

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

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

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

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

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Added missing text on page iv.

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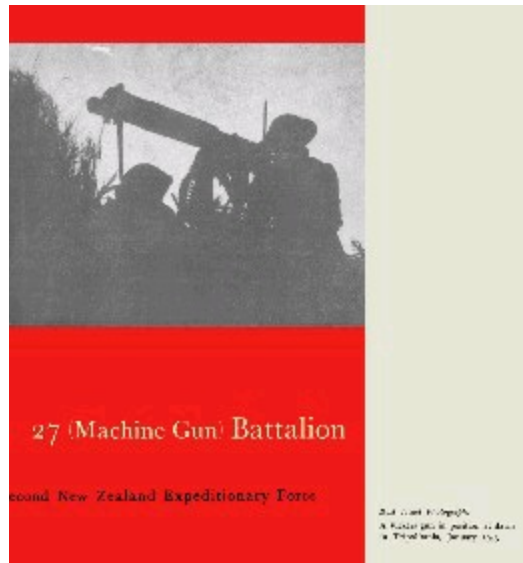
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Supply Company
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Episodes and Studies—10 volumes

Special History of The Subject
In The Second World War 1939-45

27 (Machine Gun) Battalion

by

ROBIN KAY

WAR HISTORY BRANCH
DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL AFFAIRS
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND
1975

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

27 (Machine Gun) Battalion

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27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

[FRONTISPIECE]



Minqar Qaim, 27 June 1942

Minqar Qaim, 27 June 1942

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

[TITLE PAGE]

Official History of New Zealand
in the Second World War 1939–45
27 (Machine Gun) Battalion

ROBIN KAY

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1958

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

[EXCUSE]

I humbly pray them to admit the excuse
Of time, of numbers, and due course of things, Which cannot, in their huge and
proper life Be here presented.

—Shakespeare, King Henry V

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27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

FOREWORD

Foreword



windsor castle

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

I feel it an honour to be asked to write a foreword to the War History of this excellent Battalion, which had a most distinguished record. It was engaged in every battle in which the Division fought, and shared with the Divisional Cavalry the record of serving overseas longer than any other unit in the [2 NZEF](#).

The 27th (Machine Gun) Battalion was one of the first units of the New Zealand Division to go into action in the Greek Campaign in April 1941. It was a grim experience. Right from the start we were in a very hazardous position, and it was due in no small measure to the fighting qualities of the Division that we were able to fight the rearguard actions that started at [Vevi](#) and Mt Olympus and continued back for three hundred miles to the beaches in the [Peloponnese](#).

Then followed [Crete](#), where the Battalion fought at [Maleme](#) and [Galatas](#). It also served with great distinction in the battles in the [Western Desert](#), including the 1941 offensive in [Cyrenaica](#), at [Minqar Qaim](#), and later shared in the disasters at Ruweisat and El Mreir, and finally contributed in active roles in winning the victory at [Alamein](#) and the campaign in [Tunisia](#).

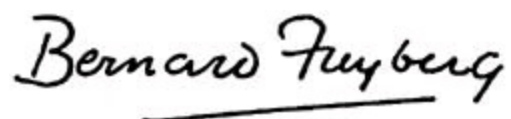
In Italy a company of the 27th Battalion was the first New Zealand unit to go into position across the [Sangro River](#), and during the fighting from the [Sangro](#) to the [Senio](#) the Battalion was continually in the forefront of the advance and fired nearly

nine million rounds of ammunition.

For the last campaign the 27th Battalion was converted into Infantry early in 1945. Its first major engagement as an Infantry Battalion was the crossing of the [Sillaro River](#). The Battalion fought a gallant action at the [Gaiana Canal](#), and continued in a key position till the finish of the war, and particularly in the advance which led to the capture and occupation of [Trieste](#). Subsequently it served with the New Zealand occupation forces in [Japan](#).

The 27th (Machine Gun) Battalion was fortunate in having as its first commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel Inglis, who had served with distinction as a machine-gun officer in the First World War. Later it was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonels Gwilliam, Robbie, White, McGaffin, MacDuff, Hutchens, Steele, Sanders, and in [Japan](#) by Titchener, an original member of the unit who had risen from being a private soldier to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.

I hope many New Zealanders will read this history of an excellent battalion.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

,
Windsor Castle
18 April 1957

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

PREFACE

Preface

'... on the rare occasion one glances through old letters home one's face almost becomes red. We were fairly hard on those in authority we didn't think measured up—often quite wrongly as it later transpired or when the overall picture was able to be seen. Of one thing I am quite convinced, that is we were certainly not normal at the time. Perhaps in some cases it takes ten years to return to that status. Presupposing we were all more or less the same it now becomes clear that the job coordinating all the dope you have got together into something like the true picture is anything but a cinch.'

The man who wrote these words is one of very many who have assisted in the compilation of this history. Without this assistance the task would have been almost impossible. Unlike most other units, which more or less retained their unity in battle, the machine-gunners did not fight together as a battalion: their companies were usually under the command of different brigades, and their platoons in support of different infantry battalions. For long periods the machine-gunners were dispersed throughout the Division; occasionally they were with British, Australian, Indian, Canadian or Greek formations. Only in rest billets or base camps were they able to renew acquaintances and compare notes. This disruption of contacts did not weaken their esprit de corps and spirit of comradeship—which are still evident at reunions—but it meant that few records have been preserved of the actions of platoons and individual gun teams. For this reason I have had to depend on the letters, private diaries and recollections of the survivors of these actions. It has been a most absorbing task.

I am very grateful to all those, far too many to list here, who have so willingly and patiently helped me in various ways, often at great personal inconvenience. The maps were drawn by the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department.

Robin Kay

wellington

June 1957

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Official

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G. V. Turnbull

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R. L. McGaffin
collection

Lt-Col D. G. Steele

D. G. Steele
collection

Lt-Col J. L. MacDuff

W. A. Whitlock
collection

Lt-Col G. P. Sanders

New Zealand
Army (G. F.
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The ranks are those held on discharge or at the date of death.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 1 – GOING OVERSEAS

CHAPTER 1

Going Overseas

The 700-odd men who formed 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion came from all parts of New Zealand and all walks of life. When they volunteered for service overseas soon after the outbreak of the Second World War, about 120 of them described themselves as labourers, eighty as clerks, seventy as drivers of lorries, buses, taxis, tractors and other vehicles, forty as carpenters, forty as farmhands and shepherds, and thirty as farmers; among the others accountants, civil servants, salesmen, butchers, bakers, grocers, painters, storemen, mechanics and electricians were well represented. Anybody who saw the arrival at Burnham Military Camp on 3 October 1939 of this heterogeneous crowd might not have recognised the origin of a highly efficient, specialist unit of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force. In fact many of these men would have to be taught their job from the very beginning.

Officers, NCOs, and potential NCOs, mostly those with previous training, including a handful of Regular soldiers and men who had devoted part of their spare time to Territorial service, had arrived at [Burnham](#) a fortnight earlier. They had found the camp in the noisy and dusty process of being enlarged, and had to pick their way among trucks, bulldozers, graders and other machines working against the clock. Almost overnight bare paddocks had become a system of streets; buildings had sprung up like mushrooms.

At the outset the battalion ¹ was without a commanding officer. Lieutenant-Colonel [Inglis](#), ² who had a distinguished record as a machine-gun officer in the First World War, had been selected for the position, but had to undergo an operation and did not assume command until early in December. In the meantime the battalion was run by a caucus of officers, with the Adjutant (Captain [King](#) ³) having much to do with the organising of headquarters, companies, platoons and sections; on 16 October Lieutenant-Colonel [Mason](#) ⁴ was given temporary command.

The first stage of the battalion's evolution was the sorting out of companies. ⁵ Those who came from [North Auckland](#), [Auckland](#) and [Waikato](#) were chosen for 1 Company; those from Taranaki, Wellington West Coast, [Wellington](#), Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa for 2 Company; those from the [South Island](#) for 3 Company; and

members of Scottish Territorial units and others of Scottish descent for 4 Company. Men were also selected according to their previous experience for administration, signals, transport, anti-aircraft defence, and the other activities of Headquarters Company.

Training was begun immediately. Regimental Sergeant-Major [Brant](#)⁶ was there to show the men the ropes. Rifles and web equipment were issued and the would-be machine-gunners were paraded in more or less straight lines to go through the motions of elementary rifle drill. One squad could hear, sometimes all too clearly and with distressing results, the commands addressed to another, but in spite of such initial confusion, order and efficiency emerged in a commendably short time.

Then the Vickers guns⁷ arrived. They had been manufactured by the Lithgow works in [Australia](#), were beautiful to look at, but were covered with pounds of grease packing. The task of getting them into working order was accepted with enthusiasm.

The training left nothing to chance. Even the most experienced men had to start from scratch and learn everything anew while the others caught up; they had to share the boredom of the instructors who talked themselves hoarse day after day as they went over the familiar routine of stripping and assembling and elementary gun drill.

The regimental badge—the crossed-gun emblem—was issued on 11 October. This was quite an event. Hitherto there had been a variegated mixture of insignia throughout the camp; now a visible sign of belonging made all the difference. Later, when the universal [2 NZEF](#) badge was to be worn by all troops, it was with the keenest regret that the battalion took down its distinctive emblem.

October ended with icy showers and bitterly cold wind from the south, which gave the North Islanders a chance to demonstrate their parochialism. About this time an epidemic of a virulent form of influenza, the '[Burnham](#) bot', incapacitated at least half the battalion and held up training. This outbreak, some thought, was caused by inoculations, open drains and [Burnham's](#) everlasting dust. By the second week of November, however, nearly everybody had returned to duty.

And then for the first time, on 13 November, the men fired the Vickers on the range. Redcliffs turned on bright sunshine and a gentle sea breeze for the occasion.

There was some splendid shooting and competition ran high; anxious platoon commanders scanned the targets through their new binoculars. But the numbers did not go up until the next day. The winning platoon, of course, had been sure of success all along, but the others had no difficulty in finding explanations for their temporary lapses.

The war drew closer. On 7 December two officers and eight other ranks⁸ went home on a brief final leave; these were members of the [Advance Party](#), which left [Wellington](#) in the [Awatea](#) on the 11th on the first stage of the voyage overseas.

Training was begun under canvas at Cave, in South Canterbury, on the 8th. This gave Lieutenant-Colonel Inglis, who had joined the battalion only two or three days earlier, the opportunity to see how it would fare under active service conditions and to 'get the weights' of his officers. In the opinion of one subaltern, 'he succeeded in no mean manner!' The battalion was introduced to the 'Inglis design'⁹ of gun emplacement, which had been devised in the First World War. Positions were occupied at night and next morning the CO personally checked every gun, causing some anxious moments among platoon and section commanders. The battalion was taken out on exercises, which included long carries, action from trucks, occupation of positions, and direct fire orders. At the end of a strenuous day everybody was of one mind: this sort of thing was to be preferred to [Burnham's](#) bluegums, boulders and bulldozers. Field firing was 'great fun, the boys really enjoyed it', and the guns were made to boil for the first time. The farmer on whose land the shooting was done had served as a machine-gunner in the First World War. The CO offered him a shoot, and his first shots hit a gate half a mile away.

The First Echelon of [2 NZEF](#) was placed on 'active service' on the 14th, and the troops went on a fortnight's final leave. [Major-General Freyberg](#) inspected the battalion and the other troops at [Burnham](#) on the 30th; the final church parade was held on New Year's Eve, a Sunday; there was a march through [Christchurch](#) and an official farewell at Cranmer Square on 3 January 1940, and in the afternoon the camp was open to visitors.

The question, What is the ship called Z6 on which we are to embark and where is she going? occupied all minds.

The embarkation was supposed to be shrouded in secrecy. The blinds of the train were drawn on the journey from [Burnham](#) to [Lyttelton](#), in the afternoon of 5 January, and an officer was on duty at each end of each carriage, but 'bush telegraph' methods must have been at work—when the blinds were raised multitudes were revealed milling around the wharf behind a barrier of locked gates.

The battalion went aboard a Polish ship, the [Sobieski](#), which also carried 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company, a section each of the [Medical Corps](#) and [Dental Corps](#), and three nursing sisters. Lieutenant-Colonel Inglis was in command of all troops. ¹⁰

The troopship [Dunera](#) took aboard 20 Battalion and other troops, and both vessels sailed about 5 p.m., escorted by HMS Leander. Next morning they joined the ships from [Wellington](#)—[Rangitata](#), Orion, [Strathaird](#) and Empress of [Canada](#), escorted by HMS [Ramillies](#) and HMAS [Canberra](#)—which had been lying at anchor in Cook Strait since the previous afternoon. The convoy headed westwards into the Tasman, and the First Echelon's last glimpse of New Zealand, the white tip of Mount [Egmont](#) sank below the horizon.

Built in 1937 for the American run, the [Sobieski](#) was a luxury liner of 11,000 tons. The troops were quartered in cabins, with officers first class, warrant officers and sergeants second class, and rank and file 30-odd to a cabin on the lower deck; they enjoyed some of the comforts of peacetime tourists, but the cabins were very stuffy, in spite of the air blowers, when the ship was blacked out and the portholes closed at night.

From the beginning to the end of the voyage relations with the Polish crew were cordial. Only a few spoke English, but linguistic difficulties were more or less overcome by a system of dumb show, which produced goodwill if it did not always achieve the desired results. The continental style of cooking, however, caused some distress until remedied. 'One gets rather fed up of highly seasoned, "tasty" and oily muck.... Tea! They had no more idea of making tea than flying,' wrote an officer, who also objected: 'One could not do a thing for oneself at first but now one is at least permitted to transfer jam from the dish to one's plate.'

Smoking on deck after dark and showing lights from portholes were strictly

forbidden, and if such an offence escaped the notice of the ship's police it seldom went undetected by the vigilant naval escorts. If a porthole was left open by accident or was opened for a few minutes by someone feeling the heat in his cabin too oppressive, the offending transport was informed immediately, and so accurate were the Navy's reports that individual culprits usually could be traced and dealt with.

Limited deck space curtailed the training programme, which began on the second day out from New Zealand. Games and physical training were intended to prevent the men from getting soft.

On a glassy sea the convoy steamed west at a deliberate twelve and a half knots until, on 10 January, it came close enough to the Australian coast to be within range of patrolling aircraft. Next day it was augmented by four Australian troopships — *Orcades*, *Orontes*, *Orford* and *Strathnaver*—and on the 12th by the *Empress of Japan*. The *Leander* left the escort, which was strengthened by HMAS *Australia* and HMAS *Sydney*, making a total of fourteen ships. Cold winds and heavy seas were encountered in the Australian Bight, where some of those who had prided themselves on being good sailors were disillusioned.

The next port was at *Fremantle*, where the *Sobieski* berthed on the 19th, and leave was granted to *Perth*, whose citizens were lavish in their hospitality. The appearance of men parading next day with Australian badges and even Australian uniforms, for which they had exchanged their own, was 'ghastly'. They showed little repentance, despite rigid inspections and disciplinary action, but a vaccination had a salutary and sobering effect.

For the second stage of the voyage the Australian warships left the convoy, which was joined by HMS *Kent* and the French cruiser *Suffren*. When Colombo was reached on 30 January the *Sobieski* was one of the last ships to enter the harbour, which appeared to be 'a terrific jumble of funnels and masts'. Only one ship at a time could pass between the two moles. There were no wharves and the ships were lined up in seven rows, with about 50 yards between the vessels and the rows about 200 yards apart. Tugs butted at the bow, sides and stern of each new arrival until it was in its mooring place, and there were tugs, barges, launches, bum-boats, catamarans and junks all over the place. The transports were soon surrounded by swarms of

small craft laden with fruit, curios, and eager vendors gesticulating and crying their wares. Purchases were made by basket, in which money was lowered over the ship's side. As soon as the gangway was let down agents from laundries and other businesses tried to get past the guards by dodging under their arms and between their legs, but although they waved papers which they claimed were references from the port authorities, only officials were allowed aboard.

The troops were paid the equivalent of 16 shillings sterling in [Ceylon](#) currency and were advised to get rid of it or to change it ashore as it could not be accepted in the ship's canteens. Each man was given a packet of biscuits and an orange, so as not to impose too great a strain on Colombo's caterers. The troops disembarked by lighter and marched through the town to Rifle Green, where a canteen and other facilities had been prepared for them. They were then dismissed until late afternoon, when they reassembled to return to the ship. Those who were on duty during the day were given leave at night. Most of them went sightseeing and looking for bargains. 'It was rather fun watching the troops making their way back in rickshaws,' said somebody who preferred to walk. 'They had the poor devils racing one another. It looked odd to see a great 6 ft N.Z. sitting in a sort of enlarged two-wheeled pram being pulled along by a skinny 5 ft native.'

Only eight men failed to return to the ship on time, and they arrived before morning. Next day training was resumed as usual. Colonel Inglis was most emphatic that the ship had to be just as clean and tidy and everybody fit for work after leave as at any other time. The training was suspended, however, when the time came to leave Colombo. The boom across the harbour entrance was swung aside and ship after ship slipped her moorings and headed out towards the horizon.

Now the convoy was escorted by an aircraft carrier, HMS Eagle, and three warships, the [Sussex](#), [Ramillies](#) and Hobart, and also included a French troopship, Athos II, bound for French Somaliland. The New Zealanders had already been told that their destination was Egypt. The ship's magazine announced: 'We are going to a place called El Ma'adi, about twelve miles south of [Cairo](#) on the east bank of the River Nile.' Men wondered how to pronounce the name.

The voyage across the [Arabian Sea](#) was as calm and uneventful as that from [Perth](#) to Colombo, except that aircraft from the Eagle flew about daily, and one of

them plummeted into the sea within sight of the convoy. The crew was rescued. The troops manned ship as a salute to the Eagle when she passed down the line of transports, and again for the [Ramillies](#) when she left the convoy in the Gulf of [Aden](#); the latter was replaced by the destroyer Westcott. The convoy divided while passing [Aden](#) on 8 February; the Orion and [Rangitata](#) and three of the Australian transports put into that port to refuel, the French ship proceeded to her destination, and the rest of the convoy entered the [Red Sea](#) through the straits of Bab el Mandeb, where it left the naval escort, with the exception of the Hobart.

By this time the troops were finding the routine of shipboard training increasingly irksome, although some variety had been provided by a live-shoot practice from the deck, which had aroused intense interest among the ship's crew. As the destination drew near, however, the training was discontinued in favour of packing and storing equipment in readiness for disembarkation. The Vickers guns were to be left on the ship.

A following wind made the [Sobieski](#), now low in oil and water, roll badly for a day or two. The temperature rose, but not as much as might be expected, and when the convoy ran into a head wind it became appreciably cooler. Islands were passed, land appeared on both sides, the barren, rugged coasts of Arabia and North- [East Africa](#), and the convoy reached [Suez](#) on the morning of the 12th, after a voyage lasting thirty-eight days.

The [Sobieski](#) and [Dunera](#) were the only two transports to berth alongside the quay at [Port Tewfik](#), at the end of a causeway running out from [Suez](#) and near the entrance of the Canal; the other ships anchored a short way out in the bay and were unloaded by lighter.

The machine-gunners had time to study their surroundings before disembarking on the 15th. Their first impressions were not very favourable. The Egyptian, while perhaps sturdier than the Sinhalese of Colombo, seemed dirtier and more ragged. 'The outer garment appears to be a night-gown affair, a bit of cloth round the head, no footwear.' Native vendors who came alongside the ship sold leather handbags, purses, wallets, cigarette cases, wooden camels and donkeys, and large numbers of oranges, but the troops had been dissuaded from touching other foodstuffs and drinks because of the risk of disease.

The town looked interesting at a distance but lacked the green trees of Colombo. At close quarters it was much less attractive. Some officers who went ashore were struck by the



filthiness and dilapidation of the mud-daubed, lath and plaster buildings. 'It is a wonder the first puff of wind doesn't raze the whole show.... The smell! We first whiffed it while on the boat and on land it became more pronounced but here it was overpowering ... a combination of over-ripe pigsty plus Rotorua ... add a strong component of carbide and you about have it.'

At last the time came to disembark. After a four o'clock reveille the battalion was entrained by 7.40 a.m. and began the 90-mile journey to Maadi actually ahead of schedule. The carriages had hard wooden seats and bare floors—a harsh contrast to the comforts of the Sobieski—and the journey was dusty, smoky and hot. 'We admired just sand, sand in ridges, flats, scarps, heaps.... There were working parties in some places but all they appeared to be doing was just shifting sand —some guessed roads, some guessed searching for ancient ruins. We saw many ruins but whether ancient or modern it would be hard to say after seeing Suez.' When the train entered the cultivated Nile Delta, interest quickened at the sight of lucerne crops, orange groves, water buffalo pulling wooden ploughs— 'the kind of plough Jesus must have made in his carpenter's shop'—donkeys carrying incredible loads, and blindfold oxen turning water wheels.

Cairo looked much the same as Suez, except that some parts of it were 'really attractive, new looking, clean buildings, bright gardens'. At the main railway station (Bab el Hadid), where 'we were immediately besieged by Gyppos selling all manner of stuff including lurid literature', the engine changed ends before pulling out on a

branch line through the Dead City— graves and houses mixed up in a macabre fashion—and into the desert again. And then the train suddenly stopped.

Major [White](#) ¹¹ describes the arrival at [Maadi](#): 'We could see a few trucks standing about, a lot of soldiers and a band but why for? in the middle of the desert? We were soon disillusioned. Here we were to detrain! We stepped out into about 4 in. of soft fine dust and soon were enveloped in a cloud of it as men tramped about forming up into companies.

'Soon we were on the move, each company in a smoke screen of dust of its own making. A hundred yards or so we passed over the crest of a rise and could see desert stretching away before us on either hand with many tents nearer at hand. Before long we were in among the tents and were led aside to our own group.'

The tents had been erected by British troops in straight lines —later they were re-erected in 'broken' formation. Each New Zealand unit had a 'foster parent' British unit, and the machine-gunners found themselves under the wing of the King's Royal Rifles, who had met them at the railway siding with their regimental band and had played them into their lines. Their cooks had prepared a meal and had made other arrangements for the comfort of the newcomers. Their quartermaster and some of his staff remained for a while to help the battalion settle.

A month or two earlier the site of [Maadi](#) Camp had been a typical desert waste, and it still had a bleak look. The battalion's lines had a few wooden buildings—the officers' mess, the orderly room, the quartermaster's store, and mess huts. The task of erecting tents brought home the difficulties that had been encountered by the New Zealand advance party, Egyptians, and others supervised by the [Royal Engineers](#). What looked like loose sand was a mere veneer, under which sandstone had to be drilled before tent pegs could be driven.

Members of the advance party, who had received no mail since leaving New Zealand in December, were delighted to be reunited with their battalion. They had arrived in Egypt on 7 January and Staff-Sergeant [Stanley](#) ¹² and Privates [Mayers](#) ¹³ and [Wilson](#) ¹⁴ had assisted in erecting the camp. It had been intended that the rest of the party should attend schools of instruction, but because training facilities had not been available they had been sent to [Mersa Matruh](#), in the [Western Desert](#),

where they had been attached to the only machine-gun unit in Egypt, 5 Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. Later, Captain Grant ¹⁵ had gone to the Middle East Tactical School at the Abbassia Barracks, [Cairo](#), but Captain [Luxford](#) ¹⁶ and the remainder of the party had stayed at [Matruh](#) (which still had all the appearances of a peacetime seaside resort) until just before the arrival of the [First Echelon](#) in Egypt. 'We took part in the normal Battalion training but our duties were by no means arduous and the whole party were treated as honoured guests,' says Luxford. 'It was in fact nothing but a glorious desert holiday.'

[Maadi](#) Camp gave no promise of a desert holiday. Although the men had been told what to expect, they were not prepared for the sharp drop in temperature during their first night there. Reveille was at 6.30, when it was still almost dark, and everybody's teeth were chattering as the men made their way from their dusty tents to the taps to wash and shave with gritty soap. British Army field rations for breakfast came as a shock— only about half a feed for a hungry man. Egypt is going to be hell; why the devil did they want to bring us here?

¹ Thirty officers and 704 other ranks, organised in battalion headquarters, headquarters company and four machine-gun companies, each composed of three four-gun platoons.

² [Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis](#), CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Greek); [Hamilton](#); born [Mosgiel](#), 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn 4 Dec 1939–13 Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde 1941–42 and 4 [Armd Bde](#) 1942–44; comd 2 [NZ Div](#) 27 Jun–16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, [Germany](#), 1947–50; stipendiary magistrate.

³ [Lt-Col J. S. King](#), MBE; [Wellington](#); born NZ 11 Mar 1898; Regular soldier; comd 2 NZEF School of Instruction 8 Jan 1941–1 Feb 1943.

⁴ [Brig S. D. Mason](#), CBE, ED; born [Australia](#), 7 Sep 1892; accountant; Commandant, [Burnham Military Camp](#), 1940; died 18 Nov 1953.

⁵ 1 [Coy](#) (1, 2 and 3 Pls), 2 [Coy](#) (4, 5 and 6 Pls), 3 [Coy](#) (7, 8 and 9 Pls), 4 [Coy](#)

(10, 11 and 12 Pls).

The war establishment of a machine-gun company was modified from time to time but in 1940 comprised Coy HQ (OC, 2 i/c, CSM, CQMS, transport corporal, corporal cook and 20 privates) and three platoons each of 39 or 40 men, which gave a total company strength of 144. Each platoon comprised Pl HQ (subaltern, sergeant and five or six privates) and two sections (each of two NCOs and 14 privates). Each section had two Vickers guns, and each gun team included five gun numbers and a driver. By Sep 1944 the platoon had been increased to 42 men, and the company to 154.

⁶ Maj P. A. M. Brant, m.i.d.; born Durban, South Africa, 3 Jul 1907; Regular soldier; wounded 20 May 1941.

⁷ The .303 Vickers medium machine gun has a rate of fire of about 500 rounds a minute, is water cooled, weighs about 40 lb. with water in the barrel casing, is mounted on a tripod weighing about 50 lb., and is fed by a belt containing 250 rounds. The normal rate of fire is one belt in about two minutes, and rapid fire one belt in about a minute. Introduced late in 1915, the Vickers is more reliable mechanically and half the weight of its predecessor, the Maxim.

⁸ Capts J. L. Grant and J. H. R. Luxford, WO II G. B. C. Pleasants, S-Sgt H. V. Stanley, Sgts C. A. Newland, C. S. Mason, A. E. Fear, R. M. Rapley, and Ptes R. C. Mayers and H. V. H. Wilson.

⁹ In place of the orthodox V-shaped trench, this was a deep, narrow, semi-circular one, which gave protection against shell and mortar fire. The gun was placed within the radius of this trench, with its tripod below ground level and the long leg of the tripod pointing to the front instead of the rear. This allowed the gun team to get closer to their weapon and gave an 180-degree traverse. The gun could be lowered flush with the ground by collapsing the tripod, and a tank could then pass over the pit without doing any damage. With all excavated soil hidden out of sight, the gun emplacement was difficult to detect.

¹⁰ The officers of 27 (MG) Bn when it embarked were:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col L. M. Inglis

2 i/c: Maj S. C. V. W. Sugden

Adj: Capt J. S. King

IO: Lt A. W. Cooper

MO: Capt J. R. H. Fulton

Padre: Rev L. P. Spring

Headquarters Company

OC: Capt A. J. Neil

QM: Capt C. D. Bryson

Sigs Pl: Lt R. I. Crafts

TO: Lt H. H. Parata

AA Pl: 2 Lt K. J. Frazer

1 Company

OC: Maj F. J. Gwilliam

2 i/c: Capt M. H. Sheriff

Lt E. J. Tong

2 Lt R. I. Blair

2 Lt G. L. Lee

2 Company

OC: Maj P. W. Wright

2 i/c: Capt J. H. R. Luxford (Advance Party)

Lt R. J. Mason

Lt C. C. Johansen

2 Lt W. F. Liley

3 Company

OC: Maj R. L. McGaffin

2 i/c: Capt J. L. Grant (Advance Party)

Lt H. A. Purcell

2 Lt R. H. Howell

2 Lt D. J. Parsons

4 Company

OC: Maj A. W. White

2 i/c: Capt J. K. Robbie

Lt E. S. McLean

Lt A. T. B. Green

2 Lt R. H. Kerr

Reinforcements: Lt A. W. Brown, 2 Lts R. C. Bradshaw, A. H. Dickinson, J. A. Snedden, O. Somerset-Smith, D. G. Steele.

¹¹ Lt-Col A. W. White, ED and bar; Stratford; born Collingwood, 9 Feb 1903; school-teacher; CO 27 (MG) Bn 16 Oct 1942–31 Jan 1943; wounded 24 Nov 1941.

¹² WO II H. V. Stanley, EM and two bars; Wellington; born New Plymouth, 5 Oct 1909; green-keeper; member victory parade contingent.

¹³ Cpl R. C. Mayers; Christchurch; born Murchison, 1 Sep 1919; insurance agent.

¹⁴ Pte H. V. H. Wilson; born Marton, 4 Aug 1918; farm labourer.

¹⁵ Lt-Col J. L. Grant, ED; Christchurch; born Timaru, 19 Mar 1908; master butcher; CO 2 Bn NZ Scottish Regt 1943.

¹⁶ Maj J. H. R. Luxford, ED, m.i.d.; Wanganui; born NZ 3 Sep 1909; grocer; chief instructor SATW Army School (in NZ) 1942; 2 i/c 3 Bn Fiji Regt 1942–43; wounded 29 Sep 1944 (in Italy).

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 2 – EGYPT

CHAPTER 2

Egypt

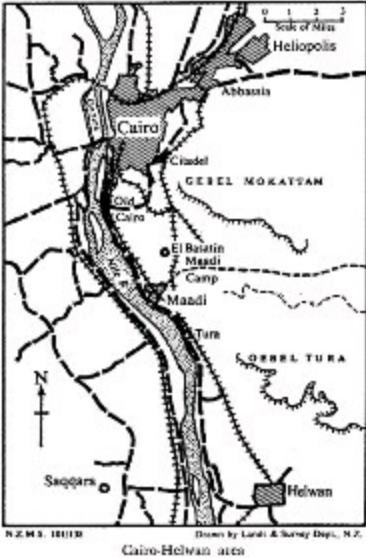
Egypt had been selected as the destination of the 2 NZEF because of its strategical situation and because of the facilities it offered for training. The forces based there could be despatched, should the need arise, to Europe or anywhere in the Middle East; they could protect the Suez Canal, or the oilfields in Iran and Iraq. But the New Zealanders and Australians were not arriving in a strongly held area; they were joining a weak and ill-equipped garrison and—until their own equipment arrived—were themselves no strong reinforcement. The British troops in Egypt and Palestine were only sufficient for a partially equipped infantry division and a weak armoured brigade; they were short of transport and ammunition.

Our propaganda wisely did everything possible to conceal our real weakness, even proclaiming that we had half a million troops in the Middle East. No doubt it was fortunate for the ill-prepared though resolute New Zealanders—and the other troops in Egypt—that there were then no Germans in North Africa to take advantage of the situation. The Italian Army in Libya was vastly superior in numbers if in nothing else, but Mussolini waited until 10 June to decide which would be the winning side before he declared war on Britain and France. About three months later the Italians advanced with extreme caution a short distance into Egypt.

And so, providentially, the 2 NZEF was allowed ample time to train, equip and organise. The first week in Egypt was given mostly to 'interior economy' while the men settled in and adapted themselves to living in the desert—or on the fringe of a desert. About the fifth day a wind began to raise the dust. Dust got into, over, and around everything. To make the tents more or less dust-proof, the skirtings were held down with sandbags, and guy ropes were tied to pieces of wood or rock buried in the ground.

When the camp was properly organised the men were well fed. 'The MG Bn was the first unit to build their own camp oven and the only unit to supply their men with meat pies once weekly,' says Captain Robbie.¹ 'Corned beef originated in our lines and was made by our butcher. A quantity of bread was made and the first loaf presented by the CO to Gen Freyberg.'

The training programme was designed to develop physical fitness, a thorough knowledge of combat methods, and speed



Cairo- Helwan area

and confidence in handling weapons. Route-marching and sport were the most effective ways of making men fit. The marches were either across the desert around the camp or along the road which led into the **Maadi** township, along its streets shaded by jacarandas and flametrees.

At first the desert marches covered only short distances to accustom the men to the soft surface—dust, grit and stones rather than sand—and the hot climate, but before long they ranged farther afield, over stretches of rough and rocky ground to harden feet, until the men were familiar with most of the barren wadis and escarpments within a few miles of the camp. One of the longer and more interesting marches was up the cliffs—which had to be climbed in single file along a winding track—onto **Gebel Mokattam**, the plateau north of the camp and overlooking **Cairo**. No matter how far the marchers went or in what direction, they almost invariably met an Egyptian with a donkey or a camel, or with oranges or mandarins to sell.

The daily routine emphasised the toughening-up process. Lieutenant **Johansen**² describes a typical day like this: 'Reveille —5 minutes after all on parade in gym. kit. 20 minutes' P.T. followed by about 1 ½ 2 mile gallop over the desert. Shower— and spit and polish, not to mention rifle cleaning, no mean task—dirt and sand. Breakfast. Platoon, company and then battalion parades and inspection. 10–12 mile

route march—foot inspections, methylated spirits. Lunch. Work until “Mad dogs and Englishmen” proved true, then siesta period introduced. Rifle exercises, etc., and elementary gun drill. Evening meal.’ The CO's inspections were no cursory affairs; they were ‘long, agonizing’ and kept everybody up to the mark.

For a while the shortage of proper equipment called for ingenuity and imagination. Gun drill was carried out with boulders and pieces of wood as substitutes for guns and tripods—the first twelve Vickers guns were issued without tripods. Inferior, gimcrack tools were the only implements available for digging gun emplacements. Johansen refers to ‘the great joy of everyone when proper personal equipment was issued of a new pattern. Officers until then had to hang everything on to their Sam Brownes until they looked like Kiwi versions of Santa Claus.’

In due course most sports were catered for: football, hockey, tennis, athletics, boxing, cricket, swimming, water polo, rowing and yachting on the Nile, golf and bowls—but Rugby football had the strongest following. The battalion reached the final of the first series of Rugby competitions, which 19 Battalion won by 11 points to nil, and its water polo team, with expert coaching by an Egyptian former international, won the inter-unit competition for the Freyberg Cup and also beat a side selected from the rest of the 2 NZEF.

Leave to Cairo began during the third week at Maadi. One company at a time was allowed out of camp from 4.30 p.m. until 1.30 a.m. Army transport was provided at a cost of one piastre (about 2 ½d) for the return journey to the Maadi railway station, and fast diesel railcars made frequent trips (the single fare, one piastre) to Bab el Louk station in Cairo. Alternatively a party of half a dozen men could hire a taxi, usually a most ramshackle affair, for about 30 piastres, and travel by direct route from the camp to the city, a distance of seven or eight miles.

Before going on leave each man was issued with a map of Cairo showing what places were ‘in bounds’ or ‘out of bounds’. Already he had been warned by the Provost Marshal—and by a medical officer—how best to avoid the snares and dangers of a large foreign city. So off he went. As a newcomer easily recognised by his uniform, he had to learn how to resist hordes of very persistent Cairenes who pestered him to have his boots shined, to buy obscene postcards, or to see an exhibition of a very questionable nature.

Some visitors to [Cairo](#) found 'the filth, sordidness and degradation inconceivably disgusting and what is so remarkable in contrast the wealth of wonders to be explored.' The casinos, cabarets, picture theatres, restaurants, bars and clubs got most of their money. The Egyptian Museum was still open (it was closed after [Italy](#) entered the war), and trips were organised to the mosques and bazaars, Coptic churches, the Pyramids of Giza, Memphis and Sakkara, and the Nile Barrage. Later excursions went farther afield, to [Alexandria](#), to [Luxor](#) and Aswan in Upper Egypt, and to Palestine.

But it wasn't necessary to go as far as [Cairo](#) to fill in off-duty hours. Shafto's bug-ridden cinema—once wrecked by an exasperated audience—showed well-worn films twice nightly seven days a week; the [NAAFI](#) (Navy, Army, Air Force Institute) provided wet and dry canteens and a restaurant for the men and corporals; the officers and sergeants had their own mess bars; and there was the [YMCA](#). The [Maadi](#) Tent, an excellent and much-appreciated institution run throughout the war by the English residents of [Maadi](#), offered light meals, concerts, and a place to relax in comfort. The [Maadi](#) Sporting Club reserved some of its amenities for officers, including the use of its swimming pool and club house, but allowed all ranks to use its cricket ground, golf course and tennis courts.

Training exercises that had begun at platoon level progressively involved larger formations, which brought the machine-gunners into close association with the other arms of the 2 NZEF. On 8 April and for the next four days the battalion joined [4 Infantry Brigade](#) in an exercise at [El Saff](#), alongside the [Nile](#) about 30 miles due south of [Maadi](#). The battalion was required to march from camp to a bivouac area at Wadi [Garawi](#), half-way to [El Saff](#); in the heat of the day this was a grilling test of endurance, and some men fell out on the way. The exercise was the battalion's first experience of co-operation with an infantry brigade. It comprised a brigade attack before dawn, a night withdrawal, and the preparation and occupation of a defensive position. At the conclusion the machine-gunners returned to [Maadi](#) by motor transport—tired, but with a better knowledge of how they would ultimately go into action.

Experience had also been gained in how to cook, eat, wash and sleep in the open. The meals were very good; the food arrived in the company areas in hot

boxes. Water, rationed at one and a half gallons a man a day for all purposes—cooking, washing and drinking—was supplied by water truck. To manage all day on one bottle of drinking water, while digging and carrying machine guns and heavy equipment, with the temperature sometimes over 100, required self-discipline. Attempts to sponge off the mixture of sweat and dust on the first night so reduced the water supply that for the remainder of the exercise very little washing was possible. A fairly severe dust-storm was a nasty initiation in sleeping out, but many men built ingenious break-winds with groundsheets, tarpaulins from trucks, dixies, gun chests, and anything else they could find.

At one place, where a stop was made for a couple of meals, the flies were the worst yet encountered, and quite a few were swallowed with the food. 'It wasn't that they were so plentiful as so blasted persistent,' complained a machine-gunner. 'I don't think there is anything so exasperating as to make half-a-dozen swipes at a fly which merely dodges the barest minimum and settles in exactly the same spot.'

The battalion's next spell in the open was under more pleasant conditions, for less wind meant less dust. On 22 April, again at [El Saff](#), the [First Echelon](#) began an exercise which lasted four days and was the nearest thing to battle the men so far had experienced. A force called 'Milesia', commanded by Brigadier [Miles](#)³ and comprising 27 (MG) Battalion, Divisional Cavalry, a battery of [4 Field Regiment](#) and a detachment of engineers, defended some wells against attacks by the 'Puttagonia' force, consisting of [4 Infantry Brigade](#) and attached units under the command of Brigadier Puttick.⁴ Even in practice the 4 Brigade Group was a sight to boost morale — not that it needed any boosting.

By May it was evident that Mussolini had made up his mind to enter the war on the side of [Germany](#). He wished to 'rectify' [Italy](#)'s position in the [Mediterranean](#), and public opinion in [Italy](#) was being whipped up by organised demonstrations and an inspired press campaign. 'The myth of [Britain](#)'s invincible naval power is gone,' boasted one fascist newspaper.

At this time of uncertainty 'flap' was a word much in use at [Maadi](#); it described any move or unexpected development that gave rise to excitement and rumour. Anti-aircraft pits suddenly appeared in the camp. Orders came to stand by for varying periods as inlying pickets, and troops suddenly vanished overnight—for

garrison duty, it was soon discovered. On 13 May 1 Company occupied prepared positions east of the camp; on the 18th 2 Company took over guard duties at the Citadel, and 3 Company a similar task at the [Helwan](#) airfield. New Zealand troops became responsible for the security of [Cairo](#), where more than 30,000 Italians lived and fifth column activities might be attempted.

The posting of 2 Company to the Citadel, which was used as a detention barracks, was the subject of some comment by the rest of the battalion; some suggested that discipline in the company would benefit. Nevertheless the quarters were found to be comfortable, though the heat was oppressive, and both officers and men had their washing and boot-cleaning done for them. The company provided the first guard from [2 NZEF](#) for the fortress and rose nobly to the occasion. 'I have yet to see a smarter guard,' said one officer. 'There was great competition even among the hardest cases and the anti-spit-and-polish men.'

Built in the twelfth century by Saladin with the slave labour of captured Crusaders, the Citadel stands on a spur jutting out from the cliffs of [Gebel Mokattam](#); with the dome and slender twin minarets of Mohammed Ali's mosque rising above its sturdy walls, it dominates the landscape for miles around. [Cairo](#) is laid out below. Nearby, among the narrow, tortuous, foul-smelling streets that tunnel their way through a bees' comb of native dwellings, are the towers and minarets of other mosques: farther off are the taller, whiter buildings of the more spacious, modern, European quarter, and beyond this, isolated by the [Nile](#), is the green, complacent island of [Gezira](#). Across the river the city merges with the cultivation, and on the horizon the pyramids squat at the edge of the [Western Desert](#).

The other scene of guard duties, [Helwan](#), lies 16 miles south of [Cairo](#), to which it is connected by the railway that passes through [Maadi](#). In peacetime this small town, on rising ground east of the [Nile](#), is known to tourists as a health resort; it has a mineral spa and a very ornate bath-house. The tourist trade now languished, but [Helwan](#) assumed fresh importance because of its aerodrome, an [RAF](#) station, the army camp that was soon to spread across the desert to the south, and the conversion of its largest hotel into a New Zealand general hospital. At the aerodrome the machine-gunners were employed on the general security scheme—defence against air attack, parachutists, fifth columnists and saboteurs—during the next three months. The guns were dug in and sited to cover the perimeter of the aero

drome, and the gun teams were accommodated in dugouts alongside the gunpits.

While digging gun sites in some low mounds the men of 4 Company (which relieved 3 Company on 27 May) struck water which advertised its mineral properties: it smelt like [Rotorua](#). Further investigation revealed water under each mound, which had been built up by wind-blown dust adhering to the damp surface. The machine-gunners enjoyed the luxury of a spa of their own.

This period of guard duties was very strenuous, not only because of the heat, which sometimes reached 110 degrees in the shade, with humidity adding to the discomfort while the [Nile](#) was in flood, but also because the troops available were scarcely sufficient for the task. The same day that 4 Company relieved 3 Company at [Helwan](#), 1 Company went to the Heliopolis aerodrome, east of [Cairo](#), where perimeter defences were also established, and two days later 2 Company was relieved at the Citadel by Rhodesian troops and returned to [Maadi](#). Thereafter, while two machine-gun companies were on guard at the aerodromes, the other two and Headquarters Company remained at [Maadi](#), and the companies on guard duty were relieved fortnightly.

From time to time captains and subalterns were recalled to Battalion Headquarters for a fortnight's reversion to the ranks for a drill and duties course under warrant officers. Sergeants took command of platoons; officers, who 'mothered a rifle and gear like any private soldier', learnt to see things from the privates' point of view; the rest of the battalion enjoyed the spectacle, and it is even recorded that the officers themselves thoroughly enjoyed their respite from authority. 'Most of us learnt the rudiments of soldiering and sweated out the slack and slovenly habits of other days,' says Captain Robbie.

After Italy entered the war, some 60-odd New Zealanders, mostly from Divisional Cavalry, but also from [27 Battalion](#) and one or two other units, were selected to form three long-range patrols to collect information about the Italian garrisons of the oases in southern [Libya](#). Most of the original officers of these patrols were Englishmen who had explored the [Libyan Desert](#) before the war, but Lieutenant [Steele](#),⁵ a machine-gun officer, was one of the first patrol leaders and later commanded the New Zealand squadron of the [Long Range Desert Group](#), as the new unit became known.

The long-range patrols, which were the first ⁶ to cross the vast Egyptian Sand Sea, hitherto considered impassable, made many expeditions deep into enemy territory; they explored every corner of [Libya](#) and southern [Tunisia](#), raided lonely Italian outposts, co-operated with the French of Equatorial Africa, and later supported the British Eighth Army by raiding enemy airfields and destroying aircraft on the ground, shooting up transport, keeping a day-to-day watch on road traffic behind the enemy lines, reconnoitring routes, and navigating for outflanking forces.

Lieutenant-Colonel Inglis, who had moulded a heterogeneous crowd of civilians into a strong and effective fighting unit capable of using the machine gun to the best advantage in all phases of battle, was to be denied the opportunity of commanding the battalion in the field. On 13 August he was promoted to the temporary command of [4 Infantry Brigade](#); subsequently he was to take this brigade into action, first as infantry and then as an armoured formation, and on two occasions he was to command the New Zealand Division. He was succeeded as commanding officer of [27 \(MG\) Battalion](#) by Major [Gwilliam](#). ⁷

Field-Marshal Graziani's Italian army assembled on Egypt's western frontier. Except for the small mechanised forces which raided the Italian frontier posts as soon as Mussolini declared war, the heavily outnumbered ⁸ British awaited the expected enemy onslaught near [Mersa Matruh](#), the small coastal town at the head of the [Western Desert](#) railway, about 200 miles west of [Alexandria](#). To reach [Matruh](#) the Italians would have to cross about 150 miles of barren, largely waterless, coastal plain, and would have to maintain themselves with ever lengthening supply lines.

The first New Zealand units joined the British forces in the [Western Desert](#) in mid-June. During the next two months two battalions of infantry were busy excavating an anti-tank ditch (never used) at [Garawla](#), near [Matruh](#), and other units were employed on the protection and maintenance of lines of communication. By the beginning of September most of the New Zealand troops were in the desert, many of them at [Baggush](#), about 30 miles east of [Matruh](#).

While 1 and 2 Companies remained on guard duty at [Helwan](#) and [Heliopolis](#), the rest of [27 Battalion](#), now fully equipped with transport, left [Maadi](#) for [Baggush](#) on 27 August. From [Cairo](#) the battalion motored seven miles to [Mena](#) House, the fashionable hotel a few hundred yards from Cheops' Pyramid, and there turned north

onto the monotonous desert highway to [Alexandria](#). Halfway House, the rest house at [Wadi Natrun](#), was the only sign of human habitation until the tents of bedouin camps were seen near the [Mediterranean](#) coast. The battalion spent the night at [Ikingi Maryut](#), about ten miles south of [Alexandria](#), and then headed westwards past a few miles of tall palms and fig trees—rooted, surprisingly, in white sand—and onto a switchback road along a low ridge a mile or two from the sea. Inland stretched an apparently limitless, dun-coloured desert, much of it covered by stunted, sparse scrub. The one or two villages along the route were almost too insignificant to notice in passing; the occasional, solitary railway station seemed to serve no purpose at all. The convoy climbed a fairly steep rise near [Fuka](#), and a few miles beyond, near the [Sidi Haneish](#) station, reached its destination in the evening. A dust-storm was blowing and some trucks were late in getting in; it was midnight before everybody was settled.

Between the sea and an escarpment, and surrounding the wells of Maaten [Baggush](#) and [Maaten Burbeita](#), the machine-gunners and the other New Zealanders assigned to the task constructed a chain of earthworks, the [Baggush](#) Box. There 1 and 2 Companies, after being relieved of their guard duties at the [Cairo](#) aerodromes and spending a fortnight near Ikingi Maryut as lines-of-communication troops (1 Company defending the [Amiriya](#) aerodrome against airborne attack and 2 Company as a mobile reserve), joined the remainder of the battalion on 16 September.

Careful planning and many weeks of arduous digging went into the construction of a skilfully concealed fortress. A war correspondent described a machine-gun team's 'miniature fortress', which was entered through a zigzagging trench: 'Blindly for a while, after the brilliant sunshine outside, you grope past solid, sheltering walls—hard sand, limestone or perhaps reinforced concrete. The roof above you, flush with the surface of the ground, is so firm that you feel nothing could come through it. You pass into a tiny but snug living room, where bunks may be placed along the walls. Now your eyes are "in focus" again, and you see that there is really plenty of light, led indirectly through ingenious arrangements of empty petrol tins and stovepiping. Ahead, in the gun position proper, you realise how well this defensive post is placed. The concealed opening through which the gunner directs his fire commands a remarkable view of his front, but is so small and so perfectly camouflaged as to be invisible from any distance.'

Had the Italians been willing and able to push so far into Egypt, these defensive positions might have been the first testing ground of the 2 NZEF—but a siege in the [Baggush Box](#) was not to be the New Zealanders' first action.

The Italians crossed the Egyptian frontier in mid-September and, in face of the light screen of British mechanised troops, pushed as far east as [Sidi Barrani](#), where they halted. Not in a position to start an immediate counter-attack, the British took what precautions they could against a further enemy thrust. Orders were given for the mining of the main road and tracks between [Sidi Barrani](#) and [Matruh](#), the destruction of the telephone lines, and the salting of all wells ⁹ in the area. A party of New Zealand machine-gunners, led by Lieutenant [Frazer](#), ¹⁰ assisted in the salting of the wells.

With ten 15-cwt trucks, each carrying two men (drawn from the Anti-Aircraft and Signals Platoons), Frazer was told to report to a major of the [Royal Engineers](#) at a rendezvous on the [Matruh- Sidi Barrani](#) road. 'We loaded crude salt from [Matruh](#) on the way up and sampled a high altitude bombing attack by the Italians while doing so. It caused us no grief.' The English major explained that the machine-gunners were to work with a party of [Royal Engineers](#) who had already reconnoitred the wells and estimated the amount of water in them. Sufficient salt was to be tipped into each well to render the water undrinkable, and this was to be followed by a stick of dynamite, 'to help with the mixing process'.

Working in an area about 50 miles from east to west and extending 15 or 20 miles into the desert between [Matruh](#) and [Sidi Barrani](#), and travelling some 300 or 400 miles altogether, they salted about forty-five wells during the next ten days. When they ran out of salt they returned to [Matruh](#) for more.

Meanwhile the Italians had moved into [Maktila](#), about 11 miles east of [Sidi Barrani](#), and were busy preparing their positions at [Tummar East](#), [Tummar West](#) and [Nibeiba](#), south of [Sidi Barrani](#), but obviously they were not looking for trouble; their transport kept to the main road and to the tracks running to their outpost positions. 'We were working in the desert with a screen provided by the 11th Hussars and a Recce group of the 4th Indian Division,' says Frazer. 'Sometimes we worked behind the Italians and often saw their convoys. Either they did not see us or did not want to; that suited us too, as we wanted to get as much done as possible without

interruption.'

Other parties of engineers were laying minefields around road and track junctions—on which two trucks were blown up, one belonging to the machine-gunners and the other to the engineers. The machine-gunners managed to salvage theirs. Also, Indian engineers were cutting down the telephone posts, drag ging them together and burning them. But after all these preparations for delaying their advance, the Italians failed to attack. Instead, the British themselves attacked about two months later. 'The mines had to be lifted and new telephone posts put in. Above all, we had to drink the water from our own salted wells. The general opinion was that it had a gently purgative effect, made the milk curdle in one's tea, but made passable coffee. We had occasion to sample the fruits of our labours for several years thereafter as we passed and re-passed this area on various occasions.'

If the Italian Army seemed reluctant to give battle, the Italian Air Force was a little more active, but seldom were its bombers seen by daylight, and they usually flew too high for accurate bombing. An occasional hit-and-run raid—usually they ran before hitting—was harmless enough. Aircraft sprinkled parts of the desert with 'thermos bombs', explosive devices shaped like khaki-coloured thermos flasks, which were primed by impact with the ground and afterwards exploded by vibration or when touched. These were made harmless by rifle or Bren-gun fire. On one occasion a bold Italian fighter pilot in a Macchi biplane machine-gunned the [Sidi Haneish](#) airfield and destroyed a Valencia on the ground.

Dust-storms were frequent occurrences at [Baggush](#). High winds, sometimes howling gales, swept the fine dust over miles of desert and even out to sea. Dust that could be smelt and tasted, irritated your eyes and nose, gritted in your mouth, mixed stickily with the perspiration on your skin and matted your hair, found its way into the most securely fastened tents and dugouts, lay thickly on beds, eating utensils, weapons and equipment, reduced visibility to a few yards and cast a gloom over the countryside.

The dust-storms were severe where the continual movement of men and vehicles loosened the surface of the desert; conditions were more pleasant farther inland, beyond the escarpment, where the companies went for exercises and manœuvres. 'We liked these trips because there didn't seem to be so much dust, and

if we went far enough not many flies, and it was a break,' wrote Major White.

Near the escarpment were areas covered with mounds about a foot high, where dust had been embedded in the scrub bushes; this made the going very rough. In other places a clay surface that showed signs of cultivation was like corrugated iron to drive over; elsewhere stretches of good, gravelly surface extended for miles, or outcrops of rock would slow vehicles down to a walking pace. Beyond the limit of the vegetation, not so very far inland, jutting rocks might replace small bushes as points to steer by. On higher ground trig points would be marked by cairns or tar barrels set in cement. These trig points, or wells marked by cairns, or graves (usually mounds of stones), were aids to navigation.

The companies practised separately the selection and rapid occupation of positions by day and night, and also indirect machine-gun fire. The battalion, travelling in 120-odd vehicles, carried out a desert march in open formation, with the companies taking turns as advance guard, flank guards and rearguard. The companies also trained with the infantry battalions, and the whole battalion took part in a 4 Brigade Group exercise, in which the [RAF](#) co-operated, and a battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment acted as 'enemy'. Mock attacks were made on a perimeter camp (similar to the Italian camps near Sidi Barrani) by night and a hastily prepared defended locality by day.

The New Zealanders trained with zest and were eager to meet the enemy. Others, however, were to win the spectacular victories of General Wavell's offensive, which began on 9 December. Some New Zealanders—Divisional Signals and Army Service Corps units—did take part, but the men of 4 Brigade Group remained in reserve at [Baggush](#), disgusted and at first unable to believe that they had been left out.

Italian aircraft raided [Baggush](#) on 10 December, dropping bombs in 4 Company's area, which was near the airfield and alongside the railway. Two tents were damaged, but there were no casualties. Two days later some 500 drivers and relief drivers of 220 trucks from 4 Brigade Group, including sixty-seven trucks from 27 (MG) Battalion, were given a small but not altogether unimportant part in the advance. They were to carry petrol and oil to a supply depot near [Bir Abu Misheifa](#), about 25 miles south of [Sidi Barrani](#), and to bring back prisoners of war from the [Sidi Barrani](#)

area to the railhead at [Matruh](#). They set out in high spirits, with 'Skypu Gogetters' and 'Bring 'em back alive' chalked on their vehicles. During a week of dust, driving by moonlight on bitterly cold nights, loss of sleep, and scratch meals at odd hours, nothing dampened their enthusiasm.

On their first trip they collected nearly 300 prisoners, half of them Italians in shabby, bluish-grey uniforms and the remainder Libyan natives in even shabbier multi-coloured clothing, who scrambled eagerly aboard the trucks. The transport was then required for another task, the delivery of about 100 tons of ammunition and rations to a supply depot not far from the Libyan frontier and 20-odd miles inland from [Sollum](#). On the way the convoy passed through several captured Italian camps, littered with vehicles, weapons and equipment. How very crude these defensive positions seemed in comparison with the skilfully planned and camouflaged [Baggush](#) Box. The convoy made a third trip, this time with urgently needed petrol and oil, for the forward supply depot. Italian aircraft bombed the depot while the trucks, unobserved, were halted about seven miles away.

The 200-odd trucks returned to their units on 20 December. The men who had to remain at [Baggush](#) all this time saw their first Italians when train-loads of them passed on their way back to the prisoner-of-war camps. And that, apart from the souvenirs brought back by the envied truck drivers, was about all they did see of Wavell's campaign.

Christmas 1940, the first Christmas in the desert and the first overseas for the [2 NZEF](#), was spent at [Baggush](#) and was celebrated well. Thanks to the assistance of the National Patriotic Fund Board, turkey, chicken, mutton, vegetables, fruit and Christmas pudding were spread before the men, whom the officers waited on at the tables. 'Beer appeared mysteriously ... and it was not long before old enemies became friends and old friends became enemies....'

A few days later, on the 29th, 4 Brigade Group received another call for transport, this time to convey 19 Australian Infantry Brigade to the Libyan frontier, and again the sixty-seven trucks from 27 (MG) Battalion were among those employed. The Australians were collected at [Burg el Arab](#), near [Alexandria](#), and carried to Fort [Capuzzo](#). The drivers and their passengers slept through the coming of the New Year in the open desert. The leading convoy reached its destination next

day and the others a day later. The Australians debussed and, while the transport returned eastwards, prepared to storm the Italian fortress of [Bardia](#), which fell on 5 January.

On that day another event was celebrated at [Baggush](#): the [First Echelon](#) had completed its first year overseas. Now, however, the spell in the [Western Desert](#) was drawing to a close. Orders came on the 9th to move back to [Helwan](#). Tents were struck, gear packed, and everybody was ready to leave on the 11th. The journey took two days, the battalion bivouacking for the night well past [Amiriya](#), and on the second day a dust-storm which had sprung up overnight put nearly all the motor cycles out of action and sand-blasted the paint down to the bare metal on the windward side of the trucks.

At [Helwan](#) the battalion found units of the [Third Echelon](#) (which arrived in September) already in residence—in huts. The more seasoned troops had to be satisfied with tents and a few partly completed huts for messrooms, offices and stores. The machine-gun officers decorated their mess with trophies brought back from the desert. Pride of place was given to an Italian machine gun which the drivers had collected from the wreckage of the Italian defeat at [Sidi Barrani](#).

The battalion was rejoined by 1 Company, which had left [Baggush](#) in November to assist in the training of 6 Infantry Brigade at [Maadi](#). It also received twenty-two men who had arrived in Egypt with the [Third Echelon](#); they had gone into camp in New Zealand as machine-gun reinforcements, had been transferred to an anti-tank company, and now became machine-gunners again. The battalion was below strength as the result of a year overseas without reinforcements. This deficiency was partly made up when 60-odd men of the 4th Reinforcements arrived in January, but the battalion did not return to full strength until another sixty reinforcements came with the [Second Echelon](#) from the [United Kingdom](#) early in March.

The two months at [Helwan](#) were a period of final intensive training. The battalion, company by company, practised at the rifle and machine-gun ranges. A very impressive demonstration was given by 5 Platoon of an indirect shoot with Mark VIII Z ammunition, which has a range of 4500 yards, as compared with the extreme effective range of 2800 yards of the ammunition used in the First World War.

The companies practised river crossing on the Nile. Paddling themselves and their guns across in collapsible assault boats, the men at first moved gingerly to avoid falling into water that was not at all enticing in its natural state, but soon handled their boats with more assurance. The vehicles were ferried across on rafts assembled by the engineers.

The machine-gunners co-operated with the artillery and infantry in a series of mock attacks in which only the presence of the enemy was left to supposition. The infantry, advancing behind an artillery barrage, was supported by machine-gun fire, and live ammunition—smoke and high-explosive shells and mortar, light and medium machine-gun fire—convincingly simulated battle conditions.

Much emphasis was laid on route-marching with heavy loads. Probably no other unit packed its men so heavily, but the long marches by day or night with guns, ammunition, tripods and spares hardened and strengthened shoulder muscles and feet and prepared the battalion for the arduous campaign on which it was soon to embark.

These months of training, of working and living together in the desert, had wrought changes. The men were leaner, browner, fitter than they had ever been; they carried out their manœuvres and exercises with the smoothness and precision that comes only with practice; they handled their weapons instinctively and with the utmost confidence. And now, at long last, the New Zealand Division was assembled under its own commander. It was ready to meet the enemy.

¹ Lt-Col J. K. Robbie, ED; Nelson; born Christchurch, 5 Sep 1909; shipping and cargo clerk; CO 27 (MG) Bn 25 Jul–16 Oct 1942, 3 Apr–19 Sep 1943.

² Maj C. C. Johansen, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ 2 Oct 1910; civil servant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ Brig R. Miles, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914–19; CRA 2 NZ Div 1940–41; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped 29 Mar 1943; died Oct 1943.

⁴ Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); [Wellington](#); born [Timaru](#), 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); comd [4 Bde](#), Jan 1940–Aug 1941; [2 NZ Div \(Crete\)](#) 29 Apr–27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941–Dec 1945.

⁵ Lt-Col D. G. Steele, OBE, m.i.d.; [Rotorua](#); born [Wellington](#), 22 Mar 1912; farmer; OC A (NZ) Sqn LRDG, 1941–42; CO 22 (Mot) Bn 1944; 27 (MG) Bn, 11 May–20 Nov 1944.

⁶ An English officer and five NZ machine-gunners (L-Cpls C. H. Croucher and W. J. Hamilton, Ptes R. A. Tinker, J. Emslie and R. O. Spotswood) were the first to cross the Egyptian Sand Sea and reconnoitre in southern [Libya](#). Both Croucher and Tinker later commanded patrols of the LRDG; Tinker was awarded the MM and MC.

⁷ Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam, ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 9 May 1904; clerk; CO 27 (MG) Bn 13 Aug 1940–25 Jul 1942; [24 Bn](#) Jul–Nov 1942; town clerk, [Auckland](#).

⁸ In a telegram dated 11 Aug 1940 from the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to the High Commissioner for the [UK](#) in NZ, the forces in North Africa were given as follows: British—one armoured division less one brigade, one infantry division, one infantry brigade, one NZ infantry brigade, one Indian division less one brigade; Italian (in [Libya](#))—16 divisions (8 ½ facing Egypt, 7 ½ facing [Tunisia](#)).

⁹ These wells, the old Roman cisterns, or 'birs' as the Arabs call them, are often huge subterranean caverns hewn in the limestone; surface water runs and filters through into them during the brief rainy season and is stored there during the long dry summer.

¹⁰ Maj K. J. Frazer, MC, m.i.d.; Bathurst, Gambia, [West Africa](#); born [Auckland](#), 28 Jul 1914; bank clerk; wounded 16 Apr 1945.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 3 – THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

CHAPTER 3

The First Encounter

Italy invaded Greece from Albania on 28 October 1940. Against great odds but lacking nothing in courage, the Greeks repelled the Italians and drove them back into Albania, but then faced a greater peril from another quarter. When German forces began to concentrate in Bulgaria it became obvious that the day was not far distant when they would come to the aid of their Axis partner. To meet this situation Britain decided, despite misgivings about so hazardous an enterprise, to send a force to assist in the defence of Greece.

