Capt R. A. Nottle; Nelson; born Westport, 28 Jan 1917; clerk; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 14 Apr 1945.

²⁹ L-Sgt G. R. McIntosh; Timaru; born Timaru, 28 May 1913; porter; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

³⁰ Capt D. N. Potts; Christchurch; born Wellington, 5 Jan 1916; clerk; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 29 Apr 1945.

³¹ WO II D. H. Cross, BEM, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Wellington, 18 Oct 1907; quarryman.

³² Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; CRE 2 NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer 30 Corps 1941–42; commanded 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped in Germany, Mar 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1949–52; Commandant Northern Military District, Mar 1952–.

³³ Pte D. R. Harvey, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 4 Apr 1914; linesman; wounded and p.w. 30 Nov 1941; escaped 15 Jun 1942; recaptured 2 Sep 1942; released 29 Apr 1945.

³⁴ Lt A. C. T. Robertson, DCM, m.i.d.; born NZ, 8 Sep 1909; carpenter; wounded 21 Mar 1943, died on active service 8 Feb 1944.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 6 – SYRIA

CHAPTER 6

Syria

FOUR days after their return to [Baggush](#) the Libyan survivors were joined by a large contingent of reinforcements. The first task of the new Battalion Commander, Lt-Col [Satterthwaite](#),¹ was to reorganise the unit so that the best use could be made of fully trained personnel. Check parades revealed that HQ Coy outnumbered the others. Battalion HQ had been captured almost intact, and the rifle companies were scarcely able to muster a platoon apiece. Officer replacements arrived from [Maadi](#). Before long most of the empty dugouts were reoccupied and training had recommenced.

All ranks were following with great interest the Eighth Army's counter-attack in [Libya](#). Fifth Brigade was still in the field and was taking a leading part in the action. But the news of [Japan](#)'s entry into the war caused greater excitement, the thoughts of everyone centring on New Zealand and the possibility of loved ones being in danger. On their journey from [Maadi](#) the reinforcements had heard rumours of the Japanese attack on [Pearl Harbour](#) and for a while were more interested in the [BBC](#) news than in settling down amongst their new comrades. There was wild speculation on the future role of the Division, and many hoped that the changed war situation would mean a return to the [Pacific](#). Although rumours flashed through the camp for days, most of the troops realised their wishes could not be considered and were content to await developments.

Living conditions at [Baggush](#) gradually improved as the troops became more adept at making their underground quarters weatherproof. The days were warm but the nights bitterly cold. The more industrious went to extraordinary lengths to gain some comfort: fireplaces and chimneys were built from benzine tins and walls lined with sandbags or corrugated iron. Doors were fitted to keep out the cold winds which became more frequent late in December. On several occasions sandstorms reduced visibility to a yard or so. Men caught outside at night during one of these storms were soon lost and their cries for help echoed through the camp.

Rain fell for short periods on many occasions, but most notable was a thunderstorm which occurred about midnight on Monday, 22 December. Dugout

roofs sprung leaks and there was soon constant seepage through the sides of trenches. Flood waters built up against dugout doors until they collapsed, the unfortunate sleepers being almost drowned in the deluge. Many, including the CO, were forced to evacuate their quarters hurriedly, leaving letters, papers, photographs, and all manner of gear to float out with the tide. The evacuees, damp and uncomfortable, spent the rest of the night with more fortunate friends. At dawn all paddled around in the wreckage seeking lost gear and equipment. The anti-tank ditch which formed the camp perimeter resembled the River Avon and many buried mines were washed out.

Meals and messing arrangements improved as the weeks went by. At first the troops had had their meals in the open, but large tents were erected as messrooms and the food became less gritty. Two things tended to improve the standard of cooking. One was the rivalry between company cooks and the other the acquisition of a large stock of flour in a raid on a nearby dump. Christmas 1941 was a day of days. [Patriotic Fund Board](#) parcels had already been distributed, and on the 25th there was another issue plus a large quantity of mail. Although outward demonstration may have been lacking, there was no doubt that all ranks appreciated the generosity of the people in New Zealand. The special dinner in each messroom was a masterpiece of preparation. On the menu were soup, roast turkey, mutton, cauliflower, peas, potatoes, plum pudding and custard, and beer, nuts, and fruit bedecked the tables. Festivities were continued in the dugouts long after the meal. Later a special evening meal topped off a memorable day. Amongst the old hands there was a note of restraint for they had not forgotten their absent friends.

On New Year's Eve there was a vivid and prolonged display of fireworks such as never came from the factories of [China](#). Accurate shooting by the Signal Platoon set off several land mines which added to the din. 1942 was toasted, and everyone hoped the year would see an end to hostilities. Farther west the Axis forces were being driven back towards [El Agheila](#). [Tobruk](#) was no longer encircled.

During December little training had been carried out at [Baggush](#), although there had been frequent route marches. These usually ended somewhere along the coast so that everyone could bathe in the cool surf or collect wreckage from ships sunk in the [Mediterranean](#). Tactical exercises began early in January. As part of a brigade competition the companies practised attacking roles over a strenuous course across

rolling country. Eventually A Coy was chosen to represent the battalion but was beaten in the finals. The rest of the training was confined to range practice, minelaying, quick debussing from vehicles, and lectures on first aid. At a ceremonial parade on 13 December Brig Barrowclough read messages of congratulation from the GOC Eighth Army and [General Freyberg](#) on the valuable part played by the brigade in the recent fighting. The Brigade Commander also welcomed the reinforcements.

The football season, interrupted by the spell in action, was continued under difficult conditions, sandstorms often making playing unpleasant. Only a few of the original battalion team had returned to [Baggush](#), but under Padre Kingan's coaching a new team was selected and welded into a fine side. Four games were played against other units without a loss. Inter-platoon and company games were hotly contested, with vociferous supporters barracking from the sidelines. Although loosened a little by a rake made largely from barbed wire, the grounds were hard and plenty of skin was lost in a hard tackle or tight scrimmage. Soccer, too, became very popular, with enthusiasts training newcomers to the game.

Soon after their return to [Baggush](#) the Libyan survivors were granted seven days leave. It was not possible for them all to go at once, but each week a small party left on a visit to [Cairo](#), [Alexandria](#), [Luxor](#), or Assuan. Many of the battalion wounded had been evacuated to 2 NZ General Hospital at [Gerawla](#), near [Mersa Matruh](#), and transport was provided for those who wished to visit them. The evenings were spent in dugouts where, thanks to the large parcel mail, the men were often able to



Flooded at Baggush, December 1941

Flooded at Baggush, December 1941



Christmas parcels at the Battalion post office, Baggush

Christmas parcels at the Battalion post office, Baggush



Shells landing among transport at Sidi Rezegh

Shells landing among transport at Sidi Rezegh



German tanks, armoured cars, and lorries close in on 6 Brigade on the morning of 1 December 1941

throw supper parties. On a few occasions the YMCA Mobile [Cinema Unit](#) arrived in the area and set up its screen in some sheltered wadi. A great deal of enjoyment was derived from these open-air shows, which usually consisted of a newsreel, travelogue, cartoon, and a light comedy film. The Kiwi Concert Party picked a very cold night for its only appearance and few saw its excellent performance. After Christmas the Brigade band staged concerts in the company messrooms.

Company canteens operated smoothly but frequently were unable to meet the demands made on them. Beer, chocolate, and tinned fruits were rationed, and often there were shortages of such items as soap or toothpaste. Regular visits by the [YMCA Mobile Canteen](#) helped to make up the deficiencies. Mail arrived regularly by air from [Cairo](#). The Egyptian Mail and NZEF Times kept everyone abreast of local and home affairs. Each night at six o'clock a crowd collected around the battery-operated radio to listen to the latest war news.

After seven weeks at [Baggush](#) everyone was pleased to learn that the brigade was returning to [Maadi](#) Camp and civilisation. The battalion left in two groups on 23 January. Soon after lunch the rail party marched to the [Sidi Haneish](#) siding and clambered into covered wagons, 35 men being crammed into each one. Meanwhile, the road party finished loading the unit vehicles and set out towards the tar-sealed road to [Cairo](#). The train left at 6.30 p.m. and reached [Amiriya](#) by breakfast time. A very satisfying meal was served from a cookhouse alongside the station, and it did

much to revive those who had tried to sleep curled up on the vibrating steel floors of the wagons. The second leg of the journey was more interesting. Passing the extensive swamps south of [Alexandria](#), ducks (and natives) attracted the attention of marksmen. There was a steady volley of shots until the train was stopped and the miscreants warned. Progress up the Nile Valley was slow, and it was four o'clock before the train arrived at the [Maadi](#) siding and the party detrained.

The troops marched to the north-east corner of the camp near the Pall Mall cinema, each company being allotted a group of tents. Before a week had passed there were few who wished to return to [Baggush](#). Water was not rationed and hot and cold showers were available. The sewerage system no longer consisted of a large hole in the ground as at [Baggush](#), but of tins emptied daily by native labourers. As the newsboy was wont to call— ver' sweet, ver' clean, ver' hygiene! Meals were good, fresh meat and vegetables being very welcome again. Butter replaced margarine and occasionally tasty pies were served. The seven-day leave scheme was continued and each day leave parties went to [Cairo](#); the men were also able to visit the New Zealand hospitals at [Helwan](#) and [Helmieh](#) to see friends who had left the battalion after being wounded in [Libya](#). The camp offered a wide range of evening entertainment, from beer and a game of housie-housie at the [Naafi](#) to light programmes at the two cinemas, concerts at the [Lowry Hut](#), or a card game and supper at the [YMCA](#) and Church Army huts. The only cloud on the horizon was the report of Japanese successes in the [Pacific](#). Not only was the situation alarming, but the airmail service had ceased and letters were longer in transit.

[Maadi](#) also offered improved facilities for training. Each company paid a visit to the battle-practice range at [Abbassia](#) and some strenuous hours were spent on the assault course. To enable officers and NCOs to become more familiar with compasses, night exercises were carried out. With several excellent ranges nearby, firing practices were held regularly. Instructors from the Engineer Depot gave several lectures on the lifting and laying of various types of mines.

Two special parades were held in February. On the 12th General Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, inspected the brigade and afterwards presented decorations won in recent actions. A sandstorm made conditions unpleasant as the three battalions marched past the General in column of companies and advanced in review order. Two days later the brigade assembled to farewell its commander, Brig

Barrowclough, who was returning to New Zealand. His successor, Brig G. H. Clifton, joined the brigade at [Kabrit](#). The training syllabus left time for Rugby and soccer, most of the games being played on the hard grounds inside the camp. When the time came for the unit to move to the Canal Zone the Rugby team was still undefeated. The soccer team failed to win either of its matches but held a team from the King's Royal Rifles to a draw.

Early in February a political crisis in [Cairo](#) plunged the camp into sudden activity. As a precautionary measure British troops were posted to strategic positions around the city. All leave was cancelled and the battalion moved to the Citadel, an ancient fortress overlooking [Cairo](#) from the south-east. Three days later a new Egyptian Cabinet was formed under the then pro-Ally [Nahas Pasha](#), and the crisis was over. Meanwhile, the troops had explored the stone vaults and dungeons of the Citadel and visited the beautiful Mohammed Ali and Turkish mosques nearby. On the 6th the unit returned to [Maadi](#), marching through the Dead City—an evil-smelling burial place for thousands of Egyptians and happy hunting ground for many more thousand flies.

* * *

About a week later 6 Brigade was directed to move to [Kabrit](#), a military camp close to the [Great Bitter Lake](#). The road party was on its way soon after breakfast on 21 February, and about twelve hours later the main body marched to the [Maadi](#) siding. It was a particularly cold evening and several hours elapsed before the train arrived. During this interval the Brigade band played popular tunes. Most of the men fell asleep after the journey began and at daylight were surprised to find the train had reached Zagazig, a town in the [Nile Delta](#) half-way between [Cairo](#) and the Canal. After a stop for breakfast the journey was continued past cultivated areas, through [Ismailia](#) and south past the Sweet Water Canal towards [Suez](#). The line skirted huge military encampments, well-stocked [RAF](#) aerodromes, and extensive aircraft assembly plants, until at midday [Geneifa](#) was reached. Lunch was provided from trucks in the station yard, and after the meal the companies set out on foot for the new camp.

There were only a few miles to be covered, but it was a blistering hot day with the sand radiating the scorching sun, and everyone was relieved when the rows of

white tents came into sight. Particularly evident on this trip were the ubiquitous native hawkers who surround troop trains wherever they stop. Their goods ranged from oranges, biscuits, chocolate, local tobacco, peanuts and coloured drinks to the trashiest assortment of cheap wallets, trinkets, and photos. Perhaps the best known train huckster is the eggs-and-bread walad, who does a good trade with hard-boiled eggs, small elongated loaves of bread and a pinch of salt. All must make enormous profits on the little they do manage to sell.

The camp at [Kabrit](#) covered a wide area. It had been set up as a training ground for combined operations, with a naval establishment and training centre at the southern end of the [Great Bitter Lake](#). All around were barren, sandy wastes relieved by stunted scrub growth, a little oasis of palms, some Pines on [Kabrit Point](#), and hundreds of white tents. The tents were widely dispersed, the battalion being spread over several acres with the cookhouse near the centre. On hot, windy days, and there were many, the platoons stationed along the camp perimeter found the trek to meals tedious and unpleasant. Officers and sergeants had messrooms but the remainder ate in the open. Because all water had to be carted, a rationing system similar to that in [Baggush](#) was introduced. There was little time for sport, and evening entertainment was limited to occasional picture shows, card games, and reading. Mail was arriving very slowly and leave was curtailed. It was an abrupt change from life at [Maadi](#). The evening of 26 February will be particularly remembered. High winds and the dust-storms which accompany them were always a curse, and on this night several tents were blown down. Vain attempts were made to rescue letters and papers which disappeared at high speed. Such was the disorder caused by this wind that normal training was abandoned on the 27th until the damage was repaired.

For the first few days after their arrival the troops chiselled into the hard rock pan and set their tents below sand level, the spoil being heaped around the sides. As soon as this work was completed training began. Several days were spent practising rowing, ascending and descending vertical ladders, disembarking from dummy landing craft and crossing barbed-wire obstacles, and companies in turn made a general tour of the naval yard. Various types of landing craft were inspected, including the two designed for infantry work—the ALC (assault) and the SLC (support). Later the troops boarded these craft and, with sailors in charge, crossed

the lake to practise landings. These exercises were also carried out after dusk and were generally successful, the co-operation between sailors and soldiers being first-rate. Often an infantryman misjudged the depth of the shallows or some other unrehearsed incident added humour to the exercises. A morning was spent aboard a Glen ship, parent ship to small landing craft. Originally it had been planned to do a landing exercise from this ship, but a raid by enemy bombers the night before caused her to be diverted to a safer anchorage. An excellent lunch was served on board, and officers will testify to the quality of the ship's stock of gin.

The following evening a final practice was carried out from the small craft. A landing was made on the eastern shores of the lake, each man carrying full battle equipment. The companies then advanced across country to take up a defensive position several miles inland. There were a few minor hitches. Some sections became temporarily lost and one or two compasses proved unreliable, but by midnight the men were in position, all shivering in their damp clothes. Artillery and anti-tank batteries had given the infantry close support and their efforts made the exercise more realistic. At dawn the positions were abandoned and the rest of the day was spent in field firing at various targets.

The training of the past weeks had given all ranks some idea of what would be expected of them should they be called on to make an opposed landing. It had also aroused considerable speculation on the future role of the Division. In the Western Desert the [Eighth Army](#) was beginning to withdraw from its [El Agheila](#) positions in the face of increasing enemy pressure. The Japanese drive through the South Pacific was also gaining momentum. All rumours were temporarily set at rest when, early in March, it was learned that the Division was moving to [Syria](#) to relieve Australian forces stationed there. In recent months this country and Palestine had assumed greater military importance, since Axis forces driving into the Caucasus might soon be in a position to turn south through [Turkey](#) to the vital Persian oilfields and the [Suez Canal](#).

On 12 March the battalion set out from [Kabrit](#), leaving a baggage party to follow by road. Its destination was [Aleppo](#), in northern [Syria](#). As usual the day before departure had been spent in dismantling the camp and preparing for the move. That night everyone slept out in the open, and a cold night it was! Reveille was at 2.30 a.m. and breakfast was eaten in the dark. Trucks arrived and the troops scrambled

aboard them with still no sign of the dawn. The convoy set out for [Geneifa](#), where there was some delay before the train pulled into the station. During this period a few natives with their usual cunning managed to spirit away a box of rations. The loss was discovered within a few minutes and one of the company QMs, wise to the tricks of the Egyptians, found most of the missing articles by the simple expedient of examining all freshly turned sand.

The train left [Geneifa](#) soon after 6.30 a.m. and headed northwards through [Ismailia](#), reaching Kantara West about eleven o'clock. A crowd of Australians was on the platform and they were besieged with inquiries about conditions in [Syria](#). 'It's been bloody cold!' was a common retort. The troops detrained and, heavily laden with all manner of gear, clambered onto small ferry punts which carried them across the Canal. Four hours went by before the rail journey was continued. This time the carriages were very crowded. As night fell the men sorted out places to sleep, some on luggage racks, others in the passageways, and still more under the hard wooden seats. A space was generally left for the primus so that the billy could be boiled during the journey. During the night the train crossed the [Sinai](#) Desert, and before the travellers were properly awake had pulled into Lydda station. Breakfast was eaten and there was a rush on a nearby fountain, but before many had washed the journey began again. The country the train now passed through resembled parts of New Zealand and was in direct contrast to the barren wastes of Egypt. Trees and sown fields were green with spring growth. At each communal settlement the Jews were using tractors and modern farm implements, but the Palestinian Arabs were tilling the soil in the manner of their forefathers. The contrast between Arab and Jew was dramatically marked in the cities of [Jaffa](#) and [Tel Aviv](#), side by side on the Mediterranean. By midday the train had reached [Haifa](#), and the battalion prepared to march to a transit camp three miles away.

A night was spent in this camp, set in pleasant surroundings with tents scattered amongst olive groves. In the morning everyone climbed into buses; these had seen many years of service, and some, not unexpectedly, broke down temporarily during the journey. The route lay through the modern town of [Haifa](#), with its busy port, huge oil refineries and clustered houses, along the coastal road past [Acre](#) and a wonderfully preserved Roman aqueduct still in use, and across the Syrian border. Shattered roofs, bullet spattered walls, and gaping holes in buildings told the story of

the Australian land assault and the naval bombardment preceding it. French gendarmerie in their traditional uniforms were policing the towns under Allied administration. Late in the afternoon [Beirut](#) came into view. A stop was made for a meal at a camp on the outskirts of the city, and dusk was falling as the convoy turned inland towards the [Lebanon](#) Mountains. The road rose sharply from the plain to twist and turn up the mountainside. One by one the buses dropped back, each held up by some minor defect. At length, almost suddenly, the top of the pass—thousands of feet above sea level—was reached. Great sheets of snow on the mountain slopes glistened in the night, only to be swallowed up in a blanket of mist. The rest of the journey was uneventful and by midnight the convoy reached [Rayak](#), where everyone transferred to a waiting train and settled down in trucks and carriages. The local [Naafi](#) supplied a hot cup of tea, very much appreciated. A prominent figure on the station platform was the Rayak Town Major, impressively dressed in furs and Russian balaclava.

Shortly after midnight the train pulled out, heading north up the [Bekaa Valley](#) towards [Aleppo](#). By 7 a.m. it reached [Homs](#), a fairly large town in central [Syria](#). As soon as breakfast was over the journey was continued through heavily cultivated country. Fruit trees were in blossom, and occasionally glimpses were caught of the huge water wheels (*noria*) for which this valley is famous. The Syrians appeared to dress more picturesquely than the [Palestinians](#), and their bell-shaped huts clustered together looked in the distance like beehives. The perfectly straight furrows of ploughed land, hundreds of acres in extent and cultivated with primitive implements, were an amazing sight. Later, after lunch was over, the general monotony of the journey was relieved by a young colt which tried to race the train. Urged on by the troops it kept level for several miles, only to fall back in the end from sheer exhaustion. About five o'clock [Aleppo](#) and its huge citadel came into sight. The train pulled into [Baghdad](#) station and the long journey was over.

[General Freyberg](#) and Brig Clifton were on the platform, and the troops had no sooner detrained than A Coy was detached and sent off in trucks for the frontier outposts. The rest of the unit marched to the German Barracks in the western suburbs of the city and was billeted in large two-storied buildings. Shortly afterwards guards and pickets were posted at various stores, dumps and compounds, including a large [RASC](#) dump at Mouslimie (Mussolini) Road and others at the [Baghdad](#) and

Damascus stations. The natives were cunning thieves, and in the past there had been serious losses of valuable stores. Consequently guards were armed and on the alert for intruders. Natives who worked in the compounds during the day were frequently searched and snap patrols examined suspicious traffic on the roads. The company not on duty was sent on route marches or took part in tactical exercises with mortar and artillery support.

The Australians' warning about the weather proved very true. The road party which was bringing most of the blankets was delayed, and during those few days the troops in **Aleppo** nearly froze. Throughout March rain fell almost every day and on several occasions there were heavy falls of snow. Icy winds swept down from the mountains and penetrated the thickest of clothing. At the barracks straw-filled palliasses were provided and hot showers were available. As a precaution against malaria mosquito nets were issued. Whenever possible fresh fruit and vegetables were bought at the local markets, but meat of Syrian origin did not compare with that from New Zealand. **Aleppo** was not unlike **Cairo**. It had its native quarters and ancient citadel, mosques and minarets, while the European and more modern section of the city contained well-stocked shops, theatres, and cabarets. The Naafi was the most popular rendezvous, as it sold the only drinkable brand of beer.

The company on duty at the frontier—a rotation system was introduced—was given a variety of tasks, including the manning of outposts and the distribution of flour amongst the villagers. Two platoons were stationed at Soudji and other outposts at the Turkish frontier and shared quarters with French gendarmerie. Syrian troops, clad in colourful costumes reminiscent of comic opera, were also stationed in the locality. Small-scale



exercises were often held; during one of these some of the battalion accidentally crossed the frontier and nearly precipitated an international crisis. Several miles to the south, at the village of [Azaz](#), the rest of the company, billeted in Nissen huts, was more concerned with villagers and flour. Each native sought to gain as much of this commodity as possible and the situation often required delicate handling. The Syrians as a whole seemed to be friendly disposed towards Allied troops. On 9 April British, French, and New Zealand troops took part in a ceremonial parade through the streets of [Aleppo](#). The local inhabitants whom it was hoped to impress turned up in large numbers to watch.

A few days later 5 Brigade arrived in [Aleppo](#) and assumed responsibility for the area. Sixth Brigade was directed to move south to the [Bekaa Valley](#), where the main defences of [Syria](#) were being prepared. After [21 Battalion](#) took over its guard duties on the 13th, the battalion made ready to leave. Two days later the main body set out in ASC (1 Ammunition Company) vehicles, leaving the heavy equipment and gear to be railed or taken direct to the valley in the unit transport. The route taken by the main party was a long and circuitous one of 330 miles, the order being to move inland via Hamman to Deir ez Zor and south and west through [Palmyra](#) to [Zabboud](#) in the [Bekaa Valley](#). By this show of force the authorities hoped to impress the natives living farther inland.

Overnight stops were made at Hamman, Deir ez Zor, [Palmyra](#) and [Homs](#), and at the first three the men bivouacked on aerodromes or landing fields. Those who knew their history found the journey full of interest. They saw the famous Euphrates River and visited Deir ez Zor, a trading centre for carpets and camel hair and meeting place for camel trains. In places rich belts of vegetation, green with spring growth, ran along the banks of the Euphrates. Along the fringe of the desert there was a carpet of tall grass often smothered with flowers. Here and there were bedouin encampments—flat, black tents, pitched near the grassy patches. Hundreds of black-and-white birds rather like magpies, startled by the noise of the trucks, flew overhead. At Deir ez Zor, a city built around the only bridge over the Euphrates for hundreds of miles, a ceremonial parade was staged before large crowds. An Indian regiment, the Guides Cavalry, and the greater part of a regiment of Troupes Speciales also took part. The salute was taken by Colonel Jago, the area commander, who later entertained officers to a banquet. All the local dignitaries

were present at this function at which the last (reputedly) bottle of Napoleon brandy obtainable locally was drunk. While this was going on the troops were wandering through the streets of the city, some sampling local brands of wine and spirits and others visiting the bazaars and shops.

The remainder of the trip was dull and uninteresting except for a visit to the remarkable Roman ruins west of [Palmyra](#). Continuing westward, the convoy followed a pipeline to halt for the night only a short distance from [Homs](#). No leave was granted, and shortly after midday on the 20th the convoy passed through the village of [Zabboud](#) and stopped at the nearby camp. The rest of the battalion was already there; members of the advanced party directed the men to their new quarters, the majority going to Nissen huts and the rest to tents.

Two days later work began on the defences. The narrow valley had become an important link in the chain of defences covering the [Suez Canal](#) and the oilfields of [Persia](#). It was separated from the coastal plain by the snowclad Lebanons and from the desert wastes of central [Syria](#) by another high range, the Anti-Lebanons. Should the enemy attempt to drive south through [Turkey](#) and [Syria](#), he would be opposed by British forces on the coast and New Zealanders astride the inland route. If, as was considered likely, the enemy advance turned south-east to skirt the Anti-Lebanons, [2 NZ Division](#) was in a good position to move forward and effectively harass his long lines of communication. The brigade at [Aleppo](#) would only be able to fight a delaying action. As part of the general defence scheme, 24 and 25 Battalions were deployed on ridges on the western side of the valley with 26 Battalion forward on the lower ground. The Colonel was instructed to prepare alternative positions on rocky plateaus on the mountainside. The Divisional Artillery would be sited to cover the approaches to the valley and the proposed anti-tank ditch, minebelt, and wire entanglements.

During the weeks that followed everyone worked hard. The weather improved and shorts and shirts were worn in preference to battle dress. B and C Coys climbed the steep slopes of the mountains to their positions—C Coy to the higher plateau, known as Gibraltar, and B Coy to the lower one, known as Lower Gibraltar. Because of the hard surface tents could not be pitched in the normal way. Sangars and weapon pits had to be chiselled or blasted out of solid rock. The mountain tracks were in a bad state after the winter and nearly all supplies had to be manhandled

part of the way. On the flat working parties had to contend with hard limestone on which picks made little impression. Lieutenant [Bird](#)² and his pioneers set to work successfully with blasting powder.

By the end of May the Division was in a position to sustain an enemy attack. In the battalion sector trenches and firing pits had been dug along a two-company front on the flat, behind an anti-tank ditch and minefields. Roads and mountain tracks had been widened and repaired, and the companies on the mountainside had done all that was possible to make their isolated positions impregnable and habitable.

Throughout their stay the troops were based on the [Zabboud](#) camp, where living conditions were quite good. Civilians were employed to carry out most of the camp maintenance, but despite this there was little time for sport or training. B and C Coys spent about a month in the Gibraltar positions before being relieved by the other two companies. Shortly afterwards C Coy was sent to [Baalbek](#) on guard duties. This town, the only one in the valley, was cleaner and more interesting than any of the nearby villages and contained an excellent swimming pool. The guard duties were not very onerous and the men thoroughly enjoyed the spell. At [Zabboud](#) the monotony was broken by the occasional visits of concert parties and the Mobile Cinema Unit. The Brigade band staged several open-air concerts and impromptu community sings which were very popular. The band also climbed the steep track to Gibraltar to entertain C Coy. Card tournaments were held frequently and a debating club was formed. Mail arrived regularly, and company libraries kept a good stock of books. The general health of the troops was excellent and few cases of malaria had been reported.

The chief social event was the second battalion reunion on 16 May. Two hundred and twelve originals attended, fewer than a third of those who had assembled in [Burnham Camp](#) two years before. Major McQuade was in the chair. After the toast of the King there was a solemn pause as tribute to absent comrades. During the evening items were given by the Maori Battalion orchestra, the Brigade harmonica band, and by men from the unit. Four days later the [Duke of Gloucester](#) visited the camp and took the salute at a brigade ceremonial march past. By this time several changes in personnel had occurred. Sufficient reinforcements arrived to bring the battalion to full strength. Colonel Satterthwaite left to return to New

Zealand, having during his short stay proved himself a popular and efficient officer. He was replaced by [Lt-Col J. N. Peart](#),³ formerly of [18 Battalion](#).

Mules were used to carry supplies up the mountains, and all ranks were given instruction in handling and pack-loading these animals. Each company was sent on a mule trek. Two mules were allotted to each section and, although Indian instructors travelled with the companies, the troops were responsible for the care and loading of the animals. The first line of mules carried light machine guns, ammunition, water and greatcoats, and a second line blankets and other less essential gear. The treks, which lasted over several days, were routed over very hilly country, sometimes above the snowline. In many places it was possible only to move in single file, and the sure-footed animals proved their value under such conditions.

During the last week in May and the first few days of June the battalion participated in several manoeuvres, culminating in a five-day brigade exercise. Although there were those who still clung to the hope of an early return to New Zealand because of the Japanese menace, the nature of the exercises gave no hint of this. Travelling in RMT lorries, the battalion practised moving in desert formation behind a light armoured screen to consolidate on set objectives. Air cover was provided by the [RAF](#). These exercises were repeated after dusk to give the many newcomers to the unit some knowledge of what was required of them.

On 3 June the battalion returned to [Zabboud](#) but stayed there only six days before leaving for [Aleppo](#) and the German Barracks. The journey through [Homs](#) and Hama was completed in two easy stages, Col Peart taking the opportunity to try out several desert exercises on the way. After [21 Battalion](#) handed over on the 12th, the troops settled down to the routine of guards and pickets once more. On the 14th D Coy left for a rest camp at [Latakia](#) on the coast but was suddenly recalled four days later to join the battalion in a rapid move south. Orders reached Battalion HQ on the 17th, and by 8 p.m. the following day the troops had entrained and were away, leaving the rear party to clean up the barracks and follow by road.

The rail party travelled all night and shortly after dawn reached [Rayak](#). The troops detrained and at midday set out in RMT lorries over the Lebanon to the coast. They reached [Haifa](#) soon after 9 p.m., but within two hours were aboard another train bound for Kantara East. Few stops were made, and by midday the

following day, the 20th, the men were waiting in lines to clamber aboard the small ferries and recross the Canal. At Kantara West a third train was waiting, and it moved off at 4 p.m. Late that night the party reached its destination— [Mersa Matruh](#)—and the troops tumbled off the train, erected bivouacs, and went to sleep, too tired to be interested in Rommel's counter-attack in the [Western Desert](#). Over 900 miles had been covered in 55 hours!

The rest of 6 Brigade had not arrived and the battalion came under command of 5 Brigade. The CO, who had been taken ill during the journey, had been evacuated to a hospital at [Nazareth](#), and Lt-Col [Watson](#)⁴ assumed temporary command. In the morning the troops marched five miles to Smugglers' Cove for a rest and a swim. Two days later, on the 23rd, they returned to [Matruh](#) to take up a position around an aerodrome, but no sooner had they dug in than orders were received to return to [Amiriya](#), where the rest of 6 Brigade was assembling. The move was made after dusk on the 24th and by dawn the convoy from [Matruh](#) had reached the staging camp. Captain Wilson and the road party from [Syria](#) arrived later in the day, having followed the main body at a more leisurely pace. They found the journey through the [Sinai Desert](#) extremely unpleasant, the heat being almost overpowering. Flies and swirling dust had added to the discomfort. But at [Amiriya](#) there was only one topic of conversation—Rommel's attack. All day streams of traffic had been moving back from the front. [Tobruk](#), the [Malta](#) of the desert, had been captured and the Axis armies were sweeping on towards Egypt.

¹ Col [S. M. Satterthwaite](#), m.i.d.; [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 7 Jan 1897; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn 8 Dec 1941–26 Apr 1942.

² Lt [I. A. Bird](#); Cromwell; born Westport, 10 Sep 1910; engineer's assistant.

³ Lt-Col [J. N. Peart](#), DSO, m.i.d. (3); born [Collingwood](#), 12 Feb 1900; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn Nov 1941–Mar 1942; CO 26 Bn 1 May–20 Jun 1942, 29 Jun–4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

⁴ Lt-Col [C. N. Watson](#), MC, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Tinwald](#), 8 Jan 1911; school teacher; CO 26 Bn 20–29 Jun 1942; CO 23 Bn 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; released 3 Apr 1945.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 7 – THE BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 7

The Battle for Egypt

THE situation had become very serious. After the reopening of the Axis offensive on 26 May the Eighth Army had suffered a series of reverses. Enemy armour had broken through the Gazala line, forcing the Allies to withdraw. Both sides lost heavily in the fighting which followed, but the enemy retained the initiative and continued to drive towards the Egyptian frontier. The New Zealand Division, less 6 Brigade, formed part of a delaying force based on the old Matruh defences, while farther east other Allied forces were reforming along a line which ran roughly north and south through the El Alamein station. Subsequently, after the departure of 26 Battalion, the Division was relieved at Matruh by 10 Indian Division and moved about 20 miles south to Minqar Qaim. Sixth Brigade's transport was sent forward to assist it to carry out a mobile role.

During 24 and 25 June the troops at Amiriya listened eagerly to the BBC news bulletins and watched with some dismay the continued streams of eastbound traffic. Although there did not seem to be much panic, the columns were disorganised. Guns and ambulances intermingled with all types of vehicles, many of which were being towed. The roads were still packed with transport the following day, the 26th, when 6 Brigade left Amiriya and marched under a blistering hot sun to the Agami beaches on the outskirts of Alexandria. The battalion camped on sand dunes or in concrete pillboxes close to the sea. That evening Lt Carson,¹ the IO, arrived back from Matruh with the rearguard party. He brought back news of events farther west and confirmed the rumours that the enemy had crossed the Egyptian frontier.

Before the battalion had been 24 hours in its new camp orders were received to move forward to the Alamein defences. About seventy men were on leave in Alexandria and trucks were sent into the city to collect them. The drivers knew most of the



The mosque at Sidi Rezegh

The mosque at Sidi Rezegh



Some of the Battalion survivors of the Libyan battles

Some of the Battalion survivors of the Libyan battles



Meal time at Baggush

Meal time at Baggush



Training at Kabrit for combined operations

Training at **Kabrit** for combined operations

haunts of New Zealanders, and in surprisingly quick time all the men were back at the beach. Soon afterwards the battalion embussed in South African lorries and moved off westward with the rest of the brigade. That night the troops bivouacked in the desert about ten miles south of **Alamein** station and six miles from the Bab el **Qattara**, an area prepared as a defensive 'box' and known as Fortress A or the **Qattara Box**. Early the next day, 28 June, the brigade occupied this fortress and the transport returned to its base. Battalion and company sectors were allotted, and all ranks were soon busy digging into the stony ground or helping with the many tasks necessary to make a defensive position. At this juncture 6 Brigade was without supporting arms, except those contained in the three battalions, and was short of mines, ammunition, and rations. The pipeline which ran through the area was badly corroded in places and provided only a trickle of water. On the same day came news of the Division. During the previous afternoon enemy forces had encircled it, but it had escaped by driving through the German lines after dusk and was now reforming at **Alamein**. **General Freyberg** had been wounded and Brig **Inglis**² was in command.

The Box was oblong in shape, its perimeter consisting of ridges varying in height. Numerous wadis and folds crossed the area, offering some cover to the few thin-skinned vehicles. The 26th Battalion took over the southern sector and Col Watson placed the companies in a rough semi-circle, A Coy facing west, B Coy south-west, and D Coy south. C Coy and HQ Coy were stationed in reserve behind the flanking companies. The last two days of the month were busy for everyone. Most of the digging was completed and the pipeline repaired. Supplies were received and

mines laid around the perimeter of the Box. Meanwhile, the rest of the Division assembled in the area and [28 Battalion](#) moved into the eastern corner of the Fortress. Colonel Peart returned and resumed command. Sixth Brigade carriers, including those of the battalion, had been placed under command of Brig Winsor and, after several brushes with the advancing enemy, covered the evacuation of [El Daba](#). The Carrier Platoon rejoined the battalion on 4 July; it had with it eight new carriers, which had been found on trucks on the railway with no owners.

At this juncture the [Eighth Army's](#) line of defence was based on three strongpoints, with mobile forces covering the gaps. First South African Division occupied the defences at [Alamein](#); [2 NZ Division](#) manned Fortress A at [Qattara](#); and remnants of [5 Indian Division](#) occupied Naqb Abu Dweis on the northern fringes of the reputedly impassable [Qattara](#) Depression. During the first three days in July the enemy made several attempts to breach the line, but although he made some penetration between the central and northern sectors he failed to dislodge the South Africans. Enemy activity in the vicinity of Fortress A was slight. A few shells landed in the battalion sector but caused no damage. Hostile reconnaissance parties were sighted in the distance a number of times but they did not attempt to approach the defences.

On the 3rd the Italian armoured [Ariete Division](#) made a threatening move northwards of Fortress A, but it ran into heavy fire from a mobile force of New Zealand artillery and infantry and suffered serious losses in men and guns. To disorganise Rommel's troops still further, 5 Brigade was ordered to attack and capture the [El Mreir Depression](#), which lay several miles north of the Box and south-west of the enemy salient on [Ruweisat Ridge](#). To support this attack 6 Brigade was to leave its position and move back to Divisional HQ to act as a mobile reserve. Only skeleton forces were to be left behind.

No explanation was given the battalion and, somewhat surprised by the order, the troops prepared to leave the Box. Transport arrived about 11.30 a.m. on the 4th, and within an hour the vehicles were widely dispersed near [Qaret el Himeimat](#). The rest of 6 Brigade arrived at intervals during the day. In accordance with the policy of maintaining battalions on a three-company basis, partly because of shortage of transport and partly to achieve greater mobility, C Coy was detached and sent to [Maadi](#). There were many in the company who sought immediate transfers to other

companies. General disappointment was felt that the battalion should be divided in this way. Meanwhile, 5 Brigade had succeeded in gaining a hold on the El Mreir Depression and 4 Brigade had moved forward to cover its left flank. Sixth Brigade was ordered to return to its former position in Fortress A.

By dusk on the 5th the brigade was back in the Box. The absence of C Coy necessitated a slight readjustment of positions and in some instances new trenches had to be dug—an unpopular decision. Two days passed uneventfully. A small enemy convoy was sighted west of D Coy, but desert haze prevented observation of the results of the artillery fire directed on it. Early on 7 July 4 Brigade advanced north-west towards Mungar Wahla and by daylight was on its objective. Later in the day a change in the situation brought about the withdrawal of both 4 and 5 Brigades, and during the night they moved back east of the fortress area. Sixth Brigade was also ordered to be ready to abandon its position. The southern strongpoint held by Indian troops had already been abandoned, and the [Alamein](#) Line was being shortened.

The news of the impending move caused a fresh outbreak of rumours in the battalion sector, the most persistent of which sent the brigade to [Maadi](#) for a rest. The evening passed without a confirming order, but as Col Peart expected that the move would be made under cover of darkness, all ranks were astir by 3 a.m. Trucks moved into the sector, were loaded, and then dispersed again. The hours passed. At 7 a.m. the orders were still awaited, so the cooks' trucks were unloaded and breakfast served to the hungry men. Finally, at 9.30 a.m. orders arrived, and the battalion moved to an assembly area near Qaret el [Himeimat](#) to await the arrival of the rest of the brigade. When the journey was continued early on the following morning (9 July), it was generally known that 6 Brigade was returning to [Amiriya](#) to form part of the general reserve. That night the battalion bivouacked near [Burg el Arab](#), and in the morning the convoy continued on to its destination.

This had been the battalion's eighth move since its arrival from [Syria](#) three weeks earlier. Knowing little of the reasons for these seemingly unnecessary moves, many of the men expressed some feeling on the matter. All ranks were fit and ready for action after their long spell in [Syria](#) and had not expected to be withdrawn during such a crucial period. The Qattara Box had been abandoned and all their hard work had gone for nothing. Still, nobody objected strongly to the spell at [Amiriya](#), for it

offered a pleasant break from desert conditions. Fresh fruit and vegetables reappeared on the menu and leave was granted to [Alexandria](#). The comments persisted, however, and pessimists forecast that the spell would be short. At a battalion parade on the 13th the CO addressed the men, explaining some of the mystifying moves. Brigadier Clifton also gave a résumé of the general tactical situation and spoke of possible future roles for the brigade. During 6 Brigade's absence the Division, after move and counter-move with no serious fighting, had taken up a position east of the Box and south-east of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), which was still partly held by the enemy.

* * *

The pessimists were right. On the day of the parade the battalion was ordered to move forward and join the Divisional Reserve Group to permit [18 Battalion](#) to rejoin 4 Brigade. Ninth Australian Division had arrived from Palestine and taken over the coastal sector of the Alamein Line, and by attacking along the coast had drawn off some of the enemy forces previously stationed around [Ruweisat Ridge](#). This ridge, a long, narrow fold in the desert, jutted into the [Eighth Army's](#) defences. Some twenty to thirty feet above the surrounding desert, it commanded observation over a wide area and was of tactical value to both sides. The 4th and 5th Brigades were to attack and capture the western half of the ridge, leaving the eastern end not already held to be taken by [5 Indian Division](#). Success would enable British tanks to exploit westward and circle to cut the enemy's lines of communication. It was expected the New Zealanders would have to overcome fairly heavy opposition.

By nightfall on the 13th the battalion was bivouacked about 35 miles east of Divisional HQ. In the morning it moved forward and joined the Reserve Group in a sector south of the forward brigades, the companies moving into positions recently vacated by [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#). Before long the men were chipping into the hard rock pan. Digging slit trenches in the heat of the day always caused a lot of cursing, and it seemed to the men that the battalion was fated to strike the rockiest parts of the desert. Later in the day the value of deep trenches was emphasised when several Stukas dive-bombed the position. Several men were caught in the open and three were wounded. Altogether it was an unpleasant day. Not only was it particularly hot, but innumerable flies hovered in and around the trenches. A light dust-storm swept the area and covered everybody and everything with a layer of

fine sand. After dusk the air became chilly.

The assault on the ridge by 4 and 5 Brigades was scheduled to begin after dark. The Reserve Group was not to move forward until the attacking brigades had consolidated on their objectives. It would then take up a position about two miles south of the ridge and guard against a counter-attack from the south or south-west. There was little likelihood of any move until early on the 15th, but Col Peart decided to leave nothing to chance and ordered company commanders to have their men ready by 11 p.m. But it was 3 a.m. before the order was received and the transport moved from its harbour to embus the men. Travelling in desert formation the battalion made slow progress, and by daylight only six miles had been covered. The troops debussed and formed up to march to the new sector about two miles away.

No opposition was expected, but as B Coy in the lead neared the sector it encountered spandau fire directly ahead. More surprising still, enemy tanks were clearly seen on the western end of the ridge which was to have been captured by 4 Brigade. These tanks opened fire on a burnt-out tank which lay close to the spot selected by the Signal Platoon as its headquarters. The enemy's fire did not prevent the companies from taking up their positions: B Coy to the right, facing north, A Coy alongside, facing north-west, and D Coy on the left flank, facing west and south-west. Battalion HQ and HQ Coy dug in behind A and B Coys. The ground was slightly undulating and afforded little cover for vehicles. Fortunately anti-tank guns were soon in action and the enemy tanks lumbered out of sight.

The platoons were still digging in when the enemy began to shell and mortar the sector. B Coy on the right flank bore the brunt of this, and before the day was over reported five men wounded. Several vehicles were damaged, including the battalion orderly-room truck. Enemy aircraft appeared at intervals and Stuka dive-bombers damaged two more trucks, one of which carried a quantity of beer. All was lost. The annoying part of this loss was that the beer should have been distributed the day before. Late in the afternoon Ju88s bombed the area and several men were injured by flying splinters. The only cheering note was the sight of 37 prisoners from the Ariete and [Brescia](#) divisions being brought back into the lines by the Carrier Platoon, which had been on reconnaissance north of the sector.

It had been assumed that the fighting on Ruweisat was over except for mopping

up. This had not been confirmed, and the presence of enemy tanks early in the morning and the severity of the shelling and mortaring had caused some apprehension. Later, reports of what had happened filtered through. Both brigades, despite heavy casualties, had succeeded in driving the enemy from the ridge and had taken many prisoners. Unfortunately enemy tanks bypassed during the night caused havoc at dawn. British tanks which were to have supported the New Zealanders did not arrive, and the hard-won successes were being gradually lost. At 4 p.m. it was reported that 4 Brigade had been overrun and that 5 Brigade was being hard pressed. General Inglis ordered a general withdrawal to the line of the Reserve Group's positions. At nightfall enemy attacks subsided, and 5 Brigade disengaged and fell back to take up a position on the right and north-east of 26 Battalion. The remnants of 4 Brigade arrived in dribbles throughout the night and moved through to the rear.

The 16th and 17th July were anxious days, for it was feared the enemy might attempt to follow up his success and the battalion was poorly equipped to meet a tank-supported attack. Fourth Brigade, less 18 Battalion, had been sent to Maadi to reform, and 22 Battalion, which had also suffered heavy losses, accompanied it. Sixth Brigade had been sent for and was expected to arrive during the 17th to take over the Reserve Group's sector. No attack eventuated, the enemy being content to shell and mortar the sector at intervals. Enemy aircraft bombed the area on several occasions, generally at meal times, but caused little damage. Altogether seven men were wounded and several vehicles damaged or destroyed during the period. Patrols were sent out at irregular intervals but they seldom encountered the enemy. Lieutenant Talbot³ failed to return from one of these and it was later ascertained he had been killed.

About four o'clock on the afternoon of the 17th 6 Brigade arrived, and about an hour later 24 Battalion was moving up on the left of D Coy. Brigade HQ was set up close to Battalion HQ, which later moved closer to A Coy. The Reserve Group, joined by 25 Battalion, moved back. At tea that night two cans of beer per man were distributed and quickly consumed. The three days had been hot and trying, and four sweltering hot days followed. In their trenches the men were besieged by flies, which hovered around in their thousands. The cooks worked under difficult conditions, and many a cooked fly found its way into a mess tin. Shelling and

mortaring continued as before and airbursts caused a number of casualties, with B Coy suffering most. One man was killed and ten wounded. After dusk on the 19th [23 Battalion](#) took over the right-hand platoon's sector. No. 8 Platoon moved into reserve and No. 11 into the former's position.

These four days saw some of the most active patrolling carried out by the battalion in the desert. Each night several parties were sent out in different directions, some to points over two miles from the lines. In most cases they were reconnaissance patrols, never more than a section strong. The patrols went to extraordinary lengths to avoid detection: anything likely to rattle or shine was left behind, socks were worn over boots, and sometimes the men blackened their faces. Although the battalion had done little of this type of work before, casualties were fairly light. Two men were killed, another wounded, and five taken prisoner.

Two fighting patrols, each of platoon strength, were sent out to test the enemy's strength in certain areas. The first of these, No. 16 Platoon led by Lt [Gifford](#),⁴ travelled north-west about 3000 yards before it encountered the enemy. The platoon immediately attacked with rifle, bayonet, and grenades. In the sharp engagement which followed over a dozen enemy were killed and others wounded. Two NCOs from the 382nd Infantry Regiment, only recently arrived from [Crete](#), were taken prisoner. The attacking party did not escape unscathed: one man was killed, another wounded, and four taken prisoner. Sergeant [Tither](#)⁵ received a nasty abdominal wound early in the fighting, but continued to use the bayonet with vigour until the Platoon Commander gave the order to disengage. Later, weakened by his wound and in great pain, the sergeant found he was unable to keep up with the others. He refused to allow any of the men to remain with him for fear that at daylight their presence would attract hostile fire. Much later in the morning he reached the lines alone and exhausted.

The second fighting patrol was drawn from 7 Platoon, led by Lt [Allen](#).⁶ It also went out in a north-westerly direction. As the patrol was about to engage an enemy working party it came under fire from the rear. The platoon returned the fire, but realising that the element of surprise was gone, the Platoon Commander gave the order to retire. No casualties were suffered. Several small patrols ventured out in daylight, but most of them ran into trouble of some sort. After lunch on the 18th Lt Clubb and two men from 17 Platoon set out to investigate three British tanks which

had been disabled in the fight for [Ruweisat Ridge](#). No sooner had the party reached the tanks, which were a considerable distance from the lines, than it was pinned down by machine-gun fire. Folds in the ground were the only cover available, and when one of the party, L-Cpl [Skinner](#),⁷ attempted to change his position, he was killed by a machine-gun burst. The other two remained still until after dusk; they brought back valuable information, including the location of three 88-millimetre guns and several machine-gun posts. In this manner a great deal of information about the enemy was pieced together and was the subject of a congratulatory message from the Divisional Commander.

On 21 July another attempt was made to gain a decision in the Ruweisat-El Mreir area. Plans were drawn up for a night attack on both features by infantry, followed by armoured exploitation at dawn. The 161st Brigade ([5 Indian Division](#)), which already held the eastern end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), was to attack westward while 6 Brigade seized the [El Mreir Depression](#), which lay south-west of the ridge and ran almost parallel to it. Sixth Brigade's task was not easy. To accomplish it the attacking battalions would have to form up in no-man's-land and advance northwards through a minefield with their left flank brushing against the enemy's FDLs.⁸ Little was known about the forces likely to be encountered, although it was expected the enemy would react strongly. No air photographs were available, but reconnaissance reports gave the impression that few, if any, tanks would be encountered but that a tank-supported counter-attack could be expected. For this reason the non-arrival of [2 Armoured Brigade](#), which was to be in support, could imperil the success of the operation.

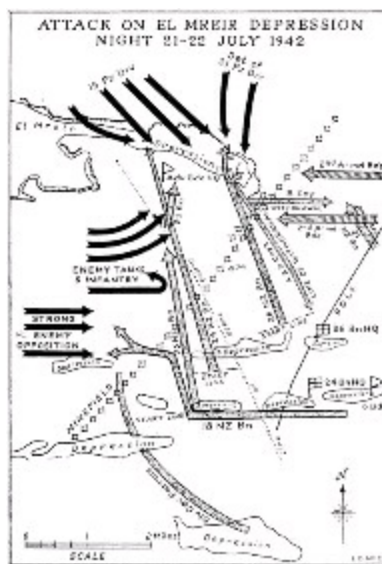
Colonel Peart received orders on the morning of the attack. The 24th Battalion, with 26 Battalion on its right, was to advance on the objective, while [25 Battalion](#) and [18 Battalion](#) (attached) protected the open left flank. The attack was to begin at 9 p.m. and would be preceded by heavy artillery concentrations on known or suspected enemy strongpoints. Fifth Brigade was arranging for additional supporting fire, and one company of [21 Battalion](#) was to move nearer the depression to preserve a link with 26 Battalion. Each battalion was to form up on a different start line, and there was little likelihood of contact between 24 and 26 Battalions during the 4200-yard advance. The Colonel decided to attack on a two-company front with A Coy on the right and D Coy on the left, Tac HQ and B Coy following close behind.

The supporting arms— carriers, mortars, two-pounders, and a platoon of machine-gunners from [27 MG Battalion](#)—formed the greater part of the transport column, which was placed under the command of Capt [McKinlay](#).⁹ This group, which also included the ammunition carriers and several unit vehicles, was to follow a party of sappers detailed to gap the minefield.¹⁰

Throughout the rest of the morning and the afternoon the troops were busy with preparations. Ammunition and reserve rations were distributed and each platoon was given a number of 'sticky bombs'. Platoon commanders were given their orders. Compasses and watches were checked. Late in the afternoon [Wellington](#) bombers passed overhead to bomb the western end of the depression. Some of their bombs exploded uncomfortably close to the battalion lines. Shortly afterwards [24 Battalion](#) began assembling on its start line. It was still daylight, and the movement of men and vehicles attracted heavy enemy fire and probably gave warning of the impending attack. The firing slackened off at dusk, and all was quiet as the battalion moved forward to its taped start line. It was very dark and visibility was limited to a few yards, but the companies had plenty of time to get into position.

At 8.45 p.m. the 25-pounders opened fire. It was an impressive display. The sky was lit up by gun flashes and the ground reverberated to the explosions. This was something new to the troops. For more than two-thirds of the men this was their first action; half deafened by the sound of the crashing shells and the roar of the guns, they lay waiting, somewhat apprehensively, for the order to advance. Dust and smoke reduced visibility still further, and when at nine o'clock A and D Coys began to move forward, both companies were forced to travel in fairly close formation.

The two companies quickly disappeared into the murky darkness, and Tac HQ and B Coy followed. For a while all was



ATTACK ON EL MREIR DEPRESSION NIGHT 21–22 JULY 1942

quiet except for 5 Brigade mortars and Vickers guns firing into the depression. As the leading troops neared the enemy minefield which ran close to the objective, they came under enemy

mortar and machine-gun fire which caused some casualties. The fire was not heavy enough to hold up the advance, but more trouble was encountered at the minefield itself. The wire marking the minefield was booby-trapped and the IO, Lt Carson, tripped it. The explosion was a signal for a hail of small-arms fire from enemy infantry dug in along the rim of the depression, who had apparently been expecting the attack. The troops dived to cover and the fire passed harmlessly over their heads.

Minutes passed. From the depression came the sound of revving engines. Then, during a lull in the firing, the resonant voice of Capt Richards ¹¹ was heard urging his men to charge. The leading platoons of both companies scrambled to their feet and fought their way over the low ridge into the depression, shouting and cursing, firing at anything that moved. It was so dark that it was difficult to distinguish friend from foe. The four platoons pressed across the basin, overrunning post after post. Some of the enemy tried to get away in trucks but few succeeded. The strongest opposition came from the eastern end of the feature, and in the mad rush 18 Platoon swung to the right and finished up almost in front of A Coy. No. 17 Platoon also swung right and continued on until it was out of touch with either company. A Coy, though somewhat scattered, retained its original formation.

It had been expected that the attacking infantry would have to clean up a number of anti-tank gun posts, but none was seen. A few tanks had been encountered during the charge across the basin, and individual attempts were made to knock these out with sticky bombs but without much success. Lieutenant [Williams](#)¹² planted two bombs on one tank and others tried to do the same, but it was dangerous work and casualties resulted. Meanwhile, heavy machine-gun and mortar fire forced the troops to take cover. Some occupied abandoned trenches and others crouched down behind low ridges. A Coy was centred around a ridge in the centre of the basin but the D Coy platoons were scattered over a wide area. When Capt [Young](#)¹³ attempted to locate his forward platoons and reorganise his company, he ran into machine-gun fire from a tank and was severely wounded.

It soon became apparent that the battalion had fought its way into the middle of a tank laager. Some tanks were still moving around in the basin and many more were hull-down along the northern lip of it. Platoons soon used up their stock of sticky bombs and had no choice but to wait helplessly until further supplies arrived. Casualties had been fairly heavy, and men continued to be hit as the enemy mortared and machine-gunned the area from positions some distance away. On the north side the platoons were in close contact with enemy infantry, who lobbed grenades and poured a heavy volume of fire on the crouching New Zealanders. The enemy tanks were not inactive and red tracer from their machine guns criss-crossed the basin.

Realising there was little else to do but hang on until the supporting arms arrived, Capt Richards began organising the troops in the basin into some sort of defensive position. D Coy was obviously scattered, and there was no sign of [24 Battalion](#) on the left flank. The situation was unchanged when Col Peart arrived and set up his headquarters with A Coy. Tactical HQ and B Coy had been delayed by heavy defensive fire along the line of advance and both had suffered losses. B Coy had remained on the south lip of the depression and was digging in there. Unfortunately the wireless set to Brigade HQ had been damaged during the advance and the only means of communicating with Brig Clifton was by runner. (As it happened the Brigade Commander was in a similar position and had also lost his wireless.) A small patrol was sent out to locate [24 Battalion](#), but it ran into enemy troops and was forced to retire. Subsequent patrols also failed to make contact.

By using company sets the Colonel was able to communicate with the transport column, which was in difficulties. It had swung too far to the right during the advance and had run into the minefield. Two carriers were blown up, and later, to make matters worse, the ammunition truck was hit and set on fire. This was a serious loss for on the truck was the much-needed supply of sticky bombs. The burning vehicle attracted the attention of enemy gunners and before long several more lorries were hit. Seven anti-tank guns were with the column, and the CO ordered the gunners by wireless to open fire on the enemy tanks. Only a few rounds were fired as it was impossible to judge the range.

As it was going to take some time to extricate the guns and vehicles, Capt McKinlay went forward to acquaint the Colonel with what had happened. The minefield was much more extensive than had been expected and a big task lay ahead of the small party of sappers. Lieutenant [Fraser](#),¹⁴ the anti-tank officer, accompanied him as far as B Coy and then returned to get his guns forward. Subsequently one gun was blown up on a mine and several sappers injured. It was nearly daylight when four of the guns reached B Coy.

By this time the battalion was almost ready to withdraw. When Capt McKinlay reached Tac HQ shortly after midnight he found the CO very worried about the lack of support, particularly the non-appearance of [24 Battalion](#). No news had been received from this battalion or from the Brigade Commander. Patrols sent out to locate them all returned with a similar story—enemy troops were holding the ground west of the battalion. Having learned that the ammunition truck had been lost, and realising that his troops would have to have some form of protection against tanks before daylight, the CO sent the Adjutant and Capt McKinlay back to Rear Brigade HQ. They were to try to find out what was happening and bring back a load of sticky bombs. The doctor was also required forward to give urgent attention to wounded who could not be moved because of the heavy fire. The two officers arrived at Rear Brigade HQ to find that nobody there knew any more than they did. Communications had broken down completely, but it was obvious from the large number of casualties being brought back that [24 Battalion](#) had run into heavy opposition. Captain [Hall](#)¹⁵ rang through to Divisional HQ and explained the precarious nature of the situation to Maj-Gen Inglis. The GOC gave orders for the battalion to hold on as the armoured support was on the way. Meanwhile, Capt McKinlay had collected four carriers, two

of them loaded with sticky bombs, and shortly afterwards the party set out for Tac HQ accompanied by Lt [Rutherford](#).¹⁶ On the way one of the carriers struck a mine and the driver was wounded. The doctor stayed behind to attend to the wounded man while the others continued on with their precious load. They arrived at the depression just before dawn to learn that Col Peart had already given orders for the troops in the basin to retire. Several factors had contributed towards this decision. Enemy infantry, supported by tanks, had worked back into the depression and were rounding up scattered sections of the two companies. It was only a matter of time before the rest of the battalion would suffer a similar fate unless the British tanks arrived before first light. Four enemy tanks were reported in B Coy's area. In the basin it had become increasingly dangerous to move around. Armoured vehicles were moving about in the vicinity of the northern edge of the depression, and it seemed probable that the enemy was only waiting for dawn to make a sweep over the area. Casualties had been heavy and were steadily mounting. As a last resort Lt [Boyd](#)¹⁷ and two other ranks had been sent to locate [24 Battalion](#). Twenty minutes later they returned to report complete failure.

The Adjutant's news did not alter the Colonel's decision. Sticky bombs were not much use in daylight and four two-pounders could not be expected to stem a tank-supported attack. It was almost dawn and there was no sign of the British armour, so the order was given to withdraw completely from the area. Within a few minutes the troops were on the move, running in small groups across the uneven ground. Machine-gun and mortar fire followed them. The remnants of A and D Coys retraced their steps towards the start line, while the Colonel led B Coy and Tac HQ towards [21 Battalion](#) HQ, east of the depression. The withdrawal was completed with only one casualty, one officer being severely wounded on the booby-trapped wire.

In the [21 Battalion](#) area were the British tanks for which the battalion had waited so anxiously. They moved off in the direction of El Mreir soon afterwards. The CO continued on to 5 Brigade HQ, where he communicated with the GOC and was ordered to reoccupy his position with whatever forces he could muster. The General said that the British tanks were already entering the depression. Leaving the Adjutant to collect and bring forward all the supporting arms he could muster, Col Peart hurried back to B Coy and personally led the leading section towards the depression. It was broad daylight, and as the company ran forward, section by

section, it came under fire from enemy machine-gun posts east of the objective. These were quickly overrun, and the company finally took up a position along a ridge about 300 yards east of its earlier position.

From this position the company could look along the depression and watch the tank battle, and also drink the hot tea brought forward by CQMS Jones.¹⁸ Colonel Peart went forward and spoke to the tank commander, who stated that he could see no need for infantry. Many of the British Valentines had been knocked out on the minefield and those which did get through were no match for the heavier-armoured German tanks. The six-pounder anti-tank guns which accompanied the Valentines and the battalion's three-inch mortars did much more damage, and the enemy slowly withdrew. In the distance a number of trucks were burning, strengthening the belief that the rest of 6 Brigade had met trouble.

Shortly after 1 p.m. the company was ordered to withdraw to its original sector, where the battalion was to come under command of 5 Brigade. Colonel Peart was advised that his men would be sent out for a short spell. Later the troops embussed and moved several miles to the rear, where Capt Wilson was waiting with a hot meal. This brought to a close the battalion's



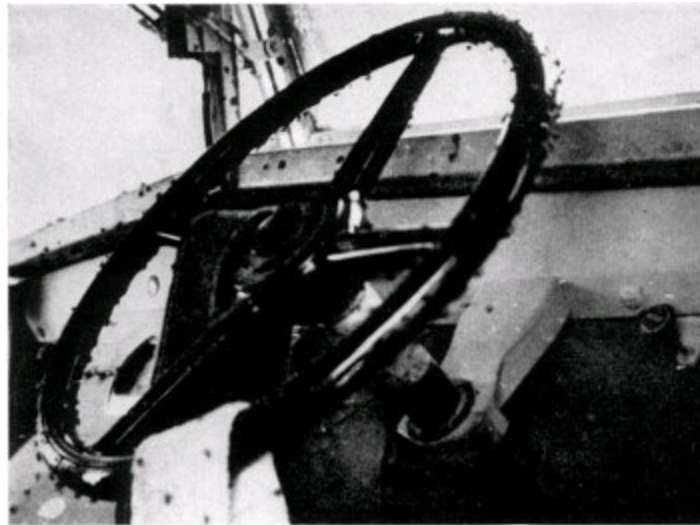
The Battalion convoy on the road from Palmyra, Syria

The Battalion convoy on the road from Palmyra, Syria

A burst pipe at the Qattara Box gave plenty of water
for those with containers



A burst pipe at the **Qattara Box** gave plenty of water for those with containers



Flies
Flies



Sandstorm
Sandstorm

first action since November 1941. Although small parties of men were still drifting in from the depression, it was obvious that the casualties had been heavy. The final count revealed that 31 men had been killed or mortally wounded, 63 wounded, and 68 taken prisoner—16 of those taken prisoner were also wounded. Nine officers were listed as casualties. D Coy had lost 65 men, A Coy 57, B Coy 21, and the specialist platoons 19—a total of 162 men and a third of the fighting strength of the unit. Nos. 16 and 18 Platoons had been captured almost intact. No. 17 Platoon, under Lt Harvey,¹⁹ although separated from the rest of D Coy and A Coy throughout the night, managed to escape through 21 Battalion's lines. It had not been a satisfactory attack in many respects although the troops—and it was the first action for most of them—had fought well. Various things had gone wrong, but everyone felt that had the British tanks come forward at first light the depression would have been held despite the losses.

The evacuation of wounded had been left in the hands of Sgt Branks²⁰ and his team of stretcher-bearers. They had done a splendid job. Although suffering from bomb-blast himself, the sergeant had continued with his work until the troops withdrew from the area. He ranged up and down the forward area in a truck, picking up the wounded as they were brought out of the basin by the stretcher-bearers. More often than not the area was under heavy fire, but none of the stretcher-bearers showed any reluctance to continue. In the minefield the driver of the Signals van was doing a similar task carrying out the wounded from that locality. Altogether over seventy wounded were evacuated during the night.

Later it was learned what had happened to the rest of the brigade. The 24th Battalion, deeper inside the enemy positions, found itself in a similar predicament to 26 Battalion and suffered very heavy losses both before and after it reached the depression. For this reason it was unable to extend east to link up with A and D Coys. Later the Brigade Commander had ordered 25 Battalion to come forward and plug the gap as soon as it had finished its original task. It was almost daylight when this battalion approached the depression, and before vehicles and troops could disperse enemy tanks overran the area, setting many of the trucks on fire. Very few of the infantry were able to escape. Brigadier Clifton was captured but managed to escape the following night.

The day following the attack was spent resting in the reserve area. The heavy losses suffered necessitated some reorganisation within the unit. The remnants of D Coy, plus its B Echelon personnel, were absorbed into A Coy, and C Coy was ordered up from [Maadi](#). After dusk the battalion returned to its former position in the line, A Coy taking over the right flank and B Coy moving into D Coy's old sector. The 18th Battalion came forward on the left flank in the place of [24 Battalion](#), which had been sent to [Maadi](#) to reorganise and reform. When C Coy arrived on 25 July it took up a reserve position behind A Coy. All three brigades had suffered heavy losses in the last few weeks. Fourth Brigade was reforming in [Maadi](#), and for the next six weeks 5 and 6 Brigades occupied a sector of the [Alamein Line](#).

The Division's role was defensive. During this period efforts were made to make the '[New Zealand Box](#)', as it was known, an impregnable fortress. By the end of August minebelts and wire entanglements surrounded it and the supporting arms were sited so that they could give ready assistance to any threatened area. The troops dug in properly, compressors being used to break up the hard rock pan. General Montgomery became the Eighth Army Commander, and one of his first actions was to order all troop-carrying transport to the rear. This effectively silenced rumours of another withdrawal. As the weeks slowly passed increasing evidence was seen of American assistance. Flight after flight of Mitchell bombers flew overhead, and leave personnel returned with stories of the arrival of shiploads of American tanks and supplies.

The battalion sector was in a depression, with a ridge forming the north-western and western perimeters. Unbelievably hot in the daytime, the area was a home not only for the troops and for enemy shells but also for the flies. These persistent pests appeared everywhere and in incredible numbers. A sweep of the hand might kill scores but hundreds took their place. Frequent dust-storms added to the general unpopularity of the area. Early in August B Echelon was plagued by large numbers of mosquitoes. There was no water for miles, and rumours circulated that the enemy had dropped the pests from aircraft to increase the sickness rate. Finally it was decided that they had been blown across the desert from the [Qattara Depression](#) by a strong southerly. Everyone at B Echelon hoped for another strong wind to blow them back again.

Enemy activity along the front was confined to desultory shelling and mortaring, which generally became heavier around dusk and at dawn. Few casualties were suffered. An unusual number of dud shells came over; they were attributed to the work of resistance workers in German factories. Enemy planes appeared on many occasions, but they generally flew at too great a height to be easily identified. On one occasion five Ju88s flew low overhead as they headed towards the enemy lines. Everyone for miles around opened fire and three were shot down.

Patrolling continued as before. Scarcely a night passed but one of the companies had men probing deep into enemy territory. The patrols were usually on reconnaissance, and by the end of the period a larger dossier of information about enemy troop dispositions, the location of minefields, guns, etc., had been collected. Fighting patrols were sent out, and on other occasions mortars and anti-tank guns were set up in no-man's-land to shoot up reported enemy posts. Brigadier Clifton took a very active interest in this work and on one occasion was heard to offer a patrol two cans of beer for a German prisoner and one for an Italian. Towards the end of the period the enemy reacted strongly to these excursions into his territory and patrolling became much more dangerous.

C Coy provided the three fighting patrols, each of platoon strength, and A Coy one of company strength. The first patrol, 14 Platoon led by Lt [Fraser](#),²¹ was the most successful. Setting out after dark on 31 July, the patrol travelled north-west about 3000 yards and encountered a large enemy working party. The platoon immediately attacked, throwing grenades and following up with the bayonet. Twelve of the enemy were killed and others wounded, at a cost to the platoon of three wounded. Private Bob [Miles](#),²² a popular member of the battalion football team, grabbed one German by the scruff of the neck and brought him back to the lines.

Nine days later Lt [Ainsley](#)²³ led 13 Platoon on a similar mission. After passing through the gap in the minefield the party travelled west for about two miles, cutting two telephone cables on the way. Hearing a noise close ahead, Ainsley gave the order to attack. Within a few minutes an enemy machine-gun post had been silenced, but the patrol came under heavy fire from a ring of other posts surrounding it. The platoon silently began to crawl back the way it had come, leaving three men behind. Lieutenant Ainsley and one man had been killed, and a third soldier was

taken prisoner.

When Lt Baird ²⁴ took 15 Platoon out on patrol over a fortnight later, the enemy was waiting for him. The patrol was subjected to heavy machine-gun fire, and withdrew with difficulty with four of its number wounded. The Platoon Commander died of his injuries, and the battalion lost one of its most popular and efficient officers. A Coy's fighting patrol did not make contact with the enemy, although listening posts were able to gain some valuable information. The size of the party and the unavoidable noise made it difficult to achieve the element of surprise so essential to patrolling.

Seven officers and 35 other ranks were posted to the unit early in August and they helped to bring company strengths back to something like normal. The sickness rate was high. By the end of the month everyone was showing the effects of the long spell in the desert. The healthy appearance of the men, so noticeable after the spell in Syria, had gone. All ranks fell victims to painful desert sores which inevitably followed a cut or bruise. Jaundice and stomach ailments took a heavy toll and the evacuation of sick men to hospital made the task of those left behind much harder. Major Thomson, who had commanded C Coy for a long period, was evacuated to hospital and his place was taken by Capt Horrell. Later Capt Horrell was sent to hospital and Capt Hall was given the command, Lt Barnett ²⁵ becoming Adjutant.

The incidence of these desert sores prompted the title of 6 Brigade's daily news sheet Desert Saws. This paper was very popular amongst all ranks, for besides the latest war news it also contained humorous articles, poems, and jokes to provide relief from the general monotony. Social amenities did not exist and it was left to the men to provide their own entertainment. A unit concert was held, one of the items being Pte R. T. Street's

FLY-FLAPPY

R T Street

Six teen on tee make pound, Two feet make a yard, Sil-ent thoughts don't make sound, Con-crete very hard,
We all know why we are dry, Why the grass is green, But can you tell me why the fly should have created been? Twenty
flies in my tea to-day, There were ten there yes-ter-day - , The sit-u-
-a-tion truly is bad, The crazy things are driving me mad, So when you
see me dance and yell - , Have pity on me, can't you tell - , That I am
sore-happy * Fly-flap-py! Some-one shoot me dead!

Chorus

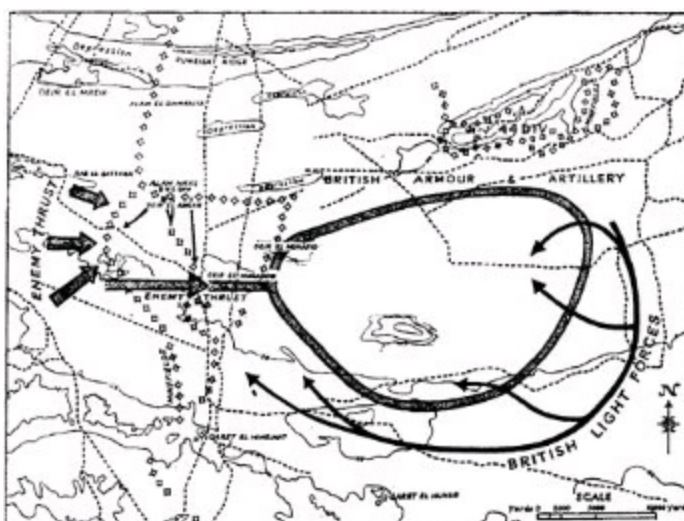
'Fly Flappy', a song that will long be remembered by the battalion. Practically no leave was granted. During August two parties of 20 men went to [Alexandria](#) and [Cairo](#) for a six-day spell.

Although there had been a lull along the front for nearly six weeks, the troops knew that sooner or later one side would take the offensive and that they would probably be drawn into the action. Rommel made the first move. On 30 August the attention of all ranks was drawn from the fighting in [Russia](#) and the [Pacific](#) to events closer at hand. This time Rommel did not attempt a frontal assault but made his thrust against the southern sector below the [New Zealand Box](#). Armoured spearheads breached the minefields and broke through the light mobile screen behind them. Before long the enemy had swept around east of the New Zealanders up against the exposed left-rear flank of the [Eighth Army](#). To meet this threat the divisional defences had to be turned to face south-east. Fifth Brigade moved around to the left rear of 6 Brigade, facing south and south-east, and 132 Brigade (44 Division), a recent arrival in Egypt, moved in on the right of 26 Battalion.

The enemy penetrated deep into Egypt but was unable to continue his sweep towards [Alexandria](#). His attack had been anticipated and armoured units and anti-tank guns had been sited to block his advance. The RAF and artillery concentrated on the enemy supply lines which had to pass through the gap between the [New Zealand Box](#) and the [Qattara Depression](#). Within four days the enemy was beginning to pull back, and plans to inflict as much damage as possible on the retreating force were put into effect.

On 2 September 151 Brigade ([5 Indian Division](#)) relieved 132 Brigade and 26

Battalion. The relief was completed after dusk, and by 11 p.m. 4 Battalion Essex Regiment was occupying the battalion sector and the battalion was stationed near Divisional HQ. Next morning Col Peart received orders for an attack. It was to be made after dusk on a two-brigade front, with 132 Brigade on the right and 5 Brigade on the left. They were to advance south from the Box through the minefields and attack towards the [Munassib Depression](#), two miles away. Elements of the German 90th Light Division and some Italian troops were reported to be holding the northern lip of this feature, the possession of which would provide direct observation for artillery fire on the retreating enemy. The advance was to be silent, for it was hoped to have the infantry and their supporting arms through the minefield gaps before the enemy was aware an attack was imminent. Artillery OPs would accompany the infantry to give support if required. The 25th Battalion was to gap the minefield, and [18 Battalion](#) was to stage a limited diversionary attack westward from its sector.



The enemy thrust 30 August–3 September 1942

Colonel Peart's orders were to secure the right flank of 132 Brigade. The battalion was unlikely to encounter much opposition in doing this as it would only be filling the gap between 132 Brigade and the continuation of the minebelts extending south from the [New Zealand Box](#). The enemy had gapped this minefield in the vicinity of the [Munassib Depression](#) on 30 August, but it was reported that his forces had not attempted to extend northwards. It was a wide front to cover from the depression in the south along the length of the minebelt, and Col Peart decided to commit all three rifle companies.²⁶ The supporting arms were to cover any gap

between 132 Brigade and the southernmost company.

The companies were warned to be ready to move at 9.30 p.m. so that they could reach a rendezvous south of the minefield gap by zero hour—eleven o'clock. From this point they would move towards their respective objectives—B Coy almost due west towards the outer minefield, A Coy close to a small depression (Deir el Angar) several hundred yards to the south, and C Coy farther south to a position on a rise near another depression, [Deir Alinda](#). Battalion HQ was to be set up about 1500 yards south of the gap, and the supporting arms, excluding those with companies, would be sited in the vicinity.

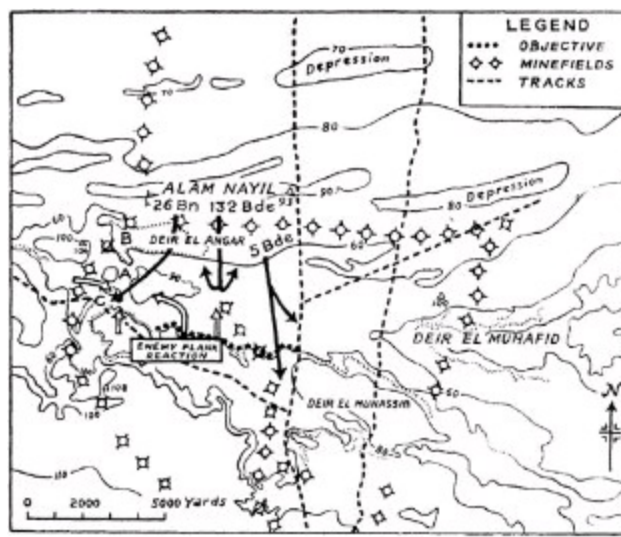
The rest of the day passed quickly. Company commanders studied the plan and completed internal arrangements. Shortly before dusk 132 Brigade began marching towards the minefield gap which had already been taped. As they passed the Tommies commented on the size of the New Zealanders' picks and shovels and seemed amused when told each soldier carried one or other into action. There was no delay on the forming-up line, and punctually at 9.30 p.m. the battalion moved off in two columns towards the minefield gap. The rifle companies, led by B Coy, formed the right-hand column, and Battalion HQ and the supporting arms comprised the other.

As the two columns moved through [25 Battalion](#) and entered the minefield gap they encountered heavy mortar and artillery fire which caused a number of casualties. Enemy planes were dropping anti-personnel bombs, and it was evident that the enemy was aware of the location of the gap and that an attack was imminent. The British infantry were through the gap, but their transport and supporting arms were still in the area and hopelessly disorganised. This did not delay the infantry column to any extent but effectively held up the supporting arms. The confusion was worse at the south end of the gap. British trucks were rushing in all directions; some had been abandoned and others were on fire. The shelling was very heavy and the companies had difficulty in maintaining contact and keeping going. More men were hit, including Col Peart. Lieutenant Barnett was close at hand when the Colonel fell and realised that he was very seriously injured. Sergeant [Lock](#),²⁷ of the Provost section, found an empty jeep and set off with the Colonel to the RAP. This NCO, who had an uncanny sense of direction, soon found the RAP and was back with the Adjutant soon afterwards. It was after eleven o'clock by this time and

the companies were on the move towards their objectives. Lieutenant Barnett promptly took control and tried to reorganise the 132nd Brigade transport so that the battalion column could get through and set up Battalion HQ. It was a slow job made more difficult by the darkness and the heavy shelling, but gradually with the help of others the Adjutant managed to get his column free. Leaving the others to disentangle the British transport, he set off on a compass bearing towards the hollow selected beforehand as the site for Battalion HQ.

By good navigation he landed on the right spot. Unit vehicles were dispersed and the supporting arms sited to cover the southern front. The enemy shelling had not abated, but by 12.30 a.m. this work was almost completed. At the minefield gap British and New Zealand officers were hard at work trying to move the British vehicles away from the danger zone. Many of the drivers were demoralised—it was their first action—and consequently they were hard to handle. The situation was made worse by the arrival of other transport which started to come back through the gap and block the passage of southbound traffic. Painstakingly the officers, including several from the battalion, sorted things out. All the while more and more trucks were being hit and each blaze seemed to attract heavier fire.

Meanwhile, at Battalion HQ the Adjutant was faced with another and more dangerous situation. Even as the supporting arms moved into position, troops of the assaulting West Kent battalions came streaming back into the area. They seemed hopelessly disorganised. Some of them were unarmed. Their story was soon pieced together. Having had little desert training, the two battalions had advanced in close formation towards their objectives. After suffering some losses in a minefield and from hostile shelling, they ran into a merciless hail of lead from machine-gun posts directly ahead of them. Their entrenching



ATTACK ON ENEMY FLANK 3-4 SEPTEMBER

Attack on enemy flank 3-4 September

tools proved too small to be of use, and with little cover available they had broken after suffering very heavy casualties. Many of their officers had been killed or wounded, and companies and platoons became badly disorganised as they retired.

Lieutenant Barnett made strenuous efforts to reorganise the British troops, not so much to get them to return to the attack but so that they could cover the gap. It was a critical period. No word had been received from the forward companies, and in view of the situation on their left some anxiety was felt for their safety. The Brigade LO, Lt [Buchanan](#),²⁸ and Lt [Piper](#),²⁹ the newly appointed IO, set out to locate them. Within half an hour they had found A and B Coys, both of which had reached their objectives without meeting opposition. Desultory shelling was going on, but the men were well dug in and were not suffering casualties. Major Walden was informed of the Colonel's injuries and immediately left for Battalion HQ, Lt Boyd being left in charge of B Coy. Buchanan and Piper could find no trace of C Coy in the area where it was expected to be, and thought that Capt Hall might have gone too far to the south. The area was quiet, and this allayed any feeling of anxiety.

Battalion HQ was still occupied with 132 Brigade, At this juncture it was not known whether the left flank battalion of the brigade, the 2nd Battalion of the Buffs Regiment, had also pulled back with the others. Hours passed and the New Zealand officers could do little to alter the situation. Heavy shelling made the task harder. In the meantime signallers laid lines to A and B Coys, which reported that enemy shellfire was becoming heavier. The anti-tank platoon and the reserve detachment

of mortars, together with some from 132 Brigade, were moved south of Battalion HQ to cover the front. Brigade and Divisional HQ were advised of the position, and a request was made for tank support to deal with an expected enemy counter-attack at dawn. Sixty men from the West Kent battalions were collected and sent south to link up with C Coy. They never reached their destination. The New Zealand Intelligence corporal who accompanied the party stated that it met very heavy fire and within a few minutes was so scattered that it was impossible to collect the men together again.

With the situation more settled, although not very secure, efforts were made to locate C Coy. Scouting parties were sent out from A Coy and Battalion HQ, but they all reported failure. At dawn the position was unchanged. Enemy shelling became much heavier and it was dangerous to move far from a trench. Artillery support was requested and smoke shells were fired around a number of suspected enemy OPs. When Brig Clifton arrived at Battalion HQ about 7 a.m., the shelling had eased off. The Brigade Commander arranged for the battalion carriers to move south to help cover the open front, and then, accompanied by Maj Walden, set out in a jeep to locate the missing company. At eight o'clock an artillery OP forward of Battalion HQ reported sighting a jeep surrounded by Italian troops south-west of A Coy. It was feared, and later found to be true, that the two officers had been captured.

For the second time within a few hours Lt Barnett became acting Battalion Commander. He had already accomplished a multiplicity of tasks which do not normally come within the scope of an Adjutant, and his troubles were not over. From the companies came messages indicating the enemy was preparing to counter-attack. Appeals for tank support were unavailing. The Divisional Artillery stationed behind the southern escarpment was mainly occupied with the open front. As the morning wore on more reports of enemy preparations were received. Italians were forming up west of A Coy and tanks were moving about south-west of B Coy. Enemy reconnaissance patrols approached both companies and were engaged by the forward platoons. Fortunately at this juncture and FOO of 64 Medium Regiment RA arrived at Battalion HQ and was immediately sent to B Coy HQ. Fire from this regiment broke up the enemy concentrations and effectively delayed the counter-attack.

Shortly after midday Maj Richards arrived at Battalion HQ and assumed

command, Lt Harvey taking over A Coy. The Major found that all communication to Brigade HQ had been lost, and soon afterwards he left to discover if the battalion would withdraw from its salient. In his absence the Adjutant carried on as before. Enemy shelling, which had gradually eased off during the morning, began again at 1 p.m. It became so heavy that at one time it was feared it might be the prelude to a counter-attack. The 25-pounders and medium artillery fired heavy concentrations on danger points, and after a while everything returned to normal. At 1.30 p.m. Lt A. J. Fraser arrived with news of C Coy.

The company had suffered heavy losses around the minefield gap early in the night, and in the confusion the attached signal and RAP personnel had become separated from it. This was a serious loss, for with the signallers went the No. 18 set. The company continued on towards its objective and reached it without much difficulty. At dawn it was a different story. There was no sign of friendly troops, and the three platoons were heavily engaged on three sides. Patrols were sent out to locate A Coy. Throughout the morning the company was fully engaged in a little battle of its own. By midday supplies of ammunition were very low and the position was fast becoming desperate. Because of his heavy casualties Capt Hall could ill spare men to establish contact with Battalion HQ. Three small patrols were sent out and Lt Fraser's was the only one to succeed.

From Fraser's story it was clear that C Coy was some distance south-west of its intended objective and obviously in grave danger of capture. [All reports seem to indicate that the bearings given Capt Hall were based on a map which showed the north-south minefield in the wrong position.] Lieutenant Barnett realised that it was going to be difficult to extricate the company with the enemy in such close contact. Arrangements were then made for 64 Medium Regiment to lay a smoke screen around the reported location of the company. The guns were about to fire when a sudden dust-storm obscuring visibility caused a postponement. The storm also prevented Capt McKinlay and Lt Fraser from reaching the company with three carriers. When it subsided the carriers made another attempt, but ran into accurate anti-tank fire which destroyed one vehicle and forced the others to withdraw. By this time several other C Coy men had reached A Coy; they reported that the company was almost surrounded and that Capt Hall intended to withdraw at dusk.

Major Richards returned to Battalion HQ at 4.30 p.m. with news that a withdrawal would begin as soon as it was dusk. For the forward platoons it was a long wait. They could see enemy movement in the distance. As each threat developed it was broken up by concentrated fire from the supporting arms. The enemy stepped up his shelling and mortaring as the light began to fail, but when the first company began moving back through the gap at 8.30 p.m. the fire had almost ceased. The rest of the battalion followed at intervals, Battalion HQ and the supporting arms bringing up the rear. By midnight the troops were back in the reserve area they had left little more than twenty-four hours before. Major McQuade took command of the battalion, the fifth officer to assume this duty in one day. Although the battalion had fulfilled its role and 5 Brigade had inflicted heavy casualties, the success of the attack was to some extent nullified by the losses suffered by 132 Brigade. From the battalion's point of view the operation was not a success for C Coy was still missing and had, in fact, been captured.

All day Capt Hall had waited for some sign from Battalion HQ and for the return of the patrols he had sent out. Late in the afternoon enemy gunners ranged on the company, and shortly afterwards the area was pounded by heavy and sustained concentrations. The fire was too heavy for a withdrawal to be attempted, and this plan had to be abandoned. Enemy infantry attacked in force, and although the small party put up a spirited fight it was soon overwhelmed. Twelve men managed to escape, and later they joined the nine others of the company already safe behind the minefield gap. The remaining 21 were captured. Six, including Capt Hall and the remaining platoon commander, were wounded.

Altogether this company had suffered 53 casualties—12 killed, 11 wounded, and 30 taken prisoner. In comparison the rest of the battalion had escaped lightly. HQ Coy had lost 13 men and B Coy 12. The battalion casualties were 19 killed or mortally wounded, 28 wounded, and 33 taken prisoner—a total of four officers and 76 other ranks. Colonel Peart had died of wounds. The loss of three of the battalion's senior officers (Col Peart, Maj Walden and Capt Hall) at this stage of the war was a heavy blow, for all three had been highly efficient and popular. Colonel Peart had won a well-deserved DSO for his part in the El Mreir action and had built up an impressive record in earlier campaigns with [18 Battalion](#).

In an action in which Battalion HQ personnel had been called on to cope with duties normally outside their scope, Lt Rutherford and the RAP staff excelled themselves. The doctor was quickly on the scene when trouble occurred around the minefield gap, and although the area was under heavy fire he attended to many of the wounded on the spot. Later he set up his RAP near Battalion HQ and, together with his sergeant, scoured the area for wounded, visiting both A and B Coys before Lt Barnett was aware of their location. When the ambulances of 132 Brigade were blown up on mines and its medical supplies lost, the doctor and his men worked unceasingly attending to the many casualties of that brigade. Altogether over 200 wounded were treated in the RAP within 24 hours. This also meant extra work for the stretcher-bearers and those responsible for the evacuation of the wounded. Although he was under no obligation to come into the firing line, Mr. Gray of the [YMCA](#) paid many visits to the RAP and evacuated wounded to the rear.

As quickly as he had broken through, the enemy withdrew from his southern salient. His venture had been costly for he had lost many tanks at a time when they were vital to him, particularly as the [Eighth Army](#) was receiving more tanks, planes, and men as each day passed. Everyone in the battalion was hoping the Division would be withdrawn for a rest, but on 5 September orders came to return to the old sector in the Box. The changeover was uneventful and the men settled down to their earlier routine, sweltering in the heat all day and patrolling after dusk. There was little to report. The enemy had withdrawn behind his own minefields and was content to mortar and shell the sector at odd intervals each day. Allied planes appeared in ever-increasing numbers, and occasionally the monotony was broken by a dogfight overhead.

On 8 September came the news all had been waiting for—the Division was to be relieved by 44 Division and a Greek brigade and was to move to a rest area near the sea. An advanced party left Battalion HQ early on the 10th. B Echelon left during the afternoon and was followed late that night by the main body. After a bumpy and uncomfortable trip across the desert, the convoy turned on to the tar-sealed main road and by 6 a.m. had reached the rest area near [Burg el Arab](#). Sixth Brigade's area extended along a sandy escarpment only 250 yards from the sea. Battalion HQ, company headquarters, and cookhouses were set up on the south side of the ridge, and the troops pitched their tents on the ridge itself or in convenient hollows.

Company strengths were low. Of the 773 men who had travelled down from [Syria](#), plus those subsequently posted to the battalion, only 405 remained. Sixty-seven had been killed or mortally wounded, 133 wounded, and 104 (including 22 wounded) taken prisoner. The remaining 64 of the 368 casualties had been evacuated to hospital through sickness. In addition to Col Peart, the battalion had lost five company commanders and fifteen other officers. There were many gaps to be filled before it would be ready for another spell in the line.

Nine pleasant days were spent by the seaside. During the heat of the day swimming was the most popular pastime. At nights there were picture shows, concerts, and performances by the [Kiwi Concert Party](#). The 6th Brigade band ran a number of impromptu open-air concerts. Many of the men recorded greetings which were subsequently broadcast in New Zealand. The highlight of the spell was the leave scheme. Every three days about 80 men left on a six-day trip to [Cairo](#) or [Alexandria](#). Day leave to [Alexandria](#) was also granted.

A number of changes in command took place. Lieutenant-Colonel [Fountaine](#),³⁰ from [20 Battalion](#), was appointed Battalion Commander. His first task was to reorganise the unit on a three-company basis, with a full complement of specialist sections and platoons. The arrival of 273 reinforcements enabled this to be carried out. Major [Morten](#),³¹ from [23 Battalion](#), became second-in-command and Capt L. G. Smith took over B Coy. On his return from hospital Capt Horrell resumed command of a newly-formed C Coy. Brigadier [Gentry](#)³² was the new Brigade Commander.

Early on 19 September the battalion disembarked on RMT and moved south to a divisional training centre, known as Swordfish area. The Carrier Platoon was already there, having moved direct from the [New Zealand Box](#) after the relief. Company areas were selected and the troops spent the rest of the day settling in, pitching their tents on or near some low ridges.



Training began almost immediately with a divisional exercise. Although the troops were unaware of it, this exercise was a rehearsal of the assault already planned against the German defences on [Miteiriya Ridge](#). The 9th British Armoured Brigade came under command of [2 NZ Division](#) and trained with it. In the exercise many new features were introduced. The troops advanced through minefields behind a creeping artillery barrage. Behind the infantry, sappers gapped the minefields to enable the tanks and supporting arms to join the infantrymen on the objective. Provost detachments marked the minefield gaps and the areas of advance with lights. Bofors guns fired tracer along the line of brigade boundaries to assist the infantry to maintain direction.

After the exercise was over the real training began. Platoons, companies, battalions and, last of all, brigades practised again and again their particular part in the planned assault. Much of the work was new and therefore interesting. Moreover, each soldier knew what he had to do and why, and this stimulated interest and made the exercises more successful. Those who had fought at El Mreir were quick to note that the tanks were to move at night so that they could join the infantry before and not after dawn. Signallers and wireless operators received special training to improve communications. As the days passed the men became more confident, and the brigade exercise was an unqualified success.

On the last day of September a special brigade parade was held in honour of the [Eighth Army](#) commander. After the march past General Montgomery inspected the troops and presented decorations won in recent actions. He also congratulated the brigade on its fine record and its steadiness on parade. A few days later National Patriotic parcels were distributed. These were very acceptable at this period, when

all ranks were living under hot and trying conditions. Captain Wilson sprang a surprise one night at tea-time, the cooks serving fruit and ice-cream. Except for two heavy rainstorms which almost washed out the camp, and an unpleasant hailstorm, the weather was fine. The days were hot and the nights cold. Dust-storms were a nuisance, and it was impossible to keep gear or food free of fine particles of sand.

By the middle of October training was completed, and on the 15th the battalion returned to [Burg el Arab](#). Everyone knew that the return to this seaside resort was but a stepping stone to the line. General Montgomery had indicated in his speech that the [Eighth Army](#) was almost ready to attack—and attack to win. On the 17th officers attended a conference at which they were able to study a plaster model of the front. The plan to breach the enemy's defences was explained in some detail. By the seashore rumours were circulating freely, while overhead passed flight after flight of Allied bombers and fighters. On the 20th when orders to move to a forward area were received, nobody was surprised. Everyone knew that this time the role would not be defensive.

¹ [Maj W. H. Carson](#); Dunedin; born Kaitangata, 11 Jun 1906; barrister and solicitor; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

² [Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis](#), CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, VD. m.i.d., MC (Greek); [Timaru](#); born [Mosgiel](#), 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; commanded company in 1 Bn NZ Rifle Bde and in NZMG Bn 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan–Aug 1940; commanded 4 Bde 1941–42 and 4 Armd Bde 1943–44; commanded 2 NZ Div 27 Jun–16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, [Germany](#), 1947–50.

³ [Lt S. Talbot](#); born England, 4 May 1906; school teacher; killed in action 16 Jul 1942.

⁴ [Lt G. P. R. Gifford](#); born NZ 26 Jun 1916; civil servant; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

⁵ [Sgt M. C. Tither](#), MM; born NZ 24 Feb 1913; school teacher; wounded 18 Jul 1942; killed in action 7 Jan 1944.

⁶ Capt L. B. Allen; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 29 Apr 1909; stock auctioneer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; released 29 Apr 1945.

⁷ L-Cpl J. J. Skinner; born NZ 1 Jul 1916; storeman; killed in action 18 Jul 1942.

⁸ Forward defended localities.

⁹ Maj A. R. McKinlay; Lawrence; born Lawrence, 21 Mar 1914; assistant company manager.

¹⁰ Appointments on the eve of the attack were:

CO: Lt-Col J. N. Peart

2 i/c: Maj H. G. McQuade

Adjt: Capt H. J. Hall

QM: Capt F. W. Wilson

IO: Lt W. H. Carson

TO: Lt A. W. Barnett

A Tk: Lt J. I. D. Fraser

OC A Coy: Capt E. E. Richards

OC B Coy: Major E. F. Walden

OC D Coy: Capt R. M. Young

OC HQ Coy: Capt H. J. H. Horrell (acting)

Signals: Lt K. W. Hobbs

MO: Lt A. M. Rutherford

Padre: Rev. Fr. J. S. Kingan

¹¹ Lt-Col E. E. Richards, DSO, m.i.d. (2); Nelson; born Kumara, 6 Dec 1915; civil servant; CO 26 Bn 30 Dec 1943–30 Apr 1944.

¹² Lt-Col J. R. Williams, DSO, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 27 Jul 1911; solicitor; CO Div Cav Bn Jan–Apr 1945; wounded three times.

¹³ Capt R. M. Young; Christchurch born Palmerston North, 24 Jun 1913; solicitor; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁴ Capt J. I. D. Fraser; Wakaroa; born Auckland, 12 Apr 1919; storeman; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁵ Capt H. J. Hall; Christchurch; born Timaru, 8 Sep 1912; architect; wounded and p.w. 4 Sep 1942; released 29 Apr 1945.

¹⁶ Capt A. M. Rutherford, MC and bar; Inglewood; born Dunedin, 27 Mar 1915; medical practitioner; wounded 22 Mar 1943.

¹⁷ Maj B. Boyd, MBE, m.i.d.; Trentham Military Camp; born Dunedin, 21 Apr 1918; clerk.

¹⁸ Capt D. W. C. Jones; Waimate; born Dunedin, 6 Nov 1912; shop assistant.

¹⁹ Maj D. P. W. Harvey, MC, m.i.d.; Picton; born Havelock, 4 Feb 1918; clerk; CO (temp) 23 Bn Sep–Dec 1945.

²⁰ Sgt A. E. Branks, MM, m.i.d.; born Invercargill, 23 Oct 1907; ambulance driver; accidentally killed 4 Apr 1944.

²¹ Maj A. J. Fraser; born NZ, 8 Mar 1905; school teacher; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

²² Pte B. G. Miles; Hapuku; born NZ, 13 Aug 1918; labourer.