The troops despatched were scarcely sufficient for the task: 1 Armoured Brigade, with a regiment of light tanks and one of cruiser tanks which were of little use because of defective tracks; 6 Australian Division, which had taken part in the Cyrenaican campaign; and the New Zealand Division. Nor could they expect adequate protection against air attack while the RAF's eighty serviceable aircraft—Blenheim bombers and Hurricane and Gladiator fighters—were outnumbered by more than ten to one.

Preparations for the move started many rumours, that the Division was going to Greece, Libya, or elsewhere, but the destination was not revealed until after the troops had embarked. The 27th (MG) Battalion received a warning order on 10 March, ostensibly to go on manoeuvres. Tents were struck, gear was packed, and the men spent a few nights sleeping in the open. The battalion left Helwan on the morning of the 14th and drove into a dust-storm, one of the worst of the war, on the Mena- Alexandria desert road. Visibility was reduced to less than ten yards, several trucks broke down and had to be towed, and all but two of the motor cycles were forced to fall out. The Intelligence Officer (Second-Lieutenant Leslie ¹) was injured when he fell from his motor cycle and was taken to hospital.

Late in the afternoon the battalion reached Amiriya transit camp, a most inhospitable place at the best of times but at its worst during a dust-storm, and proceeded to an area just north-west of Ikingi Maryut where tents had been erected. The transport, the Anti-Aircraft Platoon and an advance party left for Alexandria on the 16th. Kitbags and messing gear were loaded on Australian

vehicles and taken to the wharf next day. The machine-gunners paraded in full marching order on the morning of the 18th, each man carrying a pick and shovel and two days' rations in addition to his usual load, and marched to the [Ikingi Maryut](#) railway station. After a short train journey, made extremely uncomfortable by the amount of impedimenta carried, they reached the wharf and embarked, ² in company with the Petrol Company and some Australians, including General Sir Thomas Blamey and members of his staff, in the cruiser HMS Gloucester.

The battalion vehicles and their drivers, together with [RAF](#) ground crew and equipment, had sailed for [Greece](#) the previous day in the Queen Adelaide, a cargo ship of under 5000 tons, as part of a convoy of eleven vessels escorted by three warships. Usually the Queen Adelaide's only defence against air attack was an old Hotchkiss machine gun, which the New Zealanders now repaired. For this voyage her armament was reinforced by ten Bren guns of the Anti-Aircraft Platoon (under Sergeant [Brundell](#) ³) and a 'Chicago piano'—four Vickers assembled on a multiple mounting—in charge of Staff-Sergeant [Weeds](#), ⁴ the battalion armourer, with five or six men to maintain the guns and ammunition. ⁵

In the afternoon of the 20th the convoy was attacked by aircraft, and a tanker astern of the Queen Adelaide was struck on the bridge by two bombs, which set fire to her superstructure and put her out of control. 'She immediately lost way and drifted to the rear of the convoy,' says Private [Bayly](#). ⁶ 'We later heard the fire in the bridge was extinguished and that she was under control and making for Crete. The plane that bombed her was the one that swung up and then came down on the stern of Queen Adelaide....' It met a hail of lead from the [Chicago](#) piano, fired by Weeds, and went away smoking; it plummeted into the sea some distance from the convoy. The Queen Adelaide's officers and men were delighted. 'The captain gave us two bottles of "Black and White" and 1,000 yellow cigarettes to divide among the AA gun crews for saving his ship,' says Weeds. 'I was given a good nip each night by him also for the same reason.'

The voyage was otherwise uneventful, but it was slow. Rations issued for four days had to last six and a half. There were no proper cooking facilities, but the men improvised as best they could. Water was steam-heated in a four-gallon container and everyone helped himself whenever he could from tea made in biscuit tins. Some flour was given to the ship's cook, who made fresh bread, and an [RAF](#) airman

produced bully-beef stew and pies all day long.

The convoy reached its destination, [Piraeus](#), the port of [Athens](#), on the evening of 22 March. The main body of the battalion had arrived three and a half days earlier.

The journey of the [Gloucester](#) had not been altogether without incident. The cruiser left [Alexandria](#) shortly after 5 p.m. on the 18th, and taking a course to the west of the island of [Crete](#), made an average speed of 29 knots during the night. Enemy aircraft appeared overhead next morning and aimed four bombs at the ship, but missed, the nearest being only forty yards astern. [Piraeus](#) was reached in less than twenty-four hours, and no time was wasted in disembarking the troops.

But the advance party ⁷—Captain Johansen, his batman and Corporal [Dowding](#) ⁸—could not be found. Although they had left [Amiriya](#) two days ahead of the battalion, their ship, the SS *Hellas*, had sailed from [Alexandria](#) about the same time as the [Gloucester](#), and, taking twice as long over the voyage, did not reach [Piraeus](#) until the afternoon of the 20th, when the CO and the Intelligence Officer (Lieutenant [Bradshaw](#) ⁹) were at the wharf to meet them.

The New Zealanders and Australians received a tumultuous welcome from the Greeks, who cheered them in the streets of [Athens](#). It was not without a little interest, however, that they observed the German flag flying from the office of the Embassy and the members of the German staff leaning over the balcony, for [Germany](#) was not yet at war with [Greece](#).

The machine-gunners were taken in 18 Battalion transport— their own being still at sea on the *Queen Adelaide*—to a tented camp on the slopes of [Mount Hymettus](#), a short distance from [Athens](#). Next morning they found themselves in a fragrant pine forest. 'A delightful change altogether to hear the birds chirping away.... How nice it is to see real green country, and walk once more on grass.' Greeks thronged the camp selling eggs, bread, fowls and wine, and offered to wash clothes for a very moderate price.

Leave to [Athens](#) was granted during the two days at [Hymettus](#), and in this brief time many men visited the [Acropolis](#), which rises 200 feet above the surrounding

city, with the Parthenon, the temple of the goddess Athena, at the summit. They saw other monuments of ancient [Greece](#), the stadium built in 1895 for the first of the modern Olympic Games, and the city's underground railway. They found that their pay—545 drachmae, equivalent to 21 shillings—went further than it had done in [Cairo](#) or [Alexandria](#). Wherever they went they were gladly received by Greeks who wished to demonstrate their gratitude to the troops who had come to their aid. It was evident that the people of [Athens](#) were acutely conscious of the imminence of invasion.

On 21 March Captain Johansen and the other two members of the advance party reconnoitred a camp site for the battalion at [Kifisia](#), about ten miles north-west of [Athens](#); they erected a number of tents before the main body of the battalion arrived two days later. 'So in fact the advance party actually did the job for which they were detailed,' says Johansen.

Meanwhile Colonel Gwilliam received orders to go with a reconnaissance party to [Amindaion](#), in northern [Greece](#), where he was to report to an Australian brigadier. He set out on the morning of the 22nd, accompanied by Lieutenant Bradshaw and the officers commanding 1 Company (Captain Grant), 2 Company (Captain Robbie), and 3 Company (Major [McGaffin](#) ¹⁰).

The remainder of the battalion left [Hymettus](#) on the morning of the 23rd, and after three and a half hours' march, reached the green and wooded area of their new camp. Their transport arrived from Egypt a few hours later. They did not have long to refresh their eyes with the beauty of their surroundings; in two days they were away again.

The Allies faced the threat of sudden attack by the German divisions concentrated in southern [Bulgaria](#). In broken, alpine country where the few roads wind through deep valleys and defiles, the invasion could be expected to come by way of the main mountain passes: the Struma River valley, which crosses the Bulgarian border at the [Rupel Pass](#) in the north-east, the Vardar (or Axios) River valley in the centre, and the [Monastir Gap](#), between the Vardar and [Albania](#). The [Monastir Gap](#), a valley flanked by mountain ranges, offered an easy route across the frontier between the towns of [Monastir](#) in [Yugoslavia](#) and [Florina](#) in [Greece](#).

In Albania the Greeks were holding the Italians north of the frontier; in the north-east they occupied the Metaxas line, a series of fortifications constructed in the nineteen-thirties and covering [Salonika](#) against attack from [Bulgaria](#). They could not bring themselves to surrender their hard-won gains in [Albania](#) or to withdraw from the Metaxas line to a shorter and more easily defended line across the peninsula. It was decided, therefore, to take position on the [Aliakmon line](#), which stretched from the mouth of the [Aliakmon River](#) in the Gulf of [Salonika](#) north-westwards through [Veroia](#) and [Edhessa](#) to the Yugoslav frontier.

Everything now depended on what [Yugoslavia](#) would do. Should Yugoslav resistance or German recognition of Yugoslav neutrality fail to prevent an attack through the [Monastir Gap](#), not only would the invaders be able to cut off the Greek Army in [Albania](#), but they might also outflank the British and Greek forces in the [Aliakmon line](#) and by advancing down the valley in the rear cut off the defenders' route of retreat. Uncertainty about Yugoslav intentions and anxiety about a German thrust through the [Monastir Gap](#) led to the formation of the Amindaion detachment, which at that stage was to include 3 Battalion [Royal Tank Regiment](#) and 27 (MG) Battalion less one company.

When the machine-gun reconnaissance party arrived at Amindaion, a village near the southern shores of the Petersko and Vegorritis lakes, on the morning of the 24th, Colonel Gwilliam found the acting CO of 3 Battalion [Royal Tank Regiment](#), who said he had not been told that the machine-gunners would be arriving and was unaware of the presence of any Australian brigadier in the area. He suggested that Gwilliam should see the GOC 20 Greek Division at [Xynon Neron](#), a village three miles west of [Amindaion](#), but the Greek general was not interested in the battalion when he found that it would not be operating under his command. Uncertain as to what exactly was intended for their battalion, the machine-gun officers spent the next two days reconnoitring and waiting for orders.

North of [Amindaion](#) the broad valley, about 1000 feet above sea level, is cut off by a scrub-covered ridge, broken only by a narrow gap, the [Kleidi Pass](#), which takes its name from a small village on its eastern side. The main road and railway enter this pass and continue north-westwards through the [Florina](#) valley and over the Yugoslav frontier to [Monastir](#), about 20 miles away. From [Vevi](#), a village near the

northern entrance to the pass, a road leads eastwards around the northern shore of [Lake Vegorritis](#) to [Edhessa](#) and [Salonika](#); another leads to [Florina](#), about ten miles west.

Obviously the most likely route of attack would be through [Kleidi Pass](#). The ridge on each side, giving wide observation over the [Florina](#) valley towards [Monastir](#)—a valley bare except for scattered poplars, oaks and willows, and the white-walled, red-tiled villages in the foothills—and also over the valley to the south, in rear of the [Aliakmon line](#), therefore was vitally important. Gwilliam considered that at least a division would be required to defend the pass. Although other troops, British and Australian, were to join the [Amindaion](#) detachment, much less than a division was to be available.

The main body of the battalion, under Major [Wright](#) ¹¹ (the second-in-command), left [Kifisia](#) in its own transport on the 25th, and spent the first night on the coast near [Atalandi](#). Next day's move was 'through wonderfully picturesque and ever-changing country, along the sea coast, through many villages—always warmly welcome—over precipitous mountain ranges, through lush valleys' to a staging area near [Larisa](#). Along the way were innumerable wayside shrines, and also flocks of storks. Fresh-complexioned women worked in the fields and even on the roads in company with old men and boys; the other men were at the battlefield.

From [Larisa](#), which had been wrecked by an earthquake—wreaths lay at the doorways of some of the demolished houses—the route led into mountain country where icy gusts from the snow-covered peaks of [Mount Olympus](#) were keenly felt by men who had so recently left Egypt. Orders were received for two companies (instead of one, as at first intended) to report to the New Zealand Division at [Katerini](#), near the Gulf of [Salonika](#), and 3 and 4 Companies therefore pulled out from the column. The remainder of the battalion continued on through [Servia](#) to bivouac south of [Kozani](#), and completed the journey on the 28th, when 1 Company was sent to [Lofoi](#) and 2 Company to [Palaistra](#) to cover the roads north of [Kleidi Pass](#) and east of [Florina](#). Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company stayed near the southern entrance to the pass.

A day later Grant and Robbie decided to move their companies to alternative positions because they considered it tactically unsound to have them so close to the

villages. The wisdom of this was seen when Italian bombers and fighters, flying very high, attacked the villages. There were no casualties, but some people thought that the safest place to be when the Italians bombed a village was in the village itself, so seldom did they get anywhere near the target.

The machine-gunners dug gun emplacements and improved the roads and tracks, and were ordered to stop digging on the 31st because plans had been changed. 'After we got there,' says Captain Johansen, 'plans were always changing and we had several alternative positions.' Colonel Gwilliam had made his original dispositions on the assumption that he would have three machine-gun companies and that sufficient troops would be available to enable them to be 'so disposed as to use a river on the Yugoslav border as a tank trap and also deny the enemy the high country on each side of the Pass.... With the information coming to hand from time to time as to the troops which would be available for the defence it was consequently necessary to make new plans with the final result that the forward troops were in fact at the foot of the hills the retention of which was so vital to the defence.'



GREECE

When Germany declared war on [Yugoslavia](#) and [Greece](#) on 6 April, the New Zealand Division and two weak Greek divisions held the [Aliakmon line](#). Apart from mountain tracks, the only routes by which the line might be penetrated were down the east coast and through the passes of [Olympus](#), [Veroia](#) and [Edhessa](#). The New Zealand Division was in the coastal sector and covering the [Olympus](#) passes; in the

centre 12 Greek Division was occupying the [Veroia Pass](#) area, but was expecting to hand over to the Australians, of whom only one brigade had begun to arrive; on the left 20 Greek Division thinly covered [Edhessa Pass](#) and as far north as [Mount Kaimakchalan](#). And the [Amindaion](#) detachment weakly guarded the [Monastir Gap](#).

The Greeks on the Bulgarian front were in a hopeless situation against an enemy with vastly superior equipment and overwhelming air support. Within two days the Germans, although they encountered extremely stubborn resistance, were infiltrating the Metaxas line in the [Rupel Pass](#) area and outflanking the line through the Axios River valley, and by 9 April they were in [Salonika](#). At the same time the sudden collapse of the ill-prepared Yugoslav Army meant that they were in a position to attack from [Monastir](#).

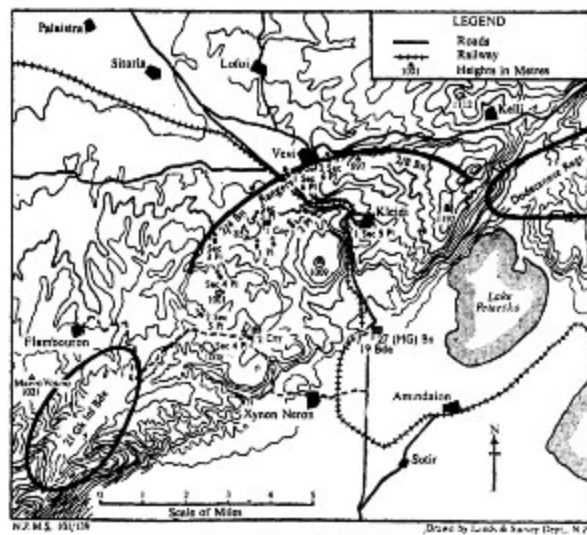
To meet this menace it was decided to reinforce the [Amindaion](#) detachment and to pull back the left wing of the [Aliakmon line](#) so as to present a continuous front from the [Amindaion](#) area across the Vermion range to [Katerini](#). This was to be only an intermediate position, to be held as long as was necessary to withdraw the Greek Army from [Albania](#) and to organise with troops from the [Aliakmon line](#) a position where it was hoped to make a more protracted defence: the [Olympus- Aliakmon River line](#), which was to extend westwards from [Mount Olympus](#) through the high country near the southward bend in the [Aliakmon River](#) to [Grevena](#). The force in the [Amindaion](#) area, [Mackay Force](#),¹² was to defend [Kleidi Pass](#) during this redeployment.

Rain had fallen for several days and consequently the machine-gunners had great difficulty in getting into position on the night of 8–9 April. Second-Lieutenant [Newland](#)¹³ says that the journey his men had to make 'over the worst six miles of country roads imaginable took approx 4 ½ hours. Each truck had to be pushed through the deep mud many times during the night. Scrub had to be cut in many places....'

Captain Robbie placed 6 Platoon (Lieutenant [Liley](#)¹⁴) at the entrance to [Kleidi Pass](#), and the rest of 2 Company in the vicinity of Point 1001, a feature on the ridge to the west. Captain Grant deployed 1 Company on two features about midway between [Vevi](#) and Point 1001.

As soon as the trucks were unloaded they were sent back to B Echelon, some miles to the rear, which left the platoons feeling isolated and cut off. 'We were not in the happiest of positions,' says Liley, who had been told to expect a German attack that night and could obtain no information about other troops in the area. He placed No. 1 Section (Corporal [Cook](#)¹⁵) about 100 yards to the right of the main road and just high enough on a slope to give a good field of fire towards [Vevi](#) and along the road, and No. 2 Section (Corporal [Green](#)¹⁶) on high ground east of the village. The two sections were about 1500 yards apart and separated by hilly, scrub-covered ground; as there was no telephone they could not be controlled from Platoon Headquarters, which was later established about midway between them. Liley took No. 1 Section (Sergeant [Morgan](#)¹⁷) of 5 Platoon, which was attached to his platoon, back towards Kleidi and selected a site for it on a forward slope between the village and the road in the pass; this section was to be in reserve to cover the road in case a break-through should occur.

Part of [1 Armoured Brigade](#)¹⁸ arrived by the road from [Edhessa](#). The 1st Rangers (a motor battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps) was detached from the column and given a position on the line of a minefield that Australian engineers were laying across the entrance to the pass. Two Australian battalions, arriving later from the south, continued the line to the east and west. On the Rangers' left [2/4 Battalion](#) deployed on a four-mile front along the ridge, and on the right [2/8 Battalion](#) occupied positions on the high country between [Vevi](#) and [Lake Petersko](#). Next morning Liley made contact with the Rangers and promised to assist them with fire as much as possible. 'They were extremely thin on the ground,' he says. 'I would estimate some sections were 50 yds apart.'



Dispositions, 10 April 1941
Dispositions, 10 April 1941

The Greeks began to evacuate the villages in the [Florina](#) valley, taking into the hills some of their more precious possessions and animals. About 2000 men, women and children found shelter in a coalmine in 1 Company's area.

The troops defending [Kleidi Pass](#)—the Rangers, the two Australian battalions and the two New Zealand machine-gun companies—under the command of Brigadier G. A. Vasey (commander [19 Australian Brigade](#)), were supported by two regiments of 25-pounders, four batteries of two-pounder anti-tank guns, and three troops of medium guns. The armoured brigade, less the Rangers, was in reserve in the valley to the south of the pass.

First contact with the enemy—actually the first by the New Zealanders in [Greece](#)—was made on the morning of 10 April by a troop of Divisional Cavalry which had been given the task of protecting some British engineers sent to destroy a bridge just beyond the frontier on the road to [Monastir](#). Before the engineers could complete the job a German column came down the road, and after exchanging fire the patrol raced back to [Kleidi Pass](#).

Snow had fallen in the high country during the early hours of the morning, but the weather cleared soon after daybreak and observers near the pass were able to report the enemy's approach. After midday the field and medium guns opened fire on vehicles at long range. Second-Lieutenant [MacDonald](#)¹⁹ (1 Platoon) had an excellent view of the shelling. 'A shell went over our heads and we thought that the mediums were ranging on the road. However we used our telescope and had a look.

Great shock. There were miles of German MT showing up very black on the roads in the clear Greek atmosphere. The shelling stepped up and before long we had a queue waiting to use our telescope.

'The shelling went on all day for the Germans had a traffic jam. There was untold damage ²⁰ and we could see the enemy inf running through the shell bursts for the shelter of shell holes. The country was open and there was practically no cover.

'Four Blenheims went over and bombed this colossal jam; one was shot down by the German AA guns right up in the forward troops. This was the only time I saw our own planes over in [Greece](#).'

The enemy drew off behind a low ridge three miles away, but did not return the fire, apparently because his tanks and infantry had outrun his artillery. Movement to the west and south later in the afternoon, however, suggested that he might attempt to probe around the left flank, where there was a gap between [Mackay Force](#) and the Greek Cavalry Division farther west. The Greek [21 Infantry Brigade](#), which was supposed to fill this gap, was not seen until next day.

To counter infiltration in this area Newland's 5 Platoon (less the section at Kleidi) and an attached section of 4 Platoon were sent to [2/4 Battalion](#)'s left flank to cover the [Flambouron](#)-Xynon Neron road over the ridge, and 1 Platoon was withdrawn from 1 Company to occupy Point 1008, south of this road, where it overlooked the small valley leading to [Flambouron](#). About 9.30 p.m. Newland's two sections fired on motor cycles and infantry entering the village, but could not tell whether they had done any damage.

The Germans occupied [Vevi](#) about dusk. After dusk tanks could be heard moving about in front of the Rangers, and men shouting. Both sections of 6 Platoon, which had fixed lines laid out to cover the forward infantry positions, opened fire soon after nine o'clock and were very busy until about midnight, when an enemy mortar tried unsuccessfully to dislodge No. 2 Section, which was about half a mile from the village. An hour later the same section held off an attack by an infantry patrol without trouble.

A section from the Rangers—six men with four Bren guns and an anti-tank rifle—had been attached to No. 2 Section for protection, and some Australians, also armed with Bren guns, were half a mile to the rear. About 1.30 a.m. Corporal Green heard somebody shout and, looking round, saw about thirty yards away in the moonlight some unarmed men with their hands held above their heads, and an armed man in their rear, who shouted that he was an Australian. Green asked this man, who was in German uniform, what part of [Australia](#) he came from, and getting no reply, fired at him. Turning quickly Green saw to his front about fifty yards away a dozen Germans fully armed with automatic rifles. One of them shouted repeatedly, 'Surrender, you are surrounded.' Green threw a hand grenade and made his escape.

It appears that, while the Germans had been engaging No. 2 Section from the front, a patrol had worked its way around to the rear, captured six Australians, and escorted them down onto the machine-gun positions. Together with the Australians and the Rangers eleven New Zealanders were taken prisoner and marched a few miles, put into trucks and taken north into [Yugoslavia](#).

Green was confident he could recapture the guns and was given permission to try. He took with him Platoon Headquarters and some Rangers, but was unsuccessful; he had to be restrained from rushing the post on his own.

The Rangers drew back their right company, leaving No. 1 Section in a very exposed position. The enemy infiltrated into dead ground about thirty yards from the guns, which could now be attacked from the rear. Shortly before dawn Liley saw some of the Rangers go back past his headquarters and questioned one of them; he then realised he had little time to withdraw No. 1 Section. Private [Hall](#),²¹ whom he despatched to bring the section back, was fired on by two Germans on the way, but gave the warning, and soon after daybreak the section arrived at Platoon Headquarters. The gun crews brought all their equipment and ammunition, but few blankets. Liley withdrew his men to the top of a long, steep slope; they came under light machine-gun fire on the way, but had no casualties. From this position, about 250 feet up, they could engage targets on the plain below.

Snow fell in the early morning of the 11th (Good Friday) and continued intermittently throughout the day. The machine-gunners, having spent a sleepless night in sodden gunpits, were wet through and distressed by the cold; their boots

were water-logged. Snow and mist sometimes reduced visibility to 50 or 100 yards.

'We engaged targets on the plain throughout the day at medium ranges but were harassed by heavy mortar fire directed by spotter planes,' says Liley. 'We fired the Vickers at this plane but it was obviously heavily armoured. The top of this hill was fairly flat, some stunted brush, and impossible to dig. It was rock with a little gravel and soil top. These heavy mortars, apparently directed by the plane, kept us on the move—he was on to us as soon as we opened up on a target, and we would be obliged to shift 100 yds or so.'

On the other side of the pass 2 Platoon (Lieutenant [Hains](#)²²) and 3 Platoon (Lieutenant [Kirk](#)²³), which were also shelled, fired on advancing infantry, causing casualties; they put out of action three of the four combination motor cycles the enemy was using to ferry his troops forward. On the left flank Newland's two sections, between snow storms—the snow was from six inches to a foot or more deep by evening—found targets at ranges from 1500 to 2500 yards. They engaged a mule train climbing up towards the [Mavro Vouno](#) peak, on 21 Greek Brigade's front behind [Flambouron](#); this they thought was carrying a heavy machine gun or a light mountain gun. Both types of weapon were in action on [Mavro Vouno](#) next day.

High up on Point 1008 1 Platoon was not in action during the day, but was not entirely undisturbed. 'The tracks of a dog in the snow worried us because we thought it might be from a Hun patrol,' says MacDonald. 'So plunging through the snow and mud we went about 1 ½ miles to the right and down to an A/Tk gun on the road. The men reported it to be a mongrel sporting dog. So we went back and had some more rum.'

Blizzard-like conditions prevailed that night (the 11th–12th). The remaining men of 6 Platoon who were not required to man the two Vickers guns formed a rifle screen facing the rear, from which direction some light mortar shelling was coming, presumably from the Germans who had infiltrated the Australians' lines. The two Vickers fired on fixed lines down a re-entrant that appeared to be a natural line of approach for the enemy. A strong German patrol pushed forward in the darkness, but found that 'the line on top of the feature was stubbornly defended ... got to within 20 paces of the positions, but was forced to ground by heavy, accurate LMG and HMG fire.'²⁴ Soon after daybreak an Australian company commander, reporting that the

machine-gunners' shooting had been most effective, told Liley 'The gully is full of dead Jerries.' A wounded German from a mountain regiment was brought as an exhibit.

The machine-gunners were scarcely in a fit state to handle their guns. Probably none of them had slept for three nights. Corporal Cook was evacuated with frostbite. 'After the cold night in wet boots I was very concerned, didn't want to see them crippled,' says Liley, who withdrew the rest of his men into a small valley for shelter. Colonel Gwilliam and Major Wright brought up dry greatcoats and a rum ration, and some hot food arrived from the Australians, the first food, other than fowls and eggs obtained from the village of [Vevi](#), the platoon had received in four days.

Preparations were under way to withdraw [Mackay Force](#) on the night of 12–13 April. The plan was for [1 Armoured Brigade](#) and some attached troops, including the machine-gunners, to protect the withdrawal of [19 Australian Brigade](#), which was to occupy ground north of the [Aliakmon River](#) west of [Servia](#). The Rangers, supported by the machine-gunners, were to cover the withdrawal of the two Australian battalions from the line in the evening of the 12th and were to be the last to leave.



Mackay Force rearguards

Part of the armoured brigade group (supported by one machine-gun platoon) was to occupy a position astride the road at [Sotir](#), a mile or two south-west of [Amindaion](#), to cover the main withdrawal, while the rest of the brigade group was to occupy a final rearguard position at [Proastion](#), three miles south of the town of

Ptolemais, through which the **Sotir** force would withdraw. The armoured brigade and attached troops were then to go back to the **Grevena** area, across the **Aliakmon River**. Headquarters Company had been sent there already.

While discussing the situation with Liley shortly after 8 a.m. on the 12th, Gwilliam was called away to reconnoitre for the positions in the rear to cover the planned withdrawal, which Brigadier Vasey told him would not be made before 7 p.m. Assisted by Lieutenant Bradshaw, he completed the pin-pointing of gun positions in the **Proastion** area about 3 p.m. Already 1 Platoon had been ordered to leave Point 1008 to report to **1 Armoured Brigade** at **Sotir**.

The enemy had come to the conclusion (according to German reports) that the feature on which Liley's guns had been in action during the night was the key point in the British line covering **Kleidi Pass**; from it the British could see the German assembly area at **Vevi** and could enfilade the pass road. The enemy therefore decided to capture this feature (Point 997) before launching his main assault on the pass.

This preliminary attack came about 8.30 a.m. in the area where 2/8 Australian Battalion's left flank joined the Rangers' position astride the entrance to the pass. The foremost Australian platoon was overrun, but the remainder of the battalion held until the Rangers were seen falling back on the lower ground. The Australians then withdrew their left flank a short distance, but regained some of the lost ground with a counter-attack about an hour later. The Germans, however, retained their foothold on the ridge.

Unable to assist the Australians in such close fighting—the attack had been made in heavy fog—Liley withdrew his guns 100–150 yards. He next sent No. 1 Section 6 Platoon back to the position that No. 1 Section 5 Platoon had been occupying near the village of Kleidi, where the men could rest, and brought the less weary 5 Platoon section forward to the reverse side of the hill, not quite as far forward as the 6 Platoon section had been but nearer the road. Most of the cloud cleared from the sky and the day became warmer.

The two platoons of 1 Company on the other side of Kleidi Pass, where they had been supporting the Rangers—one Vickers gun had been put out of action with a

bullet through the rear casing—realised something was wrong when they saw the enemy scrambling over the high ground on their right. The Rangers prepared to pull out and, although Captain Grant did his best to persuade them to stay, left their heavy equipment and retreated through the machine-gunners about 11 a.m. Finding themselves now the only troops forward of the artillery, 2 and 3 Platoons kept up a steady fire to their front until about two o'clock, when the CO [2/8 Battalion](#) advised Grant to retire and said his infantry would cover the withdrawal. While the machine-gunners were carrying their guns, ammunition and equipment to the southern foot of the hill, Lieutenant Hains was asked by an artillery officer to explain the situation to the latter's commanding officer by telephone. Learning what had happened, this CO immediately communicated with the Australian Brigade Headquarters, which refused to believe that the Rangers were not still in position.

Captain [Purcell](#) ²⁵ had a similar experience when he spoke to Brigade Headquarters from a medium battery. 'The HQ appeared still confident that all infantry were still in position and no penetration had been made. I did my best to advise him that at that moment the infantry (Rangers) were already in rear of the guns and that in a very short time the medium battery would be under direct small arms fire from the enemy. The enemy by now had established OPs on the high ground and some observed gunfire on HQs and gun lines soon convinced all in rear that the situation had changed.'

The two platoons became split up into groups of three or four men. Some found transport when they reached the road; others continued on foot. 'About 4 miles further on our trucks were waiting for us and were we relieved,' says Sergeant Philpott. ²⁶ 'We were so done after our forced tramp we could not have gone much further. As we retreated, several shells fell close to us and we were lucky that the shrapnel flew over our heads, although we suffered a few casualties.'

Lance-Corporal [Bergin](#) ²⁷ was severely wounded. 'I remember calling out to be picked up but no one seemed to hear. Finally a 3 ton truck towing a 25 pounder stopped and the Aussies picked me up....'

The Germans launched their main attack about midday, or shortly afterwards, against [2/8 Battalion](#)'s exposed left flank, and later tanks and infantry reached the whole of the battalion's front, east of the pass. The Australians, lacking adequate

anti-tank defence and now under fire from their left rear and also from the right (where the Greek [Dodecanese Regiment](#) was putting up a stiff rearguard fight), retreated over the ridge with heavy losses, mostly men captured.

The section of 5 Platoon was forced back after inflicting casualties on German infantry at ranges of about 500 yards or less. The Germans 'were more closely bunched than usual and presented a perfect target for MMG fire,' Liley recalls. Early in the afternoon 6 Platoon had given overhead fire from the rear position. This had been put down, at the Australians' request, to the left of the section of 5 Platoon. 'I was told by an infantry officer that the shoot was at least partly successful; he said the enemy withdrew a little but so did some of his [the Australian] forward sections. They could probably hear it going over and thought they were being fired on from the rear.' Liley returned from the 6 Platoon section to the forward 5 Platoon section about the time the main German attack began.

'It must be remembered that few if any of the infantry engaged in this attack were dug in and when enemy tanks appeared on the top of the hill our defence was completely disorganised. At the same time I saw that the road defences had gone and enemy infantry were moving unchecked up the road. There was in fact nothing to stop them except the sec of 6 Pl in reserve and further back some Artillery. As far as I could see there was no infantry reserve and no tanks or anything else to restore the position. At that time everything must have been wide open to the enemy for some miles to the south.

'I accordingly ordered Sec Comdr 5 Pl to withdraw his Sec and came back to the reserve position. Must have made good time running almost parallel with the road and helped by enemy fire from those on the road. Sec 6 Pl had a wonderful position just where the bend in the road appears ... slightly above and looking right down a straight road for perhaps 1000 yds. We held our fire until the enemy were about 150 yds distant and then opened both guns on road. The enemy were thick on the road as they thought probably they had passed all opposition. Both guns fired several belts rapid before it was necessary to search for targets. Enemy casualties in this action must have been extremely heavy ²⁸ as there was little cover on either side of the road. We maintained this position for quite some time, probably at least an hour before enemy commenced firing on us from our left rear. 25 Pounders were now shelling the road just behind our position and we withdrew accordingly on the west

side of the road and about 200 yds from it. Sappers then blew the road as we passed. I am pleased to say we brought out all our guns and equipment.'

Carrying their guns and equipment, the machine-gunners withdrew five or six miles on foot. Liley was later awarded the MC for his 'most commendable courage and coolness'. Apart from the eleven men captured, the casualties included Corporal Dowding, who had been killed during the last attack at the forward position on the 12th.

Convinced that the infantry in the centre had retired, Mackay Force Headquarters ordered the artillery to pull out. The last to leave was a troop of the [Royal Horse Artillery](#) astride the road at the southern entrance to the pass. Supported for a time by two Australian anti-tank guns, these four 25-pounders held the gap in the late afternoon while the rest of the force went back to the delaying positions farther south. They fired over open sights on the advancing Germans until they were less than a quarter of a mile away, and then calmly withdrew.

The machine-gunners on the heights above [Flambouron](#) had been firing at long range on the Germans working around the left of the Greek brigade, which was observed to be gradually drawing back. But the collapse at [Kleidi Pass](#) placed 2/4 Australian Battalion and its supporting troops, including the machine-gunners, in grave danger of being cut off. About five o'clock Brigadier Vasey told the battalion commander that the front had 'lost all cohesion', and ordered him to withdraw. Half an hour later Captain Robbie, who had already received instructions from [27 Battalion](#) for the planned withdrawal later that evening, overheard on an Australian telephone circuit a conversation which indicated that the situation was hopeless. He got in touch with the Australian CO and was told that a general withdrawal was in progress. He then advised Newland by despatch rider to get his two sections out as soon as possible.

Robbie was assured that the machine-gunners could be of no further assistance. The vehicles arrived and Second-Lieutenant Hatton's ²⁹ guns (section of 4 Platoon) were manhandled to the road well south of Point 1001. Johansen had set off already with Company Headquarters.

It was discovered that the engineers had blown up a bridge and completely

blocked the road east of [Xynon Neron](#). Here part of Battalion Headquarters under the Adjutant (Captain [Cooper](#)³⁰), Headquarters 2 Company and the section of 4 Platoon were held up until an alternative route could be found. The track selected petered out in an open field only 40 yards from the main road. Eight vehicles were hopelessly bogged and had to be set on fire; only three trucks could be pushed out, and the men from the burning vehicles were loaded onto these and passing Australian transport.

Newland received at 6 p.m. Robbie's order to retire immediately. By this time the enemy in the hills to the west was shelling the machine-gunners' positions and the road 'probably hoping to cut us off by coming in from the left flank.' Newland had a hurried conference with the officers commanding the Australian infantry company and an Australian anti-tank troop; they decided that the anti-tank guns and their vehicles would have to be destroyed, and that the infantry would cover the machine-gunners' withdrawal.

Newland's two sections managed to carry out most of their equipment and ammunition, some of the men making five trips to the gun positions, but had to abandon much personal gear. They were shelled as they drove along the road to [Xynon Neron](#), but no damage was done. They saw fires beyond the village (probably the burning trucks left by the other machine-gun party) and deviated over the fields to the main road further south. The Australians who delayed their departure to cover Newland's withdrawal were not so fortunate. After reaching the main road near [Xynon Neron](#) they had a brush with some German motor-cyclists, in which the company commander was killed, and they then walked into a strong enemy position astride the road, where some seventy of them were captured.

While returning from his reconnaissance of the [Proastion](#) rearguard position in the afternoon, Colonel Gwilliam met traffic heading southwards. Lieutenant Hains, asked why he was withdrawing before 7 p.m., explained the situation to him, and the CO then took back to [Proastion](#) the vehicles that were ready. There the RSM (Sergeant-Major [Ross](#)³¹) and the Provost Sergeant (Sergeant [Olney](#)³²) accomplished the almost impossible task of sorting out other battalion vehicles as they arrived mixed up with the packed transport retreating south, and by 9 p.m. most of the machine-gunners were in the positions selected by the CO.

Meanwhile the first rearguard prepared for action near [Sotir](#), where the main road passes between a low spur rising to the north-east and a marsh stretching south-westwards to Lake Rudnik. In front of this position a small stream, swollen by the rain and snow, formed a tank obstacle. Two Australian companies, strung out along the ridge on the right, watched the stream and the approaches from [Amindaion](#); a company of the Rangers less than two platoons strong, supported by 1 Platoon and some anti-tank guns, covered the road and a demolished bridge on the left; two field batteries covered the whole front, and two squadrons of the Royal Tanks were in reserve behind the ridge.

The Germans did not attack that night (12–13 April), but a patrol came up to the demolished bridge, only 40 yards from the machine-gunners, who kept quiet and allowed them to retire unmolested. A frosty dawn revealed the enemy camped on the flats south of [Kleidi Pass](#). Through his binoculars MacDonald saw trucks, half-tracked vehicles, motor cycles, and men getting up and stretching themselves. The commander of the armoured brigade (Brigadier M. V. S. Charrington) was surprised when MacDonald pointed out the enemy to him. 'He asked me what I was going to do and said to shoot when the light was better. Opened up at 600 yards and finished up at 3000 yards. Had 10,000 rds a gun and used the lot—two guns firing straight down the road and two enfilading—an MG paradise; open country, no cover. This was the advance party. Soon inf came over or up to [support] them from the pass area. They came in small groups and deployed, but we stopped that effort. The next attempt was on our right flank—we were warned by runner that the Hun was coming that way. Stopped that.'

The infantry advance was broken up by artillery, machine-gun and small-arms fire. It would be hard to say how many of the enemy had been hit, and how many had just thrown themselves flat. One small party of Germans succeeded in crossing the stream and took cover behind an overhanging bank, but the tanks in hull-down positions prevented any further progress.

The rearguard then began to retire. MacDonald's platoon was extricated without casualty, although the guns had to be manhandled in the open—very quickly too—over the crest of the ridge to the transport. When the rearguard was completely withdrawn about 10 a.m., the enemy, who previously had used only small arms and

mortars, launched a fresh attack from [Xynon Neron](#) and pasted the ridge with shellfire.

The [Sotir](#) force went south through [Proastion](#), where the second delaying position was astride the road at the northern entrance to a gorge with hills rising a thousand feet on each side. Three companies of the Rangers were deployed on a low ridge, in front of which, as at [Sotir](#), flowed a small stream. A squadron of the Royal Tanks and [4 Hussars](#) (less a squadron on the left flank) watched the northern approach on the right flank, and two batteries of 25-pounders, seven two-pounder guns and twelve Vickers guns were in support. Grant's 2 and 3 Platoons had been in position along the ridge since 5 a.m., and Hatton's 4 Platoon was on high ground in the rear by midday.

The enemy came on rapidly in tanks and armoured troop-carriers, which were assisted over the demolitions by bridge-laying tanks, and began to shell the rearguard in mid-afternoon. Tanks, approaching through the village of [Asvestopetra](#) on the left, threatened to outflank the position and were engaged by the [Royal Horse Artillery](#) over open sights. At the same time an attack on the right flank was held by the infantry and armour. Favoured by fine weather, German aircraft appeared for the first time in large numbers and began to dive-bomb and machine-gun. 'We were machine gunned three times by several 'planes within 2 hours at Coy. H.Q.,' says Philpott. 'One complete gun team in my Platoon were rendered casualties, all receiving wounds which required immediate attention.' The aircraft also caught 6 Platoon, which was in reserve farther back along the road and was ordered to pull out late in the afternoon. 'We had not gone very far before we were attacked by fighters and heavily strafed,' says Private [Saunders](#).³³ 'Jack O'Donnell³⁴ was badly hit ... and died shortly after.'

At dusk, when German tanks and infantry began to close in from the left flank, orders were given for the withdrawal of 2 and 3 Platoons, which were then deployed on the left of the road at the entrance to the gorge, where they maintained a dense volume of fire for five to ten minutes in the general direction of the enemy and assisted materially in holding the attack while the transport and artillery pulled out. As darkness fell Brigadier Charrington told the machine-gunners to get away. "'Cease fire—embus"' was ordered,' says Purcell, 'and in a matter of moments we had joined the fast moving column of vehicles moving rearwards.'

Hatton's platoon also received orders to withdraw. 'It was now quite dark and there was heavy tank and small arms fire from our right flank as we moved down the road. Several of our trucks and tanks were blazing by the roadside. By the direction of the enemy fire, there was a lot of tracer, it was quite obvious that the encircling movement by the enemy, which we had observed earlier in the day, was almost closed. We were then stopped on the road in an area which must have been adjacent to 1 Armd Bde HQ (there were quite a number of tanks commanded by the Brigadier) and told to bring whatever fire we could to bear on our forward and right flank. Enemy fire at this time was quite heavy, both tank fire and small arms. We dismounted our MMGs from the trucks and fired rapid for 5 to 10 minutes. Our tanks and small arms were also in action. We were then told by the Brigadier to on trucks and off—we were only too pleased to oblige. The enemy had apparently withdrawn or not yet reached the road to our front as we went through the gap without incident.'

The whole of the rearguard force managed to get clear that night and retired to [Grevena](#). The enemy did not follow up because—as is now known—he had run out of petrol and ammunition.

¹ [Lt J. C. Leslie](#); born Pietermaritzburgh, 3 May 1907; farmhand; lost at sea (while serving with [3 NZ Div](#)), 25 Jul 1942.

² The officers of 27 (MG) Bn who embarked for [Greece](#) were:

Bn HQ

CO: [Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam](#)

2 i/c: [Maj P. W. Wright](#)

Adj; [Capt A. W. Cooper](#)

IO: [Lt R. C. Bradshaw](#)

MO: [Capt J. R. H. Fulton](#)

HQ Coy

OC: Capt M. H. Sheriff

QM: Lt R. P. Williams

Sigs Pl: Lt R. I. Crafts

TO: Lt D. J. Parsons

AA Pl: 2 Lt M. B. Luxford

1 Coy

OC: Capt J. L. Grant

2 i/c: Capt H. A. Purcell

1 Pl: 2 Lt H. J. MacDonald

2 Pl: Lt R. L. Hains

3 Pl: Lt G. C. Kirk

2 Coy

OC: Capt J. K. Robbie

2 i/c: Capt C. C. Johansen

4 Pl: 2 Lt O. J. Hatton

5 Pl: 2 Lt C. A. Newland

6 Pl: Lt W. F. Liley

3 Coy

OC: Maj R. L. McGaffin

2 i/c: Capt E. S. McLean

7 Pl: Lt A. H. Dickinson

8 Pl: Lt R. H. Howell

9 Pl: Lt A. T. B. Green

4 Coy

OC: Maj A. W. White

2 i/c: Capt E. J. Tong

10 Pl: 2 Lt D. G. Carnachan

11 Pl: 2 Lt P. A. M. Brant

12 Pl: Lt J. A. Snedden

³ S-Sgt H. W. Brundell; Eastbourne; born Wellington, 4 Apr 1913; clerk.

⁴ Lt G. W. Weeds, m.i.d.; Burnham; born Invercargill, 25 Apr 1913; Regular soldier.

⁵ With the assistance of Sgts W. S. Dawes (NZOC) and D. H. Luke (MT sgt) Weeds built the Chicago piano at Baggush in Aug 1940. 'There wasn't any gas welding equipment on issue then,' he says, 'so everything had to be either rivets or bolts, all bending done cold using a railway truck buffer as an anvil.'

⁶ Pte B. W. Bayly; New Plymouth; born NZ 14 May 1905; salesman; wounded 25 May 1941; p.w. 27 May 1941.

⁷ The advance party was to have a camp ready for the battalion when it arrived.

⁸ Cpl L. R. Dowding; born NZ 30 Apr 1918; upholsterer; killed in action 12 Apr 1941.

⁹ Capt R. C. Bradshaw; Silverstream; born Sydney, 5 Nov 1941; public accountant; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

¹⁰ Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin, DSO, ED; Wellington; born Hastings, 30 Aug 1902; company manager; comd 3 Army Tank Bn (in NZ) 1942; CO 27 (MG) Bn 31 Jan–3 Apr 1943; 19 Armd Regt 1943–44; Advanced Base, Italy, 1944.

¹¹ Maj P. W. Wright, ED; Te Kuiti; born Auckland, 23 Aug 1903; insurance inspector; acting CO 27 (MG) Bn Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

¹² Mackay Force comprised HQ 6 Aust Div, ? Aust Fd Regt, 2/1 Aust A-Tk Regt, HQ 1 Armd Bde, 2 Regt RHA, 102 A-Tk Regt RA, 3 RTR, 4 Hussars, 1 Rangers, 580 Fd Coy RE, 64 Med Regt RA (less a troop), 27 NZ (MG) Bn (less two companies) and one or two small detachments.

¹³ Maj C. A. Newland, m.i.d.; Masterton; born NZ 4 Jan 1913; meat grader.

¹⁴ Capt W. F. Liley, MC; New Plymouth; born NZ 14 Mar 1915; cashier; GSO 3 (Intelligence) 2 NZ Div 1942–43.

¹⁵ Cpl C. W. Cook; New Plymouth; born New Plymouth, 14 Jan 1906; salesman; p.w. 2 Jun 1941.

¹⁶ Sgt L. E. Green, m.i.d.; born England, 16 Jul 1909; fitter and carpenter; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

¹⁷ Sgt F. G. Morgan; Lower Hutt; born Scotland, 9 Dec 1914; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

¹⁸ A group including 4 Hussars withdrew through Veroia Pass to Kozani, and 3 RTR was already in the Amindaion area.

¹⁹ Capt H. J. MacDonald; North Auckland; born Napier, 9 Aug 1908; sheepfarmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁰ The German casualties were surprisingly few. The attack at Vevi was made chiefly by units of the SS 'Adolf Hitler' Div and tanks of 9 Panzer Div.

²¹ Pte F. R. Hall; born NZ 31 May 1915; barman; wounded May 1941; died 1955.

²² Capt R. L. Hains; New Plymouth; born Te Kuiti, 12 Nov 1910; clerk; wounded Nov 1941; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

²³ Maj G. C. Kirk; born Auckland, 8 Apr 1917; insurance clerk; wounded Nov 1941; died of wounds 4 May 1943.

²⁴ Battle report of Leibstandarte SS 'Adolph Hitler' Div.

²⁵ Lt-Col H. A. Purcell, DSO, m.i.d.; Singapore; born Dunedin, 18 Jan 1915; seed salesman; CO 20 Armd Regt 1943–44, 1944–45; wounded 19 Dec 1944; now Regular soldier.

²⁶ Sgt F. J. Philpott, EM; Whangarei; born Whangarei, 24 May 1919; accountant; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁷ L-Cpl D. H. Bergin; Timaru; born Timaru, 16 Oct 1914; boot repairer; wounded 12 Apr 1941.

²⁸ The battalion of the SS 'AH' Div which attacked Kleidi Pass reported that its casualties during 10–13 Apr were 37 killed, 98 wounded and 2 missing. It also claimed that this 'bold attack to open the door to the heart of Greece paved the way to final victory in Greece.'

²⁹ Capt O. J. Hatton; Pahiatua; born NZ 29 Oct 1915; salesman.

³⁰ Maj A. W. Cooper, ED; Gore; born Clifton, 1 Apr 1912; company secretary.

³¹ Capt M. W. J. Ross, m.i.d.; born Auckland, 16 Apr 1918; chemist; died of wounds 18 Apr 1945.

³² WO II R. R. Olney; born Auckland, 24 Nov 1907; cranesman.

³³ Sgt W. D. Saunders; New Plymouth; born New Plymouth, 21 Jun 1917;

printer; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

³⁴ Pte J. T. O'Donnell; born NZ 8 Sep 1905; labourer; killed in action 13 Apr 1941.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 4 – WITHDRAWAL FROM GREECE

CHAPTER 4

Withdrawal from Greece

After the collapse of the Yugoslav armies and the German drive down through the [Monastir Gap](#), the Greek and British forces were not strong enough to hold the troops and tanks, supported by a virtually unopposed air force, which the Germans could bring against them, and were compelled to withdraw from one defensive line to the next, until in the end the Greeks surrendered and the British were evacuated from Greece.

By delaying the German advance from [Monastir](#), Mackay Force was to have given the Greeks time to withdraw from the Vermion mountain range to positions on the left of the Mount [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line. While the British were to hold the sector from the Aegean coast to the southerly bend of the [Aliakmon River](#), the Greeks were to continue the line westwards from the river bend to the other coast. The German advance, however, was too swift to allow the Greeks time to complete this withdrawal, mostly on foot over extremely rugged country. Consequently, just as the original [Aliakmon line](#) had to be abandoned in face of the threat of encirclement from [Monastir](#), so in turn the [Mount Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line would have to be given up for an even shorter line farther south.

On 27 March 3 and 4 Companies had left 27 (MG) Battalion to join the New Zealand Division in the [Aliakmon line](#). At that time the Division was holding the coastal sector with [6 Brigade](#) by the sea, 4 Brigade inland on the left, and 5 Brigade preparing positions to cover the mountain passes in the rear. With Major McGaffin, who arrived from [Amindaion](#) on the 30th, again in command, 3 Company went into positions to support [6 Brigade](#) near the Gulf of [Salonika](#) and spent a week or so digging gunpits and communication trenches. Meanwhile 4 Company joined 22 Battalion in divisional reserve and supporting [6 Brigade](#), and its platoons, after deploying with the infantry companies, also spent some time digging in.

On the day [Germany](#) declared war (6 April) Lieutenant [Green](#) ¹ and Private [Verdon](#), ² both of 9 Platoon, were wounded when the latter was examining a booby-trap device, which may have been dropped by a fifth columnist. Succumbing to his injuries next day, Verdon was the first New Zealand machine-gunner to die in

Greece.

Before they left their positions near the coast the machine-gunners saw [Salonika](#) on fire on the night of 8–9 April. ' [Salonika](#), within view of our positions and across the bay, was heavily bombed ³ at nightfall and the sky was lit up all night by the flames of the burning city,' wrote Private [Clemens](#). ⁴ 'The Germans marched in and occupied it this morning and it was still burning. All night last night while on picquet I heard roads and bridges all around being blown up in readiness for a "strategic withdrawal" and to hinder the Gerries.... A pitiful sight all day seeing Greek civilian refugees pushing back from the Germans. Women with babies in their arms and children by their sides, all crying, followed by a donkey cart carrying all the chattels....'

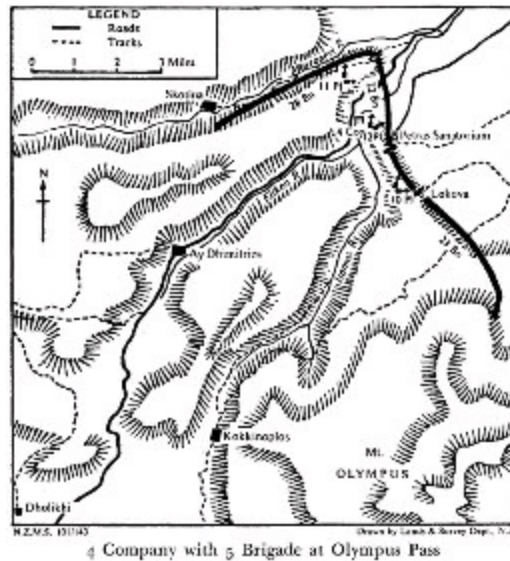
Fourth Brigade was sent back to [Servia Pass](#), where it occupied a position overlooking the [Aliakmon River](#) valley on the main route to the north-west. Sixth Brigade went back behind 5 Brigade, which was astride the [Olympus Pass](#) on the [Elasson- Katerini](#) road. Thus, with 21 Battalion blocking the narrow coastal route at [Platamon](#), the New Zealand Division by 11 April guarded the main mountain passes between [Servia](#) and the [Aegean Sea](#).

Coming under the command of 5 Brigade, 4 Company went back to [Olympus Pass](#) in the early hours of the 10th. The brigade was to defend a narrow defile in which the white ribbon of the road was cut out of the rock walls. To the south the 9000-foot [Mount Olympus](#), coated with snow, resembled a peak in the Southern Alps; to the east and north, beyond the tree-studded coastal plain and the little white-walled villages, was the [Aegean Sea](#). Rain began to fall at dusk and continued throughout the next two days; and then it snowed.

The machine-gun platoons were allotted their areas shortly after arrival and by evening on the 10th all the guns were in position and the men were digging in. 'I had sited my platoons with the guns fairly close together and high and this proved a good scheme as it enabled them to do some jobs on a wide arc and at long range and later to get out over the back quickly,' says Major White.

On the right 10 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Carnachan](#) ⁵), with its guns above the village of [Lokova](#), supported 23 Battalion, which was spread along the forward

slopes of a ridge covering the approaches from the coastal plain. In the centre 12 Platoon (Lieutenant [Snedden](#) ⁶) supported 22 Battalion, which



4 Company with 5 Brigade at Olympus Pass

was astride the road at the entrance to the pass, with the Vickers on the ridge between the road and a sanatorium. On the left 11 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Brant](#)) supported 28 (Maori) Battalion in broken, wooded and scrub-covered country which nevertheless gave an excellent view of the road. This platoon, says Sergeant [Bradshaw](#), ⁷ 'occupied delightful gun positions... the greater part of the target area was ranged and target maps drawn. This was achieved by [[Sergeant](#)] [Ken Booker](#) ⁸ setting off in a truck complete with a flag on an extremely long pole, stopping at appropriate points while the gun numbers, range takers etc. got busy. When everybody was happy, he was waved on to the next point that he selected.'

When [6 Brigade](#) withdrew from the [Aliakmon line](#), it left a rearguard comprising 34 Anti-Tank Battery, 3 MG Company, and the Bren-carrier platoons of the three infantry battalions, under the command of the CO 7 Anti-Tank Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel [Duff](#) ⁹). The brigade retired through [Olympus Pass](#) to the [Ay Dhimitrios-Dholikhi](#) area, and the rearguard came back the following evening to bivouac near the village of [Kokkinoplos](#). The machine-gun company and carrier platoons later joined [Divisional Headquarters](#) near [Dholikhi](#) in case of parachute and air attack.

After [6 Brigade](#) had gone [Divisional Cavalry](#) remained in sole possession of the [Aliakmon line](#), which the Germans approached in the afternoon of the 12th. The

cavalry delayed the enemy's crossing of the river before withdrawing through [Olympus Pass](#). Hostile vehicles were reported coming down the road from [Katerini](#) towards evening on the 14th, and a party of motor-cyclists rode boldly up the pass road several hours later, but made off when 22 Battalion opened fire with light machine guns. Throughout that night enemy vehicles, their headlights blazing, were seen and heard bringing troops forward.

Realising that the [Mount Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line could not be defended, chiefly because the Greeks could not reach their allotted positions in the time available, General Wilson, GOC British Troops in [Greece](#), decided to withdraw to the [Thermopylae](#) line, astride the narrow neck of mountainous country between the gulfs of [Corinth](#) and Euboea, which the British alone might have some chance of holding.

Confident of their ability to make a prolonged stand at [Olympus Pass](#), the officers and men of [5 Brigade](#) Group were surprised and disappointed to hear that they were to withdraw. Brigadier [Hargest](#) ¹⁰ explained at a conference early in the morning of the 15th that the brigade was to go back to the head of the pass that night and hold there for twenty-four hours to cover the withdrawal of the Australians and New Zealanders from positions farther west. Preparations were begun for 4 Company to go to the vicinity of [Ay Dhimitrios](#); Sergeant [Reid](#) ¹¹ took back 12,000 rounds of ammunition and reconnoitred the new position. Then word was received in the afternoon that the move had been postponed until the following night (the 16th–17th).

No real attack developed on [5 Brigade's](#) front on the 15th. German tanks and vehicles, advancing cautiously, apparently trying to find covered ways of approach, were fired on by the defending artillery, mortars and machine guns. There were no targets for 10 Platoon, but 12 Platoon fired for about half an hour in the morning against tanks approaching along the road—these eventually withdrew—and 11 Platoon was in action most of the day against troop-carrying transport and troops who came within range.

'When the Jerries came along the Pass Road,' says Bradshaw (11 Platoon), 'it was rather like playing a piano. The guns shot on the road, the Jerries got off the road. The guns shot to left and right of the road, the Jerries got back on the road, etc. There was one particularly attractive bend in the road open to the guns but as

far as the enemy was concerned [it gave] a visual cover. It was quite intriguing to watch the trucks arriving at the bend, then stopping (hit), running straight on out of control, etc. It was here that Charlie Murray¹² achieved some marvellous long range shooting by means of adding clino readings on to his guns when at their maximum sight elevation.'

In the afternoon the enemy began to shell 5 Brigade at random, apparently searching for 5 Field Regiment's gun positions, but did very little damage.

Tanks opened up with cannons and machine guns on 22 Battalion about 6 a.m. on the 16th. They were promptly engaged by 12 Platoon, the mortars and 25-pounders, and withdrew a short distance for shelter. Snedden's Vickers next brought their fire to bear on a dense smoke screen near a tank concentration where German infantry might have been sneaking into the forest under cover of the smoke, and severely damaged six troop-carriers. When the smoke cleared the machine-gunners, supporting the artillery, continued to harass the tanks.

Fresh attacks up the road, although coming at times within a few hundred yards of 22 Battalion's forward positions, were broken up by the 25-pounders, Vickers, mortars and Boys anti-tank rifles. The effectiveness of this defensive fire is described by a platoon commander in the flanking Maori Battalion, who 'could see road from Katarina [Katerini] black with enemy vehicles. They advanced right under us ... 5th Field 25 pounders opened fire and picked vehicle-tank after vehicle-tank until jerry found it too hot. Staff car came up part of way and lasted one minute and a half before it was blown to hell. Then light tanks, lorries, rushed in and hid behind banks or road right below us but were picked off simultaneously.... There must have been a big number of casualties. 50 or 60 vehicles or so caught fire. I know there were many, for all I did was Hip-hooray for each one hit and that was all day.'

One section of 12 Platoon was extremely successful (according to a message from 22 Battalion) with sustained fire against infantry advancing in a stream bed. Small parties of Germans wearing shorts and jerseys were engaged elsewhere until movement ceased. Towards midday the enemy artillery became active. 'He got on to us on his fourth shell and accurate shelling followed,' says Snedden. 'Two small ration dumps were hit and some blankets were destroyed.' Heavy fog then descended and there was a lull in the fighting, but later the platoon found targets in

front of the [Maori Battalion](#).

Meanwhile, on the right, 23 Battalion had been busily engaged with parties which it was thought were trying to infiltrate around the flank. Heavy fog which came down from the mountains and for several hours reduced visibility to a few yards handicapped 10 Platoon, which nevertheless gave what support it could, shooting by instrument.

Troops advancing on foot took advantage of the fog and rain late in the morning to close up on the [Maori Battalion](#) on the left. When the weather began to clear in mid-afternoon the Maoris saw Germans entering the deep ravine of the Mavroneri stream, where they were beyond effective small-arms range. Unfortunately 11 Platoon, whose Vickers would have had some excellent shooting had they still been there, had already been sent out in preparation for the general withdrawal. At dusk the Germans suddenly attacked the Maoris—the only determined infantry attack on the whole front—and overran some foremost posts, but at a disproportionately heavy cost.

Because of an adjustment to [28 Battalion's](#) line, 11 Platoon, having already prepared one position, had moved on the 13th and hurriedly dug another. After being in action most of the day on the 15th and again next morning, these machine-gunners had to withdraw by a slippery ridge track to the road, preparatory to occupying a position at the top of the pass before dawn. Hearing that they were unable to reach the road by the selected route because of the enemy infiltration, Major White ordered the transport corporal (Pulford ¹³) to turn his trucks, 'a very ticklish undertaking on the narrow winding road in the fog and dark,' and go back down the pass to the place where they could get straight on them. 'They brought out all their guns, much ammo and quite a lot of gear,' says White. 'It is worth recording of all Pls that in preference to their blankets and personal gear the men brought out fighting equipment.' ¹⁴

Snedden's platoon also withdrew all its guns and most of its gear. The equipment had to be manhandled down a very steep, slippery, zigzagging track to the bottom of the pass and up to the road near Company Headquarters, which tested every man's stamina. Taking the risk of being left behind, Privates [Tong](#) ¹⁵ and [Harris](#), ¹⁶ using a commandeered donkey as a pack- animal, returned for a last

load after the infantry had withdrawn. The platoon left its rendezvous on the road at 9.15 p.m. and reached [Ay Dhimitrios](#) before midnight. It was billeted in a house.

Carrying its Vickers and equipment, 10 Platoon got away before nightfall and withdrew with 23 Battalion about seven miles over a mountain track, roughly parallel with the main pass road, to [Kokkinoplos](#). This route rose 2000 feet above the pass over a shoulder on [Mount Olympus](#), and the distance seemed interminable to the heavily laden men struggling up a precipitous track deep in mud. The platoon remained with 23 Battalion, which it supported in the vicinity of [Kokkinoplos](#) next day, and did not rejoin 4 Company until 19 April.

Shortly after midnight on the 17th 11 Platoon was in position near [Ay Dhimitrios](#). It was raining and the men were wet and cold, but they did at least get a hot breakfast before daybreak. The rain stopped, but there was a heavy fog—excellent protection against hostile aircraft—and everything was wringing wet. Major White was getting 12 Platoon into position when he was told of a change of plan: he was to take his guns farther back. By 8.30 a.m. both platoons were in the new positions — ‘real good going, the lads worked like bullocks right through the piece.’ Now about three miles south of [Ay Dhimitrios](#), 12 Platoon was on the right of the road, and 11 Platoon on the left.

In this area, also, [5 Field Regiment](#) sited its guns for an anti-tank role. The [22nd Battalion](#) had completed its withdrawal, but the [Maori Battalion](#), which had been delayed by the German attack the previous evening and had to retire over very difficult tracks to the road, was late in arriving. Some even feared the Maoris had been lost, but they now appeared, ‘much to everyone's jubilation, marching up in formation along the road.’

Fourth Brigade at [Servia Pass](#) and 21 Battalion at [Platamon](#) had gone into action about the same time as [5 Brigade](#). Fourth Brigade had no difficulty in driving off the enemy, but 21 Battalion, after repulsing attacks on 15 April, had been forced by the weight of the opposing tanks and infantry to retire next day to the [Pinios Gorge](#), farther south.

Hitherto it had been expected that the main threat to an orderly withdrawal to [Thermopylae](#) would be a rapid German advance from the north-west—where the

Greek forces were disintegrating—and onto the plain of [Thessaly](#) before the retreating columns were clear of the bottleneck of roads at [Larisa](#). Now, however, it was realised that the real danger came from the right flank rather than the left; enemy armour and mountain troops were advancing down the Aegean coast in greater strength than had been anticipated. An Australian brigade group ([Allen Force](#)) was despatched to the Pinios Gorge, the narrow route from the coast to the plain of [Thessaly](#), and together with 21 Battalion was to block this route until [Anzac Corps](#) was clear of [Larisa](#).

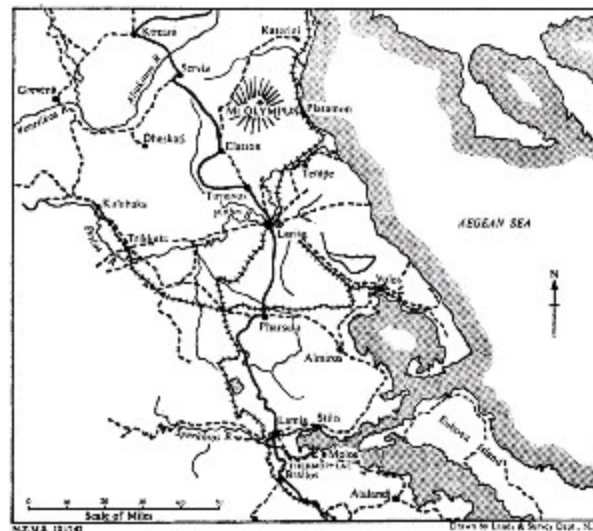
[Major-General Freyberg](#) decided to take advantage of the heavy fog blanketing the hills to accelerate the withdrawal of [5 Brigade](#), and told Brigadier Hargest to get his brigade back by daylight on the 17th instead of the following night as previously planned.

Only 23 Battalion was in contact with the enemy. A party of Germans had followed the battalion over the track to [Kokkinoplos](#) during the night and kept up a steady exchange of fire with it throughout most of the morning, although they had difficulty in picking out targets in the mist. A Company, which was in a col above the village and covering the track leading down into it, bore the brunt of this, but the other companies and 10 Platoon also joined in. A German account says: ‘... the enemy [New Zealanders] defended their positions extremely sternly and courageously. Our casualties were caused by direct hits by mortar bombs or accurate MG fire.’ Exhausted by the trek across the mountain, the enemy did not press the attack, and 23 Battalion, covered by the Vickers, withdrew about midday to the village of [Pythion](#), two miles away, and had a hot meal before embussing.

The rest of [5 Brigade](#) got away without interference. The two machine-gun platoons (11 and 12), which had their vehicles with them, left at 1 p.m. They passed 3 Company, already in position near [Elasson](#) with [6 Brigade](#), which was covering the withdrawal of 4 and 5 Brigades from the [Servia](#) and [Olympus](#) passes. Major White's party made good progress until they reached [Larisa](#), where they were held up by traffic blocking the roads. The weather began to improve and they had only just got clear of the town and were temporarily halted on the road to [Volos](#) when aircraft attacked the town and nearby bridges. ‘A flight of six light planes—fighters—came along and we just sat and innocently watched them. There was a line of field ambulance vehicles in front of us which probably accounted for fire not being opened

further along the road. Then “crumph” “crumph” and general scatteration.’ In this raid 4 Company had its first casualties: Lance-Corporal [McColl](#) ¹⁷ and Privates [Steel](#) ¹⁸ and [Eden](#) ¹⁹ were wounded, and two trucks damaged but towable.

[Anzac Corps'](#) orders for the withdrawal to [Thermopylae](#) required that while the Australian Division used the main road from [Larisa](#) through [Pharsala](#) to [Lamia](#), the New Zealand Division should go by the coastal route through [Volos](#). Fifth Brigade was to stage at [Almiros](#), part of the way to its destination, while the transport returned to collect [6 Brigade](#). It was



Withdrawal routes to [Thermopylae](#)

discovered on the morning of the 17th, however, that the boggy [Larisa- Volos](#) road was unsuitable for heavy traffic, and the Division was diverted down the inland route—the Australians' road. Some units, including 4 Company, did not learn of the new route in time, and others were told by staff officers while on the way.

Taking the coastal route, White's company bivouacked at 10 p.m. at [Nea Ankhialos](#), half-way between [Volos](#) and [Almiros](#). A search next morning (the 18th) failed to locate [5 Brigade](#), which was expected to be at [Almiros](#). The machine-gunners were without petrol, food and orders, but some aviation spirit was found on an abandoned airfield, and rations were obtained at a dump which had been left in the charge of an English corporal, who did not take much persuading that it was time he moved on.

White had a vague idea that the next stand was to be made at [Molos](#), so decided to move off; at that moment somebody arrived in a staff car to tell him to do that. The company caught up with the column including the ambulance that had travelled ahead of it the previous day. Frequent hold-ups occurred. 'We could see that [Lamia](#) was being pestered very heavily. Late in the afternoon we were able to move on. We had chosen a route cutting out across the river flats to avoid the town and were about to turn off when we were halted by a very inquisitive Inf bloke. He had been told that no more of our troops were to come that way and to fire on anything that appeared: he had four A-Tk guns lined up on us and was just waiting to get as many [vehicles] nicely trapped as possible when he realised that there was something familiar about their looks! We continued!'

It was dark by the time 4 Company reached [Molos](#). No guides could be found and nobody seemed to know where anybody else was, so the convoy kept on going down the road, to bivouac eventually at [Cape Knimis](#), ten miles beyond [Molos](#). Next morning (the 19th) it was discovered that [5 Brigade](#) was 11 miles back, and by midday 4 Company, including 10 Platoon, ²⁰ was concentrated in the brigade dispersal area.

Despite the confusion caused by the change of roads, also the chaos on the main route jammed with Australian and New Zealand traffic and the persistent low-level attacks of an unopposed [German Air Force](#)—which as a matter of fact caused remarkably few casualties—4 and 5 Brigades successfully completed their withdrawal to [Thermopylae](#). First Armoured Brigade, to which 27 (MG) Battalion less 3 and 4 Companies was still attached, was to have covered the final withdrawal across the Plain of [Thessaly](#), but ceased to be an effective fighting force.

By the time the brigade had reached [Grevena](#) on 14 April its tank strength had been considerably reduced, by mechanical breakdowns rather than enemy action. Air attacks now caused further losses. At dawn that day Colonel Gwilliam found that they had been sleeping in an open valley without any possibility of obtaining cover from air attack. 'In fact,' he says, 'with all the troops and transport concentrated in the area it was a real bombers' paradise.' He therefore ordered an immediate withdrawal and took his battalion across the Venetikos River to an area where it could disperse and camouflage. 'This was a wise move as not half an hour later the

concentrated area was heavily bombed with disastrous results.'

Private [Gummer](#)²¹ says, 'We had gone a few hundred yards when down swooped three Stukas, laying their eggs willy nilly. Our machine-guns opened fire and just over the hill we saw two of the bombers crash in flames.²² A few trucks hit, but not one casualty. Having made the passage through Hell Fire Pass [the Venetikos gorge], we pulled up for the night with HQ Coy, which had been a day ahead of us... Within an hour of settling in, a swarm of Stukas came over and caught the tail end of our convoy, an English convoy, and scores of Greeks in the deep pass. They lay their eggs there and from where we were we could see them falling from the dive-bombers. Into the best cover we scampered. An ammunition truck hit burnt and exploded for nearly 2 hours afterwards. Planes came over all the time till darkness fell.'

In the evening Brigadier Charrington decided to withdraw his brigade south of the Venetikos. Heavy dive-bombing of the intermingled Greek troops and refugees, motor transport, and horse and ox-drawn carts packed head-to-tail on the narrow, tortuous road, produced such shambles that the brigade took from just before midnight on the 14th until the following evening to cover the six or seven miles.

The machine-gunners' task on the 15th was the protection of the road in the vicinity of the bridge across the Venetikos. In rear of the battalion this road passed through a forest, which the enemy bombed all day, dropping many incendiaries as well as high explosive, but fortunately the trees were too wet to burn. As they returned from each raid the aircraft strafed the machine-gun positions and transport, but did no damage.

The B Echelon transport, including Headquarters Company and B Echelon of [27 Battalion](#), had been sent back to [Kalabaka](#), another 20 miles to the south. Later the LAD truck and orderly-room truck left Battalion Headquarters to join Headquarters Company. Aircraft dive-bombing and machine-gunning near [Kalabaka](#) set fire to lorries and an ammunition dump alongside the road. The exploding shells blew a crater in the road, which of course was jammed with vehicles. Private [Richardson](#),²³ from the orderly-room truck, directed the trucks past the danger, which permitted the column to proceed and earned him the MM.

Brigadier Charrington ordered Gwilliam to occupy the forest south of the Venetikos that night and remain there the next day (the 16th). After examining the many marks on the ground caused by the day's bombing, the CO did not have much hope for his unit's survival next day. It rained so heavily on the 16th, however, that the enemy planes did not take to the air. By 6 a.m. Gwilliam had sixteen guns sited on both sides of the road and one in mobile reserve. An hour later he was told that he was to withdraw his guns at 1 p.m. and that the battalion was to pass to the command of [Anzac Corps](#).²⁴

The now crippled armoured brigade was ordered to withdraw through the Australian brigade ([Savige Force](#)) at [Kalabaka](#), and began to move off in mid-morning. The machine-gun companies left at 2 p.m. and a rearguard an hour later. By midnight the head of the column had gone only 12 miles and the tail had managed only five. An English officer²⁵ says that it was 'an awful road which had been bombed very heavily the day before. The effect of the rain on the damaged track, metalled only in occasional stretches, was immediate and serious. Our march was a fight. Maps were unreliable and the better looking of two routes petered out in a quagmire. Bomb holes had to be filled in. In places the road had been quite destroyed and deviations had to be made frequently, while every vehicle that used them made the mud worse. Trucks which slithered off the mountain track and down the hillside had to be hauled back. But the rain and cloud concealed our movement and saved us from the [Luftwaffe](#).

'Everywhere lay the debris of the retreating army. Ammunition, arms and equipment, derelict vehicles, dead men and animals. And all the time the rain drizzled down.'

The machine-gunners salvaged two three-ton trucks, an anti-tank gun and truck, and a Baby Austin (which they later handed over to Divisional Cavalry—a fine gesture).

The armoured brigade, now ordered to go straight on to [Atalandi](#), south of the [Thermopylae](#) position, resumed the retreat before dawn on the 17th. It was still raining and there was much low cloud, but a few miles from [Kalabaka](#) the mud track gave way to a tarmac road, to everybody's intense relief. At [Kalabaka](#), which the machine-gunners reached soon after midday, 5 Platoon (brought up to strength by a

section of 4 Platoon) was detached for a rearguard role with the Australians.

The brigade column halted for rations and fuel at the next town, [Trikkala](#), which it reached in the afternoon, and then headed eastwards towards [Larisa](#), but soon discovered that the traffic bridge over the Pinios River just beyond [Trikkala](#) had been blown up prematurely. An alternative bridge was found, but the deviation caused some delay and the [Luftwaffe](#) returned to the attack. 'Fortunately we were well spaced and could get off the road into the adjoining fields,' says Gwilliam. Some Australians, whose trucks had been supplying the dump at [Trikkala](#), had two or three casualties, who were attended to by the medical officer (Captain [Fulton](#) ²⁶).

At [Larisa](#) the column met the main flow of traffic streaming back from the [Mount Olympus](#) positions and down the road through [Pharsala](#) to [Lamia](#). Realising that enemy aircraft had been causing 'devastating havoc' on convoys passing through the [Pharsala](#) Pass in daylight, Gwilliam (who had been made responsible for the armoured brigade's B Echelon as well as his own transport) decided to go through the pass at night. This he succeeded in doing, although delayed for some time by transport of the [Maori Battalion](#) halted in the pass. The Maoris were persuaded to pull off the road beyond the pass.

The machine-gun battalion reached its dispersal area, south of [Atalandi](#), in the evening of the 18th, having withdrawn some 250 miles from its positions near [Vevi](#). The CO reported to Brigadier Charrington, who told him that he had lost all his tanks except five and that all his new tanks had been lost in an air raid on [Piraeus](#) harbour. Gwilliam was instructed to report to Headquarters New Zealand Division.

'The war seems to be all around us, but we have seen damn all,' Private Clemens (8 Platoon) wrote in his diary on 16 April. That afternoon, in rain that soaked everything, 3 Company moved south, and on the way some of the men called at an ASC dump (which was to be destroyed) and stocked up with all the rations they could carry, including tinned cherries, raspberries, and strawberry jam—items which they had not seen before in an army ration. Next day the company occupied positions with [6 Brigade](#), which was guarding the two roads between [Elasson](#) and [Tirnavos](#), north of [Larisa](#).

On the shorter east route, which crosses a steep pass, 9 Platoon (Sergeant

Alborough²⁷), less a section, took up a position with 24 Battalion on top of a ridge. The rest of 3 Company was with 25 Battalion on the longer and easier west route. The supporting artillery (Australian and New Zealand 25-pounders and some medium and anti-tank guns) was also on the west route, where it could bring under fire the open, rolling country in front of the infantry, deployed on rising ground.

At dawn on the 18th a Divisional Cavalry rearguard north of Elasson clashed with the Germans coming down from Olympus Pass, and some of 34 Battery's two-pounder anti-tank guns claimed half a dozen tanks and other vehicles before withdrawing. Sixth Brigade could see vehicles moving in the foothills north of Elasson and approaching the town. A demolition blown in a defile near the town halted the enemy with his vehicles nose-to-tail within range of the 25-pounders, and accurate shelling, mostly by the twenty guns of the Australian regiment, which fired 6500 rounds that day, held up a powerful German force, including a battalion of tanks.

'Well at last we saw some fun and I suppose you could call it action,' says Clemens. 'Had a go at enemy planes that came over and believe we got one—not absolutely sure but near enough—any way I put a burst of 150 at her....' This plane, a twin-engined Messerschmitt, crashed in 25 Battalion's area and was credited to 8 Platoon.

Early in the afternoon the troops on the west road were shelled by guns east of Elasson, but this fire seemed to be directed—with the assistance of a reconnaissance plane—at the field guns in the rear. Lieutenant Dickinson²⁸ (7 Platoon) located the German gun positions and pointed them out to an Australian observation post officer, but they were beyond the range of the 25-pounders.

From their ridge near the other road 9 Platoon had a grandstand view of the day's fighting. 'No shots were fired as in late afternoon only tanks were in possible long range, but we were shelled just on dark,' Alborough says. Having accomplished its task of blocking the two roads until dark, 6 Brigade was beginning to thin out when tanks led troop-carrying vehicles up the road towards 24 Battalion; they met demolitions and concentrated shellfire, but delayed the battalion's departure for a time. Some shells landed within a few yards of 9 Platoon without exploding.

All of the troops from both roads succeeded in getting away safely and withdrew

southwards through [Tirnavos](#). To cover this withdrawal Brigadier Barrowclough²⁹ formed a rearguard of a company of infantry and some carriers from 25 Battalion, some anti-tank and field guns, and 7 Platoon. This rearguard passed through [Tirnavos](#) shortly after midnight and [Larisa](#) an hour later. [Larisa](#) appeared to be deserted and was 'just a heap of smouldering and smoking ruins, with the odd patch still burning here and there,' says Dickinson. It had been bombed half a dozen times the previous day.

The brigade column took the coastal road through [Volos](#) and reached [Molos](#) in the evening of the 19th. 'On the road until 10 o'clock tonight—26 hours in all and it is about the worst trip I have ever done,' wrote Clemens. '... there was a chance of the Gerries cutting us off and the retreat was a real mess up. Passed through many bombed towns and several times had to clear off the trucks when Gerry planes came over....'

The rearguard (including 7 Platoon, less a section which had gone back with the remainder of 3 Company) halted at dawn astride the road a few miles north-west of [Volos](#), where it was to cover the withdrawal of [Allen Force](#) and 21 Battalion from the [Pinios Gorge](#). Very little was known about the situation at the time, but the German column that had come down the coast had been delayed only just long enough in the [Pinios Gorge](#) for [Anzac Corps](#) to get clear of the [Larisa](#) bottleneck. [Allen Force](#) and 21 Battalion had been driven into the hills or were making their way south in small groups over boggy farm tracks east of [Larisa](#). The Germans had blocked the road from the gorge a few miles east of that town.

The rearguard, now joined by Divisional Cavalry, remained until about midday in a position of all-round defence and was then ordered to withdraw immediately to [Molos](#). The convoy passed through [Volos](#) and down the coastal road, 'through a deserted countryside.... I remember seeing two Hurricanes sitting on a little airfield. This was pretty cheering until we passed close by and saw both were burnt out,' Dickinson recalls. Enemy aircraft strafed the convoy.

The journey was continued all next night. Dickinson's truck seized up on the outskirts of [Lamia](#), so he sent the others on ahead to [Molos](#) while somebody got some more oil. Another truck ran off the causeway south of [Lamia](#) and overturned, but the men jacked it up onto ammunition boxes and toppled it back on its wheels.

Dead tired after three days and two nights without sleep, 7 Platoon found 3 Company next morning (the 20th).

Dickinson's men, however, had not been the last machine-gunners to pass through [Larisa](#). Newland's platoon (No. 5), which had joined the [Savage Force](#) rearguard at [Kalabaka](#) a day or two earlier, drove through the town with the last Anzac Corps troops about 3 a.m., only three or four hours before the Germans entered. This platoon lost a truck and some equipment which went over a bank two or three miles beyond [Larisa](#), but had no casualties then or during some bombing and strafing. It left the Australians at [Brallos](#) on the 20th and rejoined 2 Company.

The British now awaited the Germans in the [Thermopylae](#) line, at the neck of a long peninsula extending south-eastwards towards [Athens](#). The main road south from [Larisa](#) branched at the town of [Lamia](#), from which one road continued southwards across the plain through which the Sperkhios River flows to the sea; this road then zigzagged up [Brallos Pass](#), which was held by the Australians. The other road, after crossing the Sperkhios, ran eastwards between the mountains and the sea to the village of [Molos](#) and down to the coast. It was on this coastal route that Leonidas and his Spartans had held the narrow defile against Xerxes' invading Persians, until outflanked and overwhelmed by men who descended in their rear from a track through the foothills. In the succeeding centuries the silting of the river delta had converted the defile into a coastal flat three or four miles wide, but the modern defenders of [Molos](#) were in a position not altogether unlike that where Leonidas had stood in 480 B.C.

Fifth Brigade was deployed along the coastal road west of [Molos](#), in the foothills and covering the bridges on the road to [Larisa](#). Fourth Brigade was on the right watching the coast between [Molos](#) and [Cape Knimis](#), and [6 Brigade](#) was in reserve.

On 19 and 20 April 4 Company reconnoitred for positions and dug in in support of [5 Brigade](#). The Luftwaffe was seldom absent. 'The Hun Air Force played Merry Hell up and down that road all both days dive-bombing and machine-gunning,' wrote Major White. 'Of course movement was cut down to a minimum but some of us had to go out on reconnaissances....'

Three Hurricanes appeared 'as if by magic' on the 20th when a score or more

German aircraft were busy bombing [Lamia](#) and machine-gunning the road out of the town. After some circling about one German plane went into a steep dive with smoke streaming from an engine. A parachute appeared a second or so before the plane hit the sea off [Molos](#) and blew up in a fountain of flame and spray. By this time the other German aircraft, hotly pursued by the Hurricanes, were almost out of sight. But this was only a brief respite.

Captain [Tong](#) ³⁰ set out with two of 4 Company's trucks in the evening of the 19th in search of ammunition and rations, and did not return until the early morning of the 21st. Not able to find any dumps and delayed by air raids, his party went as far south as [Levadhia](#) and rescued some ammunition and rations from a train that had been left burning by bombers.

The machine-gun battalion (apart from 3 and 4 Companies) left its bivouac area north of [Atalandi](#) and rejoined the Division on the 20th, after an absence of over three weeks. The convoy was bombed and strafed while pulling into an olive grove near [Cape Knimis](#). The attack lasted six hours. [Sergeant-Major Hunter](#) ³¹ and Private [Comer](#) ³² were killed and two others wounded, but it was surprising that casualties were so few. The men, remaining concealed as best they could all afternoon, were unable to dig slit trenches until darkness fell, when they set to work with a will.

The Division's front was adjusted next day when [6 Brigade](#), with 3 Company still under command, moved forward on the right of [5 Brigade](#). In addition to supporting the infantry west of [Molos](#), the machine-gunners were to watch the coast to the east, in case the enemy might attempt a flanking move along the island of Euboea and a landing behind the line. While two platoons of 1 Company joined 4 Brigade, the third (2 Platoon), together with 5 Platoon from 2 Company, watched the beaches on each side of the [Longos](#) headland. They did not see the enemy.

The Division's dispositions were not maintained for long, however. Already it had been decided, with the consent of the [Greek Government](#), which feared that a prolongation of the struggle would end only in the devastation of the country, that the British should evacuate [Greece](#).

Colonel Gwilliam explained the orders for the evacuation to his officers on the morning of the 23rd. Everything not absolutely essential was to be destroyed,

including all except twenty-nine vehicles, without using fire or explosives. The men were to take only the clothing they wore, their personal equipment and ammunition, greatcoats, and one blanket each. The battalion, less the two platoons of 1 Company with 4 Brigade, 3 Company with 6 Brigade, and 4 Company with 5 Brigade, was to leave that night.

Aircraft passed overhead all day, but the battalion had escaped the Luftwaffe's attention since the unfortunate day it arrived near Cape Knimis, no doubt because the trucks were well camouflaged and the men kept to their trenches. The convoy pulled out in the late evening and, passing through Atalandi, stopped before daylight in a valley beyond Levadhia, where it remained concealed all next day, while planes still searched continuously. The following night the convoy passed through Thebes to a lying-up area south of Mazi, 20-odd miles from Athens, and dispersed in a wooded valley, in which the open spaces were thickly carpeted with red poppies. Next day (the 25th) was Anzac Day.

The third night move, this time through Athens, brought the machine-gunners to the shelter of trees beside a small village about 12 miles from Porto Rafti. 'We had quite a lot of trouble with various ORs who went into the village sampling the wines with disastrous results,' says a platoon commander. The men gave the villagers food and anything else they no longer wanted.

The CO had received no information about embarking his men, so towards evening on the 26th sent Lieutenant Bradshaw to find the headquarters controlling the arrangements. Bradshaw found an Australian major who thought the machine-gun battalion was to leave from C beach (Rafina), not D beach (Porto Rafti) as guides had stated earlier in the day. He next saw Brigadier Miles, who gave him orders that the machine-gunners were to follow 5 Field Regiment at 8.45 p.m. to D beach. He returned to Battalion Headquarters with little time to spare.

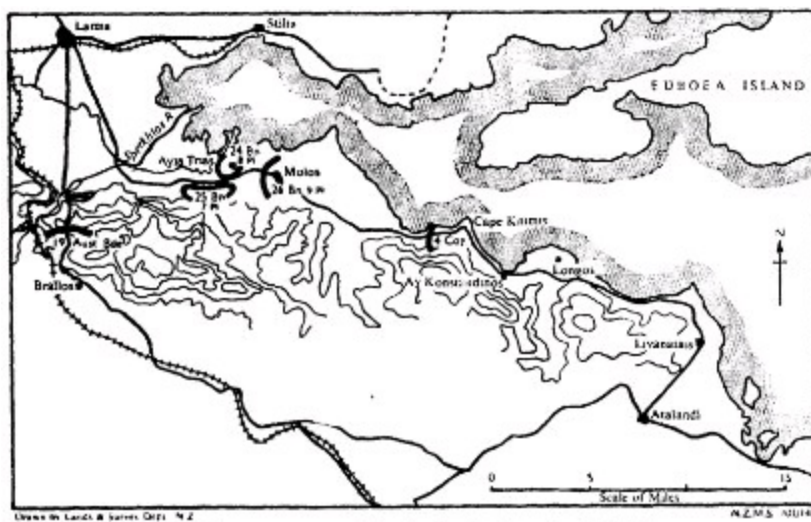
When the convoy approached Porto Rafti about 10 p.m. Brigadier Miles asked that a party be left to provide road blocks, and Second-Lieutenant Luxford³³ and the Anti-Aircraft Platoon were detailed for the task. Luxford recalls that 'just as we were being lined up ready for embarkation Lt-Col Gwilliam came to me and told me ... to take 30 ORs and myself and 4 drivers and put in 4 road-blocks to cover the withdrawal of the 4th Brigade on the Sunday night [the 27th]. To make up the 30

ORs I had to get some of 6 Platoon, mainly drivers. I started off about mid-night from [Porto Rafti](#) and finished putting in the last road-block about 3.30 a.m. next morning....' This composite platoon, armed with four Vickers and four Bren guns, established a post on the road to [Rafina](#), another at the turn-off on the main [Athens](#) road, and two on the road to [Porto Rafti](#).

Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Company (less the reinforced Anti-Aircraft Platoon), 2 Company and 2 Platoon, after debussing near the [Porto Rafti](#) beach, formed squads of about 100 men each. One squad took the wrong turning and reached the beach only just in time to board the last caique (Greek fishing boat) ferrying troops to the transport *Salween*, on which they were all embarked by 2 a.m. on the 27th. Below decks they found steaming hot coffee waiting for them. They spread their blankets wherever they could, on the decks and tables, and slept. Later they discovered that 3 Company was also on board.

After the departure of [5 Brigade](#) from [Thermopylae](#) on the night of 23–24 April the defence of the pass had been left to [6 Brigade](#), supported by 3 Company and a formidable array of artillery—a medium regiment, four field regiments, two anti-tank regiments and a light anti-aircraft battery. No. 8 Platoon was with 24 Battalion near the little village of [Ayia Trias](#), two miles west of [Molos](#), 7 Platoon with 25 Battalion, which was extended three miles along the southern side of the road towards [Lamia](#), and 9 Platoon with 26 Battalion, in reserve immediately west of [Molos](#).

Air attacks became even more frequent and vicious next day, but achieved little beyond making it more dangerous to move



3 Company with 6 Brigade at Molos
3 Company with 6 Brigade at Molos

in the open. German armoured forces, obviously preparing to attack, were shelled near **Lamia**. Two tanks attempted to cross the flat ground north of 25 Battalion early in the afternoon, but were knocked out at long range by the field guns; there was no further threat from that direction. Motor-cyclists, closely supported by a few tanks, then came along the road from **Lamia** and infiltrated into the hills west and south-west of 25 Battalion, which drew back its left company. The guns of 7 Platoon, sited on the other side of a ridge which extended across the road, were unable to assist 25 Battalion by shooting where the enemy was infiltrating.

About mid-afternoon a much larger group of tanks and lorried infantry pushed along the road against **6 Brigade**. '... with very little warning four tanks came round a bend and straight in the middle of the **25 Bn** position,' writes Dickinson. 'They had huge swastika flags flying and were closed right down almost nose to tail and line ahead on the main road with no infantry at all to support them.

'Looking back now, with experience of armour in my subsequent career, their tactics were shocking and they deserved all they got.

'The lead tank halted at the approach to a bridge, within 25 yards of my No. 1 Gun and the rest closed up behind him. Being closed down he was fairly blind and he didn't see the 2 pdrs nor the 25 pdr sitting within fifty yards of him.

'It must have been a shock to the Kiwis but they quickly recovered. The 25 pdr whipped off his net and slammed a shot in at point blank range. So did the 2 pdrs

and another 25 pdr only about 200 yards away. It was glorious while it lasted.

'Seeing their leader go west the other three turned tail and fled. Unfortunately vision was limited to less than half a mile of the road but our guns got two more tanks and only one managed to get round the bend again and I think he was badly hit.'³⁴

The enemy retaliated with a flurry of shells, mortar and small-arms fire. The guns of 7 Platoon had been sited well forward with the 25-pounders and anti-tank guns, but were useless against tanks even at that range. No. 1 Section was enfiladed from the road along which the enemy approached, and Dickinson decided to bring it back into the main battalion position, where it could engage the ground on the left flank from which the small-arms fire was coming.

'The tanks did not come on our flank,' says Clemens (with 8 Platoon near [Ayia Trias](#)), 'but we were treated to a grand stand view as our anti-tank units and 25-pounders engaged them about ½ mile to our left—bullets and shells flying all ways.' When 25 Battalion was forced to give ground on the left 8 Platoon saw men running across open country. 'I did not fire as I was not sure if they were enemy and no one could tell me where [25 Bn](#) was,' reported Lieutenant [Howell](#),³⁵ the platoon commander. 'I think in view of subsequent information that these men were enemy who later took up a position enfilading our position with a machine gun.' But there was much confused movement at the time, and the men Howell saw could easily have been New Zealand infantry or gunners.

The fighting died down in the evening. Having fulfilled its task of holding the [Thermopylae](#) position for the specified time, [6 Brigade](#) began to withdraw. The infantry thinned out and boarded the transport, and the medium and field guns, which could not be evacuated from [Greece](#), were reluctantly wrecked, the last of them—those of the [Royal Horse Artillery](#)—shortly before midnight.

Major McGaffin had received orders in the afternoon to pull out after dark, the platoons with the battalions to which they were attached, and his company headquarters with Brigade Headquarters. Only 7 Platoon had difficulty in getting away. Dickinson sent a despatch rider back for the transport, but it could not be found. It was subsequently discovered that the five trucks had left the dispersal area

at the right time and had headed down the road towards the platoon, but had been stopped by an infantry officer who had told the drivers there was nobody in front of them and they were to take on troops and go back, which they did. Dickinson embussed his platoon with 25 Battalion. All the guns and equipment and some ammunition were brought out.

The company had only one casualty. Private [Goodwin](#)³⁶ had evolved a theory about the duration of the danger period after the explosion of a shell: he stoutly maintained that if you took cover and counted slowly up to twenty after hearing the explosion, it was then quite safe to raise your head and look around. His theory was exploded near [Molos](#). A shell scored a direct hit on a derelict Bren carrier in front of his slit trench. He raised his head above ground level at the expiration of the twenty-second period, just in time to receive a hefty clout by a portion of the carrier's tool box.

The last vehicles were clear of [Molos](#) by midnight. Some three hours later, when the Germans formally attacked and captured the vacated position, the brigade column, travelling with lights south of [Atalandi](#), was well on its way towards [Athens](#), and by 6 a.m. on the 25th 3 Company was assembled in the [Mazi](#) area, where it spent the day under trees.

McGaffin received orders early in the afternoon to go to D beach. The company was delayed at the start by attacking aircraft, but drove through [Athens](#) and reached its bivouac area two miles from [Porto Rafti](#) about midnight. In the city 'the reception was tremendous and it was an occasion I shall never forget,' says Dickinson. 'The Greeks knew we were deserting them and knew what was in store for them, yet they cheered and thanked us as we went.'

The men were concealed in the olive groves all next day, and destroyed their vehicles and surplus gear. Each man not carrying part of a gun was told to take two belts of ammunition, which he draped about his body. Late in the evening they made their way to the embarkation point, where an Australian naval officer told them to dump their guns and ammunition, but they had no intention of abandoning the weapons at this stage, and after an argument took them on board the *Salween*. There 'we had the most welcome reception of all. Waiting for us was a feed of stew, fresh bread and hot cocoa.'

The battalion (less 4 Company, two platoons of 1 Company, and the reinforced Anti-Aircraft Platoon) sailed for Egypt on the Salween. The Vickers were manned in an ack-ack role during five air-raid alarms on the 27th and another next day; whenever the raiders appeared they 'went into action from all directions and I know the ship's funnel got a few holes,' says Dickinson. 'By this time the gunners were so fed up with the Hun they just put their sights on the plane and swung the gun from start to finish.' Although bombs were dropped and one ship had a near miss, the convoy reached [Alexandria](#) unscathed early on the 29th.

Meanwhile 4 Company, after withdrawing from the Thermopylae line with [5 Brigade](#) on the night of 22–23 April, was given another rearguard task.

The company did not leave [Thermopylae](#) without loss. Its vehicles were held at the brigade dispersal area until dark, but a German plane, out later than usual, strafed them as they were going forward to pick up the platoons, putting a truck out of action and killing the driver (Private [Ramage](#) ³⁷).

The company bivouacked at 3 a.m. at [Ay Konstandinos](#), and later in the morning received orders making it part of a divisional rearguard commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel [Clifton](#). ³⁸ It was a strong force, also including armoured cars of Divisional Cavalry, a battery of the [Royal Horse Artillery](#), about fifteen anti-tank guns, the carrier platoons of 22 and 28 Battalions, and a few engineers. At dusk the three machine-gun platoons moved to their positions astride the road, between a rocky spur and the sea west of [Cape Knimis](#). The road was under constant air attack all next day (the 24th), but the gunners were not spotted. They could hear the battle for [Thermopylae](#) raging ten miles away.

Sixth Brigade was late in reaching the rearguard that night, but the transport, after streaming back head-to-tail, began to thin out at midnight. The machine guns were then taken back to their trucks, and the road demolitions were blown shortly before 2 a.m.

White led part of the rearguard back to the road junction south-west of [Atalandi](#), where an Australian picket reported that all the Australians from [Brallos Pass](#) had gone through and had last made contact with the enemy 20 miles back. Clifton's force now became the [Anzac Corps](#) rearguard. White's group waited fifty minutes at

the road junction, as planned, until orders came by wireless from the main group to continue towards [Thebes](#). A halt was made near that town while Clifton ascertained the next move. The convoy got away again in daylight and passed through 4 Brigade, which was dug in and awaiting the enemy at [Kriekouki](#), before stopping to rest among the trees south of [Mazi](#).

White now learned that his company was under the command of Divisional Cavalry as part of a force covering the embarkation from beaches north of [Athens](#). The company kept under cover until the air activity ceased for the day and as darkness fell set off for [Tatoion](#) (about 12 miles north of [Athens](#)), which was reached at 1.30 a.m. on the 26th. A reconnaissance was made for gun positions, but the machine-gunners did not occupy them because Divisional Cavalry patrols would give them sufficient warning to do so if necessary. Sergeant Bradshaw was sent off at midday with a section from 11 Platoon as a road block. His orders were: 'If attacked defend position to death. If no attack before midnight, return to main rearguard.' The section returned without having been in action.

After spending a quiet day 4 Company piled onto the few remaining trucks about 8.30 p.m. and set off for the beach at [Rafina](#). The company became divided on the way and White tried to collect it together at the point where the last vehicles were destroyed, but was told by the embarkation officers: 'All unit organisation wiped out. Do exactly as we say.'

Groups of men from many units were shepherded silently down to the beach. When told to throw away their Vickers and tripods—'personal weapons only'—the machine-gunners stepped out of the ranks, hurriedly rearranged their loads, dumped the tripods, and hid the guns and some belts of ammunition under their greatcoats. They then made their second approach, but not all of them got away that night. In the end, however, the eleven serviceable guns of 4 Company were salvaged; four were taken to Egypt and the remainder to Crete.

Major White, Captain Tong, Lieutenant Snedden and some sixty machine-gunners, most of them from 4 Company, were taken by landing craft to the [Glengyle](#) in the early hours of the 27th. They soon produced their Vickers, lashed them to the rails and manned them for action. At midday the ship was attacked by dive-bombers, and a near miss that lifted the bow violently out of the water damaged some plates

and started a leak. The raiders were met by a tremendous volume of fire from the Vickers, anti-tank rifles, Brens and rifles, and the ship's own armament. There were no further attacks and the [Glengyle](#) reached [Alexandria](#) in the early morning of the 29th.

Half of 11 Platoon, most of 10 Platoon, and others had been left at [Rafina](#). 'We returned unhappily to the hills,' says Bradshaw, but next evening (the 27th) it was 'Down to the beach again ... embarked on destroyer (HMS [Havock](#)) ... had to dump tripods, but stuck to guns amid protests by Navy.' Next morning they arrived in Crete.

After leaving the [Molos](#) area on the night of 22–23 April 4 Brigade Group had occupied a position on a ridge between [Kriekouki](#) and [Mazi](#), south of [Thebes](#) on the road to [Athens](#), to cover the withdrawal of the other British forces to the beaches from which they embarked. This covering position was astride the road through a gorge in the ridge which rises abruptly 2000 to 3000 feet above the plain south of [Kriekouki](#). The three New Zealand battalions (18th, 19th and 20th) were supported by seventeen Australian 25-pounders, seven [Breda](#) anti-aircraft guns of the [Royal Horse Artillery](#), seven Australian anti-tank guns, some Australian engineers, and an Australian machine-gun company; 1 NZ MG Company (less 2 Platoon) was in a valley on the [Athens](#) side of the pass. 'The valley was only about half a mile to mile wide and cultivated,' writes Sergeant-Major [Johnstone](#).³⁹ 'Most of the hills on the North side were wooded right down to the edge of the valley. The trees were, for the main part, pine and holly with a fair sprinkling of oaks; this made excellent cover and it did not take the boys long to get their trucks completely camouflaged. Now so well was this done that at no time did the Jerries realise that we were occupying the position.'

Early on the 25th the last of [Anzac Corps](#)—6 New Zealand Brigade, [19 Australian Brigade](#) and Colonel Clifton's rearguard (including 4 Company)—retired through 4 Brigade's positions. Orders were received in the afternoon, however, that 4 Brigade was to postpone its withdrawal twenty-four hours to the following night (the 26–27th). Detachments were sent out to protect both flanks and deal with paratroops. One detachment, including 1 Platoon, four Bren carriers, an infantry platoon from 19 Battalion and one anti-tank gun, went to a road junction, where it covered the road through [Megara](#) from the [Corinth Canal](#).

'We were told to hold the road at all costs,' says Second-Lieutenant MacDonald. 'It was not a pleasant task getting to our positions—planes were skimming over and we were well bombed and strafed. It seemed like a death warrant with the stuff that was flying about when moving in daylight on that road. Dived so often into the prickly-pear on the side of the road that I arrived a mass of blood. A very windy trip.

'Reached our destination in the dark and the Greeks said that the Huns were just down the road. Had 4 MGs and 4 Bren Carrs—put two MGs on road side and two on the rly line two hundred yards away—three Bren Carrs dug in.'

Fourth Brigade Group, still undetected, heard explosions in [Thebes](#) on the morning of the 26th, and about 11 a.m. a column of a hundred vehicles, closely spaced and with motor cycles and a light tank some fifty yards ahead, approached along the road. They continued in this formation, the vehicles jammed almost tailboard to radiator, until the leading motor cycles were only 2000 yards away and the rear of the column was within range of the Australian artillery. The guns opened fire and the Germans were seen to scatter and then board their trucks again and drive back to [Thebes](#), leaving eight vehicles on the road.

About midday came the expected air attack, the rearguard position having now been revealed. 'In a few minutes over came the recce planes and they flew close to the ground seeking our whereabouts,' writes Johnstone. 'Soon they were followed by a number of Dorniers and in about an hour there were over a hundred planes [including Messerschmitts] in the air. Some of them flew that low that we were looking on top of the pilots. But still not a move by our chaps and the Jerries could not find the Aussies' guns, they had been as well camouflaged as our positions ... the bombers started dropping a few bombs about 2000 to 3000 yards behind our positions hoping to find the position of the guns. At this time the Jerries have brought up another column of trucks and tanks and had reached the position that the previous one had ... the whole twelve guns opened up again and repeated the damage they had previously done ... soon the planes were over again.... This time they bombed and machine gunned the place that they had done before, with of course the same results, absolutely no damage at all.... It was a grand sight to see countless bombs falling on to an uninhabited and defenceless bit of ground.... Now the guns are silent again and the enemy planes begin to get fewer and fewer until

there are only about 20 left. The time is now 3 o'clock and the sun shines down (on this side of the hill) on smoking trees and a torn and blistered hillside, some cautious movement is noticed near the concealed guns as more ammo. is brought up, (on the other side) on smoking and burning trucks and tanks, dashing ambulances and frantic repair gangs seeking a way through the tangled wreck. Afar on the edge of the swampy plain tanks can be seen exploring a way round the swamps. Motor cyclists are dashing hither and thither trying, I suppose, to reorganise the wrecked column.'

German artillery went into action and a gun duel continued all afternoon. Infantry moving towards the left flank were dispersed by machine-gun fire. Johnstone took out a patrol to see that the enemy did not infiltrate through a gap in the hills on the right flank, but saw nothing there.

Disturbing reports were received early in the afternoon that German paratroops had landed on the road between [Megara](#) and [Corinth](#), and that the bridge over the [Corinth Canal](#) had been destroyed. If true, these reports posed an awkward problem, for 4 Brigade Group had been ordered to retire over the canal that night. Confirmation was received about 6 p.m. that paratroops were on the [Corinth](#) road, but there was no definite news that the bridge had been destroyed.⁴⁰ Soon afterwards, however, a message came from [Divisional Headquarters](#) that the brigade group was to withdraw through [Athens](#) to the beaches in the east.

As darkness fell the artillery began to pack up, but the guns still fired when no planes were directly overhead. When it was completely dark 1 Company's drivers brought their trucks out from their hiding places and lined them up close together in column. In silence every man went about his task, packing on the machine guns and stores that were to be taken; other gear, including blankets, was buried. Captain Purcell returned from a visit to [Athens](#) with a supply of petrol and some bread.

The brigade group began to withdraw at nine o'clock and was soon speeding up to 30 miles an hour with lights on along the roads to [Porto Rafti](#). Demolitions were blown by the Australian engineers under the direction of the officer commanding the rearguard, [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#).⁴¹ The troops that had been detached to the flanks rejoined the brigade. MacDonald's detachment had remained in its position near [Mandra](#) until 2 a.m., 'and would still be there if [Lt Col Kippenberger](#) had

not come down in a car and told us to pull out on the tail of 4 Bde.'

The brigade group passed through a sleeping Athens, and some miles beyond dispersed all guns, vehicles and equipment under the olive trees. The units were spread along about 15 miles of the road and, as the enemy was known to be approaching Athens, ⁴² Brigadier Puttick decided to take up a defensive position covering Porto Rafti. While the troops were moving in daylight to their positions about four miles from the beach, they were detected by 20-odd German aircraft and severely machine-gunned. This fire exploded a shell in an Australian ammunition wagon, which produced other explosions, and soon vehicles, crops in the fields and trees were blazing fiercely.

The machine-gun platoons had split up into groups and Johnstone's party was passing through the village of Markopoulon when the aircraft attacked. 'We saw the Greekos pointing upwards so we looked up and, oh hell, the air was black with Messhies and Dorniers and they let us know that they had come in no uncertain manner. Our party (as soon as the truck had stopped) sprinted down an alley way and took refuge in a fowl house which gave us cover from view but not from fire. The people of the village opened their doors to the boys and took them into their cellars; not only did they take them in but they gave them soft seats to sit on, water to wash in, wine to drink and food to eat.... They were full of sympathy for us and all assured us that we would be back some day; for they were very concerned for our safety.'

About half an hour later, when the planes turned their attention elsewhere, Johnstone's party climbed onto their trucks, 'and off we went at a hell of a bat, she was doing about sixty along the road outside the village. The road was lined with burning cars and trucks and an ammunition van was popping off in great style.' The aircraft returned, and the men dived off the truck, which 'went up in a puff of greasy black smoke.' The men took to the fields and for the next mile or two dodged from tree to tree. These olive trees were 'the biggest I have seen yet ... some have a girth of 15 feet; so big that four of us could dodge the Messies who were flying at ground level....'

A detour was attempted through a cornfield, but this was set on fire. 'We stopped to help three girls who had been working in the field and had come under the displeasure of the blonde gods of the skies ... and had stopped a hail of bullets,

one girl (about 10 years old) had her arm shot off ... she had guts if ever anybody had, not a murmur out of her as we dressed her arm.'

Nine Australian guns had been destroyed by the explosions, and many New Zealand infantrymen had been killed and wounded. By one o'clock, however, 18 and 20 Battalions were in their intended positions, 19 Battalion in reserve, and the Australian artillery and New Zealand machine guns in support. 'Took up a defensive position on the hills above [Porto Rafti](#). H. Purcell and I had MGs in truck plus A/Tk gun and crew,' says MacDonald (1 Platoon). 'Our platoon took up positions behind and supporting A Coy. of the 20th Btn.,' adds Philpott (3 Platoon).

In mid-afternoon a column of sixty to a hundred German vehicles entered [Markopoulon](#). The guns did not fire on the village, but whenever vehicles emerged they were met by concentrated fire from the field, anti-tank and machine guns and mortars; they returned to the sanctuary of the village. The attack, expected hourly, did not come, but aircraft returned to strafe.

From a hill high above the sea Johnstone watched the British make their second-last stand in [Greece](#): ⁴³ 'The day is beautiful. ... the sun shines brightly and the scent of flowers is everywhere. If one could not hear the noise it would represent a very peaceful scene indeed. The noise comes from many sources; the battery of 25 pounders are still firing though the bombing has silenced all but two of them. Several planes have been shot down and they are in various stages of destruction, all burning with a cracker effect as their ammo explodes. There are several trucks burning, the incendiaries have done their work. There seems to be hundreds of planes in the air and they are all doing their damndest to make the noise more terrific. They are gunning everything they see moving...'

The brigade began destroying its remaining trucks, and when darkness was falling, the last of the guns. The withdrawal began at nine o'clock. 'We covered the last four miles to the beach on our only two trucks, some 15 on each,' writes Philpott. 'If we had to walk quite a number would not have made the grade. Our trucks were destroyed some short distance from the beach and gun equipment and personal gear were then carried to the beach.'

The men were ferried in caiques and other light craft to the cruiser [Ajax](#) and the

destroyers [Kimberley](#) and [Kingston](#). Some of the seriously wounded had to be left behind. In defiance of the officers controlling the embarkation, who ordered them to destroy their guns, 1 and 3 Platoons took their eight Vickers onto the ships.

Luxford's composite platoon of about thirty men, who had been ordered to provide road blocks covering 4 Brigade's withdrawal, also embarked that night. Although he had been told he would be under the command of 4 Brigade, Luxford did not receive any orders—apparently Brigade Headquarters did not know he was under command. Early on the 27th he grew anxious about the situation and decided to withdraw his men. 'When I got to the post on the main [Athens](#) road, an Australian Ambulance was coming from [Athens](#) so I stopped it and asked the driver what the situation was. The driver replied that he was taking some stretcher cases into [Athens](#) but was stopped by M.P.'s. and told not to go any further as the Germans were already in [Athens](#). Having got this information I then made my way back to the beach....' On the way he met Captain Grant, who told him to embark with 1 Company.

Among the 2500 New Zealanders, Australians, British and Greeks in the [Ajax](#) were two Greek girls in battle dress 'smuggled on by the Aussies'. The ships sailed about 4 a.m. on the 28th, and disembarked the troops—and the girls—at [Suda Bay, Crete](#), six hours later.

In Greece the machine-gunners had inflicted many casualties on the enemy, just how many it is impossible to tell. Their own casualties were surprisingly few: eight other ranks killed, one officer and twelve other ranks wounded, three officers and thirty other ranks captured. Of the thirty-three who became prisoners of war, some were convalescents and reinforcements who had been in the transit camp at [Voula](#), near [Athens](#).

Some 800 New Zealanders, organised as a reinforcement battalion, left [Voula](#) on 25 April and crossed the [Corinth Canal](#) to [Argos](#), in the [Peloponnese](#) peninsula. They were to have been evacuated at [Navplion](#), but because of the arrival of a large number of Australians and the loss of the transport [Ulster Prince](#), which grounded and was bombed and gutted by fire, were directed to [Kalamata](#). There 8000 troops, mostly Australians, were taken off by destroyers on the night of 26–27 April, but nearly as many were left, including the Reinforcement Battalion.

Next day 'we were bombed and machine-gunned by German planes,' says Second-Lieutenant [Mabin](#).⁴⁴ 'There were all different sorts of troops camping around this area—New Zealand, English, Aussie, [Cypriots](#) and a number of Yugo-Slav soldiers, all waiting to be evacuated. We all moved down to the wharf at 8.30 p.m., taking up our position for embarking. We waited until midnight but no ships turned up and so we were ordered back to our camping areas....'

A small German mobile column drove into [Kalamata](#) in the afternoon of the 28th. A fierce counter-attack retook the town— in this action Sergeant [Hinton](#)⁴⁵ (from 20 Battalion) won the Division's first VC—but only 300-odd men were evacuated by destroyer that night, and 7000 or 8000 surrendered to the enemy who arrived in force next morning.

But they did not all surrender. Some escaped into the hills and remained on the loose for months before they were picked up by the enemy or succeeded in making their way back to the Allied lines. Mabin was a member of a party of eleven who escaped in an 18-foot fishing boat. The journey of more than 150 miles to [Crete](#) took nearly twenty days, 'with the Jerry one jump ahead or behind us all the time.' They rowed or sailed at night and hid on the Aegean islands in the daytime. 'We can't say enough about the way the Greeks helped and fed us because without their help we could never have made the trip.'

¹ [Capt A. T. B. Green](#); [Wellington](#); born [Timaru](#), 15 Jan 1917; clerk; wounded 6 Apr 1941; p.w. 2 Jun 1941.

² [Pte W. L. Verdon](#); born NZ 1 Aug 1913; fireman; died of wounds 7 Apr 1941.

³ Many thought at the time that the fires were started by the bombing of [Salonika](#), but it has since been revealed that they were burning petrol storage tanks destroyed by a Canadian Commando unit.

⁴ [Cpl J. J. Clemens](#); [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 1 Apr 1918; accountancy clerk; wounded 18 Jul 1942.

⁵ Capt D. G. Carnachan; born Auckland, 22 Jul 1914; accountant; died on active service 17 Nov 1943.

⁶ Maj J. A. Snedden, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Aug 1915; clerk.

⁷ Sgt W. M. Bradshaw; Wellington; born NZ 25 Nov 1918; clerk; p.w. 25 May 1941.

⁸ WO II K. B. Booker, MM; born NZ Nov 1915; warehouseman; wounded May 1941; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁹ Brig C. S. J. Duff, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 19 Nov 1898; Regular soldier; CO 7 A-Tk Regt 1940–41; 4 Fd Regt 1941–42; CRA 3 NZ Div 1942–44; NZ MLO, Melbourne, 1947–48.

¹⁰ Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; MP 1931–44; Otago Mtd Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 20 Bn, Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, France, 12 Aug 1944.

¹¹ S-Sgt J. C. Reid, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Te Kuiti, 7 Jun 1913; saddler.

¹² Cpl C. P. H. Murray; born Martinborough, 6 May 1917; grocer; p.w. Apr 1941.

¹³ 2 Lt C. R. Pulford, MM; New Plymouth; born NZ 15 Jun 1917; railway porter.

¹⁴ While visiting 27 (MG) Bn at Maadi in Aug 1941 Gen Freyberg referred to the carrying of the MGs from Olympus Pass and said: 'I don't know which company it was but I'm very proud of that company.' One gun had been damaged at Olympus Pass and had to be destroyed before 4 Coy left Greece; the others were all saved.

¹⁵ Pte W. H. Tong, m.i.d.; Leigh; born Feilding, 26 Jun 1911; firewood

contractor.

¹⁶ Pte H. V. F. Harris, m.i.d.; born England, 16 Sep 1901; labourer.

¹⁷ L-Cpl M. I. D. McColl; Auckland; born NZ 12 Feb 1919; linesman; twice wounded; p.w. May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

¹⁸ Pte R. Steel, m.i.d.; born Oamaru, 12 Mar 1909; labourer; three times wounded; died 3 May 1956.

¹⁹ Sgt L. D. Eden; born Auckland, 16 Jun 1918; mechanic; twice wounded.

²⁰ 10 PI had travelled with 23 Bn down the Larisa- Pharsala road, but had found the route from Pharsala to Almiros impracticable, so had continued through the night to Lamia. It had then been told to take the coastal road to Stilis and Almiros, but before reaching Stilis had been ordered to turn round and make for Molos, which it had reached in the evening of the 18th.

²¹ Pte R. O. Gummer; Auckland; born Auckland, 8 Sep 1914; painter.

²² Lt-Col Waller (CO 102 A-Tk Regt RA) says that two German aircraft were shot down by small-arms fire, one of them by his regiment. Capt Johansen says that English gunners brought down both planes.

²³ Pte M. J. Richardson, MM; born NZ 2 Nov 1915; surveyor's assistant.

²⁴ 1 Aust Corps, consisting of 6 Aust Div and NZ Div, was renamed Anzac Corps on 12 Apr.

²⁵ Lt-Col Waller, 'With the 1st Armoured Brigade in Greece', in The Journal of the Royal Artillery.

²⁶ Lt-Col J. R. H. Fulton; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 19 Aug 1900; medical practitioner; SMO Tonga 1943; SMO Burnham Military Camp 1944.

²⁷ WO II M. H. Alborough, EM and bar; Nelson; born Nelson, 23 Mar 1913; clerk; coronation contingent 1951.

²⁸ Maj A. H. Dickinson; Tauranga; born NZ 4 Jan 1917; civil servant; sqn comd 18 Armd Regt 1943; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

²⁹ Maj-Gen Rt Hon Sir Harold Barrowclough, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre; Wellington; born Masterton, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 7 NZ Inf Bde in UK 1940; 6 Bde 1 May 1940–21 Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in Pacific and GOC 3 NZ Div 8 Aug 1942–20 Oct 1944; Chief Justice of New Zealand.

³⁰ Maj E. J. Tong; Otorohanga; born Feilding, 27 Apr 1910; electrical inspector.

³¹ WO II A. D. Hunter; born Timaru, 17 Oct 1914; clerk; killed in action 20 Apr 1941.

³² Pte J. O. Comer; born Thames, 21 Dec 1913; carpenter; killed in action 20 Apr 1941.

³³ Lt M. B. Luxford; Hastings; born Wanganui, 14 Mar 1913; grocer.

³⁴ Of the 28 German tanks that took part in the attack, probably 17 were destroyed, many of them by four guns of 5 Fd Regt.

³⁵ Capt R. H. Howell; born NZ, 29 Nov 1917; farmer; died of wounds 27 Jun 1942.

³⁶ Pte A. N. R. Goodwin; born NZ 8 Mar 1904; farmer; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; died 10 Aug 1948.

³⁷ Pte P. J. Ramage; born NZ 30 Nov 1902; labourer; killed in action 22 Apr 1941.

³⁸ Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and 2 bars, MC, m.i.d.; Porangahau; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier (MC Waziristan); CRE 2 NZ Div 1940–41; CE 30 Corps 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped, Germany, Mar 1945; NZ MLO, London, 1949–52; Commandant, Northern Military District, Mar 1952–Sep 1953.

³⁹ WO II L. B. Johnstone, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 11 Sep 1909; electrical engineer; wounded May 1941.

⁴⁰ The Germans dropped a paratroop force astride the Corinth Canal on the morning of 26 Apr. They occupied the bridge, and shortly afterwards it was blown up.

⁴¹ Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, Crete, May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 30 Apr–14 May 1943 and 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; Prisoner of War Reception Group (UK) 1944–45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946–57; died Wellington, 5 May 1957.

⁴² The Germans occupied Athens that morning (27 Apr).

⁴³ The last organised resistance was at Kalamata.

⁴⁴ Capt E. D. Mabin; Ashburton; born NZ 9 Aug 1916; bank clerk; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

⁴⁵ Sgt J. Hinton, VC, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Riverton, 17 Sep 1909; driver; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 5 – CRETE

CHAPTER 5

Crete

The cruiser *Ajax*, one of several ships which brought men of 27 (MG) Battalion to Crete, arrived at Suda Bay on the morning of 28 April, and passed through a gap in the anti-submarine boom near a small island— Suda Island. Close in shore lay the cruiser *York*, beached after being severely damaged by Italian motor boats a month earlier; an oil tanker was barely afloat, and several other craft were damaged. But the men in the *Ajax* were more interested in the ships at anchor which they knew carried fellow survivors from Greece. When their vessel tied up alongside two destroyers lashed together near the water-logged tanker, shouts of recognition were exchanged on all sides.

An air-raid siren wailed somewhere in the hills that towered above the harbour. 'Action stations' sounded on the ships, guns were elevated, and eyes searched the sky in all directions. Ack-ack guns opened fire, and puffs of smoke were seen perhaps 20,000 feet above. 'We hold our brens ready,' wrote Sergeant-Major Johnstone. 'What for I don't know because they are no good over 2,000 feet, but I suppose it is the feeling of being able to hit back if the enemy comes down low enough.' The plane was reconnoitring, however, and soon departed.

Disembarkation began immediately. The men climbed the concrete steps onto the main street of Suda, where they were met with 'New Zealanders and Tommies to the right, Aussies to the left,' and were told to walk a few miles along the road to a transit camp. 'Off we go in twos and threes carrying our gear. I still have my bren and 24 full mags., my rifle and two haversacks, this makes a pretty good load, and as we are very tired it seems twice as heavy.' They were offered 'a cup of delightfully cold water and occasionally a glass of wine' at houses along the way, and at last reached the camp, where they were given tea, bully beef and oranges. 'It is a great day, a lot of lost friends have been discovered, the sun is shining and it is nice and warm, our tummies are full and we are enjoying a smoke in the shade of the trees. Who cares for air raids? Nobody apparently, everybody is far too busy talking and recounting past experiences. Some air raid warnings are given but they are treated with contempt because the planes keep up very high and unless they clip the top of the trees like they did in Greece nobody cares.'

The men were then directed farther along the road to a camp near [Canea](#), the capital of [Crete](#), where they were to spend the night. 'Again we get a rousing reception from the local lads and lassies as we plod along. We come to a stream where a lot of NZers are having a long overdue wash and swim.... For many this is the first wash for over a month. It will be so in my case when I get a chance to get into the water. We inquire the way to our camp and soon find it up the stream a bit and entirely covered in olive trees. A most delightful spot indeed and we down packs and gear, strip off our clothes and into the creek we go.'

The water was colder than expected, and the bathers were soon out and dressed. They had an odd assortment of clothes: some wore a mixture of summer and winter uniform; others had British, Australian, Greek and even German garments. 'I must say we looked a pretty tough lot as we sat around the improvised cook house.'

After a good meal they settled for the night under the olive trees. A few had blankets, and most had greatcoats; none had both and a few had neither. 'So we sleep in heaps and pile the coverings over as evenly as possible.' In the morning they were wakened by the chatter of Greek children. A roll call after breakfast revealed that about a third of the battalion had been collected together, with Captain Grant the senior officer. ¹ They were mostly from Company Headquarters and 1 and 3 Platoons of 1 Company, the Anti-Aircraft Platoon, and 10 Platoon and half of 11 Platoon of 4 Company. With other men detached from their companies during the withdrawal from [Greece](#) they totalled 208.

They now proceeded to a camping area east of the village of [Galatas](#). Following the road along the coast to the west, they missed the proper turn-off and had to retrace their steps two or three miles. It was hot, and those who had sore feet or were tired were allowed to make their own pace. Some were given rides in trucks, but very few vehicles were about, and most of the men just 'walked and walked until at long last we came to the camp.'

[Crete](#) was now the foremost Allied position facing the German advance through the [Balkans](#). If the island fell to the enemy, he would gain a base from which his aircraft could attack Egypt and the [Suez Canal](#) and shipping in the Eastern [Mediterranean](#). The invasion would probably be by air and sea; if paratroops—who

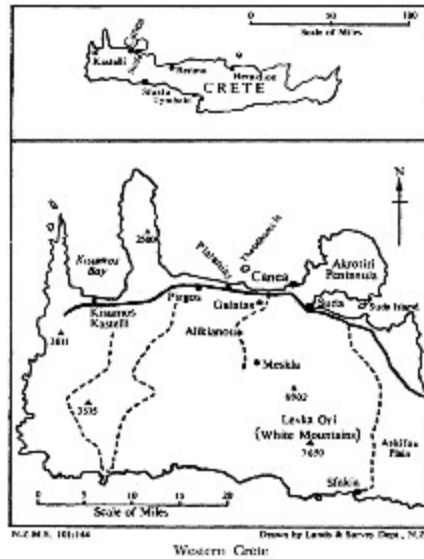
had been employed at [Corinth](#) in [Greece](#)—could seize the island's airfields, other troops could be landed from the air, and perhaps further troops and heavy equipment could be brought in small ships.

[Major-General Freyberg](#), who assumed command of the forces on [Crete](#) on 30 April, found that the troops available for the island's defence were the original garrison of one British brigade (another two battalions arrived later from Egypt); some ill-equipped Greek regiments composed largely of raw recruits; and a number of British, Australian and New Zealand units evacuated from [Greece](#), all below strength and short of equipment; altogether some 32,000 ² British and 10,000 Greeks. These forces were deficient in guns, ammunition, transport, signals equipment, digging tools and other essentials. Specialists—gunners, engineers, drivers and others—were formed into infantry units although not trained for such a role and in some cases strange to their weapons. The Navy gave all the assistance it could by bringing equipment and supplies, but port facilities were most inadequate, and the [Luftwaffe](#), operating from airfields in [Greece](#), had complete control of the sky.

From the defenders' point of view [Crete](#), 160 miles long from east to west and 40 miles wide at the broadest part, faced the wrong way. A backbone of mountains, rising in places to 7000 and 8000 feet, sloped abruptly down to the sea on the southern side, where no suitable harbours existed, but descended more gradually to the north coast, where the best harbours and only airfields were situated. There was an aerodrome at [Maleme](#), about ten miles west of [Suda Bay](#), the principal port for bringing in supplies; a landing ground at [Retimo](#), about 30 miles east of [Suda](#); and another aerodrome at [Heraklion](#), a small port 35 miles farther east. They were linked by only one road from east to west; few, very poor roads led across the island to the south.

The defence was centred mainly around these airfields and the [Suda Bay- Canea](#) area. The New Zealand Division (less 6 Brigade, which had returned to Egypt), now commanded by Brigadier Puttick, was to hold the [Maleme](#) or westernmost sector, which lay along the coast west of [Canea](#) and extended a mile and a half to three miles inland; it was an area traversed by steep-sided valleys, where olive groves, vineyards and occasional fields of corn were cultivated in terraced slopes and on the lower ground near the shore. In this sector the machine-gunners were deployed

during the next few days.