²³ Lt P. C. Ainsley; born Hastings, 21 Jan 1913; shop assistant; killed in action 10 Aug 1942.

²⁴ Lt J. R. Baird; born NZ, 14 Mar 1916; painter and paperhanger; died of wounds 25 Aug 1942.

²⁵ Lt-Col A. W. Barnett, MC; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 13 Oct 1913; draper; CO 25 Bn 23 Apr–18 Oct 1945; commanded (temp) 6 Bde 19 Oct–1 Dec 1945; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

²⁶ Battalion appointments at this time were:—

CO: Lt-Col J. N. Peart

2 i/c: Maj H. G. McQuade

Adjt: Lt A. W. Barnett

QM: Capt F. W. Wilson

IO: Lt D. C. Piper

Carriers: Capt A. M. McKinlay

MO: Lt A. M. Rutherford

OC A Coy: Maj E. E. Richards

OC B Coy: Maj E. F. Walden

OC C Coy: Capt H. J. Hall

OC HQ Coy: Capt J. J. D. Sinclair (acting)

Singlas: Lt K. W. Hobbs

Padre: Rev. Fr. J. S. Kingan

²⁷ Capt A. R. G. Lock, DCM, MM, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Masterton, 4 Jan 1914; carpenter; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

²⁸ Capt N. Buchanan, MC; born Scotland, 6 Dec 1916; pastrycook; died of wounds 17 Dec 1944.

²⁹ Maj D. C. Piper; Ashburton; born Oamaru, 11 Sep 1910; clerk.

³⁰ Col D. J. Fountaine, DSO, MC, m.i.d. (2); Westport; born Westport, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO (temp) 20 Bn 21 Jul–16 Aug 1942; CO 26 Bn 11 Sep 1942–30 Dec 1943, 8 Jun–16 Oct 1944; commanded Advanced Base, Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 19 Nov 1941.

³¹ Lt-Col T. B. Morten, DSO; Little River; born Christchurch, 30 Sep 1913; shepherd; CO 25 Bn 28 Jan 1943–29 Feb 1944; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

³² Maj-Gen W. G. Gentry, CBE, DSO and bar, MC (Greek), US Bronze Star, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born London, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; commanded 6 Bde 5 Sep 1942–22 Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (NZ) 15 Jul 1943–21 Jul 1944; commanded 9 NZ Bde (Italy) 11 Feb 1945–14 Jan 1946; Deputy Chief of General Staff, 8 Jul 1946–20 Nov 1947; Adjutant-General, 1 Apr 1949–31 Mar 1952; Chief of the General Staff 1 Apr 1952–.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 8 – THE BATTLE OF ALAMEIN

CHAPTER 8

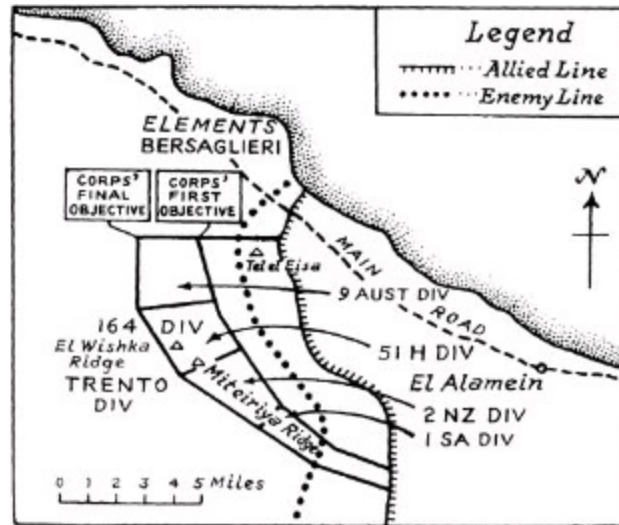
The Battle of Alamein

THE journey to the divisional assembly area at Alam el Onsol was made after dusk on the 21st and took less than three hours. Unit guides met the convoy and directed companies to their dispersal areas, and by midnight the troops had dug in. Next morning detailed orders for the attack were received from Brigade HQ, and shortly afterwards Col Fountaine issued his own orders. These plans were the main topic of conversation for the rest of the day as officers and NCOs discussed their part in them and studied special overprinted maps of the new sector. This was the first occasion the rank and file had been given full details of what lay ahead of them, and to this can be attributed some measure of the subsequent success of the battle.

General Montgomery planned to attack along an eight-mile front from a point north of [Ruweisat Ridge](#) to the coast. Four divisions under the command of [30 Corps](#) were to make the assault: 9 Australian Division in the north, 51 Highland and 2 NZ Divisions in the centre, and [1 South African Division](#) in the south. Fourth Indian Division, also in [30 Corps](#), was to carry out a diversion raid along the [Ruweisat Ridge](#). The full weight of Allied air power had already gained air superiority and would be used to harass enemy movement. It was believed that the enemy was not expecting an attack on the northern front, and various measures had been taken to encourage this view and hide the assembly of the Allied forces. At the same time as [30 Corps'](#) attack, [13 Corps](#) was to attack in the south with 44 Division, [7 Armoured Division](#), and 1 Fighting French Brigade, to breach the defences if possible and distract the enemy's attention from the vital thrust in the north. The infantry task was to penetrate the enemy's fixed defences sufficiently to allow armoured units to exploit westward. Immediately the enemy showed signs of abandoning the line, every effort was to be made to cut off his retreat. For this phase of the operation [2 NZ Division](#) was to become fully mobile and take a leading part.

A difficult task lay ahead of the infantry, for the enemy had had plenty of time to perfect his defences. Intelligence reports and overprinted maps of the area gave a clear picture of the depth, dispositions, and approximate strength of the enemy forces. The Division's sector, which lay due west of [El Alamein](#) station, was 2000 yards wide at the base and nearly 6000 yards on the objective; it had been equally

divided between the two brigades, 6 Brigade taking the southern half. The start line lay only a short distance forward of the existing FDLs and about



30 Corps' OBJECTIVES—ALAMEIN 23 OCTOBER 1942

30 Corps' objectives— Alamein 23 October 1942

2600 yards from those of the enemy. The latter were manned by elements of the Trento (Italian) Division, plus some German troops from 164 Light Division. They were well dug in behind a minefield and wire entanglements.

There was a gap of 3000 yards to the second and main enemy line based on [Miteiriya Ridge](#). This feature ran diagonally across the front, rising about 25 feet above the surrounding desert. A battalion from 164 Division and a company of Italians were occupying this line and were closely supported by a screen of heavy machine guns, mortars, and anti-tank guns established in the vicinity. Extensive minefields had been laid on both sides of this ridge. Between the two defence lines lay other uncharted minefields and an unknown number of machine-gun posts. There were no tank forces directly opposite the New Zealand sector, and it was hoped that the Allied armour would pass through the infantry before the enemy could regroup his forces. Behind El Wishka Ridge, west of Miteiriya, the Axis Commander had concentrated most of his light and heavy artillery, including approximately seventy 88-millimetre guns. By deepening his defences and equipping his troops with a high proportion of automatic weapons, Rommel had been able to present his attackers with a formidable task. Except for [Miteiriya Ridge](#) and a few low folds, the desert was fairly level, affording little cover. Moreover, the ground was hard and stony.

Much time and thought had gone into planning this assault, in which the infantry were required to capture the two enemy defence lines and consolidate beyond the minefield on the forward slope of Miteiriya. To give the armour more room to work, the assaulting troops were to extend the front as they advanced so that on the final objective it would be approximately treble the width of the start line. As a guide Bofors guns were to fire tracer along the line of brigade boundaries. Strong artillery support would be provided, and in the New Zealand sector over a hundred guns would be firing. They would concentrate at first on known and suspected enemy positions, and later some would switch to firing a barrage behind which the infantry would advance. By this means it was hoped to force the enemy troops to remain under cover until the New Zealanders could reach them, and also disrupt his counter artillery fire. The rate of advance was fixed at 100 yards in three minutes, with pauses on the main objectives.

The attack was divided into two phases. The first entailed the capture of the enemy FDLs, and in the 6th Brigade sector this task had been entrusted to [24 Battalion](#). The 25th and 26th Battalions following up would then pass through and advance to the final objective. The 26th Battalion was given the right-hand sector, and Col Fontaine decided to move through [24 Battalion](#) with A and C Coys in the van and Tac HQ ¹ and B Coy following close behind. The rest of Battalion HQ would bring up the rear. The three companies would all continue over [Miteiriya Ridge](#) and consolidate beyond the minefield. Battalion HQ would be set up on the reverse slope. All internal communication would be by No. 18 set or runner, but signallers were to lay line to the companies as soon as they had consolidated. Although the companies were only at three-quarter strength because of sickness, it was expected they would be able to extend over the widening front and maintain contact with flanking battalions.

Success largely depended on the early arrival of supporting arms. This presented a much more difficult problem than the infantry assault. At least three minefields lay between the start line and the final objective, and these would have to be gapped before tanks and guns could move forward. Sappers had been detailed for this work, but as only one section was attached to 26 Battalion there was a possibility that casualties or slow progress might cause considerable delay. With this in mind the Colonel divided his supporting arms into two groups. The first, the

Special Group, was placed under the command of 2 Lt McDonald,² the Carrier officer, and comprised two Scorpions (Matilda tanks fitted with mine-clearing flails), three Crusader tanks (Warwickshire Yeomanry), two two-pounder anti-tank guns, two Universal carriers, and four 3-inch mortars also on carriers. This group was to follow the infantry and, with the aid of the Scorpions, make its own way through the minefields.

The Second Group, the Fighting Transport Group under the command of Maj McQuade, was to assemble at a traffic control post which would be set up by Brigade HQ east of the first objective, and remain there until ordered forward by the Brigade Commander. It would then follow a route lighted by battalion provosts to the minefield gaps, and join up with Battalion HQ east of Miteiriya. The provosts were given an important task. Together with the sappers, they were to follow 24 Battalion in its advance and endeavour to have a lighted start line on the first objective before A and C Coys reached it. After the companies had passed through they were to light lanes to Battalion HQ.

Throughout the 22nd the preparations continued, although the date of the attack was still not known. Ammunition, extra rations, sandbags and grenades were issued. Three Bangalore torpedoes for blowing gaps in the barbed wire, flares, and rockets were issued to each company. At this late stage sickness, principally jaundice, added to the CO's worries. In less than a week he lost Maj Morten, Maj Richards, Capt McKinlay and Lt Barnett, all of whom were evacuated to hospital. Lieutenant J. R. Williams was given command of A Coy and 2 Lt Seal³ became Adjutant. After dusk the brigade set out on a ten-mile march to a forward lying-up area. It was a long, dusty march, made more trying by continual traffic which stirred up swirling clouds of thick, yellow dust. What was more irritating was the sight of infantry of other units in these trucks.

By midnight the battalion had reached its new area and slit trenches had been dug. Everyone was very confident and sensed that the attack would not be long delayed. Having studied maps and reports, all knew what they had to do and were aware of the difficulties they might encounter, but they had also seen the tremendous reserves at the back of them. The sight of hundreds of guns, squadrons of tanks, and the almost constant roar of Allied planes passing overhead had given a

big uplift to morale. The stage was set for the offensive and the players ready. ⁴

During the 23rd the troops rested in their slit trenches and kept out of sight. However, it seemed that the air battle had been won for no enemy planes appeared. Late in the afternoon Col Fontaine attended a conference at Brigade HQ; he returned with the news that the attack would begin at 9.40 p.m. Like a well-oiled machine, all sections of the unit went ahead with their final preparations and soon all was ready. Zero hour was close and the men were glad the waiting period was almost over.

By half past nine the companies had formed up away from the direct line of the guns just behind them, ready to move to the start line. Except for those men hurrying to and fro completing last-minute tasks, everyone was standing or lying about in the moonlight waiting for the guns to open fire. Knowing that this attack might well prove the turning point in the battle for North Africa, all ranks were keyed up and excited. The old hands knew this was no ordinary attack. The silence was almost oppressive. Minutes passed.

Suddenly, with a crash, guns all around belched flame and shells. Hundreds of guns up and down the line joined in. Sharp flashes of orange flame stabbed the night sky and the ground trembled. Unconsciously voices were raised and ears covered to keep out the deafening noise. The attack was on!

At 10.46 p.m. Col Fontaine gave the order to move, and 35 minutes later the companies reached the start line. They immediately extended and continued to advance in open formation with sections in line. Ahead was [24 Battalion](#) and the dull flash of exploding shells. Although there was a full moon, dust and smoke had reduced visibility to a few yards. As the leading platoons neared the first objective visibility became worse. On several occasions there was delay while contact was re-established, and the troops were a few minutes late in reaching the second start line, which they were due to cross at 12.40 a.m. The CO wirelessly both companies not to delay as the barrage was already starting to lift. Hastily deploying into extended line, the four leading platoons set out to catch up with the line of exploding shells. Scarcely anyone had noticed [24 Battalion](#) on its objective and, apart from a few lamps, the second start line had been almost unrecognisable in the poor light.

Soon after they caught up with the barrage A and C Coys had difficulty maintaining flank contact on the widening front while continuing to hold the barrage. In the bad visibility it was hard to judge the barrage line. Runners were continually moving from platoon to platoon and to the flanks to check up and ensure that contact was being kept. C Coy on the right flank was considerably assisted by the tracer from the Bofors guns and contact with the left-flank company of [22 Battalion](#) (5 Brigade) was maintained almost without a break right on to the final objective. Unfortunately C Coy's wireless set was damaged by a shell splinter early in the night. This threw a heavy burden on the CSM, WO II [Neal](#),⁵ and the runner, Pte [McIndoe](#),⁶ who were continually on the move for the rest of the night carrying messages to and from platoons and Tac HQ. On the left flank it was a different story. Touch with A Coy was soon lost, and there seemed to be an ever-widening gap between the two companies as the advance continued. Fortunately ground opposition was almost negligible at this stage and the gap was adequately covered by B Coy moving up behind.

Lieutenant Williams was in a similar position. Soon after leaving the start line contact with C Coy, [25 Battalion](#), was lost, but about half-way to the ridge 8 Platoon reported that it had been regained. However, by extending to the left to keep contact, A Coy was unable to reach over far enough to the right to link up with C Coy, and the gap between Nos. 7 and 14 Platoons remained. As they approached the ridge both companies came under small-arms fire from the left flank, but it was not heavy enough to hold up the advance. The men crossed the minefields almost without knowing it, the only casualty being an A Coy runner who was killed when an anti-personnel mine exploded. On the extreme right flank 15 Platoon was being troubled by a 25-pounder firing short. Nothing could be done about it and the platoon suffered a number of casualties. Tactical HQ and B Coy, not affected by the problem of flank communications, bumped into the forward platoons on several occasions. Receiving several messages from the CO urging him to keep up with the barrage, Capt Horrell kept his men moving and in the thick visibility overran it. Shells crashed all around the company and eight casualties were suffered. Up to this stage the opposition had been negligible. Very few enemy troops had been encountered; some had run away into the haze and others had been killed or taken prisoner.

There was a 15-minute pause while the barrage pounded the ridge, and during

this period contact between the two companies was re-established. A Coy suffered casualties from enemy shelling and small-arms fire, 2 Lt [Ramsay](#)⁷ (9 Platoon commander) being killed while attending to a wounded man. Sergeant [Hinton](#)⁸ took over. Then the barrage lifted, and both companies climbed the ridge and continued down the forward slope against slight opposition. Contact between them and with [25 Battalion](#) was lost almost immediately. C Coy met no direct opposition but was seriously hampered by small-arms and machine-gun fire from the left and left rear. A Coy also was held up several times by heavy crossfire. The enemy was using less tracer than usual and it was difficult to discover where the fire was coming from. Most of it seemed to be from 25 Battalion's sector. Beyond the minefield the company ran into more trouble, this time from machine-gun posts directly ahead. Bren gunners tried to dislodge the enemy but failed, and each post had to be charged and captured.

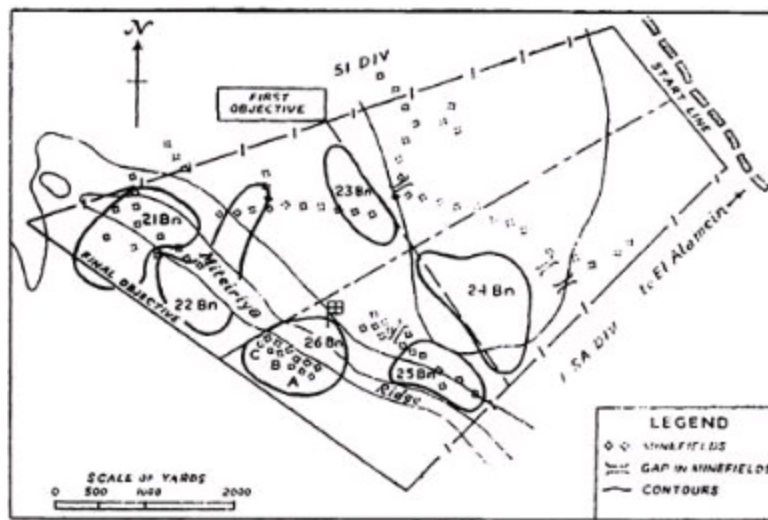
When he was about 400 yards beyond the minefield Lt Williams gave the order to halt, and the men took cover from the still troublesome flanking fire. He was not certain if he had reached his objective, and hesitated to go farther until he was more sure that [25 Battalion](#) was on his left. Soon afterwards he met Capt Horrell. C Coy had moved about 700 yards down the slope before halting. Capt Horrell was making a quick reconnaissance when Sgt Lock of the Provost section appeared out of the gloom. He had been sent forward to locate the forward troops, and he informed Capt Horrell that he was too far forward. The Company Commander moved his men back about 200 yards, and the three platoons sheltered in two shallow parallel wadis. Company HQ was set up in some abandoned enemy trenches.

The two officers decided to consolidate along the line of the wadis, extending as far left as possible to cover that open flank, for it was clear that [25 Battalion](#) had not advanced over the ridge. B Coy, which was digging in forward of the minefield and had also suffered losses from the crossfire, was asked to cover this flank. While the troops were digging in enemy fire increased considerably, and A Coy and to a lesser extent B Coy suffered serious losses. Lieutenant Williams lost another platoon commander when 2 Lt [Gillett](#)⁹ was killed as No. 7 Platoon extended across to the left flank. Success signals were fired but were not seen by Battalion HQ, which at this time was in trouble of its own. However, Sgt Lock and Pte McIndoe were already on the way back with the news.

It was nearly 3 a.m. by the time Tac HQ reached the wadi east of the ridge where Col Fontaine had set up his headquarters. The situation there was somewhat confused. An hour earlier Main Battalion HQ, which had followed B Coy during the advance, had been heavily shelled as it neared the ridge. A direct hit killed three men and wounded several others. Signal rockets and flares were lost and the batteries and aerial of the No. 11 set destroyed, severing all communication with Brigade HQ. More important still, Battalion HQ personnel were so scattered that several hours elapsed before they were collected together again. The Colonel was carrying on with a reduced staff, and on receiving Sgt Lock's news he sent Sgt Hay¹⁰ to Brigade HQ with a report. Two signallers were sent back to collect another mast and batteries.

While he was with Capt Horrell, Lock was wounded in the face when a captured enemy gunner threw a grenade at him. He refused to be evacuated and, after helping with some of the other wounded, returned to where sappers were hard at work trying to clear a gap through the minefield east of the ridge. In lighting the first objective and the lane through the minefield the provosts had all become casualties, and it was left to this NCO to complete the task and later guide the transport column to Battalion HQ.

By 3.30 a.m. the three forward companies had consolidated. A Coy had withdrawn slightly and extended to the left. Heavy shelling prevented B Coy from exploiting beyond the FDLs, and patrols approaching the left-rear flank were subjected to withering enemy machine-gun fire. All three companies were suffering casualties from heavy shell and mortar fire on the ridge and the forward slope. Battalion HQ was also under



POSITIONS OF NZ BATTALIONS AT DAWN 24 OCTOBER
Positions of NZ Battalions at dawn 24 October

shellfire. The wireless link to Brigade HQ was still out and all communication with the companies had to be by runner. No news had been received from 25 Battalion, but at 4 a.m. Lt May¹¹ of that battalion arrived at 26 Battalion HQ and Col Fontaine was able to define the gap between the two units.

The 25th Battalion had not crossed the ridge and there was a 600-yard gap to A Coy. The CO decided that the enemy fire was too heavy at this stage to attempt to move his men around to cover this flank.

Shortly afterwards Capt Rutherford and his staff arrived. To an anxious inquiry they reported that the Transport Group was still held up in the minefield. The RAP was set up in the wadi, and almost as soon as it was up the doctor and Sgt Bowie¹² set out to collect the wounded from the forward slope. For some time stretcher-bearers had been carrying wounded across to a central line between A and C Coys to await evacuation. Some were sheltering in a captured RAP, together with a spectacled German doctor and several of his patients. From 4.30 a.m. onwards Bowie spent most of the time in the forward areas attending to the wounded and helping the stretcher-bearers. On several occasions he accompanied the doctor in a jeep over ground thickly sown with mines. Back and forwards they went despite the shelling and mortar fire. Twice their jeep was blown up, but another was soon acquired and they carried on as though nothing had happened. Bowie suffered concussion and was evacuated but within twenty-four hours was back again. The stretcher-bearers were doing a grand job. Corporal Lonie¹³ and Pte Ives¹⁴ attended

to C Coy wounded and trundled them back to the collection point in a German handcart. It was a tribute to all concerned that only three of a total of nearly eighty wounded died during the 24-hour action.

Five o'clock came with no sign of the supporting arms. The Colonel was very concerned about the open flank and hoped to have guns sited to cover it before dawn. Just before first light 2 Lt [Barcock](#)¹⁵ arrived with two two-pounders and three mortar carriers—all that was left of the Special Group. The CO immediately ordered him to take the two guns forward and site them to cover the forward companies. The mortars were dug in along the ridge. The two gun crews negotiated the forward minefield without loss, and Barcock positioned the guns about midway between and close behind the two companies. Not far away was the German RAP. Enemy shelling was very heavy and, before the guns were properly dug in, one gun sergeant, [Sgt Thorburn](#),¹⁶ was wounded. The German doctor was brought over, but before he could attend to the wounded NCO the enemy scored a direct hit on the gun. [Thorburn](#) was killed and Barcock and the doctor wounded. The other gun was dug in without mishap and did some good work later in the day.

Meanwhile, the Transport Group had reached Battalion HQ. It was too late to send any more support through to the forward companies so a gunline was formed along the crest and reverse slope of the ridge. Beyond it signallers were laying lines through to each company. The No. 11 set had been repaired and the battalion was again in touch with Brigade HQ. The late arrival of the Special Group had been caused by a number of unforeseen difficulties. One of the Scorpions had broken down at the start point, and the other led the tanks, carriers, and guns across the desert. It was dark and visibility was obscured by clouds of dust and smoke, but everyone was keeping a sharp lookout for the lighted second start line and [24 Battalion](#). After travelling about 2000 yards without seeing anybody or anything, the second Scorpion broke down and the party stopped. [2 Lt McDonald](#) was a little perturbed about the direction in which the tanks had led the party, and he went ahead to examine an object that looked like a man in the distance. There was a loud explosion, and when 2 Lt Barcock went over he found the Carrier officer dead. The object, a booby-trapped shell, was a maze of trip wires. Barcock was considering the next move, when a New Zealand sapper officer arrived who said that the minefield gap lay south of the axis of advance. This did not help much as the party was

unaware of the line of this axis. Some South African soldiers then appeared, and this indicated that the party had swung south in its initial advance. Realising the importance of reaching the battalion before daylight, Barcock decided to risk everything and move through the minefield in a north-westerly direction. Two of the tanks and three of the carriers were blown up but the rest got through.

The Transport Group had been delayed mainly by the slowness with which the minefield east of the ridge was gapped. Initially some delay had occurred at the TCP, where 24 Battalion vehicles blocked the passage of the group, but when Maj McQuade reached the minefield gap the sappers were hard at work with bayonets prodding for mines. They were making slow progress, and Maj McQuade decided to move his guns and vehicles into the gap so that there would be no delay when the job was completed. Tanks of [9 Armoured Brigade](#) arrived shortly afterwards and attempted to crowd into the narrow gap. As a result the battalion column was split into several small groups separated by the tanks. When the gap was reported clear more confusion was caused as each tank and truck tried to get through first. Major McQuade, with Sgt Lock helping him, was able to despatch his group piecemeal, Lock directing them to the wadi where Battalion HQ had been established.

The arrival of the supporting arms and the [9 Armoured Brigade's](#) tanks eased the situation considerably. Both were in a position to cover the immediate front and the troublesome left flank. From [Miteiriya Ridge](#) the ground ran gently down to the El Wishka Ridge, and in the words of one officer 'it was as bald as a billiard table.' While this created problems for the battalion in that it allowed the enemy to watch all movement from [El Wishka](#), it also minimised the chances of a counter-attack in daylight. A more acute problem was the enemy still holding [25 Battalion's](#) objective. Mortar and small-arms fire from this area had already caused casualties to A and B Coys and was hampering movement. On the right flank three Crusader tanks reached C Coy, leaving more of their number disabled in the minefield. They arrived soon after dawn and attracted heavy fire. One was hit and the other two soon withdrew behind the ridge, earning the thanks of the infantrymen who had suffered most from the shelling. The disabled tanks were a target for enemy gunners throughout the rest of the day and were soon a shambles.

With the situation more or less stabilised, Col Fontaine was able to sum up the position. The companies had succeeded in reaching their objective, and although

they had subsequently withdrawn slightly the purpose of the attack had been achieved. C Coy was in touch with [22 Battalion](#), but there was a wide gap on the other flank. Lack of numbers prevented the infantry extending across the 1300-yard front and beyond it. Few prisoners had been taken and, although there were a number of enemy dead about, it seemed that the enemy had withdrawn in the face of the barrage to the comparative safety of [El Wishka Ridge](#). Several anti-tank guns and spandaus had been captured intact. The sappers had not been able to gap the minefield on the forward slope. This minefield was much more extensive than originally thought, particularly to the rear of C Coy. A narrow, winding lane, taped off by the enemy and of little use to tanks, led through it.

Some of the troops had been able to utilise the well-constructed enemy defences in the area, but the remainder had to hew out holes in the rocky ground. It was impossible to get down more than a few inches, but the spoil was built up round the sides to give better protection. While the men were digging in, the enemy had sent up flares against which they had been silhouetted. The whole area was almost continuously under heavy fire and this caused a large proportion of the casualties. By daylight Pte [Scanlan](#) ¹⁷ and his linesmen had run line to B and C Coys, enabling them to call down counter-battery fire.

* * *

By 7.30 a.m. dozens of tanks and armoured vehicles had reached the reverse slope of Miteiriya. They milled around for a while and then settled down to engage enemy targets on [El Wishka Ridge](#). The 25-pounders also began firing. From a military point of view this was highly satisfactory, but unfortunately the enemy retaliation fire fell mostly on the hapless infantry. For a while the sector became an inferno with shells and mortar bombs exploding all over the place, each one throwing up a large cloud of dust, flame, and smoke. The forward troops had a bad time and suffered casualties. Those dug in around the ridge did not escape unscathed. An airburst over Battalion HQ wounded seven more of the staff, including the Adjutant. Nobody was killed, but four of the men were badly wounded. After this, to quote the Colonel, 'everyone became a jack of all trades'.

The artillery and tank duel with the enemy lasted until midday and the doctor had been busier than ever. Stretcher-bearers carried the wounded to collecting

points and the jeep raced down the forward slope to pick them up as before. The German RAP was cleared and the flag taken down. This flag had been a landmark giving the approximate position of the companies, and when it was removed there was nothing to show where over 200 men were stationed on the forward slope. At 10 a.m. the casualties numbered 90, including 24 killed. A Coy had lost nine killed and 22 wounded. Lieutenant [Harvey](#),¹⁸ the only platoon officer left in the company, had been wounded, and NCOs were in charge of the three platoons. B Coy reported four killed, including its CSM, and 14 wounded. C Coy had lost 15 men, and Battalion HQ was operating twelve short. The specialist sections and platoons had also lost twelve, including two officers. By midday the total casualties had passed the century.

Progress reports of the Corps' attack were encouraging. Each division had succeeded in gaining a portion of its objective, although none had had complete success. A brigade of 9 Australian Division had reached its final objective and on part of its front so had 51 (Highland) Division. Except on the left, where [25 Battalion](#) was about 800 yards short of it, 2 NZ Division had secured all of its objective. The right-hand brigade of [1 South African Division](#) had not reached the objective but the other brigade was reported to be on it. In no sector had armour been able to pass through the infantry and exploit at daylight.

Shortly after midday the enemy shelling slackened off, much to the relief of the infantry, and the rest of the day passed almost uneventfully. At intervals the enemy sent over salvo after salvo, but at no time did the shelling become as heavy or continuous as in the morning. The forward troops soon found that any movement attracted heavy fire, not only from the guns behind El Wishka Ridge but also from machine-gun and mortar posts on the left flank. Snipers in this area had the greater part of the battalion sector under observation and they made conditions rather uncomfortable. Mortars engaged these snipers but only succeeded in quietening them temporarily. Matters were made worse by the intense heat and the ever-present flies. The troops were without the protection of the deep trenches, mosquito nets, and barricades used in the [New Zealand Box](#) two months earlier, and the flies swarmed around each shallow hole in their hundreds. Cursing could not drive them away; all ranks were thirsty, tired, and rapidly becoming irritable.

About 3 p.m. a column of transport was noticed moving along El Wishka Ridge.

Shortly afterwards enemy infantry and tanks began to move down onto the flat and advance towards A Coy. They were immediately engaged by the 25-pounders and the tanks near Battalion HQ. Sergeant Foster's ¹⁹ anti-tank gun scored a number of hits on a Mark III at a range of 1200 yards. The action did not last long, the enemy infantry withdrawing under cover of a smoke screen and the tanks making off south, leaving some of their number behind. While this was going on two companies of 133 Motorised Infantry Brigade and one from the King's Royal Rifles arrived in trucks at Battalion HQ. They had been ordered to take up a position behind the New Zealand infantry ready to follow the tanks when they broke through. Colonel Fountaine, realising the folly of attempting to dig in on the forward slope in daylight, ordered them to disperse around his headquarters until nightfall.

Later in the afternoon the CO attended a conference at Brigade HQ at which a plan for tank exploitation was discussed. It was to be another night operation. The battalion's part was to provide protection to sappers gapping the minefield on the forward slope. A barrage was to be fired to drown the sound of tank movement. Dusk fell and enemy shelling practically ceased. All ranks were pleased to learn that armour was soon to act as a buffer between them and the enemy, but at the time the forward troops were more concerned about the non-arrival of a hot meal. Ration parties had been sent back to the ridge, but at nine o'clock only A Coy's party had returned. The sappers had finished their task and everything was ready for the tanks to move forward.

Half an hour later the CO learned to his consternation that the opening line of the barrage lay approximately where A and C Coys were dug in. Messages were sent to all three companies ordering them to retire to the ridge as quickly as possible for the guns were to open fire at 10 p.m. Runners dashed out from each company headquarters and the platoons were soon on the move. C Coy was the slowest to get going, and Nos. 13 and 15 Platoons were caught in the barrage and quickly became disorganised. The rest of the troops were not much better off for the forward slope had become a mass of tanks and trucks. The enemy artillery had opened fire and shells were exploding all around. The darkness added to the confusion. The officers found it almost impossible to retain any formation and they continued back to the ridge with whatever men they could find.

By midnight the company commanders had located Battalion HQ from amongst

the confusing lines of vehicles and tanks and had rounded up most of their men. No. 15 Platoon was missing, but the rest of the men were vainly trying to dig holes along the reverse slope and crest of the ridge. The missing hot-boxes were located and the men were having a half-cold meal when bombers were heard overhead. Nobody took much notice until the bombers dropped flares which silhouetted the long columns of transport and tanks. As the troops dived to shelter the first stick of bombs fell. It caught a number of thin-skinned vehicles on the left of the sector and within a few minutes about twenty of them were ablaze, lighting up the whole area. Anti-aircraft guns were firing hundreds of rounds in the air. Shells were going up and coming down from all directions. Trucks and tanks broke column and scattered. At one time the CO seriously considered withdrawing his men farther back. It was just about as unsafe in a slit trench as above ground, and the men were continually dodging out of the way of a lorry, tank, or armoured car. Fortunately, although the planes remained overhead for several hours, the bombing was not heavy. Enemy shelling also slackened off. By 1 a.m. things had begun to quieten down, although there was still a lot of tank movement.

Fairly heavy casualties were expected but a check revealed only two—one killed and another wounded. The British infantry had not escaped as lightly and the RAP staff had to forego their chance of a sleep to attend to their wounded. No. 15 Platoon had been found. It had bypassed Battalion HQ in the confusion and eventually reached Brigade HQ. As everyone was very tired the Colonel decided not to send his companies forward until just before daylight. It was evident that only part of the tank force had passed through the minefield gap, the balance, disorganised by the bombing, being scattered over a wide area.

The next day, 25 October, was a Sunday. Shortly before dawn the companies set out towards their forward positions. Tanks were still moving about, but apart from this the sector was quiet. Unfortunately, in the darkness A and C Coys swung too far to the right and C Coy dug in forward of [22 Battalion](#). This was not known until after daylight, when it was too late to do anything about it. C Coy's wireless set broke down, but later a message was relayed through [22 Battalion](#) to inform Battalion HQ of what had happened. The troops had dug in along a line of shallow wadis with tanks all around them. The latter began engaging targets on [El Wishka](#) as soon as it was light, and before long were themselves the target for a considerable

amount of hostile fire. Huddled in their shallow holes, the men fought off the flies and watched tank after tank being knocked out. Great clouds of smoke and dust at times hid everything from sight. Despite the heavy fire—and it lasted until midday—few of the infantrymen were hit. Some had miraculous escapes. After each salvo heads popped cautiously out of the holes and there would be a chorus of yells to find out if anyone had been hit.

After midday the remaining tanks moved south, taking most of the enemy fire with them. By 2 p.m. the sector was fairly quiet and the two companies moved across to their old positions. Later in the day 15 Platoon rejoined C Coy. Meanwhile, around Battalion HQ some reorganisation had been taking place. Part of the armoured force had withdrawn to the rear, leaving a few tanks stationed along the reverse slope of the ridge. In [25 Battalion](#)'s sector lay the wreckage of many vehicles, while on the crest of the ridge and down the forward slope were dozens of tanks. Many had struck mines and others had been knocked out by enemy fire. Fortunately, enemy gunners were paying little attention to these stationary targets and shelling of the area did not become heavy until nearly dusk. About 4.30 p.m. large-calibre guns opened fire on Miteiriya from long range. They caused few casualties, and by the end of the day only nine men had been wounded.

It had been a more successful day for the machine guns and mortars dug in along the crest of the ridge. Several of the troublesome enemy machine-gun and sniper posts had been quietened or completely silenced. Captain Rutherford, returning from one of his periodic visits down the forward slope, brought back some enemy maps which B Coy had captured, together with an officer and NCO. Even to a novice the maps appeared to be complete in every detail, and they were rushed to Corps HQ for examination. On another occasion the doctor returned with a combination periscope and rangefinder which was presented to [6 Field Regiment](#).

After dusk more tanks arrived at Battalion HQ and those forward of the companies began to move back through the minefield gap to laager for the night. It was clear there had been no break-through, and the armour had obviously suffered very heavy losses. Company commanders had been ordered to report to Battalion HQ at seven o'clock, and shortly before that time a disturbing message was received from A Coy's wireless operator that C Coy was being rounded up by tanks. At first the message was treated as a joke. Captain Horrell, who arrived at Battalion HQ a few

minutes later, took the same view. A second message, this time from B Coy, confirmed the story. Colonel Fountaine immediately ordered both companies to withdraw behind the minefield. The three company commanders left to return to their headquarters. In the meantime Battalion HQ vainly tried to raise C Coy, which only a short while before had been in line communication with it.

When the three officers reached the minefield they met A and B Coys, plus a few men from C Coy. The C Coy men confirmed the presence of an enemy tank in the company's area, and Capt Horrell decided to go on to his headquarters to make sure. In the meantime the supporting tank commander had been warned of what had happened and had ordered all troops to remain where they were. The tanks opened fire and Capt Horrell, who was close to C Coy HQ by this time, had to race to cover. It was a tense situation, for nobody had the least idea of the strength of the enemy party. Lieutenant A. J. Fraser (14 Platoon), who had escaped, arrived at Battalion HQ and told the CO that there had been only one enemy tank and that it was probably well away by that time. This news was passed on to the British tank commander and movement restrictions were relaxed. Three tanks were posted to watch the minefield gap.

On going back to Battalion HQ Capt Horrell was ordered to round up a party of his men and return to the forward sector to collect any abandoned gear. The small party met unexpected opposition at the minefield gap, where the tank commander informed Capt Horrell he would fire at anything that moved. Colonel Fountaine had been adamant on the question of getting the gear, so the party continued on to C Coy's sector. Everything was soon collected, even the unopened hot-boxes of food. Sound asleep in one of the listening posts was a Bren gunner. He was very abusive at being wakened but lost no time in joining the others when he learned what had happened to his mates. Somewhat apprehensively the party set out on the return journey, but there was no sign of the tanks at the gap.

The story of how the C Coy men were captured was not pieced together until much later. After dusk listening posts had been established forward of the platoons, and the men were out of their trenches, yarning and stretching their legs after a long day in cramped positions. Tanks had been moving back through the sector since dusk and the arrival of one more did not arouse any particular interest. This tank, a

General Grant, moved past one platoon, the commander saying something to the men in English. It then wheeled and came up behind the forward platoons. Still unsuspecting, the men approached to swap yarns with the crew, only to find themselves covered by two Germans armed with spandaus. Caught unarmed the men had no choice but to surrender, and Lt [Barton](#)²⁰ and 32 other ranks were marched off to captivity. A few others managed to escape by dropping into tank ruts.

Immediately he realised what was happening Lt Fraser, who was at company HQ, rushed over to the nearest British tanks and begged the squadron commander to take some action. The British officer refused on the grounds that he would have to wait for instructions from his own CO. In the meantime 2 Lt [Boyle](#),²¹ 15 Platoon commander, had unsuccessfully tried to shoot the two Germans on the tank, which quickly disappeared from sight. C Coy was now reduced to few more than twenty men, some of whom had been badly shaken by the heavy shelling of the past 48 hours. Captain Horrell had been wounded during the afternoon but remained with his company.

For the second night in succession a line was formed along the crest of the ridge and the troops spent most of the time before daylight trying to dig in properly. About midnight the tanks withdrew from the sector, leaving one squadron behind the ridge. The British troops also moved out. A troop of six- pounders (7 Anti-Tank Regiment) was sent forward by Brigade HQ and took up positions to cover the forward slope. The line was further strengthened when the right-flank company of 25 Battalion extended across to link up with A Coy. While all this movement was going on the enemy guns were silent. The almost constant stream of Allied planes overhead probably accounted for this.

At dawn on the 26th hostile shelling and mortaring began anew with the enemy gunners concentrating on the ridge and the reverse side of it. Allied tanks and artillery were soon retaliating. A number of targets was registered but the enemy's long-range guns were beyond the reach of our 25-pounders. About 8.30 a.m. the enemy fire slackened off considerably and the troops were able to poke their heads out of their holes without fear of flying splinters. Hot meals were brought forward and for the rest of the day there was little activity on both sides. Captain Horrell, whose head wound had festered, was evacuated, and Lt Fraser took over the remnants of the company. A close watch was kept in case the enemy tried to

infiltrate onto the forward slope, but at dusk there had been no sign of movement.

Meanwhile, the CO had been to Brigade HQ and had learned that there was to be another night attack. The 25th Battalion was to move forward to its original objective; the 26th would accompany it so that an unbroken line would extend across the New Zealand sector. The 25th Battalion was to have a full barrage and the 26th aimed concentrations. On reaching their objectives the forward companies were to provide covering parties to sappers detailed to lay mines across the front. At 6 p.m. [General Freyberg](#) visited Battalion HQ and discussed the situation with the Colonel, who by this time was scarcely able to keep his eyes open. Half an hour later a lone Ju88 appeared and everyone scattered. It continued on its way and bombed areas to the rear.

As there had been no movement on the forward slope during the day, the Colonel did not expect any opposition to the advance. The main problem was whether A and B Coys could extend across the front sufficiently to link up with 22 and 25 Battalions on the objective. A Coy had about forty men left and B Coy sixty. The guns began firing at 8 p.m. and the troops began to move forward. Lieutenant Williams had 8 and 9 Platoons grouped together under Sgt Hinton on the left and 7 Platoon on the right. The remnants of C Coy were in reserve. Captain Smith, B Coy, retained the normal formation of two platoons forward and one in reserve.

The advance was almost a repetition of that of 23 October. A Coy had not gone far before it came under heavy machine-gun fire from the left flank.²² Flares silhouetted the advancing men and Sgt Hinton's party suffered heavily. The sergeant was killed and Lt Williams wounded. The CSM, WO II A. D. [Mangos](#),²³ took over the company, part of which was pinned down by the flanking fire a long way from the objective. The balance, which included most of 7 Platoon, had been less affected by the crossfire and had continued through the minefield, only to be held up by small-arms fire short of the objective. One of the two signallers with the company was shot through the head but the other, Pte [McCarthy](#),²⁴ operated the phone, passing information back to Battalion HQ. He maintained this line under very heavy fire, and largely through his efforts the remnants of the company were eventually withdrawn from the slope in safety. In the meantime C Coy had been switched to assist A Coy, but it too came under heavy fire and was forced to seek cover.

On the right flank B Coy reached its objective without much difficulty, the only casualties being six men injured when a mine exploded. No sooner had the men begun to dig in than the sector came under intense mortar and machine-gun fire. Private Scanlan, who had accompanied B Coy with the intention of running cable out as it advanced, ran out of line some distance from the objective. For the next hour or so he had a lively time relaying messages from his phone to where Capt Smith had set up his headquarters. Deciding it would be best to withdraw the remnants of A and C Coys to the ridge, the CO then tried to put his decision into effect. A message was sent through Pte McCarthy to the men pinned down on the left flank, and those left in 8 and 9 Platoons and C Coy crawled back to the ridge, bringing their wounded with them. No. 7 Platoon was withdrawn through B Coy, which later moved to the centre of the sector and dug in again. By 11 p.m. the remnants of the two companies were back on the ridge. A Coy had lost another 14 men, half of whom had been killed or who died later. Its casualties for the three days were 16 killed and 40 wounded; C Coy's casualties were 4 killed, 19 wounded, and 33 taken prisoner.

The 25th Battalion had reached its objective, but B Coy was unable to link up with it or with [22 Battalion](#). In view of what had happened the night before, the Colonel was very anxious to get anti-tank support through to the company. Captain [Ollivier](#)²⁵ was sent forward to site positions for the guns. Later the tank squadron gave covering fire as the guns moved down into position. By 3.30 a.m. four two-pounders and two six-pounders were dug in behind the company without a shot being fired at them. Sappers did not arrive to lay the mines, but the night passed without further incident.

The 27th was another day of early morning shelling and mortaring which slackened off after Allied planes appeared. Snipers were not so active and the day passed without casualties. All ranks were wellnigh exhausted from lack of sleep and the strain of the four days' action. Shortly before 11 a.m. came the news all had been hoping for—the Division was to be relieved at dusk by [1 South African Division](#), which was side-stepping to the right. Time passed slowly, or so it seemed. The heat was oppressive and the flies particularly irritating. At length dusk fell and the men stirred from their holes. B Coy sent out strong fighting patrols beyond its sector but they reported no sign of the enemy in the vicinity. The Transvaal Scottish Battalion was late in arriving and everyone was on tenterhooks, expecting at any moment to

hear the uneven drone of enemy bombers. For once there was no air cover. When at length the South Africans arrived everyone was keen to be gone; but the South Africans would not be hurried. Colonel Fontaine abandoned the idea of sending his men back in two groups. Instead, as each truck was filled the driver set off for the Alam el Onsol area to which 6 Brigade had been directed. By midnight the troops, hollow-eyed and nervy, were clear of [Miteiriya Ridge](#). A few hours later they were having a hot meal before settling down to some real sleep.

* * *

Only three days were spent in the Onsol area before the Division again moved into the line. Most of this time was spent resting and sleeping. Beards were shaven off and bathing parties taken to the beaches. Cigarettes, chocolate, and tinned fruit were distributed by Mr. Gray from National Patriotic Fund stocks. Mail was read and reread. By the third day much of the strained, set look had disappeared from faces and the troops were beginning to show more interest in the battle still continuing not far away. The recent action had taken a heavy toll of the battalion. Of the 615 men who had left the assembly area so confidently on 22 October only 430 remained: 32 had been killed, 101 wounded, 33 taken prisoner, and 19 evacuated sick—a total of 185. The loss of ten officers, including two company commanders, was particularly severe at this stage of the battle. Five officer replacements, four of whom had been on the sick list, returned to duty. Lieutenant Barnett resumed his duties as Adjutant and Lt Piper as IO. The heavy casualties necessitated some reorganisation in A and B Coys, in each of which the troops were grouped into two platoons.

Meanwhile, [Eighth Army](#) continued to exert heavy pressure along the whole front. On the 29th officers attended a conference at Brigade HQ. Brigadier Gentry discussed the recent action and the lessons to be drawn from it, and also outlined future plans for the Division. General Montgomery believed the enemy was beginning to crack under the continuous pressure. A full-scale attack was to be launched from 51 (Highland) Division's sector with the object of breaking through the remaining minefields which barred the way to armoured exploitation. Two British brigades (151 Brigade from 50 Division and 152 Brigade from 51 Division), under command of [2 NZ Division](#), would be making the assault, and 6 Brigade plus [28 Battalion](#) would move forward to occupy the existing line. If, as was expected, the enemy did crack and the armour succeeded in its task, [2 NZ Division](#), fully mobile,

would join in the pursuit.

On the 30th detailed orders for the move were received. Sixth Brigade was to relieve 152 (Highland) Brigade in the southern half of the new sector, 26 Battalion taking over from the 5th Seaforth Highlanders. A preliminary reconnaissance was made during the afternoon and at 6.30 p.m. the troops embussed. It was a slow journey made worse by the traffic on the tracks and the thick clouds of dust churned up by each vehicle. By eleven o'clock Battalion HQ had been set up and the companies were moving into their new positions. The Colonel had been in somewhat of a quandary as to how to hold the sector with so few men. He finally decided to place B Coy forward, with A and C in reserve. By 1 a.m. the men had dug in and the relief was complete. The transport had gone back to B Echelon, a few miles to the rear. Except for light and ineffectual shelling, the relief had been completed without enemy interference and the night passed without incident.

The attack was postponed until 1 November, and for two days the battalion occupied part of the forward defences. In comparison with the one left a few days earlier, the sector was very quiet. Enemy shelling did not become heavy at any time and only one casualty was reported. Forward sections spotted for the artillery and sent back reports on enemy troop movements, gun flashes, etc., which were registered as targets. After dawn on 31 October snipers caused some bother, but the three-inch mortars fired several concentrations on their reported location and nothing more was heard from them. To hide the presence of New Zealanders no patrols were sent out and pickets were on the alert for enemy raiding parties. Allied fighters and bombers were overhead most of the time, but at irregular intervals enemy planes sneaked through this screen.

After dusk on 1 November infantry, tanks, and transport began to assemble behind Battalion HQ. They made quite a din but the enemy displayed little interest. Hawkins mines around Battalion HQ were lifted, and about 10 p.m. B Coy withdrew from its sector as the opening line of the barrage had been fixed along it. To the men it felt rather strange watching other troops preparing to attack. Later, at 1 a.m., when the massed artillery began firing, the noise was deafening and sleeping became impossible. The barrage was the heaviest yet. Hour after hour it continued, with the enemy retaliating and laying a pattern of fire over the whole area.

Fortunately his effort was not sustained and only A Coy reported casualties. Three men were killed by a direct hit.

The scene at dawn was amazing. In every direction as far as the eye could see were tanks, guns, transport and men. Prisoners, German and Italian, were arriving back from the front. They came not in ones and twos but in platoons and companies. By 10 a.m. over 300 had been counted. The British troops had suffered losses too, for ambulances were continually going to and fro. Later in the day details of the fighting were received. Both British brigades had suffered heavy casualties but claimed to have reached their objectives. Nearly 500 prisoners had been taken and, what was more important, 9 Armoured Brigade had passed through the infantry to continue the assault. Although the result was not known, the decisive stage of the battle had been reached.

During the night 6 Brigade took over the right-hand forward sector from 151 Brigade, 26 Battalion relieving the 9th Battalion [Durham Light Infantry](#) on the left flank. The transfer took an hour and was completed by midnight. Because the unit was operating with only three rifle companies, each low in strength, the British positions were not reoccupied. The troops had to dig new holes. The ground was rocky and most of the men gave up after they had gone down about six inches. Those who continued to dig had blisters to show for their efforts. Stones and sandbagged walls were built around each hole.

By daylight the battalion was firmly established in its new sector. A and B Coys had taken the forward positions and had dug in along a rocky ridge a few feet above the level of the surrounding desert. C Coy was in reserve near Battalion HQ. Signallers had laid line to the companies and the supporting arms were in position. Blankets and heavy gear had been brought forward on stores trucks. The forward platoons were in contact with [25 Battalion](#) on their right and with 152 Brigade on the left. During the attack the 9th [Durham Light Infantry](#) had stopped about 800 yards from its objective, and as a result the troops were dug in alongside the reserve battalion of 152 Brigade. There was still a great congestion of guns and transport in the area. During the morning more arrived, including some tanks. While it was reassuring to have such a weight of arms close at hand, it formed an attractive target for enemy gunners. Nevertheless the enemy fire did not become heavy until later in the day.

The news of the success of the previous night's attack was overshadowed by an Eighth Army Order of the Day received during the afternoon. It stated that at last the enemy was cracking and pulling back from his [Alamein](#) defences. This was more evident in the coastal sector where the Australians had fought so well. The natural jubilation caused by this news was tempered by the reopening of enemy artillery fire. Using 88-millimetre guns at long range, he concentrated on the low ridge occupied by A and B Coys, and the latter had four men wounded. Later the peace around Battalion HQ was rudely shattered by a burst which exploded near the RAP. Headquarters personnel had just finished their evening meal and most of them were caught out of their dugouts. Four men were killed and six wounded. The Adjutant was peppered by shell splinters and had a miraculous escape from death. A splinter also hit the centre pole of the RAP tent and brought it down on all inside.

¹ Tactical HQ in this action comprised CO, IO, Signals officer, and two signallers with a No. 11 set.

² [2 Lt C. C. McDonald](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Feb 1908; stock agent; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

³ [Lt J. E. Seal](#); [Lower Hutt](#); born [London](#), 14 Jan 1915; Regular soldier; wounded 24 Oct 1942; serving with [RNZAF](#) (Flt Lt).

⁴ Appointments on eve of attack:

CO: [Lt-Col D. J. Fontaine](#)

Adj: [2 Lt J. E. Seal](#)

QM: Capt F. W. Wilson

IO: Lt A. B. Kennedy

A Tk: 2 Lt W. A. Barcock

Carriers: [2 Lt C. C. McDonald](#)

OC A Coy: Lt J. R. Williams

OC B Coy: Capt L. G. Smith

OC C Coy: Capt H. J. H. Horrell

OC HQ Coy: Maj H. G. McQuade

Signals: Lt K. W. Hobbs

Padre: Rev. H. S. Scott

MO: Capt A. M. Rutherford

The 2 i/c, Maj T. B. Morten, was in hospital.

⁵ WO II H. H. C. Neal; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 27 May 1913; company secretary.

⁶ Sgt W. J. McIndoe, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 25 Feb 1915; carpenter.

⁷ 2 Lt J. N. Ramsay; born Dunedin, 15 May 1918; solicitor; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.

⁸ Sgt A. J. Hinton; born NZ 23 Jul 1902; fruiterer; killed in action 26 Oct 1942.

⁹ 2 Lt P. E. C. Gillett; born England 6 Jun 1915; pig buyer; wounded 22 May 1941; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁰ Lt E. M. Hay, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Timaru, 3 Nov 1913; civil servant; wounded 30 Jul 1944.

¹¹ Lt J. E. May; Auckland; born Wellington, 11 Feb 1914; accountant; wounded 16 Dec 1942.

¹² Sgt A. J. Bowie, MM; Kaitangata; born Matamau, 19 Nov 1903; farmer.

¹³ Cpl A. D. Lonie, m.i.d.; Park Hill, Heriot; born Seacliff, 16 Feb 1914;

mental hospital attendant.

¹⁴ Pte C. E. Ives; born England 11 Apr 1907; hospital attendant; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁵ Capt W. A. Barcock; Dillmanstown; born Christchurch, 24 Mar 1913; salesman; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁶ Sgt W. C. Thorburn; born NZ 12 Jul 1917; teamster; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁷ Lt J. P. Scanlan, MM; Dunedin; born Beaumont, 4 Apr 1917; clerk.

¹⁸ Capt R. K. Harvey; Blenheim; born NZ 28 Sep 1914; clerk; twice wounded.

¹⁹ WO II E. J. Foster; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 29 Mar 1915; shoe repairer; wounded 31 Mar 1944.

²⁰ Capt A. M. Barton; born NZ 17 Nov 1914; shepherd; p.w. 25 Oct 1942; repatriated 29 Apr 1945.

²¹ Maj R. A. Boyle; born NZ 4 Jun 1916; grocer; wounded 25 Apr 1943; killed in action 10 Feb 1945.

²² It was thought that the machine-gun fire came from a strong working party which later withdrew in the face of 25 Battalion's barrage.

²³ WO II A. D. Mangos, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Timaru, 31 Jan 1909; advertising clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²⁴ L-Cpl B. R. McCarthy, MM; born Alexandra, 26 Jun 1912; line erector.

²⁵ Maj F. M. Ollivier; Masterton; born NZ 11 Jan 1916; student; wounded 30

Apr 1943.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 9 – THE PURSUIT

CHAPTER 9

The Pursuit

COLONEL FOUNTAINE was at a conference at Brigade HQ when the shelling occurred, and he returned with the news that within twenty-four hours the Division would commence its mobile role. Latest information confirmed that the enemy was withdrawing, leaving a strong rearguard force to delay the [Eighth Army](#). The New Zealanders, with the 4th Light Armoured Brigade and the weakened 9th Armoured Brigade under command, were to head south-west to cut off the Italians in the south. Subsequently this plan was changed and the Divisional Group was directed on [Fuka](#), 65 miles to the north-west. The 154th Brigade would relieve 6 Brigade, which was to move along lighted lanes through the minefields to a divisional assembly area near [Sidi Ibeid](#). The route to this area lay immediately to the east of a line to be established by the armour on the morning of the move. Each brigade was to retain supporting arms under command. Rations to last eight days and petrol for 200 miles were to be carried.

The relief was completed during the morning of 4 November. The troops marched a short distance to the rear to wait for transport and the order to move. At 9 a.m. B Echelon and the transport arrived and everyone settled down in the hot sun to await further orders. B Echelon had received its share of shelling during the past three days. One officer and five other ranks had been wounded and a 15-cwt. truck destroyed. A cooks' truck and a jeep had been damaged by mines. At 10 a.m. Brigade HQ advised that the move to the brigade assembly area would begin about 2 p.m. Lieutenant Piper tested the route through to this point and reported that the going was bad with numerous soft spots. All ranks knew they were in for a dusty ride.

Two o'clock passed without any orders from Brigade HQ and it was nearly 5 p.m. before the vehicles set off southwards. Two hours later they joined the rest of 6 Brigade Group. Only a few miles had been covered and everyone was caked with dust. The prospect of many more hours' travelling in this manner was not pleasant. At the assembly area the battalion vehicles took up their position in the Brigade Group, and without delay the columns headed south-west towards the minefields and the divisional assembly area. The route was lit by green lamps and was very

much worse than that covered by the battalion earlier in the evening. Soft patches of sand many times bogged down lines of vehicles. Around each truck cursing soldiers shoved or worked with picks and shovels to free it. The carriers did a great job, ranging up and down the columns helping to free those trucks worst held, but there were not enough of them. To the men it seemed that they got their trucks on to firm ground only for them to sink in once more. Desert formation was abandoned and before the night was through companies and platoons were all mixed up. Time was important to the success of the outflanking move, and 6 Brigade, the last of the Division's formations to move out, was already hours late.

While 6 Brigade was struggling to reach [Sidi Ibeid](#) the Division left the assembly area and moved north-west. The leading 6 Brigade trucks were guided to the route by the light from a burning vehicle, and in the early hours of the morning joined the tail end of the Division's columns. The Division was moving very slowly, and gradually more and more of the brigade vehicles arrived. Some were still missing when Brig Gentry gave orders to halt. While the cooks prepared breakfast the missing trucks arrived. Ahead the drive on [Fuka](#) had begun in earnest.

At 9 a.m. the Brigade Group formed up and set out in the wake of the Division. Before long it had caught up with the long columns of vehicles, tanks, and guns now moving behind the enemy defences and heading straight for the coast. The tanks and AFVs were in front and the pace was slow. To the Allied pilots who flew overhead the Division must have presented a marvellous sight—thousands of vehicles spread across the desert, each one throwing up its little cloud of dust. All day the advance continued, the columns turning left or right to avoid soft patches or skirt minefields. Stops were fairly frequent, and on several occasions the armoured screen brushed against enemy rearguard parties. The route was strewn with abandoned or burnt-out vehicles, tanks and guns—signs of the damage done by Allied aircraft. During one of the longer halts equipment and food was salvaged from this wreckage.

At 5.30 p.m. the Brigade Group reached the minefield south of [Fuka](#), but instead of following the rest of the Division through the gap it turned south-east to laager for the night. The columns made slow progress and it was eight o'clock before the vehicles had dispersed and the troops debussed. It had been a long, tiring day, particularly for the drivers. That night strong pickets were posted but nothing

untoward happened. By morning the general situation had changed considerably. Under cover of darkness the enemy had managed to withdraw the bulk of his forces east of [Fuka](#), except for thousands of Italians without transport. Three British armoured divisions driving westward from the Alamein Line during the previous day had penetrated deep into enemy territory and, with the New Zealanders, would continue the pursuit.

About 7 a.m. on the 6th an enemy column was sighted moving south-east across the front. The battalion's anti-tank guns and Bren carriers were quickly in action. Several went racing across the desert to cut off the enemy. Shortly afterwards they returned with about 600 prisoners, most of them Italians. About fifty men from 22 Armoured Brigade, who had been captured a few hours earlier, and some wounded were freed. The Italians seemed pleased to be captured but the Germans were unsmiling. Meanwhile, plans to continue the pursuit in daylight had been finalised. The immediate objectives were [Baggush](#) and the [Sidi Haneish](#) airfield, urgently needed by the [RAF](#). Sixth Brigade and the two armoured brigades were to lead the Division and move by separate routes towards this area, with [7 Armoured Division](#) moving on their left.

By 9 a.m. 6 Brigade was on the move. At the minefield gap south of [Fuka](#) it was delayed while the balance of 9 Armoured Brigade moved through. Once through the minefield the group opened up into desert formation—a grand sight in the bright sunlight. Soon afterwards the state of the going slowed up progress. There were many hold-ups, none of which was caused by enemy action. Later heavy rain showers kept down the dust but made conditions unpleasant for those in trucks with leaky covers or with none at all. At five o'clock the group reached the escarpment south of [Baggush](#) and a halt was ordered. The vehicles dispersed and the men bedded down for the night. The armoured units reported the aerodrome and [Baggush](#) clear of the enemy. As darkness fell gunfire was heard to the south-west but few worried about it.

They were more concerned about the heavy rain which began shortly afterwards. Open trenches quickly filled with water, while tarpaulins and groundsheets kept the rain out only for a while. Nearly everyone rushed to the trucks and spent the night huddled up inside or under them.

By dawn the desert was a sea of mud. Here and there were great pools of water in which the men were shaving and washing. The rain had ceased but nearly everything, including bedding and clothing, was soaked. Drivers tried to move their vehicles, which only became bogged deeper than ever.

Not only was the battalion completely immobilised, but the rest of the [Eighth Army](#), including a supply column bringing badly needed supplies, was held up by the mud. Without these supplies the Division could not continue the pursuit. The enemy, moving back along the main road, was less affected by the weather and made good his escape. More rain fell during the morning and conditions became very unpleasant. At midday the cooks provided a hot meal, and a very welcome meal it was! The skies cleared during the afternoon and the cold southerly wind rapidly dried the ground. Meanwhile the carriers had been pulling the heavier vehicles on to firmer ground. [General Freyberg](#) expected the supply column to arrive overnight and made plans to continue the advance next day, 8 November.

During the night the supply column arrived, and in the morning the battalion formed up in desert formation and moved alongside Brigade HQ. For several hours the group remained stationary. During this interval a considerable amount of booty and equipment was salvaged from enemy positions nearby, much of it to be thrown away later. At length, when the columns began to move, Doctor Rutherford was seated in a well-equipped German ambulance. At Divisional HQ plans had been completed for an advance on [Mersa Matruh](#), reported to be held in some strength. [General Freyberg](#) planned to move south of the

New Zealand positions bombed by Stukas — pre-Alamein period



New Zealand positions bombed by Stukas — pre- **Alamein** period



The barrage at Alamein, 23 October 1942

The barrage at **Alamein**, 23 October 1942



Wheel tracks in the desert at Alamein

Wheel tracks in the desert at **Alamein**



Bogged down near Fuka — shaving from puddles

Bogged down near Fuka — shaving from puddles

town, and while 5 Brigade made a feint attack from that direction, 6 Brigade and the armour would sweep around the town and assault from the west, thus closing the escape route.

After lunch the group began to move, but it soon ran into difficult going. Many vehicles became stuck and had to be hauled out by carriers and, in a few cases, by bulldozers. Stops were frequent and by 5 p.m. only eleven miles had been covered. In the meantime armoured patrols had entered [Matruh](#) to find it deserted. This news caused a change in plans. A halt was ordered and the troops bedded down. Sixth Brigade was to occupy the town in the morning while the rest of the Division continued to advance on [Sidi Barrani](#) and [Halfaya Pass](#).

* * *

Next morning Col Fountaine was ordered to move into Mersa [Matruh](#). The battalion moved at ten o'clock, but because of the traffic moving west it was 6 p.m. before all troops had reached the town. The rifle companies bivouacked alongside the salt lakes close to the town while Battalion HQ and HQ Coy occupied the Western Barracks. Recently vacated by Italians, these quarters were in a disgusting condition.

In the morning everyone was out exploring the town or fixing up new quarters. Cleaning up the barracks took several days. [Matruh](#) had been used as a base depot and contained large stocks of food and equipment. In their haste to get away the

Italians had left most of this behind. Some of the buildings had been blown up but the enemy had not been able to complete this task. Captain Wilson and his staff stacked cases of jam, tomato relish, macaroni, spaghetti, tinned meat and cheese for future use. The troops concentrated more on the stocks of clothing, equipment, confectionery and wine. Some of this, although useless to soldiers, had a commercial value, but [Cairo](#) and its black market was a long way off. The wines, a mixture of good and bad, were freely distributed and drunk, sometimes with unpleasant results. The better quality wines seldom caused lasting ill-effects, but this was not the case with such fiery concoctions as 'Purple Death'.

Sixth Brigade did not leave [Matruh](#) until 20 November. The eleven days there were not spent in festivities. [Matruh](#) became a forward supply base for the [Eighth Army](#) and ships arrived regularly at the wharf or at Smugglers' Cove nearby. Each day large parties from the battalion were detailed to help with the unloading. The days passed quickly. On the 11th Padre Scott, who had returned to the battalion about the middle of October to replace Father Kingan, held a memorial service in honour of the 49 men who had lost their lives in the recent action. A few days later reinforcements arrived, in all seven officers and 69 other ranks, the majority being men who had been on the sick list.

Their arrival enabled Col Fountaine to carry out some reorganisation and build up the strength of his rifle companies. The mortar, anti-tank, and carrier platoons were detached from HQ Coy and became known as Support Company. Captain McKinlay was given the command. Major Richards succeeded Maj Morten as battalion second-in-command, Capt Ollivier took over A Coy, and Capt [Sinclair](#)¹ C Coy. Lieutenant Kennedy, who had assumed the duties of Adjutant when 2 Lt Seal was wounded and again when Lt Barnett was wounded, was confirmed in that appointment.

Meanwhile the Division had continued the pursuit. [Halfaya](#) Pass was captured; [Sollum](#), [Sidi Azeiz](#), and [Bardia](#) fell without a shot being fired. It became apparent that Rommel did not intend making a stand east of [El Agheila](#). The divisional columns did not go beyond [Bardia](#) but armoured columns of the [Eighth Army](#) took up the pursuit. On 8 November American and British forces had landed in North Africa and the Axis commander was now facing two fronts.

On 20 November 6 Brigade left [Mersa Matruh](#) to rejoin the Division. The journey to the divisional camp site near Sidi Azeiz was made in easy stages. A late start was made on the 20th and the columns travelled only 16 miles before halting for the night. Seventy-eight miles were covered the next day, and about 3 p.m. on the 23rd the camp came into view. It was nothing to enthuse over—just another piece of desert. During the next few days efforts were made to improve conditions in the camp. Semi-permanent living quarters and cooking establishments were set up and roads and tracks levelled and improved. Football and hockey grounds were also prepared.

Twelve days were spent here, and as soon as the necessary equipment arrived from [Maadi](#) sport took up most of the time. At irregular intervals working parties were sent to unload cargoes at [Bardia](#) and [Fort Capuzzo](#). There were a few short route marches and some lectures on mines. Once or twice bathing parties were taken to the beaches, but most of the men had to be content with the showers of the [Mobile Shower Unit](#). Water was strictly rationed, and each man was permitted to stand under a trickle for sixty seconds. After some practice everyone got used to washing off most of the desert grime within the time limit.

The weather had become much cooler, especially after dusk, and battle dress was being worn again. The epidemic of jaundice which had taken such heavy toll of the unit since June eased off almost completely, but mild outbreaks of colds and influenza took its place. The weather had little effect on sports enthusiasts. After a series of trial games battalion teams were selected. The Rugby team played two games, losing to 23 Battalion and winning its match against [21 Battalion](#). Much greater rivalry was shown in inter-company and platoon games, which were often very spirited. In a very willing match the sergeants defeated the officers by nine points to nil.

Highlight of the spell at [Sidi Azeiz](#) was the arrival of a large surface mail, the first for a long time. With growing excitement the men watched drivers unloading from their trucks bag after bag of parcels, papers, and letters. The letters were read in private but the parcels were shared at dugout parties for some time afterwards. Beer was still short but the majority of the men had their store of wine. There was

little to do in the evenings. A piano had been brought from [Matruh](#), and around it a crowd gathered almost every night. Early in December the [Mobile Cinema Unit](#) showed a film in the open. That night the piano was deserted.

Each night at six o'clock a crowd collected around the radio to hear the latest war news. Everything was going well. The Russians were striking back and the Japanese advance had been stemmed. The Eighth Army was swiftly advancing towards the [El Agheila](#) line, where it was expected that Rommel would make his next stand. As the days went by and the armoured units drew nearer to this line, the troops realised that the Division would soon be called back into action. Another 87 reinforcements had joined the battalion, bringing the unit strength up to 498.

Orders to move to the battlefield were received on 3 December, and within twenty-four hours 6 Brigade was on its way. Its destination was [El Haseiat](#), an isolated spot south-east of [Agedabia](#). Each brigade group was to move independently by an inland desert route across [Cyrenaica](#), and the 342-mile journey was scheduled to take five days. Bren carriers were left behind to come forward on tank transporters by the main road.

As the last vehicles moved off from the camp area there was little to show where 500 men had stayed for a fortnight. Here and there were rectangles of petrol tins that had been used to line dugouts; left behind, too, was the piano—upright in the centre of the desert waste. It could no longer be carried and was left to rot and rust. Soon it was hidden from sight by the thick clouds of dust thrown up by the departing column. That night the brigade camped about six miles east of [El Adem](#). The battlefields of the campaign of November 1941 were not far away. As the trucks passed Pt 175 and the [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque, all eyes turned to gaze at those desolate spots where so many New Zealanders had lost their lives. In the minds of those who had survived were bitter memories of how they had stood defenceless against enemy tanks. In one short year how different was the story!

Early the next day, the 5th, the columns moved past the El Adem airfield. Its edges were lined with the wreckage of German and Italian planes, piled high out of the way. Allied aircraft were already using the field and several big transports landed while the trucks roared past. For the rest of the day the view was sand and more sand, and at dusk the brigade camped near [Bir Hacheim](#), a desolate spot made

famous by the Free French troops six months earlier. All that now remained were a few burnt-out tanks and lorries and some barbed wire half buried in the sand.

The rest of the journey was monotonous and uninteresting and at times most unpleasant in the thick, swirling dust. On the 5th the brigade changed direction, heading south-west towards its destination. Three days later it halted at [El Haseiat](#) and the troops settled down to await the arrival of the rest of the Division. As the wait was likely to extend over several days, tents were pitched and slit trenches made comfortable. The Brigade Group remained in desert formation and, for security reasons, movement of vehicles in the area was strictly curtailed. Trucks and tents were camouflaged and a strict blackout enforced after dark in case enemy reconnaissance planes appeared. Sappers advised that most of the tracks around the area were mined. While waiting the troops prepared for the action which they knew lay ahead. Equipment was cleaned and oiled. Instructors from the specialist platoons gave lectures and NCOs attended a two-day course of instruction at Brigade HQ. The Carrier Platoon arrived and took up its position in the battalion formation.

During 10 and 11 December the [Eighth Army's](#) plan to breach the [El Agheila](#) line was explained in detail to officers and senior NCOs, who were taken to Divisional HQ for the purpose. Colonel Fontaine was able to illustrate his talk with the aid of a small plaster model of the front. This showed the terrain, enemy troop dispositions, and known and suspected enemy minefields. The enemy line was formidable. It had been prepared after the Libyan campaign of November 1941. Near the coast the front was protected by salt marshes and deep minefields. Hills ran south of these to end in tracts of soft sand, believed impassable to heavy vehicles.

The Division had been given a very important role. Supported by [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#), it was to sweep around on the southern flank and come up behind the enemy line. This bold outflanking move had been made possible by the discovery of a route through the soft sand. A patrol of the King's Dragoon Guards, led by Capt P. D. Chrystal, had reconnoitred the route from [El Haseiat](#) to [Marble Arch](#) during the first week of December. Chrystal's Rift, six miles broad with deep, precipitous sides, could be used by the divisional columns after the route had been prepared by bulldozers.

After negotiating this rift the Division was to head for the coast and [Marble Arch](#)

with the object of cutting the enemy's supply line to [El Agheila](#) and blocking any withdrawal. The success of the 'left hook' depended largely on whether the New Zealanders could get near their objective before the enemy was aware of the threat to his rear. At the same time two British divisions were to launch a frontal attack on his main defences at [Agheila](#).

On the 11th 6 Brigade Group moved 42 miles south-west to a divisional assembly area, where it formed up in desert formation behind the tanks and AFVs. Rain fell during the night, and although unpleasant at the time, it kept the dust down the next day. By nightfall on the 12th the heads of the columns were close to the rift. The vehicles remained in open formation and the troops slept close by. More rain fell. In the morning the battalion vehicles began to move slowly through the narrow gap. Speed was increased on the far side and the columns had covered 60 miles before a halt was ordered. No reconnaissance planes had been sighted and it was believed the enemy was still unaware of the move, although reports from [El Agheila](#) indicated that he was already beginning to withdraw westward.

For the third night in succession it rained. On the 14th when the troops embussed a thick fog enshrouded the vehicles. A closer formation was adopted and the advance continued through barren country and along fairly good tracks. Later the fog lifted but low-lying clouds prevented enemy air observation. Thirty-five miles had been covered when the Brigade Group halted for lunch. At a conference at Brigade HQ early in the afternoon Brig Gentry explained the changing situation to his battalion commanders. All reports indicated that the enemy had already withdrawn part of his forces to the vicinity of [Marble Arch](#) and that the bulk of what was left at [Agheila](#) would soon be on the move. In view of this the Division would move north-west with all possible speed towards [Marble Arch](#). On reaching the [Via Balbia](#), the main coastal road, 24 and 25 Battalions would consolidate on the low hills on both sides of it, 26 Battalion remaining in reserve. Fifth Brigade Group would remain in a reserve area south of 6 Brigade, while the armoured force would cover the western flank. This would leave the enemy only a few coastal tracks by which he could escape.

The advance was continued at 4 p.m. and a stop was not called until half past ten. Nearly 80 miles had been covered. The armoured screen was now close to enemy territory. On the morning of the 15th more rain fell. The troops were ready to

embus at 7.30 a.m., but the start was delayed nearly three hours while the tanks refuelled. Latest reports indicated that the enemy was holding 6 Brigade's objective and plans were changed. The brigade was directed to move farther west to Bir el Merduma and north to cut the coastal road. Fifth Brigade was to take up a position on the southern flank, facing east. Wireless silence was broken and the race to the coastal road was on. Fearing enemy air attacks, the CO dispersed the Anti-Aircraft Platoon amongst the columns.

After crossing 15 miles of rough, stony country the columns reached a level stretch of desert. Speed was increased and before long the Brigade Group had outstripped the slower-moving tanks. At 4 p.m. the Divisional Cavalry reported it had encountered the enemy. Half an hour later the brigade halted but within a few minutes was on the move again. The country became hilly and progress much slower. Colonel Fountaine went ahead to join the Brigade Commander on a reconnaissance. A few minutes before 7 p.m. the order to halt was given. The Colonel returned from the reconnaissance but immediately went back to Brigade HQ. While he was away the troops had a meal of cold rations.

The brigade had turned off the divisional axis of advance shortly before sunset to head directly towards the coast. Consequently it no longer had the armoured screen in front of it. The coastal road was believed to be only about four miles away, and a carrier patrol, including three from the battalion, was sent out to report on the route the brigade would have to follow. It was now believed that the greater part of the enemy force was still east of the Division. In view of this Brig Gentry decided to continue the advance without waiting for the patrol's return.

By the light of a moon partly obscured by clouds, the trucks left the flat desert behind and began to cross a series of sharply defined ridges. Before long trucks were jammed nose-to-tail. Each time a ridge was crossed another loomed up ahead. There was terrific din as hundreds of vehicles accelerated to climb the steep slopes. Several were stuck in narrow gullies and the trucks behind had to move around them. Four miles were covered in this manner before another halt was ordered. The difficult going had caused some confusion. Column formation had been lost and trucks of the Artillery and other units were intermingled with those of the battalion. After a lot of shouting and cursing everything was gradually sorted out.

The carrier patrol had not returned so another was sent out with orders to keep in wireless contact. After it had gone about 1000 yards the Brigade Group followed. The going became more and more difficult, but by 9 p.m. three more miles had been covered. A halt was ordered and the Colonel went to Brigade HQ to learn the latest developments. Both carrier patrols had returned. They had been forward another 1000 yards and had heard traffic movement, presumably along the coastal road. A wadi difficult to cross barred access to it.

Brigadier Gentry and his senior officers went forward in 26 Battalion carriers to make a more detailed reconnaissance. After travelling about 1200 yards they ran into heavy machine-gun and anti-tank gun fire. The carriers immediately wheeled and turned back but the leading two were hit. Three men were wounded, two of them mortally. The Carrier officer and the surviving wounded soldier were taken prisoner. The rest of the party withdrew to safety.

Colonel Fountaine returned to the battalion at 9.30 p.m. He found that the troops had debussed and were deployed along the ridges. The transport, most of which had halted on the crest of a wide ridge, had started to move back into the wadis, a move accelerated by a few shells which had landed in the area. The CO ordered company commanders to deploy their men along the main ridge with C Coy on higher ground on the right and B Coy on the left. Defensive positions were to be sited to face north-east along a front of approximately 1500 yards. The flanking companies were each to have three two-pounders and four six-pounders (7 Anti-Tank Regiment). The remaining two two-pounders were to support A Coy. The mortars and machine-gunners were similarly divided among the companies.

Shortly afterwards Battalion HQ was set up in a wadi about 400 yards to the rear, with the transport park and the carriers not far away. In the meantime the ridge had come under heavy shell and mortar fire. It slackened off half an hour later to recommence at irregular intervals throughout the night. About 10 p.m. Lt Piper went forward to determine the position of the three companies. He found A and C Coys hard at work digging in along the crest and reverse slope of the ridge. Because of the nature of the terrain Maj Smith had moved B Coy about 600 yards farther forward. Signallers were laying line to each of the companies and by 3 a.m. everything was complete.

Ahead 24 and 25 Battalions, after overcoming some opposition, were consolidating along a ridge beyond that occupied by the battalion. A carrier patrol had ventured as far as the coastal road but did not attempt to molest the traffic on it, deciding to await the arrival of minelaying parties. One company from 24 Battalion tried to gain a foothold on the high ridge north of its position but was driven back by enemy tanks. There was no sign of 5 Brigade on the right flank. The situation became much clearer at dawn. The ridge north of 24 Battalion obscured the road from view, and the enemy was apparently strongly entrenched on it. Fifth Brigade was in position several miles to the south-east. Through an error in navigation during the night 6 Brigade had swung too far to the west. This was serious, for it meant that the tanks and artillery units which were to have supported the infantry now had to cover the wide gap. Headquarters 30 Corps reported that a large enemy force was moving towards the New Zealanders. Seventh Armoured Division was slowly moving through the El Agheila defences—too slowly to be of immediate help.

It was a beautiful sunny morning and little was happening in the battalion sector. The forward battalions were under heavy shellfire, but scarcely any of it reached the reserve area. Early in the morning some movement was noticed on a high plateau about 2000 yards west of B Coy. Thinking they would be friendly troops, nobody took much notice. Colonel Fontaine was not so sure and sent Lt Piper to investigate. This officer came under spandau fire when about 350 yards from the crest of the feature. The CO, who was watching with field glasses, ordered C Coy to attack.

The 25-pounders fired a concentration on the plateau, and as the three platoons fanned out and crossed the wadi mortars, two-pounders, and Vickers guns began firing. The leading troops climbed the slope under fire from a lone spandau. Near the top they made ready to charge, but when they did they found the enemy had gone, except for two rather scared Germans. In his haste to get away the enemy left behind five 50- millimetre guns, an unusual type of portée, and other equipment. Two of the guns were sited to cover 6 Brigade's transport and could have caused considerable damage. Suddenly spandau fire from an enemy truck about 800 yards away caused everyone to dive for cover. The platoons returned the fire and Capt Sinclair wirelessed for artillery and machine-gun support. Very soon afterwards a

jeep mounting a Vickers gun raced across the wadi and up the slope. By the time it had arrived the enemy vehicle was gone.

While this was going on enemy tanks and trucks were driving through the gap between the two brigades. They succeeded in escaping but left behind several tanks, 12 anti-tank guns, 30 spandaus, and a number of trucks—a heavy loss to the enemy in view of his earlier losses. The rest of his forces withdrew during the night by way of the [Via Balbia](#) under cover of a rearguard from 90 Light Division. A mobile column set out after the enemy, [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) following shortly afterwards.

After midday all enemy activity in the vicinity of the battalion sector ceased. A hot meal was brought forward, and shortly afterwards a warning order was received to be ready to move. The enemy portée had been driven back to Battalion HQ where it excited some interest, more particularly as it was loaded with good underclothing, socks, and food. The one bottle of brandy found was eagerly claimed. Later in the afternoon more detailed instructions were received from Brigade HQ. The Division was going to continue the chase, the immediate objective being the village of [Nofilia](#), which was reported to be strongly held. Sixth Brigade Group would be in reserve and was unlikely to take part if an assault developed. The rest of the [Eighth Army](#) was held up in the vicinity of the [El Agheila](#) position by mines and demolitions.

At 4 p.m. the battalion set out to rejoin the rest of the Brigade Group, several miles south of the position. B and C Coys were late in arriving, C Coy because it had a long way to march and B Coy because most of its personnel were bathing in a rock pool and were loath to leave it. By nightfall the battalion had taken its place in the brigade formation. At ten o'clock next morning, 17 December, the long line of vehicles began moving south-west. At 3 p.m. there was temporary hold-up as the columns passed through a British field battery which was engaging targets north-east of the brigade. Another nine miles were covered, making 48 for the day, when a stop was made.

At a conference after tea the CO outlined what had happened during the day. As it neared [Nofilia](#) [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) had been engaged by enemy artillery and armour. While this action was continuing the Division had turned south and then west for a short distance. Sixth Brigade had halted, and 5 Brigade had attempted to cut the main road west of [Nofilia](#) and complete its encirclement. The defenders were

estimated to number about 5000 and were supported by 20–25 tanks. There was a possibility that, finding his normal escape route blocked, the enemy might drive south, and for that reason normal defence measures were to be taken by 6 Brigade.

Although this was done the troops were left in peace. In the morning came rather startling news— [Nofilia](#) had been found deserted. Fifth Brigade had succeeded in blocking the main coastal road, but under cover of darkness the enemy had got away. Everyone expected the Division would continue the chase at once, but the day passed without further orders. It was the same the next day. Two days later rumours were silenced. Sixth Brigade moved to a new bivouac area about six miles north-west of [Nofilia](#) and close to the main road. A three weeks' spell from jolting trucks and flying sand lay ahead.

* * *

While drivers repaired the damage caused to their trucks by the long journey across the desert, sports committees were formed in each company. The camp site lay in undulating tussocky country and the sand seemed cleaner than usual. Football and hockey fields were soon cleared and teams selected. As usual keen rivalry was shown between companies and platoons. The battalion Rugby team lost both its matches, being defeated by 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery and, for the second time, by [23 Battalion](#). On several occasions the companies marched to the coast for a swim. A rifle range was set up nearby and a tournament arranged. The winners were Pte R. Patrick (rifle) and Pte D. M. Harkness (Bren gun).

A battalion sports meeting proved highly successful, with some close finishes to the running events. Representatives were chosen to compete at a brigade meeting. Unfortunately, the day before it took place the men had an 18-mile route march. Only one representative gained a title, Lt G. T. Kain winning the high jump. Little training was carried out and was confined to a few route marches and lectures. Selected personnel were sent to HQ [30 Corps](#) to attend specialist courses in patrolling and minelifting.

Christmas Day, 1942, the third since the battalion left New Zealand, was celebrated in time-honoured custom. Considering the distance the Division was from its base, the commissariat arrangements were excellent. The cooks provided tomato

soup, turkey, pork with apple sauce, baked and boiled potatoes, green peas, carrots and gravy, while for those who had any room left there was plum pudding and sauce. A bottle of beer and 50 cigarettes were issued to each man. Officers and sergeants served the meal in liberal quantities. After it was over the men rested. An excellent day was capped by the arrival of a large number of bags of mail and parcels. There had nearly been no plum pudding, for the half-gallon daily ration of water was insufficient for boiling puddings. The day was saved by the discovery of a large pool of surface water, which was strained into 44- gallon drums and used for the puddings. It was muddy and green but served admirably. Almost everyone thought it would be his last Christmas away from home.

Another special meal was served on New Year's Day. Three day's later the brigade moved to a divisional assembly area south of [Nofilia](#). The 18-mile journey was completed on foot as General Montgomery intended to review the troops on the march. Eleven miles had been covered by midday and the brigade halted to await the General's arrival. A strong north-westerly wind and flying sand made conditions very unpleasant. When the General arrived the troops marched past the saluting base in column of route and then continued to the assembly area, arriving about 4 p.m. Later the same day officers met in the Advanced Dressing Station tent and listened to a talk by the Eighth Army Commander. After congratulating the brigade on its achievements, the General outlined the Army's immediate and future objectives. In a confident manner he forecast the course of the campaign, even predicting when certain objectives would be captured. Before his talk ended there were few who did not share some of his confidence.

During the next four days several desert exercises were carried out with tanks. In the first one the companies practised advancing on an objective with tanks in close support. Later this exercise was repeated on a battalion scale and finally as a brigade. In these operations the tanks moved with the infantry so that they could give each other protection. This was a radical change from the tactics employed earlier at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and El Mreir.

Throughout the spell there had been little to do in the evenings. Occasionally there was a sing-song, and on 6 January the Padre and a few helpers staged a concert. The performers from the unit gave a really good show and the large audience showed its appreciation. The highlight of the programme was Cpl Bill

Pollock's ² rendering of the song-hit 'My Little Gippo Bint'. During his long service with the battalion this NCO was always ready with his ukelele and inexhaustible fund of yarns to help pass monotonous hours.

Meanwhile, supplies had been built up and the Division was ready to join in the advance through [Tripolitania](#). Fifty-eight reinforcements, including three officers, had joined the unit, some returning from a spell in hospital. On 9 January 6 Brigade Group set out in a south-westerly direction towards another assembly area. A tactical exercise was carried out on the way. By nightfall the column had covered 44 miles. Next day, a Sunday, the brigade moved west 60 miles and reached the assembly area about 2 p.m. The troops rested on the 11th; during the day the carriers arrived on tank transporters. Late in the afternoon [General Freyberg](#) visited Battalion HQ. Officers attended a conference at which the General gave an outline of the immediate plan of operations.

Three divisions were to take part in the advance on [Tripoli](#): the 51st Highland along the coast, 7th Armoured inland, and [2 NZ Division](#) through broken country farther inland still. The Divisional Cavalry's AFVs and tanks of the Scots Greys would lead the divisional columns, with 6 Brigade Group directly behind. After passing through [Beni Ulid](#), 5 Brigade Group would replace 6 Brigade as the leading brigade of the Division. Several deep wadis and narrow gorges lay in the path of the advance. Two of them, the [Wadi Zemzem](#) and, beyond it, the gorge through the [Gebel Nefusa](#), were expected to be defended by enemy rearguards.

The advance began the next morning and ended twelve days later when the battalion bivouacked near Giordani, about 20 miles south of [Tripoli](#). Throughout the 300-mile journey scarcely any contact was made with the enemy, except that on several occasions shells landed unpleasantly close. The only casualty was a carrier which was blown up on a mine. On the 18th the battalion columns were negotiating some rough, hilly country when several enemy vehicles were sighted in a wadi. A few rounds from a Bofors gun induced the enemy party to surrender. Five armoured cars and four lorries were captured, of which the drivers retained one containing MT spares and the Anti-Aircraft Platoon acquired a four-tonner mounting a [Breda](#) ack-ack gun.

After the brigade crossed the [Wadi Zemzem](#), which was undefended, rough

country slowed up the columns. The going became progressively worse as the vehicles neared and began to climb through the [Gebel Nefusa](#), a high range of hills west of [Tarhuna](#). Often it became necessary to move in column of route to negotiate canyon-like wadis, hummocky stretches of desert, soft patches of sand and the rocky escarpment barring the entrance to the gorge leading onto the coastal plain south of [Tripoli](#). The gorge was extensively mined, and several demolitions had to be cleared. B Coy was detailed to assist with this work.

On the north side of the hills the roads became better and drivers and passengers alike gave a sigh of relief. Progress continued to be slow for the armour was feeling its way forward cautiously, being content to shell enemy rearguard parties and wait until they withdrew. The troops had little idea of what was going on and showed more interest in the Italian farm settlements. After seven months in the desert it was refreshing to gaze on green grass and cultivated fields and watch the wind-mills turning in the breeze. At night the companies were generally sent forward to picket the tank laager, and from the crews the men learned of events during the day.

The 51st Division was making good progress along the coastal road, and on the 21st enemy forces were reported to have evacuated [Tripoli](#). Sixth Brigade Group halted after dusk on the following day, when only about 40 miles from the objective. There was no move on the 23rd, and during the afternoon advice was received that armoured cars of the 11th Hussars had entered the town that morning. On the 24th the troops embussed and the battalion moved in convoy along the main road towards [Tripoli](#), turning west along a secondary road after 30 miles had been covered, to bivouac a few miles past the communal village of Giordani. The camp site was a poor one on sandy ground on the fringe of the green coastal belt. The trucks dispersed under cover and the troops soon settled in. Armed bands of Arabs were reported in the vicinity and pickets were posted around the camp and vehicle park.

* * *

Although few expected it, the Division remained based on [Tripoli](#) for the next five weeks. More than half this time was spent in bivouac near the town. Little was done the first few days. Drivers started to repair the damage suffered by trucks and

carriers during the recent advance, while the troops cleaned the sand from all equipment. The dust had penetrated everywhere, even into packs and bedding. A large mail arrived, together with a number of parcels. A few route marches completed the training. On the last day of the month selected personnel took part in a ceremonial church parade in [Tripoli](#). Two days later the battalion moved 24 miles to a much better camp site near [Suani Ben Adem](#), where the men pitched their tents on green grass underneath the trees.

On 4 February a big ceremonial parade was held near [Tripoli](#), at which the salute was taken by Mr. Churchill. The parade ground was about three miles from the camp. Rehearsals were held on the 3rd and on the morning of the 4th, and lunch was served under the shade of some bluegum trees. The march past took place in the afternoon. To those taking part and to the onlookers it was an inspiring spectacle as unit after unit — thousands of troops with vehicles and guns—passed the saluting base. After the inspection Mr. Churchill gave a short talk.

A week later the battalion moved into [Tripoli](#) to take over guard duties from a battalion of the [Black Watch](#). The troops were billeted in houses and schools and for eight days mounted guards at three waterpoints and at a flour mill. On 19 February Sudanese troops took over those duties and the men were detailed in ever-increasing numbers for wharf work. At this time the [Eighth Army](#), with its long line of communication, was badly in need of supplies to enable it to continue the pursuit. The port had been repaired and a constant stream of ships was arriving. Before many days had passed the men were called on to do shift work, and each morning and night large parties left for the wharf. Although long hours were worked there was little danger of enemy interference in daylight, but after dusk enemy bombers frequently appeared. The 'wharfies' took cover and the anti-aircraft guns all around opened fire. When a raid was over the men went back to work as before. If, as happened on occasions, [Naafi](#) supplies—tinned fruit, chocolate, etc.—found their way back to the billets, the [Eighth Army](#) in turn received its supplies in record time and the ships' captains were grateful for the quick turn-round.

With so many of the battalion employed at the docks and on normal camp duties, few were left to engage in sports. In its only game the battalion Rugby team defeated Divisional HQ by six points to three. A steady stream of mail was arriving, although it took longer in transit. Evening entertainment was



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



Point 201, the feature in the centre, was taken by 25 and 26
Battalions as the first phase of the breakthrough at Tebaga Gap

**Point 201, the feature in the centre, was taken by 25 and 26 Battalions as the first phase of the
breakthrough at Tebaga Gap**



Olive groves and spring flowers near Sfax, Tunisia
Olive groves and spring flowers near Sfax, Tunisia



Native food vendors followed troop trains
Native food vendors followed troop trains

varied and included pictures and performances by the Kiwi Concert Party. The battalion staged its own revue, 'Thumbs Up'. Encouraged by their success at [Nofilia](#), the Padre and his team of performers set about planning something better. Six performances to capacity audiences were given in [Tripoli](#), two at the Miramare Theatre and the others in the ballroom of the Governor's Palace. Each night the large audience gave the performers a thunderous reception.

The amenities at [Suani Ben Adem](#) and at [Tripoli](#) were quite good. The weather in the main was warm and the days sunny, although at times high winds and rain squalls made conditions unpleasant. Battle dress was generally worn. Fresh vegetables were bought from Italian farmers and these helped to vary the diet.

There was never much beer. A local brewery was operated under Allied control but its output was very small. Plenty of wine of varying quality could be bought from local farmers or at the market. The troops' Egyptian money was called in and BMA³ lire issued, while the civilians used Italian currency. For the first fortnight of the Division's spell there were many hilarious parties and cases of over-indulgence. Disciplinary measures were taken and good quality wines purchased and sold through the company canteens. The arrival of over a hundred reinforcements from Egypt by sea enabled the Colonel to reform D Coy. The Anti-Tank Platoon was formed into two troops, each equipped with two two-pounders and two six-pounders. NCOs and trained men from the other rifle companies were drafted into the new D Coy under Capt [Aiken](#).⁴ All four companies were still considerably below full strength.

Meanwhile, [Eighth Army](#) was advancing into [Tunisia](#). By the end of February the leading elements had reached the [Mareth Line](#), behind which the enemy was regrouping his forces to hold the line and also to counter the British and American assault from the west. The German radio declared that at last the [Eighth Army](#) had met its conqueror. Knowing that General Montgomery would soon attempt to prove this wrong, all ranks felt that their days in [Tripoli](#) were numbered.

On the last day of February the battalion returned to the [Suani Ben Adem](#) area, making part of the journey on foot. In the new camp all ranks settled down to await orders to move forward, the general belief being that the Division would then take part in the assault on the [Mareth Line](#). There had been no preliminary planning or series of conferences which generally were a guide to impending actions. As a result, orders received early on 2 March to prepare to move immediately west to [Medenine](#), 180 miles away, caused some surprise. The situation was more easily understood when it became known that the Division's role was to be defensive. The enemy, having repulsed the British and American forces in northern and western [Tunisia](#), had brought the bulk of his armour south to the [Mareth Line](#). To delay the assault on this line, it was expected that he would shortly attempt a counter-attack to break up the Eighth Army concentration facing it. Delay would enable Axis reinforcements to reach [Tunisia](#) and allow the enemy time to consolidate.

Montgomery proposed to deploy his forces so that the enemy thrust could be contained with the least possible effort and the preparations to breach the [Mareth](#)

Line not impeded. Two divisions were already deployed across the front: 51 (Highland) Division along the coast and 7 Armoured Division inland of it. The 2nd NZ Division would move to the southern flank around Medenine, about 15 miles east of the Mareth defences and 20 miles from the coast. As the enemy thrust was expected about 4 March, 6 Brigade was to be in position by dusk the night before.

At 10 a.m., three hours after the warning order, the battalion was on the move following Brigade HQ along the coastal road. Good progress was made until after midday, when traffic congestion caused a series of irritating halts, slow-moving tank transporters causing most of the delay. Early in the afternoon the CO joined Brig Gentry and the other battalion commanders and raced ahead of the convoy to reconnoitre the new sector. After dusk the convoy increased speed, and at 8 p.m. the battalion passed through Ben Gardane. For almost twelve more hours the long line of vehicles forged steadily westward, with only a few short halts to break the monotony of the journey. About an hour after midnight an enemy plane circled overhead. Flares bathed the convoy in light and everyone expected the bombs to follow. Fortunately only one bomb was dropped; it exploded fully a hundred yards from the nearest battalion vehicle. It was after dawn when the battalion finally reached its sector. Drivers were showing signs of strain, and the troops felt more like sleeping than turning to and preparing defences.

Sixth Brigade was to occupy high ground north-east of Medenine. Fifth Brigade, already in position, was on lower ground south-west of the town. Brigadier Gentry sited his three battalions in a rough semi-circle, 25 Battalion facing west, 24 Battalion north-west, and 26 Battalion north. In view of the possibility of a sudden enemy attack no time was lost in preparing the defences, and by nightfall the work was almost completed. A, B, and C Coys were in the forward positions, and the supporting arms had been positioned to give all-round fire. Vehicles were dispersed at the rear and were camouflaged. The carriers, which had been left at Suani Ben Adem, came forward on tank transporters.

Sixth Brigade was in a reserve position. Fifth Brigade was west of it, two brigades of 7 Armoured Division north and north-east, and the whole sector covered by a light armoured screen. Around the brigade, as every man noticed, were many artillery units and large tank forces. Measures to counter the enemy thrust had been

carefully planned. Several approach routes were open to him: the most likely were by the roads leading from the [Mareth](#) defences and converging on [Medenine](#). A high hill, Pt 270, gave first-class observation over all these routes. The 51st (Highland) Division occupied the coastal sector, 201 Guards Brigade and [131 Brigade](#) the ridges west of Pt 270, while 5 Brigade covered the approaches west and south of [Medenine](#). Tanks of [7 Armoured Division](#) were grouped on the coastal sector, while [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) covered the open flank of 5 Brigade. Dummy minefields had been prepared in front of the positions to divert enemy tanks along a route to where anti-tank guns had been sited. Unless the enemy broke through this line, which almost surrounded 6 Brigade, there was little likelihood of the battalion being involved in the fighting.

Nevertheless strong pickets were posted after dusk and patrols were sent beyond the lines. Except for some shelling the night passed quietly. It was much the same the next night and the next, and there was a growing conviction that the enemy had thought better of his plan. During the daytime a few shells landed in the sector but most of the enemy artillery fire was directed on the airfield near [Medenine](#). The RAF was operating from this field and for a time continued to do so in spite of the shelling. There was intense air activity on both sides and the troops were interested eyewitnesses of several dogfights.

At 6 a.m. on the 6th a sudden increase in the shelling indicated something afoot. This was confirmed by wireless reports that enemy armour and infantry were moving down from the hills across the low ground. Everything went according to plan—the Allied plan. When the enemy tanks came near enough for anti-tank gunners to fire over open sights, the order to fire was given. Almost simultaneously the artillery opened fire on the concentrations of enemy infantry and transport. The results were disastrous for the enemy, who lost heavily in men and tanks. Sixth Brigade took no part in the fighting but 5 Brigade was slightly engaged. Allied planes passed overhead throughout most of the morning, but in the afternoon it was the enemy's turn. The battalion sector was strafed and bombed on four occasions. Only one man was wounded. A time bomb dropped in B Coy's area was viewed from a safe distance and with some concern. The Anti-Aircraft Platoon, firing the captured [Breda](#), shot down an Me109.

The sound of shelling continued after dusk and at intervals throughout the night.

At daybreak on the 7th a heavy inter- change of shellfire which lasted over an hour was followed by complete silence. Reports indicated that the enemy had suffered heavy losses before retiring. Fifty-two tanks had been knocked out and many prisoners taken. The air activity did not slacken; planes were passing overhead most of the time. Shortly after 10 a.m. seven Me109s bombed and strafed the sector. They came in with the sun directly behind them and caught everyone by surprise. Four men were wounded, including two members of the Signal Platoon. B Coy lost its cookhouse and its two cooks were wounded.

After this raid enemy air activity ceased. Three days passed before another move was ordered, and everyone enjoyed the short spell in pleasant surroundings. Green grass and spring flowers abounded and olive trees gave protection from the warm sun. Over a hundred reinforcements arrived. Some came from [Maadi](#) and others had been transferred from other units. Their arrival increased the unit strength to 29 officers and 589 other ranks, as compared with a full establishment of 35 and 789. To bolster the numerically weak rifle companies, the CO drew on HQ Coy and B Echelon personnel.

On 10 March orders for a move to an assembly area were received. For security reasons all means of identification were to be removed. During the day 61 LOBs, under the command of Maj Richards, left for the New Zealand base at Suani Ben Adem. Early next morning the battalion moved down to a brigade concentration area near the main road. Shortly after arriving there the Brigade Group moved off in two columns, heading south-east towards [Ben Gardane](#). By 11.30 a.m. 47 miles had been covered, and the convoy turned south onto a desert track. Half an hour later the direction was again changed, the head of the columns moving south-west towards Fom Tatahouine. By 2 p.m. another 24 miles had been travelled. The brigade halted after moving into desert formation.

After tea the journey was continued, the vehicles moving in column of route along lighted lanes. For several hours fairly good progress was made, but after passing [Fom Tatahouine](#) short halts became more numerous and drivers had to slow down to negotiate soft patches of sand and rough going. Finally, at six o'clock in the morning, the brigade reached the assembly area, where the battalions fanned out into desert formation to face north. The 150-mile journey was over.

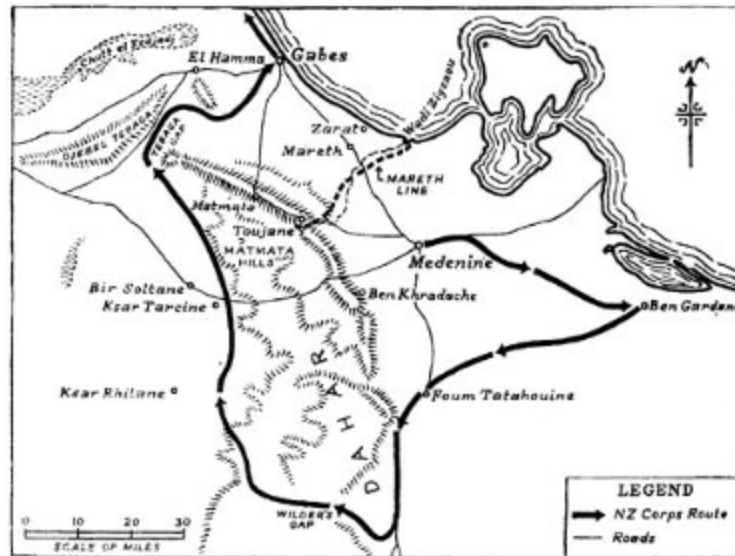
Seven days were spent in this locality, which lay about 70 miles south of [Medenine](#) and east of the Montes des Ksours, a range of mountains running south from the [Mareth Line](#). The troops dug in and every effort was made to conceal trucks and tents from air observation. The movement of vehicles was cut to a minimum and a strict blackout enforced. Sixth Brigade Group had been the first formation to arrive, and during the week the remainder of [NZ Corps](#) assembled, the total force stretching for many miles over the desert.

Because of the site selected for the assembly area everyone guessed that the Division was going to attempt another left hook. This was confirmed during 14 and 15 March when full details of the plan of operations were released. Officers and senior NCOs were taken to Divisional HQ, where they were able to study a large plaster model of the [Mareth Line](#). This showed clearly the formidable task ahead of the [Eighth Army](#).

The main enemy fortifications had been built by the French to meet possible Italian attacks from [Tripolitania](#). In the north, near the coast, the line consisted of several independent but mutually supporting strongpoints after the pattern of the Maginot Line. These strongpoints contained concrete pillboxes and gun emplacements and followed the line of the Wadi Zigzaou, which in itself was a natural tank obstacle with sheer banks up to 70 feet high in places. Salt marshes and deep minefields covered the approaches. About twenty miles from the coast the line ran up into the junction of the [Matmata Hills](#) and the Montes des Ksours. The former, impassable to any large tank force, ran back at right angles to the [Mareth Line](#) and parallel with the coast for a distance of about forty miles and ended in a high peak, the [Djebel Melab](#). From this peak a recently built chain of defences ran across a narrow valley to another range, the [Djebel Tebaga](#). It was to this narrow gap the New Zealanders were directed. The Eighth Army was no longer moving west. It had turned the corner into [Tunisia](#) and was driving northward.

The Army Commander's plan was somewhat similar to that used at [El Agheila](#). The New Zealand Division, built up to form [NZ Corps](#), was to move south, cross through a gap in the Montes des Ksours, and move north-west below the [Matmata Hills](#) to the gap between [Djebel Melab](#) and [Djebel Tebaga](#). After overcoming opposition in this area it was to drive towards the coast, the objectives being [El](#)

Hamma and **Gabes**. By this means the enemy forces at **Mareth** would be outflanked and their escape route blocked. The NZ Corps' operation was to be so timed that its Tebaga thrust would coincide with an attack by **30 Corps** on the **Mareth** defences on the night of 20 March.



The Saharan force, comprising the remnants of several Italian divisions supported by a number of tanks, was reported to be manning the Tebaga defences. **General Freyberg** had under command **2 NZ Division**, **8 Armoured Brigade**, the King's Dragoon Guards, some British artillery, and General Leclerc's Fighting French force (recently arrived from Chad), a total of about 27,000 men and 320 guns. By achieving tactical surprise **General Freyberg** hoped to crash through the Tebaga defences before the enemy was able to divert armoured reserves to oppose the Corps. For this reason the approach moves were to be made at night, so that by dawn on the 21st the vanguard would be within striking distance of its first objective. Sixth Brigade would follow the armoured screen and, in the event of the latter being unable to deal with the opposition in the gap, would be called in to clear the way.

In preparation for tasks of this nature, part of the time in the assembly area was spent in practising night attacks on prepared defences. They were unpleasant days for the skies were cloudy and the weather much cooler. Gusty winds caused the sand to fly. The approach route for the advance was reported to be rough and sappers went ahead to bulldoze tracks. At the same time Fighting French troops began driving north-west through the **Matmata Hills**, mopping up enemy outposts. On the 18th the carriers arrived and the battalion was ready to move. After dusk the next day the newly formed Corps began its 100-mile advance to Tebaga.

The battalion finally got under way about 7.15 p.m. and seven hours later reached a staging area, 35 miles from the starting point. It had been tough going, with many tricky wadis and sand dunes along the route. Only skilful driving had enabled the battalion to retain its formation. In the staging area the trucks were widely dispersed, and before long all ranks were sound asleep. The next day, the 20th, was fine and sunny, and this caused a change in plan. As there was every likelihood of enemy aircraft discovering the force during the day, the advance was continued in daylight instead of waiting until dusk. Wireless silence was broken and the troops prepared for another long spell in the trucks.

By 10 a.m. 6 Brigade Group was under way and, with numerous short halts delaying progress, it continued to move forward until dusk. All day Allied planes had hovered about, and early in the afternoon there was a dogfight overhead. At 5 p.m. American aircraft strafed the columns but did not damage any 26 Battalion vehicles. Forty-two miles had been covered when the halt was ordered, and [Djebel Tebaga](#) could be faintly seen in the failing light. The armoured screen had already brushed against several enemy outposts, which withdrew on contact. Aerial reconnaissance reports indicated that the enemy was now aware of the threat to his flank and was making strenuous efforts to strengthen his defences. A second defence line had been located in the [Tebaga Gap](#) area and considerable movement was noticed near it.

Next morning the Corps continued its advance, the armoured screen manoeuvring into position to drive through the Gap. At ten o'clock the battalion was ordered to halt. Four miles had been covered and [Djebel Tebaga](#) was now clearly in view. The Battalion Commander went forward to join a brigade reconnaissance party and while he was away met [General Freyberg](#). The General indicated that 6 Brigade would almost certainly be called on to clear the enemy FDLs. This was confirmed later in the day, when the tanks and AFVs moving into the Gap were held up by extensive minefields and by an anti-tank ditch which stretched across the valley at its narrowest point. In preparation for the attack Brig Gentry ordered 26 Battalion to move up on the right of [25 Battalion](#) at the head of the Brigade Group. This move was completed by 2 p.m. and the troops debussed and settled down to await further orders. Considerable inconvenience had been caused during the move when the trucks drove through swarms of locusts. The tanks ahead were probing the enemy defences and drawing heavy fire on themselves and on an artillery unit near the

battalion. Allied fighters and bombers were harassing enemy movement and, judging by the columns of smoke, were meeting with some success.

Detailed orders for the attack were not received at Battalion HQ until 5 p.m. Shortly afterwards Col Fontaine called his company commanders together to explain the situation and give his own orders.⁵ Minefields, a deep anti-tank ditch, and apron wire covered the approaches to the enemy FDLs, which stretched across three miles of front. A high feature, Pt 201, in the centre of the line was the important point, and as it covered the approaches to the valley it was expected to be strongly held, as also might be the high hills on the east side of the Gap. A second line of defences lay behind 6 Brigade's objective. The importance of this narrow valley had been appreciated many centuries earlier, for the Romans had built a wall across it to keep out invaders. This wall still existed, and the enemy line ran more or less parallel to it. Intelligence reports stated that both lines were still held by Italians, supported by tanks, but German troops were expected to relieve them in the very near future.



The Breakthrough at Tebaga Gap

Two battalions, the 25th and 26th, were to make the assault, the former on the left. Both were to form up along a taped start line, approximately a mile from the enemy FDLs, in readiness to attack at 9.30 p.m. The inter-battalion boundary had been fixed along a line running through Pt 201. Smoke shells would be fired on this feature as a guide. The supply of ammunition was limited and artillery support would be confined to covering fire during the advance. In the battalion sector B Coy would

form up on the right of the start line, with D Coy alongside it and A Coy on the left. The three companies would attack in this formation. On the objective A Coy would extend right from Pt 201 to D Coy, which in turn would link up with B Coy, directed to clear a hill feature on the eastern side of the valley. C Coy, in reserve, was to follow D Coy and assist sappers to fill in the anti-tank ditch. As soon as a lane had been cleared the supporting arms were to come forward.

* * *

After the conference was over and darkness had fallen, the area became a scene of noisy activity as artillery regiments moved into position and trucks moved to and fro with loads of ammunition. The men had little more than an hour in which to get ready but the majority were already half prepared. Before the companies left for the start line, word was received that the assault had been postponed until 10 p.m. because of a delay in taping the line and lighting routes to it. At 8 p.m. the troops embussed and the loaded vehicles began moving slowly along rough tracks towards the Gap. An enemy plane strafed the trucks at the end of the column but did no damage. After travelling about two miles the trucks stopped and the men continued the march on foot. Lieutenant Piper went ahead to locate the start line. Aided by bright moonlight, the companies reached it and formed up with plenty of time to spare.

During the 30-minute wait an uncanny silence fell over the front. Not a shot was fired and the men spoke in whispers. Suddenly the first salvo of shells whistled overhead to land with a crash a mile away. The men were quickly on their feet and soon moved off into the gloom. Battalion HQ followed and last came C Coy. The moonlight enabled the leading platoons to advance fairly rapidly, and they had crossed the minefield and were approaching the anti-tank ditch before the enemy seemed aware of them. Intense small-arms fire drove the men to cover. Most of the men crawled forward to the ditch, which was more formidable than had been expected: it was very deep and much too wide to jump. It was simple to slide down one side but not easy to clamber up the other with equipment on. An anti-tank gun began firing along the ditch, and those caught in it re-doubled their efforts to get out. Fortunately, before many casualties had occurred, 11 Platoon on the right flank charged the enemy gun post and silenced it and a nearby spandau. The platoon lost

several men in this sharp engagement; its commander, Lt T. R. M. Hobbs ⁶ was wounded but carried on.

Half an hour had passed and the artillery fire had ceased except for the smoke shells falling on Pt 201. The companies had crossed the ditch, and both A and D Coys were pinned down by the small-arms fire and enfilading machine-gun fire. A short distance ahead lay the apron wire and the enemy trenches. It seemed folly to attempt to charge through such a curtain of fire, but during a lull Cpl Marett ⁷ dashed forward, gapped the wire, and called on his section to follow him. Within a few minutes others were following his example, and in a short time both companies were engaging the enemy at close quarters. Yelling at the top of their voices, the men charged and with grenades, rifles, and bayonets cleared the first line of trenches. A second line received similar treatment. The result was never in doubt, and within half an hour D Coy's front was quiet. A Coy encountered much more opposition, particularly in the high ground east of Pt 201. By the time this area had been cleared 25 Battalion had captured the main objective. The platoons were somewhat scattered but a large number of prisoners had been taken. The enfilading fire had almost ceased.

This was occasioned by B Coy's capture of its objective. This company had been less affected by the ground fire, and immediately after the capture of the anti-tank gun had continued on towards the hill feature, 10 and 11 Platoons leading. A sharp engagement on the crest of the hill and the fight was over. The Italians showed little fight and many were taken prisoner. Lieutenant Hobbs was wounded a second time and evacuated. The booty included many of the machine-guns and mortars which had been causing so much trouble to those on the flat.

Battalion HQ and C Coy had borne the brunt of enemy machine-gun and mortar fire and had been forced to take cover near the minefield. Over an hour passed, and it was not until the flanking companies had reached their objectives that this fire slackened sufficiently to allow them to move forward. During this period ten men were wounded. The wireless set broke down and all communication with the forward troops was lost. While Lt Piper went back to get another set the group moved forward, C Coy to help the sappers and Battalion HQ to a shallow wadi north of the wire. Communications with Brigade HQ broke down temporarily when the Divisional

Signals wireless van accompanying Battalion HQ was blown up on the northern edge of the minefield.

By midnight the front had quietened considerably, but Col Fountaine was still anxiously awaiting news of the forward companies. Before ten minutes passed all three fired success signals. This was very reassuring, but the CO was still not aware of the location of each company headquarters. Lieutenant Piper had returned from Brigade HQ with a new wireless set but some difficulty was experienced in communicating with the companies. At 1.30 a.m. Sgt Hardie ⁸ was sent forward with some members of the 'I' section to locate A and D Coys. The party had not gone far when it met Lt N. Buchanan of D Coy. Captain Aiken had been mortally wounded and Buchanan was endeavouring to link up with A Coy. He had with him several A Coy men who had become separated from their platoon during the action. Eventually A Coy HQ was found to the right rear of Pt 201. Captain Ollivier's forward platoons were close together on high ground to the right of 25 Battalion. As D Coy had swung slightly right to maintain a link with B Coy, a wide gap existed between the left-hand companies.

It was clear that the main objective—the capture of the enemy FDLs—had been achieved. By 2 a.m. the three companies had dug in along a front facing north-east and running approximately parallel to the Roman Wall. Enemy guns were firing but few shells were landing in the battalion sector. The newly formed Support Group functioned well, and by 2.20 a.m. the supporting arms had reached Battalion HQ, where guides from the companies were waiting. The carriers dispersed in the wadi and the anti-tank, mortar, and machine-gun platoons went forward to the companies. The attached platoon of machine-gunners, No. 4 Platoon 27 (MG) Battalion, was sent to Maj Smith. Shortly after this a squadron of tanks began to move from behind 25 Battalion's positions through the battalion sector.

The prompt arrival of the supporting arms was a cheering sight to the infantrymen and a welcome contrast to other earlier battles. Although the plan had been hastily formulated and there had been an early breakdown in communications, all sections of the unit had functioned smoothly to make the attack a success. Nearly 300 prisoners had been taken, plus a considerable quantity of arms and equipment. The battalion casualties totalled 38, including five killed or mortally wounded. B Coy had two killed and ten wounded, A Coy one killed and eight wounded, and D Coy

two killed and five wounded. Captain Aiken died from his wounds and [Capt K. W. Hobbs](#)⁹ became D Coy's new commander. Corporal Marett, who had led the charge through the wire, had been wounded in both legs in the subsequent close fighting. The enemy's casualties had been relatively higher.

As daylight approached on the 22nd enemy shelling and mortaring increased, particularly in the vicinity of the tanks still moving through the sector. At dawn hostile fire became very heavy, the tanks still being the main target. The artillery and the supporting arms, dug in behind each company, retaliated. There was a general sigh of relief as the last of the tanks disappeared beyond the Roman Wall. In the meantime a Divisional Cavalry squadron began moving across towards the right flank, where B Coy was being harassed by machine-gun, mortar and anti-tank fire.

The enemy anti-tank guns and mortars were firing from a hill feature a short distance north of the company and the machine guns from another hilltop on the right. A narrow wadi divided the two. The company retaliated and, with the aid of the supporting arms, brought heavy fire on the enemy party on its right. The Italians began waving white flags. Suspecting a trap Maj Smith did not order his men forward, but part of the Divisional Cavalry moved up to the gun positions ahead of the company. The Italians there readily surrendered. Meanwhile, the battalion carriers had moved forward to the party on the right and cleared the hilltop, taking 130 prisoners. To cap a successful twelve hours a hot meal was brought forward from B Echelon, now stationed at the debussing point.

There was little activity in the battalion sector for the rest of the day. Large numbers of Kittyhawks flew overhead and strafed the enemy lines north of the Roman Wall. Several Hurricane 'tank-busters' concentrated on a wadi where enemy tanks were assembling. Two columns of smoke bore witness to the success of their attacks. At irregular intervals Me109s flew high overhead. They dropped several bombs in the sector but caused no damage or casualties.

Intermittent shelling caused only one casualty, the MO being wounded in the arm. During the afternoon a shell landed close to a British truck which happened to be in the area. Captain Rutherford, as could be expected of him, ran over to see if anyone was hurt. He was dressing the driver's wounds when a second shell landed in practically the same spot. This time the doctor was wounded. He was evacuated and

later returned to New Zealand aboard a hospital ship. Everyone was sorry to see him go for he had always been the first to reach the wounded no matter how heavy the shelling. Many men of 26 Battalion had reason to be grateful for the risks he took. Captain [Fletcher](#)¹⁰. succeeded him as MO.

Late in the afternoon company commanders were called to Battalion HQ and informed of plans for another advance which was to commence at dusk. This time the infantry were to occupy the ground won by the tanks during the day. No opposition was expected. Within half an hour of setting out A and C Coys had reached their new sectors, A Coy on high ground 500 yards north of Pt 201, and C Coy on the right in a position about 1000 yards beyond the Roman Wall. D Coy did not move.

B Coy met unexpected trouble. Ordered to occupy a high ridge north of the two hilltops captured earlier in the day, the company had moved off with the Vickers gunners remaining behind to give covering fire. As the leading platoons neared their objective they heard tanks and infantry moving along a wadi towards them. The 8th Armoured Brigade had noticed the enemy and was firing, but it was too dark to see them properly or judge their strength. Major Smith ordered his men to take cover behind the hill on the western side of the wadi and await developments. In the meantime the Machine Gun Platoon, having waited the agreed time, moved quietly forward to the objective. Without a wireless link, B Coy HQ was unable to let the platoon know about the untimely appearance of the enemy.

On reaching the crest of the objective the Machine Gun Platoon commander, Lt [Titchener](#)¹¹. was confronted by enemy troops. Shooting began, and cries of 'Infantry—where are you?' and 'Come out you bastards!' were drowned by a volley of shots. Realising that the situation might prove troublesome for the machine-gunners, Maj Smith sent 10 and 11 Platoons over, but by the time they arrived the 35 Italians holding the ridge had surrendered. The enemy tanks had apparently withdrawn, and the company occupied its objective soon afterwards.

Little happened for the rest of the night, but at dawn on the 23rd shelling and mortaring began anew. It slackened off after a while, but B Coy and, to a lesser extent, C Coy were harassed by enemy snipers on the right flank. During the night an enemy party had moved around on the right of B Coy's new position and was dug

in behind the Roman Wall. From this vantage point the enemy was able to direct accurate fire on No. 11 Platoon and his mortars made conditions unpleasant for both companies. No. 11 Platoon's commander, Sgt Carson¹², an original member of the battalion, was mortally wounded by fire from this post. Another man was wounded, and Maj Smith decided to withdraw his company from the forward slope. A patrol from 12 Platoon was sent around to locate and attempt to drive out the enemy, but it too came under heavy fire and one of its number was wounded. It was difficult to bring fire to bear on the sniper, who was protected by the high wall.



The Battalion transport ready to leave Maadi, September 1943

The Battalion transport ready to leave [Maadi](#), September 1943



The move to Italy — the RAP packs up

The move to [Italy](#) — the RAP packs up



The move to the Sangro — halting place near the Osesto River

The move to the **Sangro** — halting place near the Osesto River



The hills beyond the Sangro — the Battalion sector is on the left

The hills beyond the **Sangro** — the Battalion sector is on the left

Later the Mortar Platoon tried to drive the enemy out and finally succeeded in quietening him.

On the lower ground a section of mortars commanded by Sgt **Kearney**¹³. was trying to silence not only the sniper troubling B Coy but also another party on the flat. Hostile fire was also coming from a hill about 1000 yards beyond B Coy. So that he could direct more accurate fire, Kearney moved forward onto an exposed ridge. His action drew the attention of the snipers, but he retaliated by sniping the enemy. This went on for most of the day. Although wounded, Sgt Kearney continued to direct mortar fire on the enemy, causing casualties. At length the enemy party on the low ground had had enough and about twenty Italians waved white flags and

surrendered.

Ahead, [8 Armoured Brigade](#) was advancing against stiffening opposition. On the right flank Fighting French forces were slowly approaching [Djebel Melab](#). In the morning enemy tanks and transport had been sighted in a wadi about 4000 yards farther up the valley. Kittyhawks and Hurricanes raided this area during the afternoon and columns of smoke were still rising at dusk. Enemy shelling, which had almost ceased during the afternoon, began again for a short while just before dusk. A carrier was destroyed in C Coy's sector and one man wounded. This brought the day's casualties to five. After dusk 12 Platoon was sent around to ascertain if the enemy party was still occupying its position alongside the Roman Wall. The dugouts were empty and the platoon promptly occupied the position. The ground was very chalky and before long the men were covered with white powder. Later in the night B Coy reoccupied its forward sector, 16 Platoon of D Coy moving forward to take 12 Platoon's reserve position.

It was now apparent that the enemy had strengthened his defences in the Gap by moving [21 Panzer Division](#) and some artillery around to block [NZ Corps'](#) advance. The British tanks and AFVs had met heavy opposition during the day. On the other front the attack on the [Mareth Line](#) was not going well, and General Montgomery decided to exploit the success of NZ Corps by sending [1 Armoured Division](#) around to the Gap and so switch his main thrust to the flank. The British division was expected to arrive on 25 March, and in the meantime NZ Corps was to clear the enemy from his commanding positions on both sides of the valley and air attacks were to be stepped up.

The 24th Battalion was brought into the line on the left of [25 Battalion](#). The 8th Armoured Brigade withdrew behind the infantry each night and indicator signals were lit to enable pilots to distinguish the Allied FDLs. Yellow smoke was fired during the day, and after dusk tins filled with sand and soaked with petrol were lit. To avoid mistakes [25 Battalion](#) arranged its tins in the form of the letter 'N' and 26 Battalion the letter 'O'. Each night pickets were posted to keep the fires burning and 150 gallons of petrol went up in smoke. The enemy shelled the blazing tins and his planes dropped butterfly bombs on them, but no casualties resulted. The Allied aircraft made no mistakes and registered some good targets during the next few days.

On the battalion front there was still one prominent feature, Pt 184, which had not been cleared. It lay about 1000 yards north of B Coy and had been bypassed by the armoured columns the day before. It was known to be occupied, as the forward platoons had been troubled by fire from it during the day. As it commanded a view over the whole of the three-battalion front, its capture was essential to the success of future attacks, in particular to deny the enemy knowledge of the strength of the forces participating. D Coy was detailed to capture it. During the afternoon of the 24th Capt Hobbs and his platoon commanders examined the hill from B Coy's sector. Later the same afternoon the Carrier officer, Lt [Ross](#)¹⁴, who had been out on patrol near Pt 184, returned to Battalion HQ with two German prisoners whom he had caught by surprise. When questioned they stated that one company from 104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, [21 Panzer Division](#), had relieved the Italians on the hill.

Captain Hobbs decided to attack from the south with two platoons forward and one in reserve. The company supporting arms were to follow when the objective had been taken. The chief difficulty facing the attacking party was the limited time available to complete the task. The hill would have to be captured between dusk and moonrise—a period of three hours—otherwise the company would be silhouetted on the open slopes of the feature. Deciding that better results could be achieved if the enemy was caught by surprise, the Company Commander refused the offer of artillery support.

At 7.30 p.m. the company left B Coy and advanced across the wadi towards Pt 184. As the platoons began to climb the slopes of a hillock not noticeable from B Coy, a single shot rang out. The platoons immediately fanned out and began to advance more quickly. No. 17 Platoon worked around to the left and No. 18 to the right, leaving No. 16 and Coy HQ to come up in the centre. The men were moving as silently as possible. The leading sections of 17 Platoon had just reached the plateau-like summit when the enemy opened fire. Two men fell, both mortally wounded. The other two platoons were in a similar position and could not get over the edge of the plateau. Both withdrew slightly to gain cover from the heavy machine-gun fire.

The enemy seemed to be firing on fixed lines, and No. 17 Platoon commander, Lt Buchanan, decided to try to stalk the enemy gunners. Taking several of his men, he circled the hill and went down into the fold which separated it from Pt 184. Here

the party was able to move around in comparative safety, although flares put up by the enemy had set fire to the scrub. The men stripped off their web equipment and boots and crawled over the ledge towards the source of the firing. Buchanan soon decided it would be a useless waste of lives to attempt to continue up the steep, bare approaches to the enemy posts. He ordered his men to fall back and return to the wadi, while he and his sergeant crawled back around the hill to the rest of his platoon. Captain Hobbs had come to a similar decision. Mortars were ranging on the company, and as the moon began to rise he gave the order to withdraw. No. 17 Platoon was the only one to suffer losses. Five men, two of whom were known to be badly wounded, were missing.

When he learned what had happened, Col Fountaine ordered Capt Hobbs to take up a position alongside B Coy in case the enemy attempted to counter-attack. Heavy artillery concentrations were laid on Pt 184 and the lower feature, partly to prevent a counter-attack and also to allow the missing men to withdraw in safety. Later that night two of them reached the lines and a third, Pte Barber¹⁵, arrived about 11 a.m. the following day. This soldier had remained behind to attend to the badly wounded men. After they had died he worked his way forward in the darkness and eventually found himself at the rear of the enemy positions on Pt 184. Instead of crawling back the way he had come he stayed to note enemy defences in the area, changing his own position to get a better view. The information he brought back was of great value to 21 Battalion which had been detailed to make the second assault on the feature.

After D Coy's return the front quietened down except for the drone of Allied aircraft passing overhead. Early the next morning, 25 March, Lt Piper set out to locate the Fighting French forces which were supposed to have linked up with B Coy during the night. After some difficulty they were located two miles away. Meanwhile, D Coy had returned to its former position and a party from 21 Battalion had made a reconnaissance of the approaches to Pt 184. Shortly before midday an operation order for the expected attack on the enemy line was received. The 21st Battalion was to capture Pt 184 (which overlooked the proposed start line) during the night, and at 4 p.m. on the following afternoon a 'blitz' attack, similar to those so successfully employed by the Germans in France and Belgium in 1940, would be staged. The full weight of the Desert Air Force was to be thrown in to help NZ Corps

and 1 Armoured Division crush the opposition and drive a wedge through to the coast. Fifth Brigade was to take over the battalion sector. Both New Zealand brigades would take part in the assault, backed by hundreds of tanks, guns, and planes. The 26th Battalion was to move into reserve and was unlikely to take an active part in the operation. Knowing this all ranks looked forward to watching the promised spectacle.

During the afternoon and evening the infantry positions along the front were interchanged. Fifth Brigade moved into the line. The 28th Battalion took over from 26 Battalion, which moved over to occupy the western half of 25 Battalion's sector; 23 Battalion came in on the right and 25 Battalion relieved a battalion of the Buffs Regiment on the left flank. After dark patrols went out with sappers to search for mines which might obstruct the tanks during the attack. Behind the lines there was considerable activity as tanks of 8 Armoured Brigade took cover behind ridges out of sight of enemy OPs. Farther back artillery regiments were being deployed across the front. Trucks were everywhere.

Then came the thunder of the guns as the artillery began firing in support of 21 Battalion's assault on Pt 184. The infantry attacked from the west and captured the feature. The noise of this battle had hardly died away before the tanks of 8 Armoured Brigade began to rumble back behind the shelter of the Roman Wall and wadis to the rear of Pt 201. Despite all this noise and movement enemy guns remained silent, and the troops spent a peaceful night on picket or huddled down in trenches out of the biting wind.

Early in the morning (26 March) enemy shelling and mortaring began again but quickly slackened off when Allied planes circled overhead. The front became ominously quiet. At 3.30 p.m. the tanks began to move from their hideouts towards the Roman Wall. Shortly afterwards the battalion withdrew to the vicinity of Pt 201 to allow 24 Battalion to form up on the start line. By the time the men reached their new position the enemy was shelling the area heavily and the Allied barrage had begun. By five o'clock the companies were dug in and until dusk had a grandstand view of the blitz attack. It was a magnificent sight. At the rear hundreds of guns were belching fire, while overhead flew a constant stream of fighters and bombers. In the distance through the haze of dust and smoke, long lines of infantry and tanks were slowly moving forward. Behind them came another wave of tanks and infantry.

Below the battalion tanks and motorised infantry of [1 Armoured Division](#) were making ready to follow. As darkness fell they disappeared from sight and only the noise of battle remained.

Early progress reports confirmed that the opening phases of the attack had been very successful. The western flank had been cleared and only one feature, Pt 209, remained in enemy hands on the eastern side of the valley. After moonrise [1 Armoured Division](#) exploited [NZ Corps'](#) success and advanced to the outskirts of [El Hamma](#). Throughout the night hundreds of prisoners, Germans and Italians, arrived from the front. They were still arriving early on the 27th when a warning order was received to be ready to move forward. Transport moved into the company areas. One driver was killed when C Coy was unexpectedly shelled by long-range enemy guns.

* * *

The battalion waited all day for further orders, and shortly before dusk moved forward four miles to bivouac near 23 Battalion's sector. [New Zealand Corps](#) was to continue its advance in the morning and join [1 Armoured Division](#) south of [El Hamma](#). Fifth Brigade was still engaged with the opposition on Pt 209 and was to remain behind to hand over the area to the Fighting French forces. It was believed that the enemy had again withdrawn in the face of the threat to his flank, and that the bulk of the [Mareth](#) force was already north of [Gabes](#) and [El Hamma](#).

The advance was resumed at eleven o'clock on 28 March, 6 Brigade Group following the Divisional Artillery and the armoured screen. The Corps, moving in desert formation, was following the road to [El Hamma](#). The tracks were very dusty and the route was strewn with abandoned and damaged enemy vehicles, guns, and equipment. After travelling eight miles the columns changed direction and turned east towards a high range of mountains, the [Djebel Halouga](#). As a result of a change of plan [NZ Corps](#) was now directed on [Gabes](#) and the coast, while [10 Corps](#) was to contain the enemy at [El Hamma](#). This meant that the New Zealanders would have to circle around the southern spurs of [Djebel Halouga](#) before continuing north towards their objective.

The going became much worse as the columns neared the mountains, with low

hills and deep wadis slowing down the rate of advance. During a halt for lunch 300 Italians marched in and surrendered to the battalion, after a skirmish with the Corps' advance guard. After a short delay while these prisoners were dealt with, the columns moved on again, following the line of black diamond pickets. Near the mountains [24 Battalion](#) was left behind to guard the flank. The rest of the brigade continued to move south-east across very difficult country. The 25th Battalion remained in a deep depression, the Wadi el Merteba, and 26 Battalion halted after it had rounded the southern spurs of the mountains. It was 5 p.m. by this time, and the companies dispersed along the crest of a high ridge where they found a number of good wells. Ahead the armoured screen was engaging elements of [15 Panzer Division](#).

At dusk the British tanks disengaged and withdrew to laager behind the infantry, who had taken up defensive positions. A, B, and C Coys were forward on the ridge, with D Coy guarding the left flank. Mortars and anti-tank guns were sited to give all-round defence. The enemy shelled the area for an hour and during this period two men were wounded. In the morning the enemy had disappeared and the advance was continued. The armoured screen moved off early but 6 Brigade was delayed until midday. Even then progress was painfully slow, traffic being halted by road blocks and minefields. Fifth Brigade, moving from Tebaga by another route, cut across the front and entered [Gabes](#), which was captured without difficulty. Since it was first to reach the town, this brigade took over 6 Brigade's position in the Corps' formation. However, it was held up until the bridge in the north-west end of the town had been replaced. A long line of tanks, guns, and vehicles stretched back down the roads and tracks to where 6 Brigade was vainly trying to get ahead.

After dusk 6 Brigade changed formation and moved in column of route along a lighted track towards [Gabes](#). After travelling seven miles the convoy halted and vehicles dispersed on the sides of the road. Only 14 miles had been covered all day. An early start was made on the 30th, and by 9.30 a.m. the battalion had reached a staging area about six miles along the [Gabes- El Hamma](#) road. The troops were not left in peace for long. By 4 p.m. they were in trucks moving back towards [Gabes](#) to link up with the divisional columns forming up to continue the pursuit next day.

The last day of the month was a beautiful sunny one and swimming parties were soon on the way to the coast. Because of heavy road traffic the brigade's move

to its reserve sector had been postponed until 5.30 p.m. When the battalion moved from the bivouac area across a ploughed airfield onto the road, a carrier was blown up on a mine. One man was killed and two wounded. Traffic on the roads was still heavy, and in the darkness the rifle companies took the wrong turning. The rest of the battalion reached the reserve area and was settled in by midnight. The missing companies did not turn up until the early hours of the morning. Later the same morning word was received that 6 Brigade would not be required to move for several days.

This marked the end of the battle to breach the [Mareth Line](#). The enemy had again been forced to abandon his main defences in the face of a threat to his flank. His losses in men and equipment had been heavy. Although the battalion had taken part in the initial assault on Tebaga and had led the brigade in the later stages of the breakthrough, its casualties had been light—ten killed and 42 wounded. In comparison with the number of prisoners taken and casualties inflicted on the enemy, the results of the action were very favourable. Under Col Fountaine's leadership the battalion was functioning very smoothly as a team.

¹ [Maj J. J. D. Sinclair](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Blenheim](#), 21 Dec 1908; school teacher; wounded 26 Apr 1943.

² [Cpl W. J. Pollock](#); [Dunedin](#); born [Dunedin](#), 29 Mar 1912; hairdresser.

³ [British Military Authority](#).

⁴ [Capt J. D. Aiken](#); born [NZ](#) 4 Oct 1916; storeman; died of wounds 24 Mar 1943.

⁵ Appointments on the eve of action were:

CO: [Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine](#)

2 i/c: [Maj E. E. Richards](#)

Adj: [Capt A. B. Kennedy](#)

QM: Capt F. W. Wilson

IO: Lt D. C. Piper

A Tk: Lt R. D. Westenra

Carriers: Lt F. A. Ross

Signals: Capt K. W. Hobbs

OC A Coy: Capt F. M. Ollivier

OC B Coy: Maj L. G. Smith

OC C Coy: Capt J. J. D. Sinclair

OC D Coy: Capt J. D. Aiken

OC HQ Coy: Maj H. G. McQuade

Support: Capt A. R. McKinlay

MO: Capt A. M. Rutherford

Padre: Rev: H. S. Scott

⁶ Capt T. R. M. Hobbs, MC; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 8 Jan 1908; company director; wounded 21 Mar 1943.

⁷ 2 Lt A. J. Marett, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin. 22 Mar 1916; carpenter; twice wounded

⁸ 2 Lt N. A. Hardie; Kaiapoi; born Christchurch, 7 Nov 1917; insurance salesman; wounded 22 Mar 1944.

⁹ Maj K. W. Hobbs, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jan 1917; clerk.

¹⁰ Maj I. H. Fletcher, MC; Waitara; born Auckland, 4 Jul 1916; medical practitioner; RMO 26 Bn Mar 1943–Nov 1944

¹¹ Lt-Col W. F. Titchener, MC and bar; born Dunedin, 14 Dec 1907; public accountant; CO 27 Bn ([Japan](#)) 1946; wounded 2 Nov 1942

¹² Sgt S. A. Carson; born [Palmerston North](#), 19 Jul 1919; labourer; died of wounds 24 Mar 1943

¹³ Lt L. J. Kearney, MC, MM; born [Akaroa](#), 30 Sep 1919; school teacher; twice wounded; accidentally killed 13 Sep 1951

¹⁴ Lt F. A. Ross; Hampden; born [Invercargill](#), 12 May 1908; motor driver

¹⁵ Cpl W. G. Barber, MM; born NZ 15 Jul 1915; shepherd; died of wounds 4 Jun 1944

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 10 – THE FALL OF TUNISIA

CHAPTER 10

The Fall of Tunisia

THE battalion remained in the [Gabes](#) area until 7 April. During the week drivers worked on their trucks and company commanders took their men on short route marches. Little else was done. Most of the men were showing the effects of the long spell in the desert. All were tanned and many had lost a considerable amount of weight; some were feeling the strain of long, tiring journeys, action after action, sleepless nights and the constant tension. All realised that the battle for North Africa was not yet over. The enemy had withdrawn to a defensive line based on the [Wadi Akarit](#) and the high hills west of it. This wadi, waterlogged for most of the year, was in itself a formidable obstacle, and hills covered the approaches to it. The 30th Corps, supported by the New Zealand artillery, was to attack this line on 6 April. The New Zealand Division, under command of [10 Corps](#) ([NZ Corps](#) had been disbanded), was to be prepared to exploit success.

The day before the attack took place D Coy was ordered to report to the CRE, Col [Hanson](#).¹ He was personally commanding a party of sappers detailed to clear two lanes through the enemy minefield and anti-tank ditch in 50 Division's sector at [Wadi Akarit](#). Early on the 6th the battalion was ordered to be ready to move, but 24 hours passed before the troops embussed and the Brigade Group set out in the wake of the Division along the road to [Gafsa](#). The enemy had by this time been forced out of his [Wadi Akarit](#) positions and the Division was continuing the pursuit. Progress was very slow for the tracks were in poor condition. Flight after flight of Allied aircraft droned overhead to harass the retreating Germans. Large groups of Italians were walking dejectedly back to prisoner-of-war cages.

It was dusk by the time the battalion reached the wadi and the minefield. In pitch-black darkness the drivers began to negotiate the narrow lanes and defiles which led through them. At 9.30 p.m. the convoy halted for the night. Twenty-eight miles had been covered in the day and the battalion was several miles north of the wadi. D Coy, which had watched the attack on the wadi, had rejoined the battalion en route.

The company had had an interesting experience. When the members of Col

Hanson's party reached [Wadi Akarit](#) about eight o'clock on the morning of the attack, they expected to find 50 Division through the minefield and well on the way to the objective. Such was not the case. In fact the Division appeared to be making no real progress. Enemy defensive fire was very heavy, but it seemed that the minefield was the real deterrent. After waiting an hour the sappers went to work and cut a walking lane through the minefield. One of the D Coy platoons then moved forward across the anti-tank ditch and took up a position on an escarpment beyond it. The rest of the company went to work with picks and shovels to help the sappers fill in the ditch. The forward platoon and the Crusader tanks with the party engaged the enemy and reduced the volume of fire on the area. The minefield was a particularly treacherous one, and it was after 2 p.m. before two lanes were completed. By this time the greater part of 50 Division was in the wadi, but what was left made full use of the lanes. Colonel Hanson in his report on this operation pays tribute to the co-operation and alertness of the D Coy men who, together with the tanks, made the dangerous task of the sappers much easier.

The pursuit was continued on the 8th, the battalions moving in nine-column formation along dusty tracks. Ahead the armoured screen and 5 Brigade were feeling their way forward, with the enemy withdrawing on contact. The Eighth Army was making a three-pronged drive, with its immediate objective the ports of [Sfax](#) and [Sousse](#). The 10th Corps, with 2 NZ Division on the left and 1 [Armoured Division](#) farther inland, was driving up the coastal road. Progress continued to be slow and by nightfall only 13 miles had been covered. A very early start was made on the 9th, but the columns soon met trouble in the form of a wide stretch of soft ground. Many of the lorries were stuck in it and had either to be dug out by the men or pulled out by carriers and bulldozers. Later the battalion crossed the [Mahares](#) railway line into better country. By 1.30 p.m. 34 miles had been covered before the brigade halted to investigate a report of an enemy pocket south-east of it. Not much was known about this pocket except that it included tanks and was about five miles away.

Colonel Fountaine was ordered to make the investigation. A strong patrol was formed under [Lt R. D. Westenra](#).² It was equipped with wireless and consisted of the Carrier and Mortar platoons, a troop of two-pounders, and two six-pounders. At first the enemy could not be found, although an Italian officer complete with batman and staff car was picked up. When it was nearly dusk two enemy tanks were seen

only 900 yards away. The crews were standing alongside and obviously had not noticed the approach of the patrol. Within five minutes the anti-tank guns were ready to fire. The first shot fell short, the second was nearer, and the third set one tank alight. The other was soon knocked out also. In the gathering darkness the Germans scattered and could not be found. Closer inspection of the tanks revealed them to be Mark IIIs, one of them a Special. The patrol returned to find that the battalion had not moved and the troops had settled down for the night.

The advance continued for the next four days through more heavily cultivated country. The trucks motored through fields of barley three to four feet high, across railway lines, through tiny villages, along creek beds, through acres of prickly cactus and seemingly endless groves of olive trees. One of these groves, containing about two million trees, was reputed to be the largest in the world. Everywhere flowers of every hue and many different varieties carpeted the fields in a riot of colour. Huge bunches were tied to the radiators of trucks and, with the olive branches thrown over the canopies for camouflage, gave the convoy a holiday appearance. On the 10th the battalion moved 40 miles. That night news was received of the capture of [Sfax](#). Slower progress was made on the 11th and 12th, the battalion covering only 24 miles.

On the 13th the rate of advance became much faster, and by mid-afternoon the Brigade Group had travelled 40 miles and was bivouacked only a mile south of [Sousse](#), which had been captured the day before. Three carriers, with Sgt [Pearce](#)³ in command, were sent out to nearby villages on patrol duty—a pleasant task as the local inhabitants gave the soldiers a warm welcome. After dusk the battalion moved again, this time through [Sousse](#) to a reserve area about twelve miles north of the town.

During the day leading elements of the Division had encountered stiffening resistance, and it was apparent that the [Eighth Army](#) was close to another enemy line, in country very suitable for defence. The wide plain through which the Division had been advancing ended in a series of hills and ridges rising to the west, leaving only a narrow coastal strip of flat ground following the main road to [Tunis](#). Farther inland a high range of mountains stretched across the front. When 5 Brigade, with armoured support, attempted to cross the plain towards the hills, it came under heavy fire from enemy positions on the high ground which commanded an excellent

view of all movement in the area. The greater part of the plain was under cultivation, with olive groves giving the only concealment. It was obvious that the hills would have to be cleared before the advance on [Tunis](#) could continue. At dusk 5 Brigade was dug in on the plain and the armour had withdrawn behind it.

After dusk on the 14th the battalion moved forward another seven miles. Next day it was ordered to occupy a sector on the right of 5 Brigade. This move was completed after dusk, the companies going forward in transport to occupy positions alongside [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#). The 25th Battalion moved in on the right. C Coy, on the left flank, straddled the [Enfidaville- Kairouan](#) road, and A Coy extended on the right as far as the [Sousse- Enfidaville](#) road. B Coy was in reserve in front of Battalion HQ. D Coy remained in the bivouac area. [Enfidaville](#), a small town on the main road to [Tunis](#) and in the centre of the plain, lay almost directly ahead of A Coy.

The supporting arms were brought forward and sited to cover the front. The ground was soft and fairly level, with long grass and olive trees all around. Every effort was made to camouflage the digging and all trucks were sent to a reserve area before dawn. No sound came from the enemy, but mosquitoes were causing a lot of trouble. Since dusk they had been swarming around in their hundreds, stopping all but the hardiest from sleeping. For practically the whole time the battalion was in the [Enfidaville](#) area the mosquitoes were troublesome. Nets were not available, and lack of sleep had an important bearing on the results of attacks and on the ability of the troops to withstand the constant strain.

Daylight on the 16th gave the troops a better idea of the ground ahead of them. Directly in front of the sector it sloped down to a wadi and then rose gently into a series of sharply defined ridges and spurs. Most prominent of these was the nearest one, a high, rocky spur known as [Takrouna](#). From this point the enemy had observation over the low ground falling away to the coast and across the area where the Division was deployed. About halfway to the ridges and slightly right of the battalion lay [Enfidaville](#).

At this stage it had been decided that the main thrust in [Tunisia](#) would be made on the northern sector where the British [First Army](#) was operating. The Eighth Army, which was to take part in the landings in [Sicily](#), was to be rested as much as possible and would not attempt a large-scale offensive. Nevertheless it was to exert as much

pressure as possible on the southern flank so that the enemy would be compelled to divide his forces. Plans to attack the high ground west and north-west of [Enfidaville](#) were drawn up. On the 10th Corps' front 50 Division was to take over the coastal sector, with the New Zealanders on its left and 4 Indian Division farther inland. Headquarters [30 Corps](#) was withdrawn from the battle to rest and reorganise.

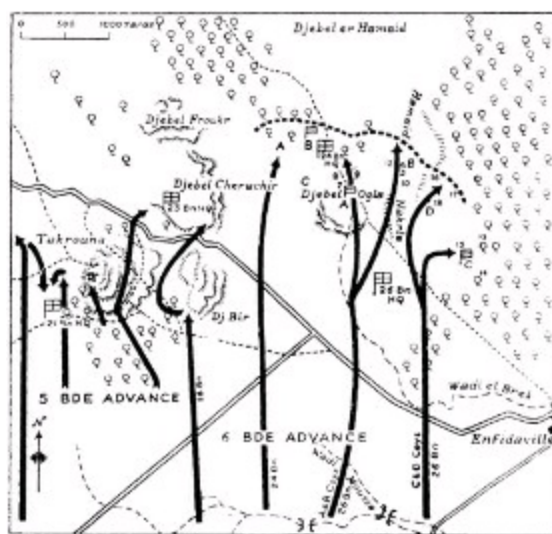
After dusk 201 Guards Brigade moved forward and took over the coastal sector. The 25th Battalion moved into reserve, and 5 Brigade extended to the left to allow 26 Battalion to take over part of the Maoris' sector. These moves were completed without enemy interference. C Coy remained close to the [Kairouan](#) road, with B Coy on its left and A Coy alongside the Maoris. Listening posts were set up some distance beyond the FDLs and reconnaissance patrols sent out. Battalion HQ and D Coy were established in wadis to the rear. The battalion was now deployed across an 1100-yard front, and from it [Takrouna](#) appeared to be much higher and more prominent. As the sector could be observed by the enemy, meals were brought forward during the hours of darkness.

For the next two days little of note occurred. The enemy shelled the [Kairouan](#) road at intervals and C Coy was subjected to some mortar fire. On two separate occasions a light truck or car ignored the sign 'Enemy Ahead' on the [Kairouan](#) road and continued blithely into [Enfidaville](#). One was greeted by a volley of shots, the other by silence. Neither came back. After dusk the slightest noise was sufficient to cause an enemy machine-gunner near [Enfidaville](#) to open fire. He soon became known as 'Itchy-fingered Joe'. On several occasions he forced reconnaissance patrols to take cover. These patrols, which went out each night, ventured over a thousand yards beyond the lines but made no contact with the enemy. They reported that a wide minefield extended across the front, with an anti-tank ditch and a deep wadi beyond it. After dark on the 17th a platoon from C Coy went forward with a party of sappers who made three crossings over the ditch and the wadi ([Wadi Moussa](#)). The latter, a natural tank obstacle, lay about 2000 yards from the FDLs.

Meanwhile, preparations to attack the [Enfidaville- Takrouna](#) line had been completed. The attack was to begin at 11 p.m. on 19 April. While the main thrust was being made by the New Zealanders, the divisions on both flanks were to conform with any gains made. Amongst the men there was a general impression

that the enemy would not make a determined stand and would soon try to get out of the country. Intelligence reports stated that his defences were of great depth and each vantage point strongly manned. Thickly-laid minefields and anti-tank ditches stretched across the flat and in places trees had been felled to improve fields of fire, leaving the stumps and trunks to block the passage of tanks. It was unlikely that the low ground would be strongly defended. Little was known about the enemy force in the hills, but elements of 90 Light Division had been identified in the area and it seemed probable the New Zealanders would meet both Germans and Italians.

Both infantry brigades had been given set tasks in the Divisional Commander's plan of attack. Fifth Brigade on the left was to capture **Takrouna** and neighbouring features, while 6 Brigade advanced across the flat past **Enfidaville** to the nearest



FIRST PHASE OF ENFIDAVILLE BATTLE, 19-22 APRIL 1943

First phase of **Enfidaville** battle, 19–22 April 1943

ridges. These ridges, Djebel Oula and Hamaid en Nakrla, were in reality spurs running down into the plain from the high hills in the north-west. Brigadier Gentry decided to commit 24 and 26 Battalions. The latter would advance on a 1500-yard front to the lower reaches of Djebel Oula and Hamaid en Nakrla. From these features the battalion was to exploit another 1000

yards, thus making a total advance of over four miles. The 24th Battalion on the left was to advance on the right of 5 Brigade and capture the higher reaches of Djebel Oula. The slopes of both objectives were covered with olive trees, but the crest of Hamaid en Nakrla was bare of vegetation except for some tussocky grass

and a few cactus bushes. A concrete water tank was plainly visible on the top of this spur.

On the 18th aerial photographs of the area were available, and officers and NCOs studied them while the CO explained his plan. The four rifle companies would all take part in the assault, with A and C Coys taking the main objective and B and D Coys doing the exploitation. In the advance B Coy would follow A on the left and D Coy would follow C on the right. When the leading companies had consolidated and the barrage had lifted, B and D Coys would pass through to carry out their task. A heavy artillery barrage would be fired in support of the attackers, who would move off from a taped start line a short distance south of [Wadi Moussa](#). The CO did not expect to meet opposition until after the men had crossed the [Enfidaville- Takrouna](#) road and were nearing the ridges. In this area was another anti-tank ditch and several enemy positions. The country was very broken, with numerous wadis and low ridges.

Communication during the advance was to be by wireless and signallers were to lay line to the companies as soon as they had consolidated. Personnel from the 'I' section were to guide the companies through the fields of wheat and fescue to the start line. To silence 'Itchy-fingered Joe' and other spandau posts in the locality, a company of Vickers gunners from 27 (MG) Battalion would fire in that direction during the initial stages of the advance. As usual the main problem was to get the supporting arms across and through the various obstacles so that they could reach the companies before dawn. To help the engineers construct lanes for the supporting arms, Scorpions were attached to the brigade, and 3 Royal Tank Regiment provided two troops of Crusader tanks for protection. Two platoons of machine-gunners ([No. 1 Coy, 27 \(MG\) Battalion](#)), and a troop of six-pounders (33 Anti-Tank Battery) came under command. Crossings over the first anti-tank ditch and the Wadi



Italian farmhouses occupied by troops on the outskirts of Castelfrentano

Italian farmhouses occupied by troops on the outskirts of Castelfrentano



Orsogna from near Castelfrentano

Orsogna from near Castelfrentano



Clearing up the camp after a flood in the Volturno area

Clearing up the camp after a flood in the Volturno area



Pasquale Road, used by the troops on 15 March at Cassino

Pasquale Road, used by the troops on 15 March at Cassino

Moussa had already been made and it was proposed to clear and light a lane through the minefield before the attack began. When the infantry signalled success the supporting arms were to move along this lane, cross the wadi, and follow a track made safe by sappers and the Scorpions and lit by the provosts. The other tanks would guard the open right flank. B Echelon and the transport were not to move until the infantry were firmly established.

Preparations for the attack were continued during the 19th. As soon as it was dark Sgt [Street](#),⁴ of the 'I' section, led a party of sappers and divisional provosts through the minefield. The sappers went to work with their detectors and began clearing the lane, the provosts marking its limits with lighted standards. It was a difficult and dangerous task in the darkness. The fields of wheat and oats were more than waist high and were thickly sown with all types of mines, many of them booby-trapped. The lane was long and tortuous, but it was completed without casualties to men or vehicles. At the start line Lt Piper and some of his men were helping the brigade 'I' section tape the line. Unfortunately there was insufficient tape or standards to complete the job, and C Coy's section was not marked.

Back in the battalion sector the men had a hot meal and were waiting for the order to move forward. The night was perfect. The sky was cloudless, and when the moon rose it illuminated the landscape almost like daylight. The air was cool, almost chilly. Except for the mosquitoes and an occasional burst of spandau fire, no sound disturbed the eerie stillness. About ten o'clock the companies began to move

through the corn and the minefield to the start line. Both the companies had some difficulty locating it, A Coy because its guide had failed to turn up and C Coy because its section was not taped. Despite this all were in position before the barrage began. Two Germans were picked up in the long grass not far from the FDLs.

Promptly at eleven o'clock the first salvo of shells crashed down some distance ahead and the Vickers began their vicious- sounding rat-tat-tat. A and C Coys moved off and were followed shortly afterwards by Battalion HQ and B and D Coys.⁵ In little more than an hour both objectives had been taken, and B and D Coys were only waiting for the barrage to lift so that they could complete their tasks. Scarcely any opposition had been encountered. A number of trenches were found beyond the second anti-tank ditch but the Italians in them seemed dazed and offered no fight. Dust and smoke blotted out the moon and reduced visibility, but good formation had been retained throughout and the leading platoons had no difficulty keeping up with the barrage. A Coy had the bad luck to be sandwiched between the barrage and the shells of a 25-pounder firing short. Near the [Takrouna](#) road 11 Platoon saw a dark object approaching and, believing it to be a staff car, opened fire. A terrified bullock, apparently unharmed, quickly turned and fled in the direction of the hills.

Deep trenches, recently vacated, were found on both objectives, and while the barrage remained stationary some of the men occupied them. The rest sheltered in folds in the ground. Enemy reaction to the advance had been almost negligible. A Coy, which had been lightly shelled, was more concerned about the short-firing 25-pounder. When the barrage lifted two platoons of this company went forward another 400 yards and took up a position among some olive trees. Captain Ollivier set up his headquarters on the crest of Djebel Ogla, with the reserve platoon nearby. C Coy swung round to secure the open right flank. Captain Sinclair sited his forward platoons in olive groves on the eastern slopes of Hamaid en Nakrla, with 13 Platoon facing east and north-east and 14 Platoon facing south and south-east. Company HQ was set up at the rear in some empty weapon pits, while 15 Platoon remained on the high ground so that it could command a better field of fire. B and D Coys moved through to take up positions along the line of the final objective. No opposition was encountered, and at 1 a.m. all four companies were busy digging holes in the hard limestone. Some of the men dodged this task by reoccupying the enemy's narrow but deep slit trenches.

Twenty minutes later the first of the supporting arms reached Battalion HQ, which had been set up in narrow, winding Wadi el Brek, at the base of Djebel Ogla. Within an hour the rest of the supporting arms had arrived and most of them were on the way to the companies. The Carrier Platoon and the tanks remained on the flat to patrol the right flank. Enemy shelling had become quite heavy, but it was not sufficient to stop signallers from laying lines to each company. Captains Ollivier and Sinclair had both reported personally to Col Fountaine, giving details of their company and platoon dispositions. Captain Ollivier reported that his company had suffered light casualties, the most serious being the CSM, WO II Mangos, who had been badly wounded in the leg when he moved too close to the barrage. Captain Sinclair brought with him five Germans whom he and his runner had captured on the way to Battalion HQ.

Long before daylight the battalion had consolidated in its new position. Colonel Fountaine had good reason to be satisfied with the night's work. The rifle companies were all in position and contact had been made with [24 Battalion](#) on the left. Wireless communication with the companies and with Brigade HQ had functioned satisfactorily during the advance and the companies were now linked by phone. The sappers had done a good job in clearing the lane through to Battalion HQ so quickly. Subsequently this lane was used for the supporting arms of [24 Battalion](#), which were then guided to that sector. The latter's No. 11 set had broken down during the advance, and from 3 a.m. all messages to Brigade HQ were relayed through the [26 Battalion](#) set. Shortly before dawn a hot meal and blankets were brought forward.

At 5 a.m. the enemy retaliated. For an hour shells and bombs of all sizes exploded amongst the olive groves and on the barren slopes where B and D Coys were deployed. The concentrations were so heavy that at one time it was thought the enemy was preparing to counter-attack. Nothing happened and the shelling eased off until later in the morning, when the sector was again plastered for a lengthy period. Fortunately the troops were well dug in and casualties were suffered only as the result of a direct hit.

On the flat the British tanks were also being heavily shelled. Three, apparently disabled by mines, were not moving. The rest separated into two groups, one moving along the [Takrouna](#) road and the other to the lower slopes of Djebel Ogla.

On the right flank a patrol from C Coy entered [Enfidaville](#), and later 201 Guards Brigade linked up with the company. On the other flank the situation was not as good. Fifth Brigade had encountered very strong opposition at [Takrouna](#) and on the lower ground to the right of it. At dawn [23 Battalion](#) was holding a position north of the [Takrouna](#) road on the southern slopes of Djebel Cherachir and a small party was established on part of the [Takrouna](#) feature. Heavy losses had been suffered by both sides.

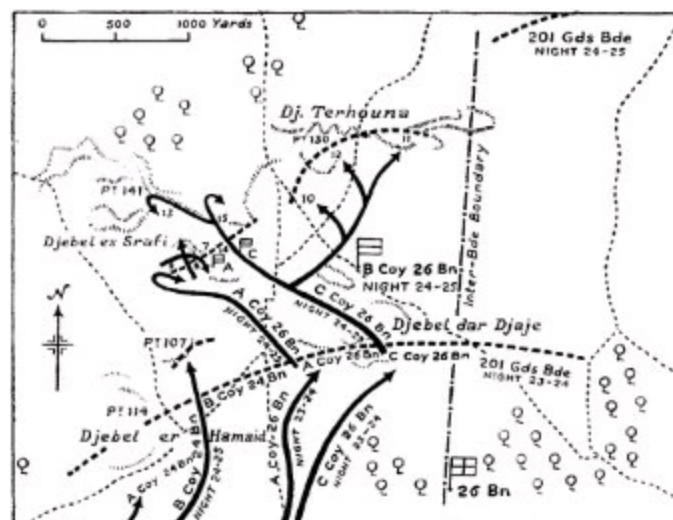
For the next three days there was stalemate on the 6 Brigade front. Fifth Brigade cleared [Takrouna](#) and was relieved by elements of 51 (Highland) Division. On the 21st Brig Gentry relinquished his command to return to New Zealand as Deputy Chief of the General Staff, and Brig [Parkinson](#)⁶ took over. Both paid short visits to Battalion HQ and the companies during the day. It was unsafe to stay long for enemy shelling and mortaring was almost continuous—some consider it the heaviest and most concentrated of the campaign. The troops were pinned to their trenches for most of the day and often far into the night. Despite its severity casualties were relatively light, although many of the men were badly shaken. Seven were wounded on the 19th and 20th, and on the 22nd D Coy reported two men killed and four wounded. During a period of very heavy shelling the same day a tank officer with B Coy was wounded. Corporal Welsh⁷ left his trench to attend to him. Disregarding the officer's order to go back, Welsh bandaged him and, with shells exploding all around, assisted him to the RAP.

Corporal Welsh's action put new heart into the men, who not only had to stand up to the enemy fire but also had to contend with some very troublesome mosquitoes. Several men were evacuated with eyes completely closed by bites. Many others, while not as badly affected, were unable to sleep for the pain and irritation of their bites. The forward troops kept constant watch for any enemy movement in the hills and ridges ahead. Whenever anything was sighted a report was sent back and artillery, tank, or mortar fire directed on it. By the 23rd enemy fire from some of these points had slackened off or had ceased altogether. Allied planes made constant attacks, and while they were around the enemy's guns remained silent. An aircraft recognition signal in the form of a letter 'T' was placed on the reverse slope of the ridge ahead of B Coy.

Hot meals were brought forward during darkness. Because of the shelling only

small parties were permitted to go back for meals at one time. The bullock seen by B Coy during the attack was found out in front of the sector by two men from C Coy. It had been killed by a shell splinter. During a lull in the shelling a hind-quarter was cut off and eaten with some measure of satisfaction.

Reconnaissance patrols were sent out each night, but although they probed deep into enemy territory they failed to make contact with his forces. The battalions were then ordered to move forward to the next line of ridges, 24 Battalion to the Djebel Hamaid and 26 Battalion to the Djebel dar Djaje. The 201st Guards Brigade was to conform on the right flank. To the battalion this represented an advance of about 2000 yards, and the Colonel decided to send A and C Coys together with their supporting arms. Everything went according to plan. At 10 p.m. on the 23rd the two companies set out down the forward



SECOND PHASE OF ENFIDAVILLE BATTLE, 23-26 APRIL

Second phase of Enfidaville battle, 23–26 April

slope with the supporting arms and signalmen following closely behind. Within an hour both companies were digging in on the objective. Contact had been made with 24 Battalion and by morning with the Guards Brigade. To shorten communications Col Fountaine moved his headquarters to an olive grove on the forward slope of Hamaid en Nakrla.

Tenth Corps was trying to increase its hold in the high ground by a series of limited advances, and during the 24th Brig Parkinson, and in turn Col Fountaine, received orders for a second night advance. Only 26 Battalion was to move, the

objectives being [Djebel Terhouna](#) and [Djebel Srafi](#), two ridges lying north and north-west of the existing FDLs. To preserve the continuity of the line, [B Coy 24 Battalion](#) was to occupy Pt 107 south of Srafi. After both objectives had been captured the Guards Brigade would again conform on the right flank.

Both features were visible from A Coy's sector. Srafi was a barren ridge rising to the north-east towards Terhouna and about 1500 yards half-left of the FDLs. Beyond Srafi, divided by a low saddle, lay Pt 141. No plans for the capture of this hill had been made, but [24 Battalion](#) was to maintain harassing fire on it if opposition was encountered on Srafi. Terhouna was an equally barren feature on the right of Srafi and about 1800 yards away. A wide wadi devoid of cover, and under observation from high ridges to the north and north-west, lay between the FDLs and the two objectives.

The Colonel planned to attack using A and B Coys. Both were to form up on Djaje and at 10 p.m. move down into the wadi, A Coy to Srafi and B Coy to Terhouna. Linesmen and supporting arms were to follow the companies as on the previous night. The support was to be the same—a section of mortars and a troop of anti-tank guns, with machine-gunners covering the right flank. Battalion HQ and D Coy would also move forward after dusk and dig in along the reverse slope of Djaje. All four rifle companies were at this stage numerically weak, although B Echelon had been combed for replacements. Few of the platoons contained more than 15 men and all were feeling the strain of the long campaign, particularly the lack of sleep and the heavy shelling of the past few days.

Although it was finally decided that the attack should be a silent one, some doubt was expressed at Battalion HQ and Brigade HQ as to whether this was wise. The Division was now very close to the enemy gunline and further advances would probably meet stiffer resistance. Captain Ollivier reported that enemy troops had been sighted on Srafi and Pt 141 early in the morning, and he pressed for artillery support. At length it was decided to arrange for support and leave the question of using it until the latest 'I' report was received from Divisional HQ. This report stated that an enemy line ran from Pt 141 along the crest of Srafi, with a strongpoint on the northern end of the objective. Enemy troops had been seen on both features during the day but doubt was expressed whether they were still there. Eventually it was decided that the attack should be a silent one.

At ten o'clock the two companies moved silently down the ridge into the wadi. At the bottom they followed a rough cart track for about 500 yards before parting, A Coy to the left towards Srafi and B Coy half-right towards Terhouna. It was 10.20 p.m. and the silence was unbroken. On the right B Coy began to climb the spurs which ran up into the plateau-like objective. Nos. 11 and 12 Platoons were in the lead, with Coy HQ and 10 Platoon following, the whole company still travelling in column of route. Suddenly enemy machine guns and mortars opened fire. Most of this fire was directed on the wadi and the approaches to the spurs. No. 10 Platoon and Coy HQ, which were most affected, moved hurriedly to cover and dug in along the lower end of the spurs. Major Smith, who was travelling with the forward platoons, ordered No. 12 to take cover while he led No. 11 into position.

In extended formation this platoon continued up one of the spurs to the crest of the feature. Several times heavy mortaring forced it to take cover, but at length it reached its position on the right of Pt 130 where the troops occupied abandoned enemy trenches. Major Smith returned to 12 Platoon, which was still under cover halfway down another spur. The enemy mortaring had increased considerably and the wadi and lower reaches of the spurs were being swept by spandau fire. Some of this fire was coming from the general direction of Srafi, and the Company Commander decided to find out more of what was happening there before taking 12 Platoon forward on the left flank. The CSM, WO II Lock, who had been left in charge of Coy HQ, could tell him little. Battalion HQ had received no message from A Coy for some time. It was long after midnight by this time and B Coy HQ was being heavily mortared. Major Smith, the only casualty, was mortally wounded.

The CSM took over. His main worry was to get the Company Commander back to the RAP and locate the supporting arms. He went forward and told the two nearest platoon commanders what had happened. As soon as Lt Airey,⁸ from 10 Platoon, arrived to take over the company, the CSM left to guide the stretcher-bearers to Battalion HQ and the RAP. The small party safely crossed the bullet-swept wadi, and after reporting to Battalion HQ Sergeant-Major Lock found the supporting arms. The route followed by B Coy in its advance was under very heavy fire at this juncture, but the CSM, with his uncanny sense of direction, found an alternative and safer route. The mortars and anti-tank guns were sited on the spurs and the

machine-gunners took up positions to cover both flanks. Meanwhile, Lt Findlay⁹ had moved 12 Platoon forward on the left flank and Coy HQ had withdrawn to the shelter of a small wadi, not far from where Lt Ross was with his carriers.

By daylight the company had consolidated on its objective. No. 11 Platoon was well forward on the right flank with No. 12 on its left rear. No. 10 Platoon had also moved forward and, being closer to Srafi, was under heavy fire most of the time. The position was by no means secure. Lieutenant Airey at Coy HQ was unaware of the location of the forward platoons and knew that it was impossible for 40 men adequately to defend a 1000-yard front. The whole of the objective was under observation from high ground on the flanks and ridges north-west of it. Fortunately, on the immediate front the plateau dropped away sharply to a cliff face and there was little likelihood of a counter-attack from that direction. The enemy's fire had not slackened off, and although the company was not suffering casualties, movement was practically impossible. Many of the men had been able to occupy enemy trenches which they camouflaged as best they could. Small-arms fire on the left flank indicated that the opposition on Srafi had not been quelled.

This was indeed true. After branching off to the left A Coy had continued on towards Srafi. Nos. 7 and 9 Platoons were in the lead and were making for the south-western end of the objective with the intention of working their way north along it. Both platoons reached the ridge without meeting opposition. They deployed and began to work their way along it. Before they had gone far they ran into intense small-arms and machine-gun fire, some of it from positions close at hand. No. 9 Platoon charged two of these posts and took several prisoners, but at length were forced, together with 7 Platoon, to retire to the reverse slope. Company HQ and 8 Platoon following had also gone to ground on the reverse slope not far from the others.

The volume of enemy fire increased rapidly, with the machine-gun posts on high ground on the right firing along the reverse slope and the wadi. Mortars ranged on the platoons, which were unable to dig in. Already one platoon commander had been killed, and the fire was too heavy to permit either attack or withdrawal. For a long while the company was pinned down. Captain Ollivier had decided that help would be needed to capture Srafi as it was evidently strongly held. As soon as the enemy

fire permitted he gave the order to withdraw. A runner was sent to find 7 and 9 Platoons and inform them of the decision. The forward platoons, out of touch with Coy HQ, had reached a similar decision and were already on the move.

It was about 2 a.m. when Capt Ollivier reached Battalion HQ and told the Colonel what had happened. Company HQ and 8 Platoon were then safely back at the start point, but the other platoons were missing. The CO decided that another attempt must be made to capture the feature, this time with a stronger infantry party and artillery and mortar support. Captain Sinclair was called to Battalion HQ and plans for a two-company assault quickly made. Both companies were to assemble in the wadi and at 3 a.m. make a frontal attack on the ridge. The assault was postponed half an hour to permit better co-ordination of mortar and artillery support. Two sections of 26 Battalion mortars and one of 24 Battalion were to assemble in B Coy 24 Battalion's sector and fire 40 rounds apiece on Srafi and twenty on Pt 141. Artillery concentrations were to be laid on Pt 141 and the ridges to the north-west, where much of the enemy artillery was located. While this was being arranged news was received of Maj Smith's death. Sergeant Newall,¹⁰ 7 Platoon's commander, arrived at Battalion HQ and reported that the missing A Coy platoons were down in the wadi awaiting further orders.

At 3.15 a.m. the artillery opened fire on the enemy batteries. In the bullet-swept wadi the two companies formed up, C Coy on the right. The mortar concentrations were fired, and as soon as they shifted to Pt 141 the order was given to advance. Guided by Cpl Munro¹¹ of A Coy, C Coy moved forward towards the eastern end of the objective. No. 15 Platoon (Lt R. A. Boyle) right and 13 Platoon (Lt G. J. Thomas¹²) left were leading, with 14 Platoon (Lt A. J. Fraser) and Coy HQ following close behind. On the left A Coy was advancing in the same formation as before. Neither company commander had had time to give his men more than a brief outline of the task ahead.

Hostile mortar and machine-gun fire became steadily heavier as the troops approached their objective. Even at this stage the enemy was mortaring the crest of Srafi where his own troops were established. The forward platoons of C Coy concentrated on two spurs running up into the main ridge, while the reserve platoon covered the ground in between. Contact was made with the enemy and fighting soon became very severe. Italian troops, well dug in and plentifully supplied with

automatic weapons and grenades, fought well, but the New Zealanders, firing from the hip, pressed forward. One after another the enemy posts were silenced with grenades and bayonets. There was no suggestion of a charge for each line of weapon pits was thought to be the last. Contact was lost with A Coy, which was also heavily engaged.

The closeness of the fighting caused the platoons to become scattered and the assault developed into a series of section and individual actions. The deeds of Pte Carter ¹³ and L-Cpl Jameson ¹⁴ may be taken as representative of the fighting and led Capt Sinclair to comment: 'In this action the credit must go to platoon commanders, section leaders, and individual soldiers. Information was scanty and unreliable—the time which would shield our movements was short—all ranks fought with courage, determination and intelligence—most of the fighting consisted of platoon and section attacks against machine-gun posts. These posts were annihilated.'

Private Carter was a member of the left-hand section of C Coy, and when machine-gun fire from the flank wounded his section leader and endangered the rest of the company, he led the remaining four men in a bayonet charge. In rapid succession three machine-gun posts were put out of action. In a similar situation L-Cpl Jameson, of A Coy, charged a strong machine-gun post on his own initiative with rifle and bayonet. Although mortally wounded, he silenced it.

On the crest of Srafi Lieutenants Thomas and Boyle, both of whom had only a vague impression of what was the objective, decided they had not gone far enough and set out towards Pt 141. Boyle was wounded soon afterwards and Sgt Cameron ¹⁵ took over. Close fighting continued as the two platoons moved over the crest into the saddle which divided the two features. No. 15 Platoon went astray in the darkness but No. 13 continued on to the right of Pt 141. After some severe fighting the remaining Italians were induced to surrender. By this time the platoon had become very scattered and Lt Thomas had only a sergeant and two privates with him. Hostile fire was still coming from the reverse side of Pt 141 so Thomas decided to continue. The prisoners were sent back towards Srafi unescorted, it being expected that 14 Platoon following would round them up. The four men set off to clear the slope, but on looking back Thomas noticed that the prisoners had returned

to their posts again. The party was now caught between two fires and one of the privates was wounded. The four made a dash for Srafi, and all safely recrossed the saddle between Srafi and Pt 141.

Meanwhile No. 15 Platoon, although separated from Lt Thomas's party, had also continued down into the saddle and encountered heavy opposition. What happened is best described by one of the soldiers who took part. An extract from his diary reads:

Anzac Day—Easter Sunday—we raced across a bullet-swept gully and up onto the first ridge—heavy mortaring—literally a withering hail of MG fire—heavy casualties. Enemy calling out to us in English ... many taunting remarks ... 'Come and get us Kiwi!' ... 'We're coming you bastards!' ... Many unlocated MG posts ceased fire as we approached only to recommence firing when we had passed. More casualties from this unknown fire that was shooting men from behind. Subsequently dealt with by reserve platoon. Enemy defences in some depth. Penetrated outer ring and were at close quarters. Bitter hand-to-hand fighting ... shooting at point-blank range ... grenades ... even bayonet fighting occasionally in evidence. Fired point-blank at an officer who stood up in his trench to throw a grenade at me. Only two of us left in the section ... isolated from the rest ... temporarily dazed by another grenade which burst a short distance away ... German mortar stonk on the area ... on his own troops too ... other bloke is wounded. Another MG post suddenly opened fire quite close to us ... bullets began to spatter viciously ... preparing to toss grenades at two Italians who appeared from nowhere ... blinding flash ... a soaring sensation ... and a hard jolt ... came to ... Platoon sergeant (J. H. A. Cameron) ran over ... looked a mess ... half my clothes blown off ... a flare shot up ... we could see excited Italians down at the bottom of the hill ... still surrounded ... enemy yelling on us to surrender. We remained perfectly still. After a while decided to make a break for it ... enemy ran up the hill after us, yelling and screaming as they came ... stick bombs exploded behind us ... my leg is broken ... Cameron helps me on ... we get there ... only four of platoon left ... at wounded collecting post...

The enemy was bringing increasingly heavy fire on the crest of the ridge and the reverse slope, not so much from machine-guns as from mortars and field guns. Captain Sinclair withdrew his men to the reverse slope and, with Capt Ollivier, tried to form a line of defence. A Coy had had a similar experience to C Coy. The western

end of the ridge was a maze of enemy-occupied trenches. The three platoons were heavily engaged and advanced in the face of heavy small-arms fire. Lieutenant Hansen,¹⁶ the only platoon officer in the company, was wounded when charging an enemy post early in the attack. He refused to be evacuated and led his men forward until the objective had been taken and the company had gained control of the crest of the ridge.

It was almost daylight when the fighting ceased. The two company commanders formed a combined headquarters in a central position and the men began digging in on either side. It was impossible to extend along the length of the ridge. Heavy losses had been suffered and a quick muster revealed that fewer than seventy men remained in the two companies. Some of these were suffering from slight wounds or from blast. No supporting arms had arrived, but the party was grimly determined to hold on until help came. At daylight the enemy counter-attacked. Leaving their half-finished trenches, the combined force manned the brow of the ridge and fought off the enemy. As the Italians withdrew they came under fire from Germans on Pt 141. Back they came onto Srafi, and once again the concentrated small-arms fire of the defenders drove them back. The Italians suffered heavily and eventually withdrew. A few managed to reach some weapon pits on the highest point of the ridge.

These pits dominated the companies' positions and it was essential they should be cleared. Sergeant Newall moved 7 Platoon to a position about 50 yards west of the enemy. Although neither party had direct observation of the other, the platoon was able to prevent the enemy taking advantage of his higher position. This quick appreciation saved the two companies many casualties. Later the platoon was able to pick off any of the enemy who attempted to fire from this point. On the other side of the enemy post Pte Dickson¹⁷ was able to effect the same result by other means. He went forward and deliberately showed himself. As two Italians rose to shoot him, he opened fire with his Bren gun and shot them instead. Continuing this process he enabled Sgt Newall's party on the western side to pick off more of the enemy, until at length the post was silenced.

By 7 a.m. the troops had completed digging in but were still without support. The No. 18 sets were not working well, but some time before a message had been passed to Battalion HQ asking for tank support. The Adjutant wirelessed back,

“Brewers” (tanks) on the way.’ A runner was sent back to guide the supporting arms through and arrange some means to evacuate the wounded. With daylight came full realisation of the importance of Srafi to the enemy. Not only did it give excellent observation of the British sector to the south-west, but it also gave an equally good view of enemy positions to the west and north-west. For this reason it was expected that the enemy would make every effort to recapture the position.

The ridge and the wadi behind it were under heavy shell and mortar fire which pinned down the weary troops. By eight o'clock the fire had increased to such a pitch that everyone thought another counter-attack was imminent. The tanks had not arrived so another message, more urgent than the last, was wirelessed to Battalion HQ. Back came the reply, “Brewers” haven't got wings.’ This was too much for those waiting anxiously on the ridge, who retorted, ‘If “Brewers” haven't we may soon have.’ An hour later the first tank rumbled into the wadi, followed soon after by several others. A carrier and a jeep raced across the wadi and, despite the heavy shelling, reached the ridge in safety. The carrier was loaded with ammunition, which relieved any worries on that score, and both vehicles were used to carry out wounded. The men watched anxiously as the two drivers, Lt Ross and Mr. Gray of the [YMCA](#), recrossed the wadi, again luckily missing the exploding shells.

Although the tanks reached the ridge at nine o'clock, they did not attempt to cross over onto the forward slope until midday. In the interim they drew heavy fire on the hapless infantry, who nevertheless derived a sense of security from their presence. Most of the wounded had still to be evacuated, and this remained a difficult problem throughout the day. Almost invariably the wadi was under very heavy fire, but Mr. Gray came forward several times in his jeep bringing comforts to the men and carrying back stretcher cases. Quite a few of the wounded, including some Italians, were lying out on the forward slope and down on the saddle. Snipers blocked every attempt to get these men back to safety, except on one occasion when Mr. Gray and a medical orderly crawled forward with a stretcher and dragged back a badly wounded man. Some of the walking wounded, seeking to avoid going through the wadi, moved south along the lower reaches of the ridge but were mistaken for enemy troops by [24 Battalion](#) and fired on. One man was killed and two others received further wounds before the mistake was discovered.

Later, when three tanks moved over the ridge, the remnants of 13 and 14

Platoons accompanied them. Dugouts in the locality were examined, but no trace of the enemy was found apart from casualties. Enemy snipers were quiet, but hostile shelling continued unabated as all ranks lent a hand to carry back the dead and wounded of both sides. The tanks continued on and later returned to report that Pt 141 was clear of the enemy. The two company commanders decided that they did not have enough men to hold both features and accordingly did not move forward. Machine-gun fire from Pt 141 indicated that the enemy was still in possession of the feature and had remained hidden in his deep trenches while the tanks made their sweep. At 2.15 p.m. the CO informed the Brigade Commander that only Srafi could be held with any degree of safety.

On the right flank on Terhouna the situation was largely unchanged. Chiefly due to the efforts of Sgt Welsh and WO II Lock, contact had been made with the three platoons and details of their location relayed to Battalion HQ. Throughout the day the enemy had continued to shell, mortar, and machine-gun the barren plateau and the approaches to it almost without a break. Early in the morning Welsh arrived at Coy HQ with news of No. 11 Platoon, which was in a very exposed position. Several times during the day he crossed and recrossed the open ground to report enemy gun positions and maintain contact. The CSM set out to locate the other platoons. He ran into heavy machine-gun fire which forced him to return. Lieutenant Ross arrived at B Coy HQ in a carrier and the two went forward, escaping by a miracle it seemed the concentration of enemy fire to which the company sector was being subjected. Contact was made with both platoons, which were well dug in and suffering no casualties. Subsequently Lt Ross crossed the open slope in his carrier many times, once carrying a hot meal forward. Captain [Hunter](#)¹⁸ took over command of B Coy and Lt Airey returned to 10 Platoon. At the end of the day no more casualties had been suffered.

By dusk the general situation had improved. Mortars, machine guns, and anti-tank guns were forward with all companies. On the right flank 201 Guards Brigade had moved forward to conform with B Coy's position, although there was a fairly wide gap between them and the New Zealanders. Signallers had laid lines to Srafi and Terhouna but found it difficult to maintain communications because of the heavy shelling of the wadi. Led by Cpl [Menzies](#),¹⁹ the linesmen spent many hours ranging up and down repairing breaks in the line. It was dangerous work and casualties were

suffered. Battalion HQ had not escaped the attention of the enemy gunners and the rear areas were often shelled. The Srafi casualties were all safely evacuated.

About 7 p.m. enemy shelling showed signs of easing, but there was no rest for the weary troops holding Srafi. Strong pickets had to be maintained, which meant that nearly everyone spent a sleepless night. The mosquitoes came at dusk as usual. Rations were sent forward from Battalion HQ and delivered without incident, except that C Coy's ration truck went astray and was not found until the early hours of the morning. To discourage the enemy from forming up for another counter-attack, three artillery concentrations were fired on Pt 141. The line was strengthened by the arrival of 18 Platoon. Commanded by Capt [Molineaux](#),²⁰ it was sent forward to plug the gap between B and C Coys. No. 10 Platoon was then sent around on the right flank and dug in between the Guards Brigade and 11 Platoon.

Hot meals were sent forward before dawn, and at daybreak the 'hate' session began anew. It ceased within an hour, to recommence at intervals during the day. It was noticeable that whenever Allied aircraft appeared the enemy guns were silent. In comparison with the previous day, 26 April was uneventful. [General Freyberg](#) and the Brigade Commander paid visits to Battalion HQ to discuss the situation with Col Fountaine. Late in the afternoon Brig Parkinson personally delivered the very welcome order that 6 Brigade would be relieved at dusk by elements of 56 London Division. A battalion of the Queen's Regiment would be taking over the battalion's sector.

When the time came for the relief to begin, the movement of transport attracted the attention of enemy gunners who shelled and mortared Srafi and the approaches to it. In a short time four men were killed and seven wounded. Captains Sinclair and Ollivier both suffered concussion but recovered sufficiently to hand over the sector to the British troops and lead the remnants of their companies to the waiting transport.

As far as the battalion was concerned, this was the end of the fighting in [Tunisia](#). The past seven days, and in particular the last two, had been harrowing. The severity of the fighting on Srafi can be gauged from the casualties suffered—eleven killed and 26 wounded, more than a third of the number taking part. Casualties for the seven days totalled 70, including 23 killed. When the [Mareth Line](#) had been captured all ranks had thought that enemy resistance in North Africa would

collapse, and such losses as were suffered around [Enfidaville](#) had not been expected.

¹ [Brig F. M. H. Hanson](#), DSO and bar, OBE, MM, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Levin](#), 1896; resident engineer Main Highways Board; [Wellington](#) Regt in First World War; commanded [7 Fd Coy, NZ Engineers](#), Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, [2 NZEF](#), 1943–46; wounded three times; Deputy Commissioner of Works, [Wellington](#).

² [Lt R. D. Westenra](#), m.i.d.; [Dunsandel](#); born [Christchurch](#), 3 Dec 1912; horse trainer.

³ [Sgt A. M. Pearce](#); [Morton Mains](#), Southland; born [Winton](#), 26 Aug 1913; lorry driver; wounded 3 Nov 1942.

⁴ [Lt R. T. Street](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Seddonville](#), 22 Aug 1910; school teacher; wounded 22 Jul 1944.

⁵ Appointments on the eve of action were:

CO: [Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine](#)

2 i/c: [Maj E. E. Richards](#)

Adjt: [Capt A. B. Kennedy](#)

QM: [Capt F. W. Wilson](#)

IO: [Lt D. C. Piper](#)

A Tk: [Lt R. D. Westenra](#)

Carriers: [Lt F. A. Ross](#)

Padre: [Rev. H. S. Scott](#)

OC A Coy: [Capt F. M. Ollivier](#)

OC B Coy: [Maj L. G. Smith](#)

OC C Coy: [Capt J. J. D. Sinclair](#)

OC D Coy: Capt K. W. Hobbs

OC HQ Coy: Maj H. G. McQuade

Support: Capt A. R. McKinlay

MO: Capt I. H. Fletcher

⁶ Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Christchurch; born Wellington, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO 4 Fd Regt Jan 1940–Aug 1941 commanded 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; 6 Bde Apr 1943–Jun 1944; commanded 2 NZ Div (Cassino), 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div, Jun–Aug 1944; commanded 6 Bde, Aug 1944–Jun 1945; commanded NZ Troops in Egypt and NZ Maadi Camp, Jul–Nov 1945; Quartermaster-General, Army HQ, Jan–Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1946–49; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

⁷ 2 Lt C. W. Welsh, MM; born Invercargill, 31 Mar 1915; farmer; killed in action 22 Mar 1944.

⁸ Capt N. W. Airey; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Dec 1904; salesman.

⁹ Capt C. Findlay; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 8 Mar 1917; clerk.

¹⁰ Lt P. B. Newall, MM; Christchurch; born NZ 23 May 1917; builder's labourer; wounded 20 Dec 1944.

¹¹ Cpl I. F. Munro; born Dunedin, 20 Nov 1917; mechanic; killed in action 25 Apr 1943.

¹² Lt G. J. Thomas, MC; Nelson; born NZ 17 Mar 1917; tobacco grower; twice wounded.

¹³ Sgt R. J. V. Carter, MM; Roto-mau, Westland; born Picton, 4 Sep 1916; labourer; wounded 25 Apr 1943.

¹⁴ L-Cpl J. W. Jameson, MM; born NZ 13 Nov 1915; farm manager; died of wounds 28 Apr 1943.

¹⁵ Lt J. H. A. Cameron; born NZ 2 Apr 1913; carpenter; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

¹⁶ Lt A. C. Hansen, MC; Nelson; born NZ 13 Nov 1917; clerk; wounded 25 Apr 1943.

¹⁷ Pte E. J. Dickson, MM; Dunedin; born NZ 8 Nov 1914; labourer.

¹⁸ Maj R. Hunter, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Invercargill, 30 Dec 1914; clerk.

¹⁹ Sgt S. Menzies, MM; born Lumsden, 22 Oct 1918; P & T linesman; killed in action 26 Dec 1943.

²⁰ Maj A. Molineaux; Burnham Military Camp; born NZ 16 Dec 1918; Regular soldier.

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CHAPTER 11 – DEPARTURE FROM EGYPT

CHAPTER 11

Departure from Egypt

THE reserve area selected for 6 Brigade lay close to the sector occupied on 15 April. Here the troops remained eight days, expecting each morning to be told to get ready to move back into the line. Practically no training was done. Sappers showed how giant cactus hedges could be gapped by Bangalore torpedoes. Surplus ammunition, including some of the enemy's, was expended on nearby ranges. Each evening mosquitoes gathered around in their hundreds. Lice also caused some inconvenience, but regular visits to the beach and hot showers nearby soon got rid of them. Mail and parcels arrived almost every day. The Minister of Defence, the Hon. F. Jones, paid a brief visit to the unit and at question time was informed that forage caps were useless. A short time afterwards berets replaced them.

Meanwhile, the fighting in [Tunisia](#) drew nearer to a close. For a few days it seemed that the battalion would take part in another attack. Fifth Brigade took over a section of the line, and subsequently [25 Battalion](#) also occupied a sector. On 5 May the battalion moved north-west of [Enfidaville](#) to a reserve position near the village of [Djebibina](#). Not far away the Axis forces were making a last-ditch stand and expending as much of their ammunition as possible. A plan was drawn up for another divisional attack; everyone was relieved when it was abandoned. On the 7th [Tunis](#) and [Bizerta](#) fell. The end was in sight. Five days later the [BBC](#) announced that all organised resistance in North Africa had ceased. By this time the battalion was again camped south of [Enfidaville](#). The news was received late in the evening, but not too late to stop the celebrations. Canteen stocks of wine rapidly disappeared.

With the end of hostilities all restrictions on leave were relaxed. Parties were taken to nearby towns, the chief source of interest being [Kairouan](#), famous for its sacred mosque. Others visited the battlefield or hitch-hiked to [Tunis](#). Everywhere civilians and soldiers were celebrating, both thankful the battle was over. Wine was drunk like water and often the camp was the scene of festivities. 'Bell's birthdays', a well-known excuse for a party since the days of [Greece](#), became more frequent. The doctor's warnings about 'Purple Death' were forgotten, at least for a time. The celebrations were not only confined to other ranks. One officer, solemn-faced and upright (but very drunk), paraded through the camp on a mule—naked except for a

long, black Italian cloak. The new issue of summer dress caused more merriment. Nearly every shirt and pair of shorts was XOS size. Amateur tailors tried to recast the glamour suits into something like normal; sometimes their efforts were even more ludicrous than the original.

About the middle of the month orders for the return of the Division to Egypt were received and the troops began to pack in readiness for the long journey. Most of them were carrying surplus gear—souvenirs acquired on the battlefield or from the long columns of prisoners who daily marched past the camp. The loss of three company commanders in the recent action necessitated some changes in command. Captain Frame,¹ who arrived from [Maadi](#) with 34 reinforcements, was given the command of C Coy; Capt Kennedy took over A Coy and Lt Buchanan became Adjutant. The spell had done a lot of good, particularly to those who had looked drawn and tired when they came out of the line three weeks earlier.

On the 16th the battalion joined the rest of 6 Brigade and set out on the 2000-mile journey back to [Maadi](#). The convoy followed the main road, passing many of the battlefields which had been so much in the news a few months earlier. Now they were almost forgotten by the world. Rusting wire, burnt-out tanks, derelict trucks, guns lying askew, and a few crosses here and there were all that remained. But to many of the men they brought back a flood of memories—sad memories of friends who had died or who lay near death in hospital.

Three days after leaving its camp the battalion reached [Tripoli](#), camping in the familiar surroundings of Suani Ben Adem. The journey was not continued until the 20th to allow the drivers to effect repairs to their trucks. In the meantime the LOBs rejoined the unit and Capt R. S. [Smith](#)² took over B Coy. Tunisian money was changed back into Egyptian currency. No leave was granted, but after dusk on the 19th the [Kiwi Concert Party](#) staged a show in the camp. The carriers remained in [Tripoli](#) to continue the journey by sea and eventually arrived at [Maadi](#) almost a month after the unit. Another full-day halt for vehicle maintenance was made four days later when the convoy reached [Benghazi](#). Parties went swimming at the beach or visited the town, and pictures were screened in the camp lines on both evenings. On the 25th Capt Wilson set out with an advanced party to make preparations for the battalion's arrival at [Maadi](#).

The journey was continued on the 26th, and the following night the troops bivouacked near [Tobruk](#), which had cost so many New Zealand lives in November 1941. The convoy was averaging over a hundred miles each day and by the 29th it had reached [Mersa Matruh](#). On the last day of the month the battalion passed the huge war cemetery at [Alamein](#), where many of the unit were buried. The rows and rows of white crosses neatly laid out and gleaming in the sun looked oddly peaceful. Near Amiriya huge dumps of enemy equipment lined the roadside for several miles. A stop was made for lunch at the transit camp, after which the convoy continued on to Halfway House at [Wadi Natrun](#). By midday next day the long journey was over and the troops were settling down in their new quarters, formerly the Southern Infantry Training Depot.

* * *

[Maadi](#) Camp was buzzing with excitement. Details of a new leave scheme had just been released. Long-service personnel were to return to New Zealand on furlough. Married men plus a balloted number of single men would form the first draft.

For those whose names appeared on the lists a hectic fortnight followed, with visits to [Cairo](#) and the hospitals and, towards the end, a round of farewell parties. Less than a fifth of those who had left New Zealand aboard the [Orcades](#) in August 1940 remained. On 14 June eight officers and 154 other ranks marched out on furlough; they were followed nearly three months later by a smaller party of eight officers and 20 other ranks. To them the thrill of returning to New Zealand was tempered by the thought that they were leaving behind many friends and a spirit of comradeship which might never be regained. The battalion lost not only half its officers but also most of its battle-trained NCOs. For this reason Col Fountaine was loath to see them go, although like everyone else he realised they had earned their spell. A [First Echelon](#) officer himself, the CO was not granted furlough, the policy being to retain key personnel until suitable replacements permitted their release.

One of the sorriest to leave was the QM, Capt Wilson. A veteran of the 1914–18 War, in which he had won the MC, this officer had been a tower of strength to each commander of the battalion and was a friend to all. He held the great record of not having left the unit for sickness or any other reason during his three years of service.

In the battalion the 'quartermastering' was done so well that it was apt to be overlooked. In action the troops came to expect their rations, hot meals, and other supplies to arrive as usual, and seldom did the QM and his staff fail to get through no matter how heavy the shelling.

Those who were left behind settled down to enjoy themselves. [Maadi](#) Camp had changed a lot since the battalion first arrived there in September 1940. Not only had it increased considerably in size, but long wooden huts had replaced most of the tents and entertainment facilities had greatly improved. The weather was very hot, and this increased the demand for liquid refreshments. The Naafis sold locally brewed beer, but it paid to be early in the canteens for room was limited. At intervals unit canteens distributed limited quantities of other brands of ale—Canadian, American, etc. As soon as the men had settled down in their new quarters, a leave scheme was introduced in addition to normal day leave to [Cairo](#). Each week about twenty men left on a 14-day visit to [Cairo](#), [Alexandria](#), [Sidi Bishr](#) or [Palestine](#). Swimming and cricket became the most popular recreations. The [Maadi](#) Baths were always crowded, but a rotation system for units improved the position. On 16 July a sports meeting was held at the baths. Almost every platoon had its cricket team and many half-day matches were played. A battalion eleven, selected after a series of inter-company games, won seven of its 13 matches.