Western Crete

To make up platoons, cooks, drivers, clerks, runners, batmen and others who had had little or no training with the Vickers were briefly instructed how to handle the guns. Only the eight guns brought by 1 Company from Greece had tripods; most of the spare parts, ammunition and other equipment had been dumped at the embarkation points or thrown overboard by naval ratings. Seven guns without mountings had been brought by the platoons of 4 Company, and others were obtained until the unit had a total of twenty-four, but most of these were without tripods, condensers, tubes, cans and spare parts. 'I learned later,' says Grant, 'that the tripods³ were sent in their boxes to the Greek units in mistake for rifles.'

Lieutenant Kirk (3 Platoon), with thirty-six men and four guns, joined 4 Brigade in the Canea- Galatas area on 30 April, and Second-Lieutenants Brant (11 Platoon) and Carnachan (10 Platoon), with 40-odd men and four guns in all, joined the same brigade next day. They were given an anti-paratroop role. Second-Lieutenant MacDonald (1 Platoon), with thirty-five men and four guns, came under the command of 5 Brigade, located farther west between Platanias and the Tavronitis River. MacDonald's guns were sited on a ridge in 21 Battalion's area, south of the Platanias- Maleme road not far from Pargos, where they were to cover the beach and the Maleme airfield. The remainder of the unit went into bivouac in an olive grove in the same battalion area, in which 23 Battalion replaced the 21st a few days later.

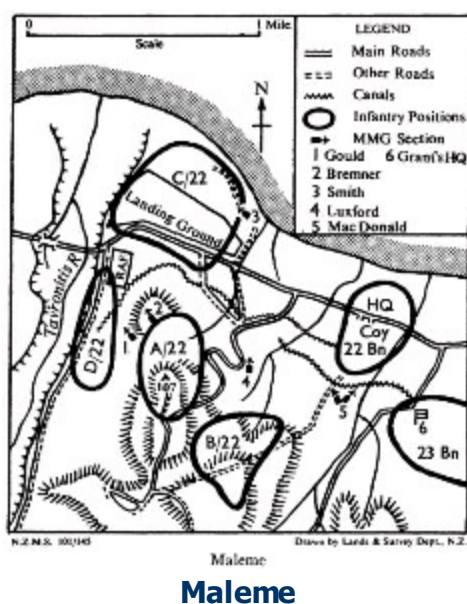
Only Kirk's and MacDonald's guns had tripods; the others were mounted on forked sticks, which made accurate shooting at any distance virtually impossible. At first each gun had only two belts of ammunition—enough for about two minutes of rapid fire—and not much more was received later. When another four guns without tripods and other essential equipment arrived on the 3rd, Lieutenant Green ⁴ (from 3 Company) and Second-Lieutenant Luxford (Headquarters Company) were each given two. These were sited to cover the eastern and western approaches to the airfield, where they came under the command of 22 Battalion. Some ammunition was procured from the [RAF](#), and mountings were constructed from six-by-six inch timber and U-brackets made to Green's specifications at an ordnance workshops.

About a week later Green and twenty-eight men were despatched to [Suda Bay](#), where they were given four brand-new Vickers guns (the tripods and plenty of ammunition came later) and were landed on [Suda Island](#) to protect the harbour defence booms. The island, only about 200 yards by 70, was an old stronghold which had once withstood a long siege by the Turks. 'Architecturally it was very interesting,' Green writes. 'There were battlements right round the slopes, old gates, strongholds honeycombed in the rock. There was a church said to mark the landing place of St Paul on his way to [Rome](#); another plum centre on the island for HQ; a lighthouse and a signalman's cottage. The strongest stone walls were on the S. point, yards thick.... there was a camp with the old gun embrasures, dungeons, iron grills and gates on the sunken way from the north to this southern stronghold. On the N. point we used sand bags to make gun positions.... We had a month's food and water.... Our work was mostly a night job, sitting by the guns watching the booms.'

The guns were mounted on wooden posts and were laid on fixed lines along the booms each side of the island. 'The only time that we fired,' says Corporal Cook, 'was one night when a supply boat from a Navy minesweeper tried to go through the boom without acknowledging our challenge. A few bursts of Vickers fire produced immediate results and we got our acknowledgment very smartly.'

To strengthen the machine-gun defences at [Maleme](#), Brant left his section in the [Galatas](#) sector and formed another platoon. He and Luxford were each given two more guns without tripods, which brought the number supporting 22 Battalion to eight.

Luxford had half his platoon, with himself in command, on a spur south of **Maleme** village, where the guns could cover the airfield and the beach, and the other section (Corporal **Gould** ⁵) some distance away, below two three-inch ack-ack guns on a ridge (Point 107) south of the airfield and overlooking the bridge across the Tavronitis. Brant had one section (Lance-Corporal **Smith** ⁶) near the eastern edge of the airfield, covering it and the beach, and the other (Private **Bremner** ⁷) above two four-inch coast guns on a rise between the airfield and Point



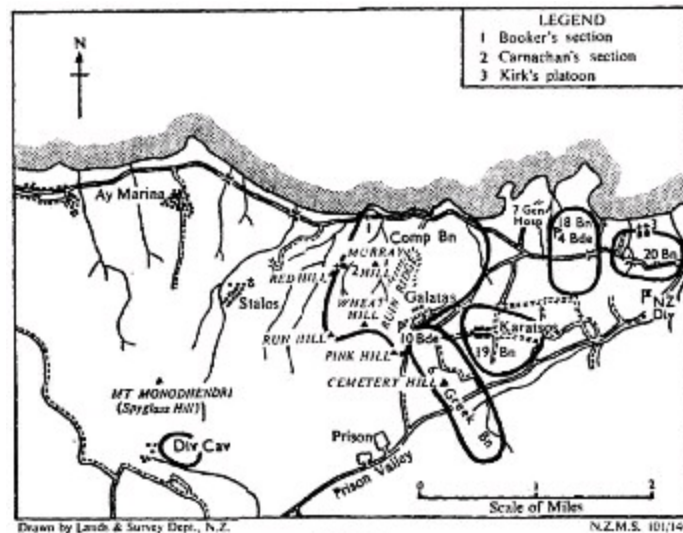
Maleme

107. To reduce the distance between their sections, Brant and Luxford exchanged command of Gould's and Smith's sections; Brant then had the four guns near Point 107.

A third New Zealand brigade, 10 Brigade (commanded by **Colonel Kippenberger**), was formed in the **Galatas** area; it comprised 20 Battalion, Composite Battalion (artillery—'infantillery'—and ASC units), a Divisional Cavalry detachment and two Greek regiments. Carnachan's section and the section formerly commanded by Brant and now under **Sergeant Booker** were placed under the command of the Composite Battalion,

Carnachan's section on **Red Hill**, a feature north-west of the **Galatas** village, and **Booker's** on a headland west of the hospital. The only other troops on the headland, says Private Hatherly, ⁸ 'were some ASC men [RMT], who were all equipped as infantry as were most of us.... We had a clear unobstructed and "grandstand" view of

the beach between us and **Ay Marina** and it was our job to deal with any landings by air or sea on that stretch.' Kirk's platoon, which had been dug in on Cemetery Hill, south of **Galatas** and overlooking **Prison Valley**, moved



Galatas
Galatas

with 20 Battalion to the coast north of **Galatas**, where its guns were also sited for defence against paratroops and a seaborne landing.

Thus, by 15 May, the equivalent of five machine-gun platoons, each with four Vickers guns, two or three Bren guns and anti-tank rifles, and a rifle for every man not otherwise armed, were deployed near the **Maleme** airfield and in the **Galatas** area. The sixth platoon, on **Suda Island**, was completely out of touch and in fact did not see the other machine-gunners again. Nor was it easy to maintain communication between the platoons on the mainland of Crete. They had no trucks (except Kirk's platoon, which received a 15-cwt on 19 May), motor cycles or telephones, and could keep in touch only by runner, which became very difficult when the enemy increased his air activity.

Mark VIII and Mark VII ammunition arrived from time to time and was distributed to some of the platoons, but in the end they had sufficient for only a few minutes' rapid fire. ⁹ Small quantities of clothing and blankets were also delivered, until each man had at least one blanket or greatcoat, shirt and shorts, and perhaps battle dress. The machine-gunners vigorously dug gunpits and slit trenches with the few picks and shovels they could borrow from other New Zealanders, the **RAF** or the

Greeks, and attempted to wire their positions, but did not have sufficient wire to do it properly.

The invasion was expected 01 16 or 17 May, and then on the 19th, but did not eventuate until the 20th. Meanwhile the sky was seldom empty of German aircraft, and Suda harbour was bombed heavily and frequently. The men in the Canea-Galatas sector watched spectacular searchlight and ack-ack displays which, however, seemed to have very little effect on the Luftwaffe. A great cloud of black smoke hung over the harbour.

The platoon on Suda Island had a much closer view. 'On one day there were eight ships blazing in the harbour, apart from the sunken York which had been hit before we landed on the island,' says Lieutenant Green. 'The repairs were almost complete when bombing sprung the plates and killed a diver. The ship settled more firmly....

'During the bombing we did nothing. There had been Bofors but they had been taken away. Anyhow we had a night job watching the booms and were told not to fire. The planes would come low and down the harbour to the sea, lower even than the level of the island.

'Most interesting was the sight of the little minesweepers covering the outer boom.... They swept up, turned neatly round and back again no matter how many planes came over bombing and strafing. All a ship had was a Lewis gun. When one did hit a plane, or more likely when a plane flying low hit the mast and crashed, we cheered the ship as it sailed along the boom.

'We had a grand stand seat when the harbour was bombed but while the blitz was on we had little sleep. There were 3.7 and Bofors on both sides of the bay. On one occasion 25 Stukas were attacking the 3.7 on N. hinterland.'

From the 13th onwards the Maleme sector was blitzed daily, sometimes for hours on end. During an exceptionally heavy raid on the 15th an RAF Gladiator, shot down near the airfield, crashed and turned over on the beach in front of a machine-gun pit. While enemy fighters tried to set fire to the plane with incendiary bullets, Lance-Corporal Smith and Private Curtis¹⁰ left the gunpit, ran forward to free the trapped pilot, and took him to safety. Smith was killed a few days later, but Curtis

was subsequently awarded the MM.

On the 19th the last British aircraft—four Hurricanes and three Gladiators—were withdrawn from [Crete](#), which undoubtedly was preferable to their being purposelessly sacrificed, but unfortunately the airfields were not destroyed.

The Luftwaffe renewed the bombardment shortly after six next morning. The [Maleme](#) airfield was not bombed—obviously it was to be saved for the enemy's own use—but its perimeter was savagely pounded, which raised immense clouds of dust and smoke. Swarms of fighters and fighter-bombers strafed the nearby countryside with such thoroughness that no man outside a slit trench seemed to escape special attention. 'I thought to myself that something was really going to happen,' says Luxford. It soon did. After a brief lull the onslaught was intensified, and some time after eight o'clock aircraft arrived towing perhaps fifty gliders, which swept in to land, some near the mouth of the Tavronitis, where the troops they carried overwhelmed the crews of the ack-ack guns; some along the riverbed, where they seized the bridge; and a few south and east of the airfield. Next came many large Junkers troop-carriers, which discharged hundreds of paratroops, a dozen from each plane, east, south and west of the airfield. While the parachutists were still floating down, and before those who reached the ground could collect together as a fighting unit, the defenders inflicted great slaughter with rifle and machine gun. But on the far side of the river the paratroops landed out of range and therefore unopposed.

One glider came down between and in rear of the two machine-gun sections in the Point 107 area, and from the cover of a stone wall its crew caused casualties and pinned down Bremner's section. Gould's section, about 200 yards south, also suffered casualties by fire from the same source, and could not bring its own guns to bear. It was subsequently reported, however, that two or three [Fleet Air Arm](#) men armed with 'those extra curly "M & V" tin grenades' dealt with these Germans.

Although handicapped by their makeshift mountings and the shortage of ammunition, the Vickers did some useful work; according to Captain [Campbell](#),¹¹ OC D Company 22 Battalion, they were able 'to get some juicy shooting in among the gliders in the riverbed.'

Gould refers to another target: 'Jerry landed two light mountain-type guns

immediately across the river from us and we spent all day unsuccessfully trying to locate one among the trees, but the other he set up most conveniently right on one of our ranging marks—on a tarmac road, without a vestige of cover at 600 yds—a Vickers gunner's dream target—then proceeded to man it with a succession of crews as we wiped them out one after another.

'After about four crews had been cleaned out he abandoned the idea and endeavoured to get [the gun] out by lassoing it and dragging it to the roadside. Another burst or two stopped that and it was not in action again during the day.'

Luxford's guns, farther east and north-east, had opened fire as soon as the troop-carriers had begun to disgorge their loads. 'The bombers flew around and around for hours protecting these paratroops'—so it seemed to Luxford—'until about 1000 hrs a further batch of fighters and bombers arrived together with more troop-carriers. These planes let go their paratroops behind me and on both sides of me, but did not make their way towards the drome in daylight. During the day we continued to fire at targets whenever they appeared.'

Many paratroops came down in 23 Battalion's area—where MacDonald's platoon and Grant's headquarters were located— and in 21 Battalion's area farther inland. Everywhere they were engaged with such devastating effect that two-thirds of a German battalion, including all its officers, were killed, and the survivors were unable to attack the airfield.

MacDonald's platoon was better supplied with ammunition. He did not have to give commands when the parachutes began to unfold. 'The men without orders unlocked the pins, had the guns loose and were following up the paratroopers. Other targets were boxes coming down. We gave one a good dose and were annoyed to find it contained only rifles. An A/Tk Gun fell among us and nearby 6 m/cycles.

'There were three waves after the first one and groups were getting established because we heard Spandaus firing in every direction. However we dealt with our own area satisfactorily.

'Boxes of supplies seemed to land past the EAST edge of the drome and the Huns seemed to be making for them. So we covered the slight rise to the drome from the SE to the EAST end. We collected a fair amount of Hun gear ourselves.'

Nevertheless the enemy was gathering in sufficient strength in the west to press the attack against 22 Battalion's positions from that direction. He captured the western end of the airfield and also breached the defences near the bridge; but as long as our troops shared the airfield with him his troop-carrying aircraft could not land. Two Junkers 52 that attempted to do so met such heavy fire that they were forced out to sea again.

Smith's men alongside the airfield had 'a pretty hectic time', but held out until nightfall, when they found the place untenable and moved back to join Luxford's section. They did not take their guns, which were bolted to the improvised mountings, but removed the locks. As they were without arms, Luxford sent them back to Grant's headquarters, about 1400 yards to the east. 'A stretcher party passed through my position just before these men got to me,' he says, 'so I directed them back the same way. However, they must have run into some Germans and been taken prisoner because when I got back myself... they had not arrived, neither had the stretcher bearers.'

Lieutenant-Colonel [Andrew](#),¹² CO 22 Battalion, passed through Luxford's position about 6 p.m. and 'told me he was withdrawing his troops from my left as he was being over-run and that he was putting a section of Infantry in front of me and that they would be in position by 8.30 P.M.' No infantry had arrived by that time, however, and an hour later, when Luxford could hear Germans around his position, he decided to withdraw his section south to Headquarters Company. There he reported to the company commander, who asked him if he had received the orders to withdraw sent to him about half past eight. He had not. Later Luxford and the few machine-gunners still with him went back with 22 Battalion as far as Headquarters 23 Battalion, where they joined Captain Grant.

Grant found the situation far from reassuring. The 22nd Battalion had withdrawn from [Maleme](#). Luxford had arrived with less than half his men. Brant was reported wounded and missing, and none of his men arrived before dawn. None of the two platoons' eight machine guns was brought back.

At nightfall Brant's platoon, still in position on the western side of Point 107, was very low in ammunition. '... both my guns were reduced to less than two belts each,'

says Gould. 'I saw Brant (who was in an Infantry post some 50 yds from my positions where he had been all day) at dusk when we were first able to move about with any degree of comfort in the ploughed area in which the pits had been sited, and discussed the ammunition situation with him only to learn that the nearest supply would be estimated at 5 miles in rear through country unknown to us and in the dark. It was obvious that even with a carrying party from the Infantry, which was not even considered to be a possibility, that there was no show of getting sufficient up to the guns to make the situation tenable at daybreak.'

D Company 22 Battalion, on the riverbank, had been out of touch with Battalion Headquarters all day; the signal section had received a direct hit when the bombing began, and the runners Captain Campbell had sent to Battalion Headquarters had not returned. In the evening Campbell went out himself to see what had happened, and about 1 a.m. told Gould that as the battalion had gone and 'we had been cut off for at least 12 hours, we could either try to march out with his boys or wait and surrender next morning. We stripped the guns and left within 10 minutes.' Campbell led a mixed party of infantrymen, machine-gunners, [RAF](#) and wounded back to B Company's area, south-east of Point 107. They heard German voices on all sides, and found that B Company had gone, so continued to retire.

'After a short spell in a wadi,' says Gould, 'we were stirred up by Spandau fire, and after trying to "get" the guns without success, [Fowler](#) ¹³ [CSM D Company] told us it was each man for himself, giving us an idea of where we were to go. Jerry got on to the boys as they made their rush over the lip of the gully and was causing casualties. Anyway it didn't appeal much to me so I made my way out solo under the muzzles of the guns causing the trouble and after some anxious minutes receiving some individual and very personal attention, managed to get clear without any damage.... I heard that three of my section were knocked out here by a Jerry grenade but never found an eyewitness....

'At this stage the boys were irretrievably scattered, one party took off on their own and ran into a patrol and were taken prisoner and others went off with friends to different units. I later located Coy HQ and took back what was left of the section and after a brief period with 23rd Battn we got to Grant just in time to start off on the hike back to the [Canea](#) area.'

The 20th May had not been so disastrous for the machine-gunners in the [Galatas- Canea](#) sector. Green's platoon, on [Suda](#) Island, watched the troop-carriers approach the harbour and then swing out to sea again; apparently this was not their destination. The aircraft could also be seen over [Maleme](#), away to the west, and the battle could be heard very clearly.

Few if any paratroops dropped in 20 Battalion's area, but Kirk's platoon saw many troop-carrying aircraft and a couple of gliders, and watched the parachutes 'falling like snow' beyond [Galatas](#) and in the direction of [Maleme](#). They also saw [Canea](#) being ruthlessly bombed. The ack-ack defences grew weaker and did not prevent the planes from flying a few feet above the trees beneath which the machine-gunners were hidden. 'Sometimes their fighters machine-gunning around us made us keep our heads down for half-hour periods,' wrote Sergeant Philpott.

No enemy landed near [Booker](#)'s section, farther west along the coast, until the afternoon, when 'a few stragglers out of one plane parachuted down inland a little from us,' says Hatherly. 'The nearest of these met with a noisy fusillade of rifle bullets as he descended. We had up to that moment filled a passive role, and all were glad, I think, to be able to "let fly" at the enemy, even though the enemy in this case was so small in number—one in fact—as hardly to matter.'

[Carnachan](#)'s section, on [Red Hill](#), saw the paratroops drop in [Prison Valley](#). The section moved to a position reconnoitred the previous night and occupied a trench on [Wheat Hill](#) over- looking [Galatas](#), and at dusk, with sights set at 200 yards, was exchanging rifle fire with enemy snipers.

[Heraklion](#) and [Retimo](#) were still in British hands, but the enemy's occupation of [Maleme](#) airfield meant that he would be able to land troops, guns and supplies to reinforce his drive towards [Canea](#) and [Suda Bay](#). Nevertheless the airfield could still be brought under fire by field guns (75-millimetre), mortars, and the Vickers of [MacDonald's](#) platoon with 23 Battalion. In fact the hostile reception given a Junkers 52 which landed on the airfield about 8 a.m. on the 21st must have persuaded the enemy that it was still too soon to attempt to land his troop-carriers there.

This plane had been about 1300 yards from [MacDonald's](#) platoon, which fired belt after belt into it. Six or seven men got out, and somebody inside seemed to be

handing out a box to them—probably containing ammunition. The motors started up and the plane took off in the direction of the sea, but one of its wheels dropped off and bounced across the beach into the water. Another plane landed on the beach about 500 yards from MacDonald's platoon, which was 'pumping everything from four MGs into it—it stopped in the shingle and nobody got out. The mortar people near us hit it directly with one bomb—their first.' Later other planes began to land on the western end of the airfield, where they were obscured from the machine-gunners' view by hills—'but the arty behind us lobbed some shells into the area. Eventually there were many planes on the 'drome—some on fire—and we were shooting at all and sundry.'

More paratroops had been dropped west of the airfield early in the morning, and some aircraft had also landed on the beach beyond the Tavronitis. Thus reinforced, and no doubt anxious to destroy the weapons—including MacDonald's four Vickers—which could fire on the airfield, the Germans advanced cautiously eastwards, and with strong support from aircraft, machine guns, mortars and light guns, probed against 23 Battalion. 'Our chief concern became more and more one of self defence,' says MacDonald. 'From the hills south of the 'drome they overlooked us on the lower ridge to the east. The inf which should have been in front melted away and the Germans began to crawl up at us.'

This German assault from the west was not successful. The [23rd Battalion](#) beat off all the attacks and withdrew only from the forward slope where the mortars and machine guns were sited, to form a new line above the old positions. At the same time two companies of paratroops jumped to the east of 23 Battalion, but most of them were killed by the [Maori Battalion](#) and a detachment of engineers.

In the [Galatas](#) sector, where the Germans, virtually hemmed in in [Prison Valley](#), were not strong enough to attack, advantage was taken of a comparative lull to strengthen 10 Brigade's front. This involved moving one of Kirk's sections from near the coast to a position overlooking [Prison Valley](#). The other section, under Philpott, stayed where it was, on the seaward side of the main road.

Kirk had been ordered at eleven the previous evening to take the section to a rendezvous in [Galatas](#), from which he was to be guided to the headquarters of the Composite Battalion. 'I was told that Major [Lewis](#) ¹⁴ would indicate an area where

my guns could engage at long range some Greek civilian prisoners who had been released and were working under the enemy trying to construct a landing ground in rear of the prison.' Kirk reported to Lewis at 2.30 a.m. and asked to be led to the area where he was to place his guns so that they could be dug in before dawn, but three hours elapsed before he was taken to [Wheat Hill](#). There he found Carnachan, and they decided to place Kirk's guns (which had tripods) in Carnachan's positions. 'These were very unsatisfactorily situated in an infantry trench, but it was the best that could be done as the whole area was very bare and constantly under mortar and MG fire. It would have been impossible in daylight to dig new positions without heavy losses.'

While Kirk's guns were going into position they came under intense mortar fire and air attack, and the section commander (Corporal [Buckeridge](#) ¹⁵) was wounded and had to be evacuated. This must have disclosed the position to the enemy, for whenever the Vickers opened fire heavy fire was returned. Nevertheless, during the next two or three days they engaged targets in [Prison Valley](#), including five anti-tank guns, at least one of which was put out of action. The enemy appeared to abandon his supposed attempt at making a landing ground.

One of Kirk's men, Private [Delury](#), ¹⁶ wrote on the 21st that it was 'very hot and had a torrid sort of day, done a fair amount of shooting. Darkness very welcome.... [We] are in sight of the prison camp, which is now flying a [Red Cross](#) flag. We have our gun but nothing else, no spare parts, no spare barrel, no condenser can, but it is going like a bird.' Next day: 'Still in our gun position, and plenty of action.... Planes had a real day out harassing and ground straffing, it seemed like the end several times. Heat and flies very trying. Rations not so hot but no one seems very hungry....'

Carnachan's section was given a close-range task covering [Galatas](#) and [Ruin Hill](#), but the two Vickers without mountings 'proved valueless' at ranges beyond about 600 yards.

The men not needed to man the two guns of [Booker's](#) section were given other tasks and spent some time with the 'infantillery', who Lance-Corporal McColl says were 'crawling around in shallow trenches and getting shot at.... A lot of them had scooped out hollows in the sides of their trenches where they huddled because they

had neither guns, rifles, or grenades....'

While one of this section's guns, under Corporal [Paterson](#),¹⁷ stayed on the headland—where it did no shooting—Sergeant Bradshaw, with six men, took the other to [Cemetery Hill](#), 'a very lively spot' just south of [Galatas](#). There Lance-Corporal [Laing](#)¹⁸ and Private [Gilroy](#),¹⁹ with the tripodless Vickers attached to the loop of an ammunition box, fought a duel with a German machine gun on the forward slopes of 'Spyglass Hill' (Monodhendri). 'Their fire was effective,' says Bradshaw. 'I could see through my glasses two Jerries hit and the Jerry m.g. finally withdrew. Darkness descended. The local infantillery were busy conducting extremely local patrols. Some time in the dawn we moved further down towards the sea....' Soon it became necessary 'to steal rations in order to be fed'; rationing a machine-gun detachment seemed to be nobody's responsibility.

If Crete were to be held, it was essential that the [Maleme](#) airfield should be recaptured as soon as possible. A counter-attack by 20 and 28 Battalions was planned for the night of 21–22 May, but because a seaborne invasion was feared—an enemy flotilla did set out for [Crete](#) but was defeated by the Navy that night—20 Battalion was not permitted to move forward from the [Canea](#) area until relieved by an Australian battalion. The counter-attack, therefore, did not get away on time. Both battalions met opposition all the way, but drove through pockets of the enemy with grenade and bayonet. Daylight overtook them when they were only a short distance beyond 23 Battalion, and despite desperate fighting they progressed no farther; a company of the 20th which reached the airfield had to pull back.

MacDonald's platoon, which had seen the flashes of bursting grenades between it and the sea during the counter-attack, now had only two guns in working order. These were well dug in, but the casing of the barrel of one was shot up, and a German damaged the other at close range. The position was under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire, and captured Bofors guns at the airfield were shooting at the top of a ridge in the rear, possibly because the enemy believed there was an artillery observation post on it. 'The shells usually skimmed our hilltop en route. Occasionally one burst on contact with the top of an olive tree.' The platoon had suffered casualties, including two killed, and some men sent back for water did not return. No food had been received since the start of the battle, and 'too many Huns [were] crawling about the vines.'

MacDonald therefore pulled back from the exposed surface on the broad top to the reverse slope of his ridge, where there was better cover from machine-gun and mortar fire. Here, with a party of Maoris, he awaited an attack which the enemy evidently was preparing. 'We remained on the reverse slope with two Maoris on top watching. They yelled "He is coming!" and came back. The Maoris fixed bayonets and I jacked up a Spandau.

'The attack began with a bursting mass of flame from the grenades the Huns threw on to the top—shook us a bit. Then they came over.

'There was no order but we stood up and charged forward, the Maoris yelling at top. The GOUNS appeared to stand aghast. It was most exhilarating; I seemed to be as light as a feather. The GOUNS let out a shriek or two and the rest bolted down hill like rabbits, over stone walls, plunging through vines. Very soon the MGs opened up, together with the mortars, and we got back quickly.

'We stayed the night on the reverse slope with some brisk exchanges of fire; one fellow would have a light trigger-finger and start up the whole show—no sleep worth having.'

The failure of the counter-attack on [Maleme](#) had confirmed the enemy in his possession of the airfield, where he was now free to pour in reinforcements of men and material as fast as his planes could land and unload. Fifth Brigade was in an exposed position and in danger of being cut off, and therefore was ordered to withdraw to a line forward of [Platanias](#) and linking up with 10 Brigade.

Captain Grant attended a conference at Headquarters 23 Battalion about 5 a.m. on the 23rd when orders were given for the battalions to go back over the hills south of the coastal road and take up defensive positions by ten o'clock. Grant set off at once with all the machine-gunners except MacDonald's detachment to take up a position near the sea in rear of the village of [Ay Marina](#). 'On the way back to this position,' he says, 'we were under mortar fire and were hard-pressed by the enemy. Sniping was prevalent from all sides and several casualties occurred, one [Lance-Corporal Smith] being killed.' They took up positions in the open and under olive trees, but could not dig in because tools were unobtainable. They experienced

several heavy concentrations of artillery and mortar fire as well as strafing from the air.

MacDonald's detachment, reduced to about ten men, remained with a group of Maoris covering the withdrawal of the main body of [28 Battalion](#). Theirs was a difficult task, for the enemy followed up very closely. ` **DITTMER** ²⁰ said that we would have to fight it out as the Huns were pressing or edging forward all the time. We therefore decided to fall back by the ridges— **DITTMER** left **T. BENNETT** ²¹ and me to fire the odd shot and give the rest some cover. Left many Maori wounded behind. Then down to the creek ourselves—have a drink! Up the other side under the olive trees—Spandaus going in all directions. I moved up that side very fast with a Maori boy carrying ammo for my Spandau. Was nearly shot by my Maoris but established myself on top and fired back at the Hun from a small cemetery. The Hun was easily seen on the main ridge ([22 Bn](#)) and on our smaller one.

`Formed up in groups: almost half a coy went round the bottom of the ridge. The rest of us, led by **DITTMER**, went back into the hills and round into the **PLATANIAS R.**—had Spandaus for extra automatics—shot up on one sunny spot by Spandaus in the hills, so left for an irrigation canal—then over the **PLATANIAS R.**

`Went almost to the beach....'

Some of MacDonald's men arrived back in parties of two or three.

The main battlefront was now on the [Galatas](#) line, which was rearranged on the night of 23–24 May. Fifth Brigade— including some of the machine-gunners who had supported the brigade during the previous four days' fighting—was withdrawn into a reserve position between [Karatsos](#) and [Canea](#); the front line, which ran southwards from the coast at [Staliana Khandia](#) to [Wheat Hill](#) and thence south-eastwards to [Cemetery Hill](#) and to the west of [Prison Valley](#), was held by 4 NZ Brigade (commanded by Brigadier Inglis) on the right and 19 Australian Brigade on the left.

Captain Grant's men reached the reserve position west of [Canea](#) about 2 a.m. on the 24th. They saw no ground fighting that day, but sheltered in their slit trenches while the [Luftwaffe](#), with great ferocity, reduced the town to flaming ruins. Huge clouds of smoke swirled over the machine-gunners' position.

At a conference at Brigade Headquarters in the evening Brigadier Hargest told Grant to collect his men together and organise them into platoons. None of the twelve Vickers that had supported [5 Brigade](#) remained, and only forty-five of the 100-odd men could be accounted for (ten more were found with 20 Battalion next day). Grant's men were attached to Divisional Signals, where Hargest could call on them should he want to use them, and were promised two Vickers and some ammunition.

By this time Philpott's section had spent about ten days coast-watching in this sector, with little to do except shelter from the strafing and bombing. When a hundred German prisoners were marched down the road towards [Canea](#) on the 23rd, 'The few Greek civilians who are still living near where we are camped were very pleased at the sight of them,' Philpott wrote. 'Their houses had been bombed and machine gunned.' Next day 'a bridge about 100 yards from camp ... received hell from the divebombers which attacked it in force, but without results, traffic still could pass at dusk.'

The six Vickers guns in the [Galatas](#) line were now supporting 18 Battalion, which had relieved Composite Battalion and was holding a 2500-yard front facing west between the sea and [Wheat Hill](#). Carnachan's section, which was covering [Ruin Hill](#) and [Wheat Hill](#), had its first casualty when Private [Malcolm](#) ²² was killed by a mortar bomb. Delury, in Kirk's section on Wheat Hill, says 'the planes kept us very low all morning, but [we were] doing some shooting in the afternoon, gun still doing a good job. A mortar has us ranged very nicely, and is too close for comfort. I think it is somewhere in the prison....'

In the afternoon (the 24th) Kirk took his section about a mile from [Wheat Hill](#) to a position near the coast road, where his two guns could engage any enemy attempting to outflank 18 Battalion on the right of the line.

Both guns of [Booker](#)'s section had now left the headland. Bradshaw had his in a 'vast cavern' (a trench six or eight feet wide) on [Red Hill](#); Paterson had the other in the [Ruin Hill](#) area. Bradshaw's position came under 'extremely severe and accurate mortaring' and machine-gun fire, which caused casualties among a platoon of 18 Battalion. Finding nobody there senior to himself, Bradshaw took the infantry under his command and towards dusk withdrew his men, now twenty-five in all, to a ridge

about 200 yards in the rear (on [Murray Hill](#)), where Private [Dalziel](#) ²³ was killed by a mortar bomb. A few ASC and artillery reinforced Bradshaw's party. He went back to Battalion Headquarters and returned with the order: 'Hold on at all costs as a strong force of our troops is coming through to counter-attack tomorrow.'

Paterson's gun and the remainder of the section were behind a ridge. Hatherly recalls a bayonet charge across this ridge—'and a little beyond I think—in which all took part. However the objective was reached without making contact with the enemy! This forward position became too hot for everyone and all withdrew to the ridge and its terrace on the rear side of the plateau. Saturday night fell with us all ([18 Bn](#) men and our gun and its men) in this position expecting the Jerries to attack during the night. They didn't though they were close enough for us to hear them talking.... During the night two separate attacks were made by our men from which the 27 M.G. men were excluded—being kept presumably in reserve. The [18 Bn](#) men suffered casualties but failed to dislodge the Jerries. That was when I recall the vegetation caught alight.'

The Germans now had a powerful force on the [Galatas](#) front: two comparatively fresh battalions of mountain troops, the remains of the paratroop regiment that had been dropped at [Maleme](#), and two battalions of the regiment in the Prison valley; they were strongly supported by artillery, mortars and machine guns, and apparently as many aircraft as the sky could hold. On the other hand the New Zealand and Australian battalions were a long way below strength, and the line was patched up with non-infantry ad hoc units; they had very little artillery and no air support.

The defenders endured a continuous drubbing from aircraft, guns, mortars and machine guns on the morning of the 25th, and this reached a peak after midday, when the enemy began his first probing attacks. Fierce fighting broke out on D Company's front, on the right of the line. The infantry 'received a terrible battering from the German mortars and machine guns but held out as long as it was possible for them to do so,' says one of Kirk's men (Corporal [Pitcon](#) ²⁴). 'They suffered very heavy casualties before they were finally forced to retire.' About 5 p.m. Kirk saw Germans on D Company's hill. 'The guns opened fire and the hill was rapidly cleared of the enemy. Several of our troops had surrendered and were used as a screen—the enemy made them walk over the edge of the hill into dead ground. The enemy

attempted to establish LMG posts which our guns successfully prevented.'

Lieutenant-Colonel [Gray](#)²⁵ (CO 18 Battalion) personally led a counter-attack, but succeeded only in delaying the advance of a more numerous enemy. It appeared to Kirk that the hill had been retaken. 'However as far as we could see no troops were left on the ground and the enemy constantly tried to establish himself on the hill. The guns prevented him from doing this—also the guns had not been located.' One of the Vickers stopped with a bullet jammed in the barrel, and as the blockage could not be cleared, had to be replaced by another, but this also stopped through the same cause.

The gun sent to Kirk as a replacement was Paterson's. This section had withdrawn to Headquarters 18 Battalion at dawn and stayed there most of the day. 'Sgt [Booker](#) manned our tripod-less gun and fired one belt straight through, spraying the ridge ahead,' says Hatherly. ' [Gallagher](#)²⁶ ... was detailed to take the gun to Kirk's platoon which was to our right down towards the sea. He was to rejoin us ... at [18 Bn H.Q.](#) but as that had been evacuated I went back there in case he was looking for us in vain. However he wasn't there—only two unconcerned donkeys! This excursion meant however that Paterson, Doyle²⁷ and myself were delayed in getting back up the next ridge (beyond which was the road leading up to [Galatas](#)). This forward slope was under heavy fire....' Doyle got back unscathed, but Paterson and Hatherly were wounded.

Not only in D Company's sector had the front been in danger that day; by 2 p.m. all the forward troops of 18 Battalion were under attack, and on the southern flank A Company was hard pressed on [Wheat Hill](#). There Carnachan's section suffered several casualties, including Corporal [Parker](#)²⁸ and Private [Spurdle](#)²⁹ killed, and both Vickers were put out of action. Throughout a terrific bombardment by mortars and under heavy machine-gun fire Parker, in charge of one of the guns, had remained at his post observing and had repeatedly engaged targets until killed while using his field glasses to spot a mortar nest.

The pressure against [Wheat Hill](#) became too great, and when A Company and its attached troops began to fall back through [Galatas](#), Carnachan's men were ordered to go too. Sergeant [Kain](#)³⁰ volunteered to organise a party to assist carry in the wounded to the ADS east of [Galatas](#), which meant making trips into country now

occupied by the enemy, and while he was doing this he lost his life. ³¹

C Company and one or two small groups were left holding the foremost positions in the centre of the line. ³² One of these groups consisted of Bradshaw's half dozen machine-gunners and twenty or thirty men of Supply Company and 18 Battalion. Armed with three Bren guns, rifles, and the solitary Vickers, they manned four trenches on [Murray Hill](#), across a narrow gully from [Red Hill](#). About 8 a.m. the first Germans appeared on the crest of [Red Hill](#), filtering forward in twos and threes, but snap shooting by the riflemen and bursts from the Vickers and Brens kept the hill clear. Mortar and machine-gun fire came from [Ruin Hill](#) (to the south), and there was much movement in an olive grove and a vineyard on the southern side of [Red Hill](#). Casualties occurred, and by midday only Bradshaw, Laing and Gilroy remained of the machine-gunners, and about a dozen infantrymen and drivers. When heavy small-arms fire was heard on the right, Bradshaw sent a runner to find out the cause; he returned to report that 'D Company are going out with their hands up.' Later another runner approached from the rear and shouted 'Get out if you can. The Jerries are all round you.'

When the infantry fell back on both flanks, the [Murray Hill](#) party was left 'holding on at all costs' on a precarious salient. Hostile fire came from their front, the right and the rear, and about 5 p.m. the enemy began to close in from [Ruin Hill](#). Bradshaw decided to withdraw. He removed the lock of the gun, in case it should fall into enemy hands; Gilroy carried the gun and a belt of ammunition; Laing had 1000 rounds. The eight infantrymen—all who remained—filed along the trench to the right with the intention of making a dash to the next cover. Gilroy recalls that one of them said, "'I've come to the end of the trench—What will I do?" "You go over and we'll see what happens," suggested another of the eight. In a moment they were all out of the trench, and in a few moments they were all shot down. All who were left, viz., Bradshaw, Laing and myself, crawled to the point where the infantrymen had started their unsuccessful dash. We were no sooner there, than we heard a commotion along the ridge—30 or 40 Germans were running towards us, shouting and squealing as they came. Sgt. Bradshaw gave the order to fire, but we were impeded with the loads we were carrying and could do nothing before the Germans were upon us. We were ordered to surrender, to walk out, and to put our hands up. We were in a hopeless position—we had no alternative but to obey. L/Cpl Laing was wounded

during the few brief seconds that we were aware of the enemy's approach.'

While the three machine-gunners were being escorted back by their captors, a German came out of some trees and opened fire with a sub-machine gun. Laing was hit again, and collapsed when he reached the far side of [Red Hill](#). Bradshaw and Gilroy bound his wounds, but had to leave him when ordered to return to the forward slope of [Red Hill](#) to pick up German wounded. 'It was then that we saw the results of the snap shooting in the morning,' says Gilroy. 'Many Germans lay dead on the hill, mostly with bullet wounds in the head or upper part of the body.'

With only one Vickers in working order, Kirk's section was still in position farther north. At 8.30 p.m. he learnt that 18 Battalion had withdrawn over an hour before. Battalion Headquarters could not be found, and the runner who went to look for it brought back the information that [Galatas](#) had been lost and that the enemy was on the reverse slope of the ridge on which the machine-gun section was dug in.

Kirk therefore ordered his men to withdraw. While they were doing so they were assisted with covering fire from a platoon of 18 Battalion in their rear; apparently this platoon had not received orders to retire. The machine-gunners came under fire while crossing a forward slope, but had no casualties. They went back across country to the [Galatas](#) road, where they found that 18 Battalion had gone farther back towards [Canea](#). Kirk 'reported to Col Gray who advised me to remain attached to his Bn. I could obtain no information as to the whereabouts of the other section and Platoon HQ.' Several men had become separated from Kirk's section. In fact, by this time men from most of the machine-gun sections were scattered throughout the Division and fighting as infantrymen.

A shortened line had been patched up between [Galatas](#) and the sea, but there was a danger that the enemy, who now occupied the village in strength, might thrust towards the coast and cut off the troops on this flank. A counter-attack on [Galatas](#), 'one of the fiercest engagements fought by any New Zealand troops during the whole war,'³³ checked any such threat.

This attack was led by two British light tanks. The corporal and gunner of one of them had been wounded, and [Colonel Kippenberger](#), who hastily organised the attack, called for volunteers. Those chosen were Private [Lewis](#)³⁴ (a machine-

gunner), who took command of the tank, and Private [Ferry](#)³⁵ (from Headquarters 4 Brigade), who became gunner. 'There was a Tommy driver, and my particular weapon was the speaking tube,' says Lewis. 'We were given ten minutes to look the tank over and to get instructions.' The instructor was Lieutenant Roy Farran, of [3 Hussars](#), who concluded: 'Of course you know you seldom come out of one of these things alive.'

In twilight, about 8.10 p.m., Farran set off in the first tank; Lewis followed in the second. Behind them came the infantry. They entered the village and proceeded down the main street towards the square. Farran's tank was knocked out and its occupants wounded. The ratchet in the turret of Lewis's tank had jammed. 'As the slit restricted visibility, I stood up in my seat. I got splinters in the forehead, my eyes were cut about a bit. I thought it time to duck.' He ducked, but in doing so lost his grip on the speaking tube to the driver, who turned the tank round. 'By the time I had found the speaking tube, we were back with the infantry. They cursed us a bit, told us what they thought. I got the tank heading in the right direction again. I don't think Ferry had fired before. Now he opened up on doors and windows, doing the place over nicely. I could see that through the slit. That's where I was. There's no doubt Ferry silenced much fire.

'We went right on to the square.... but we were almost out of ammo, and Farran hadn't broken through, so we turned back.

'On that trip we used up the rest of the ammo. Hell had broken loose down the street. The infantry was on the job. Our chaps were going through the houses with tommy guns, rifles and bayonets. There was nothing we could do to help them, so we kept on going.'

The infantry charged the square and went some distance beyond, and when at last the fighting died down only one strongpoint at the far end of the village still held out.

The troops had endured six days' fighting, with little if any respite from merciless air attacks; casualties had been mounting continually. So few men remained that a further withdrawal would have to be made if they were to keep an unbroken front. During the night of 25–26 May, therefore, the Division drew back to

a line east of [Galatas](#), which it held with [5 Brigade](#) on the right and [19 Australian Brigade](#) on the left; 4 Brigade reformed in the rear.

Captain Grant's party of machine-gunners attached to Divisional Signals had received the promised two Vickers guns with tripods and eight boxes of Mk VIII Z ammunition. The ten men who had been located with 20 Battalion came back in the evening to link up with the main party. Very severe bombing killed Lance-Corporal [Tozer](#),³⁶ mortally wounded Lance-Corporal [Morrison](#),³⁷ and wounded one or two others. By this time, also, MacDonald was reported missing³⁸—as indeed were many others. The whereabouts of Kirk's and Carnachan's men was unknown.

Philpott's men were still in the same place, where they had gone through the ordeal of waiting day after day under constant air attack. 'No sabbath day, but another hell of a day,' Philpott wrote in his diary on Sunday the 25th, 'heavy bombs have been dropping all round us and machine gun bullets spraying the ground.... their fast fighters are on top of us before we know where we are, so it is best to stay and wait patiently in one's trench.'

They had to wait another day. While Grant's party moved back early on the morning of the 26th to the vicinity of the wireless station south of [Canea](#), Philpott's section stayed in what had become [21 Battalion Group's](#)³⁹ sector of the line. This was not a very happy position. 'Bullets are whining over our heads, explosive bullets,' Private [Bell](#)⁴⁰ wrote in his diary. 'The enemy are approx 400 yds away on our blind side. We can't get the gun around to fire on them. Planes are roaring overhead continuously. About ½ hr ago a dozen or so bombs were dropped a couple of hundred yds away.... This afternoon will be embedded in my mind for the rest of my days. Mortar bombs are bursting around our gun-pit.' The line held, but could not be expected to last much longer, for the troops had reached the limit of their endurance. Another retreat was inevitable.

Philpott called at Headquarters [5 Brigade](#) at 8 p.m. and asked Brigadier Hargest if his two guns could be used for some other task, and was told that all troops would be withdrawing at midnight to an area three miles beyond [Suda Bay](#). The machine-gunners had no transport, but were to carry the guns and as much ammunition as possible. Philpott decided to leave soon after ten o'clock. He assembled his men and told them to take their own rations and to keep together. After passing through the

ruins of [Canea](#), however, they became divided into two groups, one led by Philpott and the other by Sergeant [Cato](#); ⁴¹ those who could not keep up the pace gradually dropped behind.

Meanwhile the small parties of machine-gunners still with the battered 18 Battalion had moved back to the [Suda Bay](#) area in broad daylight. Casualties had occurred in Kirk's section during an attack by four Messerschmitts, and by nightfall only seven men could be accounted for. Grant's larger group was more fortunate. His men moved at night and by 6 a.m. on the 27th were 12 miles south-east of [Suda Bay](#). Although desperately tired and hungry, they immediately dug slit trenches with tools they had collected while passing through an ordnance dump. This was just as well, because an air attack, in which incendiary and explosive bullets as well as cannon shells were used, began about eight o'clock and lasted all day. Some vehicles were set on fire, but there were no casualties among the machine-gunners. They obtained food from a nearby ration dump, and washed and drank from a plentiful supply of water.

It was now no longer a question of prolonging the defence with the hope that in some way [Crete](#) might be saved, but of getting as many men as possible over the mountains to the south coast, where they might be taken off by the Navy.

Leaving Divisional Signals—which was ordered to make all haste to [Sfakia](#), the embarkation port—Grant's group joined 20 Battalion on 27 May, and made contact for the first time since before the invasion with Kirk's and Carnachan's very depleted sections, still with 18 Battalion. Grant's two guns, which had been manhandled from the other side of [Canea](#), were placed in an 18 Battalion truck—and were not seen again. Kirk still had his guns, but only one was in working order.

They set off with 4 Brigade that night. The march was a cruel test for men already fatigued and footsore. The rough road zigzagged and twisted always upwards to a height over 3000 feet, and was congested with troops, sometimes in columns nine abreast. Trucks and ambulances weaved their way through these columns and disorganised units, and individuals kept falling out for water, or from sheer exhaustion. After marching for more than ten hours, Grant's men reached wooded country south of [Vrises](#), where they rested two or three hours before continuing on in mid-morning on the 28th to the mile-long [Askifou Plain](#). There, with

4 Brigade, they were to take up positions in an anti-paratroop role and keep the road open to [Sfakia](#).

The parties led by Philpott and Cato had not been able to get in touch with the main group of machine-gunners; they had no news of their platoon commander (Kirk) or of Grant. Hearing that [Crete](#) was to be evacuated, Philpott sought confirmation at [Divisional Headquarters](#), and was told to continue on towards the south coast. This the two parties did, walking all night and reaching the top of the pass in the morning. Food was scarce and they were lucky if they could get a cup of water. Their two Vickers guns joined the abandoned equipment strewn along the route.

Fourth Brigade was to guard the northern entrance to the [Askifou Plain](#) until the last of [5 Brigade](#) had passed through. A Company 18 Battalion, to which the few remaining men of Kirk's and Carnachan's sections were attached, was therefore sent back at dawn on the 29th to hold the head of the pass about a mile west of [Kerates](#). The remainder of the brigade, including Grant's party—now only one officer (Luxford) besides himself and twenty-two men—moved to a defensive position at the southern exit from the plain, where they stayed all day. They had no tools with which to dig in on rocky ground, but fortunately the [Luftwaffe](#) showed very little interest in them. Kirk's guns, which had been placed in an 18 Battalion truck, were still available, and the serviceable one was put in position at the southern end of the plain.

The last troops of [5 Brigade](#) came through late in the afternoon, with the enemy close on their heels, and the 18 Battalion rearguard, some fifty men supported by a light tank of 3 Hussars, had no easy task holding out until dark. ⁴² A German machine gun got in behind them and covered the road leading down to the plain, but was attended to by three 75-millimetre guns manned by Australians with the main body of 4 Brigade. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray and Kirk acted as spotters; they sat on the rocks above the road directing the fire and calling out corrections to the guns.

The delaying task successfully completed. 4 Brigade withdrew at nine o'clock to a bivouac area at the end of the road above the little embarkation port of [Sfakia](#). The machine-gunners hid in the [Komitadhes](#) ravine until late in the afternoon of the 30th, when they made their way down the steep track to the beach. Most of them embarked with 4 Brigade that night in the destroyers [Napier](#) and [Nizam](#), and after

surviving several bombing attacks at sea, reached [Alexandria](#) next day. They discovered Cato and some of his section already at [Amiriya](#). Luxford and five men, who had been detailed to remain behind when the main party sailed, turned up a day later.

Philpott was among those left at [Sfakia](#) who became prisoners of war on 1 June. The Germans bombed the village. 'White flags had been flying since dawn, we were instructed to destroy our rifles and tin hats, then waited to be collected.

'Prior to being captured we were machine gunned from the air while standing out in the open with towels and hands up. It was an appalling sight, repeatedly these fighters came in and put bursts into the large groups. The boys became panicky and a dozen or so were killed, with a large number of casualties.

'We were all grouped together and supplied with music for the rest of the day.

'The German officers were very nice to us and allowed us to do anything as long as we received permission.

'At 4.30 p.m. we commenced our long trek back towards [Canea](#) in file over broken beach tracks. Collecting large numbers of prisoners on our way, we marched all night....'

Lieutenant Green and his twenty-eight men on [Suda Island](#), with their four new guns and plenty of ammunition, had survived the battle intact, only to fall into enemy hands at the end. They were very unlucky not to get away.

They had received reports on the progress of the fighting until, about the fourth day after the invasion began, the boom control defence tower received a direct hit and 'went up in a mushroom-like cloud. We were isolated.' The last report they had received had been that the situation was well in hand, but they saw flames at the western end of [Suda Bay](#), and a few days later fires in the [Galatas- Canea](#) area. Small groups of men struggled along the road past [Suda Bay](#). Three New Zealanders in a dinghy pulled in at [Suda Island](#) with the news that the Division was going to [Sfakia](#) to embark. 'I did not believe it,' says Green, 'but they insisted.'

Ships were leaving the harbour; destroyers had come and gone. A Greek caique

arrived at [Suda Island](#) with three members of a British intelligence group, who had been sabotaging enemy ships at islands in the Aegean. They agreed to explain the machine-gunners' predicament to somebody ashore, and returned late in the evening with verbal orders that the platoon was to be picked up by tank landing craft on the night of 29 May. Green's men left [Suda Bay](#) in the LCT.

'In it we were to go to [Sphakia](#) and lay down the defence for the evacuation. The officer whom the sabotage group met must have thought we had more than four machine guns. We must have been the last ship to leave [Suda Bay](#). All night there were flares; white, red and parachute flares over the harbour.

'To my dismay I learnt that the LCT was going by the west side of the island. It was in German hands but the other way would have taken four days. Still the LCT was a very old job. It had been on the Libyan coast and needed repairs. There were two stops, one off [Maleme](#) aerodrome. Flares went up and we were shelled.

'By dawn we had made the west coast and run ashore, were camouflaged and on shore well dispersed waiting for nightfall. But unfortunately we were directly in the line of flight from [Maleme](#) aerodrome to the [Athens](#) airfields. At dawn two low flying Junkers 52 must have seen the LCT for within half an hour two Stukas came over and scored direct hits with bombs on the LCT and, as we learnt later, another LCT further north on the coast met the same fate.'

The naval commander handed over to Green, who reconnoitred and found that in the darkness they had landed on a promontory at the western end of the island. Their way of escape, southwards along the coast, was blocked by a crashed German plane; some men, armed with one of the plane's guns, were sheltering under its wing.

Shortly afterwards, at 7 a.m., a warrant officer arrived from the other LCT. His party—there were fourteen men in each LCT—wanted to join forces with Green's. They had no map, no water, and the sailors were badly clothed and shod for walking. The warrant officer wanted twelve hours to get his men over some very rocky country. Green did not want to stay, but agreed to do so because it was daylight and would be dark by the time the other party caught up with his. Shortly before it was time to leave they saw movement in the hills a mile and a half away.

Germans were approaching fast.

'We decided to run between the plane and the sea in groups of about ten, rendezvous and go overland to [Sphakia](#), over the roughest part of the island. The other party never came up—they had given up the job.

'In the dash some got through. Two sailors got to [Sphakia](#), with the aid of the Greeks, and found the Germans there. The majority were caught as the enemy had come down the promontory on a right angle front and closed the escape route. Half an hour later it would have been dark and some may have slipped through with at least a chance of starting across the island for [Sphakia](#).'

After the party had surrendered Corporal [Adams](#)⁴³ was given permission to recover his great coat down on the beach, but unfortunately his action in running to get it was misunderstood by a German with a spandau farther along the beach and he was killed.

Green was taken to [Galatas](#) for interrogation. On the way he passed [Maleme](#) airfield, where he saw over a hundred aircraft that had crash-landed or were burnt and had been dragged off to the beach.⁴⁴

The others were quartered for about six weeks at Kisamos [Kastelli](#), and were made to do road work and unload ammunition and stores from ships and barges. 'We had no option in this and were forced to do the work as at that time we were not registered POW,' says Corporal Cook. 'Later we were taken over to the main POW camp [near [Galatas](#)] which was in a filthy state, the sanitation being non-existent. After about three weeks there we were loaded onto an ancient Italian tramp steamer, some 1500 of us being crammed aboard like sardines, and taken up to [Salonika](#) where our troubles really began.'

At least one member of Green's platoon escaped. After about a fortnight at [Kastelli](#) Private [Carter](#)⁴⁵ was taken to [Canea](#) to work in a kitchen, and from there was transferred to the prison camp. Late one evening he waited for a column of trucks to pass the camp and, hidden in the dust, slipped out between two vehicles. Next day he reached [Meskla](#), in the hills to the south, where fifteen men were in hiding. With another New Zealander he made his way across the island to [Suia](#), on the south coast, where they met two Australians. They found a 16-foot boat in a

dilapidated condition and set out with a favourable wind and a blanket as a sail. They had to bail continuously to keep the boat afloat, but after a voyage of ninety hours reached [Sidi Barrani](#). While they were hauling the boat up onto the beach the gunwale broke away.

Other machine-gunners who escaped were Privates Delaney,⁴⁶ [Gilroy](#), [Grant](#),⁴⁷ [Hooker](#),⁴⁸ [Johnston](#),⁴⁹ [Marshall](#),⁵⁰ [Phillips](#),⁵¹ and [Riddell](#).⁵²

Delaney spent eleven months at large on the island. 'Hunger, dysentery, and a dislike of barbed-wire confinement' compelled him to leave the prison camp. At night he and Private [Collins](#)⁵³ slipped through the wire, crossed the road, and made their way on all fours through a vineyard. After pausing to eat some grapes, they walked for about an hour through the olive groves and settled down to rest until daylight.

They were well cared for in a small village about one and a half hour's walk from the prison camp, but as the Germans were searching for stray Allied soldiers and the [Cretans](#) who sheltered them might be punished, they decided to separate. Collins was recaptured, but Delaney took to the hills where the [Cretans](#) were visited less often by the enemy, and kept on the move from village to village towards [Retimo](#). He and an artilleryman settled in a village near [Heraklion](#); sometimes they slept in the village, sometimes in a cave. The Cretans were really hungry, but gave them food. Delaney acquired a taste for snails. 'Snails, regarded as a delicacy by [Cretans](#),' he says, 'were a tasty dish that was frequently enjoyed. The snails were first boiled so that they would give off all of their slime. They were then washed and, still in their shells, dropped into a vegetable stew into which a liberal amount of olive oil was poured.'

Two or three times Delaney and his companion were nearly recaptured. They crossed the mountains to the south coast, where they eventually joined fifteen or twenty British, Australians and New Zealanders, and on a dark night were taken on board a Greek fishing boat propelled by a noisy motor and a large sail. The boat seemed to be under the control of the Navy, but the crew of three would not say. After two days and two nights they reached [Bardia](#), where the rescued men exchanged their civilian clothes for uniforms before returning to [Cairo](#).

'All the men who stepped off the Greek fishing boat were in agreement that the

Cretans had, by feeding, clothing, and sheltering them, shown a spirit that may never be found elsewhere,' says Delaney. ` Cretans who were caught harbouring Allied soldiers were either imprisoned or shot by the Germans, but even the fear of such reprisals did not deter them in their efforts to help the Allies in every way.'

¹ His second-in-command, Capt Purcell, was summoned to HQ NZ Div on 4 May and was appointed liaison officer between NZ Div and Creforce.

² The New Zealanders, including seven infantry battalions and divisional troops, totalled 7702; the Australians, 6540.

³ Five tripods which arrived at 23 Bn at night on 19–20 May had not been delivered to the platoons when the invasion began a few hours later.

⁴ Green, who had been wounded in Greece, was evacuated from Megara beach, near Athens, in the Thurland Castle, which was bombed and hit at sea and therefore went to Suda Bay instead of Alexandria as originally intended.

⁵ Sgt A. G. de T. Gould, m.i.d.; Nelson; born NZ 21 Sep 1913; clerk.

⁶ L-Cpl A. E. Smith; born England, 25 Oct 1904; salesman; killed in action 23 May 1941.

⁷ Pte E. R. S. Bremner; born NZ 10 Feb 1919; truck driver; p.w. Jun 1941.

⁸ Lt P. M. Hatherly, MM; Tangiwai; born Marton, 16 Nov 1916; student; three times wounded.

⁹ On 14 May the guns at Maleme airfield had 16,000 rounds of Mk VIIIIZ and four boxes of Mk VII; MacDonald had 22,000 of Mk VIIIZ and two boxes of Mk VII; there was a reserve of 14,000 Mk VIIIIZ at Coy HQ. By 20 May Kirk had 20 belts of Mk VIIIIZ. It is not known how much Carnachan had.

¹⁰ S-Sgt M. W. Curtis, MM; Greymouth; born Greymouth, 18 Oct 1917; motor

mechanic.

¹¹ Col T. C. Campbell, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Waiouru](#); born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO [22 Bn](#) Sep 1942–Apr 1944; comd [4 Armd Bde](#) Jan–Dec 1945; Area Commander, [Wellington](#), 1947; Commander of the Army Schools 1951–53; Commander Fiji Military Forces 1953–56; Commandant, Waiouru Military Camp, 1956–.

¹² Brig L. W. Andrew, VC, DSO, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Ashhurst, 23 Mar 1897; Regular soldier; Wellington Regt 1915–19; CO [22 Bn](#) Jan 1940–Mar 1942; comd [5 Bde](#) 27 Nov–8 Dec 1941; Area Commander, [Wellington](#), Nov 1943–Dec 1946; Commandant, Central Military District, Apr 1948–Mar 1952.

¹³ 2 Lt T. G. Fowler, MM, m.i.d.; [Cambridge](#); born Kapuni, Taranaki, 16 Oct 1909; storeman.

¹⁴ Maj H. M. Lewis; [London](#); born [Wanganui](#), 27 Dec 1908; company secretary.

¹⁵ Cpl C. H. Buckeridge; born [Wellington](#), 12 Sep 1916; labourer; wounded 21 May 1941; died of wounds 4 Jul 1942.

¹⁶ Pte J. L. Delury; [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 18 May 1908; mill employee; wounded 24 May 1941; p.w. 27 May 1941.

¹⁷ Cpl A. Paterson; born NZ 3 Dec 1907; state forest employee; wounded May 1941; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

¹⁸ L-Cpl B. H. Laing; [Dunedin](#); born [Dunedin](#), 1 Jan 1918; truck driver and mechanic; twice wounded; p.w. 25 May 1941.

¹⁹ Pte D. P. Gilroy; [London](#); born [Glasgow](#), 26 Jan 1914; painter; p.w. 25 May 1941; escaped 1941.

²⁰ Brig G. Dittmer, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Maharashtra](#), 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; [Auckland Regt](#) 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn);

CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jan 1940–Feb 1942; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) Apr 1942–Aug 1943; 1 Div Aug 1942–Jan 1943; [Fiji Military Forces](#) and [Fiji Inf Bde Gp](#) Sep 1943–Nov 1945; Commandant, Papakura Military Camp, 1946; Commandant, Central Military District, 1946–48.

²¹ [Capt F. T. Bennett](#); born [Rotorua](#), 11 Jan 1909; driver; wounded 31 May 1941.

²² [Pte W. H. Malcolm](#); born NZ 23 Nov 1905; labourer; killed in action 24 May 1941.

²³ [Pte O. Dalziel](#); born [Scotland](#) 24 May 1916; quarryman; killed in action 24 May 1941.

²⁴ [Cpl T. M. Pitcon](#); Dunedin; born [Te Kuiti](#), 24 Apr 1915; labourer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Aug 1941; recaptured Oct 1941.

²⁵ [Brig J. R. Gray](#), ED, m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO 18 Bn Sep 1939–Nov 1941, Mar–Jun 1942; comd 4 Bde 29 Jun–5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

²⁶ [Pte F. R. Gallagher](#); born [North Auckland](#), 26 Jun 1915; labourer.

²⁷ WO II [T. E. Doyle](#), MM, m.i.d.; [Brisbane](#); born [Wairoa](#), 21 Aug 1913; truck driver. (Apart from the time he was on furlough, Doyle served with the battalion throughout the campaigns in [Greece](#), [Crete](#), [Libya](#), [Egypt](#), [Tunisia](#) and [Italy](#).)

²⁸ [Cpl W. D. Parker](#); born NZ 6 Nov 1909; joiner; killed in action 25 May 1941.

²⁹ [Pte F. M. Spurdle](#); born NZ 7 Nov 1917; railway employee; killed in action 25 May 1941.

³⁰ [Sgt B. W. Kain](#); born NZ 15 Jan 1913; shepherd; killed in action 25 May 1941.

³¹ A New Zealander who visited [Crete](#) in 1954 was told by a priest at [Galatas](#) that the Germans had lined up some civilians in front of the church when Kain opened fire from a nearby corner. The civilians escaped, but six or seven Germans and Kain himself were killed. The priest believed that the civilians would not otherwise have escaped death.

³² In [Crete](#) D. M. Davin says: 'By holding on so long there is little doubt that these resolute troops prevented a break-through in the centre which would have overwhelmed Battalion HQ and might have carried on with even more serious results.'