On 6 August a battalion picnic was held, the troops spending the day amidst the pleasant surroundings of the Barrage, a well-known picnic resort. Tea, soft drinks, ice-cream and beer were provided and everyone enjoyed himself. Four days later a large party attended the divisional sports meeting at the Farouk Stadium in [Cairo](#). A battalion representative, Sgt S. A. McCartney, won the hop, step and jump title. Meanwhile preparations were being made for another battalion concert. It was staged at the El Djem Amphitheatre at [Maadi](#) on 1 September before a large audience which gave the performers an enthusiastic reception.

Only two formal parades were held during this period. On 14 June a United Nations Day parade was held in [Cairo](#) and was a colourful and impressive display. Battalion representatives were selected and for a week before the parade were put through a rigorous training programme—much to their disgust. Two months later, on 19 August, a ceremonial brigade parade and march past was held near the camp. [General Freyberg](#) took the salute and later presented decorations won during the

recent campaign.

The departure of so many men on furlough and the subsequent regrading of others left the unit very low in strength. It was not so for long. By mid-September the return of casualties from hospital and postings from the 9th and 10th Reinforcements increased the strength state to 34 officers and 748 other ranks. The constant influx and exodus of officers and NCOs on leave, furlough, and to instructional courses, plus internal changes in command, had interfered to some extent with training during the first six weeks back at [Maadi](#), and it was not until the middle of July that a training programme was attempted. Leave was curtailed and the troops settled down to a fortnight of barrack drill and elementary training. When this was over—and everyone was glad of it—field exercises and specialist lectures and training began. At first the exercises were confined to platoons and sometimes to companies. Patrolling, with special emphasis on making the best use of natural cover, was one of the main features of the programme.

Towards the end of August the exercises became more comprehensive. It was obvious that the Division was training to fight under European conditions. Many of the features of desert training disappeared and were replaced by others, some the lessons drawn from the campaign in [Greece](#). It was difficult even for those with a good imagination to picture cultivated valleys, terraced slopes, stone walls, narrow country roads and scrub-covered heights, when all around was sand and more sand. On 7 September began a five-day brigade manoeuvre which was held in the desert south of the camp. The object of the exercise was 'to study the conduct of operations in close country.' In the sandy wastes where the battalion camped on the night of the 7th, it was hard to visualise country such as can be seen in most parts of the [South Island](#), but this limitation was not allowed to hamper the exercises. Companies and battalions practised quick debussing from transport, small-scale assaults on fixed defences, patrolling, attacking and taking cover. Special attention was paid to vehicle dispersion, faster means of communication, and all-round protection against guerrilla activities. The exercises ended fittingly on the shores of the [Red Sea](#), where all ranks waded out into the cool water. Four days later the battalion left [Maadi](#) for the last time.

Everyone knew that the Division's stay in Egypt was limited and expected that in due course it would rejoin the Eighth Army, which was by this time in [Italy](#). The change in the training syllabus supported this theory. First stage in the move to a new theatre of war was the transfer of the Division to [Burg el Arab](#) on the coast. The 100-mile journey was to be done on foot.

After their return from the manoeuvres the troops packed and prepared to leave [Maadi](#). On 15 September they embussed on transport, and as the column of vehicles moved through the camp they gazed for the last time on the rows of huts and tents, [Naafi](#) buildings, theatres and recreation halls which had been 'home' for so long. The convoy stopped at the 40 Kilo peg on the [Maadi- Amiriya](#) highway and all ranks debussed to continue the journey on foot. The march was to extend over seven days, the troops resting during the heat of the day and beginning their march at sunset. Ambulances would follow to pick up those with blistered feet. After treatment these men would be graded A, B, or C; only those in Grade C would be given a ride for the rest of the way.

Great rivalry existed between platoons, companies, and battalions over this march, and each man was on his mettle for hot bitumen roads are notoriously hard on feet. On the first two nights the RAP attended to over eighty men. Others required treatment as the journey was continued, and by the time the last leg of the march was started few were without blisters. Nevertheless it was with nearly a full complement that the battalion reached its destination, although few of the men were by then walking naturally. At Amiriya transport was waiting to carry them to [Burg el Arab](#) where the cooks had hot tea waiting. It was after midnight before bivouacs had been erected along the sandy foreshore and everyone had settled down, with their blisters, to sleep.

The next day, Wednesday 22 September, was polling day for the New Zealand General Election, and keen interest was shown in the results when they came to hand. Two days later the battalion moved out into the desert to take part in a divisional manoeuvre. For some reason or other 5 and 6 Brigades completed the exercise separately. New features of the exercise were a further speeding-up of communications, particularly in relation to tank and artillery support, the greater use of codewords in passing messages, and improved co-ordination of all arms. On the

26th [General Freyberg](#) addressed officers and sergeants on the lessons of the exercises. The following day, hot, tired and dusty, the troops returned to [Burg el Arab](#) and, almost as one man, made for the cool surf.

For the next three days the men practically lived in the water. Doctor Fletcher and his staff completed the typhus inoculations. On the last day of the month orders for the Division's move to [Italy](#) were received. An advanced party under Maj Bullôt³ had already left. Brigades were to travel separately. Sixth Brigade was to move to [Amiriya](#) on 3 October in readiness to embark on troopships two days later. All vehicles, together with their drivers, were to remain behind and follow by a later convoy.

The last three days at [Burg el Arab](#) were busy. Everything had to be packed, rations distributed, embarkation rolls made out, and arrangements completed for the disposal of base kits. The battalion was to travel in two flights; at [Amiriya](#) A and B Coys went to Camp A and C and D Coys to Camp B. Headquarters Company was divided between the two camps. Before lunch on the 5th B Flight paraded with full equipment. Some of the men were so heavily laden that it seemed incredible they could walk under such a weight. Trucks carried this party to the docks at [Alexandria](#), where the troops were transferred by barges to the Dunottar Castle. A Flight followed and during the afternoon embarked on the *Reina del Pacifico*. These two transports and a third, the *Sabijak*, escorted by five destroyers of the Royal Greek Navy, were to carry the brigade to [Italy](#).

Early the next morning the convoy steamed out to the open sea. The battalion had left for ever its old haunts— [Maadi](#) Camp, with its huts and shouting paper-boys; [Cairo](#), with its gharries and evil smells; the Desert and the battlefields where so many men had fought and died. Now all was quiet and peaceful where once artillery thundered and machine guns rattled. Major Horrell was the only 'original' left. It was perhaps as well the others had gone for their memories were of the Desert and [Greece](#). The battalion was to fight under totally different conditions in a new country, and for most of the men, recently arrived from New Zealand, [Italy](#) was to provide their haunts, camps, and battlefields.

¹ Maj A. S. Frame; [Wellington](#); born Herbert, North Otago, 11 Aug 1908;

civil servant.

² Maj R. S. Smith; born [New Plymouth](#), 21 Jan 1916; school teacher; wounded 26 Oct 1942; killed in action 24 Dec 1943.

³ Lt-Col B. R. Bullôt, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [New Plymouth](#), 3 Feb 1915; Regular soldier; AQMG HQ [2 NZEF](#) Jun–Oct 1945; wounded 28 Nov 1943.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 12 – FIRST BATTLE IN ITALY

CHAPTER 12

First Battle in Italy

THE three-day voyage across the [Mediterranean](#) was uneventful, and early on 9 October land was sighted. All ranks lined the ships' rails to catch a first glimpse of the new country. The scene was very different from Egypt and the Desert. Thousands of olive trees stretched back from the coast to the distant skyline in seemingly endless rows. The country was very hilly and little villages dotted almost every hilltop. From a distance the port of [Taranto](#) appeared to be clean and modern, with large stone buildings and sea-walls standing out in the bright sunlight.

The ships dropped anchor in the stream, and shortly afterwards landing craft came alongside the Dunottar Castle. Disembarkation began immediately, each man finding the steep, narrow gangway difficult to negotiate under an awkward load of arms and equipment. B Flight was soon ashore and the men formed up to march through the port to a camp site about five miles away. Closer inspection revealed [Taranto](#) as a town of dingy buildings and dirty streets, its shopping centre a vista of closed shutters and stone walls. Hungry-looking civilians lined the footpaths and silently watched the troops march by. By 2 p.m. B Flight had reached the new camp. Company areas were allotted and the men began digging trenches and erecting bivouacs beneath the olive trees. A Flight, led by Maj Horrell, arrived later in the afternoon and the battalion was reunited. Everything had not gone according to schedule. The greater part of the cooking gear had not arrived by teatime and the meal consisted of bully beef and biscuits. After sundown the temperature dropped considerably and bed was the warmest place. Major Horrell's party was without blankets, which had not arrived from the ship, and the men spent the night huddled underneath some borrowed from B Flight.

Conditions improved during the next few days. Permanent cookhouses were set up. Stone walls, which marked the boundaries of olive groves and which had stood for centuries, were demolished to make paths around the camp. Winter was approaching and special attention was paid to drainage. Mosquito nets were issued as a protection against malaria. Mepacrine tablets, issued at [Burg el Arab](#), were taken daily and a special ointment to rub on exposed parts of the body was provided. As an added precaution slacks and long-sleeved shirts had to be worn after

dusk. Largely because of these simple precautions few of the battalion contracted malaria.

Once the troops had settled down leave was granted to [Taranto](#). As more and more of the Division arrived in the area an increasing number of troops congregated in the town; it had little to offer in the way of entertainment. The older section was reminiscent of [Cairo](#) with its inadequate drainage, side-street disposal of refuse, and consequent variety of evil smells. Battered buildings and half-sunken hulks along the waterfront showed the havoc wrought by Allied bombers. The Germans had ransacked the town before leaving and the people were obviously very hungry. Long queues waited to buy the small stocks of food offered for sale.

Although training began soon after the unit arrived in [Italy](#) sports enthusiasts found time to prepare Rugby and soccer grounds. A battalion soccer team was selected after several elimination games. It defeated the CCS but lost to 25 Battalion. No unit Rugby team was formed but several torrid and exciting platoon and company games were played. In the company series A and D Coys were the finalists, and a play-off between the two ended in a draw—no score. The game was played on a heavy ground at a fast pace, and at the end of play black eyes, barked shins, and skinned noses were noticeable. There was little to do in the evenings. A South African mobile cinema unit visited the camp several times, one of its visits coinciding with a heavy downpour. Company canteens operated smoothly, although some commodities were in short supply—one of them was razor blades. From the local [Naafi](#) each man could buy a weekly ration of 50 cigarettes, a bottle of beer, and a small quantity of chocolate. From this source, also, limited quantities of wine could be obtained.

For the first few weeks the companies were often sent on route marches. The monotony of marching was relieved by the scenes of interest passed on the way. The sight of cultivated hills, acres of olive trees, narrow roads, the mud huts of the shepherds, and the low stone walls which divided each family plot provided a pleasant change from the desert. On one occasion the battalion marched to Crispiano, quite a large village several miles away. The grimy, badly drained town held little of interest, and the poorly dressed civilians watched their uninvited guests with distrust. Later they became more friendly, displaying a commercial interest in the leather jerkins worn by the troops. Little children, barefooted and half starved,

soon lost their fear. At lunchtime they gathered around the men, begging scraps of food. Their elders remained at a more discreet distance. As a result of some bargaining many water bottles were filled with a beverage more potent than water. In the fields between the town and the camp peasants were busy cultivating small, stony plots of ground, using primitive ploughs. Women and girls were doing most of the hard work. Maize, barley, and wheat were being sown in these plots between the rows of almond, fig, and olive trees. It seemed incredible that one family could exist on the produce from such a small strip of land.

The training programme was planned to fit the troops for a new style of warfare. Some of the technique used in the desert actions had to be discarded, or modified so that it could be successfully applied in close country. In addition to route marches and hardening-up drill, platoons and companies practised various tactical exercises. Later, manoeuvres were carried out on the type of ground likely to be encountered farther north. From the start it was evident that the weather and ground conditions would be important factors in the fighting in [Italy](#). This fact was emphasised towards the end of October when heavy rain caused widespread flooding. Despite the drainage system most tents were flooded. Roads around the camp became impassable to most vehicles and for several days training was abandoned. However, by the time the unit left for the front line on 13 November good progress had been made in learning the new battle technique. Particular attention had been given to forming-up methods, movement by night through wooded country, section stalks, fieldcraft and patrolling. Various methods of attacking an objective and consolidating, with and without tank support, were practised. To improve platoon and company communications a new light wireless set, the No. 38, was issued. Although its range varied according to the terrain, this set was of considerable value in later actions. The Piat (Projectile Infantry Anti-Tank) was also issued to platoons. This weapon, spring loaded, fired a bomb capable of holing walls and piercing the armour of most tanks. It was reasonably accurate up to about 120 yards, although the bombs were cumbersome and the weapon fairly heavy.

Platoon and company runners attended a seven-day intelligence course. Snipers would have more to do in this campaign than in North Africa, and 16 men were selected and trained for this role. Company commanders and specialist officers spent

several days on TEWTS (tactical exercises without troops) and afterwards the same exercises were carried out with the men taking part. Throughout the training period movement was hampered by lack of transport. By the end of October only a few jeeps had reached the battalion, and the rest of the unit transport did not arrive until after the move to the front line had begun. Fourth Armoured Brigade had rejoined the Division. The 18th, 19th, and 20th Battalions were now armoured regiments equipped with Sherman tanks, and 22 Battalion, which had joined 4 Brigade, had become motorised. Those of 26 Battalion who had fought in North Africa knew that the infantry could now expect closer tank support.

The transit camp was over 250 miles from the front line. Since the landing on the Italian mainland on 3 September the Allies had made steady progress. [Naples](#) had fallen on 1 October and the American Fifth Army was driving up the west side of the Apennine Mountains towards Rome. On the east side of the peninsula the [Eighth Army](#) was approaching the [Sangro](#) River and the town of [Pescara](#). On 27 October Col Fountaine and several other senior officers accompanied [General Freyberg](#) to the Adriatic front. The party visited the sectors held by 5 and 78 British Divisions. On his return the Colonel gave lectures on what he had seen. The country where the Division was likely to operate was very hilly and cut by wide rivers. Communications were almost entirely dependent on formed roads, many of which would become impassable in winter. Mud was already slowing up operations.

Early in November the troops had a foretaste of an Italian winter. Heavy rain began on the morning of the 6th and continued almost without a break for four days. The camp drainage system again proved inadequate. Tents were flooded and bedding soaked. Cold winds made conditions very unpleasant. Woollen underclothing was issued and malaria precautions relaxed. Orders to move to a staging camp 160 miles away were received, and on the 11th Col Fountaine and 2 Lt [McClean](#)¹ left for [La Torre](#), a small village not far from [Lucera](#). The main body commanded by Maj Horrell was to follow two days later.

The troops packed and prepared for the long journey. The majority, being new arrivals, wondered what the future had in store for them. Nearly all believed the campaign in [Italy](#) would be short. Colonel Fountaine's news of front-line conditions had put a damper on the enthusiasm of those who wanted to get on with the job. The general war situation was good and the [BBC](#) news each night reported

successes on all fronts.

The five weeks' spell at [Taranto](#) had enabled the troops to become acclimatised. The abrupt change from the heat of Egypt to the cooler weather of an Italian autumn had had little ill-effect. Some of the men were suffering from skin infections which were slow to heal, but the general health was good. Mail from New Zealand arrived regularly but few parcels reached the camp. In other respects the men welcomed the change from the desert.

* * *

Shortly after 8 a.m. on the 13th the troops embussed on the lorries of the Divisional Ammunition and Petrol Companies and the convoy set out along the coastal road towards [Lucera](#). Steady progress was made, and by half past twelve the convoy had reached half-way and the men were endeavouring to erect their bivouacs on a ridge swept by a cold easterly gale. The journey was continued on the 14th, the convoy making slower progress because of the many deviations and heavy road traffic. The Germans had destroyed all bridges as they had withdrawn. Nearly all the villages and towns passed on the way had suffered damage of some sort. [Foggia](#), the largest town, had been almost flattened by Allied bombing. The country became better as the convoy neared [Lucera](#). There were many flourishing vineyards and olive groves and the peasants looked cleaner, healthier, and better dressed.

Shortly after midday the convoy passed through [Lucera](#) and by 1.30 p.m. had reached [La Torre](#). In company areas everyone was soon busy erecting bivouacs beneath olive trees on ground damp from recent rains. A cold wind was blowing and the skies were threatening. Before nightfall rain began and the staging area soon became a sea of mud. There was no change on the 14th or 15th, and once again tents were flooded and bedding soaked. As a general rule bivouac tents kept out the rain provided they were not touched—a near impossibility because of their small size. In any case the water seeped through underneath the tents to soak the straw-lined beds. During these two days the unit transport and the Anti-Tank Platoon rejoined the battalion. This group had landed at [Bari](#); the drivers' comments about [Italy](#) and its weather were unprintable.

Although few details had been given the men, the Division's part in forthcoming

operations had been decided. Enemy resistance on all fronts was increasing and the arrival of winter was slowing up the Allied advance. On the Adriatic coast the **Eighth Army** was near the **Sangro River**, and it was hoped to prevent the enemy from standing on his **Winter Line** behind this natural barrier. Fifth Corps was operating along the coastal sector with **13 Corps** inland from it. With the exception of 78 Division on the extreme right flank, the **Eighth Army** was advancing through hilly and mountainous country. On the west coast the **Fifth Army** had reached the mouth of the Garigliano River, about 35 miles north-west of **Naples**.

The New Zealand Division was to relieve **8 Indian Division**, on the left of 78 Division, and continue the advance towards the south bank of the **Sangro**. On 20 November **5 Corps** was to attack with the object of gaining a foothold on the northern bank of the river near the coast. If this attack succeeded the New Zealanders, operating under the direct command of Eighth



ITALY MAP NO. 1

Army, were to cross the river and advance through the hills to **Avezzano**. This advance would open the way for a westward drive on Rome, the immediate objective of both Allied armies. While the New Zealanders attacked towards **Avezzano**, **5 Corps** would continue to advance towards the port of **Pescara**. The plan depended on the weather and the state of the going. If the weather held, armour could operate with the infantry and the momentum of the initial attack could be maintained. To conceal the arrival of the Division in the line, 19 Indian Brigade was to remain in position under **General Freyberg's** command. All badges and flashes had

been removed before the troops left [Taranto](#) and wireless silence was imposed during the move to the new sector. Sixth Brigade was directed to move forward on 17 November to relieve the Indians after dusk on the 18th.

By 8.15 a.m. on the 17th the battalion was on the move, travelling as part of 6 Brigade Group. Major Horrell had gone ahead the day before to select a suitable lying-up area near the line. During the initial stages of the 107-mile journey progress was good, the roads being in fair order and free of traffic. After the convoy had passed through [Termoli](#) and turned inland, demolitions and traffic jams forced the lorries to halt many times and slowed down progress. There were plenty of signs of recent fighting—blown bridges, shell-torn homes, abandoned and burnt-out vehicles. Here and there were the graves of British and German soldiers. After dark progress became even slower. At midnight the column was held up while a burning petrol truck was pushed off the road. Nearly everyone debussed to watch as the flames leapt high in the air, silhouetting hundreds of vehicles parked nose-to-tail. At the rear of most of them a [Benghazi](#) burner was blazing and a cup of tea was on the way. Two hours later the convoy resumed its journey, finally stopping for the night on a side road leading to the village of [Gissi](#). The men did not trouble to erect their bivouacs but slept either in the trucks or on the damp ground.

About four hours later the journey was resumed. Guns were firing to the north-west, and all ranks were warned of the possibility of enemy shelling before they reached their destination. There was none, but progress was slower even than on the night before. The roads were in a deplorable condition and were choked with traffic. Drivers lost count of the number of stops while provosts disentangled traffic jams or guided northbound convoys through muddy deviations. Early in the afternoon the battalion reached the Osento River. The bridge across it had been blown, but a rough track led to a ford across which the lorries slowly passed. For many hours the column remained at a standstill. Darkness fell with many of the brigade vehicles still south of the river. Although lamps were placed along the deviation to assist the drivers, it was almost midnight before the battalion crossed. About an hour later the convoy halted in the riverbed and the troops debussed.

Ahead of them lay a six-mile march over the hills to the new sector. Except for essential vehicles all transport was to remain in the riverbed, and this meant that all

gear would have to be carried. Before the companies set out the cooks provided a hot meal—the second in 36 hours. By dawn the march had been completed and the troops were sheltering beneath olive trees about four miles from the [Sangro](#). Except for reconnaissance parties which went down to the river, the men kept under cover for the rest of the day so that the enemy would not see fresh troops moving into the line. The reconnaissance parties examined the low ground near the river and saw no sign of the enemy. Company sectors were selected and at 5 p.m. the troops set out on foot towards the river. By half past seven they had reached their positions and were digging in. The ground was wet and soggy after recent rain. C and D Coys were straddling a lateral road about a mile from the river. A Coy was on a hill slope about 200 yards to the rear, with B Coy on lower ground on the right of it. Battalion HQ was set up in a house not far from A Coy, and the supporting arms which arrived later in the evening were dispersed nearby. By 11 p.m. defensive preparations were complete. A Coy had established an outpost of platoon strength about 200 yards from the river, and C Coy had sent out a small patrol to find suitable crossing places. A few of the men had been able to occupy houses or outbuildings, but the majority had dug slit trenches and had stretched canvas covers over them to keep out the cold and the rain. The battalion was now holding a 300-yard front, with [25 Battalion](#) on its left and the Apello River, a tributary of the [Sangro](#), forming a natural barrier on its right flank.

At daylight on the 20th the troops examined their new surroundings. The narrow river flat, part of which was occupied by the battalion, was heavily cultivated with olive groves, vineyards and orchards, providing plenty of natural cover. A few apple trees were soon stripped of their fruit. Peasants and their families, undeterred by the shelling, still occupied their homes. In every direction there were hills, those to the north and north-west still occupied by the enemy. Left of the battalion and faintly discernible in the poor light, the [Apennines](#) towered over everything. On the north side on the [Sangro](#) a marshy stretch of ground ran up into a series of sharply defined hills linked together by narrow gullies, rising towards a high ridge which ran across the front to form the horizon. Half right from C Coy the marsh ended abruptly at the foot of a precipitous 150-foot cliff. The patrol which had gone down to the river the night before reported no sign of the enemy. Because of the darkness it had not been able to make a detailed examination of the river.

Seven wet and unpleasant days followed. Rain fell on the 20th, and patrols sent out that night found the river in flood. This caused the postponement of a proposed attack by 6 Brigade and armour set down for the following night. Heavy rain after dusk on the 23rd caused the tank-supported thrust to be abandoned, and the troops settled down to wait until the level of the river fell. On the night of the 26th patrols managed to wade across the river, and 24 hours later a two-brigade attack was launched.

During the week 78 Division established a bridgehead across the river near the coast. Several important changes took place on the left flank. Despite adverse conditions 19 Indian Brigade, closely supported by New Zealand armour and artillery, cleared several hilltops south-east of and overlooking the battalion sector. Fifth Brigade moved into the line and took up a position on the right of the battalion. Enemy activity was confined to spasmodic shelling which at no time became severe. Two men in D Coy were wounded by shell splinters. As the Divisional Artillery moved forward into position, the shelling of known and suspected enemy strongpoints was intensified. Allied planes passed overhead at frequent intervals but enemy aircraft were seldom sighted. The heavy rain caused extensive flooding in places and many of the fields became waterlogged. Tracks and roads leading into the sector became very muddy and almost impassable to vehicles. Water seeped into practically every trench, and envious eyes were cast towards those living in houses. It was almost impossible to dry out wet clothing and boots. To make matters worse the rain brought in its train cold winds. A Coy had its cookhouse in the FDLs, but the carrying parties from other companies had the unenviable task of crossing sodden paddocks and plodding along muddy roads to and from the cookhouses twice each day.

Intensive patrolling was carried out to locate suitable crossing places over the river and to test the enemy defences in the hills beyond the north bank. The patrols generally operated at night when it was difficult to follow any of the formed tracks leading down to the river, the approaches to which resembled a bog. Crossing the river was perhaps the worst ordeal. Opposite the battalion it consisted of several streams, swollen by rain and separated by high gravel banks. The men carried only light equipment but had to fight their way through the bitterly cold water against a strong current to reach the opposite bank. Often it took hours to get across. Beyond the far bank of the river lay a flat area, a large part of which had been ploughed.

Here the mud was much worse than along the south bank. Irrigation ditches, too wide to jump and full of dirty, muddy water, formed another obstacle. The patrols then had to climb the nearby hills in their wet, muddy clothes and, after a cold wait in the darkness, set out on the return journey. Patrolling was not popular.

Patrols were sent out each night to examine the river. The distance from bank to bank varied between 300–500 yards. At one crossing place there were three streams, two of them rock-bottomed and the third a muddy backwash. Wide gravel banks separated them. At another crossing place there were only two streams, divided by an island. Patrols on the night of the 20th reported that the water was only about two feet deep, but within 24 hours the river had risen considerably. The current became very swift and the water shoulder high.

Two patrols were sent across the river, the first early on the morning of the 21st and the second after dark on the 24th. The daylight patrol ran into trouble. It consisted of seven men from D Coy under 2 Lt Lawrence.² They set out from the FDLs very early in the morning and managed to cross the river and the flat without much difficulty. At the foot of the hill the cover ended, and Lawrence decided to head up a gully which divided the hill and a ridge on the right of it. The patrol leader and two of the men led off, the rest following some distance behind. Near the crest of the hill were several houses and civilians were seen moving about. The leaders had not gone far before they came under heavy machine-gun fire from one of these houses. The three men dashed over the ridge into another gully and quickly made their way down to the flat. At the bottom of the gully they were again caught in the open and all three were wounded. Meanwhile, the four men who had been following had opened fire from behind a low clay bank. The enemy quickly retaliated from his position on the higher ground, and the four decided to make a break for it and follow the others over the ridge. Two set off at a run but the soggy ground soon slowed them down to a walk. One man fell, mortally wounded, but the other, Pte Carlson,³ reached the ridge safely. As arranged beforehand, Carlson began firing to attract the enemy's attention and allow the others to escape. Time went by, and as they did not appear he set out alone to return to the river. Meanwhile, two of the wounded had recrossed the river but there was no sign of 2 Lt Lawrence. The two men left on the hill were thought to be prisoners.⁴

For the next 24 hours a sharp lookout was kept for the missing officer, and just

when all hope had been abandoned he was heard calling out from the north bank. Wounded in the knee, he had crawled across the ditches and muddy ground to escape capture. He was helped across the river and sent to the RAP for much-needed medical attention. The 24th Battalion, which had also sent a patrol across the river in daylight, had suffered similar losses, and the arrival of New Zealanders in the line was no longer a secret from the enemy.

A fighting patrol of 18 men from 14 Platoon, led by Lt [Frampton](#),⁵ was sent across the river after dark on the 24th with orders to find out if the houses on the hill were still occupied by the enemy. By this time the river was in flood and the patrol had considerable difficulty gaining the northern bank. The water was chest high and the current very swift. The ploughed paddocks were a sea of mud, and it took almost three hours for the party to reach the first house. It was unoccupied, and so was the next; but as the men neared the third house the enemy opened fire and Frampton gave the order to withdraw. Six hours after they had left, 18 cold, wet and bedraggled soldiers rejoined their company, thankful their task was over.

The heavy rain which caused 6 Brigade's attack to be postponed also brought a revision of plans. [General Freyberg](#) decided to employ both infantry brigades to establish a bridgehead over the river and continue the drive through the hills on the left of [5 Corps](#). In readiness for the river crossing, nine men from D Coy accompanied some sappers down to the river on the night of the 25th. They were to assist the sappers to drive stakes along the north bank of the river to which guide ropes could be attached. The current was too swift and the job was postponed until the following night. This time the sappers were more successful. The same night two other parties crossed the river, one to protect sappers who were examining a lateral road beyond the north bank, and the other to test a ford vouched for by a local farmer. Early the next morning, the 27th, it was announced that the attack would begin at 2.45 a.m. on the 28th. This news was welcomed by most of the men, who had been chafing at the continual delays and the unpleasant conditions under which they were living.

The success of the attack largely depended on two factors: the weather and the speed with which the supporting arms could be brought across the river to the infantry. The 65th Infantry Division which opposed the New Zealanders was regarded as a second-rate formation containing a large percentage of Poles and

recruits, but it was well commanded and had a good record throughout the Italian campaign. Although the enemy manned a number of strongpoints on bluffs, his main defences were sited in a series of high ridges, the nearest of which lay about six miles away. This ridge, which ran parallel to the river, could be seen from the battalion sector, with the village of [Castelfrentano](#) a prominent landmark on it. As the enemy was not defending the north bank of the river, the start line for the attack was fixed along the lateral road examined by the sappers on the night of 26 November. Five infantry battalions were to take part, the 26th in the centre, with 25 and 24 Battalions on its left and 21 and 23 Battalions on its right. Each battalion was given one or more hill objectives. Covered with low scrub and a few trees, these hills were clearly defined. Narrow gullies or low saddles connected each feature.

The 26th Battalion was to assemble behind the lateral road along a 300-yard front, with its right flank on the line of the Apello River. At zero hour it was to advance north-west and capture five features. The leading companies were to extend to the left as they advanced so that on the final objectives they would be covering a 1000-yard front. Success would bring the forward troops within three miles of [Castelfrentano](#) and about 900 yards ahead of the flanking battalions. Except for a platoon of Vickers gunners (12 Platoon, [27 MG Battalion](#)), the troops would have no close support until the river was bridged, although the artillery was to fire a barrage and concentrations on known enemy strongpoints.

Each of the rifle companies was given a separate task. ⁶ D Coy was directed to move across the river before the main body and cover the forming up on the start line. Major Molineaux was also to station guides along the south bank to guide the rest of the battalion to the crossing place. When the barrage began A Coy was to lead B and C Coys across the flat and capture the first objective, a low hill about 1000 yards from the lateral road. B and C Coys were then to pass through and advance on the final objectives, B Coy half left for 1000 yards onto a sharp ridge and C Coy 1700 yards to Pt 217 and Pt 169, two hills separated by a narrow gully. After the two companies had passed through it, A Coy was to continue its advance up the centre of the sector to another hill, Pt 171, about 600 yards away. At a later stage D Coy was to move on to A Coy's first objective. Colonel Fontaine planned to set up his headquarters in a house at the foot of this hill. The capture of these five objectives would place C Coy on two hills covering the front, with B Coy on its left

rear, A Coy on its right rear, and D Coy in reserve.

Final preparations for the night's operation were made during the 27th. Because of the possibility that the river might not be bridged when daylight came, all ranks were issued with extra food and ammunition. This included twelve rounds for each Piat and eighteen for the platoon mortar. The medical equipment of the RAP and the Vickers guns had to be manhandled across the river. To assist these two groups and help get extra ammunition across before morning, about fifty men under Capt J. R. Williams were detailed as a carrying party. Stretcher-bearers from 6 Brigade HQ were to assist the RAP staff. It was also planned to use mules to get a hot meal forward at daylight should the bridge not be completed.

Allied planes passed overhead at frequent intervals during the day and there was scarcely any enemy shelling. The sky was overcast and towards dusk heavy rain clouds built up around the hills. After dark a hot meal was served, together with a rum issue. Shortly afterwards a light drizzle began.

* * *

Shortly after 10 p.m. D Coy, less one platoon left behind as guides, moved down the river, where Maj Molineaux was faced with an unexpected problem. At the place where the guide ropes had been stretched the night before the river was too deep to cross. After some delay another place was found and the company was soon wading into the icy water. The rest of the battalion followed A Coy down to the river about an hour later. The night was particularly dark. A misty rain was still falling and visibility was limited to a few yards. At the river bank Maj Bullôt could find no sign of the crossing place or the D Coy guides. Private Ross,⁷ of the Intelligence section, was sent to find a suitable crossing place. Eventually the Italian farmer who had shown an A Coy patrol a ford the previous night was induced to guide the troops across the first stream.

The current was swift. Large boulders were scattered over the river bottom and in hollows the water reached the armpits. After climbing a stony bank the company found itself on a large sandbank. The men milled around while those in the lead tried to find a suitable place to cross the next stream. By the time one was found the rest of the battalion, including the missing D Coy platoon, was on the sandbank.

Corporal [Matson](#)⁸ leading, the troops waded into the water in single file, each man clinging to the one in front. From the chain of men came muttered curses as they stumbled over boulders or slid into deeper holes. Even the taller men found it difficult to retain their balance against the current. Large stones were being swept along the river bottom. The third channel was much different. There was no current and the water was only waist high, but the bed of the stream was thick mud which clung to the feet at each step. Nearly two hours after setting out, A Coy reached the far bank and began deploying behind the start line. The rest of the battalion arrived at short intervals. Because of the poor visibility and the need for strict silence, some confusion was inevitable as platoons and companies moved into position. Long before the barrage was due to begin, all ranks had settled down in their wet clothes to await the order to advance. A cold wind made conditions particularly unpleasant. Major Molineaux reported no sign of life in the hills ahead and no indication that the enemy expected an attack.

The wait seemed interminable. Every minute it seemed to get colder, and there was a general sigh of relief when the guns

began firing at 2.45 a.m. A Coy was rather slow to move and, due to the state of the ground, was unable to keep up with the barrage. Nos. 7 and 8 Platoons in the lead were soon floundering through muddy paddocks and across ditches full of water,



THE SANGRO-ORSOGNA BATTLE, 27 NOVEMBER 1943-2 JANUARY 1944

The Sangro- Orsogna battle, 27 November 1943–2 January 1944

while the barrage was moving farther and farther away. Battalion HQ followed A Coy, with B and C Coys bringing up the rear. Near the foot of the first hill 7 Platoon and A Coy HQ

ran into mines. Three men were killed and eight wounded, including the company commander, Maj Bullôt. The minefield had not been expected, and it was later ascertained that it covered a wide area and that many of the mines were booby-trapped.

At this stage no opposition had been encountered except for light machine-gun fire. Despite the confusion caused by the mine explosions and the loss of their commander, the leading platoons of A Coy continued up the slope of the hill. Company HQ lagged behind while two of the platoon commanders disputed the seniority of the other and decided who was to command the company. In the interim Cpl Matson's section had attacked a machine-gun post and captured its four occupants. The company remained on the crest of the hill while Cpl [Smail](#)⁹ went ahead with the leading platoon of C Coy to determine A Coy's final objective. Later he returned and led the company forward to Pt 171.

Meanwhile, B and C Coys were moving towards their objectives. B Coy had escaped trouble in the minefield and, after passing through A Coy, had turned west towards its objective, Nos. 10 and 11 Platoons leading. Because of the darkness the men were moving in fairly close formation. After crossing a narrow valley they began to climb onto the ridge. No opposition was encountered and the platoons were dug in long before daylight. C Coy was not so lucky. After leaving A Coy and descending into the narrow valley between Pt 171 and Pt 217, it ran into difficulties. The artillery had laid smoke to mark the pause line of the barrage and this smoke hung in the valley, reducing visibility almost to zero. This forced the platoons to bunch together and blotted out all landmarks. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons climbed the ridge which ran north from B Coy's position to Pt 217 and began advancing along it in the face of light machine-gun fire. They soon reached the crest of the feature, but frontal fire from an enemy machine gun forced them to seek cover as they moved down the forward slope. Major Ollivier was undecided as to his exact location and, in view of the enemy fire, ordered his men to dig in until daylight.

At daybreak Pt 169 was clearly visible and the company, moving in open

formation, set out towards it. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons crossed a narrow gully and began to climb the hillside. Until this stage there had been no indication of the presence of enemy troops on Pt 169, but when the leaders were within a hundred yards of their objective three spandaus and a 75- millimetre gun opened fire at point-blank range from the top of the hill. The troops scattered in all directions, some behind a shed and a haystack, nine to a nearby house, and the remainder took cover in folds in the ground. Company HQ and 13 Platoon were some distance down the slope and were not as seriously affected. The position of the forward platoons became worse when more spandaus opened fire. Some were firing from a hill north-west of Pt 169 and two others from a village in 21 Battalion's sector on the right rear of the company. The men sheltering behind the haystack were forced to vacate their refuge and seek shelter in a plough track.

When it was obvious that his company would not be able to capture the hill without heavy losses, Maj Ollivier wirelessly for smoke to allow the platoons on the hill to withdraw. A long twenty-minute wait followed. As soon as the smoke canisters began to land in the area and the enemy no longer had a clear view of their line of withdrawal, the men dashed madly down the hill to where the rest of the company lay under cover. Piats, mortars, and Bren guns were left behind in the scramble but the wounded were all helped or carried back to safety. Shortly afterwards the company reoccupied its former position on the forward slope of Pt 217. Two men had been killed and three wounded in the abortive attempt to capture Pt 169. The nine men who had occupied one of the houses near the crest of the feature had not withdrawn with the others, but they escaped later in the day after [6 Field Regiment](#) fired a concentration of high explosive and smoke on the hilltop.

The crossing of the river and the capture of the hills beyond it had been achieved with surprising ease, and Col Fontaine was very satisfied with the night's work. A motley collection of prisoners, 32 altogether, had been captured during the night. They were mostly Poles and Russians from [65 Division](#). The failure to capture Pt 169 was not considered important as the German positions on the hill were partially covered by C Coy on Pt 217 and the left-flank company of [21 Battalion](#). The other three companies were in position long before daylight. A Coy had encountered another machine-gun post as it moved towards Pt 171, but Cpl Matson's section forced the enemy to withdraw. Tactical HQ had been set up in a house at the foot of

the first hill, and the RAP was also operating from this point. Doctor Fletcher and his augmented staff experienced some difficulty in getting their equipment across the river and later in collecting the wounded from the centre of the minefield. In the darkness it was very difficult to find the wounded and determine the extent of their wounds. Casualties were suffered by the stretcher-bearers who went to the assistance of the A Coy men. By midday the battalion's casualties totalled 19—four killed and 15 wounded, one mortally. The evacuation of wounded from the RAP was delayed by the non-arrival of ambulances. Walking wounded were assisted across the river early in the morning, but the remainder, some of whom required urgent surgical attention, had to wait until after 10.30 a.m., when an ambulance arrived. The driver reported that all traffic was being routed across the bridge in 5 Brigade's sector. The ambulance was unable to carry all the patients, but in one way or another they were all evacuated by midday.

Throughout the attack communications had been better than had been expected. Some of the company No. 38 sets had been damaged during the river crossing, but as the companies were not far apart a relay system was implemented quite successfully. A No. 38 set on the south bank of the river had provided an excellent link between Tac HQ and Battalion and Brigade headquarters. News of the complete success of the Division's attack was received soon after daylight. About the same time it was learned that the bridge across the river in 6 Brigade's sector had not been completed. This was rather disturbing news for it meant a delay in the arrival of the supporting arms. With this in mind company commanders made several changes in platoon positions to meet the possibility of a counter-attack. The machine-gunners took up a position in the vicinity of A Coy. At 9.30 a.m. six tanks from C Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment reached [25 Battalion](#). The Squadron Commander advised Col Fountaine that his tanks would be able to support A and B Coys in the event of a counter-attack but could give only limited assistance to C Coy.

The arrival of the tanks and the appearance of flight after flight of Allied fighters and bombers eased the situation, and throughout the rest of the day the enemy was content to shell and mortar the sector at irregular intervals. Enemy planes made sporadic appearances but no bombs were dropped near the companies. At dusk the supporting arms were still south of the river, waiting the opportunity to use the 5th Brigade bridge. The non-arrival of dry clothing was serious from the men's point of

view. The night turned cold and, clad in damp battle dress without blankets or overcoats, the troops spent an uncomfortable eight hours. Late that night carrying parties took a semi-hot but none the less welcome meal forward to the men. There was no major advance during the night. C Coy reported that the enemy was using a tractor to pull the 75-millimetre gun back from Pt 169. Two patrols were sent out, neither of which saw any sign of the enemy. One patrol from B Coy climbed Pt 169 and continued on to some houses in the valley beyond it but saw nothing suspicious.

Early on the 29th a special two-day mess-tin ration was issued to each man. The battalion was ordered to send out daylight patrols as the enemy was thought to be withdrawing to the [Castelfrentano](#) Ridge. To discover whether the hills north and north-west of C Coy were occupied, small patrols probed forward about 1500 yards but saw nothing except empty dugouts and signs of a hasty withdrawal. Working in close touch with the battalions on either flank, Col Fountaine moved two companies forward at dusk, D Coy to Pt 172 on the left flank and B Coy to Pt 207, a fairly prominent feature north of C Coy. Later in the night hot stew was sent forward in canisters to the companies and the men had their first really hot meal in 48 hours. Some greatcoats also arrived. Except for a short period of heavy shelling during which two men suffered concussion, the night passed without event. Patrols sent out saw no sign of the enemy.

The last day of the month was fine and sunny. The 6th Brigade bridge over the [Sangro](#) had been completed during the night, and in the morning the supporting arms came forward to join the companies. Greatcoats and some blankets were brought across the river. Patrols were sent out and on their return the advance was continued. The 24th Battalion had replaced 25 Battalion on the immediate left flank and, with 26 Battalion, moved directly towards [Castelfrentano](#). By nightfall a line had been established about 1000 yards beyond Pt 207. The rest of the battalion also moved forward, C Coy to Pt 207, A Coy to Pt 217, and Battalion HQ to a house on the forward slope of Pt 207. Light mortaring had not hampered the advance but mines again took a toll, one man being killed and seven wounded. Tanks moving up the clay road which wound through the hills had not been able to keep pace with the infantry.

Two patrols sent out after dusk ventured within a few hundred yards of the village without meeting enemy troops, although they saw many empty dugouts.

They examined the road, Route 84, running along the crest of the ridge and found it badly pitted and blocked by a demolition near the village. The ground on either side of the demolition was too soggy for tanks to cross it. There were several trip wires in the vicinity.

The weather continued to be fine and Allied planes passed overhead frequently during 1 December. Enemy aircraft made one brief appearance and attempted to machine-gun the infantry, but accurate anti-aircraft fire drove them off. During the day hostile shelling and mortaring increased considerably but the battalion escaped with only one casualty. Brigadier Parkinson visited Battalion HQ and discussed with Col Fountaine plans to continue the advance. During the night an attempt was to be made to gain a foothold on the ridge. C Coy moved forward at 10.30 p.m. to within a short distance of the road running along the crest of the ridge. About 400 yards away was [Castelfrentano](#). Light mortar fire encountered during the stiff climb up the ridge did not hamper the company as much as tangled wire, mines, and the heavy load carried by each man.

Later in the night a party from 14 Platoon entered the village and made a rough search of it. Seven prisoners, three of them wounded, were rounded up and taken back to C Coy HQ. By daybreak six more prisoners, all from 146 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, [65 Division](#), had been captured, raising the total to 45. About nine o'clock next morning A Coy moved up the ridge and took up a position close to the village on the left of C Coy. At approximately the same time C Coy 24 Battalion entered the village unopposed.

The capture of [Castelfrentano](#) and the ridge east of it ended the first phase of the attack across the [Sangro](#). In its first action in [Italy](#) the battalion had had to contend with adverse weather. It was perhaps as well the fighting had not been severe. Excluding the man taken prisoner on 23 November, casualties totalled 39—seven killed and 32 wounded, four of them mortally. The unexpectedly light opposition encountered during the advance had given the recent reinforcements much more confidence, which was to stand them in good stead in the difficult days ahead. The 'old hands' knew that the enemy had withdrawn only because a better defence line lay behind him—and they were right. The enemy's [Winter Line](#) was based on a second high ridge which ran north-east from [Guardiagrele](#), through the

town of Orsogna, to Arielli and Ortona. The approaches to this ridge were very difficult, particularly for guns and vehicles, and were almost wholly under enemy observation. While the Divisional Cavalry moved north-east along the Castelfrentano road towards Lanciano and 4 Armoured Brigade made a thrust towards Guardiagrele, the two infantry brigades re-grouped to continue the assault.

¹ 2 Lt A. A. McClean; born NZ 11 Mar 1916; public accountant; wounded 15 Jul 1942; killed in action 31 Mar 1944.

² Capt H. H. Lawrence, m.i.d.; Kaikoura; born Wellington, 6 Mar 1921; clerk; twice wounded.

³ WO II A. B. Carlson; Oamaru; born Glenavy, 29 Apr 1912; rabbitier.

⁴ It was later ascertained that one man had been killed and the other captured.

⁵ Lt O. A. Frampton; Hira, Nelson; born Palmerston North, 1 Jun 1916; farmer; wounded 24 Dec 1943.

⁶ Appointments on eve of attack were:

CO: Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine

2 i/c: Maj H. J. Horrell

Adjt: Capt A. W. Barnett

QM: Lt M. Joel

Padre: Rev. H. S. Scott

MO: Capt I. H. Fletcher

Signals: 2 Lt S. M. Pritchard

OC A Coy: Maj B. R. Bullôt

OC B Coy: Maj R. S. Smith

OC C Coy: Maj F. M. Ollivier

OC D Coy: Maj A. Molineaux

OC HQ Coy: Capt J. R. Williams

Support: Capt G. T. Kain

⁷ Sgt E. C. Ross, m.i.d.; Invercargill; born Nightcaps, 22 Jan 1917; police constable; wounded 16 Mar 1944.

⁸ Maj B. J. Matson, MM; Hamilton; born Wanganui, 26 Sep 1918; lorry driver; wounded four times.

⁹ Lt J. I. M. Smail, MC; Berwick-on-Tweed, England; born Christchurch, 21 Aug 1920; clerk; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 13 – THE BATTLE FOR ORSOGNA

CHAPTER 13

The Battle for Orsogna

WHILE 24 and 25 Battalions advanced west towards Orsogna and Guardiagrele, 26 Battalion assembled in Castelfrentano. C Coy moved into some houses in the eastern end of the village and A Coy occupied some empty dugouts. The rest of the battalion trudged up the steep slopes of the ridge to join C Coy. During the afternoon the unit transport and the balance of the supporting arms arrived. B Echelon also moved forward. The villagers, poorly clothed and hungry, gave the troops a warm welcome. Many of them had been forced by the Germans to work on the extensive fortifications in the vicinity. Rows of deep and elaborate dugouts capable of housing hundreds of men ran along the ridge. These had received special attention from Allied aircraft and over thirty German dead were found. One of Padre's Scott's first tasks on arriving in the village was to bury these men. Mail and parcels were distributed and wet clothing changed; beards were shaved off and everyone had a good clean up. There was scarcely any enemy shelling during the early part of the day, but late in the afternoon his gunners began firing on a section of Route 84 west of the village, the famous 'Mad Mile'. C Coy reported one man wounded by shell splinters. Enemy planes flew overhead on a number of occasions, but they did not attempt to attack the village and were usually driven off by the ever-present Spitfires.

Sixth Brigade's next objective could be clearly seen from Castelfrentano. Only four miles away Orsogna, perched high on a steep-sided hill, towered over the surrounding countryside, giving the enemy a commanding view of the deep valley which divided the two ridges. North-east of the town several spurs and ridges extended from the main ridge into this valley. A narrow clay road, known as the Roman road, crossed the valley. It branched off Route 84 at a point about half a mile west of Castelfrentano, descended sharply into the valley, crossed the Moro River, and climbed the steep slopes of a ridge linking Orsogna and Lanciano.

By nightfall 25 Battalion, moving west along Route 84, had reached a point about two miles beyond Castelfrentano; 24 Battalion had crossed the valley via the Roman road and advanced to within two miles of Orsogna. Both battalions had encountered slight opposition and had dug in to await the arrival of supporting arms.

The 19th Armoured Regiment, driving north-east up the [Moro](#) valley, had overrun several enemy positions. The tanks had no infantry with them and some of the enemy troops were able to escape. A blown bridge about a mile from the Roman road brought the armour to a stop and the tanks were unable to link up with [24 Battalion](#). Interrogation of the prisoners revealed that the 26th Panzer Division, one of the best German formations in [Italy](#), had been moved in to support the battered 65th Division. Everyone knew that future advances would be hotly contested.

During the evening orders were issued for [25 Battalion](#) to attack and occupy [Orsogna](#) at dawn the following morning, 3 December. The 26th Battalion, in reserve, was to leave Castelfrentano at daybreak and take up a position between the [Moro](#) River and the ridge which linked [Orsogna](#) and [Lanciano](#). So while the men of 26 Battalion slept in reasonable comfort, 25 Battalion retraced its steps down Route 84, crossed the valley and the river (in reality only a small stream), and climbed the ridge. Tanks joined [25 Battalion](#) and at dawn the assault was launched on the town.

The artillery was still firing at 7 a.m. when 26 Battalion set off on foot down Route 84, the machine-gun, mortar and anti-tank platoons accompanying the rifle companies. Although the men were marching along a road in full view of the enemy gunners there was little shell or mortar fire, probably because the enemy was occupied with events nearer at hand. The Roman road was steep and muddy, which made it difficult for those carrying the heavier loads to keep pace with the others. No difficulty was experienced in crossing the stream in the bed of the valley. As B Coy in the lead neared [24 Battalion](#) HQ, word was received that [25 Battalion](#)'s attack had failed. The tanks had been unable to move far along the crest of the ridge and the assault had been made by one company, which had suffered heavy casualties before it was forced to withdraw. Colonel Fountaine ordered his companies to disperse until the situation was clarified. Later in the day, with the position unchanged, the men dug in, A Coy on the reverse slope of the ridge on the left of the Roman road, B Coy and Battalion HQ on the right of the road, with C and D Coys behind them on the lower ground. Some of the platoons occupied houses.

During the afternoon a working party from 18 Platoon was sent back across the stream to unload 75-millimetre shells and carry them through a narrow defile, where a Bren carrier was waiting to take them forward to the Shermans with 25 Battalion. Unluckily, soon after the party got started enemy gunners fired several heavy

concentrations on the road. Before the platoon could scatter two men had been killed and another wounded. The driver of the carrier was fatally injured. The unit transport, which was supposed to be following the infantry, had also been unfortunate. After being delayed in Castelfrentano by heavy shelling, the column had set out along Route 84. The slow-moving vehicles drew enemy fire, and before the trip was abandoned one truck had been hit. One man was killed and two others, including Padre Scott, wounded. B Echelon had also had its share of bad luck. An Italian woman had been wounded on a mine, and two men who went to assist her were killed. Both were veterans of [Alamein](#) and their loss was keenly felt. Towards dusk shelling and mortaring increased and three men were wounded, one fatally. This brought the day's casualties to ten, including six killed. At dusk a jeep raced across the valley with a hot meal for the forward troops.

After the setback to [25 Battalion](#), plans were made to launch a full-scale assault on [Orsogna](#) and the ridge ([Cemetery Ridge](#)) running north-east from it. Several days elapsed before preparations were complete, and during this period supplies were built up and the engineers worked hard to repair and build roads which would allow tanks and guns to come forward to support the infantry. Rain on the 4th and light showers two days later caused the [Sangro](#) to flood, and traffic was temporarily dislocated. The rain also limited air operations and made the task of the engineers much more difficult. The sappers worked most of the time in full view of enemy gunners. Gains were made on both flanks. On the right [Lanciano](#) was captured. Several attempts were made to reach the [Guardiagrele- Orsogna](#) road on the left flank, but although some ground was gained the road remained in enemy hands. The 2nd (British) Paratroop Brigade came under command and took over the left-hand sector, enabling [General Freyberg](#) to concentrate his Division along a narrower front.

During this lull the battalion remained in its positions on the reverse slope of the ridge. Wherever possible platoons occupied houses or barns, manning trenches at night. An outpost of platoon strength was maintained on the right flank of 24 Battalion. The men, accompanied by a detachment of Vickers gunners, dug in along a spur in full view of the enemy but were not seriously troubled by hostile fire. Enemy gunners concentrated more on the roads, and all traffic moving to and from [Castelfrentano](#) had to run the gauntlet of heavy fire. Drivers wasted no time,

speeding past danger points. Whenever tanks or bulldozers began moving about in the vicinity, the battalion sector was heavily shelled and mortared; one man in B Coy was wounded. On the evening of the 3rd sufficient blankets were brought forward to permit the issue of one to each man. Mail was also distributed.

Several reconnaissance patrols were sent out to try to find a track by which tanks could bypass [Orsogna](#). On the 4th a party from A Coy, accompanied by tank officers, examined tracks on the lower slopes of the ridge leading to [Orsogna](#). They found plenty of cover for infantry but nothing suitable for tanks. Two days later a larger party moved through the valley as far as the hill on which the town was built but found nothing suitable. Four men from C Coy tried again that night but had to admit failure. No enemy troops were encountered, although some of the houses entered showed signs of earlier occupation by troops.

By dusk on the 6th plans for an assault on [Orsogna](#) had been completed. Three battalions, two from 5 Brigade and one from 6 Brigade, were to take part. They would be assisted by an aerial and artillery bombardment, the weight of the former depending on the weather. The 24th Battalion was to make a frontal attack on the town, while the Maoris on the right moved up Pascuccio Spur to gain a foothold on [Cemetery Ridge](#). To create a diversion and protect the right flank of the Division, [23 Battalion](#) was directed to [Sfasciata Ridge](#), one of the spurs running down into the [Moro](#) valley to the right rear of the Maoris' objective. By seizing part of the [Orsogna-Ortona](#) road the New Zealanders would prevent the enemy reinforcing his troops in [Orsogna](#) by this route. Should [24 Battalion's](#) attack fail, the ridge could be used as an approach for further attacks which would eventually isolate the town.

To provide a firm base in the event of any enemy counter-attack and be in a position to exploit any gains made by the assaulting troops, [26 Battalion](#) was to move forward and occupy [24 Battalion's](#) sector after the attack had begun. The Signals Platoon of [26 Battalion](#) was also given the responsibility of maintaining communications between [24 Battalion](#) and Brigade HQ. As the bombardment was not to begin until 1 p.m., the troops had plenty of time to prepare for the move. Early on the 7th the skies clouded over and little was seen of Allied fighters and bombers during the morning. At 1 p.m. the 25-pounders opened fire, and they were still hammering away three hours later when [26 Battalion](#) began to move forward. A Coy, in the lead, swung over to the right to occupy the forward slope of the

[Brecciarola Ridge](#), only 1600 yards from the town. D Coy was a short distance to the rear and nearer the road. B and C Coys remained in reserve about 200–300 yards behind the leaders. Battalion HQ was set up in a house near C Coy. Tank movement behind the sector drew heavy fire on the battalion, one man being killed and another wounded.

Up-to-date news of the struggle for the town was being received from the assaulting battalion. The road leading to the town was under fire, and tanks and troops could be seen moving about near its entrance. The maintenance of the line to 24 Battalion HQ was in the hands of Pte [Officer](#), ¹ who went forward several times to repair the breaks caused by the heavy shelling and mortaring. Largely due to his efforts an almost constant link was kept with the assaulting unit, and this enabled the supporting arms to give the maximum assistance to those fighting in the town.

The struggle continued through the afternoon into the night. At one time it seemed the town would fall. The 24th Battalion infantry reached the square but the enemy counter-attacked, using flame-throwers and tanks, and drove them back. Almost every house was occupied by the enemy and many of the doors and windows were booby-trapped. The Shermans had not been able to get past the entrance to the town because of demolitions and mines. As a result the infantry had to fight on their own. Late that night they withdrew, the assaulting companies going behind 26 Battalion's sector and the other two to a position several hundred yards in front of A and D Coys. On the right the Maoris had captured their objective on [Cemetery Ridge](#), but the failure of the frontal attack on the town, combined with heavy ground conditions which prevented tanks and supporting arms from reaching them, compelled their withdrawal. Like 24 Battalion they had suffered heavy casualties. The only redeeming feature was [23 Battalion's](#) capture of [Sfasciata Ridge](#).

After this failure frontal attacks on [Orsogna](#) were abandoned. Instead preparations were made to isolate the town by extending the gains made by [23 Battalion](#). A fortnight went by before 26 Battalion was called on to take part in these operations, and during this lull the companies continued to hold positions on the [Brecciarola Ridge](#). Heavy rain on a number of occasions immobilised the armour and caused widespread flooding. The bad weather made conditions in the forward sectors very unpleasant. On the 8th B and C Coys relieved the forward companies of

24 Battalion and were compelled to man trenches day and night. Being only about 1200 yards from the town and under observation from **Cemetery Ridge**, they were not able to move around much in daylight. For them the rain meant wet clothes and little protection from the cold winds. Wherever possible the rest of the battalion occupied houses during the day and trenches at night. Although enemy shelling was never very heavy, the CO arranged for the reserve companies to take a turn in the forward sectors every day or so. A roster system amongst platoons was introduced to man an outpost on the **Pascuccio Ridge**; its purpose was to prevent any attempt by the enemy to penetrate between the Brecciarola and Sfasciata positions.

A constant watch was kept on movement in **Orsogna** and along **Cemetery Ridge**. Almost every night patrols were sent out to examine the road leading to the town or find a route for tanks to bypass it. **Orsogna** and the surrounding areas had been divided into artillery fire tasks, and the heavy mortars and 25- pounders were frequently called on to fire one or other of them. Enemy guns were seldom silent but, like their planes, they concentrated more on the rear areas. Jeep drivers who brought hot meals, mail, and supplies forward from **Castelfrentano** continued to run the gauntlet of heavy fire. They did not always escape unscathed. Major Horrell was wounded at the notorious Hell- fire Corner and the battalion lost its only 'original' officer. Despite these dangers meals arrived regularly, and one evening Mr. Gray came forward with an issue of chocolate and cigarettes.

Patrolling was an unpleasant task for it had to be carried out during the cold of the night and generally along a route covered by enemy gunners. A patrol of three men, which set out to locate a route to bypass **Orsogna** along the southern slopes of the ridge on which the battalion was stationed, met trouble. Led by Lt **Morrison**,² the party scrambled down the steep sides of the ridge into the **Moro** valley and, following a rough track, circled around the town and approached it from the rear. Just as Morrison, in the lead, rounded a corner a grenade or mine exploded. Flares lit up the area and voices could be heard close at hand. Unable to find out what had happened to the platoon commander, the remaining members of the party retired quickly and later returned to the lines. Morrison was posted missing. Every night, and sometimes twice a night, small parties were sent out to ascertain if the enemy was remaining the road on the outskirts of the town. During the unsuccessful attack on the 7th, sappers had lifted many mines and had partially filled in one of the large

demolitions which had blocked the passage of the Shermans. By the 20th details of this stretch of road were well known to most of the men. On the roadside was an abandoned dump covered with branches and containing enemy ammunition and equipment; closer to the town was a demolition with an abandoned Sherman nearby; and beyond it and past some houses were two other large road craters which together barred the passage of armour. Although working parties were heard, the patrols were seldom fired on and no mines were seen.

Four events of note occurred during the period and the battalion was directly concerned in three of them. On 9 December, the day after [24 Battalion](#) moved into reserve, A Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment moved past C Coy and shelled [Orsogna](#). The enemy quickly retaliated, and C Coy men crouching in their trenches listened apprehensively as shells crashed down all around them. One tank was hit and the company lost three men. For an hour, long after the tanks had withdrawn, the enemy continued his bombardment. Six days later, on the morning of the 15th, the assault on [Cemetery Ridge](#) was resumed by [25 Battalion](#) and 5 Brigade, with armoured support. All objectives were taken after prolonged fighting, but exploitation by tanks and infantry was prevented by stubborn defence and enemy counter-attacks. The troops encountered were of a different calibre from those who offered a token resistance earlier in the campaign. Anti-tank guns, cleverly sited, took a heavy toll of the Shermans. Nevertheless the gains were held and one of the enemy's main supply routes, the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road, was blocked.

The attack and enemy counter-attacks extended into the 16th but by nightfall the battle had quietened down. The following day an artillery OP at the entrance to the town reported no sign of the enemy in the vicinity. Colonel Fountaine was ordered to send a company into the town to ascertain if the enemy had vacated it wholly or in part. Two squadrons from 20 Armoured Regiment were to accompany the infantry. D Coy, which was chosen for the task, was on its way by 9.30 a.m., 18 Platoon leading, followed by 16 Platoon. Three Shermans were nearby. An hour later the company was at the demolition and Maj Molineaux reported no sign of the enemy. No. 18 Platoon crossed over to the right-hand side of the road into better cover and began to approach the town itself. The first few houses were empty, and the men were beginning to think that the enemy had really left when they ran into a minefield. Several 'S' mines shot into the air but failed to explode. Sobered by this

escape the platoon began to move more carefully through the field, when a German was seen in the doorway of one of the houses. He yelled to someone inside the house and the platoon raced to cover behind a haystack.

To the surprise of the men crouching behind the haystack the enemy concentrated his fire on 16 Platoon, which was still coming up the road. Within a few minutes the road was empty save for the three tanks held up at the demolition. Sappers and infantrymen had disappeared from sight, some to a pink house and others to whatever cover was nearest. One man, a platoon sergeant, had been wounded. While this was going on 18 Platoon had been digging in. Some of the men had to lift mines to do this, so thickly had the enemy laid them. Before the task had been completed the enemy was firing heavy concentrations on the road and the ground to the right of it. Two of the tanks were hit and communication lost with the remainder. No. 18 Platoon's haystack was set on fire—a fortunate occurrence as the smoke from it allowed some of the men to withdraw to safer ground.

Unaware of what had happened to the forward platoons, 17 Platoon was moving along the road accompanied by a second troop of tanks. They, too, came under heavy fire and were forced to take cover. The tanks attempted to run the gauntlet but one by one they were hit or disabled on mines. Matters reached a stalemate. Neither side could move without showing himself to the other, but the enemy had the advantage of knowing approximately where the New Zealanders were. Colonel Fountaine, not certain of the exact location of his company, could not call down close artillery support. Instead, [6 Field Regiment](#) laid a smoke screen over the town in an effort to neutralise the enemy fire, and also fired heavy concentrations on known gun positions. The company survived the afternoon without further casualties and at dusk withdrew from the town into reserve. A strong party was left at the demolition to guard the disabled tanks.

Two days later the battalion was relieved by [24 Battalion](#) and moved into reserve. The companies moved off after dusk and marched to [Castelfrentano](#), where they occupied comfortable billets. It was a cold night for marching and the hot cup of cocoa provided by the [YMCA](#) was welcomed. Cold, wet trenches were soon forgotten as mail was opened and accumulated parcels distributed. Eighteen casualties had been suffered during the fortnight. The eight killed or mortally wounded included two platoon commanders—Lt Morrison, who was believed killed, and Lt [Lindsay](#),³ who

together with several other men in his platoon had been hit by a shell from a 25-pounder firing short. Following the evacuation of Maj Horrell, Maj Ollivier had become second-in-command and Capt J. R. Williams had taken over C Coy. Capt D. C. Piper commanded A Coy.

* * *

The spell was very short. After dusk on the 21st the battalion returned to the line, relieving [25 Battalion](#) in a reserve sector on the right rear of [24 Battalion](#). The seven-mile march from the village was long and tedious for many of the men were suffering from diarrhoea, the after-effects of rich food and potent wines. The companies were deployed along the crest of the ridge forward of the [Lanciano-Orsogna](#) road, with A Coy on the left and the others at intervals to the right. There had been some heavy rain during the previous few days and the weather had become much colder. Fortunately, being in a reserve sector the men were able to occupy the barns and houses in the company areas. In these they sought shelter and warmth but had to put up with fleas, lice, and rats. Italian peasants still occupied the houses and, despite shelling and mortaring, showed no inclination to leave their possessions. They were poor and almost destitute—the Germans had robbed them of their livestock and food—but they gave freely of what they had. Even hardened soldiers who had fought Italians in the desert could not withstand the mute appeal of the hungry, barefooted children.

Everyone had given up the thought of spending Christmas Day in any other place than the front line but took comfort in the knowledge that the new sector was a reserve one and seldom troubled by enemy gunners. However, unknown to the men plans to extend the [Cemetery Ridge](#) salient had been completed, and for the first time in its history [26 Battalion](#) was to take part in an attack under the command of 5 Brigade. Three battalions, the 21st, 26th and 28th, were to take part in the assault, which was scheduled to begin before dawn on 24 December. A platoon from C and D Coys, plus a skeleton Battalion HQ under the command of Maj Molineaux, set out after dusk on the 22nd to relieve D Coy [28 Battalion](#). After an exhausting three-hour march over hills and gullies along tracks often knee deep in mud, the party reached the Maoris' sector near the [Orsogna-Ortona](#) road.

The Maoris moved out and the troops occupied the empty trenches, which they

manned for the next 24 hours until the rest of the battalion arrived. It was a cold and miserable wait. The German lines were in places only a short distance away and strong pickets had to be maintained. This meant that each man had to remain on duty twelve of the twenty-four hours. Sleep, even in off-duty hours, was impossible. The cold was intense and the silence was broken many times by the rattle of a spandau or the crash of an exploding shell. Those few who had brought greatcoats were much more comfortable. At dawn movement was practically impossible. The day was fine but heavy clouds kept the Allied fighters and bombers on the ground. Free from the danger of air strafing, enemy gunners were on the alert for any movement and they made conditions very uncomfortable for the advanced party. Early in the afternoon a thick ground mist enveloped the ridge and increased the danger of an enemy counter-attack. There were no houses in the vicinity and not even a hot cup of tea could be brewed. Although the advanced party did without sleep and shivered with the cold, the men in it were perhaps more fortunate than the rest of the battalion, who had to march over the same track in pitch-black darkness and go into action almost immediately after their arrival at the [Orsogna-Ortona](#) road.

Orders for the proposed attack had been given. It was being made in accordance with the policy of remaining on the offensive during the winter to keep the enemy from consolidating and building a strong chain of defences. Fifth Brigade's commander, [Brig Kippenberger](#), had decided to attack with [21 Battalion](#) on the right, [26 Battalion](#) in the centre, and the Maoris on the left. The 5th Brigade battalions had been almost continuously in action since the battle for [Orsogna](#) began, and [23 Battalion](#) had been withdrawn because of heavy casualties. The objective of the brigade was the [Fontegrande Ridge](#), west of the [Orsogna-Ortona](#) road, and another unnamed ridge beyond it. Roads ran along the crests of both these ridges, and their capture would open the way for further exploitation to complete the encirclement of [Orsogna](#). Although a barrage would be fired, the infantry would have to capture their objectives without help from the armoured regiments because of the state of the ground. Not until the Maoris had taken their objective would the tanks be able to move along the roads on the crest of each ridge. Both ridges were likely to be hotly contested. The 65th Division had been reinforced and the German commander had brought in fresh and aggressive troops, the 334th Division, to which were attached some parachute training units.

The battalion was to form up behind the [Ortona](#) road and the railway line which ran parallel to it and advance on a front of approximately 1400 yards to the objectives, 1000–1500 yards away. Reconnaissance of the area had not been possible but maps and intelligence reports indicated that the attack would be difficult, particularly should the night be dark. The 26th Battalion was further handicapped through not having seen the ground in daylight.⁴ From the road and the railway the ground sloped up fairly sharply towards the first ridge. It was broken and heavily cultivated country containing several steep-sided gullies covered with brush. On the crest of [Fontegrande Ridge](#) were many vineyards, each row of vines supported by wire fences—an obvious place for the enemy to set booby traps. A narrow, steep-sided gully divided the two ridges. Through this gully ran the [Arielli](#) stream, the width and depth of which was unknown. The second ridge was not unlike the first and contained two fairly prominent hill features, both likely strongpoints. One of these, Pt 387, was in the battalion sector and was B Coy's objective.

The attack was divided into two phases: first, the capture of [Fontegrande Ridge](#) and, after a pause, an assault on the second ridge. Because of casualties and sickness the rifle companies were below strength; to cover the sector adequately Col Fontaine decided to commit all four to the assault, each moving from different start points. C and D Coys, the former on the left, were to follow directly behind the barrage and consolidate on Fontegrande. A and B Coys were to follow and continue through to the final objective. A Coy, on the left, was to capture a group of houses on the extreme left flank and extend across to B Coy on Pt 387, about 300 yards to the right. As it was not possible to point out landmarks, each company commander was given a fixed distance to travel and a compass bearing to follow. Twenty-five minutes would separate the departure of the first company and the last, and as each one would be following a different route, it was unlikely they would encounter one another until they reached their objectives.

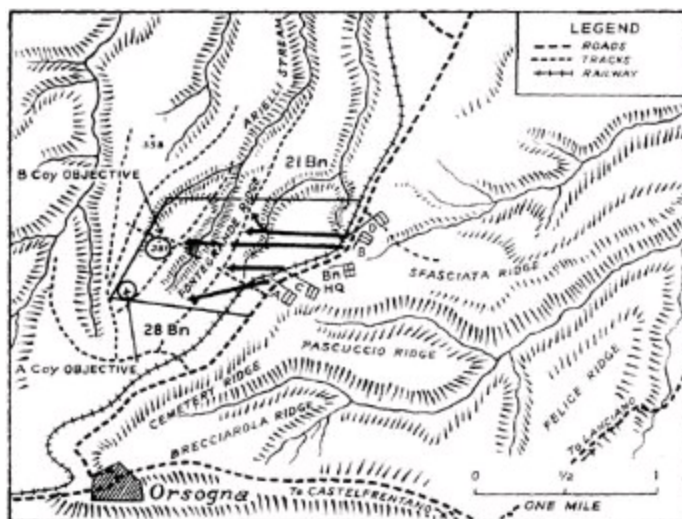
Strong artillery support had been promised. Heavy concentrations were to be laid on known enemy strongpoints and a full-scale barrage would be fired. The battalion three-inch mortars were to be manhandled onto Fontegrande to support the two companies dug in there. No. 12 Platoon 27 (MG) Battalion, which was still with the battalion, was also to move forward. The problem of getting the anti-tank

guns onto the ridge was much more difficult. The Carrier Platoon was likely to be fully occupied bringing supplies, etc., from the [Orsogna](#) sector and would not be able to tow the guns up the slope. To overcome this some carriers from [28 Battalion](#) were made available. The Anti-Aircraft Platoon was to assist the sappers with the important task of clearing mines so that the tanks could get through to all four companies before daylight. It was expected that some difficulty would be experienced with wireless sets in such rugged country, so linesmen were detailed to follow the leading companies and lay lines to the first objectives.

Generally before an attack of this nature, company commanders are given an opportunity to study the ground to be covered and the troops a chance to freshen up. In this instance this was not possible. Instead the battalion had to complete a gruelling march on the eve of the assault. The men set out from the reserve sector at dusk along the circuitous tracks which led to the 5th Brigade area. By midnight the leading platoons had reached Maj Molineaux's party. The remainder were clambering up the steep slopes of the Sfasciata Spur, along muddy tracks left by jeeps and tanks. The former were making heavy weather of the journey, and many times drivers had to climb out and, with the assistance of passers-by, push their vehicles out of the morass. The troops were heavily laden, but they did not have to overcome the difficulties faced by the Mortar, Signals and Machine Gun platoons. Only by herculean efforts were these platoons able to reach the start line before the barrage began. Weakened by diarrhoea and exhausted by the approach march, all ranks felt more like resting than forming up to take part in what promised to be a difficult action.

Shortly before zero hour everything was ready. A signal link with the battalions on both flanks had been established and the companies were deployed in the vicinity of the railway, the start line for the attack. Major Molineaux's party had broken up and the platoons were back with their respective companies. Misty rain was falling as the weary men waited for the guns to open fire. It was noticeably quiet, ominously so. A few reinforcements had joined the battalion during the afternoon and they reported that civilians in [Castelfrentano](#) had wished them luck in the attack. This news was disquieting, for if the civilians knew of the attack so probably did the Germans. Opposing the battalion were part of [65 Division](#) and some parachute troops.

Sharp at 4 a.m. the guns began firing. Flashes of orange flame stabbed the darkness and the ground trembled as shell after shell crashed down and exploded. Fifteen minutes later D Coy crossed the start line and headed for its objective, 900 yards away. C Coy was the next to move, and it was followed at short intervals by the other companies. All was well at 5 a.m. Company commanders reported they were advancing against light but ineffectual machine-gun fire. Soon afterwards, judging by the few messages received at Col Fontaine's headquarters, the situation changed. Not only were the companies meeting



ATTACK ON FONTEGRANDE RIDGE, 24 DECEMBER 1943

Attack on Fontegrande Ridge, 24 December 1943

stiffer opposition but tangled undergrowth and broken ground were also slowing down the advance. The almost impenetrable darkness forced platoons to bunch up and move more cautiously to keep their line of advance.

At 5.10 a.m. the linesmen attached to C Coy arrived back at the Ortona road. In the darkness they had lost contact with the company. An R/T message was sent to Capt Williams to send back guides, but hours passed before they arrived. C Coy was steadily approaching the crest of Fontegrande Ridge in the face of much heavier machine-gun fire. As the leading platoons, Nos. 13 and 14, neared the road they were fired on from a group of nearby houses. No. 14 Platoon was caught in the open and the platoon commander, Lt Humphries,⁵ and several others were hit. Two of the enemy posts were silenced without much difficulty; the third, stationed in a house about 100 yards from the platoon, continued to fire. Piat bombs were fired through the windows but they failed to explode. When it was obvious the bombs had

misfired, Pte [Tombs](#)⁶ stood up and yelled: 'Let's charge the bastards!' As one man the platoon followed him, bayonets fixed, yelling with excitement. This was too much for the Germans, who set off in the opposite direction. An enemy flare silhouetted them against the skyline and the platoon opened fire, wounding all four.

No. 13 Platoon, on the right, encountered similar opposition and during the fighting became separated from the rest of the company. Lieutenant Frampton, the platoon commander, was wounded charging an enemy post which was quickly cleaned out. Later, unable to find the company, the platoon consolidated on the crest of the ridge. Unaware of this, Capt Williams reported at 5.37 a.m. that he had two platoons on the high ground overlooking the gully and the [Arielli](#) stream. Half an hour later they were astride the track running along the ridge. There was no sign of A Coy, and Capt Williams thought he was possibly too far to the right. Patrols were sent out to locate D Coy on the right flank. As dawn approached hostile machine-gun and mortar fire increased considerably but by this time the men were safely under cover. Contact was made with the missing platoon at daylight.

On the right flank D Coy had reached its objective at 5.13 a.m. No opposition was encountered but sections and platoons had found it extremely difficult to maintain contact. During the scramble across gullies and through a thickly cultivated stretch of country one platoon had gone missing. Later Maj Molineaux reported by telephone that the missing men had turned up and the company was dug in along its objective. Two Germans had been taken prisoner. The left-flank company of [21 Battalion](#) had crossed into the battalion sector and was moving through D Coy to get around an obstacle.

A and B Coys both met trouble. A Coy, advancing along a line slightly to the left of C Coy, did not encounter serious opposition until after it had passed the first objective, although enfilading fire had forced the men to take cover more than once. Because of the darkness the platoons were closely bunched, and this lessened any likelihood of meeting part of C Coy. By 5.35 a.m. the leading platoons had reached the first objective and there was a fairly wide gap between the two companies. When 8 and 9 Platoons attempted to descend into the gully which divided the two ridges, the enemy lit up the area with flares. A few seconds later the troops came under fire from spandaus and mortars sited on the second ridge. The enemy fire

increased in volume and the two platoons were forced to take cover.

At 6 a.m. the situation was unchanged except that the mortar fire had become much heavier. Spandaus were also firing from the right and right rear, indicating that C Coy had either bypassed some enemy posts or had not reached its objective. On the left flank contact had been made with the Maoris, who were also held up. In view of this and the unlikelihood of capturing the second ridge before dawn, Capt Piper wirelessed the Battalion Commander for permission to dig in along the crest of Fontegrande. This was granted and the company consolidated as best it could under heavy fire, houses being occupied wherever possible. Nos. 8 and 9 Platoons remained forward of the track in positions overlooking the gully and the second ridge, while the rest of the company dug in some distance to the rear. The hostile fire did not decrease at dawn and snipers made movement particularly dangerous. For this reason it was 8 a.m. before a reconnaissance party made contact with C Coy.

By 7 a.m. the CO had received details of the positions of A, C, and D Coys. Nothing was known of B Coy, and the absence of news was causing some concern. D Coy had not sighted it and was unable to make wireless contact. The situation became worse when it was learned that the left-flank company of [21 Battalion](#) had been driven off the second ridge. As it seemed certain that the company had continued past [Fontegrande Ridge](#), there was every possibility that it might be isolated on its objective. To the great relief of those at Tac HQ on the [Ortona](#) road a wireless message was received from the missing company at 7.30 a.m. It had met heavy opposition on the crest of the second ridge and was consolidating on the reverse slope. Major Smith had been wounded and was still missing. Later in the morning fuller details of the company's misfortunes were received

The company had set out with 12 Platoon in the lead and No. 11 in support. Company HQ and 10 Platoon followed, the latter carrying tank mines. Moving in close formation, the platoons struggled across gullies and through the undergrowth to reach the first ridge without sighting anyone. No. 12 Platoon was close behind the barrage and the shell holes were still hot and smoking. After a short pause the company moved down into the gully, crossed the small [Arielli](#) stream, and climbed the second ridge. Enemy guns were silent. The men of the company, initially cautious, became more confident and advanced boldly towards the crossroads on the

crest of the ridge. A lone spandau held up progress for a while, but Pte Oram ⁷ crept forward and silenced it with a grenade. Unfortunately Oram was wounded by the explosion.

It was almost dawn by the time the company reached the crossroads. Major Smith called to the leading troops to pull back behind the road and dig in. Suddenly the enemy revealed his presence. Spandaus began firing at close range on all sides and the troops scattered. A house from which the bulk of the fire was coming was cleared at heavy cost, almost half of one platoon becoming casualties. The Company Commander shouted to his men to move back onto the reverse slope of the ridge. Spandaus were now firing from behind the company, and three of these posts had to be cleared before the running men could get back. More casualties were suffered and Maj Smith was seen to fall. On the reverse slope 2 Lt McClean, nearest to Coy HQ, assumed temporary command of the company. The men dug in under heavy fire and then waited for the enemy to follow up his advantage. Daylight revealed that the company had veered to the right of its objective and was dug in on both sides of a cleft on the lower slopes of the ridge. Under observation from the crest of the ridge, the company was not in a very secure position, but it was some comfort to see a company of [21 Battalion](#) only a short distance away.

The advent of daylight and the reassuring news of B Coy gave a clearer picture of the gains made during the night. Both [21](#) and [26 Battalions](#) were firmly astride [Fontegrande Ridge](#) although the supporting arms, except for Vickers gunners, had not reached them. On the left flank the Maoris, after suffering heavy losses, had wrested the vital road junction from the enemy. It was now possible for tanks to move along the crest of Fontegrande in support of the infantry. Only two companies, C Coy [21 Battalion](#) and B Coy [26 Battalion](#), had succeeded in crossing the [Arielli](#) stream. Neither had been able to hold the crest of the second ridge but both were dug in along the reverse slope. B Coy was only 58 strong and C Coy [21 Battalion](#) could muster scarcely a platoon. The Brigade Commander was in favour of withdrawing them from their exposed positions, but [General Freyberg](#) decided they should hold their ground. In view of this B Coy was ordered to move to the right and establish closer liaison with the [21st Battalion](#) troops.

On [Fontegrande Ridge](#) A, C, and D Coys had established contact with each

other, and they reported heavy shell and mortar fire. Every few minutes spandaus would open fire and snipers also were very active, restricting movement particularly amongst the forward platoons. Shortly before 8.30 a.m. several tanks of [20 Armoured Regiment](#) reached A Coy. They attracted heavy fire but no casualties were suffered from it. A characteristic action by Cpl Smail won admiration. He climbed on a Sherman and stood there for some time directing fire on a number of enemy posts that had been troubling his company. Later the tanks moved north along the crest of the ridge engaging targets pointed out to them by the infantry. One tank remained with D Coy for the rest of the day, giving B Coy added protection but drawing heavy fire on D Coy.

Although the enemy was obviously holding the second ridge in some strength, the opposition on Fontegrande had not been as heavy as expected. The battalion's casualties had been fairly light; they totalled 30, including four killed. B Coy had fared worst, losing twelve men, including the four killed. Major Smith had been mortally wounded and his body was later recovered. A Coy reported six men wounded and one missing (later confirmed prisoner of war) and C Coy four wounded. The remaining casualties had been suffered by the specialist platoons. Twenty-two prisoners had been taken, more than half of them by B Coy. They were identified as belonging to [65 Division](#) and a parachute training unit. About half of them were wounded and their evacuation, together with those of the battalion's wounded, presented quite a problem.

Because no suitable place could be found nearer at hand, the RAP had been set up in a house about a mile from the [Ortona](#) road. This meant a long and tiring trudge for stretcher-bearers even after they had left the firing line. B Coy in its exposed position could ill afford men to evacuate its own and enemy wounded. As some of the casualties required urgent medical attention, the acting Company Commander sent a few men who, assisted by the German prisoners, managed to evacuate them all early in the morning. The forward platoons of A Coy were also under close observation from the second ridge and the evacuation of their casualties was most difficult. In all cases the medical orderlies and stretcher-bearers responded splendidly and, despite the heavy mortar fire, evacuated wounded with a minimum waste of time. They were assisted by a light fog which for a time cloaked their movements. The fog also aided the linesmen trying to link the companies by

telephone. Mortar fire was heavy and lines were constantly being cut. In such rough country breaks were difficult to detect and the linesmen's task was very unpleasant.

Although the tanks reduced enemy fire, they could offer no relief from the penetrating cold. Few of the men had worn greatcoats into the action and others bitterly regretted their lack of foresight. Those who could warmed themselves by digging their trenches deeper. The fog lasted all morning, giving way after midday to dark clouds and then to heavy showers Christmas Eve 1943 was not a pleasant one. Those men not in houses cursed the weather as they sat shivering in their open trenches. Later in the day most of them were able to move into houses to dry out. In between showers a few fowls and rabbits were caught and cooked to supplement the hard rations. No. 14 Platoon went one better. A noise was heard in one of the empty dugouts not far away, and Pte Tombs moved quietly across with rifle and bayonet fixed expecting to collect another prisoner. He was very surprised to find that the dugout's sole occupant was a medium-sized pig tethered to a stake. Pork was served the next day.

During the day mules carried the three-inch mortars onto the ridge. Immediately they were in position company commanders gave them fire tasks. With tanks, mortars and Vickers in support, the rifle companies were more secure. B Coy was having a trying time, exposed to the weather and continually harassed by snipers and mortars. A patrol sent out during the morning to make contact with the Maoris about a mile away encountered heavy machine-gun fire near Pt 387 and was forced to turn back. At B Echelon Capt [Joel](#)⁸ and his staff were busy sorting heaps of fowls in a barn. Despite the difficulty of supply, they were determined that Christmas Day should be celebrated with a special meal. Getting this forward to the men was a problem, but one which the QM staff had become used to facing. Jeeps were to carry it as far as a forward B Echelon established not far from the RAP, and mules the rest of the way.

Shortly before dusk enemy gunners shelled the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road. For ten minutes shells fell all around Tac HQ without hitting anybody. On Fontegrande shells and bombs were exploding in all directions. For a while it was thought the sudden increase in the firing was a prelude to a counter-attack, but nothing happened. Counter-battery fire quietened the enemy gunners who, however, repeated the dose at intervals throughout the night. As dusk fell B Coy received some good news. The

25th Battalion was relieving [21 Battalion](#) on the right flank and would also take over B Coy's position. About 9 p.m. D Coy [25 Battalion](#) moved past Tac HQ on the way to relieve the forward troops. Half an hour later mules crossed the [Ortona](#) road carrying a hot meal to the companies, B Coy's being held at Tac HQ. Greatcoats and a few accessories also carried by the mules were eagerly claimed by their owners. During the night slight adjustments were made to company positions and these enabled more of the men to occupy houses. A patrol covered the ground between A Coy and the Maoris.

In comparison with the 24th, Christmas Day was quiet and peaceful with desultory exchanges of fire during the morning. Late in the afternoon 8 Platoon reported that the enemy had moved forward. Pickets had sighted troops only 200 yards away. A heavy mortar concentration was laid down on the area and no attack followed. After dusk Capt Piper was evacuated to hospital and Capt A. J. Fraser assumed command of the company. The responsibility for the sector had passed to 6 Brigade which retained the Maoris under command. All plans to continue the assault were abandoned and the line remained stationary throughout the rest of the battalion's stay in the area.

* * *

Rain fell at frequent intervals during the next few days and company commanders did everything possible to get their men into houses or barns, which were manned as strongpoints. Picket duty, whether outside in trenches or upstairs in houses, was a cold, unpleasant task, but it was much worse for the men on patrols. In addition to the small party which kept an all-night vigil on the left flank, patrols were sent on two successive nights to the crossroads where B Coy had been checked. The first one, comprising three men from D Coy, went out on the night of the 26th. They examined the road but withdrew quickly when they heard voices nearby. Twenty-four hours later four men from 14 Platoon, following a similar route, found the enemy more alert and were forced to retire before they reached the road. No more patrols were sent along this route. Instead an outpost of seven men was established in the vicinity of B Coy's old sector to protect the left flank of [25 Battalion](#), which was still holding the [Arielli](#) stream salient. Each morning when the seven men were relieved and returned to the lines, they had little to report except

that they had been almost frozen during their night in the open. The section chosen for this duty on New Year's Eve probably never spent a more unpleasant night

Enemy shelling and mortaring continued as before although not as severe. On occasions the sector would be subjected to a heavy pounding, and during some of these bombardments casualties were suffered. Sergeant Menzies, a veteran NCO highly regarded by all who knew him and who had seen service in all the desert actions, was amongst those listed as killed. When a line was reported broken late one night Menzies and another signaller volunteered to repair it. A search party later found the sergeant dead and the signaller desperately wounded. Until the 29th C Coy's sector was singled out as a target for very heavy mortar fire. The battalion mortars and the 25- pounders fired concentrations on enemy mortar sites and at length succeeded in quietening them. The nervous strain and hardships of the past weeks were having an effect on the health and morale of the troops. After Christmas Capt Fletcher and his staff became busier than ever as more and more men were evacuated to hospital with various ailments, chiefly attributable to the conditions under which the troops had been and were living. A night seldom passed without some sort of scare: the sound of shells exploding close by or an alarmed picket blazing away at the snapping of a twig or an imagined shadow. The slightest noise was sufficient to bring down enemy mortar fire. There was always the fear of an unexpected attack by the enemy, dug in only a few hundred yards away.

To ease this strain and enable the men of one company to get an occasional night's sleep, sectors were interchanged, the fourth company going back to B Echelon for a rest. As each company moved into reserve, the cooks provided a belated Christmas dinner which was none the less welcome. B Coy, under the command of Capt D. P. W. Harvey, returned to the line on the 26th and relieved A Coy. C Coy went out on the 28th and D Coy on the 30th. On the left flank [24 Battalion](#) relieved the Maoris.

Thirty-two reinforcements who joined the unit at this time eased the burden of those who had been compelled to do almost continuous picket duty. Three officers were also posted to the battalion and they took over platoons which until this stage had been commanded by sergeants. On the 29th Col Fontaine left to return to New Zealand on furlough after commanding the battalion for over a year. His sudden departure gave the troops no opportunity to show their appreciation, but he carried

with him the unspoken good wishes of all ranks. Major Molineaux assumed temporary command of the battalion but handed over to [Lt-Col E. E. Richards](#) the following day. Major Richards, as he was known to those who had served in the desert, had been on furlough, and everyone welcomed him back to the unit.

On New Year's Eve it snowed. By morning the ground was covered with a white mantle a foot deep, with drifts three to four feet deep. A bitterly cold wind was blowing and nobody wanted to venture from their houses, but new lines had to be laid to all companies, a task made more difficult because all shell holes and dugouts were hidden under the snow. Tracks had disappeared overnight. Patrolling became even more unpleasant. Advice was received that the enemy had started using white clothing for patrol work and pickets had to be doubly on the alert.

By 2 January everyone was thoroughly fed up with the slush and mud all around. Tempers were getting short and nerves frayed. News that the battalion was being withdrawn for ten day's rest caused a remarkable change. Smiles soon replaced scowls and by nightfall everyone was impatiently waiting for 23 Battalion to arrive. The relief was completed without incident, and not long after dusk the troops were cheerfully marching back towards [Castelfrentano](#), unmindful of muddy tracks and snow-filled shell craters. Lorries met the battalion and carried the men through to the village. By midnight everyone had bedded down in good, clean quarters with all thoughts of pickets, Germans, and shells banished.

The relief brought to a close the battalion's activities on the [Sangro- Orsogna](#) battlefield. The fighting had not been as severe as the ground conditions and the weather, which were perhaps the worst encountered by the unit overseas. For a large number of the men it had been their first action and a severe test. Casualties from fighting and sickness had reduced the rifle companies to approximately half strength. Thirty-three men had been killed, 74 wounded and two taken prisoner, a total of 109. Although spirits had been low at times, the knowledge that the enemy was undergoing the same trials was not lost sight of, and at no time did any man lose confidence in the final outcome of the battle.

¹ [Cpl A. H. B. Officer](#), MM; Drummond, Southland; born Ringway, 19 May 1906; farm labourer.

² Lt G. O. Morrison; born NZ 18 Apr 1908; industrial chemist; killed in action 9 Dec 1943.

³ Lt D. P. Lindsay; born Wellington, 12 Nov 1906; schoolmaster; killed in action 12 Dec 1943.

⁴ Appointments on eve of attack were:

CO: Lt-Col D. J. Fontaine

2 i/c: Maj F. M. Ollivier

Adj: Capt A. W. Barnett

QM: Lt M. Joel

MO: Capt I. H. Fletcher

Signals: 2 Lt S. M. Pritchard

OC A Coy: Capt D. C. Piper

OC B Coy: Maj R. S. Smith

OC C Coy: Capt J. R. Williams

OC D Coy: Maj A. Molineaux

OC HQ Coy: Capt A. R. McKinlay

Support Coy: Capt G. T. Kain

⁵ Maj P. J. Humphries; Tanganyika; born Southampton, 11 Nov 1921; student; wounded 24 Dec 1943; Brigade Major 6 Bde 1945.

⁶ Sgt W. Tombs, MM; born NZ 7 Sep 1919; labourer; twice wounded; killed in action 8 May 1944.

⁷ Pte J. T. Oram; Mount Hutt, Rakaia; born Ashburton, 28 Dec 1921; clerk; wounded 24 Dec 1943.

⁸ Maj M. Joel; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 3 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor;
DAAG 2 NZEF 1945.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 14 – THE BATTLE FOR CASSINO

CHAPTER 14

The Battle for Cassino

THE troops quickly settled down in their new quarters. The majority were living with Italian families who appeared to enjoy the company of New Zealanders. In the course of the next few days beards were shaved off, dirty clothing discarded, and equipment cleaned and oiled. The weather continued to be bleak and cold with occasional falls of snow. The men soon caught up on lost sleep for there was little to do except laze about. The shower-house set up in the village was well patronised, and so also was the cinema run by the Mobile [Cinema Unit](#). On 4 January a special dinner was served. Pork potatoes, green peas, plum pudding and sauce formed the main part of the menu, with tinned fruit and cream to follow. A ration of cigarettes and beer was issued. Two days later came a sharp reminder to those who had forgotten that the enemy was not far away. Several shells crashed down near D Coy's billets, two men from 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion being killed. On the 8th a large parcel mail arrived. Letters and magazines were eagerly scanned and parcels opened. That night and on succeeding nights there were many parties. Wine, cheap and plentiful, overcame the shortage of beer. The civilians, young and old, joined in the fun.

The following day orders were received to return to the line, but nobody was disappointed when these were countermanded. The weather cleared and the next few days were fine and sunny. Allied fighters and bombers reappeared and roared overhead as they turned to bomb [Orsogna](#). By the 11th the troops were beginning to get restive. Company commanders organised route marches, and working parties were sent to help the sappers keep the roads open for traffic. The snow was beginning to melt and in places the mud was ankle deep. Everyone was expecting that the battalion would return to the line and perhaps take part in another attack. Nobody was looking forward to it, least of all the 50 reinforcements who had just joined the battalion. On the 12th came word that the Division was being withdrawn for a rest. Early the next day Maj Ollivier left with an advanced party for the new camp site near [Lucera](#). The civilians sorrowfully bade their visitors farewell, and a few minutes before midnight on 14 January the battalion embussed and set out towards [Lucera](#) on the first stage of its journey south.

About two hours later the convoy halted and the troops slept by the roadside until dawn. Faster progress was made on the 15th, drivers increasing speed as soon as they turned on to the main coastal road. The convoy halted when it had covered 76 miles, only a short distance from [Lucera](#). A hot meal was served, after which some startling news was released. The Division was not going into reserve but was transferring to another front on the western side of the [Apennines](#), where ground conditions were more favourable for a winter campaign. With mixed feelings the troops bivouacked by the roadside and discussed this latest piece of news.

Early the next morning the convoy set out along a road which led to [Naples](#). The journey was full of interest. After leaving [Lucera](#) the trucks crossed a wide, fertile plain, not unlike the Taieri Plain. Farms, heavily cultivated, bordered the roads for many miles. After the convoy crossed the Cervaro River the farmland gave way to scattered olive groves and bush-clad hills. The trucks halted at 4.15 p.m. on a side road near the village of Cicciano. A hundred miles had been covered and the day's journey was over. In the distance lay the famous Mount [Vesuvius](#), a lazy feather of smoke drifting above its summit.

Another early start was made next morning, 17 January, and by 11 a.m. the battalion had reached its destination, a camp site in the valley of the [Volturno River](#). Close by were two villages, [Alife](#) and [Raviscanina](#). The troops debussed and moved into company areas where they erected their bivouacs amongst the olive groves. Here they remained until 5 February.

* * *

The New Zealanders' role on the [Fifth Army](#) front had already been decided, and as they would not be required until early in February they were given specialised training to fit them for the task ahead. Emphasis was laid on quick debussing from vehicles and assaults by small parties on strongpoints—houses or fortified posts. A demonstration of street clearing by C Coy clearly illustrated the need for a definite battle drill for work of this nature. The company had been well schooled and the sections skilfully cleared the houses one by one, keeping under cover as much as possible. Most of the casualties in the [Sangro](#) action had been caused through mines and trip wires, so detailed instruction on the best methods of detecting and lifting mines was given all ranks by sappers. Although the No. 38 set had proved its value

in the recent fighting, efforts were made to obtain better results, particularly in certain types of action. Lieutenant [Pritchard](#)¹ gave lectures to platoon wireless operators, who later carried out practical demonstrations.

Towards the end of the month companies practised river crossings on the nearby [Volturno](#). Various methods of crossing were carried out, assault boats and kapoc bridging being the most successful. There were many scenes of hilarity as inexperienced oarsmen tried to row to the opposite bank. During the daytime the troops were seldom left idle for long, route marches and range practice filling the rest of the syllabus. The ground around the camp was not suitable for sport and football was mainly confined to platoon and company games. A battalion team played the Divisional Cavalry and was soundly beaten. [Naples](#) had been placed out of bounds but small parties visited [Pompeii](#). Few exercises were carried out at night, and this left the men free to attend an occasional picture show or concert. Little rain fell during the period, but the nights were cold and few men ventured far from the lines. A heavy downpour after dark on the 25th caused some inconvenience, part of the camp being flooded.

The spell worked wonders and the general health of the troops improved considerably. Sores and skin complaints disappeared. Several American units were stationed in the neighbourhood and many of the men visited their camps. On 20 January the battalion was given the use of the American Bath Unit's facilities. The troops found the equipment of this unit very elaborate considering its proximity to the front line and would have liked to have gone again, but unfortunately after one visit the men had to be content with the New Zealand [Mobile Shower Unit](#). On the 24th [General Freyberg](#) inspected the brigade and presented decorations to a number of officers and men.

Seventy-eight reinforcements were posted to the unit during the fortnight and brought the battalion almost to full strength. About 25 per cent of the new arrivals were veterans returning from furlough. The officer losses in the recent campaign were made good and Lt-Col Richards had a full complement by the first week in February. Five sergeants who had relinquished commissions in the New Zealand Forces to come overseas, and who had served with the battalion in the [Sangro-Orsogna](#) actions, were recommissioned in the field. Major Molineaux left the battalion and his place as D Coy commander was taken by Capt Piper. Second-

Lieutenant [Palmer](#)² became Intelligence Officer.

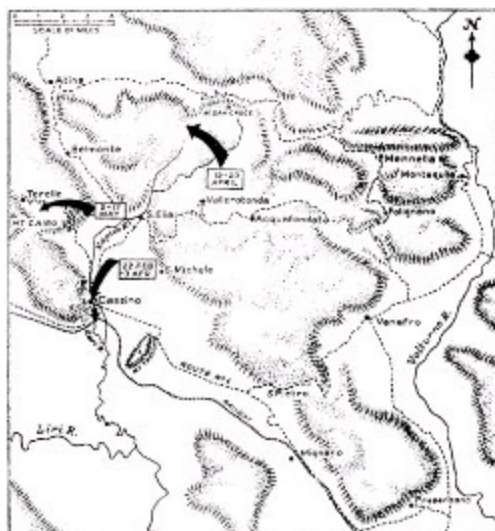
Increasing interest was being shown in the [Fifth Army's](#) offensive, which had been launched with the object of capturing [Cassino](#) and opening the road to Rome. During the greater part of the battalion's stay in the [Volturno Valley](#), the Americans pressed home attack after attack against stiffening opposition. The road to Rome was no easy path. On 22 January 6 US Corps landed on the [Anzio](#) beaches south of Rome. A bridgehead was secured but little more. The first few days of February saw bitter fighting but gains were small. Stiffest opposition was coming from the central sector, the entrance to the [Liri Valley](#). A series of hills bounded the narrow valley and the river running through it, and on these the Germans were strongly entrenched. Aerial photographs and maps of the area were made available and a study of them showed the formidable task ahead of the assaulting Americans. Not only were the hills formidable but the approaches to them were across a plain sodden with rain and under enemy observation. The main road to Rome, Route 6, crossed this plain, skirted the hills, and then ran parallel to the coast. Possession of this road could be secured only by the capture of the prominent [Monastery Hill](#) and the town of [Cassino](#) at the foot of it. The difficulties facing the Americans were not realised until after the troops had seen what had been done and had themselves taken part in the assault.

By the end of January the Americans had reached the entrance to the valley, and early in February they began a series of attacks on the main fortress area on the west side of the valley. The [New Zealand Corps](#) was formed, with [General Freyberg](#) in command and [Maj-Gen Kippenberger](#) commanding the Division. Fourth Indian Division, plus a composite force of British, American, and Indian artillery and an American armoured formation, Combat Command B, joined the New Zealanders to form the Corps. If the assault on [Cassino](#) and the hills behind it succeeded, [NZ Corps](#) was to drive up the [Liri Valley](#); if it failed, the Corps would relieve the Americans and continue the attack. In readiness to take part in the action, the Division moved forward closer to the scene of the fighting. The move took place during the first week of February, 5 Brigade relieving 36 US Division along the line of the Rapido River. Sixth Brigade was in reserve.

The battalion's move was completed without incident. By nightfall on the 5th the troops were packed ready to leave. A long line of trucks waited in the lane.

Hopes were high. At 10.30 p.m. the men embussed, and two and a half hours later the drivers stopped at the debussing point, six miles from **Cassino**. In bright moonlight the companies marched to their respective areas and the men dug in. Not far away was the railway line which crossed the plain and swung north-west toward **Cassino** and the coast. About two miles beyond it, Route 6 followed a similar route. In the morning the troops awoke to hear the sound of gunfire in the direction of **Cassino**. The day was fine but it was impossible to see **Monastery Hill**, **Cassino**, or much of the Rapido Valley. A large hill, Mount Trocchio, blocked the view. All that could be seen was the snow-clad crest of Mount Cairo. It dwarfed the hills around it and towered over the valley. Another series of hills ran up the eastern side of the valley, which farther north seemed to disappear into them.

With some misgivings the troops noticed several long-range guns near their camp. Before the day ended shells landed not far away, a reminder to everyone that they were now within



CASSINO SECTOR, 22 FEBRUARY-17 MAY 1944

Cassino Sector, 22 February–17 May 1944

range of the enemy's guns. The sector contained olive trees and vines but the ground was sodden with recent rains. The battalion transport was able to reach Battalion HQ only after working parties had repaired the track leading in to it. During the day one man from 11 Platoon trod on a Schu mine and lost part of his foot. Like many others he sought to line his trench with hay, but unfortunately for him the Germans had mined the area; it was later taped off by the Provost section.

On the 7th Col Richards went forward and saw for himself the formidable defences which were holding up the advance. [Cassino](#), a town of over 7000 inhabitants, nestled at the foot of several hills, the most prominent of which was [Monastery Hill](#). This feature, towering 1700 feet over the town, contained on its summit a magnificent monastery, mother-house of the Benedictine Order. Below the monastery, and slightly to the right, was a much smaller hill with a castle on its crest — [Castle Hill](#). Behind the Monastery rose Mount Cairo and several smaller peaks. From his positions on these features the enemy had an uninterrupted view of [Cassino](#), of Route 6 as it approached and turned through the town and wound around the foothills, and of the low-lying valley with the river running through it. This river, the Rapido, enclosed the town and formed the outer ring of the enemy's defences. The attacking force was depending on good weather, for with a river to cross and semi-swamp land beyond it, any deterioration would bring the advance to a standstill.

Unfortunately, after dark on the 9th heavy rain fell. It ceased at dawn only to recommence at dusk. The rain caused widespread - flooding. In the battalion area the troops were rudely awakened as the flood waters swirled into bivouacs, soaking bedding and equipment. In pouring rain the men endeavoured to rescue their gear and then dashed for the nearest shelter—house, barn, or hayloft. Part of B Coy which sought refuge in a hayloft, spent the rest of the night huddled in the hay with hundreds of rats as companions. At dawn the camp was a sorry sight. A few men were wearing greatcoats and battle dress but most, clad in boots and damp woollen underclothing, were searching around for their gear. It lay beneath the wreckage of tents or on the fringes of one of the many ponds. The stream which had caused most of the trouble was still in flood. Breakfast was a dismal affair. Later in the morning the sun came out. Dry clothing was issued, scowls turned to grins, and the incident soon became a memory.

On 12 February [Cassino](#) and [Monastery Hill](#) were still in enemy hands and the control of the sector passed to [NZ Corps](#). This news caused little dismay as most of the men were chafing at the continual delays. Amongst the lower ranks the Americans were criticised because of their apparent inability to force a decision. Little did the men know of the difficulties and hardships faced and overcome by their allies or of those in store for [NZ Corps](#). Those who saw the rocky mountain slopes

which the Americans had climbed, the shallow rock-walled holes where they had fought for weeks and died, and the shell-cratered plain across which they had advanced, knew how hard had been the struggle.

Another week passed without any sign of a move. On the 15th the Monastery was bombed. Knowing little of what was going on in higher circles, the troops watched flight after flight of bombers pass overhead, aware that an attack would almost certainly follow. The day passed without any word. Enemy gunners ranged on the Allied artillery nearby and shells landed all around the sector. Six men were wounded and several others had lucky escapes. Two days later King Peter of [Yugoslavia](#) visited the unit and inspected a C Coy platoon. After dusk the guns began to fire in support of the first New Zealand attack on [Cassino](#). Fourth Indian Division was attacking through the hills from the north while the [Maori Battalion](#) tried to gain a foothold in the town. It was a difficult attack to plan and carry out. All through the night the guns kept up their deafening roar. At first it seemed the assault was going to be successful, but during the 18th it was learned that the Maoris and the Indians had been forced to withdraw after suffering heavy losses. Everyone knew [General Freyberg](#) would not give up so easily and that 6 Brigade would almost certainly take part in the next attack. A few more reinforcements had arrived and the unit was at full strength, ready for what lay ahead.

On Sunday, 20 February, inaction ended. While the usual church services were being held Col Richards attended a conference at Divisional HQ. There he learned that 6 Brigade was to relieve 133 US Regiment in its sector north-east of [Cassino](#). Fifth Brigade was to retain its position south of the town, with 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion providing the link between the two brigades. The 24th and 25th Battalions were to take over positions close to the town, with 26 Battalion east and north-east of them. Sixth Brigade was to be in position by daybreak on the 23rd and be ready to take part in a full-scale attack on the town and [Monastery Hill](#) 36 hours later.

When the CO returned with this news the troops began dismantling the camp and packing ready for the move. Recon-naissance parties were sent forward to the new sector and a movement order was issued. Major Ollivier was given command of the LOB party of three officers and 48 other ranks who were not to take part in the action. With plenty of time at his disposal, Col Richards decided to send two companies forward to a lying-up area after dark on the 21st, leaving the rest of the

battalion to follow 24 hours later. The roads leading to the new position were in bad shape, and by moving in this way the Colonel hoped to avoid traffic congestion on roads often shelled by the enemy.

B and C Coys, accompanied by Tac HQ, left the camp at 10 p.m. For a while the trucks made good progress, but after they turned on to a narrow track bounded by thick woods the drivers were forced to move more carefully. It was a very dark night and the surface of the road was slippery. Eventually one of the leading trucks swung off the road and effectively blocked the passage of those behind it. A tree had to be cut down before the truck could be freed and the convoy was delayed for three hours. At length, after six hours in the trucks, the two companies debussed and dug in under cover. The second party which followed the next night took almost as long, and both drivers and men were glad the move was over.

The battalion was now sheltering on a thickly wooded hill slope on the eastern side of the valley and slightly north of [Cassino](#). Nearby was a large mule camp staffed by Indians and Italians. Beyond it lay 'All Nations' Gully', which climbed through the hills in a north-easterly direction. It was already in use as an advanced ammunition dump, and later B Echelon personnel were to know it well. The sound of gunfire drew all eyes to [Cassino](#). The town, built of stone and concrete, nestled close under the hills at the entrance to the valley. The Rapido River with its many tributaries, all swollen by rain, ran around it in a wide half-circle. From a distance it did not seem a formidable barrier, but the hills behind the town appeared to be much more difficult objectives. They seemed to rise almost perpendicularly from the flat ground and, almost devoid of cover, offered no concealed approach to an attacking party. [Castle Hill](#), which lay behind the northern end of the town, looked small beside [Monastery Hill](#). Behind them both Mount [Cairo](#), snow-capped and majestic, towered over everything. Despite the pounding it had received from the air the Monastery was still a potential menace to the Allied troops closing in on [Cassino](#). Its massive walls still stood, and from behind them the enemy could watch all that went on in the town and in the valley which contained it. Although they could not be seen, the western approaches to the Monastery were equally as difficult, for the enemy still held Mount Cairo and the high peaks north of it. From positions on these features he could pour a deadly fire on any troops which tried to attack from the west or north-west.

During the 22nd, while the troops watched the puffs of smoke rise above the town and on the slopes of [Monastery Hill](#), reconnaissance parties went down to the flat to look over the new sector. The skies clouded over during the afternoon and by dusk it was raining heavily. The rain came so suddenly that many of the men were caught unprepared and were unable to keep the water out of their trenches. Some took shelter in a French ADS, where they made the acquaintance of Fighting French troops who were at that time attacking through the hills on the eastern side of the valley. The bearded 'poilus' shared their food and wine and royally entertained their visitors until it was time for them to begin their march down to the new sector.

By this time it was 8.45 p.m. and the rain had ceased. Nevertheless it was very dark, and the rough tracks which led down to the flat and across the valley were very muddy. The leading troops were soon in difficulties as it was almost impossible to pick out landmarks, but eventually all except A Coy reached their new areas. The latter, unable to find its bearings in the darkness, retraced its steps and spent the night in the vicinity of 'All Nations' Gully'. At dusk the following night Maj Fraser was more successful.

The battalion was now concentrated on the flat ground east of the Rapido. The sector was bounded by two roads which ran out from [Cassino](#) in a northerly and north-easterly direction. C and D Coys, which held the forward positions, were about a mile from the town, with B Coy and Battalion HQ about 500– 700 yards to their left rear. A Coy was in reserve in the centre



The first stick of bombs falling on Cassino, 15 March 1944.
Left of the Monastery on top of Monte Cassino is
Hangman's Hill. Castle Hill lies directly below

The first stick of bombs falling on [Cassino](#), 15 March 1944. Left of the Monastery on top of Monte [Cassino](#) is Hangman's Hill. [Castle Hill](#) lies directly below



The nunnery from the centre of the town — a road
lies under the rubble in the centre

The nunnery from the centre of the town — a road lies under the rubble in the centre



The nunnery from the east — this section of Route 6 crosses
'Spandau Alley'

The nunnery from the east — this section of Route 6 crosses 'Spandau Alley'

The Roundhouse and (right) the Hummocks, from the railway



The Roundhouse and (right) the Hummocks, from the railway

of the triangle and still farther to the rear. The platoons occupied houses wherever possible but manned trenches after dark. Roving pickets patrolled the front and the gaps between company positions. On the right [25 Battalion](#) was occupying the northern outskirts of the town.

The Corps' plan for the capture of [Cassino](#) and Monastery Hill had been issued. A detailed operation order was received at Battalion HQ, and with it came aerial photographs and maps. The two earlier attacks on the town had been made from the west and north-west. Both had failed, largely because only a limited number of troops could be used and supporting arms could not reach them after they had passed the point of entry. This time [General Freyberg](#) planned to attack from the

north while continuing to exert pressure from the high ground in the north-west. The town was to be given a heavy pounding from the air and later by massed artillery. Following this 2 NZ Division was to assault down the Rapido Valley, capture the town and [Castle Hill](#), and then continue past the railway station along Route 6 to a point where the armour would be able to continue the thrust up the [Liri Valley](#). Immediately [Castle Hill](#) was captured, 4 Indian Division would move through the New Zealand troops holding the feature and scale the slopes of [Monastery Hill](#), supported by the full weight of the Corps' artillery. Simultaneously other Indian troops would attack the Monastery from the rear.

Many difficulties faced the attackers, the biggest obstacle being the narrow front on which the assault had to be launched. From the north only one road which could be used by tanks and infantry led into the town. The rest of the area was either flooded or heavily mined. It was known that the enemy had strengthened the natural defences of the area by completing extensive fieldworks from the banks of the Rapido in the north and east to the Gari River in the south. Large minefields covered the approaches to the town and demolitions and blown bridges blocked the roads. In the town were more minefields. It was foreseen that the bombardment might create problems, particularly to the armoured units as they tried to force a way through the rubble and fallen masonry; but it was expected these difficulties would not prove unsurmountable. The majority of the buildings in the town were very solidly constructed, and many of them were reported to have deep, connecting cellars in which the enemy could shelter with comparative safety. Intelligence reports indicated that the enemy was holding both the town and [Monastery Hill](#) in strength. The 1st Paratroop Division, reputed to be the best division in the German Army, was defending the area. Every vantage point was manned and each rocky outcrop on [Monastery Hill](#) fortified. Until the Indians cleared these outcrops and reached the bombed abbey, the enemy would be able to direct accurate fire on those attacking the town and moving along Route 6. The code-name for the attack was Dickens, a word which became well known to all ranks in the days that followed.

Sixth Brigade was directed to capture the town and [Castle Hill](#) and also establish the bridgehead at the entrance to the [Liri Valley](#). The assault was divided into two phases. The 25th Battalion, led by a squadron from [19 Armoured Regiment](#), would follow a barrage, capture [Castle Hill](#), and clear that part of the town which lay north

of Route 6. Two squadrons of 19 Armoured Regiment would then cross Route 6, closely followed by 26 Battalion, and continue the southward thrust past the railway station to the Gari River and west to Route 6 again. The 24th Battalion would take over [Castle Hill](#) when it was captured and later hand it over to 5 Indian Brigade when the latter began its assault on the Monastery. The reserve battalion was then to move forward and cover the gap between 25 and 26 Battalions.

Because of the area of the final objective Col Richards decided to commit the four rifle companies to the assault. They were to approach the town by the two roads which bounded the sector and advance through the eastern outskirts to Route 6. D Coy, which was to lead, was to follow the armour and consolidate on the station, nearly half a mile away. C Coy following was then to pass through the leaders and capture the Hummocks, a low rounded ridge about 200 yards farther south. These two objectives were known to be strongly held and had been the scene of heavy fighting when the Maoris attempted to gain a foothold on the town a week earlier. B Coy was given the southernmost objective and was to cross the swampy ground



beyond the Hummocks and consolidate along a line beyond the Gari River. A Coy was to branch off to the right and consolidate on Route 6 in the vicinity of the Baron's Palace and the Amphitheatre. The Vickers gunners, 12 Platoon 27 MG Battalion, were to follow the infantry, manhandling their guns through the town to hold a position on the Hummocks. The remainder of the supporting arms—mortars and anti-tank gunners—were not to move until the companies had consolidated. The Anti-Aircraft Platoon was to assist sappers to clear gaps through the minefields.

Colonel Richards in explaining the plan to his officers ³ did not hesitate to say

that the task in front of the battalion was difficult. The Maoris had suffered heavy losses in trying to hold the station and the Hummocks in the earlier attack. Even if the infantry succeeded in gaining their objectives, it was problematical whether ground support could be given them in the event of a sudden enemy counter-attack. The town extended only a short distance south of Route 6, and the companies would have to cross several wide stretches of open ground before they reached their objectives. The success of the assault might depend on the speed with which the Engineers cleared road demolitions and bridged the Rapido, so that the armour was not delayed and the enemy given time to recover from the bombardment. Another bridge over the river was to be erected on Route 6 to allow the passage of tanks. Communications throughout the advance would be by wireless and a link station would be set up at the Rapido River crossing. In case of a breakdown a line party was to accompany D Coy.

Maps and aerial photographs of the town were supplied to each company and all ranks were given an opportunity to study them. Landmarks on the route to be followed were carefully pinpointed—the church and nunnery on Route 6 and a group of public buildings nearby; the station and the semi-circular workshop beyond it; the Hummocks. South of the Hummocks was the Gari River, and to the west the Baron's Palace and, across Route 6, the Amphitheatre. On paper the advance appeared to be a simple one for the assault was to be made in daylight, but everyone knew that all the buildings which lined the road to the station and beyond might be occupied by the enemy and that the whole area was under observation from Monastery Hill.

With the proposed attack the main topic of conversation, the troops settled down amongst the Italian families to await the arrival of the bombers and the order to move off. The wait was a long one. For the third time since their arrival in [Italy](#) the New Zealanders were delayed by inclement weather. On the eve of the proposed attack (24 February) rain began to fall, and it continued with monotonous regularity day after day. Roads became impassable and ditches filled with water, flooding the low-lying ground. Dirty, muddy water filled the hundreds of shell and bomb craters which dotted the valley. Not until the second week in March did the skies clear. Slowly the surface water drained away and roads and tracks once more became passable to traffic. Planes were able to use airfields, and by 14 March the ground was considered sufficiently dry for tanks to cross it.

During this waiting period the battalion remained in its sector north-east of the town living with the Italian peasants, who appeared to enjoy the company of their visitors. By the end of a fortnight most of the men were tired of their long spell of inactivity and welcomed the prospect of fine weather. The battalion's duties were not arduous. There was scarcely any hostile shelling and pickets and patrols were the only unpleasant tasks. Parallel Road, which formed the right boundary of the battalion sector, was under water but the left-hand boundary road, [Pasquale Road](#), had been built up above the level of the surrounding countryside. As this road would be used by tanks and infantry to approach [Cassino](#), reconnaissance patrols were sent down it each night to determine the extent of the enemy demolitions and minefields on it. Minesweeping parties often accompanied the patrols. Although the enemy had obviously tried to wreck it, a pontoon bridge across the Rapido was intact. Nearer the town several demolitions blocked the way and in places the road was mined. Wire had also been stretched across it. Occasionally there was some excitement. A few enemy deserters came in, and twice strong patrols scouted around looking for spies reported to be in the area.

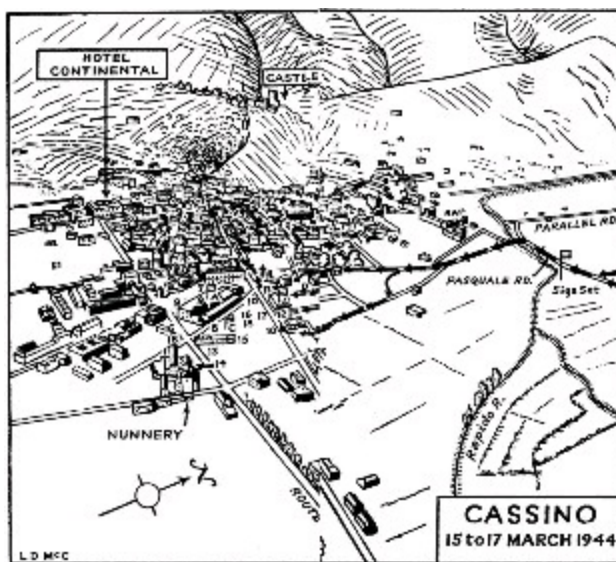
Throughout the period mules were used to bring hot meals, rations, and mail forward from B Echelon and nobody envied the Indians their unpleasant task. On the 2nd [General Kippenberger](#) was severely wounded by a Schu mine while out on reconnaissance, and Brig Parkinson became temporary Divisional Commander. ⁴ Brigadier [Bonifant](#) ⁵ assumed command of 6 Brigade. The following week parties from each company were sent back each day to the vicinity of 'All Nations' Gully' for a shower and a rest. On 14 March came the news everyone was waiting for—Operation Dickens was to take place next day. There had been a slight change in plan since the original operation order had been issued. The 25th Battalion was to hand over [Castle Hill](#) to 5 Indian Brigade, and [24 Battalion](#) was to follow directly behind the assaulting battalions and preserve the link between them, occupying the ground south of Route 6, where it ran through the town, to the station. Originally two companies were to have moved off from Parallel Road, but as it was under water in many parts, all four were to assemble near [Pasquale Road](#) before the bombardment began. Additional support had also been allocated to the battalion: a troop of 17- pounders and two 6-pounder anti-tank guns from 33 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment.

March 15 dawned fine and clear. At breakfast there was only one topic of conversation. Eager and expectant eyes scanned the skies for some sign of the bombers. A strange silence fell over the front as if everyone had forgotten about the war to bask in the bright sunshine. By eight o'clock most of the houses had been vacated and the troops were dispersed under cover in the fields and behind a given bomb-line. All ears were attuned for one sound; it came at half past eight—the distant murmur of aircraft engines. The bombers came nearer, wave after wave, and within a few minutes smoke and flame mushroomed from buildings in the town. A short interval and the next flight appeared ... and so it continued until midday. [Cassino](#) and the Monastery were blotted out in a wall of dust, flame and smoke. The ground trembled as the bombs continued to crash down and the thunderous roar of the explosions re-echoed through the hills. Over a thousand tons of bombs were dropped in less than four hours within a mile radius. As the last stick of bombs exploded in the town, 610 guns of varying calibres opened fire, some to form a barrage line for [25 Battalion's](#) attack and others to lay concentrations on known and suspected strongpoints. The hillsides were quickly dotted with dozens of white puffs which soon merged into one large cloud. Fighter-bombers darted in and out of this cloud searching for targets.

At Battalion HQ on [Pasquale Road](#) the CO waited for news of [25 Battalion](#) and the order to begin the advance. Not all the bombs had fallen within the target area. B Echelon had been bombed and C Coy's area had been straddled, but fortunately nobody had been hurt. During the early part of the afternoon the rifle companies moved into position near [Pasquale Road](#) ready to move off. Colonel Richards moved his headquarters nearer the town. About 2.30 p.m. a flight of Kittyhawks bombed C Coy but caused no casualties. Another hour passed. The guns were still firing as heavily as before but no orders were received. Four o'clock passed with still no word. Local weather 'prophets' forecast rain, and officers and men looked anxiously at the skies for nobody wanted to enter the bomb-shattered town after dark. At length came news of [25 Battalion](#). It had captured [Castle Hill](#) but was encountering stiffening resistance as it tried to move through the town towards Route 6. Tanks had been unable to go forward with the infantry because the roads were completely blocked by fallen masonry. The enemy had not vacated the town, and as the infantry

attempted to move through it snipers and machine-gunners had emerged from the cellars to inflict severe casualties on the attacking companies. Mortars and spandaus firing from buildings on the lower slopes of **Monastery Hill** also helped to slow the advance.

Although Brigade HQ was not able to give a complete picture of what was happening, it was evident that **25 Battalion** had not reached its objective and had not extended sufficiently to the left to cover the whole town. This meant that there was



every likelihood that 26 Battalion would have to fight its way through the eastern suburbs to Route 6 before it could begin its role. Moreover, the four companies would have to attack without armoured support, as the bombing had damaged Pasquale Road and the pontoon bridge over the river to such an extent that it would take the sappers several hours to repair them.

At 5.25 p.m. Brigade HQ gave orders for the battalion to advance. Word was immediately sent to D Coy, which set off in single file down **Pasquale Road** towards the river and the town. No. 16 Platoon was leading, followed by Nos. 18 and 17 and Coy HQ. The artillery bombardment had ceased and the enemy was lightly shelling the road. Within 20 minutes the leading platoon had reached the junction of Pasquale and Parallel roads. Suddenly a burst of machine-gun fire sent everyone to cover. Almost at the same time shells and mortar bombs exploded all around. Three men were wounded, one fatally. As soon as the shelling ceased—and it lasted only a few minutes—the company moved into the town, stretcher-bearers remaining behind to attend to the injured men. Dusk was falling as the long line of men began to move through the eastern outskirts of the town, following a road which led directly

towards Route 6 and the Nunnery. Even in the murky light it was possible to see the devastation caused by the bombardment. Landmarks had disappeared and so had the roads. Houses had been flattened and buildings were only walls amidst piles of rubble. There were huge craters in every direction, with shell holes in between them. [Cassino](#) as a town no longer existed.

By this time the other companies had moved off. C Coy was close behind the leaders, A Coy at the road junction, and B Coy fording the river. Dusk fell and all four companies were soon in difficulties. The darkness quickly became almost impenetrable and D Coy was forced to advance in single file, with each man clinging to the battle dress of the man in front. Second-Lieutenant Muir ⁶ was in the lead, feeling his way through the piles of rubble and trying to determine if he was on the right track. Route 6 lay only 800 yards away. Every now and again someone would trip over some rubble or slide into a bomb crater. It was a nerve-wracking advance made in an eerie silence save for an occasional burst of spandau and mortar fire. All the time everyone was expecting the enemy to open fire from one of the darker outlines that represented what was left of a building. To make matters worse heavy rain began. Nobody was wearing a greatcoat, and within an hour most of the craters were half-filled with muddy water and the ground around them very slippery. The wireless batteries became wet, and before the night was through no set would work. Meanwhile the other companies had closed up on the leaders. At 8 p.m. C Coy was only a short distance behind and slightly to the left of D Coy. A Coy was not far away, and B Coy was moving slowly along a road east of that taken by the others. The four were not in touch with one another but had been able at intervals to communicate with Tac HQ through the battalion wireless link near the river. The line party led by L-Cpl Officer was at this stage travelling with A Coy and Maj Fraser was able to make use of the phone. Shortly afterwards, when it became apparent that D Coy must be near Route 6, the linesmen went ahead and rejoined Maj Piper.

A few minutes before 9 p.m. 16 Platoon reached Route 6. It had taken the company over three hours to advance less than a mile. D Coy was now ready to begin Phase Two of the attack. Muir turned west along Route 6, intending to branch off to the left along a sunken road which led to the station. He halted his platoon alongside the Municipal buildings while he carried out a reconnaissance to determine if he was on the right track. Behind him Maj Piper was trying to locate [25 Battalion](#).

He eventually found a company commander from that battalion in the ruins of the Post Office; this officer informed him that not only had his battalion been unable to clear the route through which D Coy had advanced, but also that the left-flank companies were still some considerable distance from Route 6. This news was very disturbing for it meant that 26 Battalion had no firm base from which to launch its assault on the station and the Hummocks. Until 25 Battalion completed its task, sappers could not clear a path for tanks or supporting arms to reach 26 Battalion if and when it reached its objective.

Major Piper rejoined his company, which by this time was concentrated in an area close to the square immediately west of the Municipal buildings. Several shells exploded on the lower slopes of Monastery Hill and the flash from them momentarily lit up the area. A burst of spandau fire from a building nearby killed 2 Lt Muir and severely wounded another man standing alongside him. The rest of the platoon, and indeed the company, ran to cover. A Coy, which had appeared out of the gloom only a few yards away, attracted the attention of the enemy and was also forced to take cover. The fire was coming from a building west of the square, and the leading troops of both companies, without waiting for orders, moved off to silence the enemy post. Part of 16 Platoon began to move quietly around the left-hand side of the building, while a section from A Coy circled around to the right. Before they could achieve their object they were ordered to move back and take up another position.

Major Piper, having spoken to Maj Fraser, had phoned through to Tac HQ and informed the CO of the position. The latter, knowing that 25 Battalion was still trying to straighten its left flank, gave orders for the companies to dig in along the line of Route 6 until the western end of the town had been cleared. In the darkness it was not possible to set up clearly defined company sectors. Heavy rain was still falling and everyone was soaked. Most of the platoons took cover in the nearest pile of rubble or in bomb craters ready to move forward later. Spandaus and mortars were ranging on the area and restricting movement. Major Fraser set up his headquarters in the Municipal buildings, part of 9 Platoon being with him. The rest of the company was scattered around the building in piles of rubble and shell craters. C Coy, which had swung slightly to the left of the others during the later stages of the advance, moved across to join A Coy. Major Williams set up his headquarters in the eastern side of the Municipal buildings and his platoons took up positions east along Route 6

as far as the Nunnery. Although the two company commanders occupied adjacent cellars in the building, communication between them could be made only by climbing over the rubble of the upper stories. D Coy HQ was set up in the Post Office, which faced a road running into the hills north of Route 6. No. 17 Platoon took up a position on the south side of this road, but the forward platoons crossed Route 6 to the left of A Coy and took cover in some rubble there. B Coy, the last to arrive, turned down the Post Office road and made contact with D Coy. The two company commanders discussed the situation and decided that B Coy should try to make contact with the left-flank company of [25 Battalion](#). Major Harvey set up his headquarters in the ruins of the theatre which lay opposite the Post Office. No. 12 Platoon remained close at hand, with 11 Platoon a short distance west of it and 10 Platoon on the south side of the road near the Municipal buildings.

There was some confusion in the darkness and the majority of the men did not have the vaguest notion of where they were. A Coy [25 Battalion](#), with C Coy [24 Battalion](#) in support, was manoeuvring around to the right rear of D Coy. Hostile fire was not heavy, but it was sufficient to warn the men that the enemy was still in the town and aware of their presence. The lines of tracer seemed to come from every direction, even from the rear. All ranks hoped that [25 Battalion](#) would complete its task and that tanks would arrive before dawn. Unfortunately at 11 p.m. all communications with Tac HQ broke down. Lance-Corporal Officer had set up his phone at A Coy HQ, and B and D Coys had tapped the line and were able to keep in touch with each other by this means. Linesmen working from A Coy HQ and Tac HQ were able to mend the breaks and restore communications for a while, but shortly after midnight the breaks became so numerous and enemy shelling and mortaring so heavy that it was impossible to maintain the line in the darkness.

At 3 a.m. the situation was largely unchanged. A Coy [25 Battalion](#) had moved up on the right of B Coy but had gone no further. The Vickers gunners, following the road taken by B Coy, had reached Route 6 and taken up a position so that they could fire along it. Hostile fire in the forward areas was still not very heavy although sufficient to keep everyone under cover. Nos. 16 and 18 Platoons were in close contact with the enemy, who was established in buildings only a short distance away. Grenades and LMG fire kept the enemy on the defensive. At Tac HQ the breakdown in communications was causing some concern. All sorts of ways and

means were tried to get messages to and from the companies. The 25th Battalion was asked to make contact with the Anti-Aircraft Platoon operating about 100 yards forward of it. Messages were given to the tank squadrons attempting to move into the town from the north. Runners were sent out. All the time Lt Pritchard and his signallers were trying to keep the line to A Coy HQ mended, a difficult and almost hopeless task. At 4.35 a.m. A Coy came back on the air for a short while and the Colonel learned that the position was unchanged. Hostile mortar and shell fire was increasing and spandaus were keeping everyone pinned to their holes. The 25th Battalion did not seem to have made any material progress towards clearing the rest of the town.

Shortly before dawn paratroops made a determined attempt to regain a hold on the Municipal buildings. The troops inside and outside the building engaged the enemy with Bren guns, rifles and grenades, and the enemy retired towards the hills leaving several dead behind. About the same time Maj Harvey received orders from the CO to assist [25 Battalion](#), which was about to make an attack west towards the hills. Contact was made with B Coy [25 Battalion](#) which was to make the assault, and it was arranged that 11 Platoon should advance west along the Post Office road towards the hills, clearing the houses on either side as it moved forward. It was almost dawn before the advance began. No. 11 Platoon ran across the open ground and had covered about 150 yards before spandau fire forced it to take cover. B Coy [25 Battalion](#) was also pinned down. The platoon came under heavy fire from snipers and machine-gunners posted in the ruins of buildings all around. Three men were hit in quick succession. It was now broad daylight, and the enemy from his vantage points on the slopes of Monastery Hill and the wreckage of buildings was able to fire down on the platoon. Realising that stretchers would be needed to evacuate the wounded, Sgt [Welsh](#)⁷ ran back across the uneven ground to the Post Office to get some. Shortly afterwards he was back with a team of stretcher-bearers, and two of the wounded were safely carried to the Municipal buildings despite the hostile fire. The third man was dead. The platoon remained under cover for the rest of the day, some of the riflemen trying to snipe the snipers and so reduce the fire on their positions.

The dawn had brought nothing but trouble to the New Zealanders in the town. The rain had ceased but the weather was still cold. However, nobody was worrying

about the weather; as the light became clearer everyone became more concerned about his own personal safety. There seemed to be snipers everywhere, and they directed accurate fire on the circle of infantrymen sheltering in bomb craters and among piles of rubble. It was dangerous to move at all. Paratroopers who had hidden in the cellars of buildings during the bombardment now appeared on almost every conceivable vantage point north, east, south and west of the companies. It was impossible for those outside buildings to do anything about this fire for a concerted rush on one post would draw fire from several others. Of all the buildings nearby only the Post Office and the Nunnery retained part of a roof. The rest of the town was a shambles except, unluckily for the attackers, a number of buildings on the lower slopes of [Monastery Hill](#). Roads were scarcely recognisable. Deep craters and piles of rubble hid them from sight. The bombardment had not had the effect hoped for, and the Germans showed every sign of contesting any further advance and neutralising the gains made by the brigade.

The troops in the town did not remain entirely on the defensive despite the heavy fire directed on them. The actions of two A Coy men, Cpl [Tyson](#)⁸ and Pte O'Sullivan,⁹ were typical of what went on all day in almost every platoon area. These two men climbed on high heaps of rubble in different parts of the Municipal buildings and, in full view of the enemy on the slopes of [Monastery Hill](#), set about sniping enemy snipers. Both used Bren guns, and they succeeded in silencing a number of enemy posts which had been troubling the platoons below them. In an effort to dislodge them the enemy directed heavy shell and mortar fire on and around the building, but this did not drive them from their self-appointed task. The accuracy of their shooting was proved by the frequent appearance of enemy stretcher-bearers, who carried over a dozen casualties out of the danger zone. By their action these two men saved the lives of others and also eased the task of [25 Battalion](#) when it resumed its westward attack along Route 6.

It was give-and-take fighting, and [26 Battalion](#) did not escape unscathed. At daylight Maj Fraser found that the only entrance to his cellar faced west and was covered by enemy machine-gunners. The danger of going in and out of the building was soon proved. Second-Lieutenant [Fogarty](#)¹⁰ ran over from [8 Platoon](#) but a sniper shot him as he entered the building. A soldier following him had a very lucky escape. After this those in the building did not go outside in daylight. Across Route 6 the

forward platoons of D Coy were not very happy. During the night paratroopers had crept up to within a few yards of their position, and the platoons had almost exhausted their stock of grenades and ammunition trying to drive them out. At dawn the situation was unchanged, but it was soon evident that enemy mortars had the platoons' position registered for they were subjected to heavy and accurate fire which caused casualties. The men were unable to move because of the Germans in the rubble nearby. By the end of the day there were few in either platoon who had not been shaken by their ordeal.

Across Route 6 and only about 50 yards from 14 Platoon lay the Church and Nunnery, two large connected buildings only partially destroyed by the bombing. Both were thought to be unoccupied, but early in the morning 14 Germans were seen approaching them from the south. Heavy fire was directed on the enemy party and five were seen to fall. The remaining paratroopers entered the Nunnery by the southern entrance and before long were harassing the men on the flat from the second-story windows. Grenades were thrown at 14 Platoon sheltering in the rubble and bomb craters, which offered little protection against this form of attack. Plans were made to drive the enemy out of the sanctuary. Two sections of 14 Platoon under [Cpl W. Tombs](#) were detailed to make the assault, while the rest



The thirteen A Company men who reached the Hummocks, 17 March

Back Row: L. J. Hampton, I. W. Keen, J. Lang, J. W. Young,
J. R. McCann, R. M. Owen, J. F. O'Reilly *OCM.*
Front Row: J. H. Moore, J. M. Mitchell, G. A. London,
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26 Battalion graves at
Cassino



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Bivvies in Company lines on the banks of the Volturno

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Deviation on the road to Avezzano

Deviation on the road to Avezzano

of the platoon and No. 13 gave them covering fire. A section of 9 Platoon in the Municipal buildings was distracting the enemy's attention and had already shot one German through a window.

It was nearing midday and everything was ready for the assault when an officer wearing a black beret was seen walking unconcernedly along Route 6. He turned to enter the Nunnery but a hurried call brought him over to 14 Platoon. The tank officer, Lt [Morris](#)¹¹ of [19 Armoured Regiment](#), had left his tank a short distance back down Route 6, and to while away the time while sappers filled a road crater, had come forward to locate the infantry. He was asked to shell the Nunnery. A short while afterwards a dozen shells landed on the building. Corporal Tombs then led his men into it. A short silence was followed by a burst of firing and some shouting. Four Germans lay dead and the other five were endeavouring to escape out the southern door, pursued by a very determined NCO. As the Germans ran back across the uneven ground they met a hail of lead from the tank and from A and C Coys. Two men were hit but the rest escaped. The two sections had two men wounded. The others soon appeared at the windows of the Nunnery with grins on their faces. Major Williams decided to leave them there in case the enemy returned.

Colonel Richards found he could do little to alter the situation in the town. After the infantry positions had been determined, heavy artillery and mortar concentrations were fired on the parts of the town still held by the enemy. Closer support could not be given because of the breakdown in communications. It had been expected that the maintenance of line communications would be relatively simple after dawn but the contrary was the position. Early in the morning Sgt [Moase](#)¹² had left Tac HQ to repair the line to A Coy HQ. For hours there was no news of him. The line was not working, so Lt Pritchard set out to find him and also to repair it. After passing the RAP, which had been set up the night before in the gaol in the northern end of the town, the Signals officer encountered heavy mortar and machine-gun fire which eventually forced him to discontinue his efforts. Ahead Sgt Moase was busy repairing the many breaks in the line, caused not only by shell and mortar fire but also by jagged pieces of masonry and ironwork. His efforts were of no use; no sooner had one break been mended than the line was cut in another place. Nevertheless the signallers tried hard and persisted in their dangerous work, but by the end of the day they had to admit failure.

During the morning the situation in the town was discussed at a conference at Brigade HQ. The attack as a whole had not succeeded. Sixth Brigade had captured only part of the town and the Indians had failed to capture [Monastery Hill](#). The devastation caused by the bombardment had had far-reaching effects. It had held up the tanks at the northern entrance to the town, and without their support [25 Battalion](#) had been unable to clear part of the town north of Route 6. This in turn had delayed [26 Battalion](#) at the start line and had forced it to advance in darkness, and it was now held up in its present position without armour in support. The Indians had had a hard fight with paratroopers contesting every possible vantage point. The enemy had counter-attacked at dawn and the situation on the hill was very fluid.

Later in the day, after the Colonel was aware that tanks had reached the forward troops, the Brigade Commander called at Tac HQ with news of the Corps Commander's plans to regain the initiative. After dusk the Indians were to resume their assault on [Monastery Hill](#) and the Maoris were to attack the railway station from the south-east. At dawn A Coy [25 Battalion](#) and C Coy [24 Battalion](#), with armour in close support, were to drive west along Route 6 to the base of the hill. If the Maoris failed, [26 Battalion](#) would be ordered to capture its original objectives.

Meanwhile, in the town the situation had improved. Three Shermans reached the Nunnery at 2 p.m., and although their arrival was a signal for increased mortar and shell fire, they soon began engaging targets, particularly spandau posts, which had been harassing the men. Major Williams was also able to give the CO a résumé of the day's happenings, contact being made through Lt Morrin's wireless. One problem was the evacuation of wounded. Earlier in the day an attempt had been made to get two wounded men back to the RAP in the north end of the town. The stretcher-bearers, two of whom were Germans who had surrendered to B Coy, stepped on a mine which wounded all of them. Some [24 Battalion](#) men came to the rescue and all were evacuated. Because of the danger of mines and the heavy enemy fire, no further attempt to evacuate wounded by this route was made. Fortunately Capt [Borrie](#), ¹³ [24 Battalion](#)'s Medical Officer, had set up his RAP at the Post Office and the wounded received prompt attention. Some, however, required urgent surgical attention and would have to be evacuated. With this in mind Col Richards arranged for Capt Fletcher to shift his RAP to Route 6, at a point about two miles east of the Nunnery. Eight teams of stretcher-bearers from the Anti-Aircraft

and Carrier platoons were directed to move down this road after dark and help the companies to carry out the twelve wounded men to where jeeps could meet them.

As dusk fell 18 fighter aircraft swept over the town, heading east. Nobody took much notice, believing they were friendly. They bombed a Bailey bridge and raced back across the town, their machine guns chattering. Before the troops fully realised the planes were hostile, they had disappeared from sight. After dusk snipers ceased to operate, but sufficient happened during the night to prevent anyone from getting any sleep. The men were still wearing damp clothes and the night was very cold. Hostile shell and mortar fire eased off, beginning again when tanks moved along Route 6 and circled around behind the battalion in readiness for the dawn attack. Spandaus firing from the slopes of the hill raked the low ground around the Nunnery at frequent intervals. Fortunately casualties were very light.

Early in the evening 14 Platoon moved into the Nunnery and mounted strong pickets in the building. All platoons were on the alert in case the enemy counter-attacked or tried to infiltrate back into the area. Some of the men who had lain in exposed positions throughout the day moved to safer ones. Major Harvey vacated the theatre building, which had only one wall left, and joined Maj Piper in the Post Office. The wounded were safely evacuated. About midnight the forward platoons of D Coy withdrew to a position in front of D Coy HQ. They had suffered fairly heavy casualties—three killed and seven wounded. Some of the others were very badly shaken. About the same time carrying parties from each company collected rations from the company QMs, who had brought them most of the way. Everyone was very hungry but had hoped that the ration party might also have thought to bring greatcoats. All efforts to maintain line communications were abandoned and L-Cpl Officer left A Coy and moved back to the gaol.

Friday, 17 March, was a momentous day for the battalion. It was a day of successes and a day of heavy losses. At dawn the situation was little different from the day before. German snipers were very active but the troops, wary of their tricks, gave them little encouragement. The self-appointed platoon snipers resumed their previous day's activities. Various methods were employed to encourage the enemy to show himself. The most dangerous was for a man to display himself for a second or two so that a Bren gunner could pick the German off as he rose to fire. Enemy mortars and field guns kept up an almost constant fire on the ruins where the troops

were hidden. Some of the tanks which had moved into the town during the night were hit, including three alongside the Nunnery. [Monastery Hill](#) was partially shrouded in smoke, but shell explosions on the hillside indicated that the Indians' second attack had not succeeded and that they were still a long way from their objective. At 7.15 a.m. Maj Piper, using a [25 Battalion](#) phone, made contact with Tac HQ. Colonel Richards informed him that the Maoris' attack had failed and that 26 Battalion would advance on its original objectives some time during the day. Further details could not be given until arrangements concerning time and support had been completed, but the men were to be ready to move off at a moment's notice. This information was passed to the other company commanders.

Meanwhile, the 24– [25 Battalion](#) attack had begun. The tanks led off, heading towards the shell-cratered gardens west of A Coy. The infantry followed, keeping under cover as much as possible. After they passed A Coy they fanned out to cover the ground. Enemy snipers and machine-gunners opened fire on the two companies, and some in doing so revealed themselves to the patient A and B Coy marksmen, who did not hesitate to take advantage of it. To assist the companies still further, Brens and Vickers opened fire on enemy-occupied buildings at the foot of the hill. One by one the buildings on either side of the Gardens were cleared. A stalemate followed. Between the New Zealanders and their objective lay a 400-yard stretch of cratered and swampy ground. The enemy laid a curtain of fire across this area through which neither infantry nor tanks could pass. In the excitement of watching this attack the A Coy men forgot about the possibility that the battalion itself would soon have to make an assault.

At that time all arrangements for an attack on the station and the Hummocks had been completed. Smoke was to be fired to allow the companies to form up and artillery concentrations laid on the objectives and other strongpoints in the vicinity. The 26th Battalion, supported by A Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment, was then to attack, the tanks leading the infantry and moving south past the Nunnery along a built-up road. A decision on zero hour was delayed until the results of the 24–25 Battalion attack were known. Unfortunately Col Richards had no way of passing this information to his companies. There had been a complete breakdown of communications since early in the morning, and this was causing some concern. In the town the troops had watched the tanks assembling, and shortly after midday

they saw them moving south past the Nunnery. About the same time Maj Williams received a wireless message from Maj Thodey,¹⁴ A Squadron's commander, advising that the attack was on. The Company Commander sent runners to B and D Coys, advised A Coy, and moved his men into the Nunnery. Soon after the company assembled in the building a tank stopped outside and down jumped Col Richards and Capt Barnett. The CO had decided to set up his headquarters in the town so that he would be better able to co-ordinate the attack.

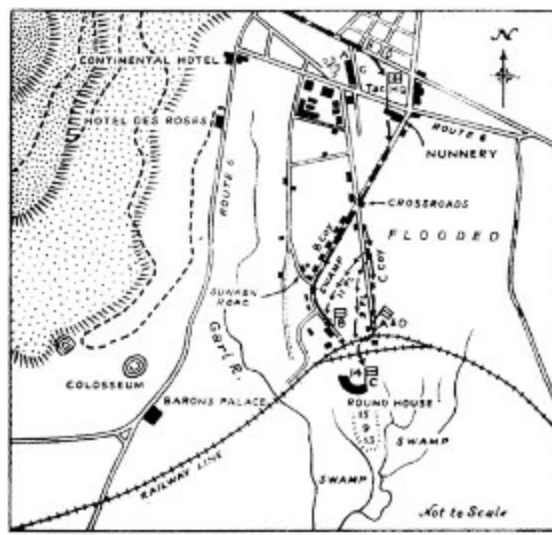
Without waiting for the other companies to arrive, the Colonel ordered C Coy to set out in the wake of the tanks. Within a few minutes the company had left the building by the southern entrance and was heading towards the station and the Hummocks about half a mile away. No. 14 Platoon was in the lead and was closely followed by No. 13, with Coy HQ and 15 Platoon bringing up the rear. The leaders, moving in single file, skirted some large pools of water and set out at a run towards a crossroads 400 yards away. They reached it in safety and paused for a breather. A few yards ahead of them three tanks were slowly moving south along the built-up road towards the station. They drew heavy fire, and while the men watched the leading tank was hit and set on fire. The crew scrambled out and dashed into a nearby house. The second tank was hit about 20 yards farther on and the third toppled over the 10-foot bank and was lost to sight. The platoon set itself for another dash, this time to the house which the 'tankies' had entered. Climbing on to the road again, the men ran the gauntlet of shell, mortar, and machine-gun fire to reach the house without loss. In the basement of the building the tank crew, some of whom were wounded, stood guard over some paratroopers who had been manning a spandau post.

No. 13 Platoon reached the building. The rest of the company had been delayed by heavy shelling and mortaring soon after they left the Nunnery. Of Coy HQ only Maj Williams and his CSM, WO II Corrigan,¹⁵ had survived. No. 15 Platoon, which had lost its commander, 2 Lt Peterson,¹⁶ the day before, lost another eight men. Meanwhile, the leading platoon had split up to continue the advance. One section under Cpl Tombs dashed along a culvert which ran alongside the road while the other two sections crossed over and ran across the swampy ground north of the station. Lieutenant Hay,¹⁷ 13 Platoon commander, followed Cpl Tombs and so did the remnants of 15 Platoon. By using this culvert the company escaped some of the

fire by which the enemy was covering the approaches to the station. Shells were exploding along the length of the built-up road and machine-gunners were raking it with bullets. When the men climbed out of the culvert it was every man for himself, and a mad rush to get to the station 150 yards away followed. All thought of formation was forgotten—there was no time to think. Puffing and blowing, the leaders darted into a cable car station opposite the railway station. Others followed, and within a few minutes the two platoons were collected together again. Despite the heavy fire only a few men had been hit.

There were two tanks nearby, one alongside the ruins of the station and the other in the yards. The commander of one of them, Lt [Furness](#),¹⁸ ran over to the platoons. He said the station itself was clear of the enemy but that there were a number of spandau posts in the yards and beyond them. Enemy shelling was too accurate for the tanks to attempt to support the company in an attack on the Hummocks, but Furness promised to give covering fire. Shortly afterwards Maj Williams and the CSM arrived and the former set about planning an assault on the Hummocks. C Coy at this juncture had a total strength of about forty, but Williams believed that by retaining the initiative success would be achieved. The Hummocks, a rocky hillock about 75 yards long and 50 yards wide, lay about 200 yards away. Between it and the station yards was a large semi-circular engine shed, known as the Roundhouse. Major Williams decided to capture this building first and then continue on to the Hummocks. Orders were given for 13 Platoon to give covering fire while 14 Platoon captured the Roundhouse. In turn, No. 14 was to cover No. 13 as it moved on to the hillock.

Without further ado Lt Hay's men dashed across the road and ran a short distance into the yards. No. 14 Platoon, led by



THE ADVANCE TO THE STATION AND HUMMOCKS, 17 MARCH 1944

The Advance to the Station and Hummocks, 17 March 1944

Lt [Quartermain](#),¹⁹ followed them and continued on to the undefended engine shed. On the way Cpl Tombs' section disposed of a small enemy post in a cleaning pit. So far the assault had been easy, but before 13 Platoon could move the station yards were swept with a murderous hail of bullets. Spandau posts east and west of the platoon had remained silent when Quartermain's men had rushed by, but they now pinned down the rest of the company. The tanks came to their assistance and, directed by Lt Hay, silenced a number of the enemy posts. During a lull in the firing Hay stood up and, calling on his men to follow him, raced towards the Hummocks. The enemy posts on the Hummocks were taken by surprise and six Germans surrendered after

a few grenades had been lobbed at them. After he was satisfied that no more enemy were on the feature, Hay withdrew his men to the eastern slope. Some of the men occupied enemy trenches while others dug new holes. As soon as this was completed the platoon, joined by the remnants of No. 15, settled down to await the enemy's reaction. (The Maoris had captured the Hummocks once but had been driven back by an enemy counter-attack.) Major Williams set up his headquarters with 14 Platoon in the Roundhouse and shortly afterwards fired a success signal, which, however, was not seen by those at the Nunnery.

Misfortune had befallen the other three companies although B Coy had escaped fairly lightly. When Maj Thodey's news was received, Maj Fraser ordered A Coy to prepare to move immediately and sent a runner, Pte [Bennett](#),²⁰ to go to the

Nunnery and find out more details of what was to be done. The runner negotiated the open stretch of ground safely and shortly afterwards signalled the company to the building. The smoke which the artillery had fired to cloak the movements of the infantry had also warned the enemy that something was afoot, and his gunners ranged on Route 6 and the area around the Nunnery. The A Coy men were well aware that snipers waited patiently for them to appear. Major Fraser knew too that a sniper had his gun trained on the western entrance to the Municipal buildings. Nevertheless, section by section, the company raced over the uneven ground in a dash to the Nunnery, 100–150 yards away. The enemy snipers were waiting and they showed no mercy. One after another the men dropped. Wounded crawled into shell craters or tried to stumble on to safety, only to be hit again. Those who paused to help were themselves hit. Those who reached the temporary haven of the Nunnery were badly shaken. Over twenty men lay dead or dying out in the open. Amongst them were some who had given long service to the battalion. They included Maj Fraser, a gallant officer who had served in every action since May 1942.

In the Nunnery 2 Lt [Lowry](#)²¹ took command of the remnants of the company. The CO ordered him to follow in the wake of C Coy. Immediately they heard the orders three men, [Sgt Wallen](#),²² [Cpl Killworth](#),²³ and Pte 'Shamus' O'Brien,²⁴ ran out the southern exit to the building and made for the crossroads. They were followed by a party of about a dozen men led by Sgt O'Reilly.²⁵ Lowry brought up the rear; he had with him the balance of the company—about 15 men. Misfortune still dogged the company. Since C Coy had passed through the area the enemy had increased his shelling and mortaring of the approaches to the station, and snipers and machine-gunners, who had remained hidden while the tanks were present, were now very much in evidence. [Sergeant Wallen](#) and the two men who had accompanied him were killed near the crossroads. The other two parties ran panting along the road until they came to the house where C Coy had sheltered. Led by the acting Company Commander, the men raced along the long culvert. Unfortunately an enemy sniper was now covering the exit and 2 Lt Lowry was mortally wounded. Several other men were hit at the same time. Sergeant O'Reilly and the only remaining company officer, Lt [Davies](#),²⁶ decided to cross the road and move on to the mud flat as the built-up road was under very heavy fire. As the men crossed over more casualties were suffered.

Sergeant O'Reilly, in the lead, was unaware of the location of C Coy, so he set out to find the best approach route to the station. On the way he dealt with a sniper who had been causing a lot of trouble. Within a short while he was back, and he led the 13 men with him to the station without any further losses. At the station WO II Corrigan directed him to the Roundhouse. One man was wounded as the party crossed the station yards. A short while afterwards O'Reilly was ordered to move his men on to the Hummocks to reinforce 13 Platoon. In the meantime Davies had reached the station with another small party. Stragglers from the company were sheltering in houses all along the route, and Davies decided to await their arrival before continuing farther. He was still waiting when B Coy arrived with the remnants of D Coy. Davies was ordered to take his men and those of D Coy and occupy the cable car station across the road.

B Coy had escaped fairly lightly but D Coy, which had left the Post Office earlier, had lost all its officers and quite a number of men. Major Piper was injured soon after he left his former headquarters. The CSM, [WO II Prebble](#),²⁷ ran across to get 2 Lt H. H. Lawrence, the only platoon officer left, to take over. Lawrence immediately ran forward and joined Coy HQ, calling on the platoons to follow him. The open ground between the Post Office and the Nunnery was under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire, and the platoons had scarcely had time to move before Coy HQ went over in a heap. Lawrence was wounded, the CSM killed, and several others wounded. Sergeant Carlson led those who were still on their feet to the Nunnery. Of the remainder, some had not heard the order to move and others were pinned down by accurate machine-gun fire from buildings south-east of the Nunnery. The twenty men with Sgt Carlson were ordered to join B Coy as it began its move to the station.

B Coy had watched both A and D Coys crossing the open ground north of the Nunnery, and each man knew it would be his turn soon. Under cover of the smoke Maj Harvey had withdrawn his scattered platoons to the Post Office, where they awaited the order to advance. With horrified eyes they saw the A and D Coy men fall. They saw wounded struck not once but two or three times before they fell prone and still. Cries could be heard above the din of the shelling. Captain Borrie did not hesitate. Accompanied by two No. 12 Platoon men, 2 Lt [Neale](#)²⁸ and Sgt [Maze](#),²⁹ he dashed out to rescue as many as he could. For 20 minutes the small party did what it could but heavy mortar fire forced it to return.

Shortly after 3 p.m. 11 Platoon made a dash for the Nunnery. No. 12 Platoon followed, and then came Coy HQ and 10 Platoon. Each group suffered losses, 11 Platoon much the heaviest. Little time was wasted in the Nunnery for Tac HQ had been set up in a room open to the skies and the enemy seemed to be trying to dislodge those inside it. Retaining the same formation the company set off for the station, the remnants of D Coy bringing up the rear. Under heavy fire the company raced to the crossroads. No. 11 Platoon continued along the built-up road but encountered machine-gun fire from a sniper's post on the roof of a house. Two sections were pinned down by this fire, but Sgt Welsh immediately led the remaining section around the other side of the building and trapped the sniper. The platoon crossed the road and followed the route taken by Sgt O'Reilly to the station, where they were joined by the rest of the company which had advanced along the sunken road. Leaving his men in houses or under cover, Maj Harvey set out to locate C Coy. Running through the station yards he found Maj Williams in the Roundhouse. The two officers decided they had insufficient men to continue the attack and, in fact, barely enough to hold the ground they had won. A plan to defend the area was quickly decided on. C Coy was to be responsible for the Roundhouse and the Hummocks, while B Coy covered the ground north of the station. Both companies would be able to cover the approaches to the station yards.

Major Harvey soon had his platoons in position. No 11 Platoon, which was low in strength, stayed close to Coy HQ in a house less than 50 yards from the station; 10 Platoon was about 100 yards away on the right flank, while 11 Platoon occupied a house a similar distance in front of Coy HQ. Both companies sited their positions to face west and south-west. By the time this was completed it was fairly late in the afternoon. More tanks had reached the station and by dusk there were twelve of them in the vicinity, some disabled but still able to fire. All could give close support to B Coy but could do little to help C Coy in the event of a counter-attack. The whole area was under very heavy mortar fire, and spandaus firing from under the hill covered all stretches of open ground. Smoke fired by New Zealand artillery soon after the troops consolidated had enabled the Germans in and around the station yards to escape westward with much lighter losses than would normally have been the case. Later the Sherman tanks gave excellent support and directed their fire on machine-gun posts along the Gari River, the Baron's Palace, the Amphitheatre, and along the foothills. They also harassed mortar positions.

The battalion's position was now fairly secure, although the forward troops were not in line communication with Tac HQ and had no support other than the tanks. The three-hour action had taken a heavy toll of the rifle companies and attached personnel. The Germans who had been encountered had not given in without a fight, and only 13 prisoners, all from 1 Paratroop Division, had been taken. At dusk the total strength of the companies on the objective was little more than a hundred. Stragglers who had been held up by snipers or the heavy shelling were still arriving, but most of those missing were casualties. A Coy had lost all but one of its officers and 36 other ranks, including 16 killed or mortally wounded. C Coy was not much better off and had lost 30 men, including 10 killed. D Coy's figures were 6 killed and 18 wounded and B Coy's 5 killed and 12 wounded. The battalion's casualties since the 15th now totalled 109, of whom 37 had been killed, and for the afternoon's attack 88, including 33 killed. One man was missing.³⁰ These figures represented almost a third of the fighting strength of the rifle companies—a serious loss in the middle of an undecided attack. Moreover, the reported casualties did not represent the true picture for there were quite a few, the majority from D Coy, still in the town. Badly shaken and unnerved by the sniping and heavy mortaring during the two days, they were of no use to the forward companies, at least until they had recovered.

* * *

The shelling and mortaring of the town had not decreased with the departure of the troops to the station. The movement of tanks along Route 6 attracted even heavier fire, much of which fell on or around the Nunnery which was being used as a general headquarters. Every now and again the enemy would fire his six-barrel nebelwerfer. It was an unpleasant afternoon for the CO and the Adjutant for by dusk the Nunnery and the adjacent church had received many direct hits. There was much to be done. Communication had to be established with Rear Battalion HQ and with the forward companies. Wounded had to be evacuated and rations and ammunition brought forward. By establishing his headquarters in the town Col Richards placed himself in a position where he was not only better able to control the movements of his own unit but also those of other units. Difficulties in maintaining communications and the aggressiveness of the enemy forced this heavy responsibility onto the CO and the Adjutant, who were compelled to remain on duty day and night.

During the afternoon Rear Battalion HQ moved from Pasquale Road to Route 6 and occupied a house close to the RAP. Signallers immediately began laying a line from the new headquarters to the Nunnery, and by 4 p.m. the two were linked by phone. The remainder of Tac HQ—signals and intelligence personnel—moved into the town. In response to an SOS call Capt Fletcher also shifted his headquarters into the Nunnery and began attending to the many casualties. Late in the afternoon Tac HQ left its exposed room and moved into a crypt under the adjoining church. Possibly because of this the success signal fired by the forward companies was not seen. However, later in the afternoon news of the success of the attack was received through A Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#). Later in the evening messages were brought back from the station by runners who had volunteered for the task. Private [Williams](#)³¹ brought news of A Coy, Pte Duff³² of B Coy, and WO II Corrigan of C Coy. These men brought details of company positions and remained to guide stretcher-bearers and ration parties through to the forward area.

Hostile fire did not ease at dusk. Apparently expecting a continuation of the attack or the arrival of reinforcements, the enemy shelled and mortared the forward areas for most of the night. He attempted to raze the houses occupied by B Coy and drive the New Zealanders off the Hummocks. His gunners were particularly severe on all roads leading to the station and on Route 6, and his shelling made the task of ration parties, runners, linesmen, and stretcher-bearers very dangerous. Many times the whole area was raked by machine-gun fire, the lines of tracer giving the only indication of its origin. It was a cold, sleepless night without greatcoats or blankets. Most of the stretcher-bearers attached to companies had become casualties themselves, and a heavy burden was placed on those who were left. From the Carrier and Mortar platoons came teams of men who worked far into the night under heavy fire, picking up all the wounded found, carrying rations and ammunition forward to the companies. Linesmen went forward and by dawn had lines through to B and C Coys. The lines did not last long; they were continually being broken and several good signallers were lost while maintaining them. The line to Rear Battalion HQ also gave endless trouble and eventually, to minimise casualties, the Colonel ordered the company lines to be abandoned. Subsequent communication with Majors Williams and Harvey was by wireless.

As soon as it was dusk the forward platoons established listening posts in front

of their positions. On the Hummocks Lt Hay moved two men onto the forward slope. It was thought that the enemy might attempt a counter-attack by approaching from the river under cover of darkness, and the troops on the reverse slope had dug in so that by standing up they could command a field of fire over this open stretch of ground. Likewise Lt Quartermain placed two men west of the Roundhouse. The night seemed long. Those out in the open, particularly on the Hummocks where the fire was heaviest, were to say the least very uncomfortable, though casualties were light. About 2 a.m. a [24 Battalion](#) company arrived to strengthen the right flank and preserve a link with the troops in the town. Two hours later there was a noticeable increase in the artillery fire of both sides. The Hummocks were heavily mortared.

Suddenly during a lull in the firing the C Coy listening posts ran back to report enemy troops approaching. It was nearly dawn, and within a few seconds everyone was on the alert. The Germans were approaching rapidly from the north-west, apparently intent on reaching the station and the yards. They rushed in, yelling that they were Indians, but nobody was deceived. Instead both companies from their dugouts, shelters, and houses poured a well-directed fire on them, inflicting heavy casualties. About a dozen reached the Roundhouse, but they too met a hostile reception and soon left, leaving behind their dead. The action was over in a few minutes. The enemy had had enough and withdrew under cover of smoke fired by New Zealand artillery. The troops on the Hummocks were waiting and, as the paratroopers ran across the mudflat towards the river, directed a steady volume of fire on them. In the words of one officer writing about the sudden departure of the enemy, 'It was a pity for they were so easily killed.' There was ample proof of this. In C Coy's area alone lay 23 dead, and B Coy had accounted for others. Six paratroopers had been taken prisoner. C Coy's only casualty was one man killed.

Within an hour enemy mortars, field guns, and spandaus were all in action again. The tanks and the artillery retaliated but the enemy fire did not slacken. [Monastery Hill](#) was again partially enveloped in smoke, a sure indication that the Indians had not succeeded. C Coy was feeling very pleased with itself, but Maj Williams realised that ammunition stocks would have to be replenished during the day in case of another attack. He could ill spare men for this dangerous task, but WO II Corrigan volunteered for it and was allowed to go. In broad daylight and under heavy fire most of the time, he made several trips to the crypt, bringing back a

heavy load each time. After dusk he guided a team of stretcher-bearers carrying hot stew, rations, and a few greatcoats through to the companies.

* * *

There was little change in the situation as far as the companies were concerned for the next three days. The troops found they could do little else but keep under cover as much as possible and hope for the best. There seemed to be no way of stopping



Manœuvres with tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment
during the spell at Arce

Manœuvres with tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment during the spell at Arce



After the Arezzo action

After the Arezzo action



Cerbaia and the Battalion sector from across the Pesa River
— New Zealand shells fall on German positions around San Michele

Cerbaia and the Battalion sector from across the Pesa River — New Zealand shells fall on German positions around San Michele



Looking north from Gradara

Looking north from Gradara

the enemy guns, which kept up an almost constant fire on the sector and the approaches to it. Wireless sets worked well again and the operators passed details of gun positions through Tac HQ to the artillery, but counter-battery fire seemed to have no effect. Mortars, tanks, and field guns fired concentrations on the Baron's Palace in an attempt to silence several troublesome machine-gun posts, but without success. By midday on the 20th 16 men had been wounded and evacuated, and the battalion's casualties for the battle were then 37 killed and 87 wounded. The number of 'battle casualties'—men whose nerves had been overstrained by the constant action of the last few days—had also increased. This placed a heavy burden on those who remained on duty in each platoon for pickets had to be maintained day and

night.

In the town there had been some changes. On the 19th 5 Brigade assumed responsibility for the area north of Route 6 and 6 Brigade south to the Hummocks. The Maoris and 23 Battalion moved into the town and set up their headquarters in the crypt, which became the rendezvous for all sorts of units and formations. Colonel Richards and the Adjutant, because of their intimate knowledge of the town and the general situation, became the 'eyes and ears' of both brigades and to some extent co-ordinated operations. The additional movement in the area did not pass unnoticed and the enemy stepped up his concentrations on the church buildings and east along Route 6. The increased use of smoke by both sides not only brought about heavier fire but, it was suspected, allowed the enemy to infiltrate back into the town. The 25th Battalion and the Maoris, with tanks in support, tried to wrest the balance of the town from the enemy. Although their efforts met with some success, they failed to clear a small area on Route 6 and under the foothills. The enemy was strongly entrenched in two hotels (Hotel des Roses and Continental) in this area and defied all attempts to dislodge him. Renewed attempts to capture [Monastery Hill](#) had failed. Instead, the enemy had launched a determined counter-attack which had isolated the New Zealand and Indian troops holding [Castle Hill](#) and Hangman's Hill, not far from it. An attack on the Monastery by armoured forces, which had approached the stronghold from the rear, had also failed.

The maintenance of communications kept Lt Pritchard and his depleted staff busy. Those not out trying to mend breaks in the line were operating the phone and wireless sets. It was the same for all at Tac HQ—heavy responsibilities, no sleep, and little rest. The evacuation of wounded to and from the crypt was always a problem. The lot of stretcher-bearers was no more dangerous than that of the jeep drivers who came down Route 6 to take the wounded from the danger zone. This road was almost invariably under heavy fire, but there was no other way to evacuate the casualties. Mr Gray of the [YMCA](#) was always a volunteer for this unpleasant task, and he made many trips to and from B Echelon in his jeep, carrying greatcoats, blankets, chocolate and cigarettes, and returning with a load of wounded. Eventually he fell a victim himself, being badly wounded as he was about to take out another load of wounded. During his long service with the battalion he had always gone out of his way to help the wounded, and many men had cause to be thankful for his self-

imposed tasks.

On the afternoon of the 20th Col Richards received a message to report to Brigade HQ for a conference. It was no simple matter to get from the crypt to Brigade HQ, which was some distance east of the town, particularly in daylight when the shelling was at its heaviest. The Colonel left the crypt in a tank, which went as far as the blown bridge over the Rapido, and then sprinted to another tank coming to meet him. He returned with the news that the battalion was remaining in the town, with the companies taking up positions south of Route 6 and facing the two hotels which were still holding out. A battalion of the Buffs Regiment would take over the station and the Hummocks shortly after dusk.

The British troops did not arrive until about 9 p.m. and over two hours elapsed before the troops left the Hummocks. B Coy was the first to move and was followed by C Coy and the A and D Coy remnants. Major Harvey made a reconnaissance of his sector, which extended north from the crossroads towards the Municipal buildings. The company moved into position without difficulty, Coy HQ and 12 Platoon moving to a house near the crossroads, 10 Platoon forward on the right in a building near the sunken road, and No. 11 almost directly behind it. C Coy withdrew from the Hummocks and reached its new sector on the right of B Coy without much trouble. Major Williams went ahead with the CSM to make arrangements to relieve the company of [23 Battalion](#) holding the sector, and later sent WO II Corrigan back for the platoons. No. 13 Platoon, the remnants of No. 15, and Coy HQ occupied one building, while 14 Platoon moved into another building on their right. In the darkness it was not possible to determine who occupied the buildings on either side.

The A and D Coy remnants, the last to leave the old sector, met with misfortune. As they moved back towards the Nunnery the enemy shelled the road heavily. Several men were hit, including Lt Davies, who later died, and WO II [Scott](#)³³, the CSM. Sergeant O'Reilly took charge and led the remainder to the Nunnery, returning later with a team of stretcher-bearers to collect the wounded. Instead of joining C Coy, the remnants spent the rest of the night in one of the cellars under the Nunnery.

In the morning C Coy was able to examine its immediate surroundings more closely. A platoon of Maoris was occupying part of the Coy HQ building, and a [21](#)

Battalion platoon was sheltering in some ruins half-right of the company. On the left were several unoccupied buildings. No. 14 Platoon was soon made aware of the occupants of an adjoining wing of its building. A bazooka crashed through the wall and two men had lucky escapes from injury. Something like this had been expected and the troops opened fire on the enemy party, which decamped leaving one of its number dead in the building. Outside the buildings all roads and tracks were covered by spandaus firing from the foothills, and the company was more or less isolated in its position during the daytime. After dusk that night the men were able to move about more freely. Strong pickets were posted in each building as it had been reported that the enemy was infiltrating back into the town.

Guided by Maj Williams, the A and D Coy remnants under Sgt O'Reilly moved forward after dark to take up a position with C Coy. The Company Commander left them in a building while he arranged for Lt Hay to carry out a reconnaissance for a suitable position. Hay met trouble, and he and the small party with him had a short but brisk fight with some paratroopers in a building. The enemy withdrew, but when Hay returned to collect O'Reilly's men they were gone. The sergeant, having waited an hour in the freezing cold, had decided to return to Tac HQ to find out what was happening. Eventually the remnants, joined by a **23 Battalion** platoon under 2 Lt Hargest,³⁴ set out for C Coy once more. On nearing the company area the officer and the sergeant went on alone to find Maj Williams. Unfortunately they ran into machine-gun fire and both were wounded, Lt Hargest mortally. O'Reilly was able to get back to Tac HQ unaided, and 2 Lt **Richmond**³⁵ was sent forward to take charge. After some delay the remnants and the 23rd Battalion platoon took up a position on the left flank of C Coy.

The companies remained in these positions until the 23rd and they found them a good deal better than their previous ones. Signallers laid lines to both companies and these did not require much maintenance. In any case the No. 38 sets were working well. Smoke lay heavy over the town and the hills all the time, and this proved rather depressing especially to tired and jaded men. Both companies were able to direct artillery and mortar fire on targets visible from their positions. It continued to be dangerous to move about in the daytime for snipers and machine-gunners in the buildings under the hill were constantly on the alert. The platoons retaliated but found that their fire usually drew heavy mortar fire on their positions.

At dusk each night jeeps brought hot meals and rations as far forward as they could and carrying parties were sent back to collect them. Tactical HQ at the crypt had little respite, for the enemy continued his bombardment of the church buildings which, strong though they were, gradually disintegrated.

On the 23rd there was a change of policy. New Zealand Corps was disbanded and the assault on [Cassino](#) and Monastery Hill abandoned in the meantime. The Division was ordered to take up an all-round defensive position to hold the gains made. The troops on [Monastery Hill](#) were to be withdrawn. As a preliminary to this regrouping, B Coy was to be relieved by a company of the Buffs and withdrawn to a second line of defence behind the Rapido River. LOB personnel and the Carrier Platoon were already holding positions along this line.

Before it left [Cassino](#) that night a party from B Coy had an unpleasant task—to bury the A Coy dead around the Municipal buildings. In the words of one officer, 'It was a ghastly job.' After dusk the men waited impatiently for the British troops to arrive, and as soon as the relief was complete they wasted no time marching down Route 6 to some houses about a mile from the town. Tactical HQ also moved out of the town and rejoined Battalion HQ. Twenty-four hours later it was C Coy's turn. It was relieved by a newly-formed A Coy, comprising LOB and B Echelon personnel commanded by Capt A. R. McKinlay. The A and D Coy remnants joined this company, the majority going to Nos. 7 and 9 Platoons. On the morning after its arrival, the 25th, the enemy welcomed the new company with a sustained burst of shelling on the platoon buildings. After dusk that day [22 Battalion](#) took over the sector and the rifle companies were wholly withdrawn from the line, the 4.2- inch mortars being the only section of the unit in action. The latter were being called on to fire on targets west of the Hummocks.

This brought to a close the battalion's part in the battle for [Cassino](#), although it was later called on to take up a position in the defence scheme for the area. The action had called for considerable nerve and endurance and had cost the unit many of its best soldiers. Casualties had been heavy, but the splendid example set by officers and NCOs had prevailed when it seemed at times that the men might wilt under the strain of continual shelling, mortaring, and lack of sleep. Five officers and 39 other ranks had been killed or mortally wounded, and three officers and 98 men wounded. To this total could be added the 43 'battle casualties' evacuated to

hospital and the many more who were held at Battalion HQ or B Echelon.

The spell was short. After dusk on the 28th the battalion relieved the Buffs in their sector south of the town. During the four days out of the line the troops, able to relax for the first time for nearly a fortnight, rested and read the mail which had accumulated. A good wash, a shave, regular meals, and plenty of sleep worked wonders, and when the time came for the men to march back to the Hummocks much of the tenseness so evident earlier had gone. The 26th was a cold day, snow falling during the early morning, but the next two days were very pleasant. Everyone who could basked in the warm sunshine and forgot about the smoke which still hung over [Cassino](#), less than two miles away. A few reinforcements joined the battalion and, with no more in sight, the CO reorganised the unit on a three-rifle-company basis. B Echelon was combed to find men to fill the gaps in each company. D Coy personnel were absorbed in the other companies, but this was not sufficient to bring the platoons to full strength. On the 28th the average platoon contained between 15 and 18 men and company strengths were about 60 all ranks. Captain McKinlay was confirmed as A Coy Commander and Lt P. J. Humphries acted as Adjutant in the absence of Capt Barnett on leave.

The new sector was a familiar one, extending north from the Hummocks to the crossroads about 400 yards from the Nunnery. A Coy was made responsible for the Hummocks and the station area, while B Coy returned to its former sector on the north side of it. As the latter had a wide front to cover, the Anti-Tank Platoon, operating as infantry, was attached to it. C Coy was to join the Carrier Platoon in the second line of defence in a position almost due east of the station. To avoid a repetition of the enemy attack of 18 March, the ground forward of A and B Coy's positions was divided into squares, each one being registered by artillery and mortars and given a code-name. In B and C Coys company commanders and seconds-in-command interchanged positions, Capt [Kerr](#)³⁶ taking charge of B Coy and Capt [Kain](#)³⁷ of C Coy.

The relief was completed without incident, there being little shelling or mortaring at the time. On the right of the station B Coy HQ occupied the building which had been its former headquarters, with the Anti-Tank Platoon occupying the houses west of it. The other three platoons occupied houses farther to the north: 12

Platoon was in that previously held by 10 Platoon, 10 Platoon at the crossroads, and 11 Platoon on the sunken road. A Coy HQ was set up in the Roundhouse with 8 Platoon in the same building. No. 9 Platoon moved onto the Hummocks and 7 Platoon occupied the cable car station. No. 11 Platoon, the anti-tank gunners, and 8 Platoon posted listening posts some distance forward of their positions, and the other platoons maintained strong pickets. Most of the tanks were centred around the station, with one or two beside the platoon houses. To close the gap between the second line of defence and the forward line, 2 Lt Grainger³⁸ and 34 men from 33 Battery 7 Anti-Tank Regiment took up an infantry position south of C Coy, manning two crossroads near the river at night.

As the dawn approached enemy mortar and shellfire increased. Direct hits were scored on a number of houses but no casualties resulted. No. 8 Platoon, stationed in and around the Roundhouse, was unlucky. A mortar bomb wounded five men, including the platoon commander, 2 Lt McLean.³⁹ Up until this stage Capt McKinlay had been unable to make wireless contact with Battalion HQ and all messages were being relayed through B Coy's set. By this means Battalion HQ was advised there were casualties to be evacuated. Captain Fletcher decided to go forward and attend to the wounded on the spot, despite the fact that it was broad daylight and the Germans were shelling all approach routes. The doctor arrived safely, and later the injured men were evacuated in jeeps, which ran the gauntlet of enemy fire to reach the station.

For the rest of the day the sector was fairly quiet although at times it was heavily shelled and mortared. Second-Lieutenant Walker⁴⁰ joined A Coy and assumed command of 8 Platoon, which now contained fewer than a dozen men. Enemy bombers made a sudden appearance but did not tarry over the area. Butterfly bombs were dropped on C Coy but caused no casualties. After dusk both companies made much use of the prearranged fire tasks, and mortar and artillery concentrations were called down on suspected enemy gun positions and suspicious troop movements. The quick response by the supporting arms to these requests was very heartening to the men on picket duty. It gave a feeling of security to all platoons more or less isolated in their houses after darkness.

At dawn on Thursday, 30 March, the Germans increased their fire over the whole sector. Mortars, including nebelwerfers, fired heavy concentrations on the station

and the Hummocks area. This fire continued almost unabated throughout the day, and counter-battery fire did little to quieten the enemy gunners. Dusk fell without any slackening of the enemy bombardment and the two companies called for concentrations across their front. Shortly before 9 p.m. the hostile fire eased off and the listening post forward of the Roundhouse ran back to report enemy troops crossing the river. A heavy artillery concentration was called down on this area, but shortly afterward the listening posts on the forward slope of the Hummocks reported that the Germans were close at hand. Both sides opened fire almost simultaneously. The Germans had divided, one party moving in from the west and the other from the south. The second party was able to bring fire to bear on 9 Platoon and caused some casualties before it was forced to relinquish its hold on the feature. The party on the western slope was unable to drive the platoon from its well dug-in positions and was content to maintain fire across from the Hummocks towards the Roundhouse and the station. This prevented the platoon from evacuating its wounded, two of whom, including the platoon commander, 2 Lt Richmond, were seriously hurt.

About the same time as the listening posts warned 2 Lt [Richmond](#) of the approach of the enemy, another party of Germans moved between 12 Platoon and the Anti-Tank Platoon. The pickets saw nothing, and it was not until Sgt [Foster](#) ⁴¹ was fired on and wounded as he entered one of the Anti-Tank Platoon's houses that it was realised the enemy was about. A few seconds later the silence was again broken as the tank at the rear of the building was bazookaed. The Germans then climbed onto the tank and fired through the opened hatch, killing the four occupants. By this time the Anti-Tank Platoon was fully on the alert but, apart from firing blindly into the darkness, could do little to stop the enemy from moving farther east. Captain Kerr, who had been doing the rounds of his platoons, called for artillery and mortar concentrations which were repeated several times. It was very dark and difficult to judge the strength of the enemy party and the purpose of his assault.

The noise of the firing allowed another party of Germans to approach 7 Platoon unseen and unheard. The picket on duty first noticed something amiss when he saw several paratroopers trying to lift the hatch of a nearby tank. The crew inside were revolving the turret in an effort to dislodge them. Within a few moments a steady volume of fire was forcing the enemy to move back towards the station. Grenades were flying in all directions and casualties were suffered by both sides. For what

seemed an age but was only a short time, the platoon fought the enemy off as he again tried to close in on the tank and enter the building.

While all this was going on other enemy groups had infiltrated into the station area. They attempted to move around towards the Roundhouse and the Hummocks but, as they came closer, ran into heavy fire from 8 Platoon which, however, was forced to give up its outside positions. It was soon apparent that this was no enemy fighting patrol but a counter-attack in strength. A Coy was not in a very good position. Captain McKinlay was out of touch with Battalion HQ at least most of the time, and had no way of finding out how 7 and 9 Platoons were faring as the Roundhouse and the approaches to it were under heavy fire. Captain Kerr was better off as only 12 Platoon and the anti-tank gunners were affected. It was little use calling for supporting fire as the enemy had penetrated the defences and it was too dark to determine his location. Later, when it became apparent that the Germans were after the tanks, Capt Kerr decided to bring some of his men from the right flank to straddle the station road and plug the gap between 7 Platoon and the Anti-Tank Platoon. A section from 11 Platoon, led by 2 Lt McClean, moved across and took up this position, from which they were able to direct accurate fire on the Germans as they darted in and out of the shadows. Several of the enemy approached B Coy HQ, and the three men on picket allowed them to get quite close before they opened fire and killed or wounded all of them.

The firing died down, but occasional outbreaks indicated that the enemy was still in the locality but mainly in the station yards. The situation on the Hummocks was unchanged. To reinforce McClean's party two sections from 10 Platoon were led by Pte Duff to B Coy HQ, and they also took up a position covering the station road and the railway line. At Battalion HQ Col Richards was receiving wireless reports from B Coy but none from Capt McKinlay. As the fighting appeared to be centred on the left flank, the CO was anxious to receive fuller details— details which the A Coy commander was unable to supply because of his isolated position. However, both company commanders had decided that the enemy was after the tanks and, having failed in his purpose, would soon withdraw. Everyone was on the alert for some sign of this happening. At 2 a.m. the enemy began to move and a heavy artillery concentration was fired forward of the companies. This must have deterred the paratroopers, for a short time afterwards A Coy was heavily engaged as the

Germans tried for the second time to break out of the station yards towards the Hummocks. For the next two hours the firing went on with neither side being able to inflict much damage.

Shortly before dawn the Colonel arranged for two tanks to cross the yards and move to support A Coy. By this time enemy troops had withdrawn from the station area, and only an occasional burst of firing from the Hummocks area disturbed the uneasy peace. A few Germans in B Coy's sector were being rounded up. Captain McKinlay called for smoke on the Hummocks, and at first light 8 Platoon ran across the open ground, joined 9 Platoon, and moved across to clear the forward slope. Part of it was cleared, but intense small-arms fire eventually forced the two platoons back to the reverse side. While this was going on the wounded were evacuated to the Roundhouse. Corporal [White](#),⁴² a medical orderly, attended to the casualties and helped to carry them out of the danger zone. Five paratroopers had been captured and they assisted stretcher-bearers to carry the casualties to the cable car station to await the arrival of ambulances.

Meanwhile the situation on the Hummocks had again reached a stalemate, although this time the enemy was in the worse position. Tanks and infantry were able to bring heavy fire on him and by 9.30 a.m. he had had enough. About twelve paratroopers made a sudden dash across the open ground, heading towards the river. The A Coy men were waiting for them at every vantage point. Under the concentrated fire from the two platoons and the tanks, the paratroopers dropped one by one until none was left running. Although A Coy had suffered quite severe losses—three killed and twelve wounded—the enemy had also lost heavily for his dead were scattered over the sector. B Coy had lost four men, including 2 Lt McClean, who was shot through the head shortly after daylight. Soon after his men left the area the enemy recommenced his mortaring. The wounded were taken down into the cellar of 7 Platoon's building, where Pte Trembath⁴³ was busy handing around liberal doses of rum. A short time afterwards jeeps arrived and the wounded were evacuated. After dusk that night Lt Hay took two platoons from C Coy forward to the Hummocks, and A Coy, which now totalled fewer than 40 men, moved to the right to cover the Roundhouse and the station yards.

After this setback the enemy made no further attempt to recapture the station area and was content to mortar and shell the sector heavily at irregular intervals

throughout the day and night. His gunners concentrated on the roads and on the buildings and positions which he now knew were occupied by the battalion. Despite the accuracy of the enemy fire few casualties were suffered, and these generally as a result of a direct hit on a trench or house. After dark on 3 April the battalion was relieved by [23 Battalion](#). By this time the men had had their fill of [Cassino](#) and were eager to be gone. For some reason the artillery fired smoke across the front just before the relief took place, and the enemy retaliated by heavily mortaring the station and the Hummocks. This delayed A Coy considerably, and it was not until after 3 a.m. that the last of the company reached Battalion HQ. The incoming company of [23 Battalion](#) had run into the mortar fire and had lost the greater part of its headquarters killed or wounded. The A Coy guide with them was killed.

Nineteen days after it had entered [Cassino](#) the battalion left it for the last time. It was not the same battalion which had confidently awaited the arrival of the bombers on the morning of 15 March, eager to do what the Americans had failed to accomplish. Only a handful of those men remained fit. Fifty-five had lost their lives and 128 had been wounded. 'Battle casualties' and sickness accounted for nearly seventy others, and there were many more unfit for duty. Those who survived carried scars hidden from sight and which only time would heal. As a supreme test of endurance and courage the battle for [Cassino](#) was to become a byword throughout the Division and the English-speaking world.

¹ [Capt S. M. Pritchard](#), m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Gisborne](#), 6 Apr 1913; accountant.

² [Maj B. H. Palmer](#), m.i.d.; [Lochiel](#), [Southland](#); born [Invercargill](#), 19 Aug 1921; clerk.

³ Appointments were:

CO: [Lt-Col E. E. Richards](#)

2 i/c: [Maj F. M. Ollivier](#)

Adj: [Capt A. W. Barnett](#)

QM: Capt M. Joel

MO: Capt I. H. Fletcher

Padre: Rev. H. S. Scott

OC A Coy: Maj A. J. Fraser

OC B Coy: Maj D. P. W. Harvey

OC C Coy: Maj J. R. Williams

OC D Coy: Maj D. C. Piper

OC HQ Coy: Capt A. R. McKinlay

Signals: Lt S. M. Pritchard

⁴ He commanded the Division from 3 to 27 March.

⁵ Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Ashburton, 3 Mar 1912; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942–Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943– Apr 1944; commanded 6 Bde 3–27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan–May 1945; 6 Bde Jun–Oct 1945.

⁶ Lt F. J. Muir, MM; born NZ 8 Feb 1915; clerk; killed in action 15 Mar 1944.

⁷ WO II D. C. Welsh, DCM; Ohai, Southland; born Feldwick, 31 Oct 1918; trucker; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

⁸ Cpl F. S. R. Tyson, MM; born NZ 29 Feb 1916; farm labourer; wounded 31 Mar 1944; killed in action 16 Jul 1944.

⁹ 2 Lt K. P. O'Sullivan, MM; Hororata; born Timaru, 5 Sep 1919; barman; twice wounded.

¹⁰ 2 Lt G. D. Fogarty; born NZ 10 Dec 1916; clerk; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

¹¹ Maj T. G. S. Morrin, MC; Dannevirke; born Wanganui, 26 Aug 1917; stock agent; twice wounded.

¹² Sgt H. C. Moase, MM, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); Kumeu, Auckland; born Riverhead, 11 Mar 1915; stable assistant.

¹³ Maj A. W. H. Borrie, MC; Dunedin; born Port Chalmers, 10 May 1917; medical practitioner; 6 Fd Amb Dec 1941–Jul 1942; RMO 24 Bn Jul 1942–Oct 1944; 3 Gen Hosp Oct 1944–May 1945.

¹⁴ Col J. I. Thodey, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Gisborne, 8 Dec 1910; life assurance officer; CO 21 Bn Jul–Oct 1944, May–Dec 1945.

¹⁵ 2 Lt D. P. Corrigan, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 21 Jul 1908; salesman; wounded 25 Oct 1942.

¹⁶ 2 Lt B. R. Peterson; Invercargill; born NZ 28 Apr 1914; public accountant; wounded 15 Mar 1944.

¹⁷ Capt H. B. Hay, MC; Alford Forest, Ashburton; born NZ 27 Apr 1916; sheep farmer; wounded 24 May 1944.

¹⁸ Capt J. G. Furness, MC; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 9 May 1915; reporter.

¹⁹ Maj W. E. Quartermain, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Doyleston, 29 Oct 1911; labourer; wounded 3 May 1944.

²⁰ Lt I. B. Bennett; Waiouru Military Camp; born London, 25 Dec 1922; chemist; twice wounded; Lt NZ Regt.

²¹ 2 Lt K. J. Lowry; born NZ 9 Oct 1912; stock agent; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

²² Sgt M. B. Wallen; born NZ 14 Oct 1914; railways employee; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

²³ Cpl C. R. Killworth; born NZ 15 May 1920; bag maker; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

²⁴ Pte B. G. O'Brien; born NZ 6 Sep 1911; labourer; wounded 2 Nov 1942; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

²⁵ Lt J. F. O'Reilly, DCM, m.i.d.; Mount Hutt, Rakaia; born Rakaia, 14 Jul 1907; barman; wounded 22 Mar 1944.

²⁶ Lt K. O. Davies; born NZ 13 Oct 1920; bank officer; killed in action 20 Mar 1944.

²⁷ WO II R. F. Prebble; born Christchurch, 19 May 1919; cabinet-maker; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

²⁸ Lt C. V. Neale; Nelson; born NZ 13 Aug 1922; clerk; wounded 1 Dec 1944.

²⁹ Sgt G. L. Maze; born Rangiriri, 29 Oct 1914; labourer; wounded 29 Jul 1942; killed in action 19 Apr 1944.

³⁰ One of the medical orderlies (Pte G. R. Black) who had gone back to the gaol with the wounded on the morning of the 16th was captured by the enemy on the return journey to B Coy.

³¹ Cpl E. E. Williams, m.i.d.; Temuka; born NZ 27 Apr 1922; turner.

³² 2 Lt G. P. Duff, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born NZ 14 Sep 1909; school teacher.

³³ WO II D. V. Scott; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 15 Feb 1918; joiner's machinist; wounded 20 Mar 1944.

³⁴ 2 Lt G. R. Hargest; born NZ 30 Jun 1922; bank clerk; died of wounds 22 Mar 1944.

- ³⁵ Lt F. N. W. Richmond; Seddon; born [Blenheim](#), 2 Mar 1916; sheep farmer; wounded 30 Mar 1944.
- ³⁶ Maj A. B. Kerr, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 13 Jan 1911; printer; wounded 7 May 1944.
- ³⁷ Maj G. T. Kain; Geraldine; born Dunedin, 20 Sep 1917; farmer.
- ³⁸ Capt E. R. Grainger, m.i.d.; Henderson, [Auckland](#); born NZ 11 Aug 1920; clerk.
- ³⁹ 2 Lt F. G. L. McLean; Waimate; born Waimate, 27 May 1918; wool classer; wounded three times.
- ⁴⁰ 2 Lt M. Walker; [Ashburton](#); born NZ 18 Jul 1918; woollen mill worker.
- ⁴¹ WO II E. J. Foster; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 29 Mar 1915; shoe repairer; wounded 30 Mar 1944.
- ⁴² Sgt M. G. White, m.i.d.; Robinson's Bay, Banks Peninsula; born [Christchurch](#), 29 Apr 1915; farmhand; wounded 28 Mar 1943.
- ⁴³ Pte R. B. Trembath; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 16 Nov 1917; labourer.
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26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 15 – THE ADVANCE THROUGH THE LIRI VALLEY

CHAPTER 15

The Advance through the Liri Valley

AFTER the [Cassino](#) sector was handed over to [23 Battalion](#) the 26th moved back to [B Echelon](#), which was situated close to [Route 6](#) and about 18 miles from [Cassino](#). Bivouacs were erected, bedrolls brought out of storage, and the troops settled down to enjoy the spell. Everything possible was done to make it enjoyable. Accumulated parcels and mail were distributed and restrictions on leave relaxed. Many of the men went on a seven-day visit to [Bari](#), where a [New Zealand Club](#) had been established. Others visited [Naples](#) and [Pompeii](#). For those left in camp there was day leave to [Caserta](#), where most of the [Cassino](#) casualties were being treated in 2 NZ General Hospital. Not far away was the [Eighth Army](#) rest camp at [Campobasso](#) where an [ENSA](#) concert party was performing, and several lorryloads of men were taken to see the show. Pictures were shown almost every night in one or other of the three battalion areas.

A change in the war establishment of the battalion enabled Col Richards to reform D Coy, with Capt Barnett as its commander and Capt Boyd as second-in-command. The Anti-Tank Platoon was disbanded and the Carrier Platoon reduced by one section. These personnel and the few reinforcements who arrived about this time were posted to the rifle companies which, however, remained numerically weak. Anti-tank support in future was to be provided by 7 Anti-Tank Regiment.

Although the troops looked and felt considerably better, the news that 6 Brigade was moving back into the line on 12 April was not enthusiastically received. It was some comfort to know that the new sector, which lay in the mountainous country north-west of [Cassino](#), was fairly quiet. Sixth Brigade had been directed to relieve 6 Lwow Brigade, and for several days until 2 NZ Division was wholly withdrawn from [Cassino](#) would come under command of the Polish [5 Kresowa Division](#). The 26th Battalion was to take over the left-hand sector in the vicinity of Mount Croce and would have Canadians on one flank and 24 Battalion on the other. For several days before the move battalion officers went forward to the new sector, the approaches to which were very difficult. It was decided to set up B Echelon at Folignano, a town near the head of the [Volturno Valley](#) on the eastern side of the mountains. From this town a rough, muddy road ran north-west through the hills to some mountain tracks,

which formed the only approach route to the battalion positions. These tracks, poorly defined, steep and slippery, climbed over hills into heavily wooded gullies, across swift-flowing streams to end high up on the slopes of Mount Croce and the Arena, a plateau-like feature on the left of it. Because parts of the approach road and the tracks were within range of enemy guns, all movement on them had to be carried out after dusk and without lights. The Poles had taken their cookhouses into the line and were using mules to carry supplies from the road to the sector, and the CO proposed to follow suit.

An advanced party went through to the new sector on the 11th and spent a rather amusing night trying to converse with the Poles. Conversation was difficult even with the aid of interpreters. The next morning the battalion embussed and travelled to Folignano, 21 miles away. Here much of the heavy gear was off-loaded and packed on mules. After dusk the journey was continued, the trucks climbing through the hills towards the Mule Point and the mountain tracks. A thunderstorm during the afternoon had made the roads wet and slippery and mud clung to everything. It was still raining when the convoy reached the small secluded valley where the Indian muleteers and Polish guides were waiting. In a surprisingly short time the mules were loaded and the companies had set off up the mountain tracks, accompanied by the long line of mules. It was very dark, and it was difficult to retain a foothold on the steep, narrow path. Sometimes a pack slipped or a mule went astray, and the hot and tiring column was held up until matters were straightened out. As the four companies neared their positions they came under mortar and shell fire, particularly severe on B and D Coys which were following the same path. In the confusion caused by this bombardment the guides and some of the muleteers disappeared, the mules became scattered, and the columns were disorganised. B Coy reached its new position in small groups, and Capt Kerr, who was acting Company Commander, directed the men to their various areas. Because of the enemy fire and the confusion it caused, the relief was not completed until nearly dawn. At daybreak the companies set out to find the missing mules. About six dead or badly wounded animals were found near B Coy HQ. The rest were scattered. Some had slipped their loads and disappeared and others had fallen over steep banks. The Indians in charge of them had also disappeared, but by midday most of the missing gear had been recovered.

The companies were spread out across a wide front, extending south-west from B Coy's positions, high up on Mount Croce, to C Coy occupying the Arena area and A Coy on the lower slopes of another feature. D Coy was close to Battalion HQ, about a mile to the rear of B Coy. Some of the platoons were situated about a mile from their Coy HQ and had a long and tiring walk each day to collect rations and supplies. Eight days were spent in the sector and, apart from trouble over supplies, it was quite a pleasant change. The Poles had left well-constructed dugouts, most of them roofed, and these were promptly reoccupied. There was scarcely any shelling or mortar fire, and the silence was broken only by the song of the cuckoos by day and the hooting of owls and the croaking of frogs at night. Working parties widened the mountain tracks and white tape was run out to guide the muleteers across difficult sections. Friendly treatment of the Indians and improvements to the track bore fruit, for by the time the battalion left the sector rations were arriving in record time and were being carried out on mules to some of the more isolated platoons.