³³ D. M. Davin, [Crete](#), p. 316.

³⁴ Lt C. D. Lewis, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born NZ 25 Oct 1913; draughtsman.

³⁵ Cpl E. H. Ferry; [Palmerston North](#); born [Wanganui](#), 1 May 1917; clerk.

³⁶ L-Cpl C. W. Tozer; born [Bristol](#), 17 Mar 1904; warehouseman; killed in action 25 May 1941.

³⁷ L-Cpl R. Morrison; born NZ 7 Mar 1918; cook; died of wounds 25 May 1941.

³⁸ MacDonald, still accompanied by a Maori, was completely done in for want of sleep. On the night of 26–27 May they found the enemy between them and [Canea](#), so put to sea in a 14-foot boat. They sailed round the [Akrotiri Peninsula](#), but were overtaken by daylight before they could reach the southern shore of [Suda Bay](#), so hid on its northern side, where they were brought water by the Greeks but were discovered and captured on 1 June.

³⁹ 21 Bn, A Coy 20 Bn, Div Cav and 7 Fd Coy.

⁴⁰ Pte J. W. Bell; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 26 May 1917; labourer.

⁴¹ WO II C. L. Cato, m.i.d.; Te Kuiti; born Stratford, 6 May 1912; farmer.

⁴² In this exploit the company, weak as it was, a single mortar, a handful of machine-gunners from [27 MG Battalion](#), and the supporting three guns, had held up at least two fresh German companies.' Davin, [Crete](#), p. 421.

⁴³ Cpl R. Adams; born NZ 6 Feb 1910; labourer; killed in action 30 May 1941.

⁴⁴ The Germans told Green that if they 'had not taken the high ground [Point 107] that night [20–21 May] the island could not have been taken and they would have evacuated next day by air and ship.'

⁴⁵ Pte B. B. Carter, MM; [Auckland](#); born NZ 23 Apr 1916; farmer; p.w. 30 May 1941; escaped 1 Jul 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁴⁶ Cpl N. C. Delaney; [Thames](#); born [Hamilton](#), 10 May 1917; p.w. 20 May 1941; escaped 17 Jul 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁴⁷ Pte A. R. Grant, m.i.d.; born NZ 10 Mar 1918; farmhand; avoided capture on [Crete](#) and arrived Egypt May 1943.

⁴⁸ L-Cpl B. F. Hooker; born [Waihi](#), 1 Jul 1909; driver; returned to Egypt from [Crete](#) Aug 1941.

⁴⁹ Pte J. J. Johnston; [Kaitaia](#); born [Whangarei](#), 5 Mar 1916; panelbeater; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 19 Jun and arrived Egypt 29 Nov 1941.

⁵⁰ Cpl W. S. Marshall, m.i.d.; born Westport, 21 Jun 1910; carpenter; returned to Egypt from [Crete](#) Dec 1941.

⁵¹ Pte H. H. Phillips; [Pukehou](#); born [Pukehou](#), 4 May 1917; farmhand; avoided capture on [Crete](#) and arrived Egypt 20 Aug 1941; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

⁵² L-Cpl R. E. Riddell; Auckland; born Wellington, 1 Oct 1916; painter; p.w. Jun 1941; escaped Jul and arrived Egypt 20 Aug 1941.

⁵³ Pte G. J. P. Collins; Christchurch; born NZ 2 Nov 1916; farm labourer; p.w. 30 May 1941; escaped 26 Jun 1941; recaptured 20 Dec 1941; escaped in Germany.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 6 – SIDI REZEGH

CHAPTER 6

Sidi Rezegh

The machine-gunners who returned direct to Egypt from Greece at the end of April were not downhearted. Indeed, upon their arrival at Helwan Camp—where they compiled lists and returns of this and that, checked gear and equipment, and replaced some (but certainly not all) of what had been lost—the distribution of large bundles of mail added to their gaiety. ‘I suppose it was reaction,’ one officer wrote home. ‘We had come through and our casualties had been remarkably light. We had been up against the Jerries and knew we could beat them.’

In weather even hotter than usual at that time of the year the battalion, about 400 strong, settled down to training, and towards the end of May took over guard duties at a prisoner-of-war camp at Helwan, an irksome task that allowed little leave and not much rest. The guard commander (Major White) thought the Italian prisoners, most of whom had been there for some time, were ‘a bronzed, healthy, happy crew who gave no trouble at all.’ But the Germans were quite different. ‘They were defiant, surly and boastful, openly declaring that they expected our places would be changed in a few weeks. The officers made all sorts of absurd complaints and then demanded the protecting power—Sweden—to report to Germany.... They also objected because they were not allowed to go to the men's pen to make Nazi speeches....’

The ninety-odd survivors of Captain Grant's detachment returned from Crete at the beginning of June. Of the 208 men of 27 (MG) Battalion who had landed on the island, seventeen had been killed or had died of wounds, and two officers and eighty-six other ranks (including fourteen wounded) were prisoners of war; sixteen of those who returned to Egypt were wounded. Reinforcements arrived to replace those who did not return. All who had served in Greece and Crete were given a week's ‘survival’ leave, which many spent in Palestine.

The battalion was relieved of its guard duties after about five weeks and moved to Maadi, where it set about reorganising and training in real earnest. Transport and equipment were replaced and the unit was again brought up to its full establishment of forty-eight Vickers guns. Twenty-five had been brought back from Greece, none

from Crete. Hard route-marching, machine-gun and rifle training, manœuvres by day and night, swimming and sports meetings filled in the next few weeks.

Each New Zealand brigade in turn trained in combined army and navy operations with HMS [Glengyle](#), a landing ship, at [Kabrit](#), on the shore of the [Bitter Lake](#) in the [Suez Canal](#) zone. In mid-August 1 and 3 Companies went there with 4 Brigade for about three weeks, and next month 4 Company accompanied 5 Brigade; 2 Company, meanwhile, manœuvred at [El Saff](#) with 6 Brigade, which had returned from the Canal in August. The combined operations, which included practice in beach landings, suggested that the Division might perhaps be required to make a landing somewhere from the sea. Its next move, however, was to the [Western Desert](#).

An advance party from the battalion left for [Baggush](#) on 14 September, and the main body (less 4 Company, which came later with 6 Brigade) followed next day. For those who had recently joined the battalion this two-day journey was their first experience of travelling in convoy and their introduction to the [Western Desert](#). The old hands noticed some changes, such as camps and airfields where there had been open desert; after their experiences in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) they took comfort in the sight of so many friendly aircraft. At [Baggush](#) they re-examined the underground shelters they had laboriously constructed the previous year; these at least had provided excellent dwelling-places for scorpions, snakes, lizards, bugs and beetles.

General Wavell had completed the conquest of [Cyrenaica](#) by mid-February, but a few weeks later, when the British were weakened by the demands of [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), German forces under General Rommel, newly arrived in Africa, had swept back to the Egyptian frontier. The Germans and Italians now besieged the isolated fortress of [Tobruk](#) and held a string of frontier fortresses, including [Bardia](#), [Sollum](#), [Halfaya](#) and the Omars; this meant that an army invading [Libya](#) from Egypt would have to make a wide detour to the south. General Auchinleck, who succeeded Wavell in July as Commander-in-Chief in the [Middle East](#), was preparing for an offensive which aimed first at recapturing [Cyrenaica](#) and ultimately at driving the enemy from North Africa, and [Eighth Army](#), formed in September under the command of Lieutenant-General Cunningham, was gathering strength for the purpose.

The New Zealand Division, therefore, trained for an offensive role. At first the battalion occupied a sub-sector of the [Baggush](#) Box, where the defences were

cleaned out but not manned, and each company in turn went out on three-day manoeuvres. Then the battalion moved two or three miles east of the perimeter of the box and dug in close to the sea at [Ras el Kenayis](#), where the men, sun-tanned and superbly fit, worked and trained hard, and outside working hours led a carefree life, with bathing and football as diversions. Companies were attached to the infantry brigades—3 Company to the 6th, 2 Company to the 4th, and 1 Company to the 5th—to rehearse attacks on dummy fortresses (Sidi Clif and Bir Stella) modelled on air photographs of the enemy's frontier positions.

One bleak, dull, November day a New Zealand Rugby fifteen defeated the South Africans by eight points to nil. Three days later, on Armistice Day (the 11th), the first moves were made for 'NZ Div Exercise No. 4', but it is unlikely that anybody was deceived by the pretence that this would be just another exercise.

The same day Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam was evacuated to hospital with eye trouble and Major Wright became acting CO. ¹ About a tenth of the battalion was to remain at [Baggush](#) as LOBs—left out of battle; this included a proportion of the officers, which meant that one platoon in each company would be led by a sergeant.

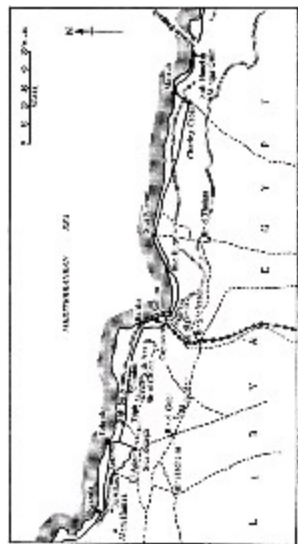
Fifth Brigade Group ² (which included 1 Company), the first formation to leave [Baggush](#), headed westwards along the coastal road, down the [Siwa](#) track and into the desert south-west of [Mersa Matruh](#). Fourth Brigade Group (including [27 Battalion](#) less 1 and 3 Companies) ³ and [Divisional Headquarters](#) followed next day (the 12th), and [6 Brigade](#) Group (including 3 Company) on the 13th. 'It was most comical to regard the gun crews who travel in the back of the trucks for the thick layer of dust all over them made them look just like circus clowns wearing their "make-up",' gloated a machine-gunner who sat in the front seat of his vehicle

The whole Division was then assembled in the open desert; its trucks, lorries, staff cars, guns, light tanks, Bren carriers and ambulances, nearly 3000 vehicles altogether, spaced about 200 yards apart in brigade laagers, extended in all directions as far as the eye could see. Vivid memories of [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) caused some apprehension about air attack, but none came.

[General Freyberg](#) called together all officers down to company commanders, and throwing aside all pretence, told them that within a week they would be in contact

with the enemy in a battle which might well play a decisive part in the conduct of the war.

Briefly the plan for crusader (the code name by which the operation was known) was that **Eighth Army** was to attack with two corps: ⁴ **30 Corps**, which included the bulk of the British armour, was to seek out and destroy the enemy armour, while **13 Corps**, of which the NZ Division was part, was to outflank and cut off the frontier defences and later destroy them. Eighth Army, 118,000 strong, with about 750 tanks, would be opposed by 100,000 Axis troops, a third of them German ⁵ and two-thirds Italian, equipped with about 400 tanks (250 of them German). The British outnumbered the Germans and Italians in field guns and aircraft as well as tanks, but the enemy had at least one advantage, superiority in anti-tank weapons, and was better organised and trained for mobile desert warfare.



From Maaten Baggush to Gazala

In daylight on 15 November the Division, its multitude of vehicles moving together as one body for the first time, drove 50 miles westwards across a stony plain towards Bir el Thalata, where it stayed that night and all next day. Then, in two night marches, each of about 25 miles, it approached the border well south of the **Omar** forts.

On the second night an electrical storm lasted several hours. 'The lightning was certainly the most vivid I have ever seen,' wrote Corporal **Millar**. ⁶ 'For a long time we thought it was the flash of great gun fire and bombs, but gradually we realised

that no gun fire could produce such terrific flashes. The alternating blinding flashes and then the blackness that followed made it pretty difficult for us to see.' The going was rough; soft sand, ridges and wadis caused delays, traffic mix-ups and broken springs. The sides of wadis twenty or thirty feet high would have been easy enough to negotiate in daylight, when the best route could have been selected, but at night a driver was lucky if he got his vehicle up at the first attempt.

At dawn next day (the 18th) the British armour invaded [Libya](#), meeting at first with no resistance; apparently the enemy, who was preparing for an assault on [Tobruk](#), did not suspect that a British offensive had begun.

The New Zealand Division crossed the frontier that night. The transport streamed through a 300-yard gap blown by the engineers in the hedge of barbed wire erected by the Italians some years earlier.

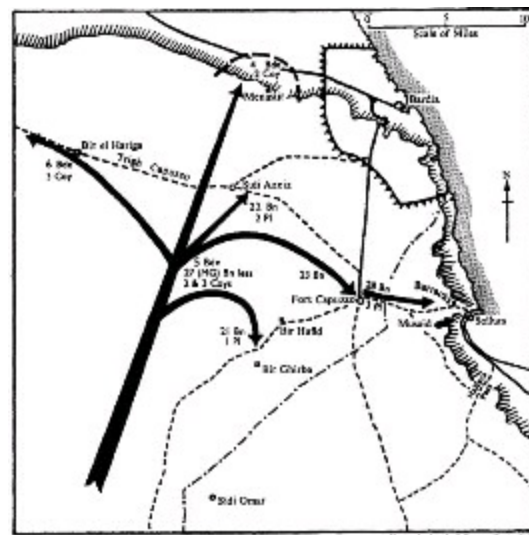
The British armour, going into action at several widely separated places on 19 November, met unexpectedly stubborn resistance at Bir el Gubi, south of [Tobruk](#), and was also violently engaged west of the Omars, but occupied the [Sidi Rezegh](#) landing ground almost without opposition. Just north of this landing ground a low ridge, presenting a steep escarpment on its northern side, overlooked the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), a broad desert track running east and west. Possession of this ridge, one of several similar features ⁷ rising from the barren, almost level Libyan plateau, was an essential step towards the relief of [Tobruk](#). [Sidi Rezegh](#), in fact, was the key to the whole battlefield; in the next two or three weeks it was to change hands five times in some of the bloodiest fighting of the desert war.

From the start [30 Corps](#) suffered more heavily than the enemy in tanks damaged or destroyed. Nevertheless the battle seemed to be going well, and encouraging reports—grossly exaggerating enemy losses—reached the New Zealand Division, which advanced northwards in the late afternoon of the 19th. At the [Trigh el Abd](#), a track roughly parallel with and about 25 miles south of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), the Division waited next day while the tank battle continued just over the horizon. The Germans moved away north-westwards soon after dawn on the 21st and were thought to be retreating; they, however, were reacting to the threat at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and were racing there to prevent the British from linking up with the [Tobruk](#) garrison.

With the enemy tanks no longer so menacingly close, 13 Corps could go ahead with its task of surrounding and destroying the frontier forts. The New Zealand Division, therefore, with Divisional Cavalry leading and 5, 4 and 6 Brigades following in that order, continued its northward movement towards the **Trigh Capuzzo**.

Early in the advance 21 Battalion, despatched by **5 Brigade**, secured **Hafid Ridge** with a company of infantry, some carriers, and a section under Sergeant Downes⁸ of 1 Platoon; this ridge gave command over the rear of the fortress line between Sidi Omar and **Sollum**. On 22 November the battalion attacked Bir Ghirba, three or four miles to the south of **Hafid**. The infantry debussed under shell, mortar and machine-gun fire, and after making some progress on foot over dead flat ground in pouring rain, were pinned down short of their objective, which was fortified with concrete pillboxes, dug-in guns, mines and wire.

A section of 1 Platoon was ordered forward to support one of the rifle companies. Second-Lieutenant **Lee**⁹ and Corporal Millar reconnoitred, 'and that,' says Millar, 'meant that we had to make a dash over a stretch of 200 or 300 yards of com-



New Zealand Division, 21–22 November 1941

pletely

open ground (I may say we RAN).' From the cover of a Bren carrier and an abandoned truck Lee pointed out the target—a machine-gun post—and Millar made

up his mind where he was going to place his two guns.

He got his section ready and 'sent them forward one at a time to proceed with a series of sharp dashes and throwing themselves flat on the ground, up to the shelter of the two vehicles.... Meanwhile I made my way to the area I had decided on for the guns and selected the best cover which consisted merely of patches of scrub only about six inches high. ... So the guns were finally mounted in their very lowest position and the chaps managed to scoop themselves shallow trenches about six inches deep where there was solid rock. But ... the coy. had not yet arrived to attack and it was rapidly getting dark, and here we were out in the open ... only 1400 yards from the enemy ... as soon as it got dark they would see the muzzle-flash of our guns and then it would be merry hell, so I sent everyone except the numbers 1 and 2 of each gun back to the trucks.... a few moments later we saw the company advancing on our left, so I yelled "fire" and away we went— but not at them of course—we were giving them blanketing fire and at the same time firing over the heads of others of our own infantry. And the hun bullets came back in answer. ... It was in fact very difficult to see anything in the growing darkness so very soon, rather than risk shooting up any of our own chaps, I called "cease fire", called up the rest of the section to carry back the stuff, and in a very short time we were all back at the trucks.... It was a miracle that not one of us had received a scratch and we had not lost any equipment....'

The [21st Battalion](#) suffered nearly eighty casualties. Millar took some of the wounded to the RAP, four miles away, and was guided back to his section by the light of a burning truck. He found his men still under fire. They had spent a miserable evening lying in muddy trenches, but now they were to withdraw. 'And away we went as smartly as we could with these b— tracers going faster and pressing us on either side....'

The attack on [Bir Ghirba](#) had failed, but elsewhere [5 Brigade](#) was more successful. While leading the Division on 21 November Divisional Cavalry had come upon a few mud huts and tents at [Sidi Azeiz](#) and collected some fifty prisoners, nearly all Italians, including a naked officer startled from his bath. Unaware of this success, 22 Battalion, with 2 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Pleasants](#) ¹⁰) among its supporting troops, mounted an attack a few hours later and 'captured' [Sidi Azeiz](#) without opposition. The same evening a strong patrol from 23 Battalion, taking the

Italian occupants completely by surprise, captured Fort [Capuzzo](#) almost without firing a shot, and severed the water pipeline from [Bardia](#) to [Sollum](#).

Early on the 23rd 28 (Maori) Battalion and a squadron of Valentine tanks ¹¹ captured the [Sollum](#) barracks, at the top of the precipitous, 500-foot escarpment overlooking the village and bay of [Sollum](#). When the supporting artillery, mortars and 3 Platoon arrived, large guns at [Halfaya](#), four or five miles to the south-east, and on the flat ground near the sea beyond [Sollum](#) were shelling the barracks. 'Had one or two sticky moments while consolidating,' reported Sergeant Cato, who added cheerfully, 'Everybody fit and wanting to have some hand in the action.'

Fourth Brigade struck unexpected trouble soon after dark on the 21st. Rain had softened the ground at the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), and farther north a deep ditch, believed to be an anti-tank ditch, ran across the line of advance. The brigade lost cohesion while negotiating this obstacle, but assembled early next morning in the neighbourhood of [Menastir](#), on the high ground overlooking the [Tobruk- Bardia](#) road. It was 'the most difficult night move of the campaign,' says Captain Johansen (2 Company). 'At 4 a.m. we bedded down by trucks in night formation for about 1 ½ Hrs then at first light opened out into desert formation to find to our surprise that we had driven right into a German encampment....'

The 25-pounders and 2 Company's Vickers went into action. When 'the Germans to the north discovered we were upon them,' Brigadier Inglis reported, 'the stretch of country we overlooked resembled a disturbed ants' nest. Camps and bivouacs were abandoned; cars, trucks, guns and motor cycles tore off into the broken country nearer the coast for cover, and our artillery and machine guns had some exhilarating shooting. Until 1025 hours nothing came back at us....'

At that time, however, 20 Battalion, which had blocked the road, half a mile from the steep, 150-foot escarpment, was counter-attacked from the direction of [Tobruk](#) by a small force including half a dozen self-propelled guns. The artillery compelled these guns to withdraw, and in the afternoon 20 Battalion, supported by a squadron of Valentine tanks, and also by flanking fire from 6 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Kinder](#) ¹²), overran some German infantry, guns and mortars.

Thirteenth Corps now surrounded the Axis garrisons at the frontier: 4 Brigade

had cut off Bardia from the west; 5 Brigade had severed land communications between Bardia and Halfaya; and the Indian Division had captured most of the strongpoints at Sidi Omar.



4 and 6 Brigades' advance, 23–27 November 1941

Sixth Brigade, with which 3 Company travelled at the rear of the Division on 21 November, was also troubled by the boggy ground during the night march, many of its vehicles being stuck fast, and did not reach Bir el Hariga, 11 miles west of Sidi Azeiz, until after daybreak. The following afternoon it set off towards Bir el Chleta, 20-odd miles farther west along the Trigh Capuzzo, where it was to come under the command of 30 Corps.

Thirtieth Corps was fighting a disastrous battle south-east of Tobruk. The Support Group of 7 Armoured Division secured a foothold on the Sidi Rezegh ridge, and then, together with 7 Armoured Brigade, fought with great gallantry—three VCs were won—to defend this vital ground against the combined German forces. Other British formations were drawn into the struggle, but the Germans prevailed, and 30 Corps, having lost two-thirds of its tanks, withdrew from Sidi Rezegh.

A message reached 6 Brigade in the afternoon of the 22nd asking that the attached squadron of Valentine tanks be sent forward at once to Sidi Rezegh, but the tanks were unable to increase the speed at which they were already moving. Later messages emphasised the urgency of the situation. Sixth Brigade was instructed to continue its advance along the Trigh Capuzzo with all possible speed to Point 175,

where it was to take up an all-round defensive position and reinforce the troops near the [Sidi Rezegh](#) airfield.

The brigade resumed the march at 3 a.m. and at dawn was astride the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) at Bir el Chleta. The brigade, in fact, had run into a German laager, although neither side was at first aware of this. Firing broke out when an enemy column approached from the direction of [Gambut](#). Part of this column drove into the middle of the laager; the remainder was diverted to the right.

The Vickers of 8 Platoon joined in the shooting. 'One of my sections immediately went into action, closely followed by the other, and effectively disabled the last few vehicles in the column,' says Sergeant [Stewart](#).¹³ 'After a brisk, but one sided, exchange of fire the infantry surrounded the enemy, who surrendered. The range was point blank and we found later that our Mk. VIII Z ammunition had pierced even the engine blocks of odd vehicles. We passed in for inspection papers which included what appeared to be a signallers code.'

Sergeant [McClintock](#)¹⁴ ordered four or five men, one of them armed with a tommy gun, to go out and capture some Germans lying in a hollow, while he covered them with his section's two guns. The Germans came out with their hands up, but one attempted to make a break for it and was shot by the tommy-gunner.

The fighting was soon over in the middle of the laager, but blazed fiercely on the right flank, where 25 Battalion and some 25-pounders had excellent targets. Many of the enemy were killed and wounded, and over 200 prisoners, including some senior staff officers from Headquarters Afrika Korps, were collected. The engagement was broken off as soon as possible and [6 Brigade](#) pushed on westwards.

From near Bir el Chleta the low, stony ridge south of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) extended 15 miles westwards to [Sidi Rezegh](#) and a mile or two beyond. In mid-morning [6 Brigade](#) reached Wadi esc Sciomar, within striking distance of Point 175, half-way along the ridge.

The attack on Point 175 was mounted in haste. Although the whole of 3 Company was available no machine guns were committed in the early stages, which was a great pity, for much of the German machine-gun fire which caused so many

casualties was long range and probably could have been countered effectively by the Vickers.

The supporting Valentine tanks and some Bren carriers quickly reached the objective, and 25 Battalion riflemen, advancing resolutely in the face of the withering fire, rounded up many prisoners—more than 300—and sent them back to the rear, but a counter-attack by German tanks and infantry overran part of the battalion, a sad and sudden ending to a high-spirited attack. With both flanks unprotected, the survivors were in a critical situation. Two companies of 24 Battalion and 9 Platoon were sent to their assistance. 'This platoon,' says 3 Company's diary, 'had a tough time.'

Led by Major Luxford in his pick-up and Lieutenant [Daly](#)¹⁵ in his truck, the platoon's four gun trucks set off from Brigade Headquarters late in the morning. 'In a matter of minutes,' says Private [Collis](#),¹⁶ who was in the leading section (Corporal Winfield's¹⁷), 'we were headed off at considerable speed in the direction of where the fighting appeared to be taking place. We flashed past the artillery and other units in action or preparing for it but it wasn't until we passed some infantry just debussed and moving forward from 3-tonners that it crossed my mind that we were going well forward. No time to speculate on this as we came to a sudden halt with the trucks in extended formation and wasted no time in getting off. There seemed to be a considerable amount of M.G. fire passing overhead. An odd bullet hitting the truck made us realise it wasn't all going high....'

Sergeant [Holden](#),¹⁸ who remained at 25 Battalion's advanced headquarters as liaison, believes the platoon was 'taken too far forward as we were under intense small arms fire when we debussed, which was a mistake as we could outrange any small arms fire of the enemy.'

After a short discussion with Daly, Luxford returned to Brigade Headquarters. Daly said the platoon was to go over to the edge of the escarpment for cover, and he, Winfield, and Corporal [Cox](#)¹⁹ of the other section ran out in that direction. Private [Woolf](#)²⁰ remembers Daly 'leaving his truck and running, and believe me he had to run as things were really sticky by this time.'

Winfield returned to his truck for his rifle, which he had left in his haste, and

then led his men over to the edge of the escarpment. 'Our section was soon stringing off behind Winfield,' Collis continues. 'We hadn't had time to take off our greatcoats & it was tough going running forward about 200 yds up a slight rise & over the lip of a depression [the edge of the escarpment]. Winfield disappeared over this lip, & when I followed a few seconds later heard him yell to get down & noticing the sand dancing up in little spurts all around went on a bit further & went down. The first members of the section seemed to reach this area safely despite the heavy M.G. fire which seemed to come from about three sides. Actually Lee²¹ of our section & Des Ralfe²² of the other had been killed on this run out but we were not aware of this. The fire was so intense it was impossible to move & in between bursts of spandau it was possible to hear Jerry giving fire orders. There was no sign of Tom Daly and the rest of the Platoon H.Q. except Pte Walker.²³ We were obviously considerably less than 100 yds from the Jerry positions....'

The section was on the reverse slope of a small ridge on the side of the escarpment, and the enemy was on the other side of this ridge, 'only a stone's throw away.' There were more enemy troops on the flat ground to the north, and tents which seemed to contain wounded.

During a lull in the fire a German tommy-gunner came towards where the machine-gunners were lying, 'to complete the job', but was shot in the stomach and 'his cries weren't altogether muffled by the other din.' A few minutes later, to the machine-gunners' intense relief, the infantry (24 Battalion) appeared, advancing in open formation. Winfield beckoned to them. 'Disregarding the intense M.G. fire,' says Collis, 'they passed through us & in a few minutes the Jerry M.G. posts were silenced & on the flat below the enemy was in full flight. We started to get the 2 guns mounted ready to join in & a group of 20 to 30 Jerry prisoners soon came back escorted by one [or two] infantrymen....' The escorts tried to get the prisoners to double up the escarpment in rear of the machine-gun section.

'At this stage the situation changed again. Our infantry started coming back as quickly as they had advanced but not so well organised. [Collis] managed to stop one sufficiently long to get the information that tanks were responsible. We were starting to join in the withdrawal when one appeared around the escarpment. Someone identified it as a Valentine but a slight breeze unfurled a Swastika as its M.G.'s opened up. We could not withdraw on account of equipment so had to go

down again while it did over the area. It continued this for what seemed a considerable time. It was here that "Johnny" Johnston²⁴ lying a few feet away from me got it, & McNeill²⁵ on the other side was hit in the thigh....'



In the beer garden, Burnham Military Camp

In the beer garden, Burnham Military Camp

Loading ammunition belts at Cave, South Canterbury



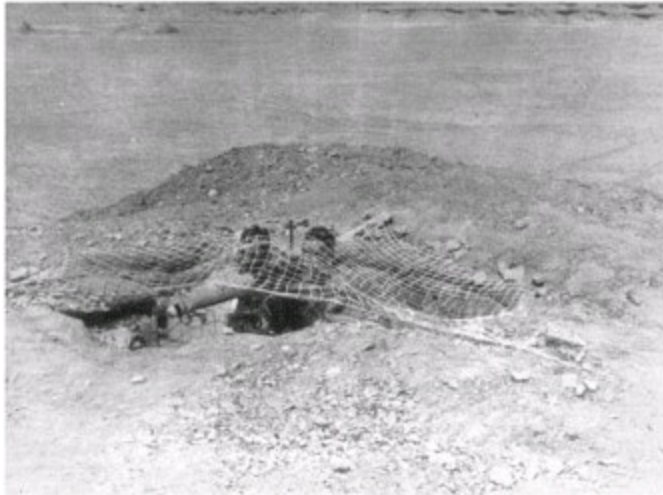
Loading ammunition belts at Cave, South Canterbury



Training on the *Sobieski*

Training on the Sobieski

Demonstrating the 'Inglis design' gun emplacement,
Maadi Camp



Demonstrating the 'Inglis design' gun emplacement, Maadi Camp



Climbing Gebel Mokattam during a route march from
Maadi Camp

Climbing Gebel Mokattam during a route march from Maadi Camp

Packing up after manoeuvres



Packing up after manoeuvres



2 Company at the Citadel, Cairo

2 Company at the Citadel, Cairo



A mineral bath at Helwan:
J. C. Reid, R. H. Kerr,
H. J. MacDonald and J. E.
Petrie

A mineral bath at Helwan: J. C. Reid, R. H. Kerr, H. J. MacDonald and J. E. Petrie



Christmas at Baggush, 1940
Christmas at Baggush, 1940

Italian prisoners from Sidi Barrani



Italian prisoners from Sidi Barrani



Near Vevi, in northern Greece. This forms a panorama with the picture on the opposite page

Near Vevi, in northern Greece. This forms a panorama with the picture on the opposite page



One of 3 Company's guns near Elasson

One of 3 Company's guns near Elasson



The road from the Yugoslav frontier to Kleidi Pass

The road from the Yugoslav frontier to Kleidi Pass

Greeks retreating from the Albanian front



Greeks retreating from the Albanian front



The airborne invasion
of Crete

The airborne invasion of Crete

German paratroopers and machine-gunners near Galatas



German paratroopers and machine-gunners near Galatas



One of 4 Company's guns steaming after helping to beat off a
dawn attack at Menastir, Cyrenaica

One of 4 Company's guns steaming after helping to beat off a dawn attack at Menastir, Cyrenaica

On the escarpment at Menastir: W. P. Gibson (in gunpit),
T. E. Doyle and M. Homer (with binoculars) of 11 Platoon



On the escarpment at **Menastir**: W. P. Gibson (in gunpit), T. E. Doyle and M. Homer (with binoculars)
of 11 Platoon



At Capuzzo: B. H. Carter, A. S. Hutchinson (in woollen cap)
and R. Walker of 2 Platoon

At **Capuzzo**: B. H. Carter, A. S. Hutchinson (in woollen cap) and R. Walker of 2 Platoon



At the edge of the Sidi Rezegh airfield: *standing*, C. A. Rogers and J. A. Black; *sitting behind gunpit*, B. V. Cox; *in gunpit*, G. T. Woolf, L. D. Daly and H. L. G. Hambling of 9 Platoon

At the edge of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) airfield: standing, C. A. Rogers and J. A. Black; sitting behind gunpit, B. V. Cox; in gunpit, G. T. Woolf, L. D. Daly and H. L. G. Hambling of 9 Platoon



Sidi Rezegh mosque. New Zealand graves in the foreground

Sidi Rezegh mosque. New Zealand graves in the foreground

In the prisoner-of-war compound at Bardia



In the prisoner-of-war compound at **Bardia**



On the way to Syria: F. W. Cowan, K. B. Booker and J. G. Watson

On the way to **Syria**: F. W. Cowan, **K. B. Booker** and J. G. Watson

The Bekaa Valley



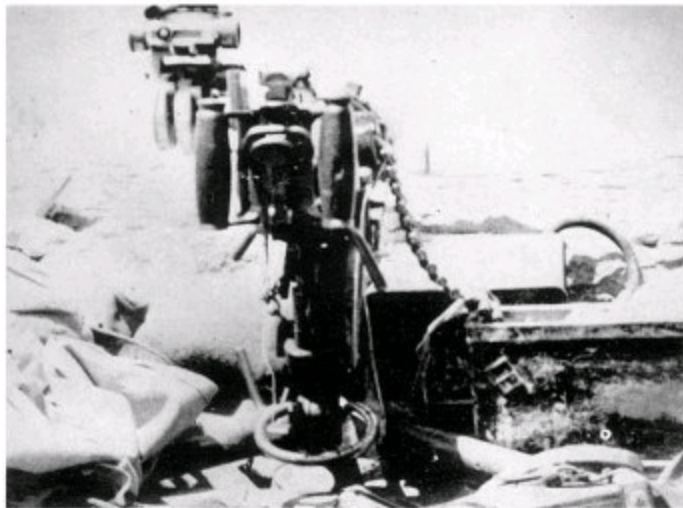
The Bekaa Valley



A sangar in the Alamein Line. W. L. Hill and E. J. Quinlan
of 2 Platoon

A sangar in the Alamein Line. W. L. Hill and E. J. Quinlan of 2 Platoon

Inside the sangar. The object out in front is a shell case used
as a night aiming mark



Inside the sangar. The object out in front is a shell case used as a night aiming mark



One of 10 Platoon's guns near Point 100, 4 September 1942

One of 10 Platoon's guns near Point 100, 4 September 1942



Defence against
the Alamein fly

Defence against the **Alamein** fly



General Montgomery, accompanied by Lieutenant-Colonel J. K. Robbie, inspecting the battalion before the Battle of Alamein

General Montgomery, accompanied by Lieutenant-Colonel J. K. Robbie, inspecting the battalion before the Battle of **Alamein**

Near 8 Platoon's gunline on Miteiriya Ridge



Near 8 Platoon's gunline on **Miteiriya Ridge**



Christmas at
Nofilia, 1942

Christmas at **Nofilia, 1942**

Examining a captured spandau: *standing*, W. A. Corney, Lt-Col A. W. White, A. H. Chadwick, N. H. Chadwick, L. C. Macartney; *kneeling*, L. H. Lynch; *behind gun*, Capt I. S. Moore



Examining a captured spandau: standing, W. A. Corney, Lt-Col A. W. White, A. H. Chadwick, N. H. Chadwick, L. C. Macartney; kneeling, L. H. Lynch; behind gun, Capt I. S. Moore

The tank fired on each side of the line of prisoners who were being hurried up the escarpment. The escorts disappeared and the prisoners escaped. When the tank was a short distance away—it went towards the left of Cox's section, farther back along the escarpment—Winfield's men took the opportunity to go over the top of the escarpment farther forward, where they joined some infantry of 25 Battalion. These troops had been advancing steadily, but could get no farther; they had very many casualties. The two Vickers were set up between two infantry platoons and engaged targets. 'Where these guns came from no one seemed to know,' says Major [Burton](#)²⁶ (25 Battalion), 'but they did a wonderful job in supporting this attack and won the admiration of all.' They fired at a derelict tank from which the Germans were sniping; there was no further trouble from that quarter. An anti-tank gun went to the edge of the escarpment and disposed of the tank which had released the prisoners.

'At dark,' says Collis, 'the line was reorganised—Winfield and Pte [Woodhall](#)²⁷ went out & brought in McNeill & we then withdrew some distance to 24th lines & were later rejoined by our trucks. The fate of Tom Daly, his batman & medical orderly was still not known but seemed fairly certain.'

Corporal Cox's section was pinned down and could not fire a shot from the time it ran out from its trucks to the edge of the escarpment. 'On arrival we lay flat,' says Private [Beckingham](#).²⁸ 'It was suicide to so much as wag your ears; the very least

movement brought down a hail of fire. An occasional mortar bomb landed near us, but to my knowledge no one was hit ... a Valentine tank appeared on our left, between us and the dispersed transport....' (This was the tank seen by Winfield's section and later disposed of by the anti-tank gun.)

Beckingham says that about 3 p.m. another tank, 'a German recce tank (similar to our Honey) was seen approaching our positions.... The tank traversed the depression immediately in front of our positions. The only thing that prevented further casualties, to my mind, was the fact that the remaining members of the platoon, not killed, were well dispersed, and remained perfectly still, lying where they had been pinned on first reaching the position.'

The tank 'then proceeded to the high ground immediately behind us and on the verge of the dispersed transport. The tank gunner fired a few spasmodic bursts of machine gun fire in amongst the transport. I do not think much damage was caused except, probably, to the nerves of the drivers. I took a quick peek behind me, and observed a German officer with field glasses up to his eyes scanning the general area occupied by the trucks. The tank then turned and proceeded back through us once again, and headed for the enemy lines. I am fully convinced that the tank crew believed us all killed, because it passed within a few feet of some of us and could not fail to see us.

'We spent the rest of the afternoon in this area, pinned down, and at dusk when we thought it dark enough to move, decided to make a break either for the dispersed transport, or our own Coy lines. I shouted to my gun team to make a break for it, but for Hell's sake spread out wide. We picked up our gear, and ran about 20 yds when Jerry let go a burst from a Spandau. We all dropped and lay still. Jim [Taylor](#)²⁹ my No. 3 gun team member lay parallel with me but about 3 ft from me. Another burst of fire landed all around us two and Jim was hit.... he must have lived about 30 seconds....'

Cox says they sheltered around a three-ton truck until dark. Privates [Farrell](#)³⁰ and [Prole](#),³¹ inseparable companions, were wounded within five minutes of each other, both in the same fleshy part of the body. When darkness came the section retired along a signals line. 'We carried on in the direction of the ADS (not knowing it was there of course),' Beckham adds, 'and about 400 yds from the unlucky scene

of the action George Holden arrived with a platoon truck, where he got it, or came from, no one cared a damn, but I can remember about 6 of us hopping on board hanging on anywhere we could get a foothold and the old bus, running on 3 pots at the most and no water, ground her way out with a farewell of Spandau bullets, a last parting gift from Jerry....'

By nightfall part of Point 175 had been captured at great cost. The casualties exceeded 400 and included more than 350— about 100 of them killed or mortally wounded—in 25 Battalion alone. Eleven men were missing from 9 Platoon, and of these at least six (Daly, Ralfe, Lee, [Horne](#),³² Johnston and Taylor) were dead.

That night the remaining two rifle companies of 24 Battalion were ordered to Point 175, and 7 and 8 Platoons came under the command of that battalion. At the same time 9 Platoon, which had been reorganised, was sent under Sergeant Holden to join 26 Battalion, which was taking up a position a mile or two south-east of Point 175. While 25 Battalion and part of the 24th had been attacking Point 175, the 26th had been expected to link up with 5 South African Brigade to the south-west, but the South Africans had been overwhelmed and dispersed by a huge force of German tanks and lorried infantry. The 26th returned to [6 Brigade](#) after dark.

Next day a bayonet attack regained the top of Point 175, but the forward slopes were under full observation and continued to be plastered by fire from a sharply defined wadi ([Rugbet en-Nbeidat](#)) and from the vicinity of a square building known as the Blockhouse on the high ground farther west. Nevertheless 3 Company's diary records that 'This day was quiet and the guns had practically nothing to do.' They fired on some vehicles.

The CSM's truck, which had left earlier to collect ammunition and petrol, returned in the evening and made off towards two derelict vehicles which apparently were thought to be part of the brigade group. The truck hit a mine and went up in flames, and Sergeant-Major [Blackett](#)³³ and Private [Gibbons](#)³⁴ had to be evacuated with injuries.

[General Freyberg](#) was instructed in the afternoon of the 22nd to leave a minimum number of troops to contain [Bardia](#)— which patrols³⁵ found strongly defended—and to send the remainder to the [Gambut](#) airfield, said to be still in use

by the enemy. Fourth Brigade, less 20 Battalion, was despatched that evening.

The brigade halted for the night after covering about eight miles, and continuing the westward advance next day, occupied the airfield and captured twenty-one aircraft with scarcely any opposition, but came under shell and mortar fire from several directions. 'The actual attack and occupation of [Gambut](#) was a novel stunt,' says Johansen. 'The whole Bde Gp simply kept forging ahead in desert formation at rather high speed sending up clouds of dust. This must have struck terror in the heart of the Hun for he beat it fast off the aerodrome. When the Bde vehicles braked hard to a halt it was just No. [2 Coy](#)'s luck to land fair & square on the 'drome. Of course the "Goons" had the place taped and in a few minutes mortars landed on us. In fewer minutes the 'drome ceased to exist as such & was reduced to countless, or to be truthful, approx 160 M. Gunners' slitties. Spades worked awfully fast.'

Later that afternoon 4 and 5 Platoons, under Johansen's command, took up positions facing north on the escarpment at the northern edge of the airfield. One of 4 Platoon's sections fired at posts near the [Tobruk- Bardia](#) road.

The [20th Battalion](#), whose supporting troops still included 6 Platoon, was relieved by 22 Battalion at [Menastir](#) on 23 November and moved to a point on the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) where [Divisional Headquarters](#) and 21 Battalion³⁶ were waiting. The whole group, moving cautiously, for enemy flares appeared in all directions, continued westwards to Bir el Chleta, which it reached about midnight.

Next morning (the 24th) 20 Battalion was ordered to make contact with 4 Brigade, which was about to resume the advance westwards from [Gambut](#). But it was decided that the battalion should first eliminate an enemy group which had been bypassed during the night and was now about three miles to the north- east.

'I still had the squadron of tanks and a platoon of machine-guns under command,' says [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#), 'so decided to make a frontal attack with tanks leading and the infantry following in trucks, machine-guns, anti-tank guns, and carriers giving covering fire from the right flank.'³⁷ The tanks, advancing at top speed, came under fire from another enemy group farther east and veered in that direction. The mortars and Vickers moved out to the right flank, with eight carriers, and quickly brought down fire to assist the infantry, which debussed

when the enemy's defensive fire became too hot. The tanks swung on to their correct course but stopped; several had been hit. They were ordered on. The infantry passed through them and closed 'swiftly and savagely'. The fight was soon over; the Germans broke and ran, and in the resultant confusion many were taken prisoner. 'I thought the most effective fire was that of Kinder's MG platoon. It was their fire which knocked out the German [88-millimetre] gun crew who when I got up were lying dead round their gun.'³⁸

In mid-afternoon 20 Battalion moved off again westwards and later reached 4 Brigade, which was level with 6 Brigade on a north-south line facing towards Tobruk.

It was not known at this stage that Rommel, in a dramatic move which was to alter the whole course of the campaign—and unwittingly enable the New Zealanders to link with the Tobruk garrison—had taken his armoured forces to the Egyptian frontier. What he meant to do, so far as can be ascertained, was to restore the frontier fortress line as quickly as he could and then return to Tobruk. With the British armour, as he thought, routed or destroyed and the frontier line intact, he would then be free for the one operation on which he had set his heart for months past—the assault on Tobruk. At the Egyptian frontier, however, he thought he saw a chance too good to miss of destroying the New Zealand and Indian divisions in one huge pincer movement by his three armoured divisions (15 and 21 Panzer and the Italian Ariete). To the achievement of this illusory objective he directed his energies for the next three days. He was punching the air. Only one New Zealand brigade, widely dispersed, remained in the frontier area, and one Indian brigade was too securely posted behind the minefields at Sidi Omar to be easily dislodged. Thus this imaginative and daring adventure ended in failure, with the capture of Headquarters 5 NZ Brigade a scant compensation for the virtual destruction of a German armoured brigade at Sidi Omar and the gift to the British armour of three valuable days' breathing space.

Meanwhile the New Zealand Division availed itself of the opportunity to break through at Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed and link with the Tobruk garrison at Ed Duda.

First of all the enemy had to be cleared from the Rugbet en-Nbeidat wadi and the blockhouse west of Point 175. Sixth Brigade, now augmented by 21 Battalion, was to attack before daylight on 25 November, and 4 Brigade was to be brought up

to its right rear at dawn. The night attack was to be with the bayonet and tommy gun; supporting fire was not considered possible.³⁹ The machine-gun platoons, therefore, were withdrawn from 24 and 26 Battalions to Headquarters 3 Company, which moved with Brigade Headquarters.

After fiercely fighting its way through the wadi in the darkness, 24 Battalion was halted by heavy machine-gun fire just below the blockhouse. The 26th Battalion reached the edge of the Sidi Rezegh airfield, and the 21st the eastern end of the ridge farther south. The combined efforts of 24 and 26 Battalions supported by artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire, resulted in the capture in daylight of the blockhouse which had at least twenty machine guns in position around it.

The supporting machine-gun fire came from 2 Company (which of course was with 4 Brigade). The platoons of 3 Company had not yet been brought far enough forward. Fourth Brigade advanced to Zaafran without much trouble, although 20 Battalion, which extended on the left to the foot of the escarpment, came under fire from the direction of the blockhouse. On the left flank 6 Platoon survived mortar and machine-gun fire, and engaged the enemy on the escarpment, and later in the morning 5 Platoon, on the right flank, also found targets in the blockhouse area. 'We had some good long range shooting, and observation of strike both by dust and effect on enemy was very good indeed,' reported Second-Lieutenant Newland, who also claimed that, owing to a misunderstanding, his platoon was not allowed to fire at several hundred enemy, who got away. 'I estimate about 500 escaped. These men were a particularly easy target for us, but we were told that we might shoot up one of our own units who were supposed to be near by at the time. This was found later not to be true.'

Sixth Brigade now faced Sidi Rezegh on the central of the three parallel ridges that commanded the south-eastern approaches to Tobruk. The plan for the night of 25–26 November was that this brigade should secure both Sidi Rezegh and Ed Duda, and that 4 Brigade should capture Belhamed. If this plan succeeded the New Zealanders would hold a corridor across two vital enemy lines of communication, the Trigh Capuzzo and the Tobruk bypass road.

Sixth Brigade's operation was to be in two stages: 24 and 25 Battalions (the latter reorganised as two rifle companies) were to advance from the blockhouse and

occupy [Sidi Rezegh](#), and then 21 and 26 Battalions were to pass through and march on [Ed Duda](#), which they would have to reach, with their supporting arms, before dawn. To help consolidate after the capture of these objectives, 7 and 9 Platoons were to be under the command of 24 Battalion and 8 Platoon under the 26th.

The 24th got away about 11 p.m., and advancing well south of the crest of the ridge (where most of the enemy had dug in), met little if any opposition. Two rifle companies moved on the right and two on the left, with the transport, including the two machine-gun platoons, in between. 'The infantry mopped up a couple of Italian outposts and we all continued on,' says Second-Lieutenant Mabin (7 Platoon). 'There was a bit of shelling and machine-guns firing on fixed lines but it wasn't at all effective. We had no casualties during the move up.'

Two companies of the 24th then took up a position facing north on the ridge overlooking the [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque (actually a tomb), where they engaged the enemy; another company faced west, another east. To form the southern side of a hollow square, 25 Battalion eventually occupied a position facing south. The machine-gunners were to take up a 2000-yard line on the western side of the square—with no infantry in support—7 Platoon on the right and 9 on the left.

'The section commanders,' says Mabin, 'were instructed to get their guns in the best position under the circumstances in the dark, and if at first light the position of the gun was unsatisfactory to move as quickly as possible to a better site. In the dark it was extremely hard to pick a place for the guns and as far as I can remember they were about 150/200 yards apart. The infantry who were at the beginning ahead of the MGs and clearing the ground for us went on to the edge of the escarpment. During the night unknown to me they pulled out [some went down the escarpment] and we were left on our own.'

A rendezvous south of [Sidi Rezegh](#) had been appointed for 21 and 26 Battalions. But 26 Battalion's approach march from the blockhouse was obstructed by the now alert enemy pockets which 24 and 25 Battalions had missed, and this battalion halted east of the 24th. Coming from a different direction, from the southernmost ridge, 21 Battalion did not find the 26th or the 24th, and ended up near the mosque, with detachments above and below the escarpment in a very precarious situation. Some fell into enemy hands; others made their way back to 24 and 25 Battalions'

lines. The second phase of the operation was cancelled.

The machine-gunners were also in a dangerous situation. Sergeant O'Brien ⁴⁰ (No. 1 Section 7 Platoon, on the right flank) says, 'It appeared to us at daylight that we were too far forward and had lost the cover from our own infantry who were then 250 yards behind us....' He sent a runner to Platoon Headquarters, but was told it had gone; a second runner reported that Platoon Headquarters had been captured. 'I then went myself to find out why we were out on our own and saw an infantry officer who told me we were supposed to be behind him. I went back to my guns to get them out but on the way I was wounded and it took me some time to get to them. By then it was too late to get out and we had to fight, just 13 of us, and what a show that was....'

Private Redwood ⁴¹ reveals how perilously close they were to the enemy. 'Having set the gun in the dark we could not shoot the immediate foreground for 50 yards with my gun. We engaged targets beyond this. However the 50 yards that we could not get a go at contained a lot of Spandaus. The one with rifles slowly silenced them. Sergeant O'Brien did a good job by knocking one out about 15 yards out in front, he having to stand erect for quite a few shots before he got him.'

Although wounded, O'Brien made another effort to get his guns out, but by this time enemy mortars had the range and 'the going was pretty bad.... At 9 AM the tanks had a go and cleaned up my No. 2 gun and some of its crew, under Cpl Helm. ⁴² I tried to get the rest over to us, only 10 yards, but there was a Mk III about 50 yards away and he wasn't very happy. We had blown the commander's head off and [the tank crew] seemed a bit wild. This tank was finally driven off by our artillery but we had one hell of a time while they go the range. This was when Cations ⁴³ was wounded and with his leg shattered we had to leave him when we went at 10.45. By now some feeling was coming back into my legs and I decided if we were to go it had to be now. Out of 15,000 rounds of Mk VIIIZ we took in with us there were only two belts per gun left and with 5 men out of action the place was too hot even for machine gunners. Cpl Helm would not leave Cations and I got the others to bury the locks from the guns and off we set. The mortars let go too and Newman ⁴⁴ stopped one which now left 5 of us and two wounded at that to keep going, and just to cap it off Ian Stewart with No. 8 Platoon shoots us up too, but we got out to the infantry. I had a look at where we had been, it certainly was a long way.'

Privates [Ferguson](#)⁴⁵ and [Price](#),⁴⁶ as well as Newman, were killed; six were wounded (of whom Cations was captured); others, including the platoon commander, were prisoners.

Platoon Headquarters had been about half-way between the two sections. As it grew light Mabin could see that he was at the top of a wadi containing tanks and infantry. Some abandoned vehicles behind Platoon Headquarters became the target for mortar and machine-gun fire. 'I was out of contact with the guns, and it was impossible to move from our positions because of the flatness of the ground and the shelling. We were just lying quietly in our slit trenches when some Mark IVs came out of the wadi and came towards us machine gunning the trucks behind us all the time. They came within 300 yards of us, stayed a short time and then went away again.... later the tanks came back again but this time with infantry. They advanced towards us and before we could do anything we were captured.'

At least one or two of 9 Platoon's Vickers did some shooting in the morning, but they were mortared heavily by the enemy and fired on by their own artillery and infantry. 'Len [Jansen](#),⁴⁷ my No 2, and myself had only dug in about 6 ins. when the sun appeared,' says Beckingham. 'From dawn onwards we were pelted from both sides by mortar, small arms fire, and 25 pounders.... During the day Eric Heaps⁴⁸ was mortally wounded at his gun on my left....'

Private Hambling's⁴⁹ gun 'let loose at a few huns and Ities' trucks. [We] were getting shot at by snipers and automatic rifles, MGs, mortars, artillery, then our own guns and MGs. No. 8 Platoon started to pepper us. Bren carrier from our infantry came out to within 200 yds of us. Let us have a few rounds and then retired. Thought we were Jerry....'

With the exception of Corporal Winfield's gun team, out of touch on the extreme left of the line, the machine-gunners left their guns and ran the gauntlet back to their own lines. Beckingham says that 'Cpl [Brown](#)⁵⁰ from 7 Pln came running towards me, and yelled "We are going to make a break for it for our own lines, we are in a bad position." I relayed the word back, and as one we all took to our scrapers and I think we all broke the 500 yd record in that mad dash....'

Apparently the Bren carrier which had gone forward to investigate had fired at Private Dudman's ⁵¹ position. Nobody had been hit, but when he got back one machine-gunner sought out an infantry officer and said, 'Call yourselves bloody riflemen? You fired point blank at us, and missed the bloody lot of us.'

Holden decided to withdraw to the artillery lines. 'Got my truck and made a break to Arty lines. Pln Trns [transport] going another route, the troops walking, distance to go was about 1800 yds. Got through & blew hell out of Arty officer at gun lines then found out they had not been told we were there & the Inf had retired when mortared in the morning & the proposed attack [by 26 and 21 Battalions] had been cancelled.'

Winfield's gun team had no contact with anybody on either side or in the rear. Their Vickers, like the others, had not been dug in deep before daylight. 'The digging of the gunpit was particularly difficult on a rocky formation and after going down a few inches we had to abandon further effort,' says Collis. 'The noise seemed to attract a bit of small arms fire. We regretted not going further with it next morning.'

At dawn they surprised some enemy troops who debussed from two vehicles—apparently a mortar team taking up position. When the Vickers opened fire the vehicles spun around and withdrew, but there was an almost immediate response from elsewhere, and for the rest of the day Winfield's men were pinned down by concentrated mortar fire. Bren-gun fire and light shelling came from behind.

With 'no news during the whole day, no food, no sign of anybody else,' Winfield decided when it was dark that the best thing to do would be to go back and try to make contact. 'We had only gone about 100 yds back when we met a hail of fire from the direction of our own lines,' says Collis. 'We had some difficulty in making our identity known and the officer in charge some difficulty in silencing the line....' The infantry 'were quite unaware that we were immediately in front. Woodhall's comment to one of the Bren gunners with a pile of empty cases beside the gun was caustic....'

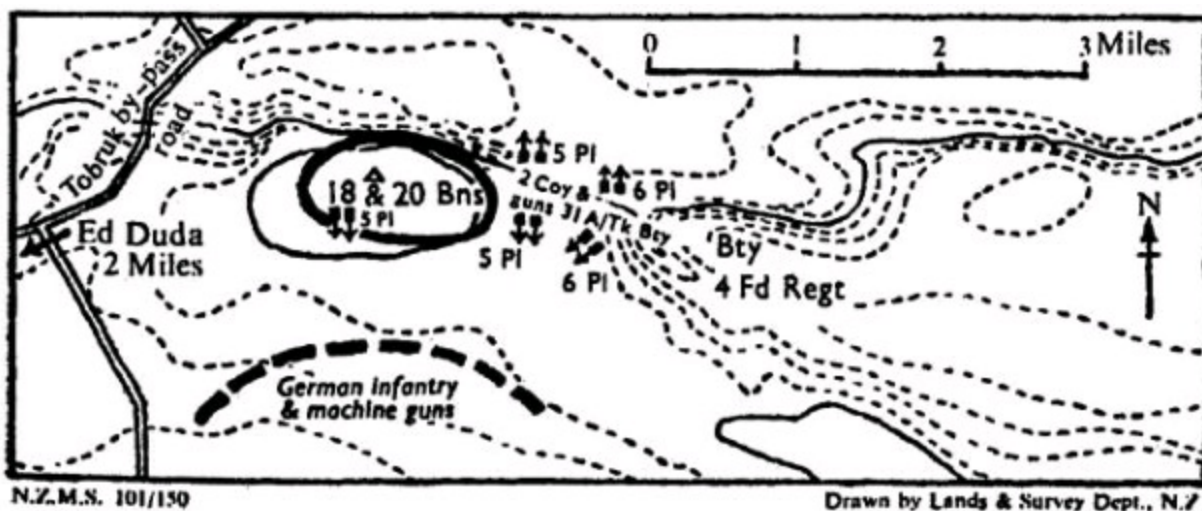
Of 7 and 9 Platoons' eight Vickers, Winfield's was the only one brought back. Holden had withdrawn the remainder of the two platoons to Company Headquarters, which was with Brigade Headquarters, and had heard that another attack was going

in that night (the 26th–27th). ‘We offered to go in with it and pick our guns up,’ he says. ‘It was agreed to for a while, then it was decided that No. 8 Pln would go in with the attack. We went forward at daylight and recovered the guns.’

Fourth Brigade had no great difficulty in seizing [Belhamed](#) with 18 and 20 Battalions in a silent attack on the night of 25–26 November, but in daylight the possession of this bald, gently sloping hill proved dangerous. Enemy guns pounded it from three sides—north, west and south—infantry bombarded it with mortars, and it was swept by machine-gun fire. Nevertheless casualties were not unduly severe.

The supporting arms—the Matildas of [44 Royal Tanks](#), 2 MG Company (less 4 Platoon), 31 Anti-Tank Battery, and the infantry's mortars and carriers—went forward at 5.30 a.m. (‘not early enough,’ says Captain Johansen) and at dawn came under shell and anti-tank fire from the direction of [Sidi Rezegh](#). Four tanks were destroyed and three damaged before they could take cover. The anti-tank battery and the machine-gun company worked their way along the northern edge of [Belhamed](#), where Johansen and Major [Levy](#)⁵² (OC 31 Battery) decided to combine forces—‘a happy combination ... that of MGs & A/T guns’—to hold the area between 18 Battalion on the left (west) and [4 Field Regiment](#) on the right (east).

Johansen ‘placed No. 5 Pl... in re-entrants in the escarpment & facing north. No. 6 Pl likewise situated on the escarpment ... but also with alternative positions facing south to south west. The 20th Bn were located west from the 18th Bn in a rather inaccessible area. No. 6 Pl had therefore to guard the gap between the 18th Bn and Bde Gp boundary on which was



5 and 6 Platoons' alternative positions at Belhamed

5 and 6 Platoons' alternative positions at Belhamed

sited a host of Arty 25 pdrs—a gap of nearly 2500 yards. Intermingled with us were A/T guns ... Coy HQs in a re-entrant midway between the two Pls.... We held these positions and were subjected to intense shelling from N and S & to machine gunning from the south, for five days.'

Newland says that each day 5 Platoon was severely shelled and was often under mortar and machine-gun fire, but suffered no casualties, 'probably because we were well hidden and covered amid the large rocky wadis running down the face of the escarpment.' The platoon fired at several targets, mostly at long range, and appeared to have a measure of success, occasionally stopping a truck or motor cycle or two, and inflicting casualties among men on foot or in the vehicles. Kinder's platoon (No. 6) which also came under shell, mortar and machine-gun fire, apparently without casualties, gave most of its attention to silencing, or endeavouring to silence, enemy machine-gun posts to the south.

Meanwhile 4 Platoon (Sergeant Hull⁵³), detached from 2 Company, was in reserve with 19 Battalion near Brigade Headquarters in the Zaafran area. At daybreak on the 26th the men of No. 2 Section found themselves on the right flank, 'parked like a neon light on a forward slope overlooking the enemy positions,' to quote Private Campbell.⁵⁴ 'We did not have our gun set up and we, proving how conspicuous we were, provided the mark for a barrage of 5? mortar. The first shell to land was almost a direct hit on our truck, landing over and past it by about 30'. This sighter collected three of our crew, Pte Thomas Twistleton⁵⁵ ... Cpl Clive Smith⁵⁶ ...

and myself.'

In the late afternoon a German reconnaissance plane, showing navigation lights, flew around slowly at a low altitude. 'Every time he flew over our positions,' says Private [Friend](#),⁵⁷ 'he shone a big lamp in his tail ... it was only minutes late we would be plastered by German artillery.' About 5.30 p.m. the plane approached very low in front of No. 1 Section. 'My gun was not loaded at that time as we were waiting to get our fixed lines to lay on,' says Private [Winterburn](#).⁵⁸ 'I immediately grabbed an ammo, belt and loaded up and pulled out the rear pin so as to get the gun to swing free and so bear on the plane. He was then about 50 or 60 yards away and about 100 feet up and I fired straight into him, not many shots, when checking afterwards only 19 had been fired, and he wobbled a bit and then crash landed about 70 yards from us. Cpl. Phil. [Tritt](#),⁵⁹ my Section Cpl., was first to the plane and promptly pulled the pilot and observer out....' The plane was armed only with a light machine gun.

'Arguments immediately started over who shot it down⁶⁰ and it was fortunate that we were the only guns around firing the new Mark VIII ammunition and in the pilot's seat and cabin we found several slugs,' says [Friend](#). 'The pilot was badly shot about the legs and was too bad to shift in the 3 tonners which we were using for ambulances and our medical orderlies after doing him up decided to wait for an ambulance. During the night though he died....' One of the maps salvaged from the plane not only gave useful information about enemy dispositions but also showed accurately New Zealand and [Tobruk](#) force positions.

At this stage it fell to 19 Battalion, the only battalion of 4 and 6 Brigades still at full strength, to complete the link between [Eighth Army](#) and the [Tobruk](#) garrison. It had originally been intended that the [Tobruk](#) force should push out to [Ed Duda](#) after it had been captured by the New Zealanders, but [6 Brigade](#) had been unable to carry out its advance from [Sidi Rezegh](#) before dawn on the 26th. In the afternoon, however, troops from 70 British Division made a sortie from the [Tobruk](#) perimeter and captured [Ed Duda](#).

The [19th Battalion's](#) advance to join hands with these troops was another night affair, but this time tanks went ahead of the infantry. The fourteen Matildas charging through the darkness demoralised the dug-in Germans and Italians, and by 1 a.m. on

27 November 19 Battalion, without a single casualty, was on [Ed Duda](#) and in contact with 1 Essex Battalion.

The same night [6 Brigade](#) completed the occupation of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) ridge. During the previous day—when 7 and 9 Platoons had withdrawn from a place ‘too hot even for machine-gunners’—the brigade had consolidated short of the mosque, but this situation was precarious. Brigadier Barrowclough saw that an attack to clear the remainder of the ridge was an ‘absolute necessity’, and therefore ordered 24 and 26 Battalions to secure all the high ground overlooking the mosque.

The two battalions fought hand-to-hand with Germans and Italians (Bersaglieri, the toughest Italian troops encountered), and suffered grievous casualties from close-range anti-tank, mortar and machine-gun fire. The Brigadier, going over the ground soon after dawn, found 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 ... the exhausted and sadly depleted ranks of 24 and 26 Bns had fought their way to victory and their victory was complete....’

The three machine guns from 9 Platoon and the four from 7 Platoon lost the previous day were recovered, but both platoons were short of men, and 7 Platoon had to be reorganised on a three-gun instead of a four-gun basis. To help consolidate on the western end of the ridge, 7 Platoon joined 24 Battalion; 8 Platoon was with the 26th (east of the 24th) and about 200 yards from the mosque; 9 Platoon was in reserve. ‘There was no need to build pits for we merely removed the Italian dead & their Machine Guns, allowing ourselves to utilize their roughly built sangars,’ says Private Clemens (8 Platoon).