Although enemy troops were not seen, working parties were often heard moving about forward of the sector. The battalion mortars and the 25-pounders fired concentrations on their reported positions. About midnight on the 15th a strong patrol was sent to examine a house forward of A Coy. It was believed that the enemy was occupying this house but the patrol found nothing. Four days later an enemy patrol infiltrated between 10 and 11 Platoons under cover of a heavy fog. An uncharted minefield had been laid between the two platoons and the explosion of one of these mines was the first warning of the patrol's approach. Both platoons opened fire and nothing more was heard of the Germans. Later the same day two men from 12 Platoon went for a stroll. The fog was still heavy and they wandered into the minefield. Both were found dead some hours later, and B Coy lost two good soldiers, [Sgt G. L. Maze](#) and [L-Cpl W. T. Coster](#).¹ Five men were wounded during the period, four on the day of arrival and the fifth the day after. One of them, [Pte Stevenson](#),² a popular performer at company entertainments, died after he reached the hospital. Major Ollivier, who had been with the battalion in [Greece](#), left to return to New Zealand on furlough. Fifty-two reinforcements joined the unit and were posted to companies.

The advanced party of 6 (British) Paratroop Battalion arrived to relieve the battalion on the afternoon of the 20th and the main body about 10 p.m. The relief

proceeded without incident and by dawn the troops had reached the new rest area, which lay east of Mount Croce in the northern end of the [Volturno Valley](#). The camp site was an excellent one set amongst pleasant surroundings on the banks of the river. The hillsides were covered with bright spring growth. The endless rows of vines were losing their winter bareness. Only 14 miles from the Mule Point, the camp was within range of enemy guns, but during the nine days spent there no shelling occurred. Another 133 men joined the battalion and brought it to nearly full strength. Amongst the new arrivals were a number of ex-officers who had voluntarily relinquished their Territorial commissions to join overseas drafts. Subsequently many of them were recommissioned. To train the many newcomers a training programme was put into effect. As it was expected that the battalion would be engaged in mountain warfare for some time to come, instruction was given in packing and handling mules, minelifting and minelaying, and range firing. To complete the morning's work stiff hill-climbing tests were carried out, sometimes with mules.

Leave was granted on a fairly generous scale and each day parties left for [Pompeii](#), [Naples](#), and [Caserta](#). Other parties



HQ truck in the mud near Rimini
HQ truck in the mud near [Rimini](#)



The outskirts of Gambettola — a platoon moves up to the line
The outskirts of Gambettola — a platoon moves up to the line



Draining the camp at Castelraimondo
Draining the camp at Castelraimondo



Testing a 'Wasp' flame-thrower near Forli
Testing a 'Wasp' flame-thrower near Forli

spent several days at the [Eighth Army](#) rest camp at [Campobasso](#). Locally there was little of interest except for the occasional picture show. It rained twice, but the days were generally fine and the weather much warmer. On the 28th [General Freyberg](#) inspected the brigade and afterwards congratulated the men on their fine showing in [Cassino](#). Two days later orders for a return to the line were received at Battalion HQ. The same day Col Richards, who had been unwell for some time, was evacuated to hospital. He had gained the confidence of all ranks during the difficult days of [Cassino](#) and had seen service in [Greece](#), [Crete](#), and the Desert. He did not return to the battalion, his place being taken by Lt-Col [Hutchens](#)³ of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion. Major Williams had taken over the duties of second-in-command and Capt Kain was again commanding C Coy. The [Rev. J. A. Linton](#)⁴ had succeeded the [Rev. H. S. Scott](#) as Padre. The latter had been with the unit since the battle of [Alamein](#) and was held in high regard by all ranks.

* * *

The new sector was somewhat similar to the previous one. It lay in the mountains west of the Rapido River and about four miles north of [Cassino](#). To reach it the battalion would have to cross the lower slopes of the eastern range into the Rapido Valley and follow the steep, winding road which led to the town of [Terelle](#). Part of this road was under close enemy surveillance. Fifth Brigade, which had been holding the sector for some time, was using mules to carry supplies. The 26th Battalion was to relieve the 21st in the centre sector on 2 May, and arrangements were made for the outgoing unit to leave behind all its heavy equipment, blankets, and supplies.

The move was made in two stages. Shortly after 1 p.m. on 1 May the troops embussed on transport, which carried them to [Acquafondata](#), a town on the western side of the hills. The Rapido Valley was under close observation from Monastery Hill, and the next stage of the move did not begin until dark. The trucks dropped their passengers in the bed of the valley and the troops marched about three miles to the lying-up area at the foot of the [Terelle](#) road. B Echelon moved to 'All Nations' Gully' and an advanced party went ahead to [21 Battalion](#) HQ. Twenty-four hours later the main body followed on foot. It was a gruelling three-hour climb up the steep sides of the mountain. At various points the companies turned off to follow mountain tracks

leading to their positions. B Coy for a second time took up a position on the right flank, with D Coy alongside it and A Coy on the left close to the [Terelle](#) road. C Coy was in reserve and dug in close to Battalion HQ. The previous occupants had constructed solid shelters and dugouts and company commanders did not attempt to alter platoon dispositions.

It was soon evident that this sector was going to be more lively than the last, for it was in full view of enemy gunners stationed on the slopes of Mount Cairo and the high ground around [Terelle](#), which lay about a mile beyond the FDLs. Any movement during the daytime drew heavy fire from these guns. At night it was the turn of the German infantry, and during the next fortnight enemy patrols were active all along the front. It became almost a nightly occurrence for the forward platoons of A Coy to defend their ground against these patrols, who were sometimes armed with flame-throwers. Reconnaissance patrols were accompanied by dogs. The aggressive tactics of the Germans—intensive patrolling by night and concentrated shelling and mortaring by day—were very trying, but by adopting similar tactics the battalion succeeded in reducing the enemy activity. Lines were run out to each company headquarters and, although signallers found them difficult to maintain, they proved invaluable in calling down artillery and mortar fire on enemy troop movements, patrols and working parties. Nearly every night Bren guns fired on fixed lines forward of the sector, while the Mortar Platoon fired heavy concentrations on suspected enemy positions. The 21st Battalion had been unable clearly to establish the location of the German FDLs and reconnaissance patrols sent out by 26 Battalion were also unsuccessful.

The problem of getting supplies to the forward troops proved less difficult than at first thought, largely due to good organisation. After dusk jeep trains loaded with supplies left Hove Dump in 'All Nations' Gully' and raced at high speed across the shell-cratered valley. At the lower jeep-head, half-way up the road to [Terelle](#), the jeeps were unloaded and drivers turned and began their nightmare journey back across the valley. Mules carried the rations on to the companies. Although they came under fire on several occasions, the muleteers did an excellent job and the men never went without meals. At each company headquarters rations were divided amongst platoon representatives, and it was left to each platoon to do any cooking that might be possible.

Three officers and 68 other ranks joined the battalion during the second week in May, bringing it to approximately full strength. Casualties by the 17th of the month totalled 21, including three killed. An unfortunate accident on the 3rd caused nearly half of them. A shell splinter exploded a heap of grenades near 14 Platoon HQ. One man was killed and eight others, including Lt Quartermain, were wounded. A few days later the platoon lost Sgt Tombs, who was fatally injured during a period of heavy shelling. On the 6th came another unexpected incident.

When B Echelon was established at the [Hove Dump](#) there was plenty of room in the gully, but the arrival of several Polish B Echelons forced the others to move farther up the gully and occupy a smaller area. This prevented normal dispersement of vehicles, and tents, supplies, ammunition and trucks were crammed together in one corner. On the morning of the 6th shells began to land about 300 yards up the gully and not far from B Echelon. The shelling continued all morning without doing any material damage, but in the afternoon a heap of ammunition covered by a camouflage net received a direct hit. The net caught fire and in turn set alight the grass and scrub on the bank behind it, sending up a cloud of smoke visible for miles. The enemy increased the tempo of his bombardment and before long had set fire to several more dumps and a number of vehicles. Frantic efforts were made to shift the burning trucks away from the others and put the fires out. Everyone lent a hand—drivers, cooks and QM personnel. Despite the danger of exploding shells and ammunition, the salvage work went on until a large dump of petrol cans and a heap of 75-millimetre shells received direct hits.

Within a few seconds the gully became an inferno of bursting petrol cans, crashing enemy shells, and exploding ammunition. Flames leapt high into the air and the ground reverberated to the explosions. It was an indescribable scene, the flames and explosions being seen and heard by the troops miles away at [Terelle](#). The expletives of the battalion QM and his inability to gauge correctly the flight of enemy shells, and the dismay shown by another soldier as he watched the dollars he had received only the night before from the sale of a German automatic go up in flames, caused much amusement in an otherwise unpleasant afternoon. The four casualties suffered were all caused by the one shell; they included Pte [Lever](#),⁵ a cook who had been conspicuous amongst those trying to save the battalion trucks, and Lt G. J. Thomas, wounded badly in the leg and slightly in the arm and hand, whose hilarious

disregard for such ills and profane refusal to go to a Polish MDS completely nonplussed an audience of British officers. Eventually he was ordered to go. The jeep train had been saved and that night it went forward as usual. Fearing a repetition of the shelling, the brigade B Echelons transferred to [Acquafondata](#) and operated from there.

Five days later, on the night of 11 May, the troops on both sides of the valley were treated to a much greater spectacle than the [Hove Dump](#) fire, as hundreds of guns from all over the valley opened fire in support of the Polish attack on [Cassino](#) and [Monastery Hill](#). All night the guns thundered and roared and by morning the valley was hidden under a pall of smoke. Under cover of it armoured units moved around in an attempt to cut the enemy's supply lines to the Monastery. For days the guns continued to fire and the smoke from the valley reached up into the hills. All ranks eagerly awaited the outcome of the battle, but the Poles were finding it difficult to gain their objectives and were making only slow progress. By the 15th the German troops opposing 26 Battalion had become very jittery and the slightest movement or noise was sufficient for them to open fire. The German commander apparently believed that a general attack along the whole front might develop, and his use of long-range, large-calibre guns indicated that he was moving his shorter-range guns out of the line.

The weather was fine until the 16th. Clouds built up during the morning and early in the afternoon it rained heavily. A high wind and hailstorms made conditions very unpleasant. Many of the dugouts and shelters were flooded and almost every roof leaked. Clothing and bedding were soaked. A thick fog followed the rain, and after dusk the forward platoons stood-to in case the enemy took advantage of the weather to launch an attack. Next day, the 17th, came word that [23 Battalion](#) would be arriving after dusk to relieve 26 Battalion, which would return to its rest area on the banks of the [Volturno](#). Blankets, heavy equipment, supplies, etc., were to be left behind for the incoming battalion.

The 23rd Battalion began to arrive soon after midnight, and as each company reached Battalion HQ it was guided towards the FDLs. Shortly before A Coy was relieved, a strong enemy patrol attacked the forward platoons. In a short action in which the platoons fired all the weapons in their possession, the enemy was beaten off and withdrew after suffering casualties. One A Coy man was killed. While the

relief was taking place a heavy mortar concentration was fired on the area thought to have been the assembly place for the enemy patrol. The Germans were caught for wounded were heard to cry out. Shortly afterwards came the enemy's reaction—an intense bombardment of the FDLs, particularly on the right flank. For over an hour the troops crouched in their dugouts as shells and bombs exploded all around. The waiting period seemed endless and each shell seemed nearer than the last. When the 23rd Battalion men arrived little time was wasted in handing over the sector and setting out over the brow of the hill. B and D Coys were the last to move and, strung out in Indian file, they trudged down a track made slippery by the rain and difficult to negotiate in the darkness. It was dawn before the last platoon reached the bottom of the hill and rejoined the others in the lying-up area. The men rested all day, and at 10 p.m. marched across the valley to where trucks were waiting to take them on to the [Volturno](#) camp. By 4 a.m. the journey had been completed and everyone was asleep.

Because of the darkness the troops did not see the British and Polish flags flying on the crest of [Monastery Hill](#). Events had moved swiftly. British troops, supported by 19 Armoured Regiment, had cut Route 6 south-west of [Cassino](#) and denied the enemy his main line of withdrawal. French Moroccan troops driving across the [Aurunci Mountains](#) into the [Liri Valley](#) made spectacular progress. On the 18th the Poles launched another attack on [Cassino](#) and [Monastery Hill](#). The town fell with scarcely a shot being fired and, although they suffered heavy losses in doing so, the Poles succeeded in capturing the Monastery too.

So while the Fifth and Eighth Armies began their drive up the [Liri Valley](#) and the hills west of it, the troops rested. The [Volturno Valley](#) was greatly changed. The spell of fine weather had caused a resurgence of growth which half hid the ugly shell and bomb craters and softened the harsh outline of the hills. The green foliage of vines and trees blended with the scarlet blooms of poppies. The peasants too seemed gayer as they tended their small plots. The brown mud encrusted on the roads had turned to dust, which followed each vehicle as it moved through the valley. For a week the battalion was left to enjoy its pleasant surroundings. Light training was carried out, generally in the mornings. Platoons or companies either went for short route marches up picturesque valleys green with spring growth or sat in the sun listening to lectures on tactical or technical subjects. The firing range was given

plenty of use. Battalion vehicles were repainted to give better camouflage, and vertical standards designed to give drivers some protection against trip wires were fixed in front of jeeps. The arrival of more reinforcements brought the unit to full strength.

Nearly every afternoon was devoted to sport. Cricket, basketball, tenniquoits, and baseball all had their followers. A Coy, which had a strong batting side, won an inter-company cricket tournament. Very little leave was granted but the troops found plenty to do during the evenings. The Kiwi Concert Party, recently returned from New Zealand, made a welcome re- appearance, and on the 24th an [ENSA](#) party staged its show 'Old Scotch'. The female members of the cast were warmly applauded and gave frequent encores. At the [YMCA](#) tent were facilities for reading and writing and, at supper time, a hot cup of tea. Good and poor wines could be bought cheaply from local farmers or at the nearby village of [Montequila](#). All ranks were following the progress of the two armies with great interest. By the 25th the barrier that had stretched across the main road to Rome since October the previous year had been completely smashed, and the pursuit of the Germans up the peninsula of [Italy](#) had begun. The 23rd Battalion, patrolling from its sector east of [Terelle](#), had found the enemy gone and had set out in pursuit. It was following the [Belmonte-Atina](#) road and was directed on the upper [Liri Valley](#). That night enemy bombers dropped several bombs not far from the camp.

On the 26th Col Hutchens was called to Brigade HQ. There he learned that 6 Brigade was to join in the chase, moving east around Mount Croce along the road leading to [Atina](#) and the upper [Liri Valley](#). Mines and demolitions were expected to be the main obstacles. The 2nd Paratroop Battalion on Mount Croce reported no sign of the enemy and it was directed to clear the two remaining heights south of the line of advance. For its advance the brigade was given strong support, 43 Anti-Aircraft Battery, 33 Anti-Tank Battery, and A Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment being placed under command. The 8th Field Company NZE, plus a party of Corps engineers, was to be responsible for clearing the roads. The 25th Battalion was to lead the advance, with the 24th following and the 26th in reserve.

The advance began after breakfast on 27 May and the battalion travelled to Folignano, twelve miles from the rest camp. No further move was made that day. The next morning the CO went forward along the road to [Atina](#) to inspect 5

Paratroop Battalion's sector near the village of [La Selva](#). The New Zealand Prime Minister arrived at Folignano and had a talk to each company. Early in the afternoon the battalion embussed and moved to [La Selva](#), taking over the Paratroop Battalion's sector. The troops dug in beneath the shade of olive trees and settled down to await the next move. The new sector had become only semi-operational and there was little for the men to do.

Two days passed. The 25th Battalion, held up by extensive minefields and demolitions, was making little headway. On the other flank 5 Brigade, driving along the [Belmonte](#) road, captured [Atina](#) and was advancing on [Sora](#), the next town of importance. There were few in 26 Battalion who were worrying about the slow rate of progress. Around La Selva the scenery was beautiful. The weather was fine and the villagers very friendly. Many of them had gone into hiding when hostilities began in their district and they looked half-starved and haggard as they arrived back at their shelltorn homes. On the last day of the month came news that 5 Brigade had captured [Sora](#) and the high ground west of the town. About the same time the road to [Atina](#) was reported clear. After midday the troops embussed and the convoy set out for a staging area near [Atina](#). En route the battalion was redirected to continue on to another area about five miles south of [Sora](#). Just as the leading vehicles reached this area there was a sudden outbreak of shelling. Everyone dived to cover but a few were caught. A shell exploded alongside one carrier, wounding the six occupants, two of them mortally. The enemy shelling ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The companies dispersed amongst the rows of vines and settled down for the night. Major G. P. [Sanders](#)⁶ joined the battalion as second-in-command and Maj Williams resumed command of C Coy.

The capture of [Sora](#) had opened the way for an advance north-west through the [Liri Valley](#). From the town a good tar-sealed road, Route 82, followed the line of the upper Liri River to [Balsorano](#) and [Avezzano](#), the objective of the abortive [Sangro-Orsogna](#) battles. The valley was narrow and flanked by high hills, which near [Balsorano](#) formed an escarpment which was expected to be strongly held. Both infantry brigades were to take part in a drive up the valley, 6 Brigade along the western banks of the river with [24 Battalion](#) forward. The 25th Battalion was to move into reserve, and 26 Battalion was to be in a position to assist the 24th if the need arose. On the left flank of the Division [8 Indian Division](#), with [20 Armoured](#)

Regiment supporting it, was following a parallel route.

On Friday, 2 June, the battalion moved into [Sora](#), most of the men occupying buildings in the town. Ahead [24 Battalion](#) was slowly advancing along Route 82. [Sora](#) had not been badly damaged by bombing or artillery fire but the Germans had treated the civilians harshly. Consequently the townsfolk gave the men a royal welcome and everywhere they were fêted. Cherries were plentiful and the Italians gladly exchanged them for chocolate and other foodstuffs. The battalion stood by all day Saturday ready to move forward, but the order did not arrive until after dusk. In the meantime a few enemy shells had landed in the town, causing damage and casualties. An ammunition truck was set on fire and two men from the Carrier Platoon were wounded.

At 9.30 p.m. the battalion embussed and moved forward about nine miles to dig in behind [24 Battalion](#), which had encountered strong opposition from enemy rearguards covering [Balsorano](#). It had been decided that [26 Battalion](#) should pass through the 24th and attack the town after dusk the following night. At dawn the CO went forward to make a reconnaissance. Intelligence reports indicated that the Germans were strongly entrenched on the plateau which contained the town, and obviously intended to hold their ground until the bulk of their forces could withdraw north. The approaches to the town were expected to be mined. The Colonel's reconnaissance confirmed the view that the attack would be difficult and possibly costly because the enemy held such a commanding position. Before he returned to the lines the CO stumbled over a sleeping German, who was promptly taken prisoner.

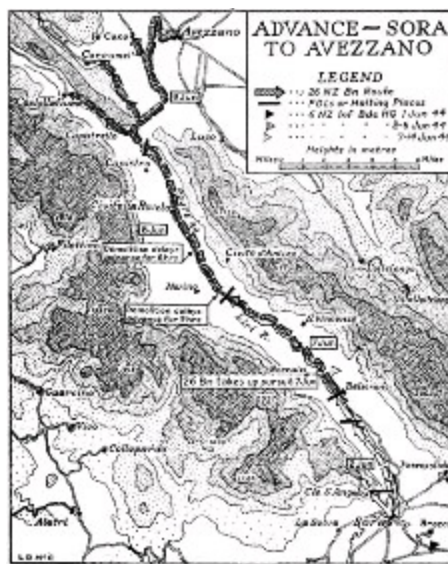
The troops prepared for action, knowing a sleepless night lay ahead of them. Conferences were held and a plan of action worked out. About two o'clock in the afternoon the battalion lines were heavily shelled. Two D Coy men lost their lives and six others, including four from D Coy, were wounded. Fortunately the shelling was all over within half an hour. Shortly before dusk came welcome news. Rome had been captured and the attack had been abandoned. Late that night the battalion marched back along Route 6 to a reserve area about four miles south of [Sora](#), arriving at the new camp about 4 a.m., footsore and weary but thankful to be moving south.

The news that Rome had fallen was still being eagerly discussed when another electrifying message was received. Allied troops had landed in [Normandy](#)! The Second Front had been opened! All ranks were highly excited. In all parts of the camp groups of men were debating how soon the war would end, and many entertained hopes of an early return to New Zealand. The Calcutta sweepstake on the probable date of the opening of the Second Front was won by Maj McKinlay.

All hopes of a sudden German collapse and an early return to New Zealand were interrupted by orders from Brigade HQ. The enemy had withdrawn from [Balsorano](#) and 26 Battalion was to lead the Division's columns to [Avezzano](#). Its role was three-fold: to clear any rearguard parties, to protect sappers repairing the road, and to assist with the minelifting. The advance would begin on the following day, 7 June, and the battalion would be supported by a squadron from [18 Armoured Regiment](#). For the first time in [Italy](#) the Division was to move as a mobile force although the rate of advance was largely indeterminable.

At 6.15 a.m. the troops debussed and the convoy moved up the [Balsorano](#) road. All went well for about an hour until the leading vehicle was halted by a huge demolition which blocked the road. Bulldozers were already at work. Brigadier Parkinson was there too. He waved his stick and told the infantry to 'get cracking up the road on foot.' B Coy immediately debussed and set out. When his men had travelled about two miles Maj Harvey gave the order to halt. No opposition had been encountered but several enemy stragglers had been rounded up. Civilians had gathered in small groups all along the way to welcome the men. Flowers, bread, wine and fruit were pressed on the somewhat embarrassed soldiers. In one instance the villagers' enthusiasm had an unfortunate sequel when a woman trod on a mine and was killed.

So while B Coy cleared mines on the road verges and sappers worked hard to fill in the road demolition, the rest of the
bat-



ADVANCE THROUGH LIRI VALLEY

talion

lay in the sun waiting for something to happen. Five C Coy men were wounded under unusual circumstances. They had lit a fire to boil the billy but had set it near a hidden mine which exploded. The afternoon wore on with no sign of a move. Three escaped prisoners of war, two South Africans and an Australian, came down the road to B Coy. They told the Company Commander that the Germans had left the area the

day before. Several large demolitions and minefields blocked the road to [Avezzano](#). Dusk fell, and it was 8.30 p.m. before the road was reported clear and the long line of tanks and vehicles began to move on once more. B Coy continued to march about 1000 yards ahead of the leading truck and, as the vehicle column was frequently halted by small demolitions, was able to maintain this lead without any difficulty. At 10.30 p.m., when D Coy had reached the village of Castelnuovo, a particularly bad demolition held up the column. The infantrymen, realising that the advance would be delayed several hours, slept by the roadside while the sappers, with a gigantic task ahead of them, worked through the night.

At 4.30 a.m. the road was again reported clear. A Coy took over the lead, with the rest of the battalion following in transport. A short distance from the town of Morino another large demolition blocked the advance. This area was thickly mined and sappers and infantrymen cleared lanes through each belt. The journey was resumed after midday and continued at short intervals until midnight. Eight miles

had been covered in 18 hours. Mines and demolitions had been the only cause for delay, and the pace of the advance was solely dependent on the ability and efficiency of the engineers. Many of the mines were linked together and booby-trapped, and in helping to clear them A Coy had six men wounded. More enemy stragglers had been rounded up and escaped prisoners of war were constantly arriving from hideouts in the hills. A Coy halted near the town of Capistrello, only four miles from the objective, [Avezzano](#).

The advance was resumed at half past five next morning, 9 June. C Coy had come forward to take the lead, and B and D Coys had also debussed so that a wider front could be covered. A Coy moved into Capistrello, where the now accepted welcome awaited the men. The townspeople had a very real grievance against the Germans. Only a short while before a party of civilians, believing the Germans gone, had brought hidden stock down from the hills, only to have it commandeered by the retreating enemy. The Italians objected and 29 of them were shot. Their bodies lay in heaps in the town.

C Coy halted when it was about two miles from [Avezzano](#) and Maj Kain sent a two-man patrol on to the village of Le Cese. The two men continued past the village and, on their own initiative, crossed the low hills and entered [Avezzano](#), which they found deserted. Another patrol from D Coy accompanied a party of engineers along a branch road as far as the Imele River. They found the bridge blown and the road mined. On the 10th Maj Kain sent a platoon forward to occupy [Avezzano](#), a town of about 27,000 inhabitants and an important communications centre. The rest of the battalion moved closer to C Coy. D Coy assisted sappers to clear the road to Corcumello and Route 5, while ahead of the battalion other engineer parties were clearing the road to [Avezzano](#). As soon as this road was reported clear, efforts were made to link up with the divisions on both flanks. Sappers accompanied these parties to repair the roads and lift mines. They had some hectic experiences, but the overwhelming welcome given them by the villagers and townsfolk more than made up for their hard work filling in road craters.

The next few days were memorable ones for all ranks. Before the area could be pronounced clear all side roads and the villages on them had to be patrolled. Remembering the welcome given to them during the advance, all ranks were well

aware of what would be in store for them in these as yet 'unliberated' areas. Although the parties were sent out ostensibly to lift mines, it was inevitable that the day should end in some small village with the civilians playing host with liberal generosity. Many of these villagers had hidden escaped prisoners, who continued to arrive in large numbers. Some came alone, some brought wives, and a few their wives and children.

Colonel Fountaine, who had resumed command of the battalion after an absence of five months on furlough, took a leading part in the most noteworthy social event. With the aid of a few staghounds, jeeps, and several officers and men from the unit, he staged an impressive display which captivated the fairer sex and dignitaries of the town of [Le Cese](#). Two British officers, both escaped prisoners of war, made an unusual request when they reached Battalion HQ. They had promised the widow who had befriended them since their escape that an English general would publicly thank her for her kindness. This they believed would enhance her reputation with the townsfolk. In the absence of Brig Parkinson, filling the temporary appointment of CRA of the Division, Col Fountaine, as acting Brigade Commander, agreed to their wish.

Riding on the turret of a staghound, the Colonel led the procession of staghounds, jeeps, and a lone staff car. The whole town turned out for the event. Decorations and banners were strung along the streets and walls were painted with all manner of patriotic signs and slogans. The townsfolk, young and old, lined the footpaths and cheered furiously as the procession slowly made its way to the main square. Embarrassed soldiers were bedecked with garlands of flowers and publicly kissed by pretty girls. From the background flasks of wine appeared. At the square the Colonel dismounted and, accompanied by several officers, mounted the dais to join the local Mayor and other dignitaries. The Mayor read a speech of welcome, after which cheering broke out anew. Later the Colonel replied, a wildly gesticulating interpreter assisting him, and the crowd surged forward, yelling more than ever. A banquet followed. Chicken, eggs, and pre-war champagne were a few of the highlights. The dance which followed was an hilarious one, and very late that night the procession returned to camp in a manner much different from its departure.

On a less elaborate scale, but equally as enjoyable, scenes similar to this were taking place all over the countryside, and general disappointment was voiced when

it was learned that 6 Brigade was being withdrawn to a divisional concentration area near the town of [Arce](#), and about 20 miles north of [Cassino](#). The advanced party left late on the afternoon of the 14th, and 24 hours later the main body followed. By dusk everyone was busy erecting tents on grass-covered slopes about a mile from the Liri River. That night a South African concert party staged an enjoyable show in the area, and this helped the men to adjust themselves to the more peaceful atmosphere of the new camp.

The battalion remained at [Arce](#) until 10 July. The camp site was an excellent one, set on easy slopes with plenty of trees to give shelter from the hot sun. Summer clothing was issued and the troops trained in readiness for another spell in the line. After a few days of elementary training and smartening-up exercises the syllabus became more varied and interesting, culminating in a series of platoon, company, and battalion exercises. Lectures were given by officers of other units on a variety of subjects, the most important being minelifting. As the war progressed the Germans had devised many new types of mines, some of them difficult to detect and dangerous to render safe. Selected men from each company were sent to a snipers' course, for the value of snipers had been enhanced by the conditions and the closer fighting in [Italy](#).

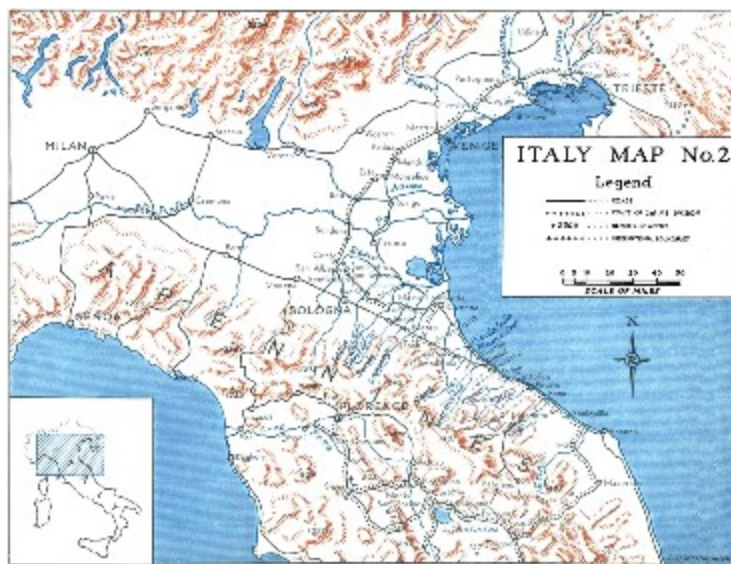
The need for a better understanding between tanks and infantry was fully realised and efforts were made to improve this. After a series of lectures a practical experiment was carried out with a squadron from [19 Armoured Regiment](#). The exercise proved fairly successful and was carried a stage further next day when the companies advanced over country in a live-shoot exercise, tanks accompanying each platoon. Guided to their targets by the infantry, the tanks did a lot of shooting which added to the reality of the scene. Radio communication between tanks and infantry was still not very successful, but when the radio failed use was made of the telephone fitted to the rear of each tank. As part of a scheme to promote better understanding between all arms of the Division, officers of the battalion spent a day with artillery units and artillery officers accompanied the infantry on some of their exercises. On 3 July Divisional Cavalry personnel demonstrated the use of their staghounds.

Although training took up a large part of the day, sports were not entirely

neglected. Cricket, basketball, baseball, and tenniquoits continued to flourish and many who had never played before were persuaded to do so. In the river were several excellent swimming pools. Very little leave was granted. New Zealanders had a new mecca in [Italy](#)—Rome. An excellent club had been established in the city but only a few were able to visit it. Picnic parties were taken to the popular tourist resorts, Lake Albano and Lago di Canterno, where the troops went tramping, boating and swimming. The party which went to Lago di Canterno stayed three days.

During the long evenings some sort of entertainment was usually provided. Pictures were shown in the nearby railway shed and several concert parties, including the ever popular *Kiwis*, gave performances. The town of [Arce](#) was not very interesting. Some heavy fighting had taken place in the neighbourhood and there was plenty of evidence of recent enemy occupation. The town was not large but the inhabitants made up in hospitality for their lack of numbers. Before the month passed there were few, including the 90 reinforcements who joined the battalion at this stage, who had not made civilian friends to whose homes they could go, always assured of a smiling welcome. Beer was still rationed but the townsfolk were always ready to sell or share their own supplies of wine. Fresh fruit and vegetables could be bought cheaply from local farmers.

On 21 June an official burial party went to [Cassino](#). Its task was a sad and gruesome one—to find and bury those of the battalion who had died there. Every member of the party had taken part in the fighting and knew where most of the killed had fallen. On their arrival they found that landmarks they had known had disappeared. Bombing and shelling had obliterated craters in which they had sheltered and where their mates had died. Tracks had disappeared to be replaced by other tracks. The bodies found were hardly recognisable; others were never found. Its grim task completed, the party returned to [Arce](#) with sad and unpleasant memories reawakened. Later, others who had taken part in the battle for [Cassino](#) visited the ruins. They saw huge piles of mines lifted from ground over which they had often trodden, the almost impregnable defences held by the enemy, and the amazing network of fortifications on [Monastery Hill](#). One and all marvelled that they, too, had escaped unscathed from such a place.



ITALY MAP NO. 2

¹ L-Cpl W. T. Coster; born NZ 23 Jun 1917; farmhand; wounded 24 Dec 1943; killed in action 19 Apr 1944.

² Pte W. E. S. Stevenson; born Arrowtown, 4 May 1908; clerk; died of wounds 26 Apr 1944.

³ Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens, DSO, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Canberra; born Hawera, 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO 27 (MG) Bn Feb–May 1944; 26 Bn 8 May–8 Jun 1944; 24 Bn Jun 1944–May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

⁴ Rev. J. A. Linton, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born NZ 27 May 1912; Presbyterian minister.

⁵ Pte C. C. Lever, m.i.d.; Waiuku; born NZ 27 Sep 1905; labourer; wounded 6 May 1944.

⁶ Lt-Col G. P. Sanders, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn 14 Jun–3 Jul 1944; 27 (MG) Bn Nov 1944–1945; 27 Bn (Japan) 1946; Director of Training, Army HQ, Aug 1949–.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 16 – THE ADVANCE ON FLORENCE

CHAPTER 16

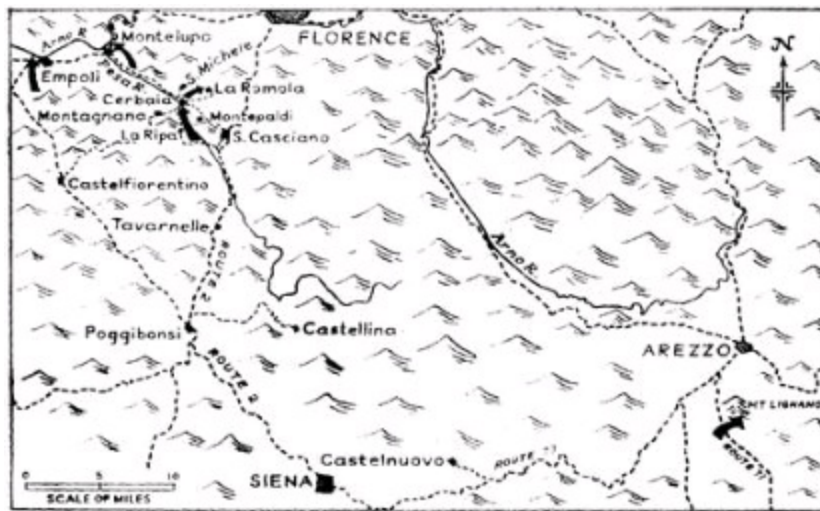
The Advance on Florence

ON 8 July rumours that the Division was shortly to return to the line were confirmed. The assembly area lay 230 miles away near [Lake Trasimene](#). After the opening of the Second Front the fighting in [Italy](#) had been given less prominence in the world's newspapers, but the Fifth and Eighth Armies' swift advance from Rome had been spectacular. As the two armies began to approach the hills south of the open city of [Florence](#) and the River Arno, they encountered stiffening resistance from an enemy feverishly trying to gain time to strengthen his next defensive barrier, the [Gothic Line](#). This ran across the peninsula from Massa on the Gulf of Genoa, north of [Florence](#), to [Pesaro](#) on the Adriatic coast. It was to [13 Corps](#)' sector south of [Florence](#) that [2 NZ Division](#) had been directed. The Corps was making its thrust along the two main roads leading north, Route 2 on the left flank and Route 71 on the right. The 6th British Armoured Division which was operating on the right had met stubborn resistance, and the task of the New Zealanders was to clear the heavily wooded hills north-east of Route 71 and so pave the way for an armoured thrust along the road through the town of [Arezzo](#) to the [Arno](#).

Sixth Brigade was chosen to relieve Sacforce, the infantry group operating in the area, and within twenty-four hours was moving northwards. During the 9th a small advanced party left the battalion area, and at 2 a.m. the main body embussed and followed. All badges and means of identification had been removed—an order which the troops had now come to expect before each action. Everyone was in good spirits, particularly the 4th Reinforcements who had joined the battalion at [Baggush](#) in December 1941. They carried with them the almost certain knowledge that this action would be their last before returning to New Zealand on furlough.

Shortly after daylight the convoy halted at a staging camp north of Rome. The journey was continued that night and by 10 a.m. on the 11th the battalion had reached an assembly area

near Lake Balsorano, a few miles south of Trasimene. Soon after his arrival Col Fountaine went ahead to inspect the [Arezzo](#) sector. It lay about 30 miles north of the lake beyond



THE BATTLE FOR FLORENCE, 12 JULY-15 AUGUST 1944

The Battle for Florence, 12 July–15 August 1944

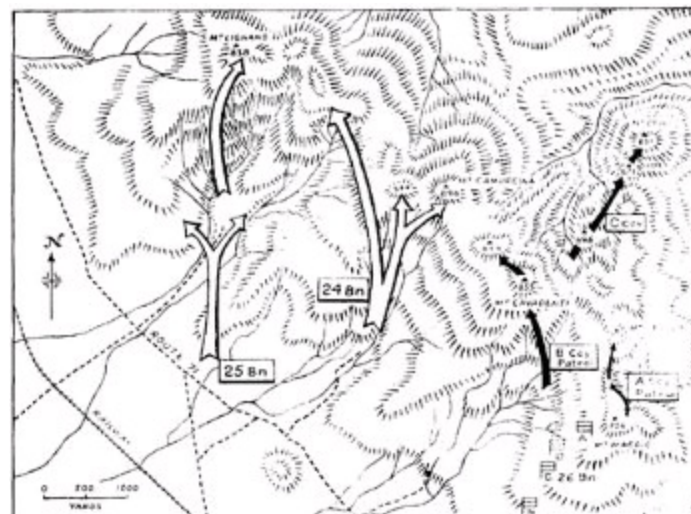
the town of [Castiglion Fiorentino](#). The 26th Battalion had been ordered to relieve a battalion of Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders in a forward sector. With [25 Battalion](#) on its left, it would take part in the initial assault on the enemy-held hilltops north of the road. To ensure the success of the operation strong support was given each battalion. Two troops of Divisional Cavalry, the 5th Brigade Heavy Mortar Platoon, and a platoon of Vickers gunners (No. [2 Coy 27 MG Battalion](#)) were placed at the Colonel's disposal. In addition he could count on almost unlimited artillery support. The reconnaissance revealed that the assault would be almost entirely an infantry task. The area of hills covering the road was divided by high saddles or wooded gullies, with the most prominent peaks—Mount Lignano on the left, Mount Camurcina in the centre, and Pt 691 on the right—covering the approaches to the others. There was little chance of tracked vehicles operating in the area.

While the men basked in the warm sunshine or bathed in the lake, preparations for the relief and the subsequent assault were made. ¹ Maps were issued and ground details carefully studied. Intensive patrolling was to be carried out first to determine the location and approximate strength of the enemy. By nightfall on the 12th all was ready, and at 7 p.m. the troops embussed and travelled up Route 71. A short distance from the new sector the convoy halted and the companies moved off on foot to begin the relief. With A Coy in the lead, they followed rough country roads and tracks through the hills. By midnight the battalion was in position, A Coy on the lower slopes of Mount Maggio, D Coy on lower ground about 200 yards west of it, and Battalion HQ about an equal distance to the south. C and B Coys in reserve were

much closer to the road. About 5000 yards away **25 Battalion** completed the relief of Sacforce. On the right flank an Italian reconnaissance force was occupying the high ground to prevent any enemy infiltration from the east.

The night passed without any sign of the enemy. At first light a three-man patrol from A Coy climbed Mount Maggio and found it unoccupied. About the same time one of the Divisional Cavalry troops, accompanied by six Shermans, set out along a rough road which wound through the hills through the south-eastern corner of the sector. The patrol, emboldened by its success, continued north from the crest of Mount Maggio along a high saddle to Pt 773 (Cerola) and then west to Pt 855 (Cavadenti), both of which were unoccupied. Later in the morning Maj McKinlay sent a platoon forward to occupy Mount Maggio. Meanwhile, the Divisional Cavalry party had been held up by a road demolition at a point almost due east of Maggio. No. 13 Platoon, accompanied by some sappers, went forward to clear the road.

The day passed with still no sign of enemy troops. At 5 p.m. two platoons from B Coy went forward to occupy Cavadenti. No. 10 Platoon was in the lead and on the crest of the feature



MOUNT LIGNANO SECTOR, 12-16 JULY

Mount Lignano Sector, 12–16 July

met an enemy patrol. Surprise was mutual but the New Zealanders were the first to recover. One German was killed and three taken prisoner; two of those who escaped were believed to be wounded. The two platoons dug in along the crest. Later in the night they were subjected to heavy mortar fire which slackened off

towards morning. Only one man was hit, and he was safely evacuated.

Satisfied that the enemy was already beginning to withdraw from the area, Col Fontaine ordered C Coy to occupy Pt 691 (Mount Opino). The capture of this feature would enable the armoured column, which had been joined by D Coy, to continue its drive on [Arezzo](#). C Coy moved off about 1 a.m. and had considerable trouble maintaining direction because of the darkness and the nature of the ground. After he had gone about two miles beyond A Coy Maj Williams ordered his men to rest until daylight, when he would be better able to determine his position. At first light it was evident the company was some distance from its objective, but Williams decided to rest his men until early in the afternoon. Mount Opino was divided into two peaks about 150 yards apart, and when the leading platoon approached the nearest, Pt 671, it was fired on. An Artillery FOO ² with the company called down a heavy concentration on the area, after which 14 Platoon charged in to occupy a house on the crest of the feature. The Germans as quickly ran down the reverse slope and escaped.

No. 14 Platoon remained on Pt 671 while the other two platoons took up positions on Pt 691, which was found deserted. The company was still digging in at last light when, following a mortar concentration, the enemy counter-attacked Pt 671. The attack was unexpected. Some of the men were caught without arms and the platoon had to retire from its position. The FOO called down another concentration, which fell in the company area and caused four casualties, including two men killed. Unfortunately communications broke down at this stage and the men had no choice but to sit quiet until the 25-pounders stopped firing. The Germans made no effort to press home their advantage, and later 14 Platoon reoccupied its position without meeting opposition.

On the right of the company the armoured column, now under the command of Maj Barnett, had skirted around the east of Mount Opino to be held up at a crossroads east of Mount Lignano. Intense shell and mortar fire at this point forced the armoured cars to fall back, and although the 4.2-inch mortars and [6 Field Regiment](#) fired many concentrations they were unable to dislodge the enemy gunners. Second-Lieutenant [Sargent](#), ³ the last officer of the battalion to be killed in action, met his death as a result of the enemy shelling.

At dawn on the 15th the situation was unchanged, but a B Coy patrol led by Cpl [Brick](#)⁴ was having an exciting time. It had set out just before dawn towards Pt 844, a hill about 500 yards north-west of Mount Cavadenti. Cautiously the small party climbed the hill slope in the half light. On the crest the corporal and Pte [McLeod](#),⁵ who accompanied him, tripped over a spandau post. Before the enemy gunners had recovered from their surprise the patrol leader had opened fire. One German was killed and the two others wounded and taken prisoner before other spandau posts in the vicinity began firing. The advantage of surprise gone, Cpl Brick set about getting his men and the prisoners back to the lines as quickly as possible. All but one of the enemy posts could be covered by Bren fire, and this was quietened by Pte [Parker](#),⁶ who coolly lobbed grenades at it. Driving the prisoners ahead of it, the patrol raced back down the hill and across the open ground to Mount Cavadenti. Despite the heavy machine-gun fire none of the party was hit.

On the left flank [25 Battalion](#) had captured Mount Lignano, the dominant feature in the chain of hills. Only three features in the area, Pt 844, Mount Camurcina to the north-west, and another Pt 844 alongside it, remained in enemy hands. The Brigade Commander, [Brig J. T. Burrows](#),⁷ decided to bring in [24 Battalion](#) and attempt to clear these points under cover of darkness. The assault was to begin at 2 a.m. on the 16th and would follow a light artillery barrage. B Coy 26 Battalion, with 7 Platoon attached, was ordered to capture the nearest Pt 844. The information supplied by Cpl Brick and the wounded prisoners indicated that the company could expect opposition, but 7 Platoon which led the attack found the hilltop deserted. Major Harvey had only just wirelessly back a success signal when the platoon reported it was being heavily shelled by 25- pounders. Frantic messages were relayed back to the gunners and the firing soon ceased, but not before two men had been killed and two wounded. One of the killed was Cpl Fred Tyson, a very popular NCO who had done so well at [Cassino](#).

This was an unfortunate ending to an operation which finished soon after daybreak, when it was learned that the Germans had withdrawn to positions north of [Arezzo](#). Those who had envisaged another mobile role, culminating in a triumphant entry into [Florence](#), were doomed to disappointment, for soon afterwards the CO was ordered to withdraw his men to [Castiglion Fiorentino](#) in readiness to move to another sector. Later in the day the battalion reassembled in a pleasant camping

area about five miles from the town. Everyone was expecting orders to move, but a week passed before the unit returned to the line. Nobody minded for the weather was beautiful and trucks went daily to the lake carrying swimming parties.

The married men and a few lucky single members of the 4th Reinforcements left for New Zealand. They were only a small proportion of those who had joined the battalion in the Desert, but they were key men and sorely missed. A special farewell celebration was held in their honour, and while there are many who have hazy recollections of what went on, the whole camp turned out to watch the party begin the long journey home.

* * *

Thirteenth Corps was now advancing across the wooded hills of [Tuscany](#) along a front of more than 40 miles. The Corps Commander had five divisions under command, and he decided to make his main thrust along the general line of Route 2 on the left flank. He planned to drive a narrow wedge through to the [Arno](#), south-west of [Florence](#) and little more than 20 miles away, using [2 NZ Division](#) and 6 South African Armoured Division. The New Zealanders' role was similar to that carried out south of [Arezzo](#)—to clear a way through the hills so that the armour could advance along the main highway.

On 21 July 5 Brigade relieved French Moroccan troops in a sector west of Route 2 and almost immediately began driving north along both banks of the Pesa River. Progress was slow for hills extended right down to the river banks; and firmly established on these were some of the enemy's best troops—4 Paratroop Division and 29 Panzer Division. On the 22nd the battalion moved across to a 6 Brigade assembly area near the town of [Castellina](#), and about 13 miles from the scene of the fighting. It was a dusty, 70-mile journey and nobody was sorry when it was over. Everyone was expecting to move into the line almost immediately, but several pleasant days of idleness passed before the battalion moved into action. This spell was largely caused by stubborn enemy resistance to 5 Brigade's advance. At the point where Route 2 crossed the line of advance and turned north along the east bank of the river, a composite force known as [ArmCav](#), and containing tanks, armoured cars, engineers and infantry, followed the road while 5 Brigade cleared the hilltops rising from the other bank. By 26 July 5 Brigade, following the line of the

ridges, had swung south of the river and the [ArmCav](#) force, following Route 2, had turned north-east towards the town of [San Casciano](#). Sixth Brigade was ordered to plug the gap between the two and then force a crossing of the river where it turned west across the front. This would bring the New Zealanders into a position where they could attack the remaining arc of hills covering the approaches to [Florence](#). The pace of the armoured drive along Route 2 was wholly dependent on the speed with which the New Zealanders cleared these hills.

Night moves on 24 and 25 July had brought the battalion close to the fighting. At dawn on the 26th the troops were dispersed under cover near the town of [Tavarnelle](#) on Route 2. Colonel Fontaine already knew his battalion would lead the brigade in its advance along the river bank and across the river. The plan was fairly simple. After 5 Brigade had captured La Ripa, a town in the line of advance of both brigades, the battalion was to follow a road leading through the town west along the river. A crossing was to be made near [Cerbaia](#). The 24th Battalion following would make another crossing west of this town, and later [25 Battalion](#) would also cross the [Pesa](#) to protect the right flank.

During the morning 41 reinforcements arrived and were posted to companies. Their arrival almost offset the recent departures. About midday Battalion HQ and A Coy set out on foot along Route 2. They turned onto the road leading to [La Ripa](#) and halted after travelling three miles. No further progress could be made until [21 Battalion](#) cleared the town. Dusk fell, and shortly afterwards sounds of firing could be heard ahead. A Coy prepared to move. Major McKinlay had under command half of C Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#), two anti-tank guns, a section of Vickers gunners, and some sappers from 8 Field Company NZE. Several hours passed. The artillery fired heavy concentrations in the vicinity of [Cerbaia](#). Finally, at 1.30 a.m. [La Ripa](#) was reported clear of the enemy. The 21st Battalion was advancing west along a road leading to [Montagnana](#), south of [Cerbaia](#).

With 9 Platoon leading, A Coy began to advance. Half an hour later it reached the crossroads just south of the town. Here a large demolition blocked the passage of tanks, and the Company Commander decided to halt until sappers could repair the damage. Two hours passed, and finally at 4.40 a.m., with daylight approaching, Col Fontaine ordered the company to continue on towards [Cerbaia](#) without support. A few minutes later the road was reported clear and the tanks began to follow in the

wake of the platoons. When it was nearly daylight Maj McKinlay discovered that in the darkness his company had turned down the road leading to [Montagnana](#). Tanks and infantry alike had to turn and retrace their steps to [La Ripa](#). On the right road the platoons lost no time in heading towards [Cerbaia](#), but it was impossible to reach it before daylight. As the two leading platoons neared a crossroads south of the town and the river they came under machine-gun fire. Two sections from 9 Platoon were detailed to clear a nearby low hill from which the fire was coming. However, by the time the infantry reached the crest of this feature the enemy had gone.

About the same time the bridge across the river was blown, and a few seconds later another bridge farther west also went up. Explosions were also heard in [Cerbaia](#), only a few hundred yards away. By this time it was after 8 a.m. and the company was in full view of the town and the hills north of it. The men took whatever cover was available while a reconnaissance patrol went ahead to examine the blown bridge. It returned after having been fired on from the town. The enemy's reaction to the advance soon took another form and the company came under very heavy shellfire. Most of the men had not been able to dig in and were sheltering in ditches near the road. In a short time three men were killed and three others wounded. Later, during a lull in the firing, 7 Platoon, which was in reserve, crossed the shallow river and entered [Cerbaia](#) from the north-east. The rest of the company followed the road and entered the town from the south. The enemy rearguard had left and [Cerbaia](#) was captured without a shot being fired by the New Zealanders.

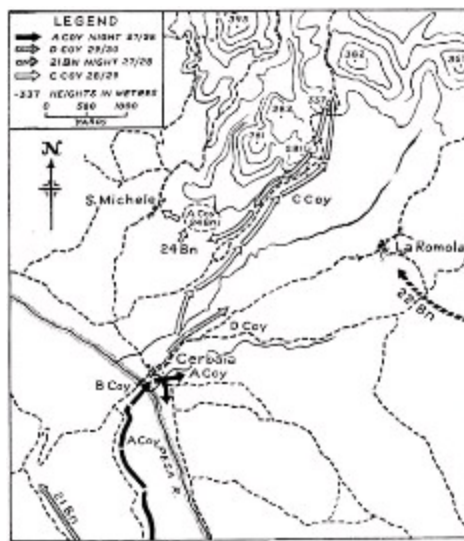
By 10 a.m. the tanks, which had lagged behind the infantry, had reached the crossroads. D Coy was with them. The rest of the supporting arms remained on call at [La Ripa](#). A short time afterwards Tac HQ moved forward to join D Coy, leaving only B and C Coys south of [La Ripa](#). Although a bridgehead had been secured across the river, the position was by no means secure. Tanks which had attempted to link up with A Coy had been unable to cross the river because of mines. The enemy shelling had become much heavier, and much of it was directed on the tank laager near the crossroads where D Coy was also sheltering. Tactical HQ and the company suffered casualties. One tank was set on fire. Telephone wires were frequently cut and communication at this stage was chiefly by wireless. Counter-battery fire failed to stop the enemy shelling.

At 11 a.m. the mobile column driving up Route 2 reported the capture of [San Casciano](#), a town east of [Cerbaia](#) and on the north bank of the river. The 21st Battalion, which had advanced along a route parallel to but south of A Coy during the night, was occupying a hill south of the crossroads. The establishment of the two bridgeheads over the river and the capture of the ground leading up to them ended the first phase of the Division's drive on [Florence](#). The battalion's part in it had been relatively simple, but the second phase did not look as easy.

* * *

The semi-circle of hills and ridges which covered the approaches to [Florence](#) reached almost to the river bank. Those nearest [Cerbaia](#) were dominated by higher ground north and west of them. From the town several roads and tracks led into the hills. One ran north-east to [La Romola](#), a small town two miles away. Another led to [San Michele](#), a village perched on the crest of a high hill overlooking [Cerbaia](#) and much of the surrounding countryside. Sixth Brigade had been ordered to capture both these towns and clear the hills, while the rest of the Division advanced east from [San Casciano](#) towards it. The Brigade Commander decided to attack after dusk with two battalions.

The 24th Battalion was ordered to establish another bridgehead across the river to the left of 26 Battalion and attack with it. Its objective was [San Michele](#), while that of 26 Battalion was the high ground overlooking [La Romola](#). Armoured support would be provided by [19 Armoured Regiment](#). The strength of the German forces was uncertain, although it was known that elements of 29 Panzer Division, supported by tanks, were in the area.



THE ACTION AT CERBAIA, 27 JULY-3 AUGUST 1944

The Action at Cerbaia, 27 July–3 August 1944

Nothing could be done until sappers had cleared the mines from the riverbed so that tanks could join A Coy. This task was completed under heavy shellfire, and by 6 p.m. the first tanks had reached Cerbaia. About the same time B and C Coys began to move forward from La Ripa. The latter company was to spearhead the advance through the hills, while B Coy occupied Cerbaia and A Coy covered the bridgehead. Major Kain, who was commanding C Coy in the absence of Maj Williams on leave, was given three objectives, the nearest of which was Pt 281, a hilltop about 3500 yards north-east of Cerbaia. If little or no opposition was encountered the company was to exploit towards Pt 382 and Pt 395 respectively, 1200 yards north-east and 2000 yards north-west of Pt 281. Major Kain had not been able to carry out any preliminary reconnaissance although A Coy patrols reported that the enemy had withdrawn into the hills. The line of advance followed a rough country road, ran up a sharp and exposed ridge, and then skirted around and through the hills.

Handicapped by the darkness and with only a hazy knowledge of the country it was to cross, the company left Cerbaia shortly after 10 p.m. and cautiously began to climb the nearest ridge. Near the top of it, on the fringe of a vineyard, two German machine-gunners were taken prisoner. There was no sign of the company of 24 Battalion which was supposed to link up with C Coy at this point. Major Kain decided to go on, although by this time the supporting armour was some distance behind. At 4 a.m. he reported that he was 600 yards beyond Pt 281 and his men were digging in on both sides of the road. No opposition had been encountered, but an enemy truck had driven past the company towards Cerbaia.

Unaware that C Coy had actually bypassed Pt 281, which was separated from the road by a heavily wooded gully too difficult to traverse at night, orders were issued from Tac HQ to carry out the second phase of the night's operation. Major Kain was ordered to exploit towards Pt 395, and a platoon from B Coy was sent to make contact with C Coy and then continue on towards Pt 382. It appeared at this stage that the enemy had either withdrawn or was withdrawing from the area. Major Kain, however, was taking no chances and he waited for tanks to join him. They could be heard moving some distance away. A section from 14 Platoon had been detailed to guide them and act as covering party to sappers testing the road for mines. Quick-witted action by the section leader, Cpl Murphy,⁸ had already saved the party casualties. As they moved up the hill someone in a trench called out 'Buona sera.' Thinking they were New Zealanders, the corporal asked who they were. The rattle of a bolt was the answer. Without stopping to think the corporal charged the trench, killed the German machine-gunner, and wounded the two other occupants. One of the wounded volunteered the information that there were more of his company about, so sappers and infantrymen prepared to find them. Just as the party was about to set out, the missing [24 Battalion](#) company arrived and reported that the Germans had been captured in a house apparently bypassed by C Coy. The enemy truck had also been captured.

At 5 a.m. the tank commander reported that he would not be able to reach C Coy before dawn. Shortly after this the forward troops were subjected to heavy mortar fire. By daylight the ridge which the company was occupying was being bombarded by mortar bombs and shells. The three tanks which reached the area could find no cover and were soon put out of commission. The situation rapidly became worse for it was evident that the enemy was holding the wooded heights around the company in strength, and from this cover he could launch a counter-attack in almost any direction. By 9.30 a.m. the enemy fire had increased to such an extent that the company had withdrawn to cover in a house. Several men had been wounded, including some of the tank crews. Without supporting arms it was impossible to retaliate, and Maj Kain saw no alternative but to withdraw, particularly as the platoons could take up no defensive positions.

The expected counter-attack developed soon afterwards, but before the Germans could surround it the company ran in groups of two and three down the

exposed slope, using every bit of cover available. A jeep being used as an ambulance had already collected all but three of the wounded and was returning for more. The driver, Pte [Robinson](#),⁹ arrived as the last of the company left the besieged house. In a matter of seconds the wounded men were on the jeep and the driver had set out down the road. Pursued by the machine-gun fire of Germans who had entered the house by another door, the jeep bumped over the rough road through the curtain of shells falling on and around it, to reach [Cerbaia](#) in safety.

C Coy halted when it reached [24 Battalion](#)'s position, which lay about 800 yards south-west of Pt 281 and extended west from the ridge across the lower slopes of Pt 261. The platoons took up a position behind and to the right of this company and dug in under heavy shell and mortar fire. The B Coy platoon sent forward early in the morning joined C Coy and dug in on the right flank. It had suffered fairly heavy casualties from shelling both before and after the hasty withdrawal. The enemy counter-attack continued, and [24 Battalion](#) personnel occupying a house forward of C Coy were closely engaged by German infantry. The enemy lost heavily and was eventually forced to withdraw. The shelling and mortaring began anew but no further attacks developed during the rest of the day.

After the first message from Maj Kain saying he was being forced to withdraw, Tac HQ heard nothing more from him until nearly 11 a.m. A few cryptic messages from tanks in the area, one to the effect that the company had been overrun and another that Tiger tanks were supporting the German infantry, caused considerable alarm. This was dispelled later in the morning when Maj Kain reported that practically all his men had been accounted for and that the enemy attack appeared to have ceased. During the afternoon more tanks crossed the river to join the troops holding the bridgehead. Counter-battery fire was increased considerably, the 25-pounders and 4.2-inch mortars concentrating on targets reported by the forward infantry. As a result of this the hostile fire on the forward areas had slackened off considerably by dusk. Plans to extend the bridgehead and capture [San Michele](#) were completed at a brigade conference late in the afternoon. The 24th Battalion was to attack west from its positions on Pt 261 and attack the village, while [25 Battalion](#) established a strongpoint on the north bank of the river east of [Cerbaia](#). To prevent any outflanking move from the direction of [La Romola](#), D Coy of 26 Battalion was to take up a position overlooking this road about a mile from [Cerbaia](#). The CO decided

to relieve C Coy, and Maj Harvey was ordered to take his company forward. The supporting arms were also to go forward.

Enemy shelling and mortaring, which had eased off at dusk, began again about 7 p.m. [Cerbaia](#) was shelled, and shortly afterwards 8 Platoon was attacked by an enemy party of unknown strength. Defensive fire was laid down by 6 Field Regiment and this, coupled with the heavy fire brought to bear by the platoon itself, broke up the enemy assault. In the mêlée two of the company were taken prisoner and three others were wounded. The enemy party was thought to have come from the area where [25 Battalion](#) intended to establish a strongpoint. In the hills a much more serious threat had developed as the enemy renewed his assault on A Coy [24 Battalion](#). C Coy, which was still in position, was not directly involved but gave what supporting fire it could. At length concentrated fire from tanks, field guns, mortars, and platoon weapons drove the enemy back and the line was re-established.

At 11 p.m. B Coy relieved the troops on the hill, who withdrew across the river to the reserve position vacated by D Coy. After 36 hours without sleep they were feeling exhausted, particularly after a day of almost constant enemy fire. Casualties totalled 15—two killed, ten wounded, and three prisoners of war.

D Coy, meanwhile, had moved about 1500 yards along the road to [La Romola](#). Sappers who accompanied the infantry tested the road for mines so that at some later stage a tank-supported attack could be made on the town. Captain [Smythe](#),¹⁰ acting commander of D Coy, deployed his men on the high ground astride the road, and the supporting arms—mortars and six-pounders—were positioned on vantage points. One of the anti-tank guns sent forward to the company went over a bank and was not recovered until much later.

The night passed without much more activity on the battalion front although spasmodic shelling caused several casualties. B Coy reported several times that artillery 'shorts' were landing in its sector. The attacks on both flanks were successful. D Coy [25 Battalion](#) crossed the river and by morning was strongly entrenched around [Montepaldi](#). C Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment captured [Talente](#), a town north of this point. On the left flank [24 Battalion](#) captured [San Michele](#) after a stern tussle.

The next day, 29 July, passed without any serious threat developing on the battalion front, a suspected counter-attack from the direction of [La Romola](#) being broken up by accurate artillery fire. The Germans apparently regarded [San Michele](#) as vital to their defences, and [24 Battalion](#) and the tanks supporting it were fully occupied beating back enemy attempts to recapture the village. Enemy shelling and mortar fire was very heavy at times, but equally heavy counter-battery fire resulted in a gradual easing of the situation. During the afternoon Allied planes made several sorties overhead, [La Romola](#) being one of the targets. Civilians who had come through the German lines gave details of the enemy's troop dispositions, ammunition dumps, and gun positions. They stated that parachutists with tanks in support were holding [La Romola](#), and that 200 poorly equipped partisans led by escaped prisoners of war were harassing the enemy in the hills north of the town.

It had been decided that 6 Brigade would not attempt to move deeper into the hills until 5 Brigade and 4 Armoured Brigade on the right flank could conform. The 22nd Battalion was already driving west towards [La Romola](#). Late in the afternoon the enemy made a determined bid to recapture San Michele. Lorried infantry drove right into the village and they were followed by several tanks. The Shermans with [24 Battalion](#) were either knocked out or forced to withdraw, but the infantry held on. The situation was very fluid, with both sides holding parts of the village. Plans to drive the enemy out were immediately prepared, and the tanks supporting [26 Battalion](#) were transferred to [24 Battalion](#) for this purpose. Late that night [San Michele](#) was recaptured.

The transfer of the Shermans to [24 Battalion](#) necessitated some changes in the forward platoon positions. More anti-tank guns were sent forward to B and D Coys and deployed. Most of the platoon positions were changed. B Coy extended its front to take over part of [24 Battalion's](#) sector. Mines were laid in front of both companies. Spasmodic shelling and mortaring caused a few casualties and brought the total for the day to twelve, all of whom were wounded. Some of these casualties resulted from long-range shelling of [Cerbaia](#).

The 30th was a fairly peaceful day with enemy shelling ceasing every time Allied planes appeared. The forward platoons called down artillery and mortar concentrations on suspected enemy gun positions at intervals during the day and the

night which followed. Battalion HQ moved into [Cerbaia](#) and a much better system of internal communication resulted. After dusk limited patrolling was carried out by both B and D Coys. There was no sign of the enemy. The Carrier Platoon went forward on foot to B Coy and was given an infantry role. From the right flank came the sounds of battle as [22 Battalion](#) closed in on [La Romola](#). The last day of the month was little different from the preceding two. [Cerbaia](#) was again shelled by enemy long-range guns but on this occasion nobody was injured. The 22nd Battalion linked up with D Coy and the stage was set for the advance to continue. The enemy was given little respite as Allied planes, tanks, artillery and mortars all took their turn at harassing his positions and lines of communication.

That night patrolling was carried out to determine if the Germans had pulled back. C Coy relieved B Coy, and later 14 Platoon was sent to occupy the house vacated by the company on the morning of the 28th. If intelligence reports were correct there were no enemy troops in the vicinity; but the platoon met opposition before it reached its objective and withdrew. Sergeant [Lane](#),¹¹ who had been wounded and left behind on the 28th, was found hiding in one of the nearer houses. Unfortunately, on the way back to the lines he sustained another wound from which he subsequently died. The Germans apparently thought this skirmish indicated an attack, for they shelled and mortared the company's sector and the ground forward of it for some time afterwards. This fire ceased after 6 Field Regiment had fired several heavy concentrations on the area where the platoon had met resistance.

On 1 August the Brigade Commander gave orders that the houses approached by the C Coy patrol be cleared in daylight to permit a full-scale attack by [25 Battalion](#) on Pt 382. The 22nd Battalion was to attack a nearby hill, Pt 361, at the same time. The capture of these two features would give the Division a view over the lower ground around [Florence](#), now only eight miles away. A three-man patrol sent out during the morning found the nearest house unoccupied, and as a result of its report the company started to advance up the ridge about 11 a.m. The first house was taken without any difficulty and the second cleared after two artillery concentrations had been fired on it. Corporal Murphy's section again distinguished itself by closing in quickly after the shelling ceased and capturing 20 Germans, including an officer, who were about to withdraw to prepared defences nearby. Later in the day a third house was taken.

The 25th Battalion was to attack under a barrage, and after dusk C Coy withdrew behind the start line. Both A and D Coys of 26 Battalion came under command of [25 Battalion](#); D Coy was to capture Pt 261, west of Pt 281, and A Coy was to form part of a reserve. The guns began firing at 10 p.m. and shortly afterwards reports of success on all fronts were received. D Coy captured its objective without loss and took two prisoners. Later [25 Battalion](#) consolidated on its objective with tanks in support. The 22nd Battalion achieved partial success.

The next day, 2 August, saw the close of the battalion's part in the battle for [Florence](#). Allied planes were active all day and consequently there was little enemy shelling. Troops of other units moving north-east and west from [San Michele](#) and [La Romola](#) crossed the battalion front, leaving D Coy holding a reserve sector. At 11 a.m. came the dramatic news that 4 Armoured Brigade had broken through the enemy barrier and was well on the way to its objective. Colonel Fontaine was ordered to withdraw his companies from the hills and concentrate around [Cerbaia](#) ready to take part in the final drive on [Florence](#). The troops were in good spirits despite the ordeal of several days under fairly heavy shelling and mortaring, and were keen to be the first to enter the city. Casualties for the week totalled 61—nine killed, 47 wounded, and five prisoners of war.

The enemy made one last effort before leaving the troops in [Cerbaia](#) in peace. At 4.30 a.m. on the 3rd everyone was awakened by the deafening noise of shells crashing nearby. For two hours long-range guns fired salvo after salvo into the town. Considerable damage was done to buildings and two trucks and an anti-tank portée were destroyed, but few soldiers or civilians were injured. Another reminder of the recent presence of Germans in the area were the mines. Many of the buildings were found to be mined, and because of them one man was killed and another wounded.

* * *

Three days passed before definite orders were received for the battalion's next role, and during this period the men saw their chance of being first into [Florence](#) slipping away. By the 5th 5 Brigade had reached the southern outskirts of the city and was holding a sector of the south bank of the [Arno](#). At this juncture, with success in sight, the brigade was relieved by Canadians. Back at [Cerbaia](#) it had begun to rain, and a plan to shift to a bivouac area was postponed.

The Division's new task was not particularly difficult and there was little likelihood of any major action. While the New Zealanders had been clearing the high ground west of Route 2, [8 Indian Division](#) on the left flank of [13 Corps](#) had continued to advance west and north-west towards the [Arno](#). No hills of any consequence barred the way, and the Indians had advanced to within a short distance of their objective. The Division was to relieve them and continue to clear the ground up to the river. After this task was completed it was to find out as much as it could about the river, the approaches to it, and the enemy's dispositions on the other side. An impression of a defensive attitude was to be created as part of a plan to conceal the assembly of American units which would later launch an attack across the river.

Sixth Brigade was directed to take over the centre sector from 17 Indian Brigade, and during the 6th Col Fontaine carried out a reconnaissance of the battalion's sector. In this area the [Arno](#) turned to run south-west, and the Indians had advanced to within half a mile of it. The battalion front extended north-east for approximately a mile from [Montelupo](#), a town near the river and reputedly still occupied by the Germans. The ground sloped down to the river and was crossed by numerous rough roads and tracks. Trees and vines provided ample cover.

At dusk the same day the troops embussed and lorries carried them to within two miles of [Montelupo](#). From this point the companies marched to their respective sectors; B Coy went to the left flank, C Coy to the right, while A Coy came up between them. D Coy remained in reserve near Battalion HQ, about half a mile to the rear of B Coy. Each company was given mortar and anti-tank support and the men dug in, hindered only by intermittent shelling. By dawn all-round defensive positions had been completed. Little happened during the day except for the departure of two senior officers, Majors Kain and McKinlay. Both had seen long service with the battalion and had fully earned a spell from front-line activities. Major Williams had already returned from leave to take command of C Coy again, and Capt [Murray](#),¹² a newcomer to the battalion who had left New Zealand with [20 Battalion](#), was given command of A Coy.

After dusk patrolling began. A fighting patrol sent to [Montelupo](#) found the streets deserted and all doors barred. Subsequently a company from [25 Battalion](#) was sent to occupy it. Other patrols examined the ground forward of the sector up to

the river and ventured about 3000 yards north-east of C Coy's boundary. In no instance were enemy troops sighted. The river was examined in various places and roads tested for mines.

On 8 August Col Fontaine was advised that his battalion was to join 5 Brigade in its sector about four miles south of [Montelupo](#). A group known as [Steele Force](#) would relieve his men after dark. Very little happened during the day and the relief was carried out without incident. By early morning the unit was concentrated in an area about three miles from the river. A reconnaissance of the new sector was carried out during the day, and late in the afternoon the troops embussed and set out by a circuitous route of 23 miles to their new position. In 5 Brigade's sector 21 and 23 Battalions were holding positions about 2000–3000 yards from the river; 26 Battalion was to squeeze between them, relieving two companies of [23 Battalion](#) as it did so. The right flank of the brigade lay close to [Empoli](#), a fairly large town on the south bank of the river. Patrol reports indicated that this town and the villages south of it were strongly held by the enemy. The addition of 26 Battalion would enable 5 Brigade to deploy [23 Battalion](#) farther to the south to link up with American troops on the left flank.

The relief was completed by 11 p.m. and the companies immediately dug in. D Coy was forward on the left flank, with C Coy on the right of it and much nearer to [Empoli](#). A Coy was in support close to Battalion HQ and B Coy in reserve some distance to the rear. Light shelling and mortaring caused no casualties to the supporting arms as they moved forward to take up positions covering the 1500-yard front. No tank support had been allocated so anti-tank guns were sent well forward. Almost as soon as they were in position the mortars and Vickers gunners were called on to harass suspected enemy strongpoints. About midnight a reconnaissance patrol sent out by D Coy ran into spandau fire near a railway embankment, which extended across the front about a thousand yards from the FDLs. An American who was with the patrol was ambushed and killed.

In the morning the troops took stock of their surroundings. Ahead of the forward companies lay a 3000-yard stretch of flat ground, broken only by the high railway embankment. Most of the ground was under heavy cultivation and vines and trees gave good cover. The main road linking [Florence](#) with the coast crossed the front and passed east through [Empoli](#). So too did the railway line, while another line from

[Siena](#) circled around on the left of D Coy to link up with it south of the town. These made [Empoli](#) an important communications centre and accounted for its size. Between the embankment and the river a network of roads and tracks linked the villages which dotted the small plain.

During the day final preparations for an attack to the river bank were made. The 23rd and 26th Battalions were to take part, and 302 US Regiment on the left flank would conform with any gains made. The intention was to capture the ground south of [Empoli](#) up to the river's edge. The attack was timed to start at five minutes after midnight and a light barrage would be fired. The 26th Battalion already had anti-tank, mortar, and machine-gun support, but to these would be added a troop of 17-pounders. The infantry would have to clear the railway embankment without tank support. The armour, which was concentrated some distance behind the FDLs, would follow the road and attempt to join the infantry as they approached the cluster of small villages near the river. Their rate of progress largely depended on the speed with which the sappers cleared the roads of mines and demolitions.

Colonel Fountaine's plan of attack was fairly simple. C and D Coys, advancing within their existing boundaries, would attack behind the barrage to the first objective, the railway embankment. After a pause they would continue on to the river. The reserve companies were to move forward, B Coy to D Coy's vacated sector and, on the right, A Coy to the railway embankment. By this means the enemy would be unable to outflank C Coy on its objective by moving south between 21 Battalion on the right and [Empoli](#). The importance of such flank protection became more apparent after the attack began. As C Coy would be advancing along a front more than twice as wide as D Coy's, 12 Platoon was placed under Maj Williams' command. Vickers gunners were to accompany the infantrymen but the rest of the supporting arms were to follow later.

Thirty-six reinforcements had joined the unit the previous day and their arrival swelled the number in the battalion to 759, including 29 officers—only slightly below strength. For a while it seemed that the attack would be made in pouring rain. The skies clouded over early in the afternoon and later heavy rain fell, but to everyone's relief it had eased off by nightfall. Desultory shelling on both sides of the river continued until long after dark. Every now and again heavy mortar concentrations

landed in and around the FDLs. They eventually claimed a victim about 11 p.m. when a C Coy man was wounded.

At zero hour the guns opened fire and the two companies began to move towards the embankment, both in open formation

. Half an hour later D Coy came under fire from machine guns around the embankment and from a group of buildings (Point [Cassino](#)) north of it. The CO immediately arranged for an artillery concentration on these buildings. This quietened the enemy fire for a time and enabled the platoons to draw



The Drive to the [Arno River](#), 9–15 August

nearer to the first objectives. Nos. 17 and 18 Platoons were in the lead and the whole company was by this time fairly closely bunched because of the darkness. Spandau fire again forced the company to seek shelter, and a little later enemy machine-gunners opened fire from a signal box on the left of the company. The troops immediately sought cover alongside the left-hand embankment. No. 17 Platoon had two men wounded by grenades tossed over this bank. No. 18 Platoon, led by 2 Lt [McNab](#),¹³ went over the top and attacked the signal box. The fight was over in a few minutes, one German being killed and two others taken prisoner.

Over an hour had passed and the company was now behind schedule. The next objective was the village of [Avane](#), a few hundred yards from the river. Retaining the

same formation, the company continued across the railway line and began to move along the main road. There was no sign of any tanks, and spandau fire from Point [Cassino](#) again forced the men to take cover. Major Barnett wirelessly for another artillery concentration, but this could not be given until the whereabouts of C Coy was known. Gradually the platoons worked their way forward and by 2.30 a.m. were past the buildings, the enemy having abandoned his posts. In the darkness the platoons followed the main road instead of turning off towards [Avane](#). This mistake was soon discovered and the men doubled back on their tracks. Open formation was abandoned, and the platoons marched in single file along the rough road which led to their objective. The pace of the advance was still very slow because of mortar fire and machine-gunning and the necessity to clear each house systematically. Dawn had broken by the time the leading elements reached [Avane](#), but the air was still murky with dust and smoke. Still moving in line, the company moved through the village until held up at a point where wrecked buildings blocked the road. The only street open turned left and would have brought the troops into [23 Battalion's](#) sector, some distance from the proposed platoon positions. While the leaders were deciding what to do the rest of the company closed up.

Suddenly a German was noticed climbing over the pile of rubble. McNab challenged him and received a bullet in the thigh. Within a few seconds the air was alive with bullets as Germans hidden in the rubble and buildings nearby opened fire. The troops scattered to the nearest cover, generally a house. The one 17 Platoon moved into was occupied by enemy troops and an NCO was killed before the Germans made their escape through a hole in the wall. Major Barnett decided against attempting to clear the town without armoured support, so all platoons mounted strong pickets and stayed where they were. The company had already lost five men, and to clear the town at this juncture would have cost the lives of many more. Eight enemy prisoners had been taken and five more were taken later in the day.

Long before this C Coy had reached its objectives—the villages of [San Maria](#) and [Empoli Vecchio](#). When the barrage began all four platoons had been deployed across the start line. Near the embankment the platoons came under fire and suffered casualties. No. 13 Platoon cleared one post and the enemy was forced to retire from the others. As the company crossed the railway line it again came under fire, but it

was not sufficient to hold up the troops for long. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons continued on towards [San Maria](#), while 12 Platoon branched off to [Empoli Vecchio](#) and 13 Platoon remained at the railway crossing. No further opposition was encountered, and 15 Platoon and Coy HQ entered [San Maria](#) to find it deserted. No. 14 Platoon had lost its bearings in the dark and had returned to the railway embankment. Later the Company Commander brought both platoons forward, where they took up positions on the outskirts of the village. No. 12 Platoon remained at [Empoli Vecchio](#), which was only about 300 yards away. By 4.30 a.m. the company had consolidated in its new position. Several prisoners had been taken at a cost to the company of three killed and two wounded.

A Coy, which had followed C Coy as far as the embankment, met the heaviest opposition, and by skilful manoeuvre had prevented a counter-attack which might have imperilled the battalion's assault. The company moved through C Coy's former sector and, continuing along a road leading to [Empoli](#), stopped at a road junction. Nos. 8 and 9 Platoons, accompanied by Coy HQ, turned left to follow a track leading to the embankment, while 7 Platoon continued down the road to straddle another road junction. The enemy was shelling both roads at this time and casualties were sustained. By 4 a.m. the company was in position. No. 7 Platoon's commander, Sgt O'Reilly, had placed his three sections rather far apart, one in front of a house on the left of the road and the other two on the right. An anti-tank gun was left on the roadside.

The sergeant was moving around his men to see if they were all right, when he heard voices and saw a column of men marching towards him from the direction of [Empoli](#). They were almost up to the forward right-hand section. O'Reilly opened fire with his tommy gun. This was a signal for confused firing on both sides. The forward section on the right fell back on the rear one and the two sections concentrated fire on the enemy, who immediately sought cover and returned the fire. The section across the road was unaware of what was happening and, in any case, could not fire for fear of hitting their platoon mates. Grenades and bullets were flying in all directions.

Realising he would need the support of the full platoon, Sgt O'Reilly set out at the height of the battle to collect the left-hand section. Despite the very real danger of running into enemy troops, he succeeded in reaching the section and bringing it

around to where the rest of the platoon was still fighting. The men were not dug in but had taken cover in conveniently placed irrigation ditches. From the volume of fire it was evident that the platoon was greatly outnumbered but there was no thought of withdrawing. A message was sent to Maj Murray, and as dawn approached 8 Platoon arrived in the area. Sherman tanks could be heard approaching along the road. The enemy turned and fled. For 7 Platoon it was just as well the enemy did withdraw. Its stack of grenades was gone, Bren and tommy-gun magazines were empty, and the riflemen had only a few rounds left. A German officer had been killed and several of the enemy wounded. Seven prisoners were taken and from them it was learned that the enemy party had totalled over sixty. No. 7 Platoon had four men lightly wounded.

An hour after daybreak the situation in all sectors was considered fairly satisfactory. The 23rd Battalion had captured all its objectives and had linked up with the Americans. That [Avane](#) had only been partially captured was not considered important as [23 Battalion](#) was in a position to give assistance if required. Mines and demolitions had held up the tanks and supporting arms, which at this stage were still some distance from the forward companies. Until tanks reached [Avane](#) no attempt was being made to clear the village or the ground between it and [San Maria](#). Casualties for the attack totalled 19, including five killed. Twenty-seven prisoners had been taken. A 500-yard stretch of ground between C Coy and [Empoli](#) was still in enemy hands. A wide irrigation ditch running down to the river separated the company from this area and lessened the possibility of any tank-supported counter-attack on that flank.

Hostile shelling and mortaring continued throughout the day and into the night. Spandaus opened fire on A Coy from the general direction of [Empoli](#), but this fire ceased soon after 9 a.m. A small reconnaissance patrol sent out to examine some houses on the outskirts of the town was fired on and immediately withdrew. Later in the day a three-man patrol led by Lt [Moncrieff](#)¹⁴ entered the town via the railway station. They reached the square before they were fired on by men in civilian clothes. Caught out in the open, they lost no time in withdrawing back across the irrigation ditch to C Coy and thence back to A Coy. In [Avane](#) there was a good deal of crossfire throughout most of the day. It ceased at nightfall and a fighting patrol found the enemy gone. Patrolling continued after dusk but opposition was

encountered at only one point. This was when a fighting patrol from C Coy set out to cover the ground between the forward companies. Half-way across it ran into heavy fire from spandau posts near the little village of [La Ripa](#).

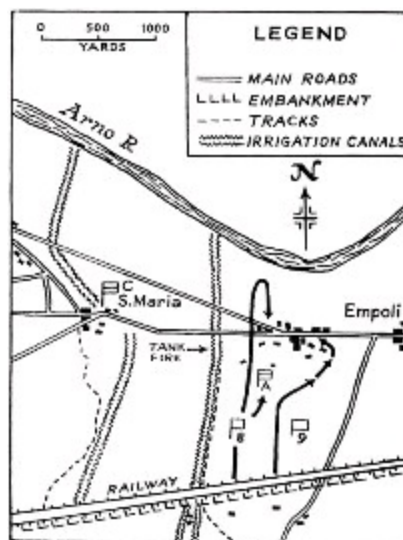
Colonel Fountaine decided to send B Coy forward to clear this ground. Captain Kerr, who was acting Company Commander, led the company towards [Avane](#) from which it had been decided to operate. In the meantime long-range enemy guns were shelling D Coy, which had moved to its originally planned position. Several artillery concentrations were fired, including one on the area B Coy was to clear. By 1 a.m. the enemy machine-gunners in [La Ripa](#) had been silenced.

The past twenty-four hours had been trying for the sappers repairing the roads. Enemy gunners were concentrating on the roads and the sappers had suffered casualties, but by daylight on the 12th tanks and mortars had reached [Avane](#) and the road to [San Maria](#) was reported clear. The next task was to clear the road from [San Maria](#) to [Empoli](#). Just before lunch a sapper sergeant was wounded by a sniper in one of a group of houses around a crossroads about half-way to the town. Major Williams detailed 14 Platoon to clear these houses so that the road work could continue. An artillery concentration was fired on the area and the platoon attacked. For over an hour Maj Williams waited for news of the attack. Sounds of firing indicated that the platoon had met opposition. Finally, at ten past six the platoon arrived back in [San Maria](#). It had been strongly opposed by enemy infantry who had turned several of the houses into strongpoints. Under fire from several directions the platoon had sustained seven casualties, including one man killed, before it was able to extricate itself.

After this rebuff the CO decided to make a company attack on the crossroads. In [Empoli](#) itself [28 Battalion](#) was slowly making progress but had not attempted to extend across to C Coy. The Colonel ordered Maj Murray to prepare to attack before dawn on the 13th. The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Towards dusk the tempo of the enemy shell and mortar fire increased considerably and for a while Battalion HQ was inundated with reports of gun positions sent in by the platoons. Already a map showing the dispositions of enemy troops along the far side of the river had been found on a dead German officer—a map which a jubilant Battalion HQ staff sent post-haste to Brigade HQ. Everyone was feeling rather pleased except perhaps the reinforcements, 70 all told, who arrived at Battalion HQ during the day and soon

joined the ranks of those doing picket duty.

By dusk only a few enemy pockets were holding out in [Empoli](#). As the Maoris had still not linked up with C Coy, A Coy's attack began at 4.30 a.m. as planned. The artillery fired several



A Coy's Assault on Crossroads, 13 August

heavy concentrations on the crossroads, after which 8 and 9 Platoons moved in to attack. They advanced from the direction of the railway embankment, and only 9 Platoon on the right met opposition. This platoon, led by Sgt Lock, swung to the right of the group of houses and then approached them from

the direction of [Empoli](#), only to be caught in the crossfire of two machine-gun posts. From the built-up area the enemy covered every avenue of approach to the crossroads. The platoon suffered heavily, two men being killed and eleven wounded. Most of these casualties could have been avoided had the four tanks at [San Maria](#) moved across the irrigation ditch as arranged. When it was obvious his men could get no farther, Maj Murray personally went across and guided the armour to the crossroads. It was now 5.30 a.m. and the Shermans wasted no time before shooting up the houses. As soon as their fire ceased 8 Platoon attacked, only to find the Germans gone. In their haste they left all their equipment behind them.

With A Coy holding the ground between [Empoli](#) and San Maria, 5 Brigade was now in possession of the approaches to the river along the whole of its sector. Late

in the afternoon of the 13th several officers of 85 US Division visited Battalion HQ. This division was to relieve the New Zealanders after dusk on 15 August. The next two days passed slowly although very little happened. Patrols examined the approaches to the river and tested it to see if it was fordable. Finally, after dusk on the 15th, 339 US Regiment arrived in the battalion sector and by midnight the relief was completed.

This brought to a close the Division's operations in central [Italy](#). The advance on [Florence](#) and the [Arno](#) had been divided into three separate phases. First came the attack through the hills to [Arezzo](#), then more hill fighting west of Route 2, and lastly the mopping-up operations around [Empoli](#), 16 miles south-west of [Florence](#). On very few occasions had the battalion come in close contact with the enemy. Accurate and sustained shell and mortar fire had caused most of the casualties in the unit. Twenty-four men had lost their lives, 91 had been wounded, and five others taken prisoner. During the same period influenza and jaundice had taken a heavy toll, although most of those evacuated to hospital eventually rejoined the battalion. Reinforcements kept the unit's strength at a fairly high figure. Captain Fletcher and the RAP staff had done a wonderful job. Often the doctor set up his RAP close to the FDLs and worked under heavy fire. Like his predecessor Capt Rutherford, he went forward whenever it was difficult to get the wounded back and attended to casualties where they lay. Because of this care few men died of their wounds, and the wounded themselves escaped a good deal of pain from lack of attention.

With officers of long experience in command the battalion was running very smoothly. In all three sectors the troops in the FDLs seldom went without a meal even if circumstances caused it to be late in arriving. This in itself was no easy task. Internal communications had been fairly good and the No. 38 sets had proved invaluable in the hills. To some of the newcomers it was rather galling to have to endure persistent enemy fire and not be able to retaliate because the supporting arms could not get forward. Nevertheless, it had been a satisfactory month and the end of the war seemed near. Morale was very high.

* * *

The rest area chosen for 6 Brigade lay in hilly country about five miles north of [Siena](#) and about 50 miles from [Empoli](#). The main body of the battalion arrived about

midday on the 16th and quickly settled down to enjoy a fortnight without training of any description. Fine weather helped to make the spell enjoyable. Fresh fruit, wine and vegetables could be purchased in the town or from small villages nearby. Each day lorryloads of troops were taken into [Siena](#), a large town of historical and academic interest. Other leave parties went to Rome, whilst a large party spent three days on the beaches around Cecina, a village on the west coast south of [Pisa](#). Because of the high percentage on leave each day there was little need for evening entertainment, but a large audience attended a performance of the [Kiwi Concert Party](#), which was voted as good as ever. On 22 August Brig Parkinson resumed command of the brigade and two days later Mr. Churchill visited the Division. On the same day an advanced party set out to locate a bivouac area on the Adriatic coast.

The Division had been transferred to the Adriatic sector, and two days later the men were on trucks heading for the [Apennines](#) and the new camp, 230 miles away. Badges and titles had been removed, for once more the move was a secret one. The roads were very dusty but good progress was made. When the convoy halted for the night, 130 miles had been covered and Lake Trasimene and [Assisi](#) had been left behind. Not far from the staging area was the town of [Foligno](#) and, of more interest to the drivers, a large airfield. No aircraft occupied this field, but parked on it were thousands of brand-new vehicles of all descriptions. Envious eyes were cast on them. On the 29th the journey was continued. The road led through several picturesque valleys and up over a 4000 ft mountain pass. Late in the afternoon the convoy came to a stop about three miles north of the town of [Iesi](#). The long and dusty journey was over and nobody was sorry.

The camp site was a good one, with plenty of shelter and a fresh-water stream nearby. Nearly everyone thought that the Division's role would be to take part in the assault on the Gothic Line, reputed to be the strongest chain of defences south of the [Po River](#), but three weeks went by before the battalion moved into the line. During this period the unit moved closer to the fighting and the rest of the Division assembled and prepared for action. While the battalion was at [Iesi](#) the weather was hot and sultry. Heavy rain fell on 1 September, but the skies cleared and bathing parties went down to the beach as usual. A large party camped for three days along the seaside near the town of [Senigallia](#). Parcels and mail now reached the men more quickly and during the stay at [Iesi](#) a large parcel mail was distributed. Rich suppers

and mild attacks of dysentery were common for several days. Poor quality wines were on sale in local bars and the soldiers were encouraged to buy their liquor from bulk supplies held by the QM. Mosquitoes caused considerable inconvenience and the nets on issue were used to good purpose. Only light training was carried out, designed to initiate recent reinforcements into the part they would have to play in future actions.

About twenty-five to thirty miles away British, Canadian, and Polish divisions and the New Zealand artillery were attacking the [Gothic Line](#) defences near [Pesaro](#). For a few days the fighting was very severe, but by 5 September a bridgehead 20 miles wide and five miles deep had been established. The next day the battalion moved 30 miles to another camp site south-east of [Fano](#). Rain fell for the next two days, but after this the weather cleared again. More attention was paid to training, and on the 7th and 8th companies witnessed demonstrations by amphibious DUKW vehicles. All ranks were given rides over land and water. On the 12th the battalion moved again, this time to [Gradara](#), a village about six miles from the scene of the fighting. The short journey was interesting for the troops were able to see sections of the famous [Gothic Line](#). Miles of wire, wide minebelts, and concrete gun emplacements stretched across the front.

The Division's role was now known. It was to remain in reserve until Canadian troops had crossed the many-pronged Marecchia River and captured the seaport town of [Rimini](#). When this had been accomplished, 6 Brigade with armoured support would exploit the bridgehead and drive up the coastal plain to [Ravenna](#). During the few days spent at [Gradara](#) several conferences were held and the battalion's part in the forthcoming operations discussed in detail. Intelligence reports and large-scale maps were studied by all officers. Finally, after three weeks of waiting, the battalion moved forward on 18 September to a brigade concentration area near [Riccione](#). There had been a number of changes in command. Majors Sanders and Williams were in hospital and Capt Piper and four other long-service officers had left for Advanced Base at [Bari](#). These losses were only partially offset by promotions within the unit. Major Barnett became the second-in-command and Capt R. Hunter assumed command of D Coy. Captain K. W. Hobbs took over C Coy and two NCOs, WO II Lock and Sgt O'Reilly, were granted commissions in the field. Reinforcements had brought the unit strength to 713, including 29 officers—three officers and 56

other ranks below full strength.

¹ Appointments at 8 Jul 1944 were:

CO: Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine

2 i/c: Maj G. P. Sanders

Adj: Capt P. J. Humphries

QM: Capt M. Joel

MO: Capt I. H. Fletcher

Padre: Rev. J. A. Linton

OC A Coy: Maj A. R. McKinlay

OC B Coy: Maj D. P. W. Harvey

OC C Coy: Maj J. R. Williams

OC D Coy: Maj A. W. Barnett

OC HQ Coy: Capt D. C. Piper

IO: Lt B. H. Palmer

² Forward Observation Officer.

³ 2 Lt F. L. Sargent; born Australia, 2 Oct 1914; clerk; wounded 25 Oct 1942; killed in action 14 Jul 1944.

⁴ Lt W. Brick, MM; Putaruru; born Ashburton, 20 Sep 1921; clerk; wounded 24 Dec 1943.

⁵ Pte A. McLeod; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 8 Mar 1919; labourer; wounded 28 Jul 1944.

⁶ Pte W. C. A. Parker; Waimate; born Oamaru, 18 Nov 1921; grocer;

wounded 19 Mar 1944.

⁷ Brig J. T. Burrows, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Greek); Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn Dec 1941–Jun 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jul 1943; commanded 4 Bde 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; 5 Bde Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; 6 Bde Jul–Aug 1944; Rector Waitaki BHS 1945–49; Commandant Southern Military District Nov 1951–.

⁸ 2 Lt E. C. Murphy, MM; Christchurch; born Australia, 19 Jul 1916; clicker.

⁹ Pte V. G. Robinson, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 22 Jul 1922; apprentice moulder; wounded 24 Dec 1944.

¹⁰ Maj P. B. Smythe, Morere; born Wellington, 29 Dec 1918; journalist.

¹¹ Sgt J. H. P. Lane; born NZ 24 Mar 1919; clerk; died of wounds 1 Aug 1944.

¹² Maj G. A. Murray, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Gore, 3 Feb 1915; shop assistant.

¹³ Lt T. G. McNab; Otekura, Balclutha; born Dunedin, 9 Dec 1918; farmhand; wounded 11 Aug 1944.

¹⁴ Lt C. M. Moncrieff; Nelson; born England, 28 Jan 1917: student.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 17 – THE ADVANCE FROM RIMINI

CHAPTER 17

The Advance from Rimini

AFTER the battalion reached the [Riccione](#) concentration area on 18 September there was a delay of several days before 6 Brigade was ordered into the line. Canadian infantry charged with establishing a bridgehead over the [Marecchia](#) River, met strong opposition from the enemy holding the San Fortunato Ridge, which covered the approaches to [Rimini](#) from the south and barred the entrance to the south-eastern end of the [Po Valley](#). While the battle for the ridge continued, plan to maintain the momentum of the [Eighth Army](#) assault and drive north and north-west into the [Romagna](#), as this part of the Po Valley was called, were completed. When the bridgehead over the river had been established, three divisions ([2 NZ Division](#) on the coast, 5 Canadian Armoured Division inland of it, and 1 British Armoured Division farther inland still) were to begin a drive to capture [Ravenna](#) on the Adriatic coast, Castel Maggiore, a few miles north of [Bologna](#), and [Bologna](#) itself. The New Zealand Division, under command of [1 Canadian Corps](#), was directed on [Ravenna](#), and it was intended to use 6 Brigade, with strong armoured support, for the first phase. On the 20th this plan was changed. Fifth Brigade was to lead the advance as far as Rio Fontanaccia, about three miles beyond the [Marecchia](#), and 6 Brigade would then pass through. The Division was temporarily commanded by [Maj-Gen C. E. Weir](#),¹ who had succeeded [General Freyberg](#) when the latter was injured in an aircraft accident on 3 September.

At this juncture there was a widespread belief amongst all ranks of the [Eighth Army](#) that the country ahead would prove to be a playground for the armour. A study of maps of the area served only to confirm this belief, although it was realised that the many rivers and canals would cause some engineering problems. Only after the [Eighth Army](#) entered the plain and encountered the new terrain was it fully realised that the [Romagna](#) imposed possibly more tactical problems than the rugged country through which the Army had been advancing. The area had formerly been a vast swamp, and the work of reclamation had continued through the centuries right up until the outbreak of war. High floodbanks were built alongside the principal rivers and streams, and these together with an extensive network of canals, dykes and irrigation ditches, ensured a rapid outflow of water after heavy rain. Some of the dykes were raised and drained naturally into the larger streams, but the majority

required the use of pumps. There were in all thirteen major rivers running across the [Romagna](#), their floodbanks rising in some instances as much as 40 feet above the surrounding plain. As there were few bridges or fords, all were tank obstacles. In autumn and winter they were frequently infantry obstacles as well. Apart from the larger streams there were the innumerable smaller watercourses—called 'Fosso' or 'Scolo' locally—running more or less parallel to the main streams, and some of these were often both tank and infantry obstacles. The two main roads which ran through the area were both embanked and safe from flooding. Route 9 ran in a direct line from [Rimini](#) to [Bologna](#) and Route 16 through [Ravenna](#) and [Argenta](#) to Ferrara. Most of the secondary roads which ran between these two highways were badly formed, narrow, and subject to flooding. Few bridges existed except on the main highways, and the secondary roads were more or less independent systems between rivers.

Apart from the roads and rivers there were other obstacles in the path of the [Eighth Army](#). The ground was clay-based and in dry weather all movement of tracked vehicles caused thick dust. A heavy shower was all that was needed to make the surface slippery and greasy; and when the weather was really wet, or after floods, the ground became a morass into which men sank over their ankles and vehicles to their axles. In winter the ground dried more slowly so that one fall of rain could hold up operations for some time. The country was in places thickly populated, the small farms and villages providing the enemy with excellent strongpoints and snipers' posts. Much of the area was given up to viniculture. The vines were grown on wire trellises carried on fruit trees spaced about ten feet apart, and were allowed to grow to a height of about 15 feet. In summer and autumn when the vines were in full leaf, visibility was severely restricted.

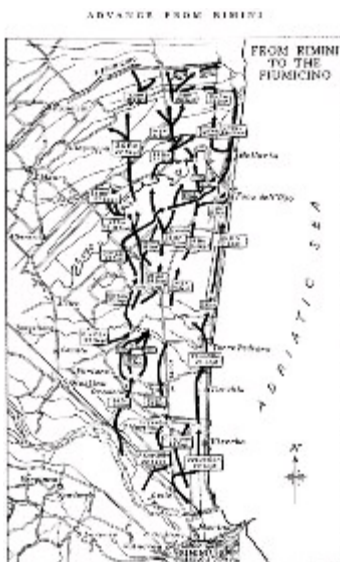
The Germans exploited these natural obstacles to the full in the ensuing months, and as winter set in the [Eighth Army's](#) offensive was gradually brought to a standstill and the attack on Northern [Italy](#) delayed until the following spring.

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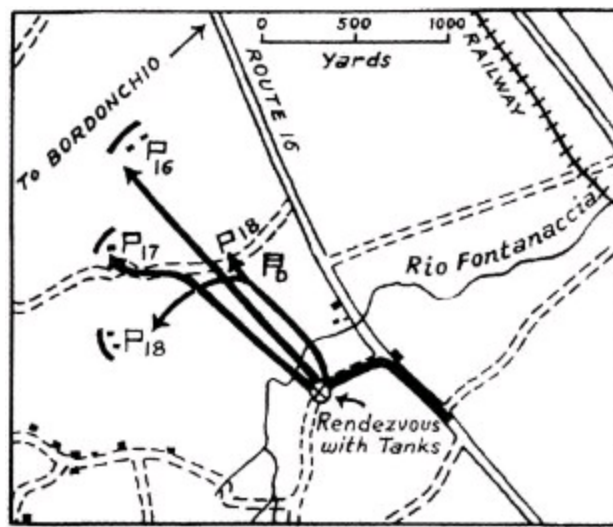
When San Fortunato Ridge fell on the 20th [Rimini](#) became untenable to the Germans, and on the following morning New Zealand tanks and infantry of 3 Greek Mountain Brigade entered the town without opposition. Fifth Brigade took over from [1 Canadian Division](#) north of the Marecchia River and began advancing towards the

Rio Fontanaccia. On the 22nd 6 Brigade moved to a concentration area about a mile south of [Rimini](#), and next morning 24 and 25 Battalions left to relieve 5 Brigade, which had been ordered to stop at the [Scolo Brancona](#), south of its objective. The 26th Battalion, in reserve, was ordered to be ready to move at short notice. By midday on the 24th the battalion was in a reserve area about two miles north of [Rimini](#). At this stage 24 and 25 Battalions were still short of the Fontanaccia but were continuing to advance against heavy fire. In the afternoon Brig Parkinson gave orders for the forward battalions to advance to the line of [Bordonchio](#) during the night. D Coy 26 Battalion, under command of 20 Armoured Regiment, would move out on the left to provide flank protection. The village of [Bordonchio](#) lay in the centre of the brigade sector, a mile and a half north of the Fontanaccia.

It was decided that the tanks and infantry should move separately to a rendezvous on a side road off Route 16 and not far from the Fontanaccia. Through a misunderstanding Maj Hunter arrived with his company at the prearranged point an hour before the tanks, but in doing so missed a considerable amount of enemy shelling on the main road. From the rendezvous the platoons, each accompanied by a troop of tanks, moved off to their respective objectives west and south of the



village. Two troops remained close to the start point to form a reserve. No. 16 Platoon moved off first, leaving the rendezvous about an hour after midnight. No. 17 Platoon followed fifteen minutes later, and then came the reserve platoon and Coy HQ. The leaders encountered no opposition. No. 16 Platoon took up a position near a house about a mile from the start point and three-quarters of a mile from the village. No. 17 Platoon, which



D Coy's Flanking Role, 24-25 September

D Coy's Flanking Role, 24–25 September

turned west along a lateral road, occupied a house about 500 yards south of No. 16. No. 18 Platoon was unlucky. While passing a house only a short distance from the start line, three men were wounded by spandau fire. One of the Shermans fired several shells into the house and nothing more was heard of the enemy machine-gunners. Shortly after this tanks and infantry were in position, although not in contact with [25 Battalion](#) or the Canadians on the left flank.

About the same time as D Coy left its rendezvous, Col Fontaine arrived back from a conference at Brigade HQ with orders for another flanking role.² A and B Coys, both with a section of mortars, anti-tank guns, and carriers under command, were to close the gap between 22 Motor Battalion on the coast and 24 Battalion on the right flank of 6 Brigade. The two companies were to be ready to move to a start line at 6 a.m. on the 25th. The 22nd Battalion had been advancing along the coastal road and had halted beyond the village of Torre Pedrara and about a mile short of [24 Battalion's](#) position south of [Bordonchio](#). The two companies were to take up a position along an embankment which ran parallel to and approximately midway between the coastal road and Route 16.

The CO accompanied the two companies when they left the reserve area next morning, and Tac HQ was set up near the start line. Major Murray led his company along Route 16 until it was almost opposite the section of embankment it was to occupy. B Coy, with Capt Kerr in command, advanced from a lateral road which linked Route 16 with the coastal road. Except for some Shermans which were

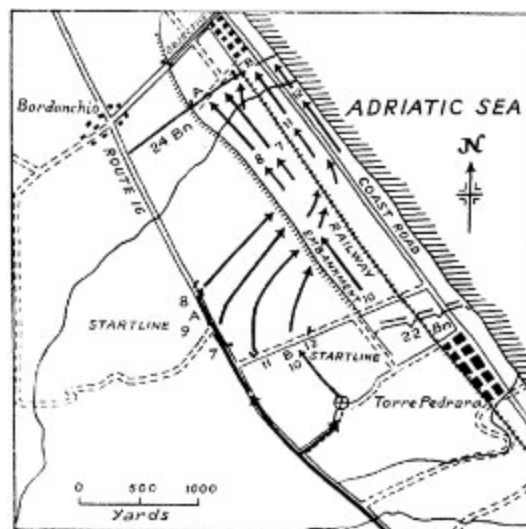
supporting the infantry, all supporting arms were left at the start point. Apart from some shell and mortar fire no opposition was encountered, and both companies were in position by 9.40 a.m. B Coy had taken eight prisoners who seemed eager to be captured. They were identified as from 162 Turcomen Division. At 11.30 a.m. the CO was ordered to relieve [22 Battalion](#) and advance up the coast to link up with [24 Battalion](#). The objective was the lateral road running from [Bordonchio](#) to the coast. Retaining the same formation, the two companies crossed the railway line and, extending across the front, resumed their advance at a quarter past twelve. Again no opposition was encountered; 500 yards from the lateral road A Coy linked up with [24 Battalion](#), which was not as far forward as was thought. Both companies reported an unusual number of enemy dead, mostly Turcomen, in the area, the result of a heavy bombardment. The companies held these positions until relieved by [24 Battalion](#) after dark.

On the left flank D Coy had not had a very peaceful time. During the day the forward platoons had been heavily mortared and three men wounded. Enemy tanks and infantry attempted to approach the sector several times but were driven back by concentrated artillery and tank fire. A carrier was bazookaed at a range of about ten yards. The driver was badly shaken but unhurt. On another occasion an enemy party approached 17 Platoon but was driven back by LMG and rifle fire. One German surrendered but the others escaped under cover of a smoke screen. A Sherman tank was hit and it blazed for some time. Later Allied fighter-bombers attacked the suspected locations of the enemy tanks and the shell and mortar fire slackened off for a while. After dusk Maj Hunter moved 18 Platoon forward on the left of 17 Platoon so that the company could give better all-round protection.

During the night A and B Coys were relieved, and early on the 26th Brig Parkinson ordered the battalion to move forward on the left of [25 Battalion](#) and establish a bridgehead over the [Uso](#), a narrow, meandering river with many U-shaped bends, reputed to be the ancient [Rubicon](#). The 24th and 25th Battalions were already advancing towards the river and intended to establish bridgeheads. The 26th Battalion crossing was to be made at a point almost due west of [Bordonchio](#), and as soon as sappers had completed crossings for the supporting arms it was planned to continue the advance to the next river barrier, the Fiumicino. This meant that after crossing the river the battalion would have to advance north-west with its left flank

on the divisional boundary.

Shortly after eleven o'clock Tac HQ moved forward to D Coy's area. Colonel Fontaine had decided to send C Coy forward to establish the bridgehead, and shortly before midday Maj Hobbs led his men past D Coy. About 1200 yards from the river the company moved into open formation and began to advance on a 600-yard front. Tanks accompanied the infantry. Apart from some spandau fire as they neared the river and mortaring as they crossed it, the forward platoons met no



THE BATTALION'S FLANKING ROLE, 25 SEPTEMBER

The Battalion's Flanking Role, 25 September

opposition. No. 13 Platoon on the left was heavily mortared as it forded the river and lost three men, two of whom were killed. It had already swung too far to the left and subsequently lost touch with the rest of the company. Meanwhile, B Coy was moving forward on the left flank, and by 5.30 p.m. Capt Kerr had two platoons over the river. The enemy chose this time to fire several heavy artillery concentrations in the vicinity of the crossing, and C Coy lost two more men. Two prisoners, identified as paratroopers, had been captured, but apart from them there was no sign of the enemy troops. The four platoons across the river were without support of any kind, and at dusk they were brought closer together so that mortar support could

be given. Colonel Fontaine had no intention of continuing the advance until the river was bridged.

It was decided, however, to deepen the bridgehead, and at 8 p.m. the two

companies moved forward 500 yards. This move was carried out without difficulty, although enemy mortar fire was still fairly heavy. Major Hobbs had not been able to locate 13 Platoon, so 14 Platoon was brought across the river to take up a position on the company's left flank. During the night B Coy and the sappers working on the crossing were troubled by spandau fire. No. 11 Platoon, commanded by Lt [Milne](#),³ was most affected, but by using the No. 38 set to guide the three-inch mortars onto their target the Platoon Commander was able to silence the enemy machine-guns. During the early hours of 27 September tanks and the supporting arms moved forward to B and C Coys. The 25th Battalion also crossed the [Uso](#) and moved forward on the right of C Coy. Nearer the coast the [Greek Brigade](#) had relieved [24 Battalion](#), and elements of the Divisional Cavalry were in [Bellaria](#), a town north of the river. At first light the missing C Coy platoon was found and it moved into reserve around Coy HQ.

During the early part of the morning some regrouping was carried out in preparation for continuing the advance to the Fiumicino. The 24th Battalion relieved the 25th on the right flank. A Coy moved across the river to come up on the left of C Coy, which in turn moved a short distance to the right. Battalion HQ and D Coy also moved forward. The CO planned to advance with two companies (A and C) forward and B Coy providing left-flank protection. Tanks were to accompany each platoon. The objective was not to be the river but a lateral road about 1000 yards south of it.

Shortly after 2 p.m., as the companies were forming up on a start line, A and B Coys were heavily mortared and both suffered casualties, Maj Murray losing his wireless operator, and B Coy having two men killed and two others wounded. At 2.45 the advance began. From the start the enemy resisted fiercely. A Coy was pinned down by accurate spandau fire, and when the tanks went forward to deal with it down came mortar bombs and shells. Frequently the enemy machine-guns fired white flares to indicate targets. The fire went on all afternoon, and it was almost dusk before any of the companies got close to their objectives. By this time all three had suffered more casualties and had lost touch with one another. After losing his wireless operator Maj Murray had considerable difficulty in getting messages to and from his forward platoons. A section of 8 Platoon, commanded by [Sgt Tavener](#),⁴ became separated from the rest of the platoon, made contact with B Coy, and later advanced on to the objective, occupying a house close to the road.

Sergeant Tavener was well aware that no friendly troops were nearby, but neither he nor any of his section made any attempt to move back. Enemy infantry attacked the house but the section fought them off, killing one and wounding others.

By dusk the companies had consolidated about 400–600 yards from their objective. Colonel Fontaine decided not to continue the advance after dark as **23 Battalion** was to move forward and relieve the battalion during the night. The day's casualties had totalled 21, including seven killed. A Coy reported two men killed and seven wounded, B Coy two killed and three wounded, and C Coy three killed and four wounded. Casualties for the period 24–27 September now totalled 31, including ten killed.

That night, as the companies of **23 Battalion** moved forward, the 26th Battalion companies moved back to occupy houses close to the Uso. B Coy was the proud possessor of a large pig traded by an Italian farmer for some tins of bully beef and a few hundred lire. For the next two meals pork was the staple item on the menu

* * *

The Brigade Commander called at Battalion HQ during the morning of the 28th and ordered the battalion to move back to a reserve area near the coast. Reconnaissance parties sent out to find a suitable place had no success, and the battalion remained where it was until Sunday, 1 October. Nothing of importance occurred during the three days. Some mail arrived and a small party left on leave to Rome. The weather, which had been good up till this stage, deteriorated. Heavy showers fell on the 28th and more rain fell before the end of the month. As a result **Eighth Army** preparations to continue the offensive were considerably hampered. On this Sunday Lt-Gen Sir Oliver Leese relinquished the command he had held since the beginning of the battle for **Orsogna**. He was succeeded as **Eighth Army** Commander by Lt-Gen Sir Richard L. McCreery. In the battalion Capt P. J. Humphries was evacuated to hospital and Lt B. H. Palmer became acting Adjutant.

After lunch the same day the battalion embussed and travelled via Route 16 and the coastal road to a reserve area about a mile north of Torre Pedrara. A and B Coys occupied houses and the rest of the men camped along the sandhills. Early on the 2nd heavy rain began and a squally onshore wind made conditions very unpleasant

for those in tents. First C Coy and then D Coy sought refuge in houses about a mile up the road, leaving Battalion HQ to brave the elements and score an issue of rum.

Early on the 4th the CO attended a conference at Brigade HQ and returned with orders for another attack. Sixth Brigade, with [Wilder Force](#) under command, was to relieve 5 Brigade along the banks of the [Fiumicino](#), [25 Battalion](#) and [Wilder Force](#) taking over the forward sectors. The 26th Battalion was to relieve the 28th in its reserve position close to the Uso. This relief was to be effected during the night of the 5th, and 48 hours later a two-divisional attack would be launched with the object of gaining a bridgehead over the river so that the [Polish Corps](#) could pass through and exploit towards the next river barrier, the [Savio](#). In the New Zealand sector only 6 Brigade would take part, and the Brigade Commander decided to employ the reserve battalions, the 24th and 26th. After relieving 25 Battalion, they were to attack under an artillery barrage. The operation would be postponed if the weather deteriorated.

The Maori Battalion was relieved without incident during the afternoon of the 5th. Lorries had difficulty in reaching the new sector, for the inland roads were in a bad state after the recent rains. No sooner was the relief completed than it began to rain again. A steady downpour continued throughout the night and by morning all roads leading to the sector were in a sorry state. During the 6th and 7th rain continued to fall at frequent intervals and only jeeps were able to reach the battalion lines. Ditches and canals rapidly filled and the ground became waterlogged. The operation had still not been cancelled and preparations for it were continued. After dark on the 6th A, C, and D Coys moved forward to commence the relief of [25 Battalion](#), and by morning 24 and 26 Battalions were occupying part of [25 Battalion's](#) sector. Early on the 7th, while some platoon adjustments were being made, A Coy lost three men wounded by mortar fire. Later the same morning final details of the night's attack were completed, but no surprise was felt when it was learned that the assault had been postponed 24 hours.

Towards dusk the rain became much heavier, and conditions became so unpleasant that the forward platoons moved back from the banks of the river to occupy houses which they manned as strongpoints. At this stage A Coy was manning the river positions, with B Coy on its right rear, C Coy in support close to B Coy HQ, and D Coy in reserve around Battalion HQ about 1000 yards to the rear. It continued

to rain during the night, and by midday on the 8th it appeared that even an attack with limited objectives would be impossible. Not only were the roads almost impassable but the [Fiumicino](#) had risen considerably. Early in the afternoon there was another postponement, this time for 48 hours.

It was still raining on the 9th when word was received that the brigade would be relieved by the [Royal Canadian Dragoons](#). By the time the Canadians arrived in the area the [Fiumicino](#) had become a raging torrent, and ditches and canals had swollen to the size of small rivers. In several places they had broken their banks and flooded large areas. By 2 a.m. the relief had been completed and the battalion was sheltering in a large building close to Route 16. Later on the 10th the troops embussed and travelled down to [Rimini](#), where they occupied buildings on the outskirts of the town; and for seven days they were left to their own devices. Fortunately the weather improved and permitted some sport. Inter-platoon and company games of Rugby were played and finally a battalion team was selected. It played two games, defeating 18 Armoured Regiment 13–8 and a team of South Africans 50-nil. Outstanding in both games were Tubby Woodhouse at half, Dave Trevathan at fullback, and Bond and Spittle in the forwards. No restriction was placed on those who wished to visit [Rimini](#). The town had been badly knocked about, and there was little of interest left except, of course, the wine bars.

While the unit was at [Rimini](#) 71 reinforcements joined the battalion. These, together with the small parties who had arrived from [Bari](#) during the past month, more than replaced those evacuated through wounds, jaundice, and influenza. Several more officers left the unit. Three, Capt Kerr, Lt Pritchard, and 2 Lt [Herbison](#) ⁵ left on appointment as instructors at Base Camp, [Maadi](#). The last to go was Col Fountaine who had been appointed Commandant of NZ Advanced Base [Italy](#). Except for one short break the Colonel had been CO 26 Battalion since September 1942, and under his leadership the battalion had had many successes. This in itself was a tribute to his tactical skill, fine leadership, and popularity amongst all ranks. In his place came Lt- [Col M. C. Fairbrother](#) ⁶ another long-service officer who had left New Zealand with [20 Battalion](#). Major Sanders rejoined the battalion about the same time and resumed his duties as second-in-command.

On the 17th 6 Brigade moved back into the line. While the battalion had been

resting at Rimini the Eighth Army had resumed its offensive. After 6 Brigade's withdrawal from the Fiumicino on the 9th a regrouping of Corps and divisional boundaries had been carried out, and 5 Brigade returned to the line to take up a position on the Fiumicino, west of that previously held by the New Zealanders. Subsequently, after the ground had dried out, a bridgehead was established over the river, and by the 17th 5 Brigade had reached the next river barrier, the Pisciatello. Sixth Brigade was to launch an attack across this river after dark on the 18th, the assault being made by 24 and 25 Battalions, with 26 Battalion providing right-flank protection and maintaining a link with the Canadians.

Reconnaissance parties visited 5 Brigade's sector during the 16th, and early the following morning the troops embussed and were carried as far as Gatteo, a village a short distance from the Fiumicino. From this point the men marched three miles to the village of Bulgarno. Battalion HQ was set up in the town and the platoons occupied houses nearby. Some heavy showers about dusk made roads and tracks very sticky. It was fine again by morning, and during the afternoon A and B Coys moved out to take up a position on the right of 24 Battalion and about a mile north-east of the village. Although there was intermittent shelling and mortaring at the time, the two companies had no difficulty consolidating in their new positions. The CO visited them late in the afternoon and gave orders for patrols to establish a link with the Canadians, who were reported to be not far away. By 8 p.m. Maj Murray reported he had established communication, and shortly afterwards Maj Harvey also reported success.

The B Coy patrol had a humorous experience. Several uncleared houses lay between the company and the Canadians, and the NCO in charge decided to make certain they were uninhabited. The first two were empty, but from the third came the unmistakable sounds of footsteps and heavy breathing. The three men stealthily approached the house and, after posting a man to each corner, the NCO called to the occupants to come out or else. Nothing happened except that the noises inside the building continued. A cautious investigation revealed a big white cow unconcernedly chewing her cud.

That night the forward battalions attacked, 26 Battalion's mortars moving forward to support 24 Battalion. By morning a bridgehead over the river had been firmly established, and at 6 a.m. Col Fairbrother was ordered to send troops across

to secure the right flank and capture the village of [Bagnarola](#). Within an hour C Coy, under Maj Hobbs, was on its way, and it was followed by D Coy a short while afterwards. C Coy crossed the river and, after passing through D Coy [24 Battalion](#), swung right along the road leading to [Bagnarola](#). The village



THE ADVANCE TO THE SAVIO, 5-20 OCTOBER 1944

The Advance to the [Savio](#), 5–20 October 1944

was captured without a shot being fired, and the company consolidated in positions astride the road which lead north-east towards the coast. D Coy, which was back under Maj Barnett's command, had in the meantime crossed the river to take up a position north-west of C Coy and about 800 yards from the river. Both companies were firmly in position before midday. C Coy had sent back two captured paratroopers. Hostile shelling and mortar fire were increasing but most of it appeared to be falling along Route 16, the brigade axis of advance. The 'liberation' of [Bagnarola](#) had been marked by enthusiastic, and to some soldiers somewhat embarrassing, civic celebrations during which the wine flowed freely.

During the early part of the afternoon the CO visited the forward companies and set up his headquarters close to the river. Later Tac HQ moved across the river into the town of [Macerone](#), where A and B Coys joined it. B Echelon moved from the Torre Pedrara area to [Gambettola](#), a village midway between the [Fiumicino](#) and the [Pisciarello](#). While these changes were being made, 24 and 25 Battalions were continuing their advance towards the next river, the [Savio](#). The enemy reacted strongly and shelled and mortared both battalions almost continuously, with the

result that at dusk they were still only about a mile and a half north-west of [Macerone](#). As part of a plan to widen the front and cover the assembly of 4 Armoured Brigade forward of [Macerone](#), 26 Battalion was ordered late in the afternoon to move forward on the right of [24 Battalion](#). It had also been decided that the brigade would not continue its advance after dark.

A and B Coys left [Macerone](#) as dusk was falling and by 7.30 p.m. were straddling a lateral road on the right of [24 Battalion](#). Both companies sent out patrols during the night but none of them encountered enemy troops, desultory shelling and mortar fire being the only signs of the enemy's presence. At 8.30 a.m. next morning, the 20th, C and D Coys were ordered to continue the advance. C Coy, the first to move, had passed through A Coy and reached a lateral road about 1000 yards farther on before a change of plan was ordered by Brigade HQ. D Coy was immediately ordered not to move. Fourth Armoured Brigade, moving through [24 Battalion](#) and sweeping around in a westerly direction, was driving towards the [Savio](#), and in doing so had taken over the greater portion of the 6th Brigade front. The 26th Battalion was now to take over from [25 Battalion](#) and continue the advance, the initial objective being the Rio Granarola Canal.

By 11.15 a.m. Tac HQ had been set up near the village of Gattolino, and the rest of the battalion was deployed along a lateral road linking this village with [Calabrina](#). The canal was about 1000 yards away. A troop of tanks had been allocated to each company. At 1 p.m. C and D Coys, spread out across a 1000-yard front, began to advance. Within thirty minutes the leading platoons were on their objective, no opposition having been encountered. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) was about to give orders to continue the advance when Brig Parkinson arrived at Tac HQ and ordered another change in plan. Fourth Armoured Brigade on the right had already reached the [Savio](#), and Canadian troops on the left were reported to be crossing it. A 2000-yard gap lay between the two; 26 Battalion was to advance through this gap to the river. It was unlikely that serious opposition would be encountered.

This proved to be true. At 3.35 p.m. A and C Coys were ready on a start line, both accompanied by a troop of tanks, a troop of six-pounders, and a section of carriers. The objective lay almost due west of the canal and was about 3000 yards away. The CO gave the order to move off, and before an hour had passed the leading platoons were near their objective. Two Germans, thought to be deserters,

had given themselves up, but apart from these there was no sign of the enemy. By 6 p.m. both companies were on their objective and had dug in. B and D Coys, which had followed the leaders during the advance, had also dug in. During the night A Coy made contact with the Canadians but B Coy was unable to locate 4 Armoured Brigade.

The next morning, Saturday, 21 October, [Col Fairbrother](#) returned from Brigade HQ with the news that [24 Battalion](#) would move up to the river's edge on the right of the battalion. During the night 5 Canadian Armoured Division would relieve the New Zealanders and 1 Canadian Infantry Division would establish a bridgehead over the river. This operation was completely successful, the battalion's supporting arms providing diversionary fire to assist the Canadians. Intermittent shelling followed the action but no casualties were suffered. On the Sunday the companies withdrew to a lying-up area, and on the 23rd moved off in transport to a rest area.

* * *

The convoy headed for Route 16 along roads made slippery by recent rains. On the way it passed two notices erected by the Canadians which read: 'Cheerio Kiwis! Nice having worked with you.' Reaching the main road the trucks turned south past [Rimini](#), stopping finally about a mile from [Iesi](#), where the battalion camped until the 25th. An advanced party went ahead to the rest area, which lay about sixty miles inland close to the village of [Castelraimondo](#). The main body arrived in the village about midday on the 25th and soon afterwards everyone was looking over their new quarters. First impressions of the large unfinished barracks, erected by the Italians to house Allied prisoners of war, were disappointing, but after a few days when amenities had been improved all grumbles ceased. The hutments were of brick with hard, stone floors. Heavy rain fell for the first few days in the area, and during this period wooden beds were made, open windows blocked up, and various types of heating apparatus installed in each hut.

Heavy rain followed by intervals of overcast skies continued throughout the whole of the battalion's stay in this area. Snow fell on one occasion but the rain which followed soon cleared it away. Cold, bleak winds swept down from the high hills which almost entirely enclosed [Castelraimondo](#) and the narrow valley in which it stood. As a winter resort the area had little to recommend it. The bad weather

naturally curtailed training programmes, but before the companies returned to the line each had trudged for many miles over wet, slushy roads and tracks. Training was confined to the mornings, and whenever the weather permitted small-scale exercises were carried out. Special instruction was given in the use of flame-throwers, the lifting of mines and booby traps. Various means of turning a house into a strongpoint were demonstrated. Range firing completed the syllabus. The arrival of 114 reinforcements brought the unit strength to 765, including 32 officers. Several changes in command took place. Majors Sanders and Smythe left the unit and Maj Barnett became second-in-command again. Major Hunter took command of D Coy and Lt [Gwynne](#)⁷ the [Support Group](#). Captain [Cox](#)⁸ became Adjutant when Capt Palmer was seconded to Divisional HQ. Doctor Fletcher also left the battalion which he had served so well since the closing stages of the fighting in North Africa. His place was taken by Capt [Malcolm](#)⁹

The wintry conditions did not prevent footballers from making use of the level ground near the barracks. Games were played on it almost every afternoon as soon as the Colonel was satisfied that drains, paths, and roads throughout the camp were in satisfactory order. After a few inter-company games a battalion team was selected to contest the Freyberg Cup. It played five games, winning three and losing the others by narrow margins. The rest of the Division was scattered in the hills around Castelraimondo, and as the valley contained the only level stretch of ground, the battalion was able to watch most of the inter-unit matches. In the evenings there was little to do. The roads were in such a sorry state that few ventured out on them after dark. Card games, arguments, celebrations, debates, quiz sessions and occasional picture shows all helped to relieve the boredom. The [Kiwī Concert Party](#) gave two very enjoyable performances, and on another occasion several lorry loads of men went to [Matelica](#) to see a performance by an Italian concert party. The village was a small and backward farming centre containing few modern amenities. The villagers were very friendly; at all times they welcomed the troops into their homes, giving freely of their hospitality. The troops reciprocated by sharing with them their cigarettes, chocolate, and foodstuffs.

Leave parties left as usual for Rome and the new club at [Florence](#). Although the size of the parties⁷ was increased, it was never large enough to satisfy those on the waiting lists. Other parties spent three days at a brigade rest camp at [Perugia](#), the

university centre of [Italy](#). This city was not far from Lake Trasimene and the camp was controlled by [Maj J. R. Williams](#), who had been evacuated to hospital before [Rimini](#). He did not return to the battalion, but early in January 1945 was appointed to command the [Divisional Cavalry Regiment](#). This was a loss to 26 Battalion for Maj Williams had been one of its most brilliant company commanders.

Mail and parcels arrived regularly and the general health of the troops was surprisingly good. Tremendous interest was taken in the war news, and the Eighth Army News was eagerly scanned for reports of the fighting on all fronts. The successes gained by the Allies in [Europe](#) had caused a marked change in the attitude of the men towards the war in [Italy](#). Few had any fear of a German counter-attack and the majority talked only of how long the Germans could last. Both the Fifth and Eighth Armies were still advancing, but more slowly as the weather became worse. The main thrust of the [Eighth Army](#) was now being directed towards [Bologna](#) via Route 9, with the Germans slowly retreating under the weight of arms opposing them.

On Monday 20 November came the news everyone had been expecting—the Division was to return to the line within the next few days. At a conference at Battalion HQ during the morning the Colonel outlined probable roles for the Division. The Allied Command hoped that the Germans would be defeated in [Europe](#) before the winter was over, and plans had been made to drive the enemy in [Italy](#) as far back as possible before that could happen. On the [Eighth Army](#) front a four-divisional attack was set down to take place before dawn on 21 November, when it was hoped to penetrate as far as the [Lamone](#) River, about ten miles north-east of the [Savio](#). In all probability the New Zealanders would relieve one of the divisions taking part in this attack. There was every indication that the Division's future role would be an attacking one. The battalion was to be ready to move within three days.

More detailed orders were received on the 22nd. The battalion would leave [Castelraimondo](#) on the 24th; its destination was [Forli](#), a modern town only recently captured. It was on the main road to [Bologna](#) and about seven miles from the [Lamone](#). By 11.30 a.m. on the 24th the long line of vehicles outside the barracks was fully loaded and the convoy set out on the long journey to the front. It was dawn on the 25th before the leading trucks reached [Forli](#) and the sleepy passengers tumbled out to move into buildings selected by the advanced party.

Light rain fell during the morning and early afternoon, but as soon as the skies cleared the troops explored the town, part of which had been badly damaged during the recent fighting. Apart from being an important centre, [Forli](#) contained a large aeronautical college which was subsequently taken over by the [Naafi](#). It was also very close to the birthplace of Mussolini. While the troops were still roaming through the streets, conferences were being held at Brigade and Battalion headquarters. The Division was to relieve [4 British Division](#) in its sector along the Lamone River during the night of the 26th. Fifth Brigade would take over the right-hand sector with two battalions forward, while 6 Brigade, with a narrower front to cover, would have only one—to be held by 26 Battalion. The British troops had not quite reached the south bank of the river, and the New Zealanders after taking over would have to breast up to it. This was not expected to cause any difficulty for it was believed that the enemy had withdrawn all his troops across the river.

Plans to secure a bridgehead across the river had already been made, and reconnaissance patrols were to be sent from [Forli](#) to find the best crossing places in the sector to be taken over by 26 Battalion. Patrols were also to be sent out after the British troops had been relieved, so that provided the weather was favourable and the river fordable, an attack would be carried out after dark on 27 November.

A successful reconnaissance of the [Lamone](#) was carried out that night by two officers, 2 Lts [Young](#)¹⁰ and [Leonard](#).¹¹ They discovered that the slow-flowing, 30-foot-wide waterway had muddy banks and that thick mud also covered the bottom. The water was waist deep and was bounded on both sides by stopbanks about 25 feet high and 10 feet wide across the top. On the extreme left of the battalion sector across the river was the town of [Faenza](#). Sounds of troops moving about, the clatter of picks and shovels, and bursts of spandau fire revealed the presence of enemy troops along the north bank. The southern stopbank appeared to be unoccupied for occasionally the enemy sprayed it with machine-gun fire. Both officers considered that the river could be forded by infantry without undue difficulty, provided there was no more heavy rain.

The weather was dull and overcast when, at 1 p.m. on the 26th, the troops boarded trucks and set out along Route 9 towards the [Lamone](#). About three miles from the river the convoy halted and the men continued the journey on foot. The

had not gone far before heavy rain began to fall. Soon everyone was cursing the Army, the weather, the Italians and their slushy roads. Even the drivers bringing up the rear with stores trucks and the like were forced to drive very carefully. Two of the trucks slid off the road into a ditch and their passengers, instead of having a dry ride, found themselves joining those marching to the sector.

By 4.30 p.m. the British troops, the 2nd Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Battalion, had been relieved and A, B, and C Coys were moving on towards the river. By dusk all three companies had cleared the approaches to it and the platoons were in houses not far from the high stopbank. No trace of the enemy had been found, but the civilians in all the houses searched were plainly pleased to see Allied troops, and they offered glasses of wine to all comers. Not even the wine could keep out the chilling rain!

The three forward companies were deployed across the 3000- yard front: C Coy on the left, B Coy in the centre, and A Coy on the right next to 21 Battalion. D Coy was in reserve forward of Battalion HQ, which had been set up in a large farmhouse about 2000 yards from the river. Except for some C Coy men the battalion was completely under cover, each platoon and



Lamone Sector, 26 November–2 December 1944

headquarters occupying houses. A suburban area, Borgo Durbecco, just south of the river from Faenza, extended from 44 Reconnaissance Battalion's (46 British Division) sector part way into that of C Coy, and Maj Hobbs placed most of his men

under cover in these houses. At dusk this suburb was heavily mortared. Although it sustained few casualties C Coy, possibly because it was closest to [Faenza](#), bore the brunt of the enemy shelling and mortar fire in the days that followed. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons were about 300 yards from the river, with the reserve platoon and Coy HQ about 500 yards to the rear. On the right Nos. 11 and 12 Platoons were about 250 yards from the stopbank, with the rest of the company at the rear. Major Murray, on the other flank, had placed all his platoons close to the river. A Coy HQ was almost as close. The supporting arms dug in, the three-inch mortars being on the left flank behind C Coy. The ground was so perfectly flat that it was difficult to gain much of a view; rows and rows of vines stretched in all directions.

On the other hand the enemy could use the tall buildings and towers of [Faenza](#) for observation. Intelligence reports estimated that three enemy battalions of a total strength of about 570 were dug in opposite 26 Battalion's sector. Opposite A Coy was a battalion of 992 Regiment, [278 Division](#), and alongside it two battalions from 67 Regiment, 29 Panzer Division. These units were known to be plentifully supplied with automatic weapons and had been given strong artillery support. The strength of the enemy reserves in the area was not known.

The battalion did not move from this sector until 2 December. On the night of their arrival A and B Coys sent patrols out to test the river's depth and locate suitable crossing places. Rain was still falling, and these parties spent several uncomfortable hours before their tasks were finished. Altogether nine patrols were sent at differing times, and their reports confirmed and added to those of 2 Lts Young and Leonard. The Lamone was fordable in places, but the muddy ledges between the near stopbank and the river were very slippery and were covered by spandaus mounted on the crest of the far stopbank. Most of the patrols were prevented from making a detailed examination of the river because of fire from these guns. For the rest of the battalion the night passed uneventfully, with only intermittent shelling and mortaring to disturb the peace. A steady stream of compass bearings was sent in from platoons and companies to Battalion HQ. They covered a wide range—from gun flashes and suspected machine-gun posts to sounds of tank and troop movement. So that the supporting arms could deal with these reports more quickly, fire tasks were drawn up and the enemy section of the line divided into targets, each with a different code-name.

Early on the 27th A Coy reported that enemy troops were occupying a house directly opposite 9 Platoon. Heavy artillery scored several hits on this building and then concentrated on demolishing a number of houses nearby, also thought to be occupied. Rain continued throughout the day, and soon after midday came advice that the crossing of the river had been postponed indefinitely. During the afternoon the New Zealand artillery programme was stepped up and by dusk several fires had been started on the north side of the river. Patrols sent out after dusk to test the depth of the river encountered increased machine-gun fire, and the slightest noise was sufficient to bring down fire from spandaus and rifle grenades. None of the patrols was able to test the river, but all reported that it seemed to have risen considerably. During the night A Coy was harassed by machine-gun fire, and the forward platoons reported the location of 15 spandaus firing on their front. When 8 Platoon, firing Brens, engaged these posts, the enemy reacted swiftly, and for a while the company was subjected to very heavy mortar fire.

The weather cleared on the 28th, and Maj Murray reported that any movement in his sector brought down hostile fire. The house occupied by his headquarters had already received a direct hit, and he believed the Germans were using the towers and steeples in and around [Faenza](#) as observation posts. Brigade HQ arranged for rocket-firing Typhoons to demolish the towers, but before they could arrive the weather had deteriorated and the project was temporarily shelved. During the day [General Freyberg](#), Maj-Gen Barrowclough, and Brig Parkinson visited Battalion HQ. Orders were given to increase the harassing of the enemy defences across the river, and every effort was to be made to force him to disclose his defences along the northern stopbank. Enemy aircraft made one of their rare appearances just after 5 p.m. One plane flew low over the sector and dropped its bombs in the rear. About an hour later an enemy tank sheltering behind a house on the north side of the river opened fire on a tower alongside 14 Platoon's house. Until the artillery succeeded in silencing this tank, the platoon spent a very uncomfortable time.

That night at eight o'clock the forward companies sent a platoon onto the southern stopbank, where the men dug in. For over an hour they harassed the enemy, using all infantry weapons. There was little reaction to this or to the concentrations fired by the three-inch mortars. The skies were overcast on the 29th. No rain had fallen during the night but the companies reported little change in the

level of the river. Very little happened during the day. Early in the afternoon guns of 32 Heavy Battery, [Royal Artillery](#), opened fire on enemy-occupied houses and gun positions, and later the forward platoons reported that several houses had been levelled. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) decided to repeat the fire plan of the night before and send parties from each company onto the stopbank again. Unfortunately the C Coy party encountered mortar fire as it moved forward, and one man was killed and the Platoon Commander wounded. From 10 p.m. to 11.30 p.m. the troops on the stopbank fired all their weapons, but this time the enemy's reaction was much different. He retaliated by engaging them with spandaus and rifle grenades, besides harassing the battalion sector with mortar and shell fire. This lasted for over an hour, and after a short silence his tanks began firing high explosive shells.

By 3 a.m. the front had quietened down considerably, but suddenly enemy tanks ranged on the house occupied by 15 Platoon. Within a few minutes it had received ten direct hits, but fortunately only one man had been wounded. The telephone line to C Coy went dead; the next news came from the Mortar Platoon which reported that an enemy patrol had been sighted by the company. The telephone was soon in working order again and a regimental concentration was laid down by the 25-pounders forward of the company. The next report from Maj Hobbs stated the enemy patrol had been sighted only 200 yards from 15 Platoon. Ten minutes later the company's standing patrol was attacked by an enemy party of eight or nine men. There was a vigorous exchange of fire during which one of the patrol was wounded, and then the enemy withdrew across the river. C Coy remained on the alert for some time afterwards but nothing further happened.

The troops awoke on the morning of the 30th to the thunder of heavy artillery on the right flank. Fifth Brigade and the Indians on the right of it were attempting to clear the approaches to the river. The brigade encountered some opposition but succeeded in drawing level with 6 Brigade. Throughout the morning a thick ground mist hung over the sector, and Shermans which came forward to harass spandau posts were unable to fire. During the afternoon a conference was held at Battalio HQ. The 46th Division on the left flank was to establish a bridgehead over the river on the night of 1 December, and if it was successful 26 Battalion would follow through. In the time left before this attack every effort was to be made to find a suitable crossing place. It was decided that two volunteers, both strong swimmers,

should test the river after dark.

About 5.45 p.m. Pte [Martin](#)¹² left A Coy HQ and set out towards the river. A few minutes later incendiary bullets set several haystacks alight in the company area. This delayed Pte [Watson](#),¹³ the second swimmer, for nearly an hour. The tension increased when C Coy reported that an enemy patrol had crossed the river forward of 15 Platoon. For the second time within twenty-four hours a regimental concentration was laid down in front of the company. Afterwards Maj Hobbs sent a fighting patrol towards the river but it found no trace of the enemy. As a safeguard the Colonel ordered D Coy to provide a fighting patrol in the area until dawn.

In the meantime the two swimmers had reached the river, Martin directly opposite A Coy HQ and Watson not far from the house occupied by 8 Platoon. Martin climbed the stopbank and, unable to retain a foothold as he descended the other side, slid down to the water's edge and found himself knee-deep in silt. Five paces out into the stream the water lapped his chin, so he returned to the bank and made his way back to A Coy HQ. Not far away Watson was in a sorry position. Crossing the crest of the stopbank, he had stumbled and fallen head-first down the 11-foot bank into the stream. He was able to right himself by grasping some shrubs on the water's edge, but found it impossible to retain his balance against the fast current. Shivering with the cold, he returned to A Coy HQ to report and seek dry clothes. It was obvious that 26 Battalion would not be able to cross the [Lamone](#) until the river dropped considerably.

Early on 1 December Sherman tanks opened fire on the troublesome towers in [Faenza](#). Later the same morning the CO was advised that the [Divisional Cavalry Regiment](#) would be relieving the battalion after dark on the 2nd. This was good news, but the two days passed slowly. The tanks continued to fire at intervals during the 1st, and at 2 p.m. C Coy reported that one tower had collapsed. No. 8 Platoon was playing another type of game. Early in the morning one of the pickets noticed a spandau lying in a weapon pit on the top of the far stopbank. A careful watch was kept in case the enemy attempted to retrieve it. Late in the afternoon the platoon's patience was rewarded, and the two Germans who came over the crest were both hit by fire from a Bren gun.

After dark platoons were sent forward to the stopbank to dig weapon pits near

the crest. There was a good deal of spandau fire, and all ranks were glad when at 10 p.m. they were ordered to return to the lines. Enemy tanks were much more lively about this time, and B Coy was harassed by high velocity shells for over an hour. Enemy mortars too were very active. At 11.15 p.m., when things had quietened down, a B Coy sentry saw several shadowy figures approaching from the river. Within a few seconds the men in the section with him were on the alert. The Germans came closer; then, unaccountably, a white flare shot up into the air from the north side of the river. The German party dived to cover but not before the section had wounded one of them. This man was taken prisoner.

Very little happened during the 2nd. The day was fine and Spitfires and Thunderbolts passed overhead to attack targets on the north side of the river. While they were overhead enemy guns were silent. The forward platoons reported targets which were relayed to the Allied pilots, who scored some direct hits. No. 8 Platoon was on the lookout to repeat its success of the day before and by nightfall three 'kills' had been claimed. The Divisional Cavalry began to arrive about 4.30 p.m., and by 8 p.m. the relief was completed and the battalion was on its way to [Forli](#), where it was to spend the next 16 days.

During this period the weather was generally overcast with occasional rain and bitterly cold winds. Often at dusk a damp mist enveloped the town, and sometimes there was a sharp frost. Training was chiefly confined to route marches and practice in different forms of river crossings. By the end of the fortnight all ranks knew something about kapoc bridges, assault bridges, Mae Wests, and various types of ferries. Even six-pounders were taken across the streams. This training lent itself to many unrehearsed incidents, and almost every time one or two unlucky ones fell into the ice-cold water. Unit drivers practised towing six-pounders behind the Weasel, a new type of carrier.

There was plenty to do when the day's training was over. Most of the shops in the town were closed, but a [Naafi](#) was operating and films were being screened in several theatres. Some of the civilians had abandoned their homes and businesses during the battle for the town, and amongst these were several wineshops and distilleries. In no time these were located; company canteens sold little wine afterwards. Impromptu sing-songs and parties helped to pass the time during the cold evenings. Another 73 reinforcements joined the unit, which at this time had a

total strength of 760, plus 31 officers. Casualties during the recent spell in the line had been very light—one killed and six wounded. This brought the total casualties since the middle of September to ten killed and 31 wounded. Captain Humphries returned from hospital and was given command of HQ Coy.

During the second week in December it became apparent to the men that something was afoot for a series of conferences was held at Battalion and Brigade headquarters. On the 16th the battalion was placed on four hours' notice to leave—its destination was the next river, the [Senio](#).

¹ [Maj-Gen C. E. Weir](#), CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO [6 Fd Regt](#) Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941–Jun 1944; commanded 2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (British) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG Army HQ Nov 1951–.

² Appointments were:

CO: [Lt-Col D. J. Fontaine](#)

2 i/c: Maj A. W. Barnett

Adj: Capt P. J. Humphries

QM: Capt B. Boyd

Padre: [Rev. J. A. Linton](#)

MO: Capt I. H. Fletcher

OC A Coy: [Maj G. A. Murray](#)

OC B Coy: [Maj D. P. W. Harvey](#)

OC C Coy: [Maj K. W. Hobbs](#)

OC D Coy: [Maj R. Hunter](#)

OC HQ Coy: Capt P. B. Smythe

³ [Capt J. Milne](#), MM; [Greymouth](#); born [Scotland](#) 18 Jan 1920; farm labourer;

wounded three times.

⁴ WO II M. Tavener, MM; born NZ 1 Oct 1917; farmer; died of wounds 24 Dec 1944.

⁵ Lt S. Herbison, MM; Dunedin; born Ireland, 4 Sep 1904; bar manager; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁶ Col M. C. Fairbrother, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde 1942–43; commanded in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; CO 26 Bn 16 Oct 1944–1 Sep 1945; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.

⁷ Maj W. J. C. Gwynne; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 28 Jun 1913; hardware assistant.

⁸ Maj K. F. S. Cox, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Marton, 30 Aug 1908; accountant.

⁹ Maj D. S. Malcolm; Palmerston North; born NZ 10 Oct 1915; medical practitioner; RMO in Fiji Military Forces, 1942–43; RMO 26 Bn Nov 1944–Apr 1945; wounded 16 Apr 1945.

¹⁰ Capt P. D. Young; Palmerston North; born Adelaide, 24 Jun 1921; clerk.

¹¹ Lt W. J. Leonard, m.i.d.; Ranfurly; born Invercargill, 7 Feb 1919; State Forest Service; twice wounded.

¹² Pte H. M. Martin; Mosgiel; born Dunedin, 12 Mar 1922; painter and decorator.

¹³ Pte R. G. Watson; Oamaru; born Oamaru, 1 Oct 1923; carpenter.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 18 – THE DRIVE TO THE SENIO

CHAPTER 18

The Drive to the Senio

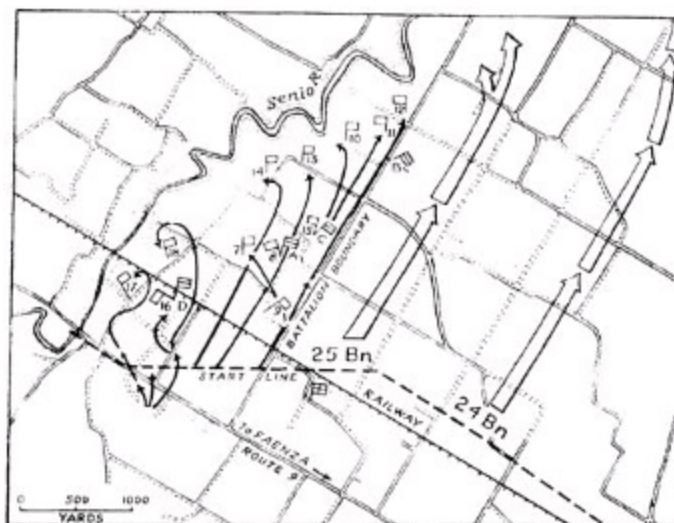
WHILE 6 Brigade was resting in [Forli](#) the [Eighth Army](#) had made some progress. On the night of 3 December 46 Division, operating south of [Faenza](#) and Route 9 where the ground was firmer and less affected by the rains, launched an attack on the German positions on the west bank of the [Lamone](#). Despite difficulties of supply caused by the absence of good roads, the British troops gained their initial objectives. By the 7th the bridgehead had been enlarged, although the enemy contested every advance. Two days later the German Commander transferred 90 Panzer Grenadier Division to this sector; its counter-attacks were beaten back, although 46 Division suffered heavily in doing so. The 10th Indian Division and 2 NZ Division, less 6 Brigade, relieved 46 Division, and on the night of the 14th a full-scale attack was launched on the [Pergola- Pideura](#) Ridge, which dominated the southern approaches to the next river, the [Senio](#). The fighting was very severe. Fifth Brigade, on the right flank, succeeded in capturing the village of [Celle](#), but the Indians were unable to gain their objectives on the ridge. However, they bypassed it and eventually consolidated on a second ridge, and the Germans were forced to withdraw. This success opened the way for an advance to the [Senio](#). On the right flank 1 [Canadian Corps](#), driving up Route 16, had captured [Ravenna](#) and by the 16th was nearing the [Senio](#) from that direction.

At this stage the Germans were still holding positions along the west bank of the [Lamone](#) north of Route 9. [Faenza](#) was still in enemy hands. Plans were made to clear the ground between the two rivers by driving north from the bridgehead over the [Lamone](#) towards the Canadians' sector, and so force the enemy back behind the [Senio](#) stopbanks. By the 19th 2 NZ Division had crossed Route 9 and forced the enemy to evacuate [Faenza](#). The day before, orders had been issued for 6 Brigade, with 43 Gurkha Brigade on its right, to continue the advance from the main road to a depth of about 3400 yards. The 56th British Division would then pass through the New Zealanders and link up with the Canadians, who would be making a simultaneous drive for the [Senio](#). After they had cleared the ground between the rivers, 6 Brigade and the British troops north-east of the New Zealanders would turn west and man the eastern stopbank of the river. Sixth Brigade and the [Gurkhas](#) were to attack at 9 p.m. on 19 December, and a heavy artillery barrage was to be fired to

support the infantry. Aerial reconnaissance and Intelligence reports revealed that the Germans were strongly entrenched along both stopbanks of the **Senio**, and that approximately a thousand infantrymen of 29 Panzer Grenadier Division, supported by tanks, occupied the ground between the two rivers.

Early on the 19th the battalion moved to **Faenza**, and early in the afternoon final orders for the attack were given at Battalion

HQ. The 26th Battalion had been given the left-flank sector nearest the **Senio** and would have **25 Battalion** alongside it and **24 Battalion** on the right flank. It was a difficult attack for the brigade, in driving across the front, was likely to meet flanking fire from the German positions on and west of the **Senio** stopbanks. To overcome this the artillery was to fire heavy concentrations on this area. Because of the wide front to be held after the advance had been completed, **Col Fairbrother** decided to commit the four rifle companies. ¹ They were to form up along a fairly narrow start line which straddled Route 9 and lay about 800 yards from the river. C and D Coys were to lead the assault. D Coy on the left was to advance across the **Faenza-Bologna** railway line to a crossroads about 1000 yards from Route 9. At this point the company was to turn left and advance onto the nearest stopbank. C Coy, moving forward on the right of D Coy, was to continue beyond the crossroads to another crossroads, 1150 yards farther on. B Coy, moving after the leaders and on the extreme right of the sector, was to extend the front another 1300 yards. After reaching their objectives both



ADVANCE TO THE SENIO, 19-20 DECEMBER 1944

Advance to the **Senio, 19–20 December 1944**

these companies were to wheel and advance west onto the stopbank. The platoons of A Coy were each given separate tasks. No. 9 Platoon was to follow D Coy and carry out any mopping up required. No. 7 Platoon was to carry out similar duties for C Coy, while No. 8 was to protect a party of sappers who were to clear the road which formed the right-hand boundary of the battalion's sector. Until this road was reported clear the supporting arms, including the squadron of tanks under command, were to remain on call at [Faenza](#). Only the Mortar Platoon was to move, and it was to take up a position behind the start line. Shortly before the attack began the Colonel learned that the eastern stopbank of the river was extensively mined; acting on orders, he told his company commanders to stop short of the river bank.

At 7 p.m. the companies began marching along Route 9 towards the start line. About the same time Tac HQ was set up in a farmhouse on the eastern end of this line, and for a while headquarters personnel became forward troops. At 8 p.m. heavy mortar fire caused two casualties at Tac HQ, but the companies were ready on the start line when the barrage began an hour later. Assisted by the ghostly glow of artificial moonlight, the troops crossed the start line and began advancing towards the railway and their objectives. They had not gone far before the enemy retaliated. Mortars and field guns ranged on Route 9 and the ground north-east of it, and for the next half hour the fire became steadily heavier. It was during this period that the companies suffered most of their casualties. The house occupied by Tac HQ received several direct hits, and all personnel retired to the ground floor of the building. The line to Brigade HQ was cut in several places and for a while it was too dangerous to attempt to mend it.

At Tac HQ everyone was waiting for word from the companies when, to quote the IO, 'all Hell seemed to break loose.' First came insistent hammering on the door and a sobbing voice demanding, 'Let me in; let me in!' Within a few seconds some twenty wounded New Zealanders, the bodies of two who had died, and as many others who could crowd into the house packed the room. The scene of orderliness changed to one of unbelievable disorder. First aid was quickly administered to the wounded, seven of whom had been painfully burned by a phosphorus bomb set off by a shell splinter. Ambulance jeeps were sent for and everything was done to make the wounded comfortable. All were from 14 Platoon [25 Battalion](#), which had been caught on the start line by the enemy's fire and some 'shorts' fired by the artillery.

For nearly an hour there was no news of the forward companies. At 9.50 p.m. Maj Hobbs reported that his leading platoons, Nos. 13 and 14, were across the railway line and still advancing against fairly light opposition. By 10.35 p.m. 7 Platoon was in contact with C Coy, and ten minutes later B Coy reported that it had crossed the railway. Shortly after 11 p.m. two men from 18 Platoon, who arrived at Tac HQ with some prisoners, brought word of D Coy. Heavy defensive fire had delayed the company just after it had left the start line and had caused some casualties, but it was now making better progress. During the next half hour several messages were received from the companies, now making faster progress, and by 12.30 a.m. C and D Coys were in position, A Coy HQ had been set up midway behind them, and B Coy was only 700 yards short of its objective. An hour later Maj Harvey reported he had reached it.

All four companies had suffered casualties from enemy fire at the start of the attack, but except in one or two instances ground opposition had not been strong. As the leading platoons approached the stopbank they had come under machine-gun and mortar fire which slowed up the advance, but wherever possible company commanders had positioned their men in houses when they had reached their objectives. This lessened casualties when enemy fire began again early in the morning. At 4 a.m. the boundary road was reported clear, and an hour and a half later C Squadron [20 Armoured Regiment](#) left [Faenza](#) on the way to support the companies. The Carrier Platoon accompanied it. Ambulance jeeps had reached Tac HQ, and the RAP personnel were fully occupied attending to the wounded, including some Germans, who had been carried back from the forward areas. Towards dawn hostile shelling and mortaring, which had abated for a time, became heavy once more, and the task of stretcher-bearers and ambulance drivers became all the more dangerous as they moved to and from the company sectors.

At dawn the situation was very satisfactory. The companies had consolidated in their new positions, with A Coy in a reserve position behind C and D Coys. Two troops of tanks had reached B Coy HQ, and one troop was with each of C and D Coys. Casualties had been fairly heavy; they totalled 53, including twelve men killed. A Coy reported six men wounded, B Coy two killed and seven wounded, C Coy four killed and five wounded, and D Coy six killed and fourteen wounded. The remaining nine wounded were headquarters personnel. An unusual number of dead and

wounded Germans had been found in the new sectors, and after dawn small groups of prisoners began to arrive at Tac HQ. By 10 a.m. the total had reached 70. Later in the morning civilians reported that about forty Germans had changed into civilian clothing in D Coy's sector, and Maj Hunter was ordered to round up all men of military age he could find. Only 17 could be found; they were sent back to Brigade HQ for interrogation.

The winter line beyond Faenza



The winter line beyond **Faenza**



26 Battalion street, Faenza

26 Battalion street, Faenza



At a company HQ
before the attack in
the Senio battle

At a company HQ before the attack in the [Senio](#) battle



Waiting to go into
action, April 1945

Waiting to go into action, April 1945

The attack everywhere had been a success. Later in the day it was learned that the rest of 6 Brigade and the [Gurkhas](#) had reached their objectives. The Canadians, too, had reached the [Senio](#). No New Zealanders had moved onto the eastern stopbank and it was believed that the enemy was still holding it. Proof of this came later in the day when C Coy reported enemy troops in front of its positions. Artillery and mortar tasks were quickly arranged and fired soon afterwards. Enemy mortar fire caused four casualties in A Coy's sector, one man being killed. Two men who went forward to examine a house in front of the company's positions failed to return, and it was later found they had been captured by an enemy patrol. At 5.30 p.m. D Coy called for artillery fire on a party of Germans believed to be east of the river. About the same time a four-man enemy patrol was engaged by 13 Platoon, which

wounded one German and took another prisoner, the other two escaping in the bad light. Shortly afterwards 18 Platoon was fired on by an enemy tank believed to be on the east side of the river. The platoon withdrew to D Coy HQ but later reoccupied its former position.

After dusk the front quietened down. A company from 28 Battalion was in close contact with D Coy, and the troop of tanks attached to it was withdrawn to form part of the general reserve with A Coy. The battalion front was shortened, all ground south of the railway line becoming part of 5 Brigade's sector, and Maj Hunter was ordered to sidestep his platoons to the right during the 21st. Arrangements were also made to harass enemy working parties with mortars and Vickers guns during the night. To this fire the Germans replied with interest, using field guns, mortars, nebelwerfers and spandaus. A constant stream of compass bearings was sent back by the platoons and within a short time over came the replies to the enemy fire. Apart from this spate of firing the night passed quietly.

At dawn on the 21st 17 Platoon sent back a wounded German found lying in front of its house. D Coy also reported considerable tank movement around the railway line on the far side of the river. This movement continued throughout most of the day despite the concentrated artillery fire directed on it. Brisk interchanges of fire, during which both sides endeavoured to knock down the houses occupied by the infantry, caused another six casualties. B Coy, which was in the most exposed position, lost four men. Late in the afternoon a conference was held at Battalion HQ. The CO's intention was to withdraw the forward platoons after dark and form a main line several hundred yards from the river. Standing patrols were to be left in the houses vacated.

Snow was falling and conditions were cold and unpleasant when these adjustments were carried out. Later 14 Platoon withdrew to 15 Platoon's area when the enemy set fire to a haystack adjacent to its house. At midnight an enemy fighting patrol armed with a bazooka attacked 13 Platoon. Pickets posted at upstairs windows gave warning of the Germans' approach and they were given a hostile reception. For a few minutes grenades and bullets flew in all directions before the enemy withdrew. Two deserters who surrendered to the platoon volunteered valuable information on enemy troop dispositions and minefields along the [Senio](#).

Two reconnaissance patrols sent out by A Coy in the early hours of the morning added to this data. The first, led by Cpl [Wilson](#),² was fired on when it was within 30 yards of the stopbank but, taking refuge in a ditch, remained long enough to plot the positions of several spandau posts. The second, led by Sgt [Brady](#),³ located a gap in the minefield below the stopbank. All around were various types of mines, including Schu, Teller and concrete mines, some connected to trip wires. The stopbank was only about fifteen feet high and was roughly sown with mines easily discernible in the poor light.

Although the snow had ceased the weather had not improved a great deal at daylight on the 22nd, and it seemed that the state of the ground was going to impede operations along the front. Brigadier Parkinson called at Battalion HQ during the afternoon and laid down a patrol policy of probing the stopbank to confirm the existence of gaps in the minefield and gauge the strength of enemy troops on it. Four patrols were sent out that night, two by B Coy and two by C Coy. Only one succeeded in reaching the stopbank without encountering mines or drawing enemy fire. Later patrols were delayed by a typical enemy practice of setting fire to haystacks in the platoon areas. One of these, a three-man patrol led by Cpl [Silver](#),⁴ ran into an enemy patrol. The New Zealanders went to ground immediately and opened fire, wounding one German and driving the others back to the river. Shortly before dawn snow began to fall again, and the forward platoons reported that the enemy seemed to be digging in along the stopbank. Artillery fire was directed on these areas, but the German working parties ceased work only while the fire continued. Enemy artillery retaliated, and platoon houses suffered severely although nobody was hurt. To deny the enemy observation of the battalion sector, it was evident that the near stopbank would have to be dominated.

To test the enemy's reaction to such a move and prepare the way for a general advance onto the stopbank, Brig Parkinson gave orders for a small-scale attack on the most prominent bend of the river. It was to take place before dawn on the 24th and would be preceded by a heavy artillery programme designed to saturate the enemy's defences. No. 8 Platoon, commanded by 2 Lt [Rogers](#),⁵ with a section from 9 Platoon, was chosen for the task, and during the afternoon of the 23rd all details of the plan of attack were discussed and settled. It was known that the bend of the river was held by No. 1 Coy, 15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 29 Panzer Division, with

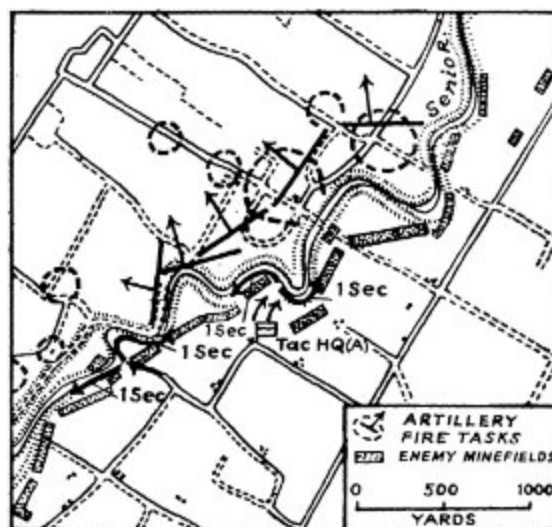
No. 2 Coy south of it and No. 4 Coy in reserve along the western stopbank. Two-men weapon pits had been dug every 40 yards along the west bank, and it was likely that further tunnelling had been completed along the east bank. Several belts of minefields lay between the battalion lines and the river, and to overcome this difficulty patrols from B and C Coys were to try to find gaps which the attacking party could use.

As it was expected the enemy would react strongly to the platoon's attack, heavy support was arranged. The 5th and 6th Field Regiments were to fire a barrage behind which the A Coy men would advance; afterwards the field guns would concentrate on selected targets. The 4.2-inch mortars of 34 Battery, 25 and 26 Battalions' three-inch mortars, and a platoon of Vickers gunners were to give flanking fire. B and C Coys were to fire all platoon weapons on either side of 8 Platoon's objectives, for it was realised that the success of the operation depended on the effectiveness of the supporting fire so that the attackers would be able to consolidate on the ground they had won. In the plan 8 Platoon was given the main task of capturing the stopbank while the section from 9 Platoon, commanded by Sgt MacKenzie,⁶ carried out the more dangerous role. They were to ascertain the height and slopes of both stopbanks and the approaches to them, and to test the depth, width, nature and flow of the river. The section's task was an unenviable one for it promised to be another bitterly cold night.

The afternoon and evening passed without incident except for interchanges of artillery fire. D Coy was relieved by a company of 2/6 Gurkha Regiment and withdrew into reserve behind A Coy. The B and C Coy patrols located tracks leading to the river in front of the houses occupied by 14 and 11 Platoons. They appeared to be free of mines. At 6 a.m. the attacking party began moving through C Coy towards the start line. Forty-five minutes later the artillery opened fire, and the infantrymen began to advance cautiously along a rough road which led three parts of the way to the stopbank. At the end of it was a demolished house which Maj Murray proposed to use as a control post. From this point two sections of the platoon were to move north-east towards the stopbank, while the other two branched west.

Although the artillery fired over 2000 shells into the target area within a short time, its fire was not sufficient to drive the Germans from their deep defences. The platoon was only halfway along the road when enemy flares lit up the area, and

within a few minutes the men came under mortar fire. With bombs crashing all around them the platoon raced for the nearest shelter, the demolished house. Led by C Coy guides, the sections separated and made their way along ditches to the stopbank, both groups travelling as fast as they could. As they climbed the stopbank they encountered heavy fire from infantry posts in front of them and on their flanks. The Germans were engaged



A Coy's Attack on the Stopbank, 24 December

A Coy's Attack on the Stopbank, 24 December

at close quarters and the fighting soon became very severe. Lance-Corporal [Prattley](#),⁷ who led one section, jumped into one weapon pit and won the struggle for possession of a spandau. Others were achieving similar results with grenades and small-arms fire. Gradually the platoon gained the ascendancy and before long held several hundred yards of the stopbank.

The second stage of the operation, consolidating the newly won positions, was much more difficult. Not only had the sections become somewhat disorganised through casualties, but the enemy was tossing grenades across the river and directing small-arms fire on those attempting to dig in along the crest of the stopbank. From positions on both flanks the Germans were also able to bring enfilading fire to bear on the platoon. At 7.30 a.m. the platoon came under fire from field guns, mortars, and nebelwerfers. So intense did this become that at 8.15 a.m. Lt Rogers advised Maj Murray that the stopbank positions could no longer be held. Almost half the attacking party had become casualties, three men being killed and

eleven wounded. Under cover of smoke laid down by the mortars the platoon withdrew, carrying as many of the wounded as was possible. The approach routes used earlier were under heavy fire and it was decided to head direct across the minefield towards the battalion lines. Prattley went ahead cutting trip wires so that the party could get through the minefield more quickly and in safety.

Although 8 Platoon had been forced off the stopbank, the 9 Platoon section had succeeded in making its river reconnaissance. While the fighting was at its height the section had reached the foot of the stopbank. Choosing a suitable moment Sgt MacKenzie, an expert swimmer, crawled up the 15-foot stopbank in the half light and let himself down into the river, which was running high between snow-covered banks. Two yards out into the stream he was forced to swim. Half-way over he submerged to find the depth of the river. Gaining the west bank, he climbed the 25-foot stopbank and from the top of it surveyed the reverse slope and the well-prepared German defences along the 12-foot-wide crest, even though he was only a few feet away from one of the dugouts. A shout from one of the Germans in it warned him he had been seen; quickly sliding down the slope, he slid into the icy water again. The Germans came over the top but in the poor light were unable to make out the swimmer, who later gained the opposite bank and returned to the battalion lines with his valuable information. Sergeant MacKenzie's exploit was particularly daring and courageous and won him the MM. Very shortly afterwards he was re-commissioned in the field; he had earlier held a commission in New Zealand.

Later the same morning an incident occurred which gave an insight into the better nature of the Germans. Stretcher-bearers returned to the foot of the stopbank where several of the A Coy wounded had been left. They found that German stretcher-bearers had already bound up the New Zealanders' wounds and moved them to a safer place, although the area had been under fire from both sides. A short truce was declared when the two parties met. Cigarettes were exchanged and, after some discussion, the enemy offered every facility for the removal of the wounded to the battalion lines.

All ranks were by this time reconciled to spending Christmas Day in the line. Although troubled by shelling and mortaring, the platoons were fairly comfortable in their houses. Wherever possible fires were lit in the ground-floor rooms, and all except those on picket or out on patrol collected around them. Meals were brought

forward morning and night by jeep from B Echelon at [Faenza](#). On Christmas Eve this town was shelled by long-range guns and the battalion lost three men, including one killed. Behind the battalion lines artillery officers were getting ready to give the enemy a warm evening. Before dawn on the 25th, [25 Battalion](#) reported that the Germans had vacated the eastern stopbank opposite B Coy, and Brigade HQ ordered the CO to send a section forward to occupy the area. This section, commanded by Sgt [Williams](#)⁸ and drawn from B Coy, reached the stopbank at 4.30 a.m. and moved into the empty dugouts. There it remained until intense mortar fire forced it to withdraw to the lines again. The section leader was badly wounded and had to be carried out.

Christmas Day 1944 was just like any other day, with periods of shelling and patrols after dusk. Pickets had to be maintained as usual. Boxing Day and the day after were little different. Patrols tried to find out if the enemy was working on his minefields or strengthening his positions along the river. Occasional mortar and artillery concentrations caused a few casualties and more of the platoon houses received direct hits. Fine weather on Boxing Day allowed Allied fighters and bombers to harass the enemy. That night the companies and their supporting arms engaged in a 'brassing up' of enemy positions, but their fire drew such a strong response from the Germans that 25 Battalion asked Battalion HQ to 'lay off' as the enemy fire was causing casualties.

At 6 a.m. on the 27th a strong enemy patrol attacked the house occupied by 7 Platoon. The upstairs pickets had hardly had time to give the others warning of the Germans' approach before three bazooka bombs exploded inside the building. This was a signal for the enemy to rush the back door, but two men on duty there opened fire and killed the leading German. Everyone inside the house was firing by this time and the Germans were forced to vacate their positions near the house. Grenades were tossed into the outbuildings, and the whole area was brought under intense LMG fire which induced the enemy to retire. One NCO, Cpl [Gregg](#),⁹ hearing sounds of movement by a nearby haystack, crept cautiously over and almost tripped over a man stretched on the ground. The NCO gave the password but the German reached for his gun, whereupon he was killed. A quick survey of the area revealed that the rest of the enemy patrol had withdrawn, leaving its commander, an officer wearing the Iron Cross, and another man lying dead near the house. Battalion HQ, which had

been advised of the enemy raid, arranged a quickly laid on 'stank' which caught the Germans as they recrossed the stopbank. Subsequently it was learned that the patrol consisted of 45 men, equipped with blankets and spare ammunition; its intention had been to occupy and hold the house as a strongpoint. The stank had caused many casualties.

Later the same morning Col Fairbrother was advised that the Divisional Cavalry would again relieve the battalion, which would return to Forli for a short spell. The relief was carried out without incident during the late afternoon and evening of the 27th, and the troops lost no time in marching to the point where lorries were waiting to carry them to their destination. By 9 p.m. everyone had arrived, and all ranks settled down to untroubled sleep in buildings set aside for the battalion. Casualties for the fortnight totalled 93, including 19 men killed and two taken prisoner. More than two-thirds of these casualties had been suffered during the attack of 19–20 December and in A Coy's abortive assault on the stopbank on the 24th.

* * *

Although a little late, the Christmas festivities were celebrated in the usual manner on 29 December. Officers and NCOs served the meal and Brig Parkinson visited each company. Beer, cigarettes, parcels and mail were distributed and the festivities continued until a late hour. The bars and cafés of Forli were crowded with thirsty soldiers seeking relaxation. On the 30th and 31st the Kiwi Concert Party gave performances at one of the local theatres. A small rotary pump found by Col Fairbrother in the Lamone sector had been incorporated into a battalion-built shower unit, an asset for which all ranks were grateful.

On the last day of the year came the news from Brigade HQ that 26 Battalion was to prepare to move back into the line on 1 January, and that in the meantime all ranks were to remain in their billets. This did not prevent the New Year being celebrated in the usual boisterous army manner, platoons gathering around a fire or heater with a good supply of liquid refreshments nearby. In the morning there was the usual hustle and bustle before the lorries set out along Route 9. By midday the battalion was concentrated in Faenza, each company occupying buildings in the town. Four days elapsed before the unit moved again, and the troops had plenty of opportunity to examine the town which was to serve as a base for the Division

during the next two months. Parts of the town had been badly damaged by shellfire and bombing, and the civilian population was swelled by refugees from outlying districts, where the fighting was continuing.

On the 5th the battalion relieved [21 Battalion](#) on the north-eastern sector of the reserve defences covering [Faenza](#). The companies moved out of the town during the day and immediately began digging weapon pits and general defences. Next morning the Colonel received orders to take over 24 Battalion's sector on the [Senio](#). The Divisional Cavalry Regiment was to relieve 26 Battalion. The companies continued to work on the defences during the morning, and an A Coy man was wounded when an undetected Schu mine exploded. Snow began to fall late in the afternoon and continued throughout the night. On the 7th the men lined up in their mess queues in six to nine inches of snow, with a bitterly cold wind still blowing.

Shortly after midday the companies marched out of [Faenza](#), past the grotesque, snow-covered ruins of buildings, along slushy and slippery roads which led to the [Senio](#). Jeeps, light trucks and motor cycles, loaded with all manner of gear and those fortunate few who did not have to walk, drove carefully past. The new sector lay north of the one previously occupied by the battalion, the left flank extending into ground captured by B Coy on the night of 19 December. A and B Coys, which were to hold reserve sectors, were in position by 3.30 p.m., but the other two companies were unable to move forward until after dark. By half past six the relief was complete. Twenty-four hours later the battalion frontage was extended to the right when A Coy relieved D Coy [25 Battalion](#). D, C, and A Coys were deployed across a 1400-yard front, with B Coy in reserve around Battalion HQ about a mile to the rear. No. [3 Coy](#) 27 (MG) Battalion, 31 Anti-Tank Battery, and B Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment were under command.

The 26th Battalion remained in these positions until 17 January, when it was relieved by [24 Battalion](#). The weather was wintry and cold. Snow fell on the 8th, and the light frosts which followed it made the snow crusty. On the 13th and 14th it rained and the ground became very slushy. The next three days were overcast, with heavy fogs morning and night. Throughout the period the forward companies maintained outposts forward of their positions. These were usually manned by a section which was relieved every 24 hours. A constant check was kept on enemy movement in the vicinity of the stopbanks, and all platoons took compass bearings

on gun flashes, machine-gun posts, etc., and these points were harassed by the supporting arms. Three patrols were sent out, their mission being to determine if the enemy was strengthening his defences east of the river. None was able to reach the near stopbank. All three patrols were equipped with snow clothing—hooded cotton jackets, trousers, breech and rifle covers. The first two were held up near an enemy-occupied house near the river, and the third, under orders to ambush the enemy along one of the tracks used by him when patrolling, saw nobody.

To discourage enemy patrols trip flares and Hawkins mines were laid around platoon houses, but these failed to stop the Germans although they often gave the platoons warning of their approach. About 10.30 p.m. on the 8th three Germans, dressed partly in white clothing, approached 15 Platoon. The sentry allowed them to move within twenty yards of the house before opening fire with his Bren gun. The Germans fled, and in the morning the platoon found a blood-stained pair of gloves, a boot, some grenades, and a bazooka in some saplings nearby. The following night an enemy patrol became entangled in one of its own minefields, for an explosion was followed by the sound of several men beating a hasty retreat to the river. During the next two nights trip flares were set off at various times, but these were thought to have been ignited by stray dogs, cats, and rabbits which roamed the area. From that time onwards there was an open season on such animals.

About 8.30 p.m. on the 12th A Coy's outpost, which was only about 100 yards from the river, was attacked by an enemy party of about eight men. The Germans took advantage of the cover provided by nearby rows of trees to approach the back of the house unseen. It was not until shadowy figures were noticed alongside some outbuildings that a sentry became aware of the danger and warned his mates. As the Germans attempted to rush the house they met a hail of small-arms fire and grenades. A bazooka bomb crashed into the building but nobody was hit. While all this din was going on the wireless operator was reporting to Maj Murray, who immediately arranged for a concentration to be laid around the house and the paths leading to the river from it. Within a few minutes mortars, tanks, artillery and machine guns were firing within a small target area. The enemy soon had had enough and they left, taking their wounded with them. Four nights later A Coy HQ was visited by a small enemy party, which succeeded in getting within thirty yards of the house before being sighted by a sentry. The enemy fired a bazooka into the roof

of the building and then made off, pursued by hot but wild firing in the dark.

Throughout the ten days the enemy continued to shell and mortar the sector at frequent intervals, concentrating mainly on roads and buildings. Some of the latter received direct hits, one man being killed and six others wounded. On many occasions the Germans brought a nebelwerfer or a self-propelled gun close to the stopbank. It usually fired only a few rounds before moving to another position, for the New Zealand artillery was very quickly on the mark. Tanks, artillery, mortars, and Vickers guns were given plenty to do attending to the various reports sent back by each platoon and outpost. The Germans were working hard to improve their positions along the river, and these working parties were the targets for frequent mortar and artillery concentrations. The tanks, two of which were stationed at each company's headquarters, were very useful for they could fire within a minute or so of a message being received.

Heavy mortar fire delayed the relief which took place during the afternoon and evening of 17 January, but by 6.30 p.m. 24 Battalion had taken over and the troops were on their way to [Forli](#) for a few days' spell.

The battalion remained at [Forli](#) until 21 January, when it moved to [Faenza](#) to take up position again in the reserve defence line. A day was spent improving these defences, after which companies carried out some training. This extended over the next four days and took the form of a three-hour route march, followed by instruction in the use of flame-throwers, wireless operating, and the lifting and laying of mines. The training was not very arduous, and for the greater part of the day and night the men were left to their own devices. The weather continued to be cold and unpleasant. Several inches of snow fell on the night of the 25th and intermittent rain next day turned it to slush. Fifty reinforcements joined the battalion on this day and were posted to companies. Some changes in command took place during the week. Three long-service officers, Maj R. Hunter and Captains F. S. [Hallett](#)¹⁰ and J. I. D. Fraser, left to return to New Zealand on furlough, and Capt Humphries was seconded to Divisional HQ. Capt Gwynne became OC D Coy, Capt Boyd OC HQ Coy, and Lt Milne OC Support Group.

On the 26th orders were received to return to the line—the [Winter Line](#) as it had come to be known. At hourly intervals from midday on the 27th the companies

marched out from [Faenza](#); A Coy to relieve B Coy [24 Battalion](#), D Coy to relieve C Coy of the same unit, and C Coy to take over from B Coy [25 Battalion](#). B Coy [26 Battalion](#) was already in the line, having relieved D Coy [25 Battalion](#) the night before. For the second time the battalion occupied a short stretch of its previous sector and ground lying to the north of it. By 7.30 p.m. the relief was complete. Tank support was again provided by B Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment, and the three forward companies—D Coy on the left, A in the centre, and B on the right—maintained outposts forward of their sectors.

The battalion held these positions until 10 February. The weather continued to be cold and wintry with occasional rain. Heavy cloud and early morning fogs prevented air operations. The melting snow filled streams and ditches and the tracks leading to outpost positions became very muddy. Conditions generally were not much different from the the earlier spell in the line. Both sides continued to batter each other's houses and lines of communication, with the enemy making much more use of his nebelwerfers and self-propelled guns. Little patrolling was carried out, a policy which had the hearty approval of platoons. The enemy was still working on his stopbank fortifications despite the heavy fire brought to bear on them by mortars and field guns. Several times the cries of wounded were heard after a concentration had been fired.

Three reconnaissance patrols were sent out during the fortnight, all from B Coy. The first, drawn from 12 Platoon, was fired on as it neared the river, but after a pause it moved forward and climbed the stopbank. Several Germans were seen moving along the reverse slope and, deciding it was too risky to stay, the patrol withdrew to the lines. The second patrol sent out twenty-four hours later followed the same path but got no farther than a ruined house near the foot of the stopbank. No Germans were seen but they could be heard talking not far away. On 4 February the enemy breached both stopbanks of the river opposite B Coy, and there was some conjecture as to the reason for this. Flooding the battalion sector, a bridge site, or a fire position for a self-propelled gun were some of the theories advanced. Eventually, to settle the matter a patrol was sent out by 10 Platoon early on 5 February. The three men got close to the demolition, but a heavy ground fog made them uncertain of their whereabouts and they withdrew. Men could be heard working in the area, and later a mortar concentration was laid down on it.

About the same time as the 10 Platoon patrol was nearing the demolition an enemy patrol was approaching 12 Platoon's outpost. The sentry allowed the four Germans to come close before he opened fire. The enemy immediately scattered, but one later surrendered to the platoon. That night about half past nine the A Coy outpost manned by eight men from 7 Platoon found itself almost completely surrounded by Germans. The enemy had again succeeded in approaching the house through lines of trees without being seen by the sentries, and had one of the Germans not tripped over a discarded bully-beef tin, the outcome of the action might have been much different. Instead the sentries, hearing the noise, saw the shadowy outlines of several of the enemy and immediately opened fire. Within a few minutes the rest of the section had joined them. Two bazooka bombs crashed through the walls of the building but the holes were immediately covered by small-arms fire. The wireless operator called A Coy HQ for help and within ten minutes shells and mortar bombs were crashing down all around the house. A pre-arranged concentration, in which tanks, mortars, field guns, and machine guns all fired within a restricted area, was laid on, and it had the desired effect for the Germans quickly withdrew, taking their wounded with them.

During the fortnight another attempt was made to secure a lodgment on the eastern stopbank, for it was believed that the Germans were reducing their forces along it. The forward battalions of both New Zealand brigades all sent platoons or sections forward. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) decided to send D Coy forward, although only one platoon was to take part in the actual assault. The plan was somewhat similar to that used a few weeks earlier. No. 16 Platoon, commanded by 2 Lt [Brent](#),¹¹ would move forward early on the evening of 31 January and occupy the D Coy outpost. As dusk fell two sections would go forward, one as far as a demolished house and the second onto the stopbank. Whether the lodgment could be enlarged chiefly depended on the enemy's reaction to the move.

After a mild harassing of the near stopbank and adjacent areas by the battalion mortars, the sections began to cross the muddy, half-frozen ground. To create a diversion A Coy's outpost opened fire with Brens and rifles and the tanks attached to that company also opened fire. Within an hour Brent tersely reported that all objectives had been taken without much opposition. The section on the stopbank, led by Cpl [Cocks](#),¹² had engaged one spandau post and with grenades and small-

arms fire had succeeded in wounding and capturing both its occupants. One Bren gunner had been mortally wounded. The section's trials were only just beginning, for soon afterwards it came under heavy fire from all sides except the rear. Its plight became worse when the second Bren gun was damaged and two of the tommy guns jammed. The men made desperate attempts to dig in but the frozen ground was too hard. They had only scratched the surface when enemy troops attacked from the right. The Germans closed in, but concentrated fire from the section's still serviceable weapons killed two and drove the others back. The enemy fire increased; under cover of it another assault party prepared to cross the river. Mortars and field guns fired several concentrations on the area but the enemy succeeded in getting his men across the stream. Enemy mortars ranged on the section's position and, realising the situation was hopeless, 2 Lt Brent gave the order to withdraw. Covered by Cpl Cocks the section withdrew, taking their wounded and the prisoners with them. At 8.45 p.m. the Platoon Commander reported that the operation had failed. All along the front it was the same story, and it was apparent that an attack on a much bigger scale would be needed to gain possession of the near stopbank.

The cloudy weather and wet conditions grounded Allied aircraft, and the enemy was quick to take advantage of their absence to harass the battalion sector with various types of field guns and mortars. Although at times this fire became heavy, few casualties resulted despite more direct hits on houses. By the 10th they totalled twelve, including two men killed. An indication that the stalemate would end as soon as the weather permitted was the work done by several minesweeping parties in the area. An armed party was always sent along to guard the sweepers, who were clearing a wide path through to the river. On one evening the minesweeping party was heavily mortared and suffered casualties. No. 9 Platoon, which formed the covering party, later returned to find its headquarters on fire. The men fought the flames but saved little of their gear; after the fire was subdued they spent the night in a nearby vino factory.

On the afternoon and evening of 10 February the battalion was relieved by [25 Battalion](#), and by 8.30 p.m. all ranks were back in [Faenza](#), glad their spell in the line was over and ready to enjoy themselves.

After six days of light training combined with plenty of relaxation, the battalion returned to the line to take over a sector on the northern end of the Division's boundary. The relief took place during the afternoon and evening of the 17th and was completed during a period of heavy mortar fire. Trucks had carried both 24 and 26 Battalions part way in to the line during the afternoon and it was thought that the noise had attracted the attention of the enemy gunners. However, nobody was hurt. C, D, and B Coys held the forward sectors, and A Coy was in reserve not far from Battalion HQ. C Coy, on the left flank, was almost opposite the enemy-held village of [Felisio](#) on the western bank of the river. Except for a line of slit trenches manned by 16 Platoon, the troops were all under cover. Some of the houses were badly knocked about and were to receive a further battering during the battalion's stay in the area, 13 Platoon's receiving two direct hits on the night of arrival.

The battalion held these positions until relieved by Polish troops on 4 March. In comparison with the previous two sectors, little of note occurred. Two days after the battalion's arrival it was learned that [26 Panzer Division](#) was holding the line opposite. This was confirmed by a deserter who surrendered to 8 Platoon that evening. Four more deserters gave themselves up to 15 Platoon on the 22nd. None was of German origin. To encourage more desertions a loudspeaker system was set up in C Coy's sector. The programme included music and
head-



The unit transport waiting to cross the Po

The unit transport waiting to cross the Po



Off duty in Trieste
Off duty in Trieste



J. R. Page
J. R. Page



S. M. Satterthwaite
S. M. Satterthwaite



J. N. Peart
J. N. Peart



D. J. Fontaine
D. J. Fontaine



E. E. Richards
E. E. Richards



M. C. Fairbrother

M. C. Fairbrother

line

news in German, followed by an appeal to the Germans to cease fighting while there was still a chance of preventing the destruction of their country. Although the efforts of a French soprano were punctuated by spandau bursts, the news which followed was given an attentive hearing. The programme was repeated the following evening, and a few mornings later the enemy replied by sending over pamphlets giving his version of the Allied break-through to the Reich. However, it appeared the Germans needed some consolation for the forward platoons often reported the sounds of singing, shouting, and loud laughter from the enemy side of the line.

The weather steadily improved, and for the most part the days were fine and sunny. Allied fighters and bombers became active again and the platoons were not often troubled by hostile fire during the daytime. Towards evening and after dusk it was the turn of the enemy artillery, particularly his mortars, which harassed the sector at frequent intervals. Several times the enemy fired airbursts over the company areas, wounding several men.

On the evening of the 23rd a 'Chinese' attack was staged. This was arranged partly to divert attention from an assault on the stopbank by 56 British Division and the Gurkha Brigade on the right flank, and also to test the enemy's reaction. The Mortar Platoon engaged many targets, most of them known enemy positions, while Vickers gunners sprayed a road over the river known to be extensively used by the Germans. The forward companies opened fire with all weapons and the tanks fired

their Brownings. Heavy mortars and M.10 self-propelled guns joined in. The enemy's immediate reaction was to send up flares. Then followed light mortaring and machine-gunning. As the mock attack eased off the intensity of the enemy fire increased, and for an hour guns and mortars of all calibres pounded the battalion sector.

Two nights later mortars, acting on information sent back by C Coy, fired several bombs into [Felisio](#). From the noise that went on and the fires started it was clear that some damage had been caused. Later field guns and mortars fired a concentration on the village and caused more damage. On its second last night in the line the battalion staged another mock attack. More weapons were brought into play and the display was much more impressive, but the enemy showed no reaction other than to send up flares. Advanced parties from 17 Battalion, 6 Lwow Brigade, [5 Kresowa Division](#) arrived during the 3rd, and the following afternoon the battalion was relieved.

The Division was being withdrawn to train and prepare for a spring offensive. The third period in the line had not been unpleasant; casualties had been light, ten men being wounded. In addition, one A Coy man had been killed and another wounded in an accidental grenade explosion. Since its departure from [Forli](#) on 18 December the battalion had lost 123 men, including 22 killed and two taken prisoner. Most of these casualties had occurred during the first period in the line when the Division was thrusting towards the [Senio](#) stopbank, and the casualties during the two months in holding positions had been relatively light. Contrary to expectations and hopes the Germans had lasted out the winter, but all ranks knew that the fighting was unlikely to extend into the summer and that before then the [Senio](#) would have to be crossed.

¹ Appointments were:

CO: Lt- [Col M. C. Fairbrother](#)

2 i/c: Maj A. W. Barnett

Adj: [Capt K. F. S. Cox](#)

QM: Capt B. Boyd

Padre: Rev. J. A. Linton

MO: Capt D. S. Malcolm

OC A Coy: Maj G. A. Murray

OC B Coy: Maj D. P. W. Harvey

OC C Coy: Maj K. W. Hobbs

OC D Coy: Maj R. Hunter

OC HQ Coy: Capt P. J. Humphries

IO: Lt S. M. Shuttleworth

² Sgt G. A. W. Wilson; Christchurch; born Sumner, 22 Nov 1922; postman.

³ WO II G. A. Brady, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Rangiora, 24 Nov 1919; clerk.

⁴ Sgt C. D. Silver; Eltham; born Manaia, 9 Feb 1913; salesman.

⁵ Lt J. W. Rogers; Montalto; born NZ 21 Mar 1922; farmer.

⁶ 2 Lt B. E. MacKenzie, MM; Christchurch; born NZ 21 Oct 1921; survey draughtsman.

⁷ Cpl J. F. Prattley, MM, m.i.d.; Temuka; born NZ 8 Jun 1923; labourer; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

⁸ Sgt B. S. Williams; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Dec 1921; clerk; wounded 25 Dec 1944.

⁹ Cpl N. J. Gregg; Templeton; born Kirwee, 10 Mar 1922; farmer.

¹⁰ Capt F. S. Hallett; Invercargill; born England, 30 Aug 1915; labourer.

¹¹ Lt A. H. Brent; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 14 Jan 1922; clerk; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

¹² WO II W. J. Cocks, m.i.d.; St. Andrews, South Canterbury; born Waimate, 16 Aug 1923; farm labourer.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 19 – THE FINAL OFFENSIVE IN ITALY

CHAPTER 19

The Final Offensive in Italy

FOLLOWING its relief by the Poles, the battalion stayed overnight at [Forli](#) and on the 5th travelled south to the district where it had spent the previous November. The convoy finally halted in the low hills about two miles west of the town of [San Severino](#) and about seven miles from [Castelraimondo](#). The advanced party had already selected suitable houses in which to billet the troops. Headquarters 6 Brigade was located in [San Severino](#) together with 24 and 25 Battalions, and the rest of the Division was in the neighbourhood.

Training began almost immediately and continued until the end of the month. The syllabus covered every likely phase of battle and was designed not only to get the men fit for forthcoming operations but also to give recent reinforcements an insight into the part they would have to play. Most recent arrivals had been officers and other ranks of 3 NZ Division posted to [Italy](#) from the [Pacific](#) theatre. Particular attention was paid to river crossings, and each company carried out this training, using assault boats and various types of bridging. During the month a section of carriers was equipped with flame-throwing apparatus and in a demonstration illustrated its terrifying possibilities. On 16 March [General Freyberg](#) inspected 6 Brigade at a parade held on the football ground at [Castelraimondo](#). After the inspection a number of awards were presented.

The all-day training syllabus limited recreation but Wednesday and Saturday afternoons were generally available for sport. Enthusiasts soon laid out playing fields and inter-platoon and company games began. Representative teams were selected. The Rugby team played several games but won only one. The hockey team, which contained some provincial representatives, won five games in a row and was unlucky to lose the sixth and the divisional championship.

A battalion race meeting held on 25 March proved an outstanding success. Riders were confident in their ability to induce their donkeys to breast the winning tape, whether by fair means or foul. A large crowd saw some close finishes and abrupt changes of form. The totalisator, which operated from the sides and backs of trucks, reported a large turnover. The big race of the day resulted in a popular win

by Unfortunate—a bay gelding by Fatigue out of Cookhouse—capably ridden by Sgt J. A. Simpson of A Coy. The winner was led up to the presentation dais by the bowler-hatted, black-frocked Clerk of the Course to receive his prize from the hands of the Hon. W. J. Jordan, who was paying a visit to the Division.

The following night a battalion concert organised by Padre [Linton](#) was staged in the Opera House at [San Severino](#). A capacity house gave the performers an excellent hearing. Two short plays were presented, one by A Coy and the other by the 'I' section, the latter being the star performance of the evening.

During the month the rest of the 4th Reinforcements left for Advanced Base and New Zealand. These men, most of whom had joined the battalion at [Baggush](#) in December 1941, were fine soldiers and all ranks were sorry to see them go. Amongst them were a number of long-service officers, including [Maj K. W. Hobbs](#), C Coy commander, who had gone overseas with [20 Battalion](#). His place was taken by [Maj Pithie](#),¹ a former 3 NZ Division officer. Two other changes of command took place, [Capt Cooper](#)² taking over [Support Group](#) and 2 Lt Brent the duties of QM. Within the Division several important changes had taken place during the winter. The Divisional Cavalry Regiment, 22 (Motor) Battalion, and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion relinquished their specialist roles to become infantry and form 9 Brigade under the command of Brig W. G. Gentry. As a result of this change selected personnel were trained and formed a machine-gun platoon, equipped with Vickers guns, in every infantry battalion.

Towards the end of the month a battalion exercise was held in an area about six miles from [San Severino](#). Mock infantry attacks with tanks in close support were practised, as well as the speedy deployment of supporting arms when the objective had been gained. The old problem of inter-platoon and company communications had been largely overcome as the troops became more used to No. 38 sets. Tanks operated with the platoons, and it had become fairly simple to direct their fire onto targets. There had been little change in platoon equipment during 1944 except that the Piat had superseded the two-inch mortar; in addition to its value as an anti-tank weapon, it was also an ideal 'casa buster'.

Although the Russians were nearing [Berlin](#) and Allied spearheads had crossed the Rhine, the troops knew that the war would not end without another battle in the

Po Valley. Security lectures held out in open paddocks made it plain that an all-out offensive to crush the German forces in **Italy** had been planned, despite the obvious difficulties facing the attacking forces. Throughout the winter the **Fifth Army**, deployed across the high mountains south of **Bologna**, had remained on the offensive and had made gradual progress. After the Division's departure early in March, the **Eighth Army** had concentrated on gaining the eastern stopbank of the **Senio** as a springboard for the spring offensive, but very few lodgments were held. The difficulties of mounting such an offensive in the vine-covered, water-logged **Po Valley** were now fully realised, but confidence grew as more and more details of the support which would be thrown in to assist the attacking infantrymen were given to the troops. Throughout the battalion's stay in the San Severino area the weather had been good. The ground had dried out thoroughly and the hills were green with spring growth.

Orders were received to move back to **Forli**, and on the afternoon of 1 April the battalion embussed and set out on the long journey back to the line. All means of identification were hidden from sight and the men were unable to say goodbye to the kindly civilians who by their hospitality had made the month's spell so much more pleasant. A few hours before daylight the convoy reached **Forli** and, moving out of the town, dispersed in nearby fields. Camouflage precautions were taken so that German reconnaissance aircraft would not notice the concentration of vehicles and men. During the afternoon the battalion moved again, this time to take up a reserve position near the small village of **Granarolo**. Ahead near the banks of the **Senio** were 24 and 25 Battalions.

The new sector taken over by **2 NZ Division** from 78 British Division lay to the north of the one occupied throughout the winter and was about six miles north-east of Route 9. Four battalions were deployed across the 4500-yard front: 24 Battalion was on the left next to the Poles, and on the right 25, 21, and 28 Battalions; 26 and 23 Battalions were in support, with 9 Brigade in divisional reserve. Before it was relieved 78 Division had captured the greater portion of the eastern stopbank of the **Senio** and only a few enemy posts remained. During the Division's absence a significant change had taken place in the **Po Valley**. The spell of fine weather had melted the snow, dried up many of the ditches and canals, and had made the roads very dusty. Vines and trees were covered with green foliage which, though it

reduced observation, was much more pleasant than the winter bareness. In the battalion sector the troops dug in along the line of grape vines and bivouacs were erected over the trenches, most of which were lined with straw for comfort. A few houses were occupied, but as the enemy artillery by this time had most of them registered, they proved a comfortable but scarcely safe habitation.

For four days little of note occurred. There was very little enemy shelling, and in warm, sunny weather the troops enjoyed the respite. Mail arrived every day; one afternoon the Hon. S. G. [Holland](#), Leader of the Opposition, and Mr. F. W. Doidge, MP, paid the unit a short visit. Both visitors were besieged with a barrage of questions concerning happenings and conditions in New Zealand and they left with numerous messages for friends and relatives. The battalion's own mobile shower was set up alongside a creek and each company was able to use it. The disadvantage of being in a reserve position was the presence of numerous field guns, which at intervals opened fire and nearly deafened everybody. Allied fighters and bombers, which passed overhead in increasing numbers as the days went by, were always a source of interest.