An unsuccessful attempt was made to reduce an enemy strongpoint in a commanding position behind 26 Battalion. Although cut off, this strongpoint had withstood two attacks by a platoon of 26 Battalion the previous day, and as Sergeant Stewart says, ‘still had plenty of sting.... One thing that stands out in my memory is the efforts made to dislodge that pocket of Germans by one platoon of infantry with the support of the mortars. I was asked to give overhead fire with MMG at 1100 yds over a crest using Mk VIII ammunition. An impossible feat, of course.’ When two platoons (actually twenty-two men), with artillery support, finally

captured the strongpoint in the afternoon of 28 November, they were surprised to find that it had contained 180 Germans (and twenty captured New Zealanders), several anti-tank guns, mortars, machine guns and small arms of all descriptions well entrenched in concreted positions.

Another enemy pocket, a much larger one, well supplied with anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns, and occupying a long, low rise about midway between [Sidi Rezegh](#) and Belhamed, had become 4 Brigade's chief concern. Under the sadly mistaken belief that the enemy there was ready to surrender and could be rounded up without difficulty, two companies of 20 Battalion were ordered to attack on 27 November. They met intense mortar and machine-gun fire, and after suffering nearly 100 killed and wounded, had to be extricated from a hopeless position after dark.

The answer to this setback was a well-organised attack next day by eleven tanks, ten Bren carriers, and three platoons of 18 Battalion, supported by both 4 and 6 Field Regiments and 5 and 6 MG Platoons. The Vickers were to fire across the fronts of the tanks from forward positions on [Belhamed](#). 'Everything went according to plan & I might say in passing was pretty to watch,' is Johansen's impression. At small cost some 600 prisoners were taken, and the last obstruction to a firm link between the New Zealanders and the [Tobruk](#) garrison was eliminated.

Since 24 November the New Zealanders had been fortunate in at least one respect: they did not have to contend with the three armoured divisions which Rommel had taken on his costly and abortive excursion to the frontier. On the 27th, however, Rommel recognised the critical situation south-east of [Tobruk](#) and ordered his armour back to that front. While driving along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) the Germans lost heavily in tanks in probably the most successful engagement fought by the British armour; but this did not prevent them from continuing the westward advance, which was to have such fearful consequences for the New Zealand Division.

Late on the afternoon of the 28th the New Zealand main dressing station, situated east of Point 175 and containing over 1000 wounded and sick, was suddenly and unexpectedly captured. Private [McCahill](#),⁶¹ one of the wounded machine-gunners there, 'heard a great shout go up. I went out to see what it was, and to my horror, the place had been surrounded by Germans ... and we were in the bag....' About 1500 Germans and Italians were released from the adjoining prisoner-of-war

cage. The enemy set up guns around the dressing station and opened fire in the direction of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#). British artillery replied, and shells falling among the tents caused further casualties among the wounded, who also were tortured by thirst and hunger before they were recaptured eight days later.

Convoys of vehicles were seen moving westwards south of [6 Brigade](#) during the morning of the 28th. At first some thought these might be 1 South African Brigade, which was expected to arrive from that direction to support the New Zealanders. 'The constant misleading statements about a South African relief column approaching from different directions were little short of amazing,' says Sergeant Stewart. 'On about 28th Nov a few trucks stopped in a Wadi on our left front about 1500 yds away and I could see through my binoculars that they were German troops whatever the vehicles, so promptly opened fire with Cpl Pye's ⁶² two guns and was smartly told by 26th Bn HQ to stop as they might be SA trucks. Perhaps they were—the men were not [South Africans].'

Early in the afternoon vehicles appeared on the high ground beyond the western extremity of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. Troops debussed and brought guns into action against 24 and 26 Battalions, but were shelled and driven off. Another convoy was reported to the south-west. About this time 8 Platoon sustained its first serious casualties. While one gun crew was digging in on top of the ridge an 'exceptionally heavy shell' landed among the men and killed Privates [Hawkins](#), ⁶³ [Boyle](#), ⁶⁴ and [Gobbe](#), ⁶⁵ and seriously wounded Corporal [Andrew](#) ⁶⁶ and Private [Connolly](#). ⁶⁷ Clemens, who alone was uninjured, evacuated the two wounded men.

The same afternoon misfortune overtook 24 Battalion. Some of the infantry had moved slightly and were digging in when a number of men were seen approaching and making friendly signs. Thinking these were friendly troops, the New Zealanders, allowing the enemy to come in, fell victims to a ruse. The forward sections were quickly overrun; others farther back could not fire without hitting their own men. The Germans, says a 24 Battalion NCO, 'came under heavy fire from the Vickers guns [probably 7 Platoon] and I noticed a German officer was having trouble in getting his men to advance in face of it.' The intervention of 24 Battalion carriers drove back the enemy, but not before he had captured 100-odd men.

At nightfall [6 Brigade](#) was still in possession of [Sidi Rezegh](#), but was reduced to

about a third of its normal strength and was threatened from the east, south and west; its vehicle park on the airfield was overlooked and in danger of coming under gunfire at dawn. Brigadier Barrowclough suggested that his transport be moved within the **Tobruk** perimeter, but was given permission only to move Brigade Headquarters and all B Echelon vehicles on to the low ground north of the escarpment. 'Div replied,' he reports, 'that CORPS orders required us to keep open the **TOBRUK Corridor** and that we must therefore maintain our present positions substantially as they were.... Nothing therefore remained but to utilise the hours of darkness in redistributing our depleted forces to the best possible advantage....'

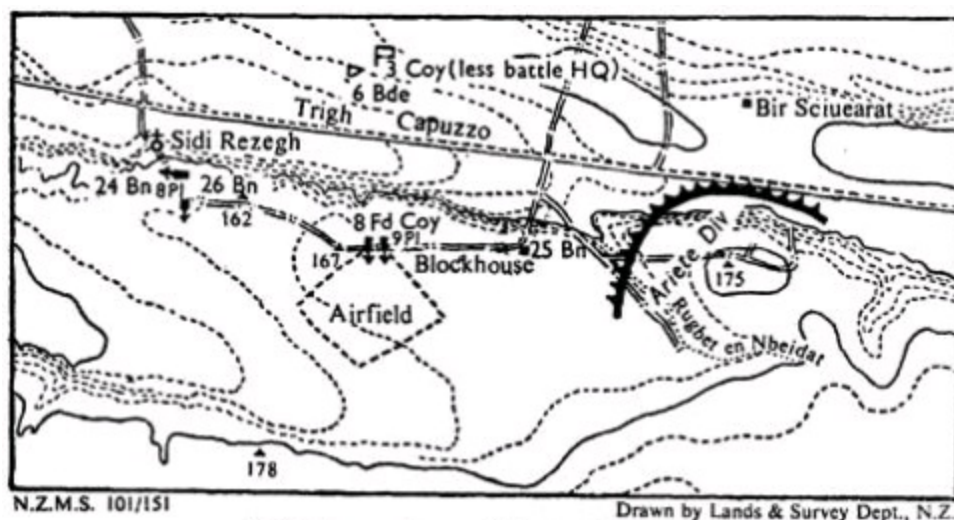
The 24th and 26th Battalions were to hold their positions on the high ground near the mosque; **8 Field Company** was to guard the airfield; 25 Battalion was to defend the area around the blockhouse; 21 Battalion was to reoccupy Point 175. The necessary moves were completed during darkness. Major Luxford, with 9 Platoon, joined the engineers (under Major **Currie** ⁶⁸) on the edge of the airfield; Headquarters 3 Company, under the command of the second-in-command (Captain **Mason** ⁶⁹), went with Brigade Headquarters below the escarpment; 7 and 8 Platoons were still with 24 and 26 Battalions.

The brigade now held a very thin line about eight miles in length, extending from Point 175 to about 1000 yards beyond the mosque. Columns of transport seen moving on the southernmost ridge next day (29 November) invariably turned out to be hostile. 'One of these convoys advanced towards our position and we found recognition to be very difficult,' says Luxford. 'We were expecting a South African convoy from the same direction and Brigade had warned us to be very careful not to shoot them up. Fire was held until the convoy was about 600 yds. away when one of the flank sections opened fire. The convoy immediately turned and made off in a S.W. direction; some of the rear ones were seen to halt at extreme range south of us and recognition was still not definitely established. A wounded man was observed out in front and a party went out to collect him. He was a German so orders were given for all M.M.Gs to open fire on the trucks in sight. This caused one truck to make off eastwards, although two remained but the personnel were observed to get out of them. During the afternoon an Italian tank drove up under a white flag. Inside was one dead, one severely wounded and two unhurt Italians.'

Early in the afternoon Brigadier Barrowclough told Luxford by telephone that he

was taking 7 Platoon from 24 Battalion and placing it under the command of 21 Battalion on Point 175; late that evening the Brigadier advised him that Point 175 had been overrun and the troops there captured. 'All I had of No. 7 Platoon after that," says Luxford, "were the six drivers and one sergeant who had managed to get away from Point 175."

During the day 21 Battalion had repelled two attacks on Point 175, and the timely arrival of 7 Platoon had helped to turn the scale in the second assault. "On arrival," says Private Coull,⁷⁰ "we took up the best position we could find in the short time available, this being a flat piece of ground with hardly any cover. No person could give us any accurate idea of how far in front the Btn. F.D.L's were so our guns concentrated on the left flank where German mortars were to be seen arriving to take up their positions. The range was long but our Vickers proved very effective, not one mortar getting into position to fire and we caused much havoc among the gun crews. Some time later [about 5 p.m.] a column of trucks escorted by tanks [or armoured cars] was noticed heading in our direction on our right flank. Everybody who should know these things informed us this column was the South Africans so we did not give them much further thought. It was not until the trucks came close and emptied out Italian Infantry and the tanks closed their turrets and fired a few shots at the



Sidi Rezegh, 30 November 1941

Sidi Rezegh, 30 November 1941

Bren Carriers behind our gun line that we realized the information was wrong.

By then it was too late for us to do anything but surrender. One cannot do much else with a dirty big tank within 20 yds of your gun....”

At Sidi Rezegh Sunday 30 November “dawned with everything still quiet, but the air charged with a tense expectancy,” wrote Clemens (8 Platoon). “Surely he must attack today or our Tanks will arrive to consolidate our position, making us secure. Something must be done soon about our own and enemy dead littering the ground all around, for the flies are thick and the air is foul.”

From about mid-morning there was almost continual movement along the southern ridge. Troop-carrying vehicles and tanks could be seen assembling and were shelled at extreme range, with little apparent effect other than retaliatory fire. Early in the afternoon 8 Platoon was warned that an infantry attack supported by tanks was expected about 4 p.m. “Everyone is on his toes and our Tommy Anti-Tank Gunners ⁷¹ assure us that no Tank will cross the wide sandy flat below us....” Almost on the tick of four tanks appeared on the ridge to the south, about two miles away. From behind the [Sidi Rezegh](#) ridge the 25-pounders brought their fire to bear on the slowly moving targets. Through binoculars Clemens saw “one, two, three fires from direct hits, but still they advance. I count thirty ⁷² in all which have evaded our Guns & as they reach the dusty flat they mill round & round in apparent disorder....’ The Germans were taking advantage of a following wind to raise a protective dust screen. The 25-pounders were prevented by the crest of the ridge from engaging them at close range. The dust cleared, and 700 yards away the tanks ‘in two nigh perfect lines’ lumbered forward with their guns blazing. Vehicles were set on fire. The British anti-tank guns, their crews ‘working heroically’, put two tanks out of action before the enemy’s concentrated fire scored direct hits on all of them. The gunners took shelter in their trenches.

Sergeant McClintock says that some of the tanks had troop-carriers behind them. ‘When they stopped in line in front of our position one trailer load of soldiers got out of their carrier, they were standing near the side of their armoured troop carrier. I would not order my men to fire, but I gave them the order “gun control”, which means that the gunner can fire if he wishes to. One gun opened up, the other one was faulty, therefore could not fire....’

‘There was still a lot of dust about the tanks but I too saw troop carriers and

also men on the back of the tanks,' writes Private Mackenzie,⁷³ who opened fire 'with a fair amount of success' among the Germans who dropped with their light automatic weapons from the rear of the tanks. '... the attack seemed to surprise them more than a little. For a time after this little do, no men appeared in sight, then looking through the legs of the Gun Tripod I saw seven men appear from behind the leading tank, they appeared to be Officers and were apparently interested in something I could not see, to my right and behind me. To bring my gun to bear on this party I had to reach out and release my traverse clamp and then half climb out of my pit as they were on my right at a sharp angle and below me, by moving slowly I got them lined up and let go swinging the gun across and back, 3 men fell as if hit when all went to earth, they did not appear again.'

Clemens observed through his binoculars 'that there are as many as five men clinging full length on the rear slope of each Tank. Their job is to cover the area & when the Tanks are through, follow & round up the prisoners. I look around to see what our Infantry are doing. All are below ground but as I gaze someone makes a dash across the open ground. His mission is not fulfilled for I see him blown to smithereens by a stray Tank shell. The Tanks are only a hundred yards away now in two columns, gingerly picking their way up the rugged slope. We all are clinging fervently to the rocky ground wishing our holes were not so conspicuous & about a quarter as wide. The Tanks stop almost upon us & we clearly hear an eventual deployment order being given by radio.... We remain as quiet as mice and the Tanks pass beyond us, four of them within a few yards of my trench. They are completing their job by occupying the high ground behind us & worrying about the concentration of Infantry there.... To our left & behind us the Infantry stream out of their holes with hands about their heads....'

Clemens watched the German infantry advance in groups. 'Caution is thrown to the wind, & they have no eyes for our area for they hurry forward to claim a share of the prisoners' loot. Orders are given to make our Guns useless & the Gunners comply by burying the locks. We call to one another hasty plans for making a mass break to the flat below & then veering right in the hope of finding Brigade Hdqs. Our slender chances vanish as a convoy appears on the route followed by the Tanks —a few German staff cars in the lead supported, as always, by motor cyclists, & followed by their counterpart of our three-tonner, with indeed a sprinkling of our own vehicles of

that description among them. There are approximately thirty wagons in close column—a perfect Vickers target—but it would be folly to open up on them with Tanks so handy. The convoy halts immediately below us, a senior staff officer gives a command & German Infantry debuss in an orderly manner. I am struck by the fact that they carry no webbing, respirators or haversacks, & indeed only about half of them carry steel helmets. Light automatic weapons and mausers are their arms and about one in every three is an ammunition number. There is a Battalion of them, I judge, and their confidence saves us from immediate discovery for they form up in threes & march past us to occupy the crest of the ridge. They are close enough to easily discern their features in the dying light.

'As the Infantry go up, the Tanks come down. Rotten luck! They have chosen our area for a refuelling point—their store trucks are now arriving—& to "laager" for the night. We remain in our holes hoping against hope that something will turn up at the last hour & save us from capture. The neatly attired Tank crews are now fraternizing excitedly. They have much to discuss and easily acquired loot to display. Detection must follow, but it is fully five minutes before, apparently by accident, someone discovers an occupied hole. A warning shout & a dozen Lugers are drawn as the Anti Tank Gunners surrender. The Germans are now the personification of complete caution. The game is up for us, for six of them come towards our holes & covered by a Tank Gun. Three of them are at the Gun Pit about five yards to my right. "Up Up" I hear one command in guttural English. With three Lugers a few feet from them handled by a capable foe, the Numbers One and Two & the Section Commander jump to their feet smartly hands well above their heads. "Are you armed?" I hear in the same foreign voice & the prisoners are lightly searched for hidden weapons. A searcher proudly withdraws a pair of binoculars from Mac's person & is the envy of his comrades. They evince small interest in the Gun. Soon the rest of the Section are on top of the ground & marched away to a nearby car. I am impressed by the almost courteous manner in which the boys are treated....'⁷⁴

Clemens, all this time, was lying on the ground pretending that he was dead. Twice a German nudged him with his foot and ordered him to get up, but went away satisfied. Later, when a favourable opportunity occurred, he walked to a slit trench where he hid before making his way to another trench. When he felt he had reached a safe distance, he began to run. He headed in the direction of some flares, but

could hear Italian voices; he went in another direction and found Germans; eventually he ran into New Zealanders, who at first mistook him for an Italian. He ended up at Brigade Headquarters, where he had the greatest difficulty in convincing anybody that there were thirty tanks at [Sidi Rezegh](#). Actually there were more than thirty, but nobody would believe that the Germans still had so many.

Clemens was the only man from No. 1 Section who escaped, but the eight or nine men of No. 2 Section also got away. 'The first we saw of the tanks,' says Pye, 'was when about 8 tanks abreast topped the rise behind us and then stopped and proceeded to blow up the 26th Bn Bren carriers and of course anything else they could see. They would be about 50 Yards away from us. Another six to eight tanks came in from the west and stopped about a hundred yards away and proceeded to line up the infantry in that area....' Pye's section and some nearby infantrymen kept down out of sight. Dusk was falling and the air was thick with dust and smoke. When it was half dark they all made a dash for freedom. They were fired on by the tanks behind them, and although some of the infantrymen were hit, the machine-gunners all got away safely to Brigade Headquarters.

In the morning of the 30th (before [Sidi Rezegh](#) was lost) Major Luxford, who was with 9 Platoon at the edge of the airfield, overheard telephone conversations between Brigadier Barrowclough and Major Burton; the latter insisted that the enemy was on Point 175. ⁷⁵

Two tanks appeared on 9 Platoon's eastern flank in the afternoon and moved over the ridge northwards in the direction of Brigade Headquarters, which was about 1500 yards away. A few minutes later one of them came back and was bagged promptly by the anti-tank guns.

Luxford learnt from Brigade Headquarters that 24 and 26 Battalions had been overrun and captured. 'Things were now pretty sticky and we were expecting a busy night.' Shortly after dark some vehicles were heard moving over the edge of the escarpment between 9 Platoon and Brigade Headquarters. Two anti-tank guns on portées went to investigate and fired on a lorry which went up in flames; it was one of three ammunition lorries towing guns.

About midnight Luxford noticed a line of men approaching from where 24 and 26

Battalions had been. He 'hurried over to the flank and warned the guns to keep a good lookout and not to fire too soon as there was a possibility of them being some of the 24th and 26th filtering back. They were allowed to come quite close and were then challenged. A great gabble of foreign language answered the challenge and so fire was opened and they could be heard running away. Later in the night a badly wounded German (a mere youth) came in and gave himself up; still later his cobber who was unhurt came in and gave himself up so that he could be with him.

'The prospects were gloomy for the morrow if the South Africans, who had been expected for the last two days, did not arrive by morning.'

They did not arrive.

Reports had reached 4 Brigade by the evening of 28 November that an enemy column was advancing westwards along the ridge south of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). That evening, too, gunfire could be seen in the direction of the New Zealand main dressing station. To strengthen his brigade's perimeter against threats from the east and the south, Brigadier Inglis formed a strongpoint just west of [Bir Sciuearat](#), a mile and a half north of Point 175. There a battery of [4 Field Regiment](#) occupied a position together with some survivors of 5 South African Brigade, sappers of [6 Field Company](#) in an infantry role, and 4 Platoon. In addition half of 19 Battalion was brought back from [Ed Duda](#) to [Zaafran](#).

An attack on the strongpoint was expected during the night of 29–30 November—when 21 Battalion had lost Point 175—but did not come until the following afternoon, when tanks and infantry were repelled by the 25-pounders. A machine-gunner had been wounded by mortar fire in the morning, but 4 Platoon—'as a result of digging deep'—had no further casualties, despite artillery, tank-gun, mortar and machine-gun fire.

Later that afternoon Brigadier Inglis told Johansen that he wanted him to concentrate the three platoons of 2 Company at the strongpoint. Johansen pointed out that this would leave the area on [Belhamed](#) between 20 Battalion (which had changed positions with the 18th) and [4 Field Regiment](#) vacant except for the anti-tank guns 'which would be deadly vulnerable without small arms and infantry.' The Brigadier agreed, but said that Point 175 'was looming up important' and ordered the

machine-gun officer to take one platoon and leave the other. Johansen therefore withdrew 5 Platoon and his battle headquarters from [Belhamed](#), and left 6 Platoon under Kinder to hold the 'gap'. The guns of 5 Platoon were sited at the strongpoint after a difficult reconnaissance by moonlight. Daylight on 1 December revealed that this small force of field guns, infantry and machine guns—later reinforced by a troop of British anti-tank guns—was located in and around a small, narrow wadi about 2000 yards south of the two companies of 19 Battalion at [Zaafran](#).

[Sidi Rezegh](#) was in enemy hands, but 4 Brigade still obstructed the cutting of the [Tobruk](#) corridor. Early in the morning tanks and infantry attacked northwards from Sidi Rezegh.

The survivors of 8 Platoon at Headquarters [6 Brigade](#) were armed with rifles. 'When dawn broke,' says Clemens, 'it appeared we were on the left flank of the Brigade Position with the Brigade Command Truck clearly distinguishable in the centre. To say we were a motley fighting force would be putting it mildly, some infantry were dug in around & in front of us while the only anti-tank Guns I could see were 2 lbs. & Bofors which were later fired over open sights.... We had no sooner taken stock of our surroundings when on the horizon we picked up the shapes of our previous day tank enemies looming towards us. When within firing distance a very confused battle took place....'

Major Luxford watched from the ridge. 'It was a real donny- brook.... Lorry after lorry went up in flames and we on the ridge could do nothing to help.' Major Currie, who was standing alongside, told Luxford that he had a three-tonner down there loaded with some hundreds of mines, and he hoped it would not be hit. 'The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a terrific explosion and he said "Well, there go the mines."'

'Things looked very black. The battle had been raging about threequarters of an hour when swarms of tanks were observed coming over the escarpment south of us. Friend or foe? It was hard to tell. I went out to contact them, and they turned out to be our own, part I think of the 4th Armoured Brigade, and I directed them on to the battle....'

At first Clemens thought the British tanks were the South Africans 'who for days

we had been told to expect', but some of the infantry must have thought they were German, for they got up out of their holes and went forward to surrender. Meanwhile the German tanks stopped firing. The British tanks wheeled sharply and advanced towards the Germans, and as they did so an officer called out from his turret, 'Come on, you fellows, we are no good without infantry to help us.'

About twenty men, including the 8 Platoon men, went forward at the double behind the tanks, which fanned out in a line. The surrendering infantry changed their minds and went back for cover. The British tanks fared badly. '... four went up in front of us in the space of seconds.... Suddenly they broke off the engagement & made off the way they had come. We M.G.'s. were left stranded & had to make our best and quickest way to cover....'

Clemens recognised Captain [Weston](#)⁷⁶ (the Staff Captain) standing up in a pick-up. 'He called out "Tell as many as possible in this sector to embus on the least number of vehicles possible & as soon as the Brigadier moves off follow him as best you can." I was still engaged in telling Anti Tank Gun personnel & various others this message when I suddenly noticed the Brig's car was away & a lot more too. For a moment I thought I was going to miss a ride when I spied Jimmy [Butler](#)⁷⁷ the Platoon Mechanic with the Ptn Hdqs truck loaded with gear. I jumped aboard & we made off....'

Brigadier Barrowclough 'came up on the ridge in his car and we were ordered to evacuate immediately and follow,' says Luxford. 'I asked him where we were going and his reply was that the tanks knew a safe place....' The sappers and one section of 9 Platoon were taken out on the tanks, the other section on an anti-tank portée. Luxford packed as many as he could on his pick-up. The group headed eastwards, but came under fire from the direction of Point 175 and swung sharply to the north towards 4 Brigade. 'There was a wild stampede of trucks across the desert. Control was gone. As a fighting unit the brigade was useless....'

As well as chasing the remnants of [6 Brigade](#) the Germans overwhelmed 20 Battalion on [Belhamed](#) and drove a wedge between 18 Battalion and the two companies of the 19th at [Ed Duda](#) on the [Tobruk](#) side and the remainder of 4 Brigade at [Zaafraan](#) on the other. Thus the [Tobruk](#) corridor was cut.

The enemy came over the brow of [Belhamed](#) towards 6 Platoon's positions within an hour of the beginning of the attack. 'Anticipating this and being unable to bring fire to bear on the enemy I had by this time withdrawn my guns and trucks and was standing by while I ... investigated the position,' says Kinder. 'Within a few minutes I considered it necessary to evacuate my lorries and men....' After going a mile or two in a north-easterly direction Kinder met three lorries, one of which had a wireless, and ascertained the whereabouts of Brigade Headquarters. At [Zaafran](#) he reported to Brigadier Inglis, who told him to post his guns on the ridge (in the area formerly occupied by 4 Platoon). There 6 Platoon fired on and dispersed at least thirty German troop-carriers advancing towards [Belhamed](#) from the north, No. 1 Section under Sergeant Green being particularly effective.

At the strongpoint near [Bir Sciuearat](#) the morning 'was one of uncertainty, and even to the men who had no way of knowing the true position, it was evident that the situation was serious,' says Sergeant [Macartney](#) ⁷⁸ of 5 Platoon. '... most of us had been disturbed by the noise of the German attack upon the [[Belhamed](#)] feature during the early hours of the morning, and none of us liked the sound of it, although we had not been able to ascertain what had happened.'

Johansen was left with six Vickers at the strongpoint when a section of 5 Platoon, commanded by Macartney and guided by 2 Company's second-in-command (Lieutenant [Lee](#) ⁷⁹), was despatched to the north-east to support [4 Field Regiment](#). Macartney had been told by his platoon commander (Newland) that he was to provide the best support he could for the field regiment, and if possible he would be given some indication of when to withdraw, 'if such a movement was possible.'

Macartney asked the CO [4 Field Regiment](#) (Lieutenant-Colonel Duff) if he had any special area in the defences he wished to have strengthened. 'He informed me that there were no plans for the placement of defending units ... and suggested we decide upon the most suitable positions, taking into account the likely direction from which the enemy would make his final assault, and our own capabilities. I conveyed this to Lt. Lee who immediately suggested we go on a reconnaissance in a Bren Carrier ... off we went—out into the "Blue", and over several crests ... towards the enemy. I noticed at this time that Lt. Lee had been wounded. He said that it was only a superficial scratch, but I suspected he was already suffering much pain....

'It was very shortly obvious to the both of us that the task of providing anything like effective defence was well nigh hopeless. The open spaces which had to be defended by so few were large enough to accommodate two battalions of infantry and supporting arms. We decided to place one gun at either end of the Regiment's forward line of guns, dig them in as deeply as possible, and hope to do some damage if the enemy came close enough....

'We found it impossible to dig holes and trenches for the guns and teams, the tools we had were not suitable to deal with the solid rock we found just below the surface ... so shallow depressions were made, with low parapets of rock built around them.' Macartney sent the trucks back a short distance, still within sight, with instructions to move only if he told them to do so. 'I felt that those trucks, if not hit ... might offer a slender chance of escape for my teams when the show collapsed.'

Lee, meanwhile, was making strenuous efforts to create a strongpoint. He worked tirelessly, moving quickly from place to place in a Bren carrier, talking and planning with officers and NCOs how to use and co-ordinate to the best advantage the few men and arms at their disposal.

Towards dusk the enemy began to close in. The last two hours, in Macartney's opinion, were 'the most glorious of the 4th Field Regiment. My admiration of these fine fellows who manned the guns transcended all personal feelings of anxiety. They were simply magnificent. They ... fired into the enemy's armoured formations until one team after another was destroyed. ... The place was just one horrid little bit of hell, with vivid flashes, ear-splitting explosions, and general confusion.'

Lee, after doing all he could to organise the scattered troops in the area to delay the enemy's advance, returned to the machine-gunners. 'I am sure,' Macartney continues, 'this brave man did not envisage a withdrawal of any kind. He came up to me and with a spirited flourish of his arms, said, "Even if they do overwhelm us by sheer weight, we shall make it a thoroughly expensive victory for them. Tell the men to be ready, for there is nothing to do now but wait for them, and have it out on the most intimate terms."'

It was getting dark and the forward artillery pieces were out of action. The Vickers were firing at a point less than 1000 yards away where the Germans were

using tracer. Through the glare of burning vehicles it was possible to see confusion developing among the troops out on the left of the forward line. Lee left the machine-gunners and sped swiftly to the spot where he imagined the initial attack would occur. A despatch rider arrived on foot from Headquarters 2 Company (his motor cycle had been knocked out on the way) with a message instructing Macartney to hold out until 5.20 p.m., if possible, and giving rough directions of where to go.

The Vickers carried on firing steadily and deliberately at any show of enemy small-arms fire. They also raked the areas in the general direction from which it was now certain the enemy was approaching, which must have had a delaying effect. At precisely 5.20 p.m. Macartney signalled the trucks and ordered the first gun out, and a few minutes later the second. By this time troops were drifting to the rear. A British tank seemed to be picking up stragglers. Macartney went out to where he had last seen Lee, and found him severely wounded in the head. 'I told him we were withdrawing, and tried to get him to come with us. He refused and insisted that no withdrawal was taking place. For several moments I tried to persuade him, and had decided to call some of my own men to assist me when a Bren Carrier crew assured me they would look after him. By this time small arms fire was streaming into the area, and I had to think about getting the gun teams out, so left him in their care. Fortunately they got him out.... Our men got out with only one casualty.... More by good luck than by skill, we rejoined our unit shortly after leaving the place.'

Lee died a month later in [Cairo](#), but lived long enough to receive an award of the MC.

It was decided that the New Zealand Division should take advantage of the protection given by [4 Armoured Brigade](#) and break out to the south-east, to reorganise in a safe area. The strongpoint, which in Johansen's words rapidly became a 'Hot Point', had to stave off attacks while the two brigades assembled. 'I must say that the sappers of the [6 Fd Coy](#) under a pal of mine Maj Bert [Woolcott](#)⁸⁰ ... fought magnificently as infantry. Fighting their 25 Pdrs as A/T guns superbly the gunners under Major [Bevan](#)⁸¹ added the strong punch to the party. We were ordered to hold the Pt until 1800 hrs if I remember correctly & as the pressing attacks left no opportunity to withdraw piecemeal, the two Majors & I decided to synchronize watches & all of us bolt for it right on the dot. This arrangement

accordingly promulgated & carried out. The one truck I lost was due to a tank shell going clean up the centre of the tray & through the motor striking the driver's (Pte 'Silver' [Gibb](#)⁸²) leg en route. The Strong Point was altogether exciting & successful.'

About 6.30 p.m. Johansen, with 4 and 5 Platoons, rejoined 4 Brigade, 'where we picked up No. 6 Pl all safe & well.' Macartney's section returned to 5 Platoon. The whole New Zealand group moved off in night formation without hindrance from the enemy.

The remnants of 3 Company found themselves next to the engineers, who had a couple of truckloads of prisoners, Germans and Italians. 'Before the move back was commenced that night orders came to dump the prisoners,' says Luxford. 'When they were told to buzz off the Italians said they wanted to go to [Cairo](#). However they were told in no uncertain terms to beat it and the move back to Egypt commenced. Much to the disgust of the Engineers when daylight came after the first night's move who should be with us but the truck load of Ities but no Germans!'

On 5 December 2 and 3 Companies were back at [Baggush](#); their part in the crusader campaign had ended.

1

Bn HQ

Acting CO: [Maj P. W. Wright](#)

Adj: [Capt R. C. Bradshaw](#)

IO: Lt O. Somerset-Smith

MO: Lt A. B. Adams

Padre: [Rev M. L. Underhill](#)

HQ Coy

OC: [Capt M. H. Sheriff](#)

QM: Lt R. P. Williams

Sigs: Lt E. A. Hunter

TO: 2 Lt J. J. Abernethy

AA Pl: Sgt L. Williams

1 Coy

OC: Capt R. I. Crafts

2 i/c: Capt R. L. Hains

1 Pl: 2 Lt C. R. Lee

2 Pl: 2 Lt G. B. C. Pleasants

3 Pl: Sgt C. L. Cato

2 Coy

OC: Capt C. C. Johansen

2 i/c: Lt G. L. Lee

4 Pl: Sgt T. G. Hull

5 Pl: 2 Lt C. A. Newland

6 Pl: 2 Lt A. G. Kinder

3 Coy

OC: Maj J. H. R. Luxford

2 i/c: Capt R. J. Mason

7 Pl: 2 Lt E. D. Mabin

8 Pl: Sgt I. J. W. Stewart

9 Pl: Lt T. W. Daly

4 Coy

OC: Maj A. W. White

2 i/c: Lt G. C. Kirk

10 Pl: 2 Lt J. F. M. Rose

11 Pl: Lt K. J. Frazer

12 Pl: Sgt S. B. Merfield

² An infantry brigade group in this and subsequent desert campaigns usually consisted of three infantry battalions, a field regiment, an anti-tank battery, an anti-aircraft battery, a machine-gun company, a company of engineers, and a field ambulance unit. On this occasion [5 Bde](#) had four battalions (21, 22, 23 and 28).

³ Bn HQ, HQ Coy and [4 Coy](#) were transferred from [4 Bde](#) Gp to B Gp Div HQ on 18 Nov. But this was only a temporary arrangement; a few days later the whole of 27 Bn, apart from [2 Coy](#) with [4 Bde](#) and [3 Coy](#) with [6 Bde](#), was attached to [5 Bde](#). Maj-Gen Inglis comments: 'At one stage [4 Bde](#) was intended to take HQ 27 Bn with it; but I could see no good purpose in doing so, because the Bn HQ had no real job and would only clutter me up with useless vehicles I did not want. I said so with the result that the 27 Bn HQ was palmed off on to [5 Bde](#), with the HQ of which it was captured. The Bn HQ would have been better LOB.'

⁴ [13 Corps](#) (Lt-Gen Godwin-Austen): NZ Div, 4 Indian Div, and [1 Army Tank Bde](#); [30 Corps](#) (Lt-Gen Norrie): 7 Armoured Div, 1 South African Div, and 22 Guards Bde.

⁵ [Afrika Korps](#) (15 and 20 Panzer Divs) and Afrika Div (which became 90 Light Div towards the end of November 1941).

⁶ Cpl I. G. Millar; [Auckland](#); born NZ 5 Aug 1918; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped in [Italy](#) Sep 1943; returned Allied forces Jun 1944.

⁷ These small ridges all run approximately in an east-west direction and rise steeply on the seaward (northern) side, but do not form a series of steps leading inland onto the plateau; the ground between them falls away almost to the same level. In [RMT](#) Jim Henderson describes them as 'a group of about five small escarpments pointing like a bony hand to a besieged [Tobruk](#).'

- ⁸ WO II J. Downes; [Christchurch](#); born Kamo, 30 Mar 1919; chemist.
- ⁹ Capt C. R. Lee; [Wellington](#); born [Napier](#), 4 Apr 1918; insurance clerk; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁰ Maj G. B. C. Pleasants; [Te Kauwhata](#); born [Halcombe](#), 31 Jan 1915; farmer; [DAQMG K Force](#) 1950–52; wounded 7 Dec 1943.
- ¹¹ NZ Div had under command [44 RTR](#) (Matildas) less a squadron and 8 RTF (Valentines) of [1 Army Tank Bde](#).
- ¹² Capt A. G. Kinder; born [England](#), 21 Aug 1905; accountant.
- ¹³ Sgt I. J. W. Stewart; [Ashburton](#); born [Timaru](#), 7 Sep 1917; farmer; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; escaped Apr 1945.
- ¹⁴ Sgt D. A. McClintock, m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Rangiora](#), 23 Mar 1917; special reservist; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; escaped, [Germany](#), 3 Apr 1945.
- ¹⁵ Lt T. W. Daly; born [Timaru](#), 14 Dec 1913; Regular soldier; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁶ Sgt J. F. Collis; [Hawarden](#); born [Oamaru](#), 12 Sep 1912; clerk.
- ¹⁷ Cpl R. A. Winfield; [Murchison](#); born [Christchurch](#), 24 Feb 1918; farm labourer.
- ¹⁸ WO II G. T. Holden, MM; [Otorohanga](#); born [Kihikihi](#), 18 Sep 1910; labourer.
- ¹⁹ Sgt B. V. Cox; [Nelson](#); born [Blenheim](#), 24 Sep 1916; salesman.
- ²⁰ Pte G. T. Woolf; [Takaka](#); born [NZ](#) 28 Jun 1913; labourer.

- ²¹ Pte A. W. Lee; born Invercargill, 22 Dec 1914; storekeeper; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.
- ²² Cpl D. L. Ralfe; born NZ 6 Apr 1915; orchard employee; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.
- ²³ Pte L. Walker; Upper Takaka; born NZ 20 Oct 1916; orchard hand.
- ²⁴ Pte J. A. Johnston; born NZ 14 Oct 1918; butcher; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.
- ²⁵ Pte A. McNeill; born Ireland, 3 Apr 1899; assistant linesman; wounded 23 Nov 1941.
- ²⁶ Lt-Col H. G. Burton, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Christchurch, 1 Dec 1899; company manager; CO 25 Bn1942.
- ²⁷ Pte J. Woodhall, m.i.d.; born NZ 24 Sep 1909; labourer; wounded 23 Apr 1943.
- ²⁸ Sgt G. G. Beckingham, MM; Christchurch; born NZ 20 Dec 1914; painter and paperhanger; wounded 22 Jul 1942.
- ²⁹ Pte J. W. Taylor; born NZ 1 Apr 1905; labourer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.
- ³⁰ Sgt A. T. Farrell; Moerewa; born Waihi, 2 Feb 1914; grocer; wounded 23 Nov 1941.
- ³¹ Pte A. A. S. Prole; Otahuhu; born Waihi, 8 Mar 1915; gold miner; twice wounded.
- ³² Pte T. R. Horne; born NZ 26 May 1915; station hand; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³³ WO I G. S. Blckett; Wellington; born Blenheim, 4 Sep 1913; Regular soldier; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

³⁴ Pte W. Gibbons; born Te Aroha, 14 Oct 1917; dairy farmhand; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

³⁵ Sections of 2 Pl accompanied 23 Bn patrols from Capuzzo towards Bardia and Halfaya with their Vickers mounted in 15-cwt trucks. 'Each time I tried to contact this Pn,' says Capt Crafts (OC 1 Coy), 'I was told they were away and not expected back for some time.'

³⁶ 1 Pl did not accompany 21 Bn on this westward advance but remained in the frontier area with 5 Bde.

³⁷ Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, Infantry Brigadier, p. 91.

³⁸ German records say the 88-mm gun was knocked out by a direct hit by British artillery, in which case the machine-gunners might have contributed towards putting it out of action—if indeed it was the same gun. But there might have been two 88-mm guns, one east and the other northeast of Bir el Chleta.

³⁹ The attack had begun before Maj Luxford knew anything about it.

⁴⁰ WO II J. M. O'Brien; Timaru; born Timaru, 22 May 1913; stoker; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁴¹ Pte S. F. Redwood; Murchison; born England, 27 Dec 1916; labourer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁴² L-Cpl A. J. Helm; Waipiata; born Dunedin, 6 Mar 1915; labourer; twice wounded; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁴³ Pte G. A. Cations; Temuka; born Timaru, 16 Jul 1917; farmhand; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.

⁴⁴ Pte S. C. R. Newman; born NZ 27 Jul 1918; bush worker; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

⁴⁵ Pte T. M. Ferguson; born NZ 20 Apr 1908; civil servant; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

⁴⁶ Pte E. H. Price; born NZ 21 Mar 1919; labourer; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

⁴⁷ Pte A. L. Jansen; born NZ 22 Apr 1913; farmhand.

⁴⁸ Pte W. E. Heaps; born NZ 8 May 1917; clerk; died of wounds 30 Nov 1941.

⁴⁹ Pte H. L. G. Hambling; Nelson; born Westport, 13 Dec 1916; draughtsman.

⁵⁰ L-Sgt J. K. Brown; born NZ 16 Aug 1918; motor mechanic; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

⁵¹ Cpl F. L. Dudman; Mangakino; born England, 11 Dec 1909; mental hospital attendant.

⁵² Maj P. B. Levy, m.i.d.; born Wellington, 1 Aug 1906; advertising agent; died of wounds 24 Jul 1942.

⁵³ S-Sgt T. G. Hull; Wellington; born Wellington, 26 Mar 1909; public accountant.

⁵⁴ Pte D. L. Campbell; born NZ 28 Oct 1916; grocery manager; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁵⁵ Pte T. F. Twistleton; born Gisborne, 14 Sep 1914; farmer; died of wounds 27 Nov 1941.

⁵⁶ Sgt T. C. Smith; Whakatane; born Whangara, 1 Dec 1917; clerk; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁵⁷ Pte A. E. Friend; Masterton; born NZ 22 Feb 1917; clerk; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁵⁸ Pte A. W. P. Winterburn; Waitara; born NZ 13 Apr 1907; casual labourer; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

⁵⁹ L-Sgt P. H. Tritt; born NZ 7 Mar 1917; clerk; wounded 2 Jul 1942; killed in action 4 Sep 1942.

⁶⁰ This light reconnaissance plane had been flying low over 4 Bde for some time and had provoked much small-arms fire. The ack-ack gunners claimed they had shot it down.

⁶¹ Cpl P. A. McCahill; Auckland; born County Donegal, 31 Mar 1911; prison warden; wounded 24 Nov 1941.

⁶² Sgt L. S. Pye, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Temuka, 28 Mar 1911; farm labourer.

⁶³ Pte T. R. Hawkins; born Waimate, 7 Oct 1917; motor driver; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

⁶⁴ Pte J. Boyle; born NZ 26 Mar 1910; grocer's assistant; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

⁶⁵ Pte R. N. Gobbe; born Christchurch, 25 Nov 1918; book binder; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

⁶⁶ Cpl W. Andrew; Hamilton; born Reefton, 19 Sep 1917; clerk; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

⁶⁷ Pte K. R. Connolly; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 3 Oct 1908; clerk;

wounded 28 Nov 1941.

⁶⁸ Lt-Col A. R. Currie, DSO, OBE; Wellington; born Napier, 12 Nov 1910; military engineer; OC 8 Fd Coy Oct 1940–Jul 1942; comd and chief instructor Eighth Army School of Minefield Clearance 1942; CO NZE Trg Depot 1943; OC 7 Fd Coy Jul–Nov 1943; three times wounded; Director Fortifications and Works, Army HQ, 1946–49; Director RNZE 1949–51; Chief Engineer NZ Army 1951-.

⁶⁹ Capt R. J. Mason, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Timaru, 13 Jan 1909; motor electrician.

⁷⁰ Pte G. C. Coull; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 21 Dec 1914; shop assistant; p.w. 29 Nov 1941; escaped 6 Dec 1941.

⁷¹ Four or five two-pounders of 65 A-Tk Regt RA were with 6 Bde at Sidi Rezegh.

⁷² Probably between 40 and 50.

⁷³ Pte J. Mackenzie; Masterton; born NZ 6 Jul 1906; casual labourer; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

⁷⁴ The machine-gunners captured at Sidi Rezegh were taken to Benghazi and on 8 Dec sailed with a large draft of prisoners in the Jantzen, an Italian cargo ship. The following afternoon, while near the south-west coast of Greece, the ship was struck by a torpedo in one of the forward holds. Five hundred or more of the prisoners (including 44 New Zealanders) were killed by the explosion and the falling debris, or died while trying to get ashore. Sgt D. A. McClintock and Pte E. A. Brightwell, who were among the last to leave the hold, helped in rescuing the injured. The Italian captain and crew took themselves off in the lifeboats, but a German naval engineer brought the ship in stern first and beached her.

⁷⁵ Later the whole Div Arty, probably 70–80 guns, fired for five minutes on Pt 175, which was very quiet for some time afterwards.

⁷⁶ Maj G. C. Weston, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born New Plymouth, 18 Nov 1916; student; SC 6 Bde 1941–42; BM 6 Bde 1942; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁷⁷ L-Cpl J. A. Butler; Timaru; born NZ 7 Jan 1907; service station attendant.

⁷⁸ Lt L. C. Macartney; New Plymouth; born Wanganui, 3 Dec 1911; farmer.

⁷⁹ Lt G. L. Lee, MC; born England, 2 Feb 1908; farmer; died of wounds 2 Jan 1942.

⁸⁰ Maj H. S. C. Woolcott; born Auckland, 29 May 1909; civil engineer; OC 6 Fd Coy 1941; wounded 1 Dec 1941; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

⁸¹ Maj T. H. Bevan, DSO, m.i.d.; born London, 27 May 1909; builder; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

⁸² Pte E. S. Gibb; Timaru; born NZ 23 Mar 1913; newspaper runner; wounded 1 Dec 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 7 – SIDI AZEIZ AND GAZALA

CHAPTER 7

Sidi Azeiz and Gazala

While 2 and 3 Companies endured with 4 and 6 Brigades the severity of the fighting south-east of Tobruk, where for a few days the New Zealanders carried the main burden of Eighth Army's offensive, the rest of the machine-gun battalion shared 5 Brigade's fortunes at the frontier.

The 22nd Battalion, which replaced the 20th at Menastir on 23 November, had 4 Company's twelve Vickers among its supporting weapons.¹ One rifle company and some anti-tank guns were astride the Tobruk- Bardia road, and the remainder of the battalion group on the high ground to the south. Major White had placed two machine-gun platoons on the escarpment, 10 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Rose² covering the road towards Bardia, and 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Frazer) covering it towards Tobruk, 'both being able to engage targets almost from their gun muzzles to extreme range.' The third platoon, 12 (Sergeant Merfield³ was in reserve 'on wheels' half a mile from the top of the escarpment.

White had visited Rose's platoon, and together with his driver (Private Tong) and the CSM (Sergeant-Major Booker), was setting out for the reserve platoon about seven o'clock next morning when a force estimated to be two companies of Germans suddenly attacked from the direction of Bardia. 'Just about the time we left Mr. Rose,' White writes, 'there were an odd rifle shot or two but nobody took much notice. We walked on passing odd groups of men preparing breakfast, fires going merrily. Then we saw a long line of men emerge from some widely scattered derelict vehicles up on the escarpment towards Bardia—right in the sun and right on our flank. One of Lt Rose's sections, Sgt Butler's,⁴ started to fire.... It was Jerry all right. He opened up evidently firing light automatics while on the move and almost at once mortar fire commenced too. Things were a bit hectic and confused for a while but my mind was made up immediately—I wanted that Res Pl in action as soon as I could....'

While Tong dropped behind a mound to fire his rifle, the OC and the CSM made dashes to a group of infantry, the shelter of a truck, and a Bren carrier. 'And then off again. There were bullets singing past galore, many of them tracer, and mortar shells seemed to be landing regularly ... somewhere about where Lt Rose would be I

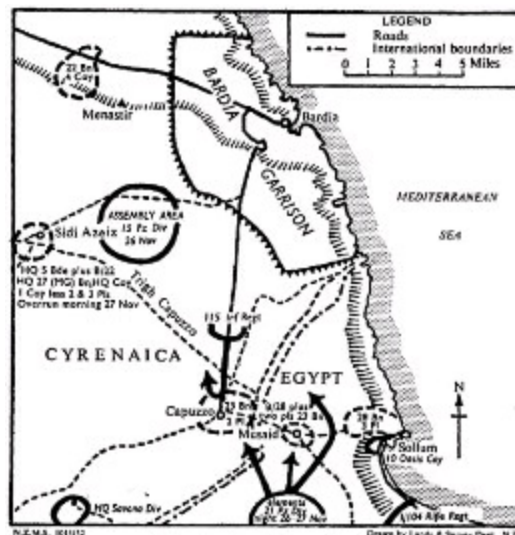
calculated. I remember thinking "I'll never get through this" and having a sort of itch in my right shoulder and thinking "I'll catch it in the shoulder" over and over again.... And then I got it but it was in the right leg....'

[Booker](#), who was running ten or fifteen yards ahead, went back to drag the wounded officer to the comparative safety of a truck. 'I could hear my MGs firing away,' White recalls, 'so I told the Sgt Mjr to go to Coy HQ to make sure they were in shape to help in the defence.' By this time 12 Platoon was helping to repel the attackers. 'The Res Pl did a real good piece of work. They brought two guns into action where they were and two [under Staff-Sergeant Stanley, the CQMS] went round the Artillery who were further out in the desert with no Infantry at all. These two guns came into action from well on the flank of the enemy attack. It was sound MG tactics executed on the spur of the moment, carried out fearlessly and swiftly under fire.... The Artillery got into action very promptly too, firing over open sights....'

The skirmish was over in half an hour. The enemy was driven off after inflicting only five casualties. [Booker](#), who had not hesitated in the face of fire, was awarded the MM.

At [Sidi Azeiz 5 Brigade](#) Headquarters group, which included Headquarters 27 (MG) Battalion, Headquarters Company and 1 Company less 2 and 3 Platoons, comprised almost as many vehicles as men and was not well equipped to withstand attack. Until a company arrived from 22 Battalion in the evening of 25 November, the only infantry was the Defence Platoon. Four 25-pounders arrived the same night. There were three 18- pounder and four two-pounder anti-tank guns, three Bofors ack-ack guns, and 1 Platoon's four Vickers. Divisional Cavalry, based on [Sidi Azeiz](#), patrolled between [Menastir](#) and [Capuzzo](#).

The machine guns provided close protection for the artillery. Brigadier Hargest ordered them to close in 'as he did not



5 Brigade, 26–27 November 1941

have enough artillery to defend a large area,' says Major Wright. 'He seemed deeply sensible to vulnerability from armour. The country was one of rock, sand and scrub with a couple of water holes and a 'drome in a slight hollow.' Captain [Crafts](#)⁵ (OC 1 Company) 'was not pleased with the posn of the 4 guns around the Bde Gp but ... could not find suitable sites which were not already spoilt by Tpt and elements of other Units....' Two guns were at the north-west corner of the perimeter, and two at the south-west corner, near the airfield.

The whole of [27 Battalion's](#) reserve ammunition, 90,000 rounds, had been sent out to the companies. The Quarter-master (Lieutenant [Williams](#)⁶ left on the morning of the 25th with a column of vehicles to get ammunition from a field supply depot, but 'found the Germans in possession of it,' says Wright, 'so he came back and that explains the shortage of ammo.'

In the half dark of early morning on 26 November a German convoy blundered into the laager. A Divisional Cavalry detachment and an 18-pounder opened fire and knocked out a staff car containing two doctors. Some trucks were captured, and fifty British troops whom the Germans had taken prisoner not long before were released. Later a huge enemy force was seen travelling from the west and south towards [Bardia](#). Long columns of vehicles passed between [Sidi Azeiz](#) and [Menastir](#), and between [Sidi Azeiz](#) and [Capuzzo](#) 'pouring by like a flood, leaving my little garrison a lonely rock in the middle of a swollen river,' Brigadier Hargest later wrote.⁷

This procession of vehicles, estimated to total 3000, continued throughout the

day. They were discouraged from coming too close to Brigade Headquarters by the artillery—which was exasperatingly short of ammunition—and the other defending weapons.

'It was a very busy day for us,' says Corporal Millar, of 1 Platoon. 'Occasionally one of the 25-pounders or the 18- pounders would open fire at the distant transport when they perhaps got a little closer, and perhaps I would fire too—we got no orders from higher up so we just used our discretion....

'Late in the afternoon a hun car, looking as if it wished to commit suicide, drove right up to 700 yards of our guns, trailing a gun behind it.... we all opened fire almost simultaneously— the car stopped and the three occupants threw themselves to the ground where they were hidden by the low scrub a few inches high. The third shot from the 18 pounder which was a few yards from our guns was a direct hit on the car—great flames and columns of smoke everywhere.... the Jerries were all badly burned and two died later.... The car burned for half the night....'

The movement of German transport ceased before nightfall, but there was still the danger that the enemy, having obtained what he wanted at [Bardia](#), might return next day and overwhelm the little force at [Sidi Azeiz](#). Brigadier Hargest, at a conference in the evening, discussed moving the Brigade Headquarters group to [Menastir](#). 'No definite arrangements were made,' says the Staff Captain (Captain [Mason](#)⁸). 'Simply discussed possibility of moving to join [22 Bn](#) and they were of course warned of the possibility and everyone warned to be ready to move at short notice.' But the Brigadier intended to stay.

Captain Hains, who now commanded 4 Company, had finished going around his gun positions at [Menastir](#) that evening when the CO 22 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew) told him that he had just had a telephone conversation with the Brigadier about the contemplated move. 'I had to go round my coy again warning them that the Bde HQ were coming through on certain lines. They had to be careful not to shoot up the convoy. I had just returned and gone to bed when I was called out to a conference ... Lt-Col Andrew said he had had another message from the Brig who would not be coming over as previously arranged. So on foot as usual went round my coy for a third time.'

The eight 25-pounders and 3 Platoon's four Vickers with the [Maori Battalion](#) at the [Sollum](#) barracks were too few and did not have sufficient ammunition to take full advantage of the magnificent view their commanding position gave of lower [Sollum](#) and across the bay to [Halfaya](#) pass. Sergeant Cato's men did not have enough long-range Mark VIIIZ ammunition, and the Mark VII could not reach the wadis below [Halfaya](#) where troops moving about and innumerable vehicles could be seen. Corporal Davidson's ⁹ section, on the right flank, had an arc of fire towards [Halfaya](#); Corporal Gardiner's, ¹⁰ on the left, occupied an old fort overlooking [Sollum](#) village, where the machine-gunners could do some useful shooting, especially when the artillery shelled the buildings in which the enemy was holding out near the pier; they could also snipe at men moving between scattered houses and sheds.

The large enemy guns at [Halfaya](#) and nearer the sea continued to shell upper [Sollum](#), but fortunately many shells failed to explode. Early on 26 November the 25-pounders, mortars and Vickers 'gave [Sollum](#) a pasting to let them know we were still in position.' The enemy shelling reached its heaviest about 4 p.m. that day. In less than a quarter of an hour probably 200 shells were fired into 3 Platoon's area without doing any harm. The troops at upper [Sollum](#) did not know at the time that this bombardment was paving the way for an enemy advance through [Musaid](#) (half-way between [Sollum](#) and [Capuzzo](#)) towards [Bardia](#).

Enemy activity was reported on all sides of 23 Battalion at [Capuzzo](#), and late in the afternoon almost simultaneous attacks developed from two directions. The force coming from the direction of [Halfaya](#) was severely rebuffed at Fort [Musaid](#) by a small group of Maoris and men of 23 Battalion. A whole German battalion attacking from the north or north-east was held off by a single infantry platoon and a section of machine guns.

The foremost platoon of A Company 23 Battalion (8 Platoon), supported by Corporal Mack's ¹¹ section of 2 Platoon, a two-pounder anti-tank gun and two three-inch mortars, was three miles from [Capuzzo](#) on the road to [Bardia](#). About 4 p.m. the enemy approached in several columns of vehicles led by a half-tracked troop-carrier. After firing at least a couple of shots, the two-pounder, still en portée, had to withdraw for cover, but it must have been chiefly responsible for halting the tracked vehicle. The other transport came on until the Vickers fire forced the enemy to

debus, probably less than 1600 yards away. Both the Vickers and the mortars, whose first shot hit a truck, did damage among the enemy, who brought his own mortars and guns into action.

Shortly after dark, when enemy machine guns had reached positions about 20 yards to the rear of each flank, 8 Platoon was ordered to withdraw, but this order may not have arrived in time, or perhaps did not reach the forward rifle sections, which instead of pulling out counter-attacked with the bayonet and drove the Germans back before being overwhelmed.¹² In this gallant action twenty-three men of 8 Platoon were killed or captured; only six, several of them wounded, escaped.

The two mortars were too hot to move and were left behind after vital parts had been removed. Corporal Brown's¹³ Vickers gun, assisted by fire from the other under Mack, was taken back to the transport, where it engaged the enemy to cover Mack's withdrawal. The No. 1 gunner (Private McGovern¹⁴) knocked out a spandau not more than 50 feet behind Mack's gun, which nevertheless was surrounded and could not be moved. Mack and Privates Harrison,¹⁵ Baker¹⁶ and Hoggard¹⁷ remained with it and gave covering fire while the rest of the force withdrew to prepared positions at Fort Capuzzo. They kept their gun working until further resistance was impossible, and then rendered it useless by removing vital parts. 'Until such time as we were completely cut off,' says Mack, 'I did not feel free to make any decisions regarding pulling out completely.'

The four men stayed near a disabled I tank until it was almost dark, when they hid under the tank. Twice German transport was brought up close and then retired. The men were not detected and sneaked away when the moon set. On the way back they encountered a German light armoured vehicle. 'It was moving straight towards us.... we sighted it first & just had time to stop together facing inwards in a kneeling position.... our hope was to make a last-second evasive action when really close & out of the line of sight of the crew. At about twelve feet this became unnecessary when we were ourselves sighted & (mistaken for some battle debris) neatly semi-circum- navigated.' They reached the fort before dawn.

The other section of 2 Platoon, which had also assisted in beating off the enemy, mounted its guns on trucks, and accompanied by two Bren carriers, was guided forward by Mack to retrieve his gun, the two mortars and a large quantity of

ammunition. The Vickers gun was reassembled, overhauled and put back into position covering the [Bardia](#) road.

Mack was awarded the MM. Undoubtedly his two guns, especially during the early stages of the attack, had done much to prevent the Germans from reaching the main defences of [Capuzzo](#).

At [Sidi Azeiz](#) the Brigade Headquarters group spent an uncomfortable, bitterly cold night, with enemy flares rising and falling in almost every direction. No enemy could be seen when the troops stood to early on the morning of 27 November, but while the machine-gunners were preparing to have breakfast—which was left untouched—the rumble of tanks could be heard in the distance. 'It sounded like the sea in a storm, or hundreds of aeroplanes flying overhead,' wrote Private [Friar](#).¹⁸ 'Stood to guns and about half an hour later the Div Cav, which had been out to reconnoitre, came back and tooled off smartly. We did not know what was in store but expected an attack.'

Divisional Cavalry had reported to Brigadier Hargest that forty enemy tanks were approaching from the direction of [Bardia](#), and had been ordered to get clear because its light tanks and carriers would be no match for the German heavy armour. The four 25-pounders, handful of anti-tank and ack-ack guns, four Vickers guns, and few platoons of infantry who remained were certainly no match for the force that now threatened them. Most of the defending weapons faced to the west. Captain Crafts 'had a look around the Gun Posns and found all pits manned and ready, but realized that we were on the wrong side of the square to get much of a chance.' The enemy came from the east.

Millar says 'we could see nothing because the noise came from behind a ridge a short distance away. The sun was just rising from behind this ridge. The morning was suddenly made hideous by the scream of shells soaring through the air and the noise of their exploding. It took no time to realise that the huns were attacking us from behind the ridge.... we were in a nice way being unable to use my section's guns as the attack was to the rear and we could only fire through our own chaps and through our own transport which was parked all in a bunch in the centre. Also, there was no enemy to be seen. So I decided that there was only one thing to do for the time-being, and that was to protect ourselves as much as we could. I honestly

cannot imagine how any bombardment could be heavier than that. They were using heavy artillery, great mortars and machine guns firing explosive bullets. For an hour and a half it was hell-on-earth....

'The crews of the few artillery guns did really magnificent work keeping on firing with absolutely no protection for themselves, but I think all the guns or their crews stopped direct hits pretty soon.... A few yards from the hole we were in was the 18-pounder which they had managed to turn about and they were doing great work keeping it in action. Just the moment a large truck drove up to it with ammunition, there was a "whoof" as a shell landed direct on the back of it. The huns must have been watching it all the time. Of course it was a huge mass of flames immediately. One brave chap tried to extinguish it with a fire-extinguisher.... It was completely impossible to do anything with those roaring flames. And it was due to explode any moment so we could not very well stay where we were...'

Millar and another man took one of the machine guns to a hole where several men were sheltering and 'were extremely unpopular bringing a gun like the Vickers amongst them.' But the hole was too small, so they made a dash to a larger and deeper one. 'We got the gun mounted with the muzzle just pointing over the edge.... but it would have been taking a needless risk to fire on the tanks for our bullets would have just bounced off. We waited for their infantry which never came....

'Finally the tanks began to move round either side of us and also right through the centre of the Brigade. It was pretty evident that the day was almost lost, so we hugged the ground in the hope that the Jerries would be in a hurry to leave the locality and might miss us altogether....' A tank stopped alongside and Millar and his companions were taken prisoner.

'We,' wrote Friar, 'were herded together like sheep by the Hun infantry who had not been used at all but had come in riding on the back of armoured cars; disarmed, put in lines, searched, and told to wait. What else could we do with machine-guns trained on us?

'By this time the tanks had moved on and the recce plane had gone from the aerodrome after the pilot had flown low over us and (presumably) taken photos. The ground staff was captured.

'Quite a number of the Jerries that we saw were wearing the Iron Cross. They did not treat us unreasonably.... General Rommel was with the tanks. I saw him myself talking to Brig. Hargest....'

Lance-Corporal [Norman](#)¹⁹ noticed that some of the Germans were very young. 'I doubt if they had ever shaved—they looked to me to be about 17 years old.' Private [Budd](#)²⁰ saw that 'scrappy looking, unshaven Jerries' were keen to get gloves (sometimes issued to the No. 1 of gun teams and usually to drivers), and 'too short and too long' underpants, which they eagerly donned; they were also ravenously hungry, and 'wolfed down contents of tins of bacon, paper and all, off our captured Q. Master's trucks.'

It seemed to Millar that the Germans had spared as many of the light trucks as they could; 1 Platoon's six trucks were all unharmed except for a few shrapnel holes. But most of the three-tonners were in flames, and 'enormous columns of black smoke poured from everywhere.... Unless you had actually seen it you would hardly credit that some of these trucks could be so mangled by direct hits....'

In this brief, violent action probably 40-odd New Zealanders had been killed and fifty wounded, most of them artillerymen; no machine-gunners had been killed, but several had been wounded, among them Lieutenant Williams and Regimental Quartermaster-Sergeant [Featherstone](#)²¹ and the LAD officer (Second-Lieutenant [Stubbs](#)²²). Among the forty officers and 650 other ranks captured were the whole of Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Company, and all except two platoons of 1 Company.

Within an hour of conquering [Sidi Azeiz](#) the German armour was well on its way westwards—towards [Sidi Rezegh](#)—leaving the prisoners in the hands of a small detachment of motor cyclists and infantry. The captives were formed up into a long column, and starting at 1 p.m., marched 16 or 17 miles to [Bardia](#).