During these few days plans for a full-scale offensive by the Eighth and Fifth Armies were finalised. They had been drawn up weeks before, and much careful thought and planning had gone into their preparation. The primary object was to destroy the German forces south of the [Po River](#) so that they could not withdraw to Southern Germany for a last stand. The offensive was divided into three phases. First 56 London Division, on the extreme right of the [Eighth Army](#) front, was to launch a diversionary attack around Lake Comacchio. This was to be followed by a three-divisional assault in the [Po Valley](#), designed to smash the five river lines between the [Senio](#) and the Po, crush the opposition, and draw off the enemy's reserves. When the Germans switched their reserves to meet this threat, the [Fifth Army](#) was to break out through the mountains, capture [Bologna](#), and then strike northwards towards Milan. Turin and Genoa. Beyond the [Reno](#) and the Po the going was much more suitable for fast, mobile warfare, and it was thought possible that the [Eighth Army](#), too, would be able to join in the drive through Northern [Italy](#).

The Eighth Army's task was formidable, although the improvement in the weather had made conditions much more favourable for such an assault. It had to cross five rivers, the [Senio](#), [Santerno](#), [Sillaro](#), [Idice](#) and the [Reno](#), before it could

attack the much-vaunted [Po River](#) line. Each of these rivers had been prepared for defence; the first two, the [Senio](#) and the [Santerno](#), were known to be strongly held. Five German divisions were dug in along the [Senio](#) line. Opposite 2 NZ Division was [98 Division](#); on its right were 26 Panzer and 4 Paratroop Divisions, and on its left, stretching across to the Adriatic coast, were 362 and 42 Jaeger Divisions. The Eighth Army plan was that [2 Polish Corps](#) on the left and [5 Corps](#) on the right (with [2 NZ Division](#) in the centre and [8 Indian Division](#) on the right) should launch a simultaneous assault on the [Senio](#); having crossed it, they were then to attack and establish a bridgehead over the [Santerno](#). Then, while the main thrust towards [Bologna](#) and north-west to the [Reno](#) was continued, [78 Division](#) would pass through the Indians and, by driving through the [Argenta Gap](#) south of Lake Comacchio, endeavour to outflank the [Reno](#) defences.

[General Freyberg](#) planned to attack under a barrage on a two-brigade front with four battalions forward. The first phase was to establish a bridgehead over the [Senio](#) to a depth of 4000 yards. This done, the attack was to continue in three phases, culminating in the assault crossing of the [Santerno](#) 24 hours later. As a preliminary to the main attack the forward battalions were ordered to complete the capture of the eastern stopbank of the [Senio](#) so that lanes could be cleared through the minefields and observation gained over the enemy defences on the other bank. This task was completed by 4 April, and from then on all ranks knew it would not be long before the main attack was launched.

After dark on the 6th enemy field guns and mortars fired concentrations along the length of the [Senio](#) positions. The bombardment lasted over two hours and shells and bombs fell dangerously close to the trenches. Nobody in the battalion was injured, however, but it was noticeable that trenches were being deepened in the morning. Two days later, on the morning of the 9th, the news everyone was waiting for was released. The companies assembled in their respective areas were addressed by [Colonel Fairbrother](#); using maps to illustrate his talk, he described the detailed plan for the attack which was to take place after dusk.

Although [26 Battalion](#), in reserve, would take no part in the initial assault on the [Senio](#), its role was none the less important. The two Polish divisions on the left were not holding any part of the eastern stopbank, and as they were opposed by [26](#)

Panzer Division and 4 Paratroop Division, it was anticipated they would meet much stiffer opposition and would not be able to keep pace with the New Zealanders. The 26th Battalion was to 'hemstitch' the left flank and prevent any counter-attack by the Panzer division on the New Zealand bridgehead. Only two companies, A and B, would be required for this role initially, and they were given specific sectors along the line of the inter-divisional boundary. C and D Coys would also cross the river and move into reserve positions ready to take over the flanking role next day.³ C Squadron [20 Armoured Regiment](#), under command, would cross the river by one of the four bridges which were to be built and endeavour to reach the forward troops by daylight. The supporting arms were to follow the tanks across the river and take up various positions from which they could cover the left flank.

Stage by stage the Colonel outlined the plan. He spoke enthusiastically of the tremendous support which would be given the infantry. It would be many times greater than that at [Alamein](#) or even at [Cassino](#). It would start with an intense aerial bombardment of enemy positions between the [Senio](#) and the [Santerno](#) by over 500 bombers. Nearly 2000 tons of twenty-pound fragmentation bombs, designed to cause the maximum casualties to men and equipment without cratering roads, would be dropped within an hour and a half. At 3.20 p.m. it was to be the turn of the artillery. On the divisional front more than seventeen regiments would open fire and, with only five pauses to allow fighter-bombers to attack, would continue their bombardment until 7.20 p.m. During the later stages the infantrymen holding the near stopbank were to withdraw 400 yards to allow the artillery to pound both banks. At 7.20 p.m. Crocodiles (tanks with flame-throwing apparatus) and Wasps, including those of 26 Battalion, were to 'flame' the western stopbank, after which the infantry would carry out their assault. Everything was being thrown in to make the attack decisive. The plan illustrated very clearly the changes which had taken place since the [Eighth Army](#) was formed in September 1941 and so confidently took part in its first offensive in November of the same year.

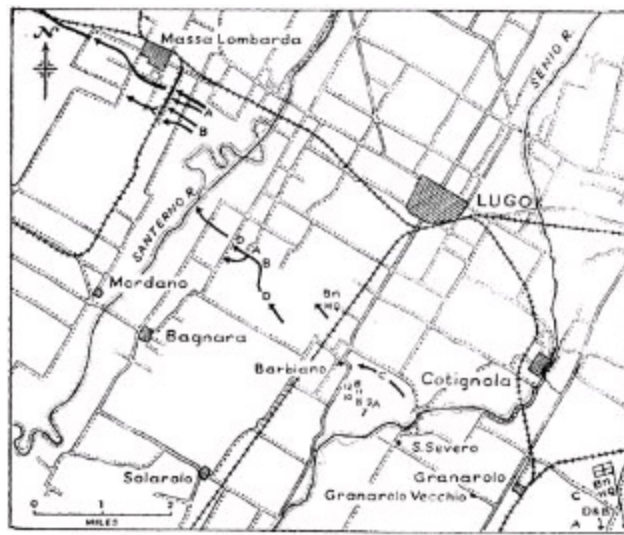
The day was perfect for an air assault. A hot sun shone in a cloudless sky. In each company area company commanders held conferences with their platoon commanders, who in turn passed all information on to their men. Detailed maps of the [Senio](#) area and a copy of the battalion operation order were issued to each officer. The troops, clad in shorts, prepared for the move. LOBs numbering about

seventy packed in readiness to move back to [Forli](#). Everyone was waiting, rather impatiently, for the bombers to appear. They arrived right on time, and from all sorts of vantage points the troops watched as, in formations of twenty or more, they thundered overhead to drop their bombs within the target area. A huge pall of smoke and dust soon blotted out the front and the ground trembled under the weight of bombs and continual explosions. It was a wonderful spectacle as the heavy bombers almost ponderously moved on to their targets, while Spitfires and Hurricane bombers darted in and out of the dust clouds to attack enemy gun positions.

As suddenly as it had begun the bombing ceased. For a few minutes there was an uneasy lull and then the massed artillery opened fire. The men of 26 Battalion, close to the gunline, were soon deafened by the terrific din which no amount of cotton-wool could keep out. As dusk fell gun flashes lit the sky, and in the milky light created by the searchlights the countryside was given a peculiar, almost unearthly hue. At 7.20 p.m. the guns ceased fire and an uneasy stillness again fell over the front. This was the moment for the flame-throwers and the following infantry. The attack was on and the barrage due to begin.

* * *

For a few minutes fiery tongues of swirling, orange flame sputtered across the river. In the fading light dense clouds of black smoke reached into the sky to join together and blot out the dust pall which still hung over the area. The infantry quickly put their kapoc bridges into position and attacked; and at Battalion HQ everyone waited for the first reports to come in. Little opposition was encountered, the Germans, demoralised and shaken, being only too ready to surrender. Both 24 and 25 Battalions soon cleared the far stopbank and began advancing across country in the wake of the barrage. At 7.40 p.m. [Col Fairbrother](#) went forward with his Tac HQ to [San Severo](#), a cluster of houses near the stopbank. Three hours later he ordered A and B Coys to join him. The attack was going well, and by midnight the leading elements of the Division had reached their objective and were half-way to the [Santerno](#). On the left flank the Poles were meeting serious resistance and were still hotly engaged in and around both stopbanks. Because of this 26 Battalion was ordered to carry out its pre-arranged flanking role.



THE BATTALION'S LINE OF ADVANCE, 9-13 APRIL 1945

The Battalion's Line Of Advance, 9–13 April 1945

As soon as the two companies arrived they were immediately ordered to cross the river. The Senio was no longer the raging torrent which Sgt MacKenzie had swum, and the troops moved over it on the kapoc bridges. Down on level ground again A Coy, and later B Coy, swung slightly left and picked their way past demolished buildings, bomb craters, and shell holes to their objectives. It was difficult to maintain direction for the line of attack, being almost due north, crossed the grain of the country, with roads and vineyards set at an angle. For a while both companies lost touch with Tac HQ, and it was not until after 3 a.m. that communications were re-established through a wireless link set up across the river. Both companies were in position by this time, with B Coy on the left rear of [25 Battalion](#) and A Coy behind it, both facing west. Neither had encountered much opposition, although machine-gun fire indicated there were enemy troops in the vicinity. The battle for the stopbanks in the Polish sector was still going on.

Meanwhile, enemy guns had registered on the [Senio](#) stopbanks but their fire did not prevent sappers from erecting bridges. C and D Coys and the supporting arms began to cross the river, and by dawn tanks were with all companies and the supporting arms were in position. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) moved his Tac HQ over the river into a house not far from the forward companies. At first light he went forward and told C and D Coys to be ready to move. The aerial and artillery bombardment began again soon after daylight; wave after wave of heavy bombers passed overhead to repeat the pounding of the day before. Both brigades were on the move again, and reports from Brigade HQ indicated that the Germans were offering only

token resistance. The 98th Division had suffered severely: about 500 prisoners had been taken on the New Zealanders' sector alone. The 8th Indian Division on the right flank had almost kept pace with the New Zealanders and had nearly as many prisoners.

The 26th Battalion did not move from its positions until after midday, when it was decided that C Coy should move to [Barbiano](#) to guard Brigade HQ and that D, A, and B Coys should continue with the 'hemstitching'. D Coy was to lead. Except for the Shermans, the supporting arms were to concentrate near [Barbiano](#), which was a small village about a mile and a half from the [Senio](#). Throughout the afternoon the advance continued, the forward battalions moving slowly ahead against light opposition. Mines and demolitions were the main reasons for the slow advance. Prisoners passing back to the cages at the rear appeared to be badly shaken. The countryside was almost bare. Trees had been stripped of their foliage and homes and farm buildings were either smoking ruins or piles of rubble. The ground was pock-marked with shell holes. Civilians who had escaped the bombing seemed dazed, but they did not forget to produce bottles of wine for thirsty soldiers.

Shortly before dark D Coy, which was close to the Canale di [Lugo](#), came under fire from an enemy post dug in on the flood-bank of the canal. The Shermans with the company opened fire, and under cover of this 17 Platoon, under Lt [Traynor](#),⁴ flanked the enemy position from the right. Two Piat bombs were fired and then the platoon closed in on the enemy, who surrendered. Fourteen Germans, including an officer, were captured and another lay dead near a spandau. Not long afterwards a sniper began to harass the company and one man was wounded. After crossing the canal, which was about 3000 yards from the [Santerno](#), the company moved past a huge demolition until it reached a crossroads about 1500 yards from the river. By midnight A and B Coys had closed up on the leaders, and they occupied buildings about four to eight hundred yards to the rear. Intermittent mortar fire was causing no casualties although it continued throughout the night. During the night and the early part of the next morning the rest of the battalion, including the supporting arms, moved forward in readiness to continue the advance.

The Santerno line, which was expected to offer a much more formidable defence than the [Senio](#), was captured at first light on the 11th. The enemy, harassed by guns and aircraft during the day, did not have time to man the well-prepared defences

along both stopbanks and was caught by surprise. The 24th and 25th Battalions met only scattered resistance and more prisoners were taken. The Division had now outstripped the formations on either flank and at little cost had breached both the [Senio](#) and [Santerno](#) lines. During the day the forward troops of both brigades began to exploit towards the old Santerno riverbed on the west side of the river. The 26th Battalion continued its flanking role, with D Coy still in the lead.

By 10 a.m. Maj Gwynne reported that his men were close to the river and were under fire from machine guns and mortars firing from the stopbank in the Polish sector. There was little cover and tanks were being used to silence the opposition. By midday the three companies were close to the stopbank; C Coy, which had returned from Brigade HQ, was also not far away. Hostile mortar and shell fire was increasing, particularly in the forward areas. No. 13 Platoon, with a troop of tanks in support, was sent to make a sweep of an area on the left of the companies where enemy troops were thought to be. While carrying out this task the platoon encountered the leading elements of 6 Lwow Brigade. The Poles, having overcome the opposition on the [Senio](#), were advancing much more swiftly and proposed to assault the [Santerno](#) on the left of 6 Brigade at dusk.

This good news was followed by even better. Everywhere the Germans were retreating. In the New Zealand sector 25 Battalion had reached the old watercourse of the [Santerno](#); 24 Battalion, on its left, had advanced several hundred yards farther on into a wide loop of the watercourse. On its right the 5th Brigade battalions and the Indians were across the river. It was now the turn of the engineers to build bridges so that tanks and supporting arms could move forward to the infantry. To cover and strengthen the left of the 6th Brigade salient over the river, [Col Fairbrother](#) was ordered to send one company across to link up with [24 Battalion](#).

The Poles attacked at dusk under a heavy barrage. Flame-throwers were used and the infantry secured a crossing. Small-arms fire throughout the night indicated that they were meeting some opposition. Shortly after midnight C Coy crossed the river and reached its objective without striking opposition. By morning sappers had erected bridges and tanks had reached the forward infantry. The stage was set for another drive.

Early on the 12th orders were issued for 26 Battalion to relieve [25 Battalion](#) on

the right of the brigade sector and exploit to straighten the divisional line as a small gap existed between the two brigades. Orders were quickly issued at a battalion conference at 10 a.m. and by midday A Coy, in the lead, was crossing the [Santerno](#) over one of the bridges built during the night. B and D Coys were both on the move, tanks going with each company. C Coy was to remain in its position on the left of [24 Battalion](#) and was to pass to the command of that battalion until relieved.

At this juncture plans were unexpectedly changed. [General Freyberg](#) had decided to hammer the disorganised 98th Division and maintain the momentum of the advance without waiting for the divisions on either flank to draw level. Some reinforcements had already reached the Germans, and 26 Panzer Reconnaissance Regiment had been identified on 5 Brigade's front. The divisional axis of advance had gradually swung in a more westerly direction, and the brigades were advancing along a line parallel to Route 9 with the intention of cutting Route 64, running north from [Bologna](#).

The forward brigades were to attack under a barrage with the object of capturing the town of [Massa Lombarda](#) and penetrating another two miles into enemy territory. Three battalions, the 28th on the right, 26th in the centre and 24th on the left, were to take part and were to form up on a start line a short distance beyond the old [Santerno](#) watercourse. These orders were not received until midday; the Colonel was given very little time to prepare his plan and get his men onto the start line. Company commanders were given verbal orders for the attack. A and B Coys, which were already across the river or about to cross, were to lead the attack and form up on the 1400-yard start line. D Coy would follow, giving left-flank protection. The tanks already with the companies would advance with the infantry. The rest of the supporting arms, including F Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery, would cross the river and later move forward to support the infantry. The attack had been divided into two phases. The first would take the battalion to a lateral road a few hundred yards south-east of Massa Lombarda, and the second to another lateral road about 2000 yards farther on. No time was set for the second phase to begin.

Returning to their companies, the three company commanders immediately began moving their men to the start line. Some of the ground had not been cleared and the leading troops encountered some opposition, but by 2.45 p.m. all three

companies were in position. It was a fine piece of organisation.

The guns opened fire at 3 p.m., and 20 minutes later the barrage lifted and the infantry began to advance. Opposition was stronger than expected and came from well-sited machine guns and, later, from tanks which harassed the leading platoons of both companies with shellfire. Quick-witted action by one NCO saved A Coy several casualties from a well-sited spandau post lying directly in the line of advance. Unable to get assistance from the tank supporting his platoon, Cpl [Rossiter](#)⁵ dashed across the open ground under heavy fire towards B Coy, where he located another tank and guided it forward. The machine-gun post was overrun and its occupants captured. When close to its objective 8 Platoon saw a Tiger tank approaching. The platoon sergeant, B. H. [Grainger](#),⁶ and Cpl [Campbell](#)⁷ scrambled into a ditch running alongside the road, and when the tank was close at hand disabled it with two shots from a Piat. The crew were taken prisoner. Two more enemy tanks were knocked out by the Shermans while rocket-firing aircraft scored hits on others. By 4.45 p.m. the leading platoons had reached their objective and were digging in on the open ground beyond it. The enemy had been taken by surprise; although some machine-gun posts had offered opposition, they were speedily silenced by well-directed tank fire. A Coy captured two field guns, together with their crews, and this brought the total bag of prisoners for the two companies to over thirty. Many of the Germans were wounded. The 24th Battalion and the Maoris also reached their objectives, and [25 Battalion](#) took over the role of 'hemstitching' the left flank.

As the infantry dug in enemy mortar and machine-gun fire increased. Self-propelled guns ranged on A Coy and caused some casualties. This fire slackened off soon after dusk when the New Zealand artillery began retaliating. Casualties for the afternoon totalled thirteen, including three men killed. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) had received orders for the second phase of the attack which was to take place at two o'clock in the morning, the infantry again advancing under a barrage. During the evening Tac HQ moved forward to join A Coy HQ in a large farm building close to the lateral road. C Coy, after its relief by [25 Battalion](#), moved to a concentration area east of the [Santerno](#).

The battalion retained the same formation for the second phase of the advance. Shortly after the barrage opened, A and B Coys began to advance across country

against very light opposition. After a pause along a lateral road running west of [Massa Lombarda](#), the companies continued on to their objective, which they reached without difficulty. A few prisoners were taken, but it was clear that the bulk of the enemy's forces had withdrawn behind the next river, the Sillaro, which was over five miles away. Tactical HQ moved to the outskirts of [Massa Lombarda](#) at dawn, arriving just as red-eyed civilians emerged from their shelters to find New Zealanders in occupation. The town had taken a pounding from the air and civilian casualties had been heavy. Partisans of both sexes were much in evidence.

[Colonel Fairbrother](#) went ahead to A Coy HQ and ordered Maj Murray to continue the advance until his men made contact with the enemy. Additional tanks were provided and the platoons were to travel as far as possible on them. By 6.30 a.m. A Coy was on its way with seven tanks in support. Brigadier Parkinson confirmed these arrangements when he called at Tac HQ half an hour later. B Coy followed A Coy. While these two companies continued the advance, D Coy was withdrawn for a well-deserved rest and C Coy moved forward to [Massa Lombarda](#) to act as reserve.

A Coy made good progress for a while, the troops enjoying the novel method of travelling, but after about a mile machine-gun and mortar fire forced the men to desert their 'iron steeds'. No. 7 Platoon was ordered forward to make contact with the enemy. The platoon moved forward in bounds over ground devoid of cover. Opposition was coming from two machine-gun posts about 1000 yards away and from a tank or self-propelled gun firing from the left flank. The two Shermans which moved with the platoon gave covering fire as the men ran forward, and by 10 a.m. the opposition had been overcome and several prisoners taken. The rest of the company moved forward as several enemy tanks opened fire along the narrow front. The Shermans engaged them, and for several hours the company was unable to advance. On the right the Maoris were similarly held up.

Fifth Brigade was at this stage being withdrawn. The relief was carried out by 26 Battalion side-stepping across into the Maoris' sector and [24 Battalion](#) crossing behind the 26th to move to the right flank of the Division. This allowed 9 Brigade to move into 6 Brigade's former sector and continue the advance. The Division was well ahead of flanking formations, and all available reserve troops were required to

cover the open flanks. The 98th Division had been completely routed and was no longer an effective fighting force, but [278 Division](#), which had been withdrawn from the [Fifth Army](#) front, had been thrown in to stem the New Zealanders' thrust. This transfer was important, for the [Fifth Army](#)'s offensive was just beginning to reach full impetus.

When A Coy resumed its advance shortly after midday, it crossed the railway embankment in front of the Maoris, waded through a canal, and then continued forward. The Shermans had to make a detour to find a crossing over the canal, and in their absence 7 Platoon moved about 600 yards to the line of a lateral road. Here the Shermans joined it and almost immediately became involved in an action with enemy tanks and self-propelled guns. The ground was very open, and enemy rearguards dug in along the banks of the [Scolo Correcchio](#), 1200 yards away, were able to sweep the area with machine-gun fire. Tank reinforcements reached the company, and rocket-firing aircraft darted here and there searching for the enemy tanks. The Shermans moved out towards the canal while the infantry dug in along the line of the lateral road. In a short, sharp engagement two Shermans were knocked out and the rest withdrew behind the infantry.

The situation was unchanged at dusk. The battalions on both flanks had drawn level with the 26th and were poised ready to continue the advance. [General Freyberg](#) decided to attack again under a barrage on a two-brigade front with the object of capturing both stopbanks of the [Sillaro River](#) and the canal before it. The four battalions which had led the advance during the day would make the assault. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) received orders late in the afternoon and decided to commit only two companies. A and B Coys, which had had little opportunity to sleep during the last four nights and which had lost 19 men, including four killed, were to remain in reserve. The supporting arms were to move forward but would not cross the river.

During the evening Tac HQ was set up with A Coy, and shortly after midnight C and D Coys passed through the leading troops on their way to the start line, east of the Scolo

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Sixth Brigade's Advance from the **Senio**, 9–29 April 1945

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. The artillery opened fire at 2.30 a.m. and the two companies were soon on the move. Although the enemy mortared and shelled the area, the troops met little ground opposition until they neared the banks of the Sillaro. Enemy tanks hull down on the far bank harassed both companies, but after an artillery concentration was laid on the area this fire ceased. First D Coy and then C Coy assaulted the stopbanks; after a short engagement both secured a foothold on the far bank.

Casualties were very light. One man had been wounded when a German prisoner threw a grenade after surrendering. About twenty men from **278 Division** were taken prisoner and were sent back to join the thousands of Germans already in prisoner-of-war cages.

It was soon apparent that the enemy had withdrawn from the stopbank, possibly to avoid the flame-throwers, and had dug in along a lateral road only a short distance west of the river. From these positions he attempted to force the 6th Brigade companies off the stopbank. The forward platoons dug in under very heavy mortar and shell fire and were continually harassed by machine guns. **Colonel Fairbrother** ordered the supporting arms to move forward, but until the river was bridged they could give only indirect support. On the left flank the Divisional Cavalry Regiment was in a similar position, but on its right 22 Battalion had not yet been able to secure and hold a crossing.

The situation was unchanged at daylight, and throughout the 14th the four platoons over the river were mortared and shelled as the enemy tried his best to force them back. The danger of a counter-attack was very great for [22 Battalion](#) on the left was still not across the river, and 16 and 18 Platoons had to watch both their front and the exposed flank. Fortunately, communications to the rear were good and counter-battery fire was called down at frequent intervals. The appearance of Allied fighter-bombers silenced many of the enemy guns. After dark [22 Battalion](#) launched another attack across the river, and although it had to beat off a determined counter-attack in the early hours of the morning, it had drawn level with D Coy by dawn. During the 15th [Battalion HQ](#) and the other companies moved closer to the Sillaro in readiness to enlarge the bridgehead. The Mortar Platoon was able to provide many of the fire tasks asked for by C and D Coys, and the Vickers gunners harassed some electric power pylons which were being used by the enemy to gain observation over the ground east of the river. Casualties in the forward companies during the 48 hours were one killed and 13 wounded.

The success of the [Eighth Army's](#) thrust, in particular that of [2 NZ Division](#), caused the Army Commander to vary his original plans. The Division was withdrawn from the command of [5 Corps](#) and transferred to [13 Corps](#). Four main thrusts were being made by the Allied armies in [Italy](#), two by the Fifth Army towards [Bologna](#) and along the west coast to Genoa, and two by the [Eighth Army](#), with [5 Corps](#) attacking through the [Argenta Gap](#) towards the [Reno](#) and [13 Corps](#) driving across the [Po Valley](#) towards Route 16. This last thrust, it was now recognised, might be a decisive one.

Details of another set-piece attack under a barrage—and the last for [26 Battalion](#)—were released during the afternoon of the 15th. It was to begin at 9 p.m. on a four-battalion front with the intention of extending the bridgehead over the Sillaro to a depth of about 2000 yards. The [25th Battalion](#), which had relieved the [24th](#), would be on the right, with [26 Battalion](#) alongside it and [22](#) and [27 Battalions](#) on the left. The barrage would be a heavy one with seven field regiments and some medium batteries firing on the 4500-yard front, for it was expected that the infantry might encounter enemy tanks and some artillery. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) decided that A and B Coys should make the assault. C Coy was to mop up and take over any prisoners captured by the forward troops. D Coy was to remain in reserve along the Sillaro stopbanks. The supporting arms would move forward after bridges had been

erected.

Late in the afternoon A and B Coys moved forward to the river bank and by 9 p.m. were ready on the start line. The attack went well from the start. Three prisoners were taken just beyond the start line, and although the enemy offered some resistance at first it was soon very clear that his men were demoralised and disorganised by the bombardment. B Coy on the right met little opposition, but A Coy was very quickly swamped with prisoners. It became impossible to provide escorts for them, and in turn Battalion HQ and C Coy found they could not handle the number taken. D Coy was called to assist. The leading platoons reached their objective, a lateral road, by midnight and dug in as enemy mortars began firing. Enemy tanks could be heard moving about nearby but none was sighted.

The attack had been very successful. Approximately 150 prisoners had been taken, most of them by A Coy, and many German dead were left lying on the battlefield. Some of them had been caught by the barrage and others had been killed as the infantry cleared their dugouts. On the right flank 25 Battalion, although it had encountered some enemy tanks, had also reached its objective. The battalions of 9 Brigade had also encountered tanks but had eventually conformed with the 6th Brigade line. Much of the enemy counter-battery fire passed over the heads of the forward troops to land on the Sillaro stopbanks, where sappers were hard at work erecting bridges. The 26th Battalion RMO, Capt Malcolm, was wounded when he went to the assistance of some wounded sappers. Nevertheless, before 2 a.m. C Squadron [20 Armoured Regiment](#) was moving over one bridge to join A and B Coys. By dawn the battalion with its supporting arms was across the river.

Before dawn the Colonel was up with the forward companies, and at 7 a.m. he ordered them to continue the advance in bounds towards the next likely defence line, the [Gaiana Canal](#), about eight miles away. A heavy ground fog hampered progress, but by 8 a.m. the two companies had reached a small canal about 1000 yards west of their former positions. No opposition had been encountered and the fog was lifting. Shortly afterwards [22 Battalion](#), A Coy 26 Battalion, and to a lesser extent B Coy, came under heavy mortar and shell fire. The ground was very open and the troops took whatever cover was available. Counter-battery fire was arranged but had no apparent effect. The 22nd Battalion unexpectedly withdrew about 800 yards on the left of A Coy, and Maj Murray called for flank protection. As C Coy was

already following close behind the leading troops, the anti-tank gunners were ordered to move forward to cover the gap.

For several hours the companies did not move. Heavy artillery concentrations were fired on a group of houses suspected to be holding the enemy rearguard parties. The 22nd Battalion moved forward again, and shortly after midday A and B Coys moved ahead to the next objective, a crossroads 700 yards away. B Coy, with C Coy following it, did not pause but carried on until it reached the [Scolo Sillaro](#), 500 yards farther on. The 22nd Battalion had not advanced and A Coy's flank was exposed to a depth of about a thousand yards. Because of this the Brigade Commander ordered the battalion not to move until 22 Battalion could conform. In the meantime sappers built a bridge over the narrow canal, and tanks and infantry engaged a number of enemy posts ahead.

Until 4.15 p.m. the companies remained on the canal bank under intermittent mortar and machine-gun fire, and then the order was given to continue the advance. Little opposition was met, and the forward platoons moved rapidly over another canal and on about another 800 yards to a lateral road, completing an advance of 4000 yards for the day. A Coy's flank was still exposed, and at the lateral road it encountered some opposition. The enemy, however, offered only a token resistance and in a short time 7 and 9 Platoons, which were leading, had captured two field guns and had rounded up a German officer and 44 other ranks of [278 Division](#). Patrols were sent forward to the [Scolo Montanara](#), 700 yards away, and they reported that it was undefended.

After dusk 5 Brigade relieved 6 Brigade and [21 Battalion](#) passed through the 26th to continue the advance towards the [Gaiana Canal](#). The battalion had been seven days in the line; although the fighting had not been severe, it had been almost constantly on the move and was seldom out of contact with the enemy. In comparison with the casualties inflicted on the enemy and the number of prisoners taken, the battalion's losses had not been heavy. They totalled 51, including ten men killed. During these seven days the Division had crossed three major rivers and advanced over 16 miles. It had smashed two German divisions and, in doing so, had set the pace of the Eighth Army's advance. The climax of the entire battle was not far away.

For two days the troops rested. There was little to do except laze about in the warm sunshine, read accumulated mail, and write letters home. All ranks were billeted in houses, and the civilians who owned them were very friendly. B Echelon moved forward and the unit showers were set up alongside a nearby creek. LOBs arrived and returned to their companies. Major Kerr, back from a tour of duty at Base Camp, [Maadi](#), resumed command of D Coy, and Maj Gwynne took over the Support Group again. On the 18th the battalion Wasps, together with those of 24 and 25 Battalions and under the command of Capt Cooper, went forward to take part in the attack on the Gaiana Canal.

After a relatively easy advance during 16 April the leading elements of the Division had met stiffening resistance as they approached the [Gaiana Canal](#). The reason for this was soon obvious. The 4th Paratroop Division, which was slowly being driven back by the [Polish Corps](#), was withdrawing across 2 NZ Division's front. Just as the war seemed to be over, the New Zealanders encountered what was without doubt one of the finest fighting formations the Germans had in [Italy](#). More troops had been added to [General Freyberg's](#) command. On the left flank was the 43rd Gurkha Brigade and on the right a regiment of the 12th Lancers in staghounds. The Gurkhas and 9 Brigade, on their right, suffered fairly heavy casualties as they advanced over the open ground east of the canal. At 9.30 p.m. on the 18th the two brigades attacked under a very heavy barrage. Wasps and Crocodiles flamed the stopbanks and inflicted heavy casualties on the paratroopers. A bridgehead was gained and, as the infantry fought hard to enlarge it, sappers bridged the canal. Throughout the 19th the fighting continued, with the two brigades slowly forging their way ahead across a number of small canals towards the next river, the [Idice](#).

This was the situation when [Col Fairbrother](#) received orders for the relief of the [Gurkhas](#) by 6 Brigade. Fifth Brigade was to relieve 9 Brigade at the same time. The relief was to be carried out after dark, and as soon as it was completed both brigades were to continue the advance with the object of getting as close to the Idice River as possible before daylight. Although the [Gurkhas](#) had advanced about 3000 yards beyond the [Gaiana Canal](#), they were still about a thousand yards behind 9 Brigade on their right, and the immediate task of 6 Brigade was to straighten the

Division's line. The 26th Battalion was to assemble near the east bank of the canal during the afternoon and later take over the left-hand sector. The 24th Battalion would be on its right, and 25 Battalion would carry out the 'hemstitching' on the left flank. The paratroopers still held a small section of the canal bank on the immediate left of the Gurkhas, and a squadron from the 12th Lancers had been sent across to deal with them.

The troops moved forward in lorries, and as they were digging in on the east side of the canal a few shells landed in the area. Gunfire on the left indicated that the Lancers were having some trouble, and a few bursts of spandau fire from the stopbank of the canal sent everyone scurrying to cover. At 9.30 p.m. the Colonel went forward to 2/10 Gurkha Battalion's headquarters and from there ordered the 26th Battalion companies forward. C Coy moved first and went onto the right flank. D Coy took the other forward position, with A Coy in support of it. B Coy remained in reserve. Tanks of 20 Armoured Regiment accompanied each company, and the supporting arms crossed the canal. Shortly after midnight the relief was complete and the CO gave the order to continue the advance. The ground over which the troops began to advance was dotted with flickering fires—haystacks and buildings set ablaze by earlier air and artillery bombardments or, as often was the case, fired by the retreating Germans. Away to the left huge clusters of flares were being dropped by aircraft and ack-ack shells were bursting above the drifting lanterns.

No opposition was encountered, and by 2.30 a.m. the battalion had drawn level with 24 Battalion and 5 Brigade on the Quaderna Canal; by 8 a.m. on the 20th the troops had crossed two more canals and had moved forward another mile. A Coy was close up on the left flank and was actually moving outside the divisional boundary. At first light 18 Platoon had a short skirmish with some paratroopers. An old Italian informed the platoon commander that seven Germans were occupying his house. The platoon moved forward and surrounded the house. Grenades were thrown through the windows, whereupon the Germans made a dash for safety. Four were killed, another wounded, and the other two taken prisoner.

After a pause for an hour the advance was continued, and by 11.30 a.m. the leading companies had moved forward another 2000 yards and were only a short distance from the Idice. There was no ground opposition but hostile mortar and shell fire was increasing. Colonel Fairbrother, who was with the forward troops, realised

that by striking swiftly in daylight it might be possible to establish a bridgehead over the river. As events proved the enemy was caught unawares. C and D Coys had no difficulty in securing the near stopbank but they encountered intense machine-gun fire when they attempted to cross over to the other bank. This, however, did not stop them for long, and by the middle of the afternoon three platoons were across.

No move to support the platoons or enlarge the bridgehead could be made until just on dusk, because of an intense aerial assault just forward of the platoons by Allied fighter-bombers. During the interval a ford was located which would enable the tanks to cross the river with ease, the water being only a few inches deep. Although this ford was in Polish territory, it was thought more important to make the best use of the advantage gained than to remain within divisional boundary lines. As dusk fell the rest of C and D Coys moved across the river. Tanks also moved over, followed by A Coy. By 9 p.m. a bridgehead had been established over the river on a front of about 700 yards and to a depth of about 600 yards. The three companies were under heavy mortar fire and were being harassed by spandaus. The Shermans retaliated but because of the darkness were unable to pinpoint the enemy positions. The CO brought the Mortar Platoon forward and deployed it along the stopbank to strengthen the bridgehead, and at 10 p.m. the forward platoons withdrew a short distance to better cover.

The 26th Battalion was holding the only crossing place over the river, and [General Freyberg](#) decided that 5 Brigade should launch an attack after dusk to secure another. Polish troops and armour would pass through 26 Battalion during the night and continue on towards [Bologna](#). The first Polish tanks arrived about 4 a.m. and soon they had disappeared from sight. Shortly before dawn the tanks supporting 5 Brigade crossed over the ford and turned north to protect the newly established bridgehead.

The advance was resumed at 8 a.m. when B Coy moved off on tanks to take up a position on the left of [24 Battalion](#). A Coy moved off soon afterwards and the battalion resumed its position within the divisional boundary. A and B Coys continued to lead the advance, with the other companies following. No opposition was encountered and by dusk four miles had been covered. At this stage the companies were ordered to halt while [24 Battalion](#) and 5 Brigade eliminated some opposition

centred around a small canal, the [Scolo Zena](#). Later in the night the leading companies only moved forward another mile and then halted for the night. Tactical HQ was set up in a large building which had been used by the Germans as a hospital. The headquarters personnel arrived in time to witness another of those tragic and unforgettable scenes so familiar in war. Civilians had returned to the area when the Germans evacuated their patients and had availed themselves of an air-raid shelter in the grounds of the hospital. The Germans then set up two anti-aircraft guns right alongside the shelter and subsequently opened fire on Allied bombers passing overhead. Before long the bombers retaliated. One gun was hit and the entrance to the flimsy shelter demolished, trapping the unfortunate civilians inside. This had happened two days before the New Zealanders arrived. An anxious crowd of civilians was still digging frantically into the huge pile of twisted woodwork and rubble. Aided by soldiers, their harrowing task of uncovering the bodies was completed. One of the first brought out was a ten-year-old boy—alive.

If Sunday, 22 April, marked the beginning of the Division's chase up the east coast of [Italy](#), then the day before marked the end of the battle for the [Po Valley](#). American and Polish troops converged on and captured [Bologna](#). The Germans were in headlong flight in an effort to get back behind the Po river defences. Brigadier Parkinson arrived at Battalion HQ early in the morning and gave orders for the battalion to move as fast as possible to cut Route 64 and, beyond it, the road leading north from [Bologna](#) through the town of [San Giorgio](#) to the Reno River.

Soon after 7 a.m. C and D Coys passed through the leading platoons and continued the advance. Four hours later they reached a crossroads west of Route 64. The men had marched over three miles without sighting the enemy, but his demolitions had forced the tanks to find alternative routes. The CO went forward and ordered the two companies to climb on the tanks and move north along the road to [San Giorgio](#) until contact was made with the enemy. The Colonel followed in a jeep and the rest of the battalion, travelling in transport, brought up the rear. The San Giorgio road was a good tar-sealed one and the tanks, although held up for twenty minutes while sappers laid a scissors bridge over a canal, made good progress. By 2 p.m. they had passed through [San Giorgio](#), already 'liberated' by a [24 Battalion](#) company. An hour later C Coy reported that it had encountered a strong enemy rearguard two miles beyond the town. Partisans stated that the enemy, dug in west

of the road, was well equipped with mortars and machine guns. Colonel Fairbrother immediately ordered the company to deploy and sent D Coy forward to cover the left flank. A and B Coys, which had remained in San Giorgio, were also sent forward together with the Mortar and Machine Gun platoons.

In an attempt to force the enemy to withdraw, C Coy sent one platoon forward to engage him. The platoon, led by Lt Turnbull,⁸ made a spirited effort to drive the paratroopers from their well-prepared positions and inflicted casualties on them. Turnbull and his sergeant, K. W. Herring,⁹ distinguished themselves in this short engagement, but in the end, after suffering some casualties itself, the platoon was forced to withdraw. The Brigade Commander was very anxious to continue the advance and he ordered 26 Battalion to brush aside any opposition. Colonel Fairbrother, who was at C Coy HQ, immediately advised the Brigadier that he did not consider the advance was wise, for not only was the enemy firmly in position but there was no sign yet of 9 Brigade coming up on the left flank. On receipt of this message the Brigade Commander agreed to a postponement. During the night artillery moved into position and shelled the enemy and by morning the road was clear.

The battalion was on the move by 6.30 a.m. on the 23rd, with A and B Coys riding on tanks and the remainder in lorries and jeeps. A few minor mishaps delayed progress for a while. One of the tanks broke down and held up the traffic, and later 11 Platoon's truck struck a mine. The explosion wrecked the front of the vehicle and pushed the engine back into the cab, but nobody was seriously hurt. By 10 a.m. six miles had been covered and the battalion was close to the Reno. All bridges over the river had been destroyed; while the troops had a late breakfast the CO carried out a reconnaissance to find a likely crossing place. Within an hour A and B Coys had waded across the river, which was only about a foot deep, and were deployed about 500 yards beyond the northern bank. Contact was made with elements of 6 British Armoured Division which, advancing in a north-westerly direction from the Argenta Gap, was moving across the Division's line of advance.

The advance could not continue until the river was bridged and tanks and supporting arms could join the infantry. As the river was wide this was likely to take some time, and the battalion was ordered to move to a brigade concentration area not far from it. During the day there had been some changes in command. The

Commanding Officer of [25 Battalion](#) had been wounded and Maj Barnett, who had had long service with 26 Battalion, was appointed to succeed him. Major Murray became second-in-command of the battalion and Capt Boyd took over A Coy. Captain Cooper became OC HQ Coy.

Early on 24 April 6 Brigade began to move towards the Po; 26 Battalion, in reserve, set out in convoy at 9.30 a.m. After passing a seemingly endless line of lorries loaded with bridging equipment, the convoy was brought to a halt by a blown bridge over the Panara River, a tributary of the Po. After a wait of over two hours the battalion moved off the road and dispersed near the banks of the river. In every direction there was burnt-out and abandoned enemy equipment—hundreds of vehicles, field guns of all descriptions, light tanks, armoured cars and all the other equipment of an army. It was striking evidence of the rout of the enemy and the damage inflicted by the Allied air force. The troops, with time on their hands, mingled with civilians, all bent on salvaging something of value from the wreckage. Some of the hundreds of horses roaming about were rounded up and the men enjoyed the unexpected pleasure of an afternoon's ride. Bartering went on with the civilians as horses were sold and then resold. After tea impromptu race meetings were held. The war seemed far away. Several German trucks were repaired and on the following day joined the north-bound convoys, each one loaded with salvage.

During the night [25 Battalion](#) and 5 Brigade crossed the Po in assault boats to encounter only slight resistance, and early the next morning the battalion crossed the Panara over a Bailey bridge. After travelling about two miles the convoy turned off the road and the trucks dispersed. Ahead engineers were building a pontoon bridge over the wide river. It was Anzac Day. During the morning Padre Linton conducted a short service to commemorate those who had fallen in another war. How different was this Anzac Day from that day in [Greece](#) four years earlier when 26 Battalion, along with the rest of the Division, had been racing south to [Corinth](#), pursued by German forces and harried by dive-bombers.

Before dawn on the 26th the battalion crossed the Po. The bridge swayed disconcertingly as the continuous stream of trucks and guns moved slowly across. It was too dark to see much. The enemy's much-vaunted river defences were unmanned; what was left of the opposing German army was scurrying behind the

next large river, the [Adige](#), about sixteen miles away. The battalion halted for a while in the village of Salara and then moved on to [Trecenta](#), where the troops lunched to the sound of gunfire some distance ahead. Bands of partisans, armed mostly with German equipment, roamed the town rounding up Fascists and Germans left behind in the retreat. The civilians, obviously glad the war was over for them, cheered wildly each oncoming and departing vehicle. Shortly before midday the convoy moved off again and, after travelling about seven miles, halted two miles from the [Adige](#). Ahead the forward battalions of 5 and 6 Brigades were lining the banks of the river, having fought off an enemy rearguard. A bridgehead over the river was to be secured after dark but 26 Battalion, in reserve, was not required to move until morning. B Coy was sent to form a protective screen around Brigade HQ, and the rest of the battalion moved into nearby houses. There were still some German pockets south of the river and, although the partisans were well organised in the area and actively engaging them, pickets were posted in each house.

The river was crossed during the night and by morning both brigades had established a firm bridgehead. Ninth Brigade and the [Gurkhas](#) passed through them and continued the chase, this time towards [Venice](#) and the Venetian line. Everywhere the Allied forces were racing ahead—Americans towards Milan, Americans and South Africans towards [Verona](#), British armour on the right of the New Zealanders and seaborne troops towards [Venice](#).

Sixth Brigade moved into reserve, and during the morning of the 27th the battalion moved into the nearby town of [Badia Polesine](#) in anticipation of a few days' rest. [Badia](#), which extended along the banks of the [Adige](#), had been severely bombed in places, particularly near the river. The bodies of many Germans lay strewn about the bomb craters while others dangled grotesquely from the twisted girders and framework of the demolished bridge. More bodies floated in back eddies of the river; civilians stated that hundreds of Germans had been drowned during the bombing raids. The companies were given various tasks. A and B Coys helped engineers clear the approaches to the river where it was proposed to erect a Bailey bridge, and C Coy was sent to collect prisoners captured by 9 Brigade. The spell was spoilt by a change in the weather, heavy rain falling during the morning of the 27th and again on the 28th.

But 28 April was a momentous day. In Germany Russian and American forces

linked up; in [Italy](#) American forces, sweeping around in a wide arc north of the New Zealanders, captured [Verona](#), crashed through the Venetian line and entered [Vicenza](#). This provided the impetus for a similar drive by [2 NZ Division](#) in which all opposition was brushed aside as 9 Brigade raced north-east towards [Padua](#), [Mestre](#) and [Venice](#). The Division became a fast, mobile striking force reminiscent of its desert days. The effect of the Divisional Commander's decision to speed up the advance was soon felt by 6 Brigade. The 26th Battalion was ordered to move at short notice, and at ten o'clock that night crossed the [Adige](#) by pontoon bridge. From there, at the head of the brigade column, it moved north through [Este](#) on to Route 16, and at dawn halted when only a few miles from [Padua](#). Ninth Brigade and Divisional HQ were in the city. Fighting was still going on for gunfire could be heard. A Coy was ordered to move into the city to protect Divisional HQ, and on the way there passed many partisans, German prisoners, and wounded.

Divisional HQ was in the eastern end of the town, but 9 Brigade had moved on by the time A Coy arrived. Major Boyd deployed his men in various buildings around Divisional HQ for partisans were still engaged in a battle with Germans and Fascists for possession of the city. Already the prisoners numbered thousands, including three German generals. While 9 Brigade cleared the northern exit to the city, the 12th Lancers raced ahead along the autostrada towards [Venice](#). As soon as it had overcome the enemy rearguard 9 Brigade followed, with Divisional HQ and A Coy close behind. After them came the rest of the Division, a long procession of tanks, trucks and guns. It was after 3 p.m. before the battalion passed through [Padua](#). Heavy rain was falling, but the people turned out in thousands and gave the troops a tumultuous welcome. Outside the city the drivers increased speed, and the convoy raced through bombed villages and farm settlements, past cheering villagers and flag-waving children. Now and again the crack of a rifle or the rattle of a machine gun was heard as partisans rounded up scattered bands of Germans. Long lines of prisoners, weary and dejected looking, marched past. At 6 p.m. [Venice](#), captured by New Zealanders earlier in the afternoon, came into sight. Instead of continuing on to the city, the convoy turned north again through [Mestre](#) to Route 14. [Mestre](#) was little different from [Padua](#) for vociferous crowds lined the sidewalks, cheering each truck in undisguised pleasure at the sight of Allied troops. Once again partisans were very much in evidence.

The Division was now heading for the next of the great rivers of Northern Italy, the Piave. All bridges were down and the chase could not be continued until a new one had been erected. In any case, by advancing almost a hundred miles in twenty-four hours, the Division had outstripped its supply lines and was becoming short of petrol. So until the morning of 1 May it rested south of the river, all units dispersed to the sides of the road and in most cases occupying houses. There was still fighting going on in the area, but 26 Battalion was not affected in its camp site a few miles south of the river. A Coy, which was still with Divisional HQ and remained attached to it for the next fortnight, was farther ahead. On the 30th the opportunity was taken to visit Venice. The Venetians were still celebrating their liberation and enthusiastic crowds gave the New Zealanders a great ovation wherever they went. Pickets from 22 Battalion were guarding one of the best hotels, the Danieli, and a notice in front of it read 'Reserved for NZ Club'.

The fighting in Italy had virtually ended, only a few fanatics showing any inclination to resist. Venice, Genoa, Turin and Milan had been freed from the enemy yoke, and of the great cities in the north only Trieste, over a hundred miles away, remained in enemy hands. The Division was directed on it and so were Tito's Yugoslavs.

* * *

Early on 1 May the Division, with the 12th Lancers out in front, set out for Trieste. Sixth Brigade, still in reserve, did not move until 11 a.m. Progress was exasperatingly slow, mainly because of the huge volume of traffic on the road and the difficult approach to the newly erected pontoon bridge over the Piave. It was 5 p.m. when at length the battalion vehicles began to cross. By that time the weather had changed and heavy rain was falling. Roads quickly became slippery and treacherous and drivers had to contend with road craters, demolished road blocks, and narrow bends. Sixth Brigade was to go no farther than Monfalcone, east of the Isonzo River and about 27 miles from Trieste. Colonel Fairbrother, accompanied by the IO, Lt McInnes,¹⁰ went ahead of the main body to find a suitable dispersal area.

Not long after dark a particularly bad demolition held up the entire convoy and trucks were jammed nose-to-tail for miles. Progress became much slower, about twenty vehicles crossing the demolition each hour. All along the column trucks crept

forward a few yards and then waited a chance to repeat the performance. Between bounds motors ticked over quietly and rain fell steadily on hoods and canopies. To this tune the troops dozed uneasily. At 8.30 p.m. the battalion was ordered to disperse four miles west of the [Isonzo](#), but before it could do so the road became impassable and the convoy was held up for three hours. Outside in the streaming rain working parties toiled to clear the road. Finally, at 5.30 a.m. the leading vehicles reached the road turn-off, where the CO (who knew of the change of plan) was waiting to direct the convoy to a dispersal area. A Coy by this time was at [Ronchi](#), a town a few miles east of the river. Neither the battalion nor A Coy was to have much rest during the next day, for while A Coy continued on to reach the outskirts of [Trieste](#), the battalion began a course in 'political diplomacy'.

* * *

During the morning the battalions of 6 Brigade were given various tasks. The 24th was sent south to the coast, where Germans were reported to be landing from naval craft. The 25th, with [18 Armoured Regiment](#) in support, went to [Palmanova](#) where the 12th Lancers were meeting opposition from an enemy rearguard. The 26th Battalion was directed to secure [Gorizia](#), 16 miles north of [Monfalcone](#) on the east bank of the [Isonzo](#). The situation there was not very clear, but the object of the move was to secure the route for Allied forces to advance into [Austria](#). Chetniks were known to be in the area and were to be taken into protective custody.

The battalion moved off in convoy shortly after midday and, travelling along a road running parallel to the west bank of the river, soon neared [Gorizia](#). Large parties of armed Chetniks were seen close to the road; they were obviously only part of a much larger force established in the hills west of the town and the river. The convoy halted while the CO attempted to discuss the situation with a Chetnik officer who was in charge of a small party near the road. The language bar prevented any conversation, but as the Chetniks seemed friendly enough [Col Fairbrother](#) decided to risk this force at his rear and move into [Gorizia](#). A number of Chetniks lay dead on the roadside and there were other obvious signs of recent fighting.

From [Gorizia](#) came the unmistakable sounds of machine-gun fire as the troops debussed and prepared to move into the town. The main bridge over the river had recently been demolished but a wooden footbridge remained. This was wide enough

to allow jeeps and carriers to accompany Tac HQ and B and C Coys into the town. The shooting died down as the troops moved in and occupied various buildings to which they were directed. D Coy remained with Battalion HQ on the west bank of the river to guard the footbridge and the transport which had to be left behind. [Gorizia](#) was held by Tito's Yugoslav troops, against whom the Chetniks had been fighting.

From the battalion's point of view this clarified the situation but certainly did not improve it. Completely unaware of it, the battalion had driven along the no-man's-land of a battle between some 9000 Chetniks and possibly as many of Tito's troops, and had in fact stopped the action. Either of the two factions could have attacked the battalion which, outnumbered and without artillery or armoured support, would have quickly been in a hopeless position. The situation was further confused by the presence of another faction within the town itself—Italians who were strongly opposed to Tito's forces and the Slavs which he supported. They tried to enlist the Colonel's aid to trace persons abducted by the Yugoslavs. It was obvious that the latter were administering the town as territory under their own control, and in doing so had deposed the town council, disarmed the Italian police, and installed a Slovene committee. The officer in charge of the Yugoslav troops, while outwardly cordial, was clearly determined to carry out his original plans. The CO took a firm stand, and to enable him to maintain it the Brigade Commander arranged for [25 Battalion](#) and C Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment to move into the town via the eastern road.

Throughout the afternoon noisy, demonstrative bands paraded through the streets, shouting slogans and waving flags. Each Slav demonstration was followed by an Italian one. Many of the Yugoslavs were armed and tension within the town increased almost to breaking point. In the meantime the troops left on the west bank of the river were also having an anxious time, placed as they were in the direct path of Chetniks and Yugoslavs. Some of the latter had crossed the river and were dug in behind D Coy, which was concentrated around a large cotton factory on the river bank. Two Chetniks were persuaded by the Adjutant, [Capt K. F. S. Cox](#), to lead him to their commander. At this stage it was not thought that the Chetnik force was a large one, and the Adjutant intended to offer it safe conduct to an area in the rear.

Captain Cox was led to a headquarters about three miles from the river. The

position was explained to the Chetnik commander, who agreed finally to suspend hostilities while the New Zealanders held positions forward of Tito's men. At this officer's request the Adjutant continued on to Mosse where, in company with officers of 6 British Armoured Division, discussions were continued with a Chetnik colonel. Preliminary arrangements for an unofficial truce were made, and these ultimately led to the surrender and disarming of over 12,000 Chetniks. The Adjutant returned to [Gorizia](#) in time to witness the arrival of the tank squadron, which was immediately sent out to patrol the streets. The 25th Battalion had also arrived and [Col Fairbrother](#) was able, with much more assurance than earlier, to ensure that friction in the town ceased. The Shermans paraded in front of the Yugoslav headquarters, and the CO on entering the building received a more responsive and attentive hearing.

On his return to Tac HQ the Colonel gave orders for the transport to move back to [Monfalcone](#) and return via the eastern road to [Gorizia](#). The convoy left the cotton factory soon after 7 p.m. and arrived in [Gorizia](#) about three hours later. Captain Cox reported a brush with Chetniks during which one signaller had been killed. As it moved south towards Monfalcone the convoy had unfortunately followed a Yugoslav car. This car was fired on and so was the convoy. The New Zealanders, thinking they had run into some Germans, stopped and began seeking the source of the firing. Private [Campbell](#),¹¹ who was wearing khaki drill trousers, an American windjacket and a red scarf, clothes not unlike those worn by Tito's troops, was shot as he walked down the road. The two Chetniks responsible were captured and the situation was clarified, but not before considerable feeling had been aroused amongst the New Zealanders over the unnecessary death.

In [Gorizia](#) a strict curfew was imposed after dark and the night passed quietly. Next morning, 3 May, it became apparent that the internal strife within the town was still present. Demonstrations began anew and tension quickly mounted. Disquietening rumours, possibly exaggerated, reached the troops. There were reports of wholesale arrests of Italians during the night. All sorts of charges were laid against Tito's forces, which had apparently worked hard during the night. Nonchalant but alert, the New Zealanders were forced to stand idly by with growing misgivings and a feeling of helplessness while the Yugoslavs endeavoured to back their political creed with force.

News that 56 Division would be taking over [Gorizia](#) during the day was received with considerable relief. Unknown to the troops 6 Brigade was required in the [Trieste](#) area, where there existed a similar situation to that found in [Gorizia](#). The relief was completed during the afternoon and by half past five the battalion was on its way to [Ronchi](#), where it was to spend the next week. In the excitement of the day before the news of the surrender of the German armies in [Italy](#) and the capture of [Trieste](#) by New Zealanders and Yugoslavs had passed almost unnoticed. It seemed that the Division could not have chosen a more troubled spot in which to end the war.

¹ [Maj L. E. Pithie](#), m.i.d.; [Melbourne](#); born Sawyer's Bay, 7 Jul 1908; salesman.

² [Capt K. C. Cooper](#); [Ashburton](#); born [Christchurch](#), 24 Jun 1908; clerk.

³ Appointments were:

CO: Lt- Col [M. C. Fairbrother](#)

2 i/c: [Maj A. W. Barnett](#)

Adj: [Capt K. F. S. Cox](#)

QM: [Lt A. H. Brent](#)

Padre: [Rev. J. A. Linton](#)

MO: [Capt D. S. Malcolm](#)

OC A Coy: [Maj G. A. Murray](#)

OC B Coy: [Maj D. P. W. Harvey](#)

OC C Coy: [Maj L. E. Pithie](#)

OC D Coy: [Maj W. J. C. Gwynne](#)

OC HQ Coy: [Capt B. Boyd](#)

⁴ [Lt K. E. Traynor](#), m.i.d.; [Petone](#); born NZ 26 Aug 1910; Regular soldier.

⁵ Sgt R. L. Rossiter, MM; Christchurch; born NZ 9 Jan 1921; clerk.

⁶ WO II B. H. Grainger, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 26 Jun 1922; salesman.

⁷ Sgt W. J. Campbell, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Invercargill, 6 Sep 1922; tailor's cutter.

⁸ Capt S. W. Turnbull, MC; Gore; born Invercargill, 23 Apr 1912; clerk.

⁹ Sgt K. W. Herring, MM; Westport; born Westport, 12 Jul 1922; bushman.

¹⁰ Capt A. K. R. McInnes; Timaru; born Invercargill, 19 Dec 1919; commercial traveller.

¹¹ Pte S. J. Campbell; born NZ 12 Nov 1911; surfaceman; killed in action 2 May 1945.

26 BATTALION

CHAPTER 20 – THE BREAK-UP OF A UNIT

CHAPTER 20

The Break-up of a Unit

WITHIN twenty-four hours of their arrival in [Gorizia](#) the roops had come to realise that the trouble found there existed throughout the greater part of the province of [Istria](#). This province, which extended from the east bank of the [Isonzo](#) to the Yugoslav border, had been ceded to the Italians in 1919. The countryfolk were mainly of Slav origin and the larger towns, through predominately Italian, contained many Slavs and Austrians. As the war in [Italy](#) reached its climax and the Division sped through [Padua](#) and on to the Piave River, Yugoslav forces drove deep into the province and occupied the greater part of it. They also captured the greater part of [Trieste](#) and immediately set up a military administration there. Widespread arrests followed, and the Italian police were in most instances marched away. Subsequently, civil administrative bodies sympathetic to the Yugoslav cause were established, and harsh measures were taken to subdue all opposition. For the Yugoslavs considered the province was theirs, if not for any other reason, then by right of conquest.

The problem was a political one which could only be settled at the Peace Conference, but in the meantime the Yugoslavs had to be prevented from carrying out their declared intention of absorbing the province. The problem was eventually settled on high military and political levels, but until this happened the New Zealand, British, and American troops in the area had to remain constantly alert and maintain a strict impartiality so that no incident precipitated an outbreak of hostilities. Various measures were taken to convince the Yugoslavs of the futility of such a course. Allied fighters and bombers flew over the area each day in great numbers, and warships stood off [Trieste](#). Wasps from the battalion demonstrated their powers on the banks of the [Isonzo](#) before an interested audience of Yugoslav troops. Wherever they went the troops carried arms.

It was not surprising that VE Day went by without any big celebrations. Nevertheless, during the week spent at [Ronchi](#) bathing parties visited the coast and various forms of entertainment filled in the evenings. It was difficult to maintain strict impartiality for the Italians in the area were very friendly and were obviously short of food. The majority of the soldiers could speak broken Italian and they learned that many New Zealand prisoners of war had worked in the locality. In any

case, the work of the partisans during the advance from the [Senio](#)— their casualties numbered thousands—had been sufficient to dispel much of the distrust felt by many New Zealanders towards their former enemies.

On 11 May 43 Gurkha Brigade took over the [Ronchi](#) area and 6 Brigade moved into positions in the hills twelve miles east of [Trieste](#). The brigade deployed tactically and the troops dug in. The battalion sector was centred around the small backward village of Samatorza, with Yugoslav troops not far away. The same day A Coy returned to the battalion. While the battalion had been at [Gorizia](#) and [Ronchi](#), this company had been stationed with Divisional HQ in the beautiful Castelle Miramare, formerly the home of the Duke of Aosta. With beaches and swimming pools close at hand, [Trieste](#) within easy walking distance, and Danish butter, cognac, and Flemish wine left behind by the Germans, the troops had thoroughly enjoyed their stay. Some of them had acquired boats and had fitted motors to them so that they could coast around the harbour. C Coy took A Coy's place and remained with Divisional HQ until 6 Brigade moved into [Trieste](#) at the end of the month.

The 26th Battalion spent nearly three weeks in the hills. It was a period of watchfulness combined with recreational activities. Except for one day fine weather prevailed, and the daily visits to the beaches continued. Very few Italians lived in the area and the Slavs were not on the whole friendly. But they did sell fresh fruit and vegetables at low cost and the QM's task was made much easier. Open-air picture shows and visits by concert parties filled in the evenings. On the 22nd 6 Brigade moved about a mile eastward and took up positions near the village of Sales, in accordance with an [Eighth Army](#) directive to assume good tactical positions. Three days later the 6th Reinforcements left the battalion to return to New Zealand. Their departure and that of the 7th Reinforcements about a month later gave rise to much conjecture on the future role of the Division, in which the later reinforcements were vitally interested. The days went by and no official announcement was made. On 30 May 6 Brigade began to relieve 9 Brigade of its duties in [Trieste](#). All ranks were looking forward to this change of duty, not only for the added comforts it would bring but because the citizens of [Trieste](#) had already come to be recognised as the most likeable and friendly encountered in [Italy](#).

The changeover was completed during 1 June, 26 Battalion relieving the 27th in the eastern end of the city. Battalion HQ and A Coy occupied the [Castello](#) san Giusto.

This fine old castle, built on a hill, contained comfortable billets and also commanded a view over the greater part of the city. The Support Group occupied some buildings nearby and the other three companies moved into similar quarters on the flat. A detachment of tanks was with each company. For the next six weeks the unit remained in the city, and despite early difficulties with the Yugoslavs, the stay was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone. [Trieste](#), a city of about half a million inhabitants, is set in pleasant surroundings with hills around it, much resembling [Wellington](#). Although the population is predominantly Italian, inter-marriage and the city's geographical position as a large port serving more than one country have produced a people far different in outlook from those of other Italian cities. Most of the population not only regarded the New Zealanders as their deliverers from the Germans but also as a bulwark against the type of Communism being forced on them by the Slav minority. They were also desperately short of food, and the New Zealanders were a good source of supply. The Yugoslavs and their supporters, on the other hand, displayed almost complete indifference towards the troops.

For the first twelve days the troops went everywhere armed. The guard and picket duties were not onerous, and otherwise the troops were to a great degree left to their own devices. Almost every day there were parades and demonstrations in the city square or through the streets. Tension was often high and there were many rumours of large-scale looting, forcible abductions and robberies. Often the company headquarters were besieged by distracted Italians seeking protection. Some of these people were found to be Fascists and were handed over to the civic authorities. C Coy, which was living in a suburb, found itself handling all manner of domestic problems. The climax came on the 8th when massed demonstrations were held in the city. All troops were ordered to remain in their billets and one company stood by to act as a flying squad should the necessity for its use arise. Fortunately the Yugoslav demonstrators, who numbered about 20,000, having sung and shouted themselves into a state of apathy, dispersed quietly. On the following day Tito's troops were noticed moving out of the city and within three days they had all gone.

Although this meant more guard and picket duties for the battalion, the absence of the Yugoslavs more than made up for the extra work. Only one disrupting element remained. This was the [Guardia del Popolo](#), which contained about two thousand armed and uniformed men and women. During the war it had assisted the partisans,

but at the cessation of hostilities it had come under communist influence. Not only was it pursuing a course of subversive action but it had been concerned in a number of armed robberies. The Allied Command decided the force should be disbanded and its members offered the choice of joining the local police or returning to [Yugoslavia](#). In case it showed fight plans were to be made to disarm it forcibly. However, when an appeal was made to the force to surrender its arms it did so, and life in the city settled down to something like normal.

This for the battalion meant a whirl of social activities, plenty of leave, race meetings, and swimming. There were plenty of dance floors and plenty of girls, the latter encouraged by the certainty of a free supper. The [Venice](#) Club had been opened and a 6 Brigade rest area established along the beaches at [Grado](#). Other leave parties toured Northern [Italy](#), visiting Turin, Genoa, Milan and Lago di Como. Men from the unit took part in regattas, swimming carnivals and athletic meetings. At the divisional trotting meeting 26 Battalion provided two drivers; one of them, Cpl M. D. Chapman, won an event.

On 8 July [21 Battalion](#) took over the guard duties in [Trieste](#) and the unit moved out to its new camp site on a plateau in the hills north of the city. Here the troops settled down to a quieter life under canvas. Conditions were pleasant and oak trees gave plenty of shade from the hot sun which beat down each day. The unit showers were brought back into use and swimming parties were taken each day to the [Barcola](#) beaches on the outskirts of the city. A light training programme was held in the mornings and trainee NCOs were given a special course of instruction. Brigadier Parkinson, who had been with 6 Brigade for most of the time since the early stages of the battle for [Enfidaville](#), left on 26 June to become Commander NZ Troops in Egypt, and [Brig I. L. Bonifant](#) took his place.

Despite the social life of [Trieste](#) and the liberal leave scheme, the thoughts of nearly everyone centred on when they would be able to return home. Although no definite statement had been made, it was generally expected that [2 NZ Division](#) would take its place in the war against the Japanese. This view was strengthened when pamphlets dealing with Japanese tactics were issued. It was also expected that many of the long-service personnel still with the battalion would return home. To all, whether destined for the [Pacific](#) or New Zealand, the burning question was—when?

On 21 July an advanced party left for a divisional concentration area south of [Lake Trasimene](#), and the rest of the battalion began to think, not without regret, of saying goodbye to Triestini friends. Five days later the brigade convoy moved out through the outskirts of the city and headed south. So ended one of the most pleasant periods spent by the battalion overseas.

The long journey south was broken into three stages, overnight stops being made at [Mestre](#), [Bologna](#) and [Fabriano](#). The convoy reached [Mestre](#) about midday, and although [Venice](#) was officially out of bounds, few continued the journey without having another stroll around the city. No such restriction existed at [Bologna](#), and during the late afternoon and evening nearly everyone was wandering through the streets of the city which for so many months had been an objective of the Fifth and Eighth Armies. The third day of the journey was by far the longest and most tiring and it was 5 p.m. before the convoy reached [Fabriano](#), about 20 miles from [San Severino](#). That night, while the troops were asleep, thieves entered the camp and, eluding the sentries, stole clothing and personnel gear from Headquarters personnel. They even entered tents and took articles from under beds and pillows while the owners slept. A search for the thieves was unsuccessful and the journey was continued.

The battalion area in the south-east corner of [Lake Trasimene](#) looked very uninviting when the convoy arrived about 1 p.m. on 29 July. A long spell of dry weather had dried up the lake considerably. The roads were very dusty and the whole area looked barren. However, amenities were soon improved and the troops settled down in anticipation of a stay of some length. Light training was continued for the first fortnight of August with battalion parades before breakfast. The afternoons were devoted to sport, and each day swimming parties were taken to the lake. Leave parties left for Rome and [Florence](#) each week and touring parties continued to visit Northern [Italy](#). A divisional rest camp was established at [Mondolfo](#), on the coast, and two companies spent a week there.

On 5 August the 8th Reinforcements left to return to New Zealand. Except for a few members of the 9ths, they were the last of the 'Desert rats' to go home and their farewell will long be remembered, although some of those leaving and some who remained behind can recollect very little of the night's activities. On the 14th

came the electrifying news of the Japanese surrender. This news caused tremendous excitement in the camp for now everyone could think of going home. Training was relaxed and a long spell of generous leave and sports all day long followed. Everything possible was done so that all ranks could visit all towns of interest near the area. The war was truly over.

The first signs of the break-up of the battalion came early in September when the CO left on appointment as Commandant of the Advanced Base camp at [Bari](#). [Colonel Fairbrother](#), who had left New Zealand with the [First Echelon](#), had won a well-deserved DSO in the recent campaign and had proved a worthy successor to Col Fountaine. He was succeeded by Maj [Pearce](#).¹ On the night of 25 September the 9th Reinforcements were farewelled. A bitterly cold wind made conditions unpleasant, but this did not hamper the celebrations. Some time after midnight it was found that the QM store truck was on fire. Within a few minutes two three-tonners were in flames, and those sleeping inside them escaped only in what they stood up in. One soldier, with great presence of mind, drove one of the blazing trucks, which he knew carried ammunition, away from the others and eventually the fire was brought under control.

The move to [Florence](#) on 9 October saw the final break-up of the battalion as a fighting unit. Carriers, portées, six- pounders, equipment and ammunition were handed in on the eve of departure. At Florence the greater part of the transport went to a disposal area at [Assisi](#). Within two months those left in the unit had gone on leave to the [United Kingdom](#), had joined J Force, or had left for Advanced Base in readiness to return to New Zealand.

After five years' service with the Division 26 Battalion had ceased to exist. But it will always be remembered with pride by those who served in it and who helped to build up and maintain its reputation; to these men the battalion had become part of their lives. In five years the 26th had been engaged in many important actions, had often seen hard fighting and had suffered grievous losses, but always a core remained around which a rejuvenated fighting unit could be built. The spirit which carried the battalion through these strenuous years still exists. Nobody could fail to be proud of the fact that he had served in the 2nd New Zealand Division with 'the Twenty-sixth'.

¹ Maj L. A. Pearce; Wellington; born Auckland, 22 Jan 1918; Regular soldier.

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ROLL OF HONOUR

ROLL OF HONOUR

Killed in Action (includes Died of Wounds)

Lt-Col J. N. Peart	4 September 1942
Maj A. J. Fraser	17 March 1944
Maj T. Milliken	26 November 1941
Maj L. G. Smith	25 April 1943
Maj R. S. Smith	24 December 1943
Capt J. D. Aiken	24 March 1943
Capt A. W. Wesley	23 November 1941
Lt P. C. Ainsley	10 August 1942
Lt J. R. Baird	25 August 1942
Lt A. M. Buckley	3 September 1942
Lt K. O. Davies	20 March 1944
† Lt D. M. Galloway	23 September 1942
Lt G. P. R. Gifford	22 July 1942
Lt D. P. Lindsay	12 December 1943
Lt G. O. Morrison	9 December 1943
Lt S. Talbot	16 July 1942
Lt W. D. Westenra	29 November 1941
2 Lt G. D. Fogarty	16 March 1944
2 Lt P. E. C. Gillett	24 October 1942
2 Lt F. G. S. Lamb	28 November 1941
2 Lt K. J. Lowry	17 March 1944
2 Lt A. A. McClean	31 March 1944
2 Lt C. C. McDonald	24 October 1942
2 Lt F. J. Muir	15 March 1944
2 Lt J. N. Ramsay	23 October 1942
2 Lt T. C. F. Ronalds	25 April 1943
2 Lt F. D. Rutherford	5 December 1941
2 Lt F. L. Sargent	14 July 1944
2 Lt J. R. Upton	25 November 1941
WO II C. W. Gaynor	4 September 1942

WO II T. H. F. Henderson	4 September 1942
WO II C. W. Neilson	27 March 1944
WO II R. F. Prebble	17 March 1944
WO II M. Tavener	24 December 1944
Sgt B. H. Atkinson	30 January 1945
Sgt J. W. Bain	7 June 1944
Sgt H. B. Bedford	27 November 1941
Sgt S. A. Carson	24 March 1943
Sgt T. A. Carston	3 November 1942
Sgt E. W. P. Dowie	22 July 1942
Sgt C. N. Growcott	26 November 1941
Sgt E. R. Harper	9 December 1943
Sgt A. J. Hinton	26 October 1942
Sgt F. S. Johanson	17 March 1944
Sgt J. B. Johnston	25 November 1941
Sgt J. H. P. Lane	1 August 1944
Sgt T. S. Lindsay	19 December 1944
Sgt L. H. Lomas	24 October 1942
Sgt S. H. MacDonald	30 November 1943
Sgt G. K. McIntosh	23 October 1942
Sgt G. L. Maze	19 April 1944
Sgt S. Menzies	26 December 1943
Sgt F. L. Musgrove	21 March 1943
Sgt I. N. B. Paine	28 July 1942
Sgt H. M. Pawson	25 April 1943
Sgt D. Poli	27 November 1941
Sgt G. Storer	12 April 1945
Sgt W. Tombs	8 May 1944
Sgt A. G. Weston	25 April 1943
Sgt A. G. Williams	24 October 1942
L-Sgt J. R. Anstiss	28 November 1943
L-Sgt A. L. Fletcher	28 November 1943
L-Sgt C. R. Holmes	17 March 1944
L-Sgt I. Jenkins	21 March 1944
L-Sgt W. C. Thorburn	24 October 1942
L-Sgt M. B. Wallen	17 March 1944
L-Sgt D. R. Wright	25 April 1943

Cpl A. W. Aldridge	17 March 1944
Cpl W. G. Barber	4 June 1944
Cpl J. B. Berry	25 November 1941
Cpl E. C. Butterfield	12 December 1943
Cpl J. F. Don	26 April 1941
Cpl C. F. Ebert	22 July 1942
Cpl E. A. Gasson	7 September 1942
Cpl W. J. Goodall	23 March 1944
† Cpl G. Gregg	3 November 1942
Cpl J. F. Gulliver	30 November 1941
Cpl A. R. Harraway	27 November 1941
Cpl L. E. Hayhurst	27 December 1944
Cpl R. J. Heney	17 March 1944
Cpl C. R. Killworth	17 March 1944
Cpl A. G. Lloyd	31 March 1944
Cpl A. T. McRae	19 December 1944
Cpl J. K. Michael	4 September 1942
Cpl I. F. Munro	25 April 1943
Cpl J. T. Olorenshaw	11 August 1944
Cpl J. L. C. Osborn	29 June 1942
Cpl W. N. Page	8 November 1942
Cpl V. E. Rice	25 April 1943
Cpl D. I. Robertson	30 November 1941
Cpl C. W. Roeske	17 March 1944
Cpl F. E. Squire	26 October 1942
Cpl A. Sykes	4 December 1941
Cpl M. H. Taylor	28 November 1941
Cpl T. G. Todd	22 July 1942
Cpl F. S. R. Tyson	16 July 1944
Cpl C. C. W. Wahrlich	27 September 1944
Cpl A. N. Walker	27 November 1941
Cpl W. R. G. Wallis	22 March 1943
Cpl F. W. Wilson	6 September 1942
L-Cpl R. M. Alexander	17 March 1944
L-Cpl A. Bousie	24 October 1942
L-Cpl W. T. Coster	19 April 1944
L-Cpl S. C. Forbes	26 October 1942

L-Cpl L. W. Gemmell	27 November 1941
L-Cpl E. F. Hosken	29 November 1941
L-Cpl R. A. Hosking	13 December 1943
L-Cpl A. Illingworth	27 November 1941
L-Cpl E. James	15 July 1942
L-Cpl J. W. Jameson	28 April 1943
L-Cpl T. A. Kemp	22 July 1942
L-Cpl H. M. Kennedy	26 September 1944
L-Cpl J. J. Lonie	14 April 1945
L-Cpl F. A. McIlroy	22 July 1942
L-Cpl G. McKinnon	12 September 1942
L-Cpl A. G. Nicholls	16 December 1942
L-Cpl A. Plows	26 October 1942
L-Cpl H. S. Rendall	26 April 1941
L-Cpl J. J. Skinner	18 July 1942
L-Cpl K. H. Smith	17 March 1944
L-Cpl E. J. Sole	22 March 1943
L-Cpl W. Stenhouse	13 April 1945
L-Cpl I. M. White	21 March 1944
L-Cpl R. A. Wilson	4 September 1942
L-Cpl P. F. Wyndham	3 December 1943
Pte D. H. Adkins	14 April 1945
Pte K. T. Agar	17 March 1944
Pte F. H. Alderton	17 March 1944
Pte V. J. Aldous	25 July 1942
Pte J. A. Allan	24 November 1941
Pte L. D. Anderson	19 December 1944
Pte M. Anderson	12 August 1944
Pte N. R. Anson	26 April 1943
Pte R. A. Ashby	22 March 1943
Pte S. E. Askin	25 March 1943
Pte C. J. Bailey	30 November 1941
Pte H. D. Bain	24 October 1942
Pte J. A. Bain	26 April 1943
Pte H. O. Banks	27 April 1943
Pte W. H. Bartlett	25 April 1943
Pte M. M. Bate	30 November 1943

Pte W. J. Baxter	28 March 1943
Pte J. G. M. Bayley	26 November 1941
Pte R. Beach	6 January 1944
Pte C. J. Beckingsall	23 July 1942
Pte L. N. Bellamy	27 November 1941
Pte P. Billett	25 April 1943
Pte F. W. Birchall	23 November 1941
Pte J. C. Blackburn	1 December 1941
Pte W. T. Boshier	17 March 1944
Pte W. A. Botting	28 September 1944
Pte H. J. Boucher	28 November 1941
Pte B. R. Boyd	24 October 1942
Pte L. A. B. R. Bragg	23 November 1941
Pte J. A. Brandham	15 July 1942
Pte A. F. Brooks	20 March 1944
Pte S. A. Brough	22 April 1943
Pte F. Brown	22 July 1942
Pte H. B. Brown	24 October 1942
Pte L. R. Brown	17 March 1944
Pte W. G. S. Brown	19 July 1942
Pte W. G. A. Burgess	27 November 1941
Pte W. L. Buss	22 July 1942
Pte F. D. Caird	26 December 1944
Pte D. C. Callander	22 April 1943
Pte A. B. Cameron	24 October 1942
Pte R. T. Cameron	27 April 1941
Pte E. J. Campbell	26 November 1941
Pte G. McL. Campbell	18 July 1942
Pte J. H. Campbell	1 December 1941
Pte R. Campbell	28 November 1943
Pte S. J. Campbell	2 May 1945
Pte C. A. Candlish	26 October 1942
Pte J. A. Carlson	25 April 1943
Pte G. A. Carson	27 November 1941
Pte J. W. G. Caswell	13 August 1944
Pte W. R. Charteris	27 November 1941
Pte H. J. Chester	30 November 1941

Pte F. Christie	29 November 1941
Pte C. A. Clark	11 April 1945
Pte R. B. Clark	20 December 1944
Pte R. H. Clark	28 July 1942
Pte R. Cobden-Cox	13 August 1944
Pte T. H. Cook	31 March 1943
Pte K. S. Cornelius	24 October 1942
Pte C. R. Cosgrove	4 June 1944
Pte O. G. Cox	27 November 1941
Pte W. E. Crane	24 October 1942
Pte R. A. Crombie	23 July 1942
Pte L. G. Cross	5 April 1944
Pte A. J. Dann	24 December 1944
Pte W. V. Davie	30 November 1941
Pte D. R. Day	19 December 1944
Pte A. J. N. DeRoo	28 September 1944
Pte J. F. Devlin	25 November 1941
Pte T. Devlin	24 December 1943
Pte D. S. Dey	27 November 1941
Pte J. Dillon	27 November 1941
Pte L. A. Dittman	4 September 1942
Pte M. F. Donnelly	17 March 1944
Pte M. W. J. Douglas	3 May 1944
Pte E. C. H. Doyle	27 November 1941
Pte J. J. Driscoll	4 September 1942
Pte J. T. Drummond	27 November 1941
Pte K. N. Dunstan	26 October 1942
Pte L. E. Dwyer	27 November 1941
Pte C. E. Edwards	24 October 1942
Pte F. W. Egan	10 May 1944
Pte V. F. Eggers	28 July 1944
Pte F. A. Elliott	3 December 1943
Pte A. C. Emanuel	18 March 1944
Pte J. C. Fahey	22 March 1944
Pte E. A. R. Falk	17 March 1944
Pte R. A. Fearn	23 March 1944
Pte A. C. Feathers	29 November 1941

Pte W. M. Fennessy	23 November 1941
Pte H. J. G. Fincham	5 December 1941
Pte J. Findlay	23 November 1941
Pte T. J. Flynn	14 July 1942
Pte R. R. Fowler	18 May 1941
Pte H. C. Fox	25 November 1941
Pte J. W. Fraser	31 May 1944
Pte E. M. Freitas	25 November 1941
Pte A. R. Friend	17 March 1944
Pte D. H. D. Fry	17 March 1944
Pte G. N. Gale	28 November 1941
Pte O. L. Gardner	16 December 1943
Pte A. L. J. Giles	2 September 1942
Pte J. B. Gillingham	28 November 1943
Pte H. J. Glastonbury	26 September 1944
Pte D. J. Gleeson	18 March 1944
Pte F. H. Gordon	26 April 1943
Pte R. B. Gowland	22 July 1942
Pte L. Grant	3 September 1942
Pte C. Green	5 September 1942
Pte N. Greig	16 December 1942
Pte J. C. Griffin	19 December 1944
Pte R. D. Griffith	4 September 1942
Pte A. H. Grindle	1 December 1941
Pte C. C. Guthrie	19 December 1944
Pte H. J. Hall	28 November 1941
Pte J. S. Hamilton	22 July 1942
Pte R. A. Hamilton	20 December 1944
Pte E. Hansen	17 March 1944
Pte H. P. Hansen	1 December 1941
Pte H. Harding	17 March 1944
Pte A. R. Harraway	27 November 1941
Pte G. Harrington	17 March 1944
Pte L. A. Harrington	28 September 1944
Pte G. G. Harris	3 August 1942
Pte A. J. Harvey	11 August 1944

Pte B. R. Hawkings	18 March 1944
Pte D. C. Henderson	5 December 1941
Pte R. M. Herriott	27 November 1941
Pte E. W. V. Hessel	22 July 1942
Pte A. C. Hill	17 March 1944
Pte R. Houston	29 July 1944
Pte A. J. Hooper	23 April 1945
Pte W. P. M. Horan	14 July 1944
Pte G. P. Howard	25 April 1943
Pte E. Huband	2 September 1942
Pte N. O. Ipsen	28 July 1944
Pte L. G. Irving	4 September 1942
Pte C. E. Ives	24 October 1942
Pte C. Jack	6 November 1942
† Pte A. G. Jennings	10 July 1941
Pte J. R. Johnson	3 December 1943
Pte P. D. H. Keach	23 November 1941
Pte P. H. Keenan	28 November 1941
Pte J. S. Kempthorne	27 November 1941
Pte T. D. Kennard	26 October 1942
Pte C. W. Kennedy	17 March 1944
Pte W. J. Kingan	19 December 1944
Pte S. J. Kitts	22 April 1943
Pte G. R. Kydd	29 March 1944
Pte A. K. Large	26 September 1944
Pte J. H. Leslie	24 December 1943
Pte W. F. Liley	15 July 1944
Pte R. C. Lilley	4 August 1944
Pte S. J. Linton	27 November 1941
Pte G. D. Lippert	21 November 1943
Pte K. E. Lithgow	3 April 1944
Pte D. G. Lorenz	30 November 1941
Pte H. A. Lucas	14 July 1944
Pte H. Lumby	26 April 1941
Pte G. A. Lundon	31 March 1944
Pte A. H. Lyall	30 November 1941
Pte W. McAnulty	22 July 1942

Pte J. M. C. McGonnell	5 March 1944
Pte J. A. McCutchan	26 November 1941
Pte J. H. McDonald	23 November 1941
Pte W. McElrea	20 April 1941
Pte W. V. McKeitch	23 July 1942
Pte C. W. McKenzie	11 August 1944
Pte J. D. MacKenzie	24 October 1942
Pte C. M. McLean	20 August 1942
Pte H. R. McLennan	27 December 1943
Pte C. G. McLeod	4 September 1942
Pte R. H. T. McMahon	27 November 1941
Pte A. J. S. McNaughton	22 July 1942
Pte V. J. McNulty	24 December 1943
Pte T. E. McPhee	2 April 1944
Pte T. G. McVey	28 November 1943
Pte P. A. Maitland	22 July 1942
Pte G. S. Marshall	15 March 1944
Pte C. I. Matheson	20 December 1944
Pte A. R. Mathieson	27 November 1941
Pte E. G. Meredith	8 December 1943
Pte J. R. Metcalfe	24 October 1942
Pte G. H. Metherell	23 July 1942
Pte S. F. Middlemiss	27 July 1944
Pte I. F. McK. Millar	17 March 1944
Pte W. R. Mitchell	22 July 1942
Pte A. S. Mollison	17 March 1944
Pte R. G. Montgomery	17 March 1944
Pte C. Moore	23 April 1943
Pte D. J. Moore	13 August 1944
Pte A. J. Morrison	25 April 1943
Pte C. H. Moss	19 December 1944
Pte D. Mulligan	4 September 1942
Pte D. Newall	24 October 1942
Pte D. J. Nicolle	20 April 1941
Pte B. G. O'Brien	17 March 1944
Pte J. McD. O'Neill	12 April 1945
Pte W. W. O'Neill	22 August 1942

Pte T. Orr	27 November 1941
Pte R. M. Pascoe	23 March 1943
Pte G. D. Paterson	13 April 1945
Pte G. J. Paterson	24 December 1944
Pte J. D. Paterson	24 October 1942
Pte J. S. Patterson	29 November 1944
Pte D. H. Paul	25 December 1943
Pte E. L. T. Paul	3 December 1943
Pte D. W. Payne	24 October 1942
Pte J. K. Peach	22 July 1942
Pte L. J. Phillips	31 January 1945
Pte E. J. Pickering	17 July 1942
Pte M. J. Prebble	25 November 1941
Pte H. McD. Purvis	27 November 1941
Pte W. J. Queale	30 November 1941
Pte G. W. P. Redditt	27 November 1941
Pte E. T. F. Reid	29 April 1941
Pte R. A. Reid	22 July 1942
Pte S. J. Rekowski	25 November 1941
Pte C. H. Richards	22 July 1942
Pte A. Richardson	17 March 1944
Pte I. W. Richardson	8 May 1941
Pte D. J. Richmond	24 October 1942
Pte K. F. Roberts	13 April 1945
Pte R. E. Roberts	27 April 1941
†Pte R. T. Roberts	30 May 1941
Pte M. A. Robertson	27 November 1941
Pte E. H. Robinson	26 April 1941
Pte H. J. Robinson	4 September 1942
Pte A. J. Rodgers	13 April 1945
Pte A. J. J. Rogers	30 November 1943
Pte R. J. L. Roscow	27 November 1941
Pte F. J. Rosenbrock	28 September 1944
Pte A. J. B. Ruff	26 October 1942
Pte I. G. Rutherford	24 October 1942
Pte G. N. Ryan	27 November 1941
Pte P. J. Ryan	17 May 1944

Pte J. H. Sandon	19 December 1944
Pte R. C. Sapwell	27 September 1944
Pte E. R. Scott	10 August 1942
Pte M. J. Searle	24 December 1944
Pte H. C. Seelye	3 December 1941
Pte G. D. Shand	30 November 1941
Pte J. P. Sheenan	27 September 1944
Pte G. M. Sherwood	25 April 1943
Pte F. W. Short	24 July 1942
Pte C. H. A. Slack	24 November 1943
Pte A. Smith	25 November 1941
Pte D. A. Souter	27 December 1941
Pte R. J. Spence	22 July 1942
Pte W. E. S. Stevenson	26 April 1944
Pte L. Stewart	4 August 1944
Pte H. E. Struthers	2 November 1942
Pte A. A. Stuart	4 December 1941
Pte W. D. Swain	3 November 1942
Pte N. D. Tabley	13 December 1941
Pte A. Taylor	26 November 1941
Pte G. A. Tetley	24 October 1942
Pte C. W. Thomas	16 July 1941
Pte J. W. Thomson	23 April 1943
Pte D. F. Thorpe	4 September 1942
Pte C. J. Tiffen	7 December 1943
Pte H. D. Tod	28 April 1941
Pte E. Toner	17 March 1944
Pte R. Treloar	23 November 1941
Pte H. Trotman	23 November 1941
Pte T. J. Tully	22 July 1942
Pte K. H. Turner	11 August 1944
Pte W. E. Tutty	14 December 1943
Pte J. B. Venning	24 December 1944
Pte A. W. Vincent	25 November 1941
Pte M. Vincent	4 February 1945
Pte K. M. Ward	11 August 1944
Pte R. P. Wareing	31 July 1942

Pte C. Watson	28 July 1942
Pte G. T. Webster	18 April 1941
Pte J. T. Webster	4 September 1942
Pte I. H. West	23 November 1941
Pte R. A. White	14 August 1944
Pte R. J. D. Wickliffe	22 July 1942
Pte R. F. Wilkins	7 December 1943
Pte M. D. Williams	26 April 1944
Pte G. H. Williamson	22 July 1942
Pte L. R. Willan	25 November 1941
Pte H. Wilson	27 November 1941
Pte I. Wilson	30 November 1941
Pte V. W. Wilson	2 August 1944
Pte R. Woodstock	24 March 1943
Pte F. Woolford	28 November 1943
Pte J. C. Wornall	24 November 1941
Pte L. A. R. Wylie	17 March 1944
Pte F. L. Yager	19 April 1941
Pte J. Young	18 April 1941

†Died of wounds while a prisoner of war.

Killed or Died of Sickness While Prisoners of War

Capt F. C. Clubb	7 March 1944
Cpl F. Bowes	21 February 1944
L-Cpl J. A. Gould	15 October 1944
L-Cpl C. M. Robertson	17 August 1942
Pte A. Clearie	9 December 1941
Pte M. F. Hanley	31 December 1942
Pte A. R. Heads	10 May 1942
Pte G. W. Henderson	9 December 1941
Pte J. E. Hooper	8 December 1943
Pte R. G. Ledlie	6 September 1942
Pte E. A. Lusk	17 August 1942
Pte W. W. Mackintosh	17 August 1942
Pte J. G. McLellan	17 August 1942
Pte A. L. McQuoid	17 August 1942
Pte J. A. G. Matheson	9 February 1945

Pte T. Mouat	30 December 1941
Pte D. Peterson	17 August 1942
Pte J. Piper	17 August 1942
Pte D. R. Stevenson	17 August 1942
Pte N. L. Sutherland	17 August 1942
Pte C. J. Trevella	17 August 1942
Pte F. T. Wallace	6 April 1944
Pte N. R. Wedge	17 August 1942
Pte B. Whalley	17 August 1942
Pte G. D. Wilson	31 March 1944

On 17 Aug 1942 an Axis ship carrying New Zealand prisoners of war was torpedoed and sunk with heavy loss of life.

Killed or Died on Active Service

Maj F. J. Brook	19 February 1941
2 Lt A. C. T. Robertson	8 February 1944
Sgt A. E. Branks	4 April 1944
Sgt J. L. Shuttleworth	28 January 1944
Pte A. J. Armstrong	1 January 1945
Pte H. R. Armstrong	20 May 1941
Pte R. L. Chamberlain	13 October 1941
Pte J. W. Glover	14 August 1944
Pte S. P. Harding	25 August 1941
Pte E. A. Killick	26 February 1945
Pte N. R. J. Mills	29 December 1943
Pte R. J. Munro	27 June 1944
Pte V. C. Ockwell	23 July 1941
Pte F. A. Ricketts	22 November 1940
Pte M. J. Smith	30 April 1943
Pte J. S. Wooton	15 September 1942

Summary

32 officers 101 NCOs 326 ORs Total: 459

26 BATTALION

HONOURS AND AWARDS

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Distinguished Service Order

Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother, OBE, ED

Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine, MC

Lt-Col J. R. Page

Lt-Col J. N. Peart

Lt-Col E. E. Richards

Maj J. R. Williams

Military Cross and Bar

Capt A. M. Rutherford ([NZMC attached](#))

Military Cross

Maj D. P. W. Harvey

Capt A. W. Barnett

Capt I. H. Fletcher ([NZMC attached](#))

Lt N. Buchanan

Lt F. G. Clubb

Lt A. C. Hansen

Lt H. B. Hay

Lt T. R. M. Hobbs

Lt S. W. Turnbull

2 Lt G. J. Thomas

Rev. Fr. J. L. Kingan (Chaplain attached)

Member of the Order of the British Empiri

Maj B. Boyd

WO I E. A. Gibson

Capt F. W. Wilson, MC, ED

Mr. G. Gray ([YMCA](#) attached)

Distinguished Conduct Medal

WO II A. R. G. Lock, MM

Sgt G. M. Dodds

Sgt J. F. O'Reilly

[Sgt A. C. T. Robertson](#)

Sgt D. C. Welsh

Military Medal

Pte W. G. Barber

Sgt A. J. Bowie

Sgt A. E. Branks

Cpl W. Brick

Pte R. J. V. Carter

WO II D. P. Corrigan

Sgt C. J. Courtier

Pte E. J. Dickson

Sgt B. H. Grainger

Pte D. R. Harvey

Sgt K. W. Herring

Pte J. W. Jameson

Sgt L. J. Kearney

Sgt A. R. G. Lock

Pte B. R. McCarthy

Sgt B. E. MacKenzie

Cpl A. J. Marett

Cpl B. J. Matson

Sgt S. Menzies

Sgt H. C. Moase

Pte A. R. Morrison

Cpl E. C. Murphy

Sgt P. B. Newall

Pte A. H. B. Officer

Pte K. P. O'Sullivan

Pte J. F. Prattley

Pte V. G. Robinson

Cpl R. L. Rossiter

L-Cpl J. P. Scanlan

Sgt L. Stove

Pte H. E. Struthers

Sgt M. Tavener

Sgt M. C. Tither

Cpl W. Tombs

Cpl F. S. R. Tyson

Sgt C. W. Welsh

Mentioned in Despatches

2 Lt R. Bethell

Lt B. Boyd

WO II G. A. Brady

Sgt A. E. Branks

Maj B. R. Bullôt

Sgt W. J. Campbell

Cpl W. J. Cocks

WO I R. Cowan

Capt K. F. S. Cox

WO II D. H. Cross

L-Cpl F. O. Delaney

S-Sgt B. G. Donovan

Sgt G. P. Duff

Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine

WO II R. I. Gibson

WO II L. W. Golding

WO II R. S. Grant

WO II R. Grigor

Maj D. P. W. Harvey

Sgt E. M. Hay

Capt K. W. Hobbs

Maj R. Hunter

Capt A. B. Kerr

Sgt P. M. Kerr

WO I L. G. Kevern

S-Sgt R. L. King

Rev. Fr. J. L. Kingan (attached)

Capt H. H. Lawrence

2 Lt W. J. Leonard

Pte C. C. Lever

Rev J. A. Linton (attached)

Sgt A. R. G. Lock

Cpl A. D. Lonie

Pte R. H. McKinney

Sgt R. D. J. Madden

WO II A. D. Mangos

Sgt W. S. Matchett

Pte J. Middleton

Capt T. Milliken

Sgt H. C. Moase

Pte A. R. Morrison

Maj G. A. Murray

Pte G. Neame

S-Sgt C. W. Neilson

Sgt J. F. O'Reilly

Lt-Col J. R. Page

L-Cpl W. R. Page

2 Lt B. H. Palmer

Lt-Col J. N. Peart

Maj L. E. Pithie

L-Cpl J. F. Prattley

Lt S. M. Pritchard

Lt W. E. Quartermain

Maj E. E. Richards

WO II A. C. T. Robertson

Sgt L. C. Robertson

Sgt E. G. Ross

Lt-Col S. M. Satterthwaite

Maj L. G. Smith

Pte H. E. Struthers

Pte S. J. Sutherland

Pte T. M. Tait

Lt K. E. Traynor

Sgt B. C. Ward

Lt R. D. Westenra

Cpl M. G. White

Cpl E. E. Williams

Maj J. R. Williams

Commendation Card

Lt B. Boyd

Sgt A. C. T. Robertson

United States Bronze Star

Sgt H. C. Moase

These decorations do not include any made subsequent to 31 January 1946 except Pte Harvey (MM). There are no official unit lists of those who were mentioned in despatches. The author has compiled the above list from 26 Battalion records and it may not be complete.

26 BATTALION

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Campaign	Killed and Died of Wounds *	Wounded		Prisoners of War †		Total	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	
Greece	—	15	2	30	—	29	76
Libya 1941	6	83	4	130	9	217	449
Egypt 1942	9	97	15	236	7	130	494
Tripolitania and Tunisia 1942–43	3	33	6	88	1	2	133
Italy	10	157	22	510	—	9	708
Died	2	14	—	—	—	—	16
30	399	49	994	17	17	387	1876

*2 officers and 28 other ranks who died while prisoners of war are included in the figures of killed for the campaigns in which they were taken.

†2 officers and 45 other ranks were wounded when taken prisoner. They are included in the PW columns only.

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This volume was produced and published by the War History Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs.

Editor-in-Chief Sir Howard K. Kippenberger, kbe, cb, dso, ed

Associate Editor M. C. Fairbrother, dso, obe, ed

Sub-Editor W. A. Glue

Illustrations Editor J. D. Pascoe

Archives Officer A. E. Monaghan

Draughtsman L. D. McCormick

The book was printed and bound by Coulls Somerville Wilkie Ltd., and distributed by Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd.

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