'The march proved to be a hard one,' wrote Friar. 'Chaps with heavy packs and blankets did it hard, as we had no water, and many of the Brigade HQ were not used to much marching. Quite a lot of gear was soon being dumped by the roadside at the stops....'

'Almost at dusk we passed through the wire of [Bardia](#)'s perimeter defence, and a couple of miles inside were told to bed down for the night on the open desert. The chaps asked for water, and a German officer ... told us we should have it, but that we must go another 3 kilos. After about an hour we moved on, in the light of the moon, and with grey clouds scudding across the sky. At each halt the chaps practically fell to the ground, where they lay until the Hun guards yelled, "Auf! Aus!"—whatever that may be; "Up! On!" I expect. Then they staggered on.... The temptation to just sit down by the roadside and let the guards do their worst was almost overpowering at times....

'About 9 p.m. we reached a walled area apparently built on or around an old rubbish dump. There we were herded inside, finding that the water which had been there had all been used and spilt long since....' A German guard gave Friar and several others 'a mouthful of cold coffee ... and it was like nectar of the Gods.'

Rommel had been present at the capture of [Sidi Azeiz](#). Later in the day he watched an attack which he intended should clear the New Zealanders from [Capuzzo](#) and [Sollum](#) and drive them back towards [Halfaya](#) Pass. This operation, in which he took such a personal interest, ended in utter failure.

At [Capuzzo](#) 23 Battalion came under heavy shellfire about midday. A hostile force, estimated to be a battalion with light tanks, armoured troop-carriers and anti-tank guns, advanced from the south-west two or three hours later. The 25-pounders and anti-tank guns scored hits on vehicles, setting some of them on fire, which forced the enemy to debus; but he still came on. The infantry and 2 Platoon were soon very busy. Second-Lieutenant Pleasants says his Vickers 'managed to get in quite a lot of good shooting, and considerable damage was done.'

The attackers showed determination and closed in on one of the weakest points of 23 Battalion's perimeter, where men of Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company, acting as a rifle company, were greatly hampered by the many vehicles in the area. The Germans found cover among the lorries and took prisoner some sixty drivers and B Echelon men, whose presence was a handicap to the defence. Spontaneous bayonet charges by several small parties, however, regained some ground.

A Vickers gun (under Corporal [Watson](#)²³) on the flank where the attack came was in danger of being overrun by a tank. 'The tank was destroyed within 10 yds of the gun pit by an A T Gun,' says Pleasants. 'Cpl Watson's brother was in the crew of the A T Gun which did the deed.' Three machine-gunners 'found it necessary' to join in a bayonet charge, in which Lance-Corporal [Dougall](#)²⁴ was killed and Private B. B. Carter seriously wounded. This action enabled the threatened Vickers gun team to get away.

Realising the urgency of delivering a message for the withdrawal, Private B. H. [Carter](#),²⁵ brother of the wounded man, rode his motor cycle across the disputed ground. It would have been much safer on foot.

All four guns of 2 Platoon were brought back behind A Company 23 Battalion, which formed up and went forward in a bayonet charge. Only sufficient gunners to keep the weapons working were left behind to give supporting overhead fire; the remainder joined the yelling, charging infantry, who put the Germans to flight. A section taken forward to assist in holding the regained positions found that the counter-attack had been pressed beyond any real need of machine-gun assistance.

As darkness fell 23 Battalion reorganised its position to rectify the weakness the German attack had revealed. Two Vickers were left to cover the [Bardia](#) road, and the other two taken to the southern side of the fort; they were dug in during the night.

The total New Zealand casualties in this engagement (including the two in 2 Platoon) were about fifty killed and wounded, but German losses were at least three times that number. The Germans released the captive drivers.

The destruction and capture of Brigade Headquarters was seen from [Menastir](#), about six miles away. 'At first we could see the spirited defence of the doomed group and thought they had managed to see Jerry off,' says Frazer; 'then one by one their vehicles were brewed up and finally we could see the enemy tanks moving in and out among them. Wireless communication ceased.'

In the afternoon of the 27th the enemy attacked 22 Battalion from the direction of [Bardia](#) with artillery, mortars, machine guns and small arms, but was driven off by four 25-pounders and 4 Company's Vickers. A runner from 12 Platoon reported to

Frazer that enemy infantry was moving up on that platoon behind a heavy mortar barrage and was threatening its right section; Sergeant Merfield sought permission to withdraw the guns of this section to a position where they would have infantry protection. Leaving Sergeant Petrie ²⁶ in charge of 11 Platoon (whose guns, facing north and west, could not take part), Frazer, with Sergeant Knox, ²⁷ 'went to have a look ... we walked 400–500 yards through a thickening concentration of enemy mortar and machine-gun fire. First we came to the gun trucks of 12 Platoon, one of them ablaze and one with its tyres torn flat. Then we found the Right Section and thankfully dropped into a gun-pit each, with the gunners.

'Around us was a grey-black forest of exploding mortar bombs; the smoke and dust made observation difficult. Jerry infantry could be seen moving towards us in a shallow wadi from which he was unable or unwilling to get any further. 12 Platoon guns stayed where they were and had some good shooting, just over the near edge of the wadi, where we reckoned Jerry would be concentrating to come over at us, and a good target on the far side of the wadi; ranges from 300 to 1000 yards. The enemy was obliged to break off the action at dusk. That night 12 Platoon was moved back to a less exposed position, with infantry protection.'

Next day a party from 22 Battalion went to [Sidi Azeiz](#) to look for survivors and to salvage any equipment that had not been destroyed. They were greeted by 27 (MG) Battalion's MO (Captain [Adams](#) ²⁸) and padre ([Michael Underhill](#) ²⁹), who had attached themselves to a New Zealand field ambulance company to help tend the wounded. 'We were overjoyed to see them,' says Frazer, 'and for the rest of the campaign Captain Adams lived and travelled, a welcome guest, on my pick-up. In the burnt-out wreckage of [Sidi Azeiz](#) we located the positions of 1 Platoon's guns and salvaged from them and two of our burnt-out armoured cars a considerable number of parts, although the guns themselves were smashed and useless.'

The troops at [Menastir](#) were isolated. Repeated attempts to open communications with other units failed. Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew called a conference of company commanders and the officers commanding the supporting weapons to consider the situation. 'We were out of touch with everybody, had little water, little ammo and no rations since Bde HQ had gone in the bag,' says Captain Hains. 'Choice: (1) stay (2) join the other Bns and re-form.' During the night of 28–29 November, therefore, 22 Battalion left [Menastir](#) to make contact with 4 Indian

Division in the [Sidi Omar](#) area, and next day took up a position at [Musaid](#).

After a reconnaissance Colonel Andrew, now acting commander of [5 Brigade](#), put 4 Company into Fort [Musaid](#) (with a front of 360 degrees) and gave Hains orders to tie up on fixed lines with 3 Platoon at [Sollum](#) and 2 Platoon at [Capuzzo](#). This was done, and the company stayed at [Musaid](#), 'subjected to regular sessions of shelling from [Halfaya](#).' Some of these shells were duds.

Major [Greville](#),³⁰ acting CO 22 Battalion, decided to deny the enemy use of a water hole between [Musaid](#) and [Halfaya](#) which was also being used by the New Zealanders. He despatched a rifle company, supported by 11 Platoon, to lie in wait. They opened fire when the enemy arrived, but to their surprise mortars retaliated. 'The infantry were saved from a sticky position by the drivers of the MG trucks who went in and picked them up,' says Hains. 'Result: Nobody could use the water hole.'

'All our mob, NZ, South Africans and Indians are fighting private battles all over [Libya](#),' Private Bell (of 3 Platoon, at Upper [Sollum](#)) wrote in his diary on 27 November. 'We are cut off, the Germans are cut off, everything is ruddy well cut off.... I wish Wavell was running this show.'

Rommel's armoured columns did not attack the troops at Upper [Sollum](#), although several hundred vehicles supported by tanks passed less than two miles away. 'We were heavily shelled from [Halfaya](#) during enemy's move across our front,' reported Sergeant Cato. One Vickers gun under Corporal [Millar](#)³¹ had moved out to Beacon Point; Corporal Gardiner had taken another to strengthen the right flank, where Corporal Davidson had his section; a captured Vickers, reconditioned by Private [Dunphy](#),³² had also been put into position. 'Those in [lower] [Sollum](#) must be fairly sick of things by this time as they cannot make the slightest move without Cpl. Millar or Cpl. Gardiner giving them something to try and dodge.'

Nevertheless, when Davidson's section, together with the artillery and mortars, supported a raid by a platoon of Maoris on the pier and some sheds in [Sollum](#), the 'Attack was not successful. Enemy in [Sollum](#) fired two red flares which was apparently the signal for all the arty in area to open up and they effectively kept us quiet for some time.'

A launch was seen entering the bay early on the morning of the 29th. When it was well within range a burst of machine-gun fire seemed to put it out of control. A few minutes later it attempted to continue on its course, but a long burst of fire made it turn and head out to sea. Later, when the periscope of a submarine was seen a few hundred yards offshore, a couple of machine guns and a mortar opened fire on it, and it soon disappeared in the direction of [Bardia](#).

The machine-gunners at [Sollum](#) did not know until three days afterwards that their battalion and company headquarters had been captured. 'Have not had any messages from brigade nor do my messages seem to be getting through,' reported Cato on the 29th; but next day he 'heard from German radio that Bde HQ has been captured.' The platoon supplemented its rations with 'scme excellent enemy tinned vegetables and French pork,' but had to put up with very salty water.

Patrols sent out from [Capuzzo](#)—usually a section of carriers, a section of Vickers and some anti-tank guns—roamed well afield and seldom failed to capture vehicles and prisoners; they also helped to keep 2 Platoon supplied with rations at a time when none were drawn from 23 Battalion. 'Rations and water generally were scarce ... for a while after Rommel had captured Brigade HQ no stores could be drawn,' says Pleasants. One foraging party found a German water cart which had been abandoned by the enemy after the engagement on the 27th. 'This was a most welcome gift as, when the pipe-line was cut by the Infantry at [Capuzzo](#), the Germans had soon woken up to the fact and cut off the supplies of fresh water.'

Rommel's armoured forces had returned to the [Tobruk](#) sector. Shortly the remnants of 4 and 6 Brigades, driven off Sidi Rezegh and [Belhamed](#), were to retire from the battlefield. But [5 Brigade](#) Group, including 4 Company and the two platoons of 1 Company, was to stay. On 1 December this brigade was relieved by 5 Indian Brigade in the [Sollum- Capuzzo](#) area and moved to [Menastir](#), to resume the role of cutting off [Bardia](#) from the west.

While 11 and 12 Platoons returned with 22 Battalion to its former position on the escarpment south of the [Tobruk- Bardia](#) road, 10 Platoon joined Divisional Cavalry, which was to patrol westwards; 2 Platoon, with 23 Battalion, went into position across the road roughly north of the 22nd, and 3 Platoon, with the Maoris, across the road a mile or two farther west.

'The machine gunners [2 Platoon] with the carriers of the 23rd and an anti-tank troop ... had moved forward in advance of the Infantry,' says Pleasants. 'They had overrun their original objective but had halted on the top of a ridge as darkness fell. Whilst "milling around" wondering whether to go back and join the infantry a member of the carrier platoon came back with a Leica Camera which he claimed to have found in the wadi just below.... there was a general mad rush into the gully and the only troops who remained by the guns were a member of the anti-tank troop who had dislocated his shoulder ... and two machine gunners who were, at that stage of the proceedings, fairly ill and desired only peace and rest. The wadi yielded some good loot—our boys getting into what had once been a German Post Office.... Whilst this "raid" was proceeding, two enemy trucks and seven Germans drove in through the assembled carriers, anti-tank and machine guns and they were captured by the resourcefulness of the three sick men who had been left behind ... these men claim that they thought it was our own transport ... had they known that it was the Germans, they say nothing in the world would have prevented them joining their comrades in the wadi beyond.'

The platoon subsequently dug in with its guns covering the ground towards [Bardia](#). The carriers and machine guns patrolled towards [Bardia](#) and along the coast. Patrols were pushed right up to the wire of the [Bardia](#) perimeter, and on one occasion 2 Platoon captured seven Italians who claimed they had been walking eastwards for three days in an attempt to reach the fortress.

'The Huns did not always know that we were covering the road to and from [Bardia](#),' says Hains. 'Every day there was the odd fellow who thought the road was clear. We got 2 Staff Cars, 2 Motor Cyclists.... Just a picnic—an open season.'

A patrol made up of a squadron of Divisional Cavalry (10 Platoon attached) and a company of Maoris (a section of 3 Platoon attached), reconnoitring some miles to the west, gave ample warning on 3 December of a large enemy column coming along the road from the direction of [Tobruk](#). Fifth Brigade held its fire as long as possible. From a vantage point on the escarpment Hains saw the long line of closely packed vehicles come on until, about midday, the head of the column was a very short distance from the [Maori Battalion](#). The enemy stopped. 'They must have sensed that something was wrong. Then the anti tank guns opened up and the first

ten or so vehicles burst into flame and smoke. It looked as if each gun crew had been given its particular target—only about 200 yards away! The Huns were out of the vehicles back along the column and out into the open.... The crack of the anti tank guns acted like a signal. The 25 pdrs opened up and I ordered my MMGs to fire ... 28 Bn across the track at right angles to the road added to the fire and the MG pl with them was mowing down the Huns who were bolting from the trucks...' At this stage only one section of 3 Platoon was with the Maoris, but soon the other, returning from the patrol, took its guns into position under fire.

Hains saw a Very light signal go up farther back along the column, and five minutes later German guns opened fire from a position farther back still. The enemy could not easily locate the troops astride the road, but could see the vehicles on the escarpment and at the foot of it. 'And the shells came at us,' says Hains. The machine-gunners could observe almost every move the Germans made, and had the range to reach them. 'It was a target from an MMG textbook—an MMG paradise. The escarpment was about 100 ft high and with my telephone I was able to direct the fire very nicely. The Arty would be doing the same.' About 5 p.m. the Maoris, under smoke and covered by fire from 3 Platoon, routed the enemy with a bayonet charge. The Vickers had excellent targets at 2000 yards when the Germans bunched and ran.

Estimates of enemy casualties vary, but according to 3 Platoon's report six officers and 146 men, all Germans, were taken prisoner, and 259 dead 'were in front of our lines.'³³ The rough handling this column received apparently discouraged the enemy from making any further efforts to link up with his garrison at [Bardia](#). Fifth Brigade had less than a dozen casualties. Corporal G. McC. Millar, of 3 Platoon, had been killed.

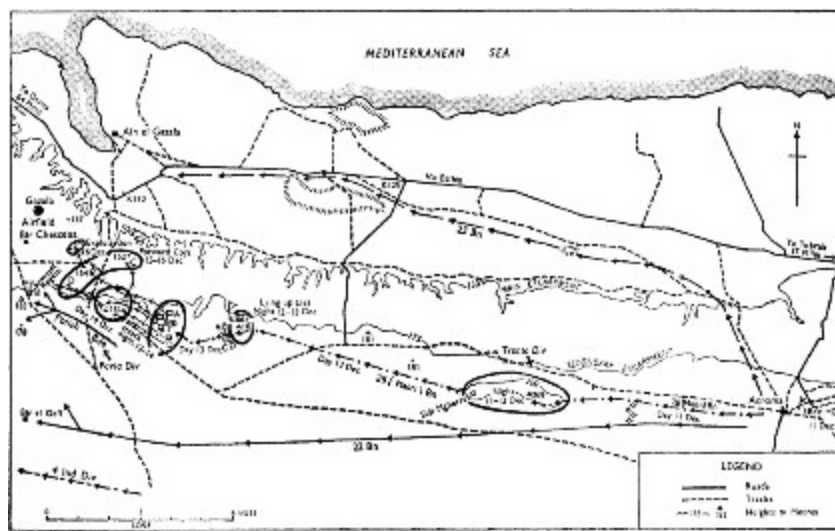
Fifth Brigade returned to the [Sollum- Musaid- Capuzzo](#) line on 4 December to relieve 5 Indian Brigade, which was needed in the [Tobruk](#) sector. With the exception of 10 Platoon, which remained with Divisional Cavalry, the machine-gunners returned to their previous positions. During this move the New Zealanders were shelled by the Indian artillery, which apparently had not been warned who they were. Several vehicles were hit, and 'accelerators were soon hard on the floor boards.'

Apart from exchanges of shellfire the next few days were quiet. On the 8th

preparations were made for an attack on lower [Sollum](#), with supporting fire from the artillery, mortars and machine guns. 'Everything was ready ... when the order came to pack up,' says Cato. Early next morning the Maori Battalion and its supporting arms left [Sollum](#) to join the remainder of the brigade at [Sidi Azeiz](#). Fifth Brigade, now commanded by Brigadier [Wilder](#),³⁴ was to be ready to take part in operations west of [Tobruk](#).

By this time the battle was going well for [Eighth Army](#): Sidi Rezegh had been captured (once again), [El Adem](#) had been taken, the siege of [Tobruk](#) had been raised, and the Axis Army was withdrawing towards [Gazala](#).

Fifth Brigade, each battalion travelling as a group with its own supporting arms, drove westwards along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#)



The advance to Gazala, 11-16 December 1941

The advance to [Gazala](#), 11–16 December 1941

to Bir el Hariga, northwards from there to the [Tobruk- Bardia](#) road, and then westwards again along the main road to Sidi Bu Amud, where the [Tobruk](#) bypass road joins the main road.

With orders to gain touch with the enemy and reconnoitre the [Gazala](#) defences, the brigade left Sidi Bu Amud in the early hours of the 11th, made slow progress along the bypass road—which was reported to be mined on both sides—through El Adem to [Acroma](#) (where the 22nd stayed in reserve) and continued the westward advance with 23 Battalion on the [Tobruk- Derna](#) road and 28 Battalion on a track

from [Acroma](#).

On the main road 23 Battalion came under shellfire, but captured the ridge [Mengar el Hosci](#), repulsed a counter-attack, and collected 250 Italian prisoners. The machine-gunners (2 Platoon) did not get an opportunity to do any shooting.

The men of 3 Platoon were cooking a late breakfast (at 10 a.m.) when a despatch rider arrived with the 'usual Maori Bn order "Get ready to fight". On trucks and the Bn drove off at what was terrific speed for a convoy in desert formation,' says Cato. About an hour later they came under artillery, anti-tank and mortar fire, but 'did not even waver' the trucks reached the foot of Point 209, wheeled half-left, and took cover in a wadi below the feature. They were within 100 yards of an artillery battery and at least twenty anti-tank guns. The Maoris debussed immediately, and advancing with fixed bayonets, took 200 prisoners on the spot.

The machine guns went into action on a ridge to the right, 'a full platoon shoot completely dominating the situation. Our right section put the second battery of arty out of action. At this stage we were heavily dive-bombed by ... Stukas.' Supported by artillery and the machine guns—3 Platoon fired 13,500 rounds—a platoon of Maoris went forward and captured an astonishingly large number of Italians. At dusk the enemy fell back towards [Gazala](#), abandoning a large quantity of equipment, including many anti-tank guns, French 75-millimetre guns, and machine guns. The 1123 prisoners included thirty-six officers. The Maoris had sixteen casualties.

Next day [5 Brigade](#), continuing the advance on a three-battalion front, met shellfire but no infantry opposition. By evening 23 Battalion, still astride the main road, held command of the [Gazala](#) landing grounds and the coastal country to within three or four miles of the small bay at [Gazala](#); [28 Battalion](#), on the escarpment running east and west a few miles inland, was a mile or two beyond Sidi Mgherreb; 22 Battalion, brought forward from [Acroma](#) to the vicinity of [Bu Allusc](#), on the left flank, was about ten miles south of [Gazala](#).

Little real progress was made on 13 December. The 23rd was shelled in the positions it had reached the previous day; the Maoris, advancing towards a strongpoint (Point 181), were halted by shellfire after going a couple of miles; the 22nd also came up against strong shellfire, but one of its companies, supported by

twelve I tanks, artillery and 10 Platoon, overran a strongpoint (Point 194) and took a hundred prisoners and some guns without loss.

About 3 a.m. on the 14th the Maoris, going forward again under the cover of an artillery barrage, met anti-tank, mortar and machine-gun fire, and closed in with fixed bayonets and hand grenades. Little more than an hour later 3 Platoon helped consolidate. Three rifle companies occupied positions in the vicinity of Point 181; the fourth (B Company), going farther forward, was cut off by fierce machine-gun fire, but beat off two counter-attacks with the assistance of Gardiner's section which had gone into position under fire. B Company's commander (Captain [Royal](#)³⁵), who was wounded, later sent a message from the advanced dressing station to thank the machine-gunners, whom he said saved his company when it was 'in a very sticky position.'

At the cost of thirty casualties the [Maori Battalion](#) captured 380 prisoners and many weapons of various kinds. The Italians had dug themselves in well, with their 75-millimetre anti-tank guns and machine guns as close to ground level as possible and camouflaged with wire netting, scrim and natural vegetation.

The New Zealanders were now up against the [Gazala Box](#), which was believed to be occupied by three Italian divisions. High ground farther south, at [Alem Hamza](#), was held by Germans whom the Indian Division, on [5 Brigade's](#) left, so far had been unable to dislodge, and still farther south attempts by [7 Armoured Division](#) to get around the enemy's inland flank had been frustrated by a screen of mobile anti-tank guns.

Thirteenth Corps, which was conducting the fighting west of [Tobruk](#), was to strike a 'hard blow', with the armour directed on a wide encircling movement around the southern flank to cut off the enemy's retreat, while the Indian Division, with tank support, attacked [Alem Hamza](#), and [5 Brigade](#), reinforced by a Polish brigade, cleared the [Gazala Box](#).

The Poles arrived in the afternoon of the 14th and were wedged in between 22 and 28 Battalions. Plans were formulated for an attack the following afternoon by two Polish battalions and the Maoris, supported by all possible fire from 22 Battalion on the Poles' left flank and by a demonstration by 23 Battalion on the Maoris' right.

The Maoris were given three objectives north-east of [Carmuset er-Regem](#), each to be taken by a company, and were to be supported by artillery, mortars and two machine-gun platoons.

Expecting the attack to start at zero hour (3 p.m.) 22 Battalion put down a heavy artillery barrage, but the Poles did not get away until half an hour later, by which time the enemy had been alerted. The Poles nevertheless attacked with great spirit and reached [Carmuset er-Regem](#), and in support 10 Platoon 'despite heavy shelling ... did great work.'

The Maoris got away on time. D Company, clearing pockets of resistance as it went, advanced along the top of the escarpment and made contact with the Poles at [Carmuset er-Regem](#) on the left. Gardiner's section (3 Platoon) almost completely exhausted its ammunition while giving covering fire, but received replenishment by Bren carrier. D Company was then relieved by the Poles and withdrew to Point 181, Gardiner's section going back with it.

Davidson's section (3 Platoon) and Sergeant Homer'³⁶ section (11 Platoon) supported A Company, which advanced swiftly over flat ground to Point 154. The four Vickers did excellent work keeping the Italians down until the Maoris were within seventy yards of them; about a company was captured. Sergeant Cross's³⁷ section (11 Platoon) also kept the Italian infantry down while C Company advanced towards Point 152, but mortar and machine-gun fire caused casualties among the Maoris, who were brought to a halt after taking the first line of trenches. Part of B Company (in reserve) was sent to assist C Company, and together they mopped up the whole position.

'During the covering shoot,' says Cato, 'the six guns [those supporting A, B, and C Companies] together were on a hundred yard front and ... had the majority of the terrific enemy arty barrages. The men were great, keeping their guns going throughout the whole show.' An attempt was made to get a section forward to C Company in two Bren carriers, but they were driven back and one carrier had a track blown off. The men and equipment returned undamaged. Later four guns were taken forward in three carriers and two trucks. Cross took his section to help A Company consolidate at Point 154. Major [Dyer](#),³⁸ [CO 28 Battalion](#), reports that 'Sgt Cross of the machine gunners here behaved heroically, maintaining the defence and

succouring the wounded during the day' ³⁹

By nightfall, therefore, the **Maori Battalion** was on all three objectives and had taken a hundred prisoners, but had suffered about fifty casualties. In the south, in the **Alem Hamza** area, the Indian Division had repulsed a counter-attack by forty tanks strongly supported by artillery and infantry, and there had been severe casualties on both sides. Meanwhile, on the southern front, the British armour had been making slow progress in difficult country for tanks.

A counter-attack against **5 Brigade** seemed imminent early in the morning of the 16th. Brigade Headquarters warned 22 and 28 Battalions that 'Arty report 800 enemy forming up Bir Chesceua....' But this concentration was broken up by intense artillery and machine-gun fire. The four Vickers with B and C Companies **28 Battalion** took a heavy toll; an artillery officer observing close to the Italian lines in a tank afterwards told Cato that the enemy was 'mown down ... it was one of the best sights of the war.'

Two platoons of Maoris, with some assistance from 22 Battalion, launched an attack on Point 137 (north of Point 154), but were halted about three-quarters of a mile from Point 154 by withering anti-tank, mortar and machine-gun fire. Sixteen men were killed and 30-odd wounded. The survivors dug in and held on to the ground they had won. 'We spent all we could of our ammo trying to cover them and they may have been wiped out had not the arty stepped in,' says Cato. 'Obtained ammo in bren carrier and were firing most of the day.'

Major Dyer asked Cato if it would be possible to get two guns to B Company's left flank at night 'as the position was none too healthy. After a rather hair-raising recce in the dark [Cato] was just about to move off with the guns when the order came to stay where we were and make our positions as strong as possible. It had been decided to form a strong pocket [near Point 152] with B and C Companies because the limited number of men left was not thought to be enough to hold the extended line.' The remainder of the battalion withdrew, and Cross's section was recalled.

Elsewhere there were signs that the enemy was in retreat from the **Gazala** line. A section of 12 Platoon (which was in reserve) had been despatched in the morning

to 22 Battalion and had dug in close to one of 10 Platoon's positions, but the guns there had 'no particular action.' In the afternoon the Poles advised 22 Battalion that they had cleared the Carmuset er-Regem area; they attacked Bir en-Naghia after dark and captured a concreted position with numerous prisoners.

The enemy evacuated the whole of [Gazala](#) during the night of 16–17 December. 'Dawn came with everybody expecting a large scale attack on our small pocket,' wrote Cato. 'We were amazed to discover that the enemy had retreated ... the last of an R.A.P. post pulling out while we watched at first light. The heavy casualties inflicted on the preceding day by arty and M.M.G. must have been at least one of the factors which made the enemy decide to withdraw. [Gazala Ridge](#), one of the enemy's strongest points, was thus invested by us without another shot being fired.'

C Company [28 Battalion](#) was ordered to go forward in the morning to secure the crossroads on the [Gazala- Derna](#) road (north of Point 152) but would not have been able to get there by the time stipulated, so some machine-gunners were sent instead. Cato set off with a section in a captured enemy truck driven by a Maori. 'Arrived at position which was three miles from our starting point only to meet a Polish recce party (one of whom spoke English, luckily) who informed us that the enemy had left hurriedly some time before. Sent a message back to Bn; and after an hour was given the order to withdraw and join Bn. On return journey discovered that we had, in our outward journey, passed through an extensive minefield on one of the two tracks.'

Bren carriers from 23 Battalion, accompanied by 2 Platoon and some anti-tank guns, advanced rapidly along the main road and rounded up many prisoners. 'It was just a hunt,' says Pleasants. 'Advanced 13 miles and trail of retreating Italians. ... Pte [Walker](#)⁴⁰ and Pte Carter distinguished themselves by capturing over 100 prisoners whilst investigating a promising looking wadi.... Pl Sgt [[Crispin's](#)⁴¹] truck lost for 2 hours in dump of enemy stores.... Besides the usual assortment of army necessities, this dump contained large quantities of food, including sweets, and opportunity was taken to replenish our supplies....'

And that ended [5 Brigade's](#) part in the reconquest of [Cyrenaica](#). The enemy went back to [El Agheila](#), followed by all the troops [Eighth Army](#) could keep in motion and supply over such long distances. On 18 December [5 Brigade](#), having assembled

in the vicinity of Bir el-Geff, about ten miles south of [Gazala](#), handed over its transport to the Guards Brigade, and received with disappointment the news that it was not to see the campaign to its end. Other transport arrived and five days later the New Zealand brigade left on the return journey to [Baggush](#). Captain Hains obtained Brigadier Wilder's permission for 4 Company and the two platoons of 1 Company, which still had their own vehicles, to return independently. On the way they were joined at [El Adem](#) by the CO (Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam) and Captain Robbie, and the latter took command of the two platoons of 1 Company.

The Axis Army still held out at the Egyptian frontier. [Bardia](#) was not captured until 2 January 1942, [Sollum](#) three days later, and [Halfaya](#), the last stronghold to fall, not until the 17th; these fortresses yielded over 13,000 German and Italian prisoners, and at [Bardia](#) more than 1100 British troops, about 700 of them New Zealanders, were released from captivity. Among them were most of the machine-gunners who had been captured with Headquarters [5 Brigade](#) at [Sidi Azeiz](#).

When these men arrived at [Bardia](#) on 27 November they were herded into a small, walled compound, but during the next day or two were moved to a slightly larger enclosure, where they spent the remainder of their captivity. The officers ⁴² were separated from the men and put in a stone-floored, iron-roofed building, where they stayed until taken to [Italy](#) by submarine.

'The new compound,' wrote Private Friar, 'was about 60 yards by 80 yards ... with a 5–6 ft. stone wall enclosing it.... The sea was quite close, but lay at the bottom of a steep cliff, and a very keen breeze continually swept the compound, veering from point to point because of the deep gullies about, so that it was difficult to get any protection from it. There was absolutely no shelter for the men.

'Sanitary arrangements were of the poorest. A trench, too wide to be comfortable, served as a latrine, and users had to crouch on the edge and cling to the rougher parts of the wall—a very precarious proceeding....' After a couple of days the trench was full. 'The chaps emptied straw into it, burned the straw, filled the trench, and got a number of half-drums with a pole along—these to be emptied daily—a much better system.'

The prisoners were given coffee—'without milk or sugar, and really only

coloured hot water'—in the morning, a very small quantity of unsweetened, boiled macaroni and bread at lunch time, and coffee again at night. Soon they were very hungry and 'would willingly have given almost any money for food.' But they were confident that they would be released. Friar's diary continues:

'1 Dec.... Men starting to feel the cold as lack of food begins to tell. Paving of the terraces torn up as the men try to make holes to protect them from the wind at night. The few who have ground-sheets make tents or covers for the holes.... Italian officer very irate about his terraces ... made the chaps fill in the holes they had dug, but they will only dig them out again later.

'2 Dec.... Only one blanket per man allowed. Those with more to hand the surplus into a pool so that everyone has a blanket....

'3 Dec.... Shower of rain during the day but not for long. Put on our greatcoats and put blankets up under them to keep them dry....

'4 Dec. Shower of rain during the night. Folded our blankets and sat on them to keep them dry, then back to bed when the rain stopped.

'5 Dec.... Shiver through every night. Getting sore hips through sleeping on the rocks.

'6 Dec. Everyone getting very weak. Almost fainted when I got up. Giddy whenever I move suddenly....'

RAF bombing of the harbour and other targets raised the prisoners' hopes of an early release, but towards the end of the second week of December this activity died down. On the morning of the 15th a hospital ship, the Aquelia, entered the harbour. 'We were told that we would be taken off by her, and packed our few belongings,' Friar wrote. 'Later told that RAP patients, Hun and British wounded, and 300 fit men would be taken. Names balloted and called out. Suspense of waiting. Not chosen....'

Corporal I. G. Millar's name was amongst those read out. 'Very soon,' he says, 'they had us marching down the steep road to the harbour.... Down at the wharf we had to wait and while we stood there the fat German captain came up and began questioning the chaps, asking how many were sick. Of course he got the answer that we were all perfectly well... Nothing happened and then to our great joy the head of

the column started wheeling about. The captain had refused to take the risk of breaking international law by taking us in a hospital ship.... It is a fact that while a lot of our chaps had found it difficult to walk downhill to the port as they were weak, going back we almost ran up that long steep hill, so great was our joy....' But not all of them returned. Several machine-gunners were among those taken aboard the Aquelia, which left for [Italy](#) that night.

On Christmas Day the slogan 'out for Christmas' became 'out for New Year'; but most of the men were still confident, if impatient. By this time biscuits had replaced the bread ration.

Between seventy and eighty aircraft passed over [Bardia](#) on 29 December, and 115 next day. 'Early morning [artillery] barrage very heavy,' says Friar's diary on the 31st. 'Began at 4 a.m. and continued unbroken until after 7 a.m. Rolled and crashed and flashed and fluttered and crumped and banged. Great doings, making the heart leap up. Machine-gun and mortar fire to add to our joy. It seems as though the big event is really under way at last.... [Air Force](#) very busy. Bombs landing along the escarpment without much resistance from the Hun Ack-Ack, even from the big AA guns.

'In the afternoon tanks followed by infantry and preceded by retiring Jerries came over the ridge, but [Bardia](#) Bill got among them and they retired out of sight again. Boys very pleased and saying "Out tomorrow"....

'1 Jan 42. Quiet day. Very strange. Cannot understand why the activity died away when we thought things looked so well yesterday....

'2 Jan. Shellfire all night kept us awake. Shells whining over our compound and bursting very close to the compound walls. Spent and live shrapnel coming straight amongst us, but nobody hurt. Very fortunate. One piece landed on the roof of our dug-out.

'At 2 a.m. fires began to burn all about us. Could see Huns with torches going from place to place lighting anything useful. Boys very cheerful—certain that the Jerries are about to throw it in.

'About 6 o'clock news that [Bardia](#) had surrendered, but warned not to leave the

compound until our troops had completed the job. It would be hard luck to stop one now. About 7.30 the guns ceased firing close to us, though there were other parts where shells were still landing. Guards on the gate had their rifles slung, but bolts open and nothing in the magazine. They can't feel too happy about things.

'About 8 o'clock the first Bren carriers and armoured cars came along the road. South Africans and our own Div. Cav. ...'

The South Africans wanted to give the released prisoners 'everything they had in the way of food ... even their own Xmas cakes and parcels and cigarettes,' says Millar. Next day they 'took us in trucks away from Bardia for good. That night they brought us to ... Sidi Omar where they had a large dump. They could hardly do enough for us here and what a feed we had.' The New Zealanders were taken in RASC transport to the railhead near Bir el Thalata, and then by train right back to 'dear old Maadi'.

In the crusader campaign Eighth Army won its first victory (13,000 Germans and 20,000 Italians killed, wounded or captured), but at no small cost. The New Zealand Division, with 1079 dead, 1699 wounded and 2042 captured, suffered over a quarter of the total (17,704) British casualties. The 27th (MG) Battalion, sections of which had taken part in almost every engagement, lost two officers and twenty-one other ranks killed or died of wounds, two officers and forty-five other ranks wounded, and ten officers (mostly from Battalion Headquarters) and twenty-seven other ranks captured, a total of 107.

¹ 2 Pl, which had been with 22 Bn before it left Sidi Azeiz, was now with 23 Bn at Capuzzo.

² Capt J. F. M. Rose; Palmerston North; born Wellington, 10 Oct 1908; accountant; wounded 8 May 1943.

³ Sgt S. B. Merfield; Auckland; born NZ, 30 Sep 1911; reporter; wounded Mar 1943.

⁴ Sgt K. G. Butler; born NZ 6 Jun 1912; laboratory assistant.

⁵ Capt R. I. Crafts, ED; Palmerston North; born Gisborne, 2 Aug 1909; mercery and clothing buyer; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; now Regular soldier.

⁶ Capt R. P. Williams; Balmoral Military Camp, Timaru; born Dunedin, 13 Apr 1908; brewery worker; wounded and p.w. 27 Nov 1941; now Regular soldier.

⁷ Farewell Campo 12, p. 16. This enemy force was 15 Pz Div, which was making for Bardia to replenish petrol and other supplies. Meanwhile 21 Pz Div had crossed the frontier into Egypt, and after 5 Pz Regt's disastrous encounters near Sidi Omar, remnants were approaching Bardia from Halfaya.

⁸ Capt W. W. Mason, MC; London; born Wellington, 21 Mar 1910; schoolmaster; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

⁹ Cpl R. S. Davidson; Wanganui; born NZ 29 Oct 1908; clerk.

¹⁰ Lt J. R. Gardiner, m.i.d.; Te Kuiti; born Wellington, 8 Dec 1920; riding school proprietor; p.w. 28 Jun 1942; escaped 13 Nov 1942.

¹¹ WO II R. J. G. Mack, MM; Papakura; born NZ 3 Apr 1917; hospital orderly.

¹² The Germans were I Bn 115 Inf Regt (reinforced before dark by II Bn) of 15 Pz Div. The divisional war diary says: '... bitter close-range fighting with bayonets and hand grenades took place. In one place the enemy [8 PI] made a penetration but was stopped by 2 light infantry guns. ...' The Germans reported that only three or four MG nests barred them from entering Fort Capuzzo and asked for 'a few tanks to be brought up to engage the MGs'. But the attackers had not reached the main defences of Capuzzo when they were ordered to break off the engagement.

¹³ Sgt F. Brown; born England, 15 May 1911; labourer; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

¹⁴ 2 Lt D. P. McGovern; Karapiro; born Te Awamutu, 6 Apr 1917; farmer.

¹⁵ Cpl J. G. Harrison, m.i.d.; Henderson; born England, 2 Dec 1910; gardener.

¹⁶ Pte C. A. Baker; born Whitianga, 14 Apr 1917; millhand.

¹⁷ Cpl D. F. Hoggard; born NZ 22 Nov 1917; labourer; twice wounded.

¹⁸ Pte W. A. Friar; born NZ 5 Aug 1914; school-teacher; died of wounds 27 Jun 1942.

¹⁹ L-Cpl W. R. Norman; Rotorua; born Hamilton, 26 May 1910; clerk and driver.

²⁰ Pte J. E. N. Budd; Dunedin; born South Africa, 30 Jun 1905; aircraft hand; wounded 23 Feb 1944.

²¹ WO II R. E. E. Featherstone; Waiuku; born Sydney, 25 Sep 1914; clerk; wounded and p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped 1 Dec 1941.

²² Capt F. H. Stubbs; Invercargill; born Gisborne, 14 Sep 1914; merchant; wounded and p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

²³ Sgt R. C. Watson, m.i.d.; Patumahoe; born Ireland, 1 Mar 1920; steel worker; wounded 23 Sep 1944.

²⁴ L-Cpl J. Dougal; born Hastings, 14 Apr 1913; shipping clerk; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

²⁵ Pte B. H. Carter; born Auckland, 23 Apr 1916; signal erector; accidentally killed 6 Jul 1944.

²⁶ Lt J. E. Petrie; born [Auckland](#), 20 Jan 1916; salesman.

²⁷ Sgt G. I. Knox, MM; born NZ 10 Nov 1914; coal merchant; killed in action 22 Apr 1943.

²⁸ Maj A. B. Adams; [Auckland](#); born [Wellington](#), 20 Apr 1914; medical practitioner; OC NZ Adv Base Camp Hosp.

²⁹ Rev M. L. Underhill, m.i.d.; [Carlisle](#), England; born [Glasgow](#), 28 May 1910; clerk in holy orders; senior chaplain [Maadi](#) Camp 1943.

³⁰ Lt-Col A. W. Greville, m.i.d.; born NZ 5 Aug 1897; Regular soldier; comd Advance Party 2 NZEF1939; DAQMG 1940–41; CO 24 Bn Dec 1941–Jul 1942; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

³¹ Cpl G. McC. Millar; born [Glasgow](#), 7 Aug 1907; forest worker; killed in action 2 Dec 1941.

³² Sgt B. J. Dunphy; [Te Kuiti](#); born NZ 18 Mar 1917; farmhand.

³³ The enemy column was Geissler Advance Guard (not Knabe Column as some believed). A German report describes 'a withering fire from HMGs [which upgraded the Vickers], mortars and A Tk guns in well-concealed positions on the escarpment on our right, and shellfire from at least 4 batteries.'

³⁴ Maj-Gen A. S. Wilder, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Order of the White Eagle (Serb); [Te Hau](#), [Waipukurau](#); born NZ 24 May 1890; sheepfarmer; Wgtn Mtd Rifles 1914–19; CO 25 Bn May 1940–Sep 1941; comd NZ Trg Gp, [Maadi](#) Camp, Sep–Dec 1941, Jan–Feb 1942; 5 Bde 6 Dec 1941–17 Jan 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Apr 1942–Jan 1943; 1 Div Jan–Nov 1943.

³⁵ Maj R. Royal, MC and bar; [Wellington](#); born [Levin](#), 23 Aug 1897; civil servant; served in Maori Bn in First World War; 28 (Maori) Bn 1940–41; comd Maori Trg Unit, [Rotorua](#), 1942–43; CO 2 Maori Bn May–Jun 1943;

wounded 14 Dec 1941.

³⁶ Sgt M. Homer; born NZ 23 Apr 1912; clerk; killed in action 16 Dec 1942.

³⁷ Capt M. W. Cross, MM; Palmerston North; born Balclutha, 16 Apr 1917; farmer; patrol commander LRDG 1943–44; OC Recce Gp 20 Armd Regt 1944–45.

³⁸ Lt-Col H. G. Dyer, m.i.d.; Onerahi, Whangarei; born Hamilton, 7 Mar 1896; school-teacher; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1941–May 1942; comd 9 Inf Bde 1943.

³⁹ In a report on the Gazala operations Maj Dyer wrote: 'It is perhaps unfair to mention special units, but the machine gunners were an unfailing support to us. From Lt MacDonald, who voluntarily stayed back with the rearguard at Maleme, to Sgt Cross at Point 154, we had always found them brave, efficient and tireless in their duties, we thought their Vickers gun the best infantry supporting weapon in the world.'

⁴⁰ Pte R. Walker; Auckland; born Brisbane, 25 Dec 1910; plasterer.

⁴¹ Lt H. A. Crispin, ED, EM; Auckland; born Ohaewai, 5 Jan 1922; vulcaniser.

⁴² Those from 27 (MG) Bn were Maj P. W. Wright, Capts M. H. Sheriff, R. C. Bradshaw, R. I. Crafts, Lts E. A. Hunter, C. R. Lee, J. J. Abernethy, R. P. Williams and O. Somerset-Smith.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 8 – THE BEKAA VALLEY

CHAPTER 8

The Bekaa Valley

Christmas 1941, like the previous Christmas, was spent at [Baggush](#), and a Patriotic Fund parcel, a bottle of beer and fifty cigarettes for each man helped to make a good day of it. When [General Freyberg](#) arrived during the dinner (poultry, fresh vegetables and all the trimmings) to say a few words of good cheer, one of the sergeants, fortified by the beer, gravely rose to make a carefully articulated reply, concluding with the offer of a noggin, which the General accepted.

If Christmas Day was a success, New Year's Eve was a triumph. Captured enemy flares and Italian hand grenades added colour and liveliness to the celebrations, and as one thing led to another, 25-pounders, Bofors, anti-tank guns, Brens, Vickers and captured firearms were enlisted to keep the party from going stale. The whole Division participated in these high jinks and as the night wore on the illuminations resembled an engagement—so much so in fact that neighbouring Navy and [Air Force](#) units asked if the Division was being attacked.

Several men were injured. The machine-gunners' orderly-room sergeant ([McManaway](#))¹ was injured by an Italian grenade in a tender spot and for a day or two had to do his work standing up. But his real grievance was that he might be suspected in days to come of having had his back to the enemy.

By this time Colonel Gwilliam had organised a new Battalion Headquarters, and reinforcements had made up most of the battalion's losses. Two companies, 2 and 4, had returned from [Cyrenaica](#) practically unscathed, but 1 Company had to replace its headquarters, one whole platoon and much transport and equipment, and 3 Company most of its officers, many men, and equipment. The men recaptured at [Bardia](#), in need of food and rest after their five weeks of incarceration, went back to base, rest camps or hospitals for a spell.

In January 1942 the machine-gunners left [Baggush](#), 4 Company going with 5 [Brigade](#) to the Combined Operations Training Centre at [Kabrit](#), on the [Suez Canal](#); 2 Company with 4 [Brigade](#) to [Maadi](#) and later to [Kabrit](#); Battalion Headquarters and 1 Company to [Fayid](#), not far from [Kabrit](#); and (after 4 [Brigade](#)'s departure for the Canal) 3 Company with 6 [Brigade](#) to [Maadi](#).

The camps in the Canal Zone were bounded on one side by the [Bitter Lakes](#) and on the other by bare hills and escarpments; the area was congested with ordnance stores, airfields and lighter wharves. There were a few Nissen huts for administrative purposes and stores, but the troops messed and slept in dug-in tents. They practised embarking and disembarking from assault craft, and made landings before dawn on the opposite shore.

When 4 Company carried out an exercise with [5 Brigade](#) in the [Red Sea](#), guns, vehicles and men were loaded on four 'Glen' ships, which proceeded down the Canal into the Gulf of [Suez](#), where an opposed seaborne landing was practised. The assaulting troops, followed by the vehicles and guns, went ashore in daylight at [Ras el Sudr](#), on the [Sinai](#) coast, bedded down for the night, and re-embarked next day in preparation for a similar landing by night. This, however, was cancelled, and the brigade returned to the [Bitter Lakes](#).

The Red Sea exercise was actually the rehearsal for a projected landing by [5 Brigade](#) in the [Gulf of Sirte](#), in rear of the Axis Army's positions at [El Agheila](#). The operation, whatever its prospects, was never attempted. Rommel suddenly emerged from [El Agheila](#) and advanced swiftly into [Cyrenaica](#). [Eighth Army](#) occupied the [Gazala- Bir Hacheim](#) line west of [Tobruk](#) and [5 Brigade](#) was ordered back to the [Western Desert](#) to hold a strongpoint on the escarpment south of [El Adem](#), where it could cover the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) and the [El Adem](#) airfield.

The brigade group, again accompanied by 4 Company (commanded by Captain Cooper), left the Canal Zone on 11 February and was assembled at [El Adem](#) five days later. It immediately began to dig, wire and mine the [El Adem](#) Box, and also organised a mobile column, composed of a regiment of Valentine tanks, a carrier platoon, a company of infantry, a battery of 25-pounders, anti-tank and ack-ack troops, and 10 Platoon's Vickers.

Hit-and-run raids on the nearby airfield were the only hostility during the brigade's stay of nearly six weeks. Greater discomfort was caused by a rain storm which flooded men out of their beds and filled weapon pits and trenches. The brigade handed over to South African troops on 22 March, and two days later, while on the way back to [Maadi](#), ran into a dust storm which cut down visibility to about five yards and temporarily scattered the convoy. Part of 11 Platoon got 'hopelessly

lost—about 8 miles in wrong direction.... While trying to find others [we] fired spandaus, rifles, pistols, Verey lights, hooted horns, whistles, etc.,' says Corporal MacLean.² 'No success till storm—worst in my experience—had cleared.... Pitched tents and sheltered all day.'

Fourth Brigade, meanwhile, completed its training at Kabrit and 6 Brigade, after a month at Maadi, did the same: this was a tedious repetition of what many had done the previous August, but life was not altogether disagreeable. There was a good supply of beer, and units organised their own canteens. 'A veritable boon', 3 Company's canteen made a profit of £68 in just over a fortnight; 1 Company's, run by Reg Walker, was amalgamated with Battalion Headquarters' with profit to both.

Nevertheless homesickness began to spread, probably because long streams of three-tonners were seen bearing Australians to Port Tewfik, where troopships lay at anchor ready to take them home. To aggravate the complaint, news was received that because of losses in the Far East the airmail service to New Zealand was to be suspended. 'So it was not without relief,' says an officer, 'that we heard of the move to Syria.'

There had been rumours about a move to green fields for some time. Now the New Zealand Division was to join Ninth Army, which was guarding against the possibility of a south ward German advance through Syria from southern Russia or Turkey—while Eighth Army faced the more immediate threat to Egypt in the Western Desert.

The New Zealanders were to prepare defences—the Djedeide fortress—protecting the northern entrance to the Bekaa valley, between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges. The first troops left the Suez Canal towards the end of February, and the whole of the Division, except 5 Brigade, had completed the move by 12 March.

Advance parties, their trucks loaded to capacity with stores, crossed the Canal at Kantara and set off along the road across the Sinai Desert; they passed through country near Beersheba where the Anzac Mounted Division had fought the Turks in the First World War, and continued on through Palestine, past



Eastern Mediterranean

the [Sea of Galilee](#), to [Damascus](#) and their destination in the [Bekaa valley](#).

Battalion Headquarters and 1 and 2 Companies travelled with [Divisional Headquarters](#) and 4 Brigade by train from [Geneifa](#) (near [Kabrit](#)) to [Kantara](#), where they had a long, tire some wait for the Palestine train in which they reached [Haifa](#) next morning. They were then packed, twenty-five men to a vehicle, into a fleet of about fifty requisitioned civilian buses, which carried them in comfort through the Palestinian hills.

'It was a glorious morning,' writes Major Robbie. 'Every thing was so fresh and green and life took on a new aspect for us, especially after the humidity and sand of the Canal Zone ... The damp grass glistened and sparkled in the sun.... The air was keen and bracing. All around was a blaze of colour— wild flowers—red, mauve, white—grew in abundance along the roadside.' On they went through [Nazareth](#) to [Tiberias](#), along the shore of the [Sea of Galilee](#), misty and sullen, and up into the hills again. 'Still wild flowers flourished among the rocks and shingly faces along the road, dulled now by the overcast and sullen sky.' Across the frontier into [Syria](#), 'stony, wild and desolate, green in places with all the evidence of a big rainfall ... it was drizzling and very overcast and getting dark.' It was dark when they reached [Damascus](#).

After spending the night in a transit camp they passed through the city in [RASC](#) three-tonners. [Damascus](#), in a green oasis between the Anti- [Lebanon](#) foothills and the tawny Syrian desert, depends on a stream which flows from a steep, narrow gorge into the heart of the city. In this gorge in the First World War a section of

machine-gunners of the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade trapped the retreating Turks and Germans and caused great slaughter. ³ 'It must have been a machine gunner's dream target. What a place—hard, cruel and sombre.'

Out of this gorge the convoys followed a winding road west wards through the hills to [Rayak](#) in the [Bekaa valley](#), where Australians were manning an aerodrome and French airmen and troops were also seen. The New Zealanders' destination was farther north, between snow-covered mountain ramparts. The next town, [Baalbek](#), was a complete surprise: the ruins of temples, built when the valley was one of the granaries of [Rome](#), towered above the trees that obscured many of the houses.

A few miles farther along the road towards [Homs](#) the small village of [Laboue](#) perched on a ridge, and nearby was the hutted camp where Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Com pany and 1 Company were to stay. ⁴ The air is decidedly keen this is going to be good— one will thrive here. I feel very hungry....

Still farther north, at the narrowest part of the valley, was the [Djedeide](#) fortress: pillboxes, section posts, gun emplacements observation posts and dugouts within a perimeter of anti-tank ditches, wire and minefields. Its construction had already been begun but much remained to be done. Fourth Brigade was to complete the defences of the eastern sector, and [6 Brigade](#), which had not yet arrived, was to take over the western sector After a fortnight at [Zabboud](#), a small village on the western side, 2 Company moved across to [El Aine](#), in 4 Brigade's sector.

Sixth Brigade, with which 3 Company travelled, also left [Haifa](#) in civilian buses, but instead of going inland through [Tiberias](#) and [Damascus](#), took the coastal route past the Cru sader capital of [Acre](#) and the ancient Phœnician ports of [Tyre](#) and [Sidon](#), now dwindled into insignificance, to the present-day Lebanese capital of [Beirut](#); the convoys then climbed to a height of 5000 feet over the [Lebanon](#) range before descending steeply into the [Bekaa valley](#). At [Rayak](#) 3 Company changed from the buses to a train, which left shortly after midnight on the 200-mile run northwards out of the valley and through the rolling, central plains of [Syria](#) to [Aleppo](#)—a total distance of over 600 miles from [Kabrit](#).

Before occupying its sector of the [Djedeide](#) fortress [6 Brigade](#) was to watch the Turkish border, and therefore was widely dispersed to the north and west of [Aleppo](#)

to guard the most likely lines of approach for an invading army—which it could not be expected to hold in check for long; the best it might do if the enemy came would be to delay him by demolitions on the roads and railways and withdraw to the main defences to the south.

For a while the whole of 3 Company occupied barracks in [Aleppo](#), a city dominated by a citadel on a mound surrounded by a dry moat. The machine-gunners guarded petrol, ammunition and rations, and exercised with the infantry; later, for about ten days, 7 Platoon was despatched to [Idlib](#), a village between [Aleppo](#) and [Antioch](#), and 8 Platoon to [Afrine](#), farther north. New Zealand infantry and artillery, 3 Company, the [Royal Air Force](#) and Free French cavalry took part in a ceremonial march through the streets of [Aleppo](#), no doubt to impress the inhabitants, and [General Freyberg](#) took the salute from the balcony of a hotel. Shortly afterwards [6 Brigade](#), having been relieved by the 5th, went south to the [Djedeide](#) fortress. With the arrival of 3 Company at [Zabboud](#) on 11 April, and with 4 Company (after travelling with [5 Brigade](#) from Egypt) at [Laboue](#), the whole battalion was in the [Bekaa](#) valley.

When the first New Zealanders arrived in the [Bekaa valley](#) they experienced heavy rains, snow, icy winds and temperatures below freezing point. 'Issues of coke were made and almost every man ... had his little tin of coke alight at night for warmth,' says Lieutenant Pleasants. 'Once burning brightly these tins were capable of giving off a fair warmth for a considerable period. The conventional method to achieve this was to swing the tin rapidly round one's head leaving a trail of sparks which looked from a distance like hundreds of fireflies.' It was difficult to get fuel for the stoves that were introduced later to heat the Nissen huts, and the men were glad of the occasional rum issue before hurrying between the blankets at night.

By the end of March, however, the valley was enjoying mild spring weather, and in the weeks that followed the men worked and trained vigorously and cheerfully in the exhilarating mountain air; they played football on grass instead of sand and stones; they ate and slept well—their appetites could no longer be satisfied by the rations previously considered ample.

While the weather was still wintry they spent some time improving their camps by levelling paths and roads and constructing drains. When it was necessary to put

in a sump near one of the cookhouses, where the rock was close to the surface the engineers were called upon to assist and 'Porky' arrived with his henchmen—all explosive experts. All went well until the charge was fired—according to rumour 25 lbs of ammonal. Pieces of rock extensively damaged the cookhouse and showered the cookhouse stores, 50 yards away, bringing down on the cooks and orderlies the tinned food stacked on the shelves.

After getting their camps into order the troops began work on the fortress defences. Each morning the working parties were taken by truck to their allotted areas, where they dug and filled sandbags and had lunch on the job. Since much of the country around [Djedeide](#) was unsuitable for motor transport, mules were employed to carry equipment and supplies to the higher positions, and with the co-operation of a Cypriot mule pack company, men were trained in packing guns and gear. Many of the machine-gun positions were resited, and most of the concrete pillboxes already constructed were left vacant. 'We were not very enamoured with pill boxes and most of us felt better below ground level and in the open.' The engineers supplied the stores for the field works and assisted with compressors and explosives in rocky ground. 'Our demands for sandbags, steel stakes, iron and timber, etc., were colossal and we got everything we asked for, not without a little resistance and the accompany ing "blarney".'

When the men arrived in the morning they found that natives had emptied the sandbags into the trenches before removing them, and had also taken iron and timber. Pickets were mounted and patrols sent out after dark to prevent further losses. Thieves who stole army stores and rifles were seldom apprehended, and raids on villages to recover stolen arms were usually unsuccessful. But the machine-gunners' losses were not heavy. On one occasion Regimental Sergeant-Major Ross, using a revolver as bait, trapped a known trafficker in arms in [Laboue](#). The British provost handed him over to the civil authorities in [Beirut](#), but he was allowed to go unpunished.

A provost sergeant ([Aston](#) ⁵ 'tall and darkly handsome with a pencil-line moustache ... ruled the villagers of [Laboue](#) with the velvet glove.' He was immensely popular with them. One night, while returning from a patrol, he was thrown from his motor cycle and killed. The villagers sent a deputation to the battalion asking permission to bury him after their own custom and 'their sorrow was evident when

we refused their wish.' They all turned out to pay their respects when his body was taken to [Ras Baalbek](#) for burial, and a squad of French gendarmerie fired a volley.

The troops bathed in the small, icy-cold stream, the 'Canal', ⁶ which bubbles out of the rocks below [Laboue](#). 'Bathing costumes were unknown and this upset the village elders,' says Pleasants. 'The local sheik (a courtly gentleman) approached Bn HQ and pointed out it was the custom for the women of the village to do their washing and draw water from this stream. The sight of the unclad soldiers was causing the women some embarrassment. However, he hastened to add, the village was very pleased to have the soldiers with them, and did not in any way wish to interfere with their customs; so if it was a NZ custom to bathe unclad, then he and the village elders would say no more on the matter. Capt [Hume](#), ⁷ the Bn Adjt, hastened to assure him that such a practice was quite common in NZ so the old man departed satisfied.'

The Lebanese were polite and obliging people, but of course intent on making all the profit they could from the visiting troops. The streets of their villages were narrow, crooked and insanitary, and the shops small and poky, with their wares hanging from the ceiling and ranging from shoes to primuses. The local paper currency 'gave us a ton of fun for a start' : one Syrian pound was worth about 2s 3d.

The troops visited Lebanese homes, where they bargained for souvenirs, feasted and drank zibbib or arak, sometimes with disastrous results. 'Our chaps could not manage the local liquor which some of them would drink despite the fact it was forbidden and we ran a first class canteen which sold the [Beirut](#) beer and at times spirits,' says Robbie. 'I am afraid the Syrians doped their liquor for sale and the Cherry Brandy and Starboard light ⁸ looked the part and that is about all.' Two men who 'got themselves soaked for two days on Cherry Brandy' required the use of a stomach pump to save their lives. 'Doc. Adams in his wisdom had these two near corpses carried through the lines on stretchers as an awful example of what "doped" grog could do to the human frame.'

To help fill in the long evenings, [Padre Underhill](#) organised cards and talks and persuaded the Q branch to turn on supper. A play was produced. The padre had a wonderful following and there was no question of absenteeism from his church parades. 'He had a crack at times at people who occupied high places in the

Battalion.'

The machine-gunners acquired a boxing ring, which they brought to [Laboue](#) 'from a fair distance' and erected in a wadi that formed a natural amphitheatre. 'In setting it was unique, and the assembled crowd interspersed with colourfully clad natives will long live in my memory,' [McManaway](#) wrote to New Zealand. 'For some six weeks now my unit has been holding bouts every Sunday afternoon. These have proved most popular and have attracted large audiences, inclusive of the local inhabitants, who I am sure considered that we were slightly crazy.' A two-day divisional tournament, which attracted seventy-one boxers and over forty wrestlers, was watched one afternoon by [General Freyberg](#).

As spring gave way to summer and temperatures of over 100 degrees in the shade were recorded, the men worked in summer kit—topees, shirts and shorts—in the daytime; reveille was at 5 a.m., and a three-hour siesta began at noon. The shirt sleeves and the legs of the shorts (the infamous ' [Bombay](#) bloomers') had to be turned down after sunset as a precaution against mosquito bites, for malaria was a real danger. Mosquito nets and anti-mosquito cream were issued, and pickets were compelled to wear head-nets and gloves at night.

Late in May 2 Company, with 12 Platoon attached, left El Aine with 4 Brigade for several days' manœuvres in the [Qaryatein](#) area, in the desert north-east of [Damascus](#); 3 Company went out with 6 Brigade on similar exercises, and then guarded an ammunition depot between [Baalbek](#) and [Rayak](#); 1 Company, after accompanying Divisional Cavalry on a reconnaissance exercise, which proved to be mostly a gentle drive over the countryside, left [Laboue](#) to join 5 Brigade at [Aleppo](#) and two days later also went on manœuvres.

The weather was exceptionally hot, but fortunately the Euphrates was close enough for many to go bathing. Sunday, 14 June, was 'a filthy, sultry, scorching day,' a 1 Company man wrote in his diary. 'A thunderstorm passed over so we stripped off expecting a shower, but it didn't come our way.' When the troops had finished their evening meal and were about to go out on a night exercise, a signal arrived at Brigade Headquarters: 'Division moving. Return to [Baalbek](#) forthwith.'

¹ S-Sgt J. S. McManaway; born Masterton, 28 May 1905; wounded Jul 1942; died 21 Mar 1947.

² Sgt W. E. MacLean; Palmerston North; born Dunedin, 6 Mar 1908; civil servant; wounded 25 Jul 1942.

³ In *With the Machine Gunners in France and Palestine* J. H. Luxford quotes this account by Sgt M. Kirkpatrick: '... Through this narrow pass a great enemy column was seeking to escape.... A section of guns (No 4) ... reaching the brink of the precipice, quickly took up positions almost invisible to the dense mass of enemy below. The head of the column was felled, and as the unfortunates behind kept pressing forward they were mown down as by some invisible scythe. Horses and men went down together in hundreds, and died in one tangled bleeding mass; many fell into the river and were drowned. The Germans fought desperately from the tops of lorries, but, seeing not where to fire, their shots were wild, and they went down in the slaughter. The water in the jackets of the guns hissed, bubbled and steamed.'

⁴ Lt-Col Gwilliam became the town major.

⁵ Sgt G. R. Aston; born Dunedin, 9 Aug 1908; truck driver; died on active service 27 Mar 1942.

⁶ The land around Laboue, writes Michael M. Alouf in *History of Baalbek*, 'is watered by many streams, all fed by several abundant springs. ... Tradition asserts that the famous Queen Zenobia dug a canal to convey a large part of this water to her capital, Palmyra. Perhaps this is why the stream, which disappears on reaching the limits of the desert, is called El-Kanat (the Canal).'

⁷ Maj K. H. Hume; Wellington; born Hamilton, 30 Dec 1912; accountant; wounded 28 Nov 1943.

⁸ Crème de menthe.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 9 – MINQAR QAIM

CHAPTER 9

Minqar Qaim

Syria was a happy and wonderful experience,' says Major Robbie. 'The green and pleasant countryside acted like a tonic. It was the foundation upon which we were able to build the resistance to trials and tribulations that came our way later on. It was like a last family reunion, for later on many of our old friends left us, killed in action, prisoners of war, and some to return to NZ on duty.' Robbie became second-in-command when Major Grant left for New Zealand to take up an appointment in the country's expanding defence forces, and then (early in June) found himself in temporary command of the battalion when Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam went off to attend a course at [Sarafand](#) in Palestine.

On the evening of 14 June Robbie and the Adjutant (Captain [Hume](#)) were called to [Baalbek](#) and there learned that the Division was to return to Egypt. The move was to be kept secret: the fernleaf sign on vehicles was to be painted over and the troops were to remove their badges and shoulder titles. A machine-gun company was to be with each brigade group— 1 Company with the 5th, 2 Company with the 4th, and 3 Company with the 6th—and the remainder of the battalion was to be part of the Divisional Troops Group, ¹ under Robbie's command. Colonel Gwilliam was to complete his course before returning to the battalion.

Advance parties, including the company commanders, left for [Maadi](#), where they were to receive further instructions about their ultimate destination.

Fourth Brigade, the first group to go, left [El Aine](#) early on 17 June, crossed the frontier at [Merjayoun](#), and stopped overnight at [Tulkarm](#), in Palestine. Next day the towns were avoided as much as possible and 'we passed many Polish encampments & were given a great amount of oranges & grapefruit by the soldiers,' says Lieutenant Newland. After a night at [Asluj](#), near [Beersheba](#), the convoy crossed the [Sinai Desert](#) to the bank of the [Suez Canal](#) opposite [Ismailia](#), and on the 20th headed through [Cairo](#) and [Mena](#) to [Amiriya](#), where the advance party was waiting. At [Cairo](#) 'the Wogs were just the same, they knew about us coming through ... one fellow even rushed up during a traffic hold up & offered to change Syrian & Palestinian money for Egyptian.'

The convoy moved out along the [Western Desert](#) road on the 21st. 'Rumour among the men has it that we are going to [Daba](#), [Fuka](#), [Matruh](#), [Sidi Barrani](#), & even some say to [Baggush](#). ... The trip & the day lengthen as we pass [Daba](#), [Fuka](#), & even [Baggush](#), speculation is rife.... The convoy slows up, we know that there is no ration or refuelling point nearby so guess that we must be just about there.' They camped that night near Smugglers' Cove, about 12 miles short of [Mersa Matruh](#), and next day moved into barracks at [Matruh](#).

The journey, about 950 miles in excessive heat, had been long and tiresome. Blowouts had meant constant chasing after light aid detachments for tyres and tubes. 'No sooner would we get one truck under way again, after proceeding another few miles, we would find another of our trucks laid up by the roadside,' says Newland. 'To cap all this work our own truck was not to be outdone having a total of eight blow-outs....'

With [5 Brigade](#) 1 Company returned direct to [Laboue](#) from the manoeuvres and waited there until the 18th for room on the roads before setting out for Egypt. Battalion Headquarters and 4 Company followed next day with the Divisional Troops Group; 3 Company rejoined [6 Brigade](#) and on the 21st was also on the way to the [Western Desert](#).

While halted at the [Suez Canal](#) on 21 June Battalion Headquarters 'greeted with unbelieving consternation' the news that [Tobruk](#) had fallen. Two days later the convoy reached [Matruh](#). 'This day, 23rd June 1942, will always remain in my memory as a day of puzzlement and bewilderment,' says Robbie. 'We got to [Daba](#) about midday and from there on we met 8th Army coming back from the [Western Desert](#). In some places they were travelling 4 deep across the road. Trucks, guns, cars, etc, all heading helter skelter towards [Cairo](#).... what the hell were we in for now. Something was haywire. Why were we going into something that had caused this stir?'

The Division occupied [Mersa Matruh](#). The fortress had been a key point in the defence when Graziani invaded Egypt in 1940, and had been the base of the crusader offensive the following year, but when [Eighth Army](#) had stabilised the line at [Gazala](#), more than 200 miles to the west, [Matruh's](#) fortifications had been allowed to fall into decay. As soon as the New Zealanders arrived from [Syria](#) they set

to work repairing the dugouts, minefields and other defence works.

The machine-gunners dug or altered the gunpits where necessary. Lieutenant [McAneny](#)² says that his (12) platoon 'was allotted four concrete pillboxes supposedly built for Vickers MGs, but we were unable to mount our guns in them and had to dig in forward of the pillboxes.' Lieutenant Pleasants' (2 Platoon) headquarters 'was situated in one of the many old tombs in the area. Place was a massive affair about 20 ft underground. Only notable event was when German planes raided the [Naafi](#) in our rear.' The Naafi was believed to be evacuating [Matruh](#), so the New Zealanders helped, and 'fed well for a couple of days afterwards.' Lance-Corporal [Lawrie](#),³ of Headquarters 4 Company, says 'we stayed ... in old dugouts full of filth and fleas.' But they did not stay long: [General Freyberg](#) had no intention of allowing the Division to be besieged in [Matruh](#).

The Division was to operate in a mobile role in the desert to the south. There were too few vehicles to carry all the infantry, so it was decided to send back to the rear one company from each of the seven infantry battalions of 4 and 5 Brigades. Headquarters 27 (MG) Battalion, Headquarters Company and the men who were to be left out of battle were among those who also had to go; Major Robbie was told on the 24th that he and his headquarters were to leave with the LOBs that night. They reached [Amiriya](#) next morning and there met 3 Company, which had come down from [Syria](#) with [6 Brigade](#). 'We gave them all we had to spare in the way of binoculars, vehicles, compasses, and warlike stores to make up their equipment,' says Robbie. 'We set off back to [Cairo](#), I am afraid a very despondent group silent with our own thoughts of what was happening to our companies and why the powers that be thought of having LOB personnel.'⁴

The New Zealand Division was relieved by [10 Indian Division](#) at [Matruh](#) on the 25th. Fourth Brigade Group, of which 2 Company was still part, was the first to leave the fortress. The company was to have got away before 3 p.m., but because of lack of transport did not start until about eleven. 'Once again we were sadly overloaded on the few 3-tonners made available by the Bde transport or whoever was responsible for such things,' says Newland. 'We were to move ... east along the main road until we came to the [Garawla](#) junction, thence south for several miles, a journey totalling some 25 miles in all, but owing to the congestion on the main road—caused by the 5 Inf Bde Gp—we tried to move along the Smugglers' Cove Rd but

again congestion was bad so after making 7 miles we camped by the roadside till daylight.' The company was off again at 5 a.m. and reached the brigade about two hours later.

Fourth Brigade was followed from [Matruh](#) by Divisional Headquarters, [Divisional Reserve Group](#) ⁵ (which included 1 Company), and [5 Brigade](#) Group (including 4 Company). The Division dispersed at Bir el Sarahna, south of [Garawla](#), and in the afternoon of the 26th moved a few miles farther south to the escarpment in the vicinity of [Minqar Qaim](#)—the cliff (or bluff) of Qaim. ⁶ Fifth Brigade took up positions on the high ground around this feature on the western flank; Reserve Group was in the centre; 4 Brigade held the lower escarpment farther east near [Bir Abu Batta](#); and 21 Battalion was sent out as a mobile column to the south. Because much of the ground was too rocky for excavation, sangars were built for weapon pits.

At dusk about twenty-five enemy aircraft swept in from the darkening eastern sky and attacked 4 Brigade's positions. It was 'the largest raid by Hun planes—JU 52 or 88—since we were in [Greece](#),' says Newland. No casualties occurred in 2 Company, but about sixty men were killed or wounded and some vehicles were destroyed or damaged in other units.

Meanwhile 3 Company had been divorced from the Division. Captain Hains had gone on ahead to [Matruh](#) with [6 Brigade](#)'s advance party. Returning to [Amiriya](#) on the 25th he met 3 Company, which was ordered to [Matruh](#). 'These trips were real nightmares due to the general confusion on the road of heavy volume of traffic returning from the desert.' When he reached [Matruh](#) late that night he found that the New Zealand Division had gone and the Indian Division was occupying the fortress.

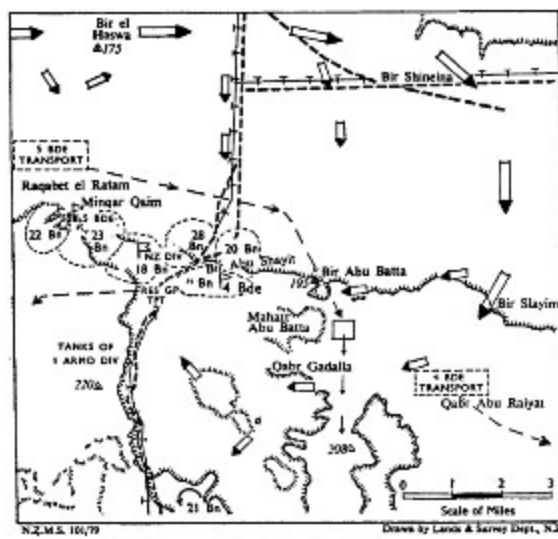
Next morning, while his company waited at [Garawla](#), Hains set out into the desert to find the Division, which he eventually located at [Minqar Qaim](#). He was told to return to [Amiriya](#). 'This was the last straw.... A few ears must have been burning that day.... This time however we did not reach [Amiriya](#)— stopped at [Daba](#)....' Hains was told to report to Brigadier Winsor, of Rear Headquarters Eighth Army, and the three machine-gun platoons were ordered to relieve guards on the nearby airfields. The Brigadier said [6 Brigade](#) would be coming to [Daba](#), and Hains therefore reconnoitred a position for the brigade, which of course did not arrive. ⁷

Early in the morning of 27 June 4 Brigade Group moved about two miles westward towards [Minqar Qaim](#) to close the gap between it and Reserve Group. The troops went on foot and the transport followed while it was still dark—in case there should be another air attack. Now in the [Bir Abu Shayit](#) area, 2 Company took up positions with 19, 20 and 28 Battalions, which gave fields of fire to the north, east and south. The troops laboured on trenches, sangars and gunpits, and the engineers laid mines, but these defences were not completed until well after dawn.

The three platoons of 1 Company were intended to deploy with the rifle companies of 18 Battalion in Reserve Group, but only 1 and 3 Platoons did so. The previous evening, when the aircraft raided 4 Brigade, the column of which 1 Company was part was halted about a mile to the north. When darkness fell it moved a few miles and stopped again. Lieutenant Pleasants (2 Platoon) tried in vain to locate Company Headquarters and find out what was happening. 'This period was to me one of complete bewilderment,' he says. 'We did NOT know where we were going or why.' The platoon bedded down for the night alongside an artillery unit, from whom it was learnt that an attack was expected at daybreak. Before dawn Pleasants moved 2 Platoon forward of the artillery positions and dug in below the lower escarpment and alongside the [Maori Battalion](#). Later in the morning, when he found Company Headquarters (which was farther back, at the foot of the main escarpment), it was decided that 2 Platoon should stay where it was.

Farther west 4 Company, on the rocky ridge above Headquarters [5 Brigade](#), was to support the infantry on the western flank; it was to cover the low ground to the north at maximum ranges and to give overhead covering fire for the infantry on the high ground to the south. Fifth Brigade's B Echelon transport was sent away because of the lack of room for it inside the position; this left 4 Company with the OC's pick-up, the CSM's truck and the twelve gun trucks.

About 8.30 a.m. a huge column of transport, shimmering in the haze and led by perhaps ten tanks, was seen five or more miles to the north, slowly advancing eastwards. Some ranging shells landed between [5 Brigade](#) and [Divisional Headquarters](#),



21 Panzer Division encircles New Zealanders at Minqar Qaim

21 Panzer Division encircles New Zealanders at Minqar Qaim

the New Zealand guns replied, and an artillery duel continued with varying intensity until late in the afternoon.

The shelling caused 5 Brigade's B Echelon transport to leave its exposed position north of the escarpment and travel at high speed eastwards across the front of the Division's defences and southwards up the escarpment near Bir Abu Batta. It was not seen again that day.

Much of the shellfire was intended for the 25-pounders, but the machine-gun positions, intentionally or otherwise, did not escape. Private Friar (1 Platoon) was mortally wounded, and several others had to be evacuated. Private Hutchison⁸ received a wound which he did not disclose and stayed with his platoon.

The day grew extremely hot and hazy; the dust raised by the shellfire and movement of transport and the smoke of burning vehicles made it difficult to see what was happening. In mid-afternoon tanks and other vehicles approached 4 Brigade from the north-east. Some of these were allowed to come within small-arms range of 20 Battalion before a very heavy fire was opened against them. Several vehicles were knocked out, and troops were seen taking cover in low scrub, from which they returned the fire, but the attack was halted and the enemy withdrew. What appeared to be another column approached from almost due east and passed to the south of 4 Brigade, which suggested that the Division was being surrounded.

Some very good shooting against lorried infantry at ranges varying from 1500 to

3000 yards—'strike observed right amongst the enemy'—was reported by 6 Platoon on the eastern flank; guarding the south as well as the east, 4 Platoon engaged observation posts and an anti-tank gun which made off quickly.

Reserve Group was shelled from the south, and towards dusk tanks approached from that direction. Corporal Gardiner says 3 Platoon was ordered to withdraw. He told his section to pack its three-ton truck and wait 'several hundred yards to the rear' while he went with Sergeant [Mason](#)⁹ to report to the commander of the troops they were supporting that they had been ordered to leave. 'We were under fairly heavy fire at this time which was probably from the tanks,' says Gardiner. 'The rear became the front and the section had an uncomfortable few minutes waiting for our return.'

Private [Binns](#),¹⁰ one of the men in the section, says the tanks 'seemed to come through the centre of our position. We made for our truck, but had to spread out and lie flat when a tank, which pierced the line and doubled back, opened up. A 25 lber put up a great duel, which no doubt saved us and our truck, two machine guns, ammo, etc.'

A troop of 25-pounders was fighting over open sights. Gardiner believes these guns 'had just been dropped there to meet the tank attack as they were not dug in.' The machine guns did not fire because they had been ordered to move. 'Further there was not a target for them unless you count tanks a target on flat open ground. I don't.' One man was wounded by a tank shell while Gardiner's section was pulling out.

'Things looked nasty as a troop of arty raced up through our position to bring anti-tank fire to bear, for there we were— trucks, 25 pdrs, arty gun crews and dozens of spare men littered over a relatively small area,' says Private [Sherrard](#),¹¹ of Headquarters 1 Company. Captain Kirk had gone to Divisional Headquarters, and Captain Howell (the second-in-command) to 1 and 3 Platoons. Sergeant-Major [White](#)¹² was taking some men to an abandoned Bofors gun when Howell returned and told him to pack up and follow him onto the escarpment. There White found both Kirk and Howell.

A number of new six-pounder anti-tank guns had arrived at the Division only

that morning; a battery of them had gone into action against the tanks, and five of the six intended for another battery (which had been too busy to change over from its two-pounders) had been moved back hurriedly out of danger. Howell saw the sixth gun on its portée, with ammunition but no crew. 'Robin [Howell] walked over to it,' says Private Lawrence,¹³ 'and it seemed to be alright so he said "this will do us". I asked him if I could go too, he said I could so I climbed aboard.'

A staff-sergeant and another man arrived, probably both from 6 Field Regiment. The latter drove the portée, while the NCO showed Howell how the gun worked. 'We drove up a rise and could see these tanks hull down and firing,' says Lawrence. 'I would say they would be about 6 hundred yards away.'

'Robin told the driver to back the Portee up to the rise, he did this and there something hit the Staff Sergeant and knocked him out. Robin then started firing at these tanks and we hit one. They were firing at us by this, you could see the dust rising off the ground in the trail of the shells that were going past the portee. I am not sure how many tanks there were but the one we hit didn't fire again. I think that in all we fired about a dozen rounds.'

'Then one of their shells hit the recuperator on the gun and [ricocheted] off.'

'Robin fired the gun again, I was feeding the shells to the gun acting as his No. 2. This shell never went off. He said what's wrong. I said it must be a dud. He ripped the breech block open and as he did so there was a terrific explosion and after the smoke had cleared away Robin was lying on the deck mortally wounded.... the 6 pounder shell had exploded on coming out of the breech....'

'Anyway with Robin mortally wounded and the Staff Sergeant out too it wasn't any use me staying there so I told the driver to drive away and we took Robin to the Field Dressing Station, on the way down the Staff Sergeant came to and seemed alright.... After that we found our way back to No. 1 Coy and I reported back to Captain Kirk, the Staff Sergeant and the other chap took the Portee and went off to find their own units.'

For his part in this action Lawrence was awarded the MM.

The field and anti-tank guns halted the German advance. 'At this time,' says

Lieutenant Rollinson ¹⁴ (1 Platoon), 'a large number of tanks loomed up on our right, heading directly for our position. In the dust and smoke haze it was impossible to identify them until they were within four or five hundred yards. We were tremendously relieved to find that they were 1 Arm'd. Div. as they wheeled right and faced the German tanks which then withdrew.... As 18 Bn. infantry were to make a counter attack ... it was necessary for us to move our guns to a position which would enable us to provide direct overhead support.' With this support the infantry captured a dozen Germans and two trucks (originally British).

About the same time as the German attack from the south, a probe came from the north against the Maori Battalion. The Maoris held their fire until the enemy was quite close, and when they opened up all four Vickers of 2 Platoon, in a good position for enfilade fire, joined in. The attack, a weak one, collapsed completely, and the Maoris made a sortie with the bayonet to take a few prisoners.

This ended the enemy's attempts to penetrate the New Zealand defences. His shelling died down and his tanks prepared to harbour. A large group of his vehicles was seen entering the re-entrant at Bir Abu Batta. The Division was now thought to be almost completely encircled; ¹⁵ its only open flank appeared to be to the south-west, where the British armour had arrived. The Division was instructed to withdraw at its own discretion. Withdrawal to the south was ruled out because the going in that direction was believed to be unsuitable, and it would take the Division too far from the fighting. It was decided, therefore, that the Division would fight its way out through the enemy known to be to the east.

Since all efforts had failed to recall 5 Brigade's troop-carrying transport, arrangements were made to pack the men on guns, portées, carriers, gun quads and every available truck. Consequently 4 Company was to carry the Brigade Defence Platoon on its already overloaded vehicles. The machine-gunners were ordered to dump everything possible, including a large quantity of ammunition. 'It was noticed,' says Lieutenant Rose, 'that the men dumped much of their personal gear in order to keep as much ammo as possible.' Headquarters 1 Company, which had been ordered to join 5 Brigade, also loaded infantry on its two three-tonners, two pick-ups and a water cart 'which ran more by good luck than anything else.' This company's three platoons moved independently with Reserve Group.

Orders were given to lift the mines so that 22 Battalion could go out safely north of the escarpment instead of travelling over the broken ground to the south. Few sappers were available, and the infantrymen and machine-gunners, who had never searched for mines in the darkness—probably had never handled them at all—had to do the job. A lane was cleared, but not completely, and several vehicles were damaged when attempting to get through. Twenty-five men in a company of the 22nd were among those killed and wounded by the explosions.

Before midnight 5 Brigade fell in behind Divisional Headquarters and Reserve Group at the rendezvous. The troops were distributed among the transport, and petrol was pooled; 4 Company gave 120 gallons to 22 Battalion's carrier platoon.

General Freyberg, who had been wounded in the neck by a shell splinter while watching the battle in the afternoon, had instructed Brigadier Inglis to take command of the Division, and the latter had handed over 4 Brigade to Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows.¹⁶ This brigade was to attack with the bayonet on a narrow front to clear the neck of high ground just south of the re-entrant at Bir Abu Batta; the transport was then to pass through the gap and pick up the infantry who had made the assault; the rest of the Division was to follow close behind. There was to be no preliminary bombardment—which would only advertise the Division's intentions. The field guns and anti-tank portées would be placed where they could protect the flanks and rear of the transport column if necessary, and 2 Company's Vickers, mounted in trucks, would also be disposed around the transport.

The start of the advance was delayed until about 1.50 a.m. by the late arrival of the Maoris. The three battalions then marched forward in the moonlight. The enemy, taken by surprise, did not open fire until the foremost attackers were almost upon him. The New Zealanders closed swiftly, and using bayonets and grenades, or firing rifles, tommy guns and Bren guns from the hip, swept through the laager and reformed on the other side. In that brief, merciless encounter they almost annihilated a German battalion.

The success signal went up; the waiting transport went forward, picked up the infantry, and sped away to the east. In the first few miles the brigade twice encountered the enemy and to avoid an engagement detoured to the south each time. The machine-gunners had been fortunate: 2 Company did not have a single

casualty in the break-out, and only one man (Private [McLean](#)¹⁷) had been wounded in the previous day's fighting.

Brigadier Inglis had grown restless over the delay in 4 Brigade's attack, for little time remained to get clear away before daybreak. He decided to get going and to take Divisional Headquarters, Reserve Group and [5 Brigade](#) around to the south of where 4 Brigade's fight was in progress.

The column moved forward a short distance and then swung to the south. After going about a mile and a half in that direction the leading vehicles stopped abruptly when confronted by a closely packed group of tanks and trucks. They had come up against [21 Panzer Division](#)'s tank laager, which opened fire with tracer missiles from tank and anti-tank guns and machine guns.

The New Zealand column presented a vulnerable, compact target of soft-skinned vehicles crowded with men. 'The firing was a bit high and unimaginative, the gunners just pumping their shells straight out,' says Lieutenant Rose. 'Had they traversed their guns at all, they would have caused terrific damage. As it was, a lot of their fire went straight down between the lines of trucks. An ambulance in the front of the column was the first to go up in flames and also a three tonner immediately behind my truck. On contact with enemy, everyone had smartly hit the ground, momentarily at a loss to know just what had happened and what to do. The order came to "whip around and get out", and we scrambled aboard and got out, picking up odd members who had lost their transport.'

Lance-Corporal Lawrie says that Major Cooper 'ordered our trucks to the front but we could not get ahead of the ambulances and enemy tank fire soon had them a mass of flames with no possible chance of rescue. Throughout this hectic period he [Cooper] had his trucks organised with orders and each man had his job to do, I being posted to sit on the pick-up turret to assist direct the driver past obstacles, but it did not matter where one sat the fiery cannon balls flew everywhere, fortunately most overhead.'

The column broke up. Some vehicles turned left; others turned right; some went back towards the north. Among those that turned right were Headquarters 4 Company and 10 Platoon. This platoon, says Rose, 'managed to stick together fairly

well and after several miles had been covered at a speed not usually carried out for night movements, a halt was called.' Rose recalls that "'Lochie" [Munro](#)¹⁸ got his truck out with a tank shell in his right front brake drum, that wheel not turning at all — [Bert Cuff](#)¹⁹ shot in the leg but said nothing about it until he fainted from loss of blood at first stop.' Lieutenant-Colonel [Glasgow](#),²⁰ the senior officer present, rallied and took charge of the party, which included field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, Bren carriers, and several hundred infantrymen as well as the machine-gunners, and led them for some distance to the south before turning east.

The rest of 4 Company (11 and 12 Platoons) went back to the north before heading eastwards. Lieutenant McAneny says that orders were passed down the line to scatter. 'There was no obligation on me to follow anyone, and even if I had attempted to do this in the darkness it would have been impossible, as I several times stopped or slowed my truck to pick up stragglers and would have lost anyone I was following.... Stopped at first light with about 26 trucks and decided on course to [El Alamein](#).'

Part of 1 Company went with the large group which turned left on encountering the tank laager. 'Orders came to turn left and go like hell,' says Sergeant-Major White. 'I was driving my truck.... I called out repeating turn left and all aboard. ...All 23 infantry plus my own crew were still on board.... I had lost sight of Capt Kirk's vehicle and the other pick up ... on my left and going like a bat out of hell trying to pass me was our broken down water cart. After a lot of yelling he pulled back into position and so we travelled the remainder of the night.'

Pleasants says that 2 Platoon's trucks kept well together 'and when a halt was called and check taken only two members of the pl were missing. No casualties had been received though bullets and shrapnel were embedded in the trucks and some of the bed rolls.' At the first organised halt the two missing men reported to the platoon; they had ridden out on a portée and the gun barrel of a six-pounder. The group was reorganised under Brigadier Inglis and resumed the march to [Alamein](#).

In the confusion of the break-out 1 Platoon became divided. 'The movement now developed into a stampede with no semblance of order,' says Rollinson. 'Everywhere trucks which had been put out of action were being abandoned and the occupants scrambling on to passing vehicles.'²¹ Finally we were through the enemy

and the going improved. Trucks travelled at great speed in an endeavour to be as far away as possible before daylight. As soon as day broke, we looked around in an endeavour to locate our other truck, but it was not in sight. We pushed on and eventually contacted our Coy. H.Q.'

Other vehicles made their way eastwards singly or in small groups. A group of about six men from Headquarters 1 Company, under Staff-Sergeant [Felton](#),²² and eight others who had been picked up earlier in the evening, had been left behind near [Minqar Qaim](#). When the word had been given to move, their three-tonner would not start. 'The switch had burnt out,' says Lawrence, who had been asleep in the back. 'After a while we got it going and then the head of the column had run into the enemy so we decided not to go that way.... it was dark and we were lucky to be on a good bit of going.'

'We went up a small rise and ran into an Indian Patrol, they weren't too sure of us and couldn't talk English but after a while Sgt Felton induced them to take us to their officer who was an Englishman. A nonchalant type, he said what's all this row going on. It was only the NZ Div breaking through the German Army about 3 miles away but it didn't seem to worry him.' He directed them towards [Daba](#). 'We left him,' says Felton, 'and immediately afterwards a column appeared through the night and I made myself known to Colonel Glasgow who instructed me to join his column.'

The missing section of 1 Platoon straggled in a day or two later. Anti-tank and machine-gun fire had punctured both rear tyres of their truck. The tyres had begun to burn, and the driver ([Donald](#) ²³) was unable to change them. Most of the infantry (from 18 Battalion) transferred to other vehicles and Sergeant [Harbutt](#) ²⁴ and Corporal McInnes, ²⁵ the senior machine-gunners, decided to abandon the vehicle and make their way on foot. They removed the locks from the Vickers guns and took water and rations from the burning truck. They planned to get as far away as possible while the darkness lasted and to lie up during the day. That morning they observed a column in the distance and one of the party investigated on a motor cycle which they had picked up. This turned out to be a small 'Jock' column with 25-pounders, anti-tank guns, Bofors, scout cars and a company of [Green Howards](#), who were carrying plentiful supplies of beer and rations. The machine-gunners were taken on by this column.

One of 3 Platoon's trucks, carrying twenty-six men, had been set on fire during the break-out. 'We flung ourselves off—fast,' wrote Private Bell. 'Trucks were passing us going like the hammers of hell.... I ran about 100 yds in the direction the convoy had been moving. I waved to several passing trucks to pick me up but no sir—they kept right on going, flat out. ... Anyhow a Bren carrier pulled up and I piled on with five others and so we rode out. To my surprise I found that four of the chaps were off our truck.' Most of the others turned up in the next day or two.

Privates [Kitto](#)²⁶ and [Wallbank](#)²⁷ were killed, which brought 1 Company's casualties to four killed, half a dozen wounded and several missing; also 1 and 3 Platoons had each lost a truck and two Vickers guns. Two men were wounded and two missing from 4 Company, which had lost two trucks and one Vickers.

Among the missing was Corporal Gardiner (3 Platoon). 'There were about 105 New Zealanders captured that night from RMT, Engs, Inf, Arty, a bit of everything I think,' he says. 'The Germans lined us up in the morning and told us the following: "You New Zealanders do not fight fair. You bayonet our wounded [a charge the captured men did not believe], so you are going to stand in the sun all day without food and only enough water to keep you alive." Luckily for us after about 4 hrs transport arrived to take us to Tobrukh and then to [Benghazi](#).'

While the other three machine-gun companies stood with the Division and then broke out from [Minqar Qaim](#), 3 Company guarded three airfields near [Daba](#). By 28 June traffic on the road had practically ceased. Lieutenant [Morgan](#)²⁸ (9 Platoon) reported that New Zealand transport was retreating eastwards in the desert to the south, and [General Freyberg](#) had left by ambulance plane from his platoon's airfield, which was about to be abandoned.

Next day British armoured cars ([12 Lancers](#)) reported an enemy column advancing along the road towards [Daba](#). A small force which included about a company of South African infantry, a few South African 25-pounders and ack-ack guns, six or eight New Zealand Bren carriers (from [6 Brigade](#)) and 3 Company, went forward about six miles to take up a position at [Sanyet Gabir](#), where the Vickers were dug in on a forward slope between the sea and the railway, 7 Platoon south of the road, 8 Platoon on the seaward side of it, and 9 Platoon farther back.

'The Brig [Winsor] assured me,' writes Lieutenant Beard²⁹ (7 Platoon), 'we would have ample warning of the German approach as [the Lancers] were still out in front of us with armoured cars and would retire through us.' Sergeant Gould (9 Platoon) recalls, however, that 'our confidence was not improved by seeing the 25 pdrs pull out followed by the Bofors at dusk; we felt as though we were being left out on the end of a branch, and everyone was ready to bolt at the drop of a hat.'

Late in the evening 'two carriers went up in flames on the railway line, and then the S.A. infantry were in action with Bren guns and grenades,' says Beard. 'It was apparent that German armoured cars or light tanks³⁰ were right amongst us. In the confusion, we fired no guns but sat tight until identification became possible.' But at least one of 8 Platoon's Vickers went into action. 'Enemy vehicles appeared on the road and later reconnoitred the sand hills in front of us,' says Lance-Corporal Clemens. 'We engaged them until it appeared we (Jack Chaffe³¹ and I) would be left behind if we did not heed the entreaties ... to embus and be off.'

Lieutenant Gumbley³² (8 Platoon) says that he and Beard 'decided that as we were not doing any good where we were the best thing we could do would be to get out.... As we were pulling out we saw a red very light go up from the direction of Daba. A pleasing sight.'

Brigadier Winsor had told the major in charge of the rearguard, whose headquarters was back towards Daba, that when he considered it was time to withdraw he was to fire a Very light. Captain Hains was alongside the major when he gave this signal.

While the rearguard was assembling near the road, the Brigadier, who apparently had heard the shooting, arrived from Daba and wanted to know who had given the order to withdraw. 'We were unable to convince him that the signal had been given,' says Gumbley. 'Tracer, obviously German, was flying everywhere,' adds Beard, 'but when I met him [the Brigadier] on the road he still disbelieved it to be hostile fire. ... After a moment or two his doubts were resolved when an enterprising German let off a burst of tracer straight up the road and it passed very close to us both.' The Brigadier said he would give the withdrawal signal, produced a Very pistol from his car, and fired two red flares straight overhead. 'Jerry appreciated this illumination and gave us the works while the flares supplied light.'

'The firing of the flare,' Gumbley continues, 'was the signal for the start of the [Daba- El Alamein](#) cross country reliability trial. There were no rules but everyone showed a marked desire to keep off the road.' One of 7 Platoon's drivers accidentally switched on his lights with his coat cuff, and the red tail light made a target for the enemy, but fortunately the shooting was high, and only one man (Lance-Corporal [Hunter](#)³³) was hit. As the trucks passed [Daba](#) they were 'nearly blown over' by the blast from a demolition, probably an ammunition dump. Enemy aircraft, with landing lights on, strafed the road.

The company camped for the remainder of the night near [El Alamein](#).

¹ Div Tps Gp: [7 A-Tk Regt](#) less three batteries, [27 \(MG\) Bn](#) less three companies, and engineers and ASC units.

² [Lt L. E. McAneny](#), MC; [New Plymouth](#); born [Wanganui](#), 12 Jun 1906; banker; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

³ [L-Cpl C. W. J. Lawrie](#); [Pukekohe](#); born [Pukekohe](#), 8 Jan 1910; accountant and secretary; wounded 18 Jul 1942.

⁴ The officers who remained with the four companies were:

[1 Coy](#)

OC: Capt G. C. Kirk

2 i/c: [Capt R. H. Howell](#)

1 Pl: [Lt C. E. Rollinson](#)

2 Pl: Lt G. B. C. Pleasants

3 Pl: Sgt C. S. Mason

[2 Coy](#)

OC: [Maj C. C. Johansen](#)

2 i/c: Lt C. A. Newland

4 Pl: Lt J. C. Evans

5 Pl: Lt W. R. Price

6 Pl: 2 Lt N. G. Blue

3 Coy

OC: Capt R. L. Hains

7 Pl: Lt D. B. Beard

8 Pl: Lt E. W. Gumbley

9 Pl: Lt L. Morgan

4 Coy

OC: Maj A. W. Cooper

10 Pl: Lt J. F. M. Rose

11 Pl: Lt K. J. Frazer

12 Pl: Lt L. E. McAneny

⁵ Div Res Gp (Lt-Col J. R. Gray): 18 Bn, 6 Fd Regt, 33 A-Tk Bty, 43 Lt AA Bty, 1 MG Coy.

⁶ The main escarpment, which rises about 100 feet from the flat country to its north, runs roughly to the west and south of [Minqar Qaim](#); a lower escarpment meets the main one at [Minqar Qaim](#) and extends eastwards beyond [Bir Abu Batta](#), where there is a re-entrant. Except on the western flank, the New Zealand positions were mostly along this lower feature.

⁷ 6 Bde was suddenly ordered to the [Kaponga Box](#) in the Alamein Line.

⁸ L-Cpl J. R. Hutchison; Rangiora; born Rangiora, 28 Jun 1915; labourer; twice wounded.

⁹ WO II C. S. Mason; [Whakatane](#); born [Masterton](#), 31 Aug 1918; packer;

wounded 3 Sep 1942. Sgt Mason commanded 3 Pl at [Minqar Qaim](#) in the absence of [Lt R. S. Brown](#), who had been evacuated sick from [Matruh](#).

¹⁰ [Pte A. L. Binns](#); [Upper Moutere](#); born [England](#), 7 Sep 1908; orchardist; p.w. 28 Jun 1942.

¹¹ [Sgt J. M. Sherrard](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Kaikoura](#), 3 Jan 1916; school-teacher.

¹² [Lt M. G. White](#); [Auckland](#); born [NZ](#) 31 Jan 1917; printer.

¹³ [Pte K. W. Lawrence](#), MM; [Hastings](#); born [Hastings](#), 6 Feb 1918; truck driver.

¹⁴ [Lt C. E. Rollinson](#); [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 19 Nov 1916; clerk; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

¹⁵ By nightfall 21 Pz Div, which apparently was attempting to encircle [2 NZ Div](#), was reduced to 14 battleworthy tanks and was short of ammunition and petrol.

¹⁶ [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; comd [4 Bde](#) 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; [5 Bde](#) Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; [6 Bde](#) Jul–Aug 1944; Commandant, Southern Military District, Nov 1951–Oct 1953; Commander K Force Nov 1953–Nov 1954; Commandant SMD Jan 1955–.

¹⁷ [Pte J. A. McLean](#); born [Invercargill](#), 28 May 1905; painter; died of wounds 31 Aug 1942.

¹⁸ [Pte L. R. Munro](#); [Christchurch](#); born [NZ](#) 14 Oct 1914; carpenter.

¹⁹ [Cpl A. E. Cuff](#); born [NZ](#) 29 Dec 1910; carpenter; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

²⁰ Col K. W. R. Glasgow, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 15 Nov 1902; headmaster; CO 14 Lt AA Regt May–Dec 1941; 5 Fd Regt Dec 1941–May 1943; OC Tps 6 NZ Div May–Aug 1943; GSO 1 NZ Maadi Camp 1944; Rector, Scots College, Wellington.

²¹ Cpl D. T. J. Coulter (1 PI), who had been wounded in the shoulder during the morning, was travelling in an ambulance which was destroyed. He managed to scramble out, jumped onto the tailboard of a passing truck, and was able to hang on with his good arm.

²² S-Sgt A. C. Felton; Christchurch; born Wellington, 10 Jan 1909; clerk; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

²³ Pte J. K. Donald; Featherston; born NZ 6 Dec 1908; farmer.

²⁴ WO II G. S. Harbutt; Otahuhu; born Cambridge, 2 Jul 1908; insurance inspector; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

²⁵ Sgt E. R. McInnes, MM; Auckland; born NZ 13 Aug 1916; driver mechanic; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

²⁶ Pte W. J. Kitto; born NZ 16 Dec 1919; linesman; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

²⁷ Pte T. Wallbank; born NZ 20 Jun 1919; labourer; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

²⁸ Capt L. Morgan; Lower Hutt; born Paekakariki, 20 Jan 1918; clerk.

²⁹ Capt D. B. Beard, MC; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 3 Jun 1913; civil servant; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

³⁰ These vehicles, whatever type they were, probably belonged to the German 90 Lt Div, which was advancing along the road from Mersa Matruh. The German armour had been directed to a place in the desert 25 miles

south of Daba.

³¹ Pte A. J. Chaffe; born Pahiatua, 18 Sep 1907; labourer; wounded 18 Jul 1942.

³² Capt E. W. Gumbley; Invercargill; born Tauranga, 8 Aug 1911; clerk; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³³ L- Cpl R. Hunter; born Oamaru, 4 Feb 1910; clerk; wounded 29 Jun 1942; died of wounds 25 Oct 1942.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 10 – RUWEISAT RIDGE

CHAPTER 10

Ruweisat Ridge

El Alamein is a solitary little station on the [Western Desert](#) railway about 60 miles from [Alexandria](#). Just to the north, between the railway and the sea, the road runs along the low ridge which separates the coastal dunes and salt marshes from the almost featureless waste which extends nearly 40 miles inland to the 600-foot precipices flanking the [Qattara](#) Depression, an obstacle to heavy vehicles. There, on the Alamein Line, across this neck of land between the sea and the Depression, [Eighth Army](#) halted the Axis invasion of Egypt.

The Alamein Line was not an unbroken line of fortifications: it originally consisted of three defended areas 15–20 miles apart. In the north [1 South African Division](#) was entrenched in the [Alamein Box](#), around the railway station; in the centre the New Zealand Division occupied Fortress A (the [Kaponga Box](#)) at [Bab el Qattara](#), a track junction in a defile between low escarpments; at [Naqb Abu Dweis](#), near the edge of the [Qattara](#) Depression, [5 Indian Division](#), reduced to the strength of a small battle group with hardly any artillery and short of water held Fortress B but was soon withdrawn. Another Indian formation ([18 Brigade](#)) was brought into the gap between the South Africans and the New Zealanders and dug in at [Deir el Shein](#), a shallow depression just north of the western end of the barely perceptible [Ruweisat Ridge](#). The gap south of the New Zealanders was the responsibility of mobile columns.

[Sixth Brigade](#), reinforced by the [Maori Battalion](#), defended the [Kaponga Box](#); [4](#) and [5 Brigades](#), having sorted themselves out after their dash back from [Minqar Qaim](#), went to [Deir el Munassib](#), a shallow depression nine miles to the south east, whence mobile columns could go forward to defend the approaches to the fortress. On 30 June [3 Company](#) rejoined [6 Brigade](#); the other three companies remained with the formations with which they had fought at [Minqar Qaim](#). ¹

Under the protection of a sandstorm Rommel flung his troops against the northern part of the Alamein Line on 1 July. The [90th Light Division](#) was brought to a halt by the South Africans and panicked under shellfire, and at [Deir el Shein](#) the Indian brigade held out valiantly until evening before being overwhelmed by [Afrika](#)

Korps. Farther south the New Zealanders, apart from shelling tanks and other vehicles at extreme range when visibility permitted, were scarcely involved. A column, which included 25-pounders, six-pounders and 11 Platoon, was sent out to the north early in the afternoon.

‘During one halt with this gun column,’ says Lieutenant Frazer, ‘when we had our guns off trucks and were trying to distinguish friend from foe in the haze, smoke and dust which enveloped Deir el Shein and all around it, we found ourselves being circled by two ME 109’s. As we watched they came in at our guns from 30–40 feet, one tailing the other. We had grabbed whatever weapons were nearest to hand and now let fly as they roared at us. I saw the smoke trace of one of our incendiaries ... plunge into the base of the wing of the leading plane; there must have been other hits as well, including Dick Gallagher’s pistol, at that close range. The ground was bare and flinty and we were not dug in; only afterwards did we think what a mess these two planes would have made of us had they opened up. However, they didn’t, they must have been in doubt as to who we were in the remarkable mix up of opposing forces that day.

‘Towards dusk we withdrew to Deir el Munassib with the unhappy feeling that all had not gone well with the Indians at Deir el Shein that afternoon and we had been unable to help.

‘Late that night, as we were sleeping alongside our trucks ... a 15 cwt stumbled into our laager with a British Lieut. Colonel and half a dozen Indian soldiers on it.’ They had managed to get away when [10 Indian Division](#) had been cut off at [Mersa Matruh](#) on 28 June, and were certain that by this time Rommel would have been at [Alexandria](#) and the [Suez Canal](#); they had been hoping to get through to [Sinai](#). ‘When we told them that 8th Army was still very much in being and hitting back all the way up to [Alamein](#) the Colonel pulled a tin of beer from his truck and insisted on sharing it, with the heartfelt toast: “Well, here’s the best piece of news I have ever had in my life.”’

From shortly after daybreak on 2 July the 25-pounders shelled enemy groups passing on the northern side of the [Kaponga Box](#), and the retaliatory fire fell mostly among 24 Battalion, which was supported by 8 Platoon on the northern perimeter. ‘The arrival of the German armour and transport ... was a sight worth seeing and we

had what might be called a grandstand seat at this spectacle and it made us realise that we had a hard row to hoe ahead of us,' says Lieutenant Gumbley.

'A Wadi about 1,000 yds. in front of our position was quickly occupied by German mortars and they promptly started to liven things up. Owing to the hard rocky surface of the area the fragmentation of the bombs was from our point of view very poor. Fortunately the chaps kept their heads down and our only casualty was Cpl. Midgley ² who lost an arm.' A carrying party was reluctant to distribute rations and water under fire, so Midgley took the much-needed stores round his section himself and was wounded while doing so; such contempt for danger earned him the MM.

Two gun columns sent out to the north were amalgamated under the CRA (Brigadier Weir ³), who then had four batteries of 25-pounders, some anti-tank guns, four rifle companies and 6 Platoon. The British armour met German tanks just north of this force and called upon the New Zealand guns for support. After what seemed to be an indecisive action the British laagered for the night—and 6 Platoon was 'very surprised to see on a battlefield the parade ground drill for dismounting from a tank.'

Early next morning the CRA's column opened fire on vehicles moving in a southerly direction towards [Alam Nayil](#) ridge. The enemy halted and replied, but obviously the New Zealanders were getting the better of it. Brigadier Weir called for an infantry attack, and 19 Battalion headed northwards at top speed. Some Bren carriers drove ahead through a small group of enemy vehicles, which so unnerved the Italians that they went forward to surrender to the infantry, who had debussed and were advancing on foot with fixed bayonets. The main body of the enemy opened fire with mortars and machine guns.

The Vickers of 4 Platoon were brought up, and while one section fired over the heads of the infantry, the other went forward to give closer support and found good targets at ranges from 1700 to 3000 yards. 'Ammo 28 belts.... Results observed on enemy arty, mortars, transport and infantry,' the platoon reported. Lieutenant Blue's ⁴ platoon (6) with the CRA's column also had excellent shooting. Against the combined fire of the Vickers, mortars, two-pounders and small arms the Italians 'didn't have a show'; some escaped, but many waited to be rounded up by the infantry.

The bag was astonishing: 352 prisoners, twelve 105-millimetre, eleven 88-millimetre and Russian 76.2-millimetre, sixteen 75-millimetre guns, five British 25-pounders, some 20-millimetre dual-purpose (ack-ack and anti-tank) guns, many mortars, machine guns, trucks, ammunition, and a quantity of medical stores. The New Zealanders, in fact, had captured most of the artillery of the [Ariete Division](#), at the cost of 20-odd casualties. Three men in 4 Platoon had been wounded.

While the New Zealanders wrought havoc among the Italian division's guns and transport, the British armour drove back its tanks. Farther north the Germans succeeded in gaining some ground on [Ruweisat Ridge](#), but it was the last effort of their declining strength; they were utterly exhausted, reduced to about thirty tanks, and critically short of ammunition. Rommel's victorious march from [Gazala](#), begun five weeks earlier, had come to an end.

'We had all had it properly, on the move all the time, off trucks, dig in, brew up, on trucks, off trucks, dig in, etc. Has anyone ever found out why we were messed about so much ... we must have moved dozens of times without purpose it seemed,' writes Private Humphreys.⁵ And that is how the next week or so appeared to most of the New Zealanders.

On 3 July [6 Brigade](#), leaving the [Maori Battalion](#) in possession of the [Kaponga Box](#), withdrew south-eastwards to [Himeimat](#); 9 Platoon stayed with the Maoris, and the rest of 3 Company joined 1 Company in Reserve Group, which moved a short distance north-westwards from Munassib to [Deir Alinda](#). Meanwhile 2 Company, with 4 Brigade, after going north to [Alam Nayil](#), headed west to laager on the eastern side of the [Kaponga Box](#); and 4 Company, with [5 Brigade](#), went south and west of the box and then north to the [El Mreir Depression](#). No doubt there were very good reasons for all these moves. In any case there was a definite purpose behind [5 Brigade's](#) manoeuvre: it was to attempt to get round the enemy's south-west flank.

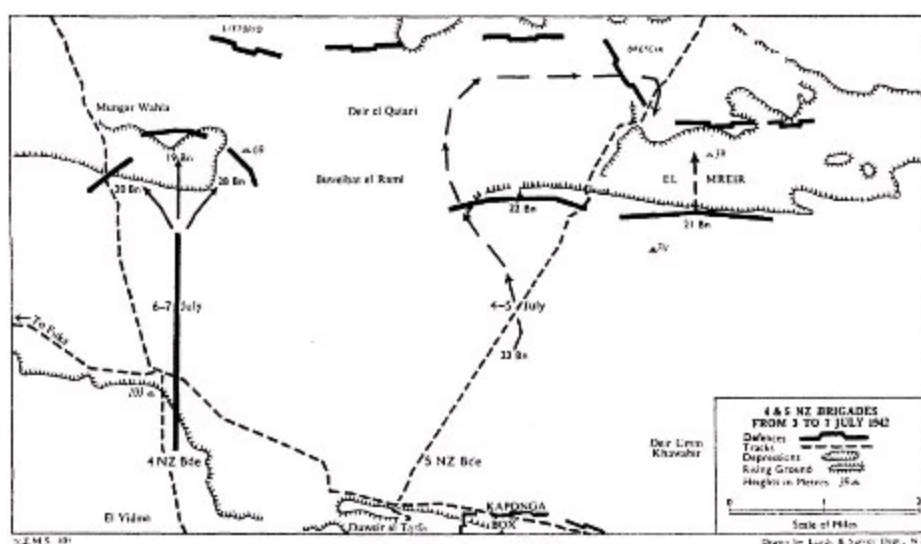
This brigade got away from Munassib before midday, but made slow progress through patches of soft sand. South of the western end of the pear-shaped [El Mreir Depression](#) 21 and 22 Battalions deployed, and [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) ordered them to advance to objectives just beyond its northern edge.

The Italians, with an unrestricted view of the brigade approaching, began to

shell the two battalions before the infantry debussed. The men left their vehicles and continued on foot. On the left 22 Battalion reached the southern edge of **El Mreir**, but found the far side was strongly held and came under such heavy fire that it had to dig in. The supporting Vickers of 10 Platoon 'had a pretty sticky time getting in, having to pass through shellfire,' says Lieutenant Rose. 'Colonel Russell ⁶ asked me if I could shoot up enemy mortars and artillery who were shelling our rear heavily and preventing our own arty. from coming into position and giving me support. 10 Platoon went well forward and the guns went into action on open ground well in front of the infantry. Shooting was pretty good on mortars and bunched transport also well out in the open. We were able to quieten them down sufficiently to let our own arty. into position.

'During the afternoon, a flat topped vehicle (something like a Portée) came around our left flank, together with one or two staff cars. German and Italian officers could be seen standing up and observing our positions through glasses. We were able to chase them off pretty smartly. At dusk we retired to the rim of the depression and dug in there, two guns on either flank of the **22 Bn.**'

On the right 21 Battalion found cover behind a rise in the ground that was actually the southern lip of the depression, and 12 Platoon was ordered forward to assist. 'Neither I nor my NCOs,' says Lieutenant McAneny, 'could locate the enemy positions but we ourselves were obviously under enemy observation as we were being continuously mortared.... our task was to endeavour to locate enemy mortar positions and silence them.



4 and 5 Brigades, 3-7 July 1942
4 and 5 Brigades, 3-7 July 1942

I ordered various ranges and switches but could not even observe strike. I reported the position to Colonel Allen ⁷ who ordered [the platoon] to continue its effort which we hoped would help in keeping some of the enemy under cover. Later in the afternoon the mortar fire became concentrated and the Colonel ordered me to withdraw 12 Pl, specifically stating in view of the particularly heavy fire, that the position was to be evacuated by crawling out. This afternoon was a very trying one, especially for the lower gun numbers who had long waits in scanty cover. It was not possible to dig guns in as time and the steady fire of the enemy did not permit.'

The withdrawal was arduous, but was successfully accomplished, and the platoon was ordered back several miles for the night. Next morning it was told to return to the position it had occupied the previous day to support an attack by 21 Battalion, but McAneny protested because he considered there was ground better suited for the purpose, so the siting of the guns was left to him.

The attack began about 6.30 a.m. The infantry were advancing with fixed bayonets when 12 Platoon mounted its guns. McAneny arranged with several platoon commanders that he would fire when their men went to ground, and when the Vickers stopped the infantry would make another dash. 'We carried on on these lines under mortar and small arms fire for a time and then fired forward at longer range as 21 Bn troops disappeared from view down a slope, but could not pick up definite targets. The fire of the enemy was very heavy and 12 Pl suffered several casualties.' Privates O'Donoghue ⁸ and Muir ⁹ later died of the wounds they received.

McAneny saw two men well forward on rising ground; they appeared to be gesticulating to him to go to them. 'I was not satisfied that my fire was effective and rather than send someone else I decided to go forward myself and reconnoitre.' The two men turned out to be a forward observation post for the 25- pounders, whose telephone line had been cut. 'They pointed out to me a heavy enemy mortar position which was well concealed. After taking bearings and ranges I immediately set off back to the guns, but the great difficulty was to retain that very small rocky enemy gun pit in my mind in a country devoid of land marks. On the way back I turned many times to make sure I still had the spot and eventually got to the guns after being blasted over a couple of times by mortar bombs.

'It was necessary to quickly shift the guns which were re-sited on open ground but owing to the slightly rising terrain in front, the gunners could not see the enemy mortar position.' By standing up McAneny could see it, however, and he laid each gun in turn on the target and opened fire. 'I think the range was about 2500 yards ... and strike was immediately observed dead on. It was then I was wounded.... I heard afterwards that the enemy mortar was silenced by 12 Pl's fire.'

McAneny was awarded the MC, and Sergeant Knox, who took command and kept the platoon in action in an exposed position, the MM.

Two companies of the 21st succeeded in reaching the foot of the escarpment on the far side of the depression, but were later withdrawn under the cover of smoke from the artillery, and that night 23 Battalion attacked from west to east across the front of the 22nd, but achieved little beyond destroying an Italian outpost. At dawn on 5 July 5 Brigade was still occupying the positions it had held the previous day; and there it remained, frequently shelled and attacked from the air, until the evening of the 7th.

During one of several dive-bombing attacks on the B Echelon transport 4 Company's water-cart (a three-tonner with a tank on the tray) was set on fire, but was saved by Privates McColl ¹⁰ and Lovett, ¹¹ who unloaded some hot petrol cans and, driving slowly, threw sand on the burning tyres.

'This was some of the most accurate dive bombing we had experienced,' says Frazer. 'Fortunately we were well dispersed on an old bivouac area with a number of tent holes scattered about. We had cut away one of the sides of some of these holes and had driven the trucks into them so that the engines and bonnets were just under ground level; while a lot of damage was done to the cabs and back ends of vehicles the engines and radiators were protected.' Major Cooper's pick-up, about the only vehicle which was not nose down in this manner, was knocked out. The shelling and bombing caused several casualties, among them Private Dewar, ¹² who died of wounds.

Plans and alternative plans were prepared; orders were issued, amended, superseded, or cancelled. 'The main impression left,' says Cooper, 'is that of uncertainty and apparent confusion— order and counter-order until it seemed we

were in complete disorder, and my inability to let my company have some definite knowledge of our position.'

Orders were given on 5 July for 4 Brigade to take [28 Battalion](#) under command and go round the south of the [Kaponga Box](#) to [Qaret el Yidma](#), for [Divisional Headquarters](#) and Reserve Group to follow, and for [6 Brigade](#) to reoccupy the box.

The previous day 4 Brigade had been shelled by 25-pounders with very little result. 'Is this the usual thing with the 25 pdr or is it the way that Jerry is using it,' asked Lieutenant Newland. 'We hope that it is the way he is using it & not the fault of the gun.... We also had two very heavy air attacks, we suffered no casualties from these but had a little damage done to vehicles. Within two hours these trucks were fit for the road again. Our QM, Lieut Murie, ¹³ arrived on a visit just in time to receive one of these raids ... however it was very good to meet someone who had at least some more recent news.'

The Maori Battalion (accompanied by 9 Platoon) left the [Kaponga Box](#) to join 4 Brigade, and about 10.30 a.m. on the 5th the augmented brigade set off in a southerly direction through country broken by wadis and escarpments. 'This trip was a bad one, the going being up and down the escarpment and the ground varying between soft sand, hummocks and very rocky, with now and then some good going.'

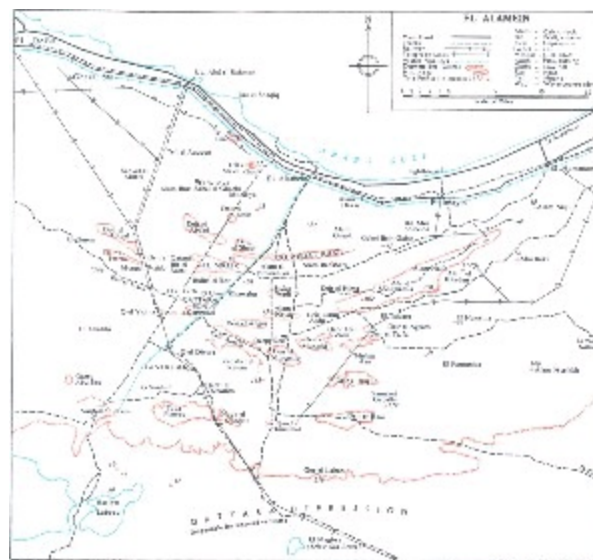
The convoy turned west and was travelling over a stretch of open, stony ground when aircraft dived out of the sun. The brigade commander (Brigadier Gray) was one of the twenty-seven killed, and about fifty were injured. One of 4 Platoon's trucks was caught, and among the men on it, Lieutenant Evans ¹⁴ and Privates Carswell ¹⁵ and Sciascia ¹⁶ were killed and nine wounded. Two men were wounded in 9 Platoon. The dead were buried and the wounded attended to before the brigade continued westwards to the [Alamein-Abu Dweis](#) track, turned north, and reached its destination in mid-afternoon after a journey of about 24 miles altogether. Aircraft attacked three times again, but the machine-gunners had no further losses that day.

On 4 July, when Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam arrived to take command of Reserve Group, 3 Company reported 'Intense hostile [air] attacks were sustained all day until dusk. There were six attacks....' Both 1 and 3 Companies had casualties. The group, following [Divisional Headquarters](#) in the evening of the 5th, struggled

through soft sand and reached its position south of 4 Brigade after midnight. Sixth Brigade, meanwhile, reoccupied the **Kaponga Box**, with 1 Company among its supporting arms.

The **1st Armoured Division** was to attempt an advance on **Ruweisat Ridge** on the night of 6–7 July, and 4 Brigade was to push northwards until it was level with and west of **5 Brigade**, so that the New Zealanders could support the British armour and exploit success. Late that night this operation was cancelled, but because of an undisclosed failure in staff work the news of the cancellation did not reach 4 Brigade, which advanced to **Mungar Wahla**.

The leading troops of 20 and 28 Battalions reached their objectives without making contact with the enemy. Going through to exploit, 19 Battalion crossed a shallow depression at the eastern end of **Mungar Wahla** and reached the high ground to the north about an hour before dawn, still without opposition. Major Johansen took 5 Platoon out on the right flank (near Point 69). While the rest of the platoon halted in a small wadi, Johansen, Lieutenant Price ¹⁷ and Corporal Fraser ¹⁸ climbed up onto a sand dune, from which they could see hundreds of Italians getting up, shaking their blankets and preparing breakfast. The nearest were about 300 yards away, the farthest another 700 yards. Fraser could not believe his eyes and asked, 'Is that the enemy?' Johansen says it was 'an absolutely perfect target for enfilade fire ... the best target I ever saw, and I saw some pretty good targets at times.'



EL ALAMEIN

The four Vickers were ordered up onto the rise and began a direct shoot. This was the signal for 19 Battalion to open fire. It was 'a proper massacre', but by eight o'clock the Italians had recovered sufficiently to reply with mortars and small arms, and appeared to be forming up for a counter-attack. They did not have the slightest chance.

Fourth Brigade's advance served no purpose: the British armour had not moved on [Ruweisat Ridge](#). The brigade was exposed to tank attack and therefore was ordered back to Qaret el Yidma, where it arrived without trouble before dark. The Division was now in danger of being cut off should the enemy on Ruweisat thrust south-eastwards towards Munassib. Fourth Brigade and Reserve Group returned to Munassib and [Alinda](#), and [5 Brigade](#) retired from [El Mreir](#) to Deir el Angar, east of the [Kaponga Box](#).

Fourth Brigade's journey of about 20 miles took all night and 'was a ghastly one,' says Newland. 'We encountered soft sand, hard rocks, hummocks, in fact all the types of ground necessary to make a night journey even more unpleasant than it should be.' 'One of the most important things during this period,' says Major Cooper, 'was the work of drivers and attached LAD personnel in keeping the vehicles going. They worked tirelessly under the worst possible conditions, with a desperate shortage of spares and the knowledge that replacement vehicles were extremely scarce. That they succeeded in keeping us mobile was amazing.'

Next night (8–9 July) the Division 'side-slipped' to the east to take up what were believed to be sounder positions, with 4 Brigade at the western end of Deir el [Muhafid](#), Reserve Group in Munassib, and [5 Brigade](#) on the Munassib- [Alinda](#) track.

Again [6 Brigade](#) vacated the [Kaponga Box](#) and went into reserve—this time right back to [Amiriya](#). A rear party, consisting of a company from 25 Battalion under Major Hutchens, ¹⁹ a few Bren carriers and six-pounders and 2 Platoon, was left to hold the fortress until relieved by [7 Armoured Division](#). Just before dusk a small enemy force approached the box from the north, but retired without attempting to close with the defenders.

'We went out to the positions before daybreak next morning [the 9th] thinking we might get in some shooting,' says Lieutenant Pleasants. 'As the light came we

observed an enemy patrol approaching the Northern entrance. By taking a circular route in the 15 cwt trucks we thought we could race them to the positions and prepare a reception. We had reached the foot of the small escarpment at the entrance and debussed ready to carry the MMG forward when the Germans complete with a light machine gun poked their heads over the top about 50 yds away ... we left. Fortunately there were no casualties. The platoon went into action about 300 yds to the rear. One section was left to give covering fire whilst the other moved round to the flank to enfilade the German positions. What promised to be an interesting action was broken up with the arrival of a couple of Armd Cars from 7 Armd Div. The Germans broke off the engagement and departed westwards at high speed.'

No relief party appeared at the appointed time, and the enemy could be seen closing in from the west and north. A strong force approached the corner where the machine-gun post had been. The last New Zealanders withdrew, and Pleasants took his platoon back to 1 Company (which had returned to Reserve Group). Not long afterwards the Germans and Italians launched an assault with tanks, infantry and artillery and captured the unoccupied fortress.

Early next morning (the 10th) a terrific artillery bombardment was heard to the north; about 20 miles away the guns heralded an attack by 9 Australian Division, which had been brought down from [Syria](#). The Australians progressed as far as [Tell el Eisa](#), but this did not lessen activity on the New Zealanders' front. Soon after daybreak a strong force including tanks occupied [Alam Nayil](#) ridge, about three miles from 4 Brigade. An attack seemed imminent, but did not eventuate; the enemy, after being shelled and bombed, withdrew later in the day.

'This was a thoroughly harassing day,' writes [Brigadier Kippenberger](#), whose [5 Brigade](#) was on the south-west flank. 'We were constantly warned by Division that we were about to be attacked and, with reports of enemy movement continually coming in from all three sides of the position, I was puzzled which way to look.... This afternoon a column of armoured cars, guns, and lorries made a sudden, swift advance along the foot of the [[El Taqa](#)] plateau, driving due east. Everyone fired at them but they drove on through the shellbursts unhurt and in the most gallant style....' ²⁰ They unlimbered some field guns and opened fire. From a dug-in position on fairly high ground about 2500 yards away 11 Platoon had a perfect view of them.

'After about half a dozen bursts from our guns,' says Frazer, 'we saw the enemy infantry scuttling to their trucks and trying to escape back to the West. They abandoned the two guns and two of their lorries which they made one subsequent unsuccessful attempt to recover.'

Despatched from 4 Brigade to support the 5th, 4 Platoon also did some shooting against the armoured cars and lorried infantry. '...our guns went into action in real copy book style straight off the trucks on the ground,' says Sergeant Boyle.²¹ '...we must have caused some damage as we had return fire of mortars & M.G. but they fell short.... Darkness was soon upon us and the guns were then set for night firing.' But orders came to return to 4 Brigade.

Fifth Brigade's position was now untenable, and during the night it leapfrogged through 4 Brigade and dug in facing north.

This repeated taking up and abandoning of positions, the many withdrawals and the lack of information bewildered the troops, but the thought that they were beaten did not enter their heads. Major Cooper recalls that 'the stories, possibly exaggerated, of base wallopers burning papers and generally doing their scones, caused them vast amusement.'

The latest plan called for an attack north-westwards over the western end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#) to Deir el Abyad. It was to be in three phases: in the first the New Zealand and 1 Armoured Divisions, with the New Zealanders on the left, were to secure a start line running north-eastwards from [Alam Nayil](#); in the second the New Zealanders were to capture a bridgehead on Ruweisat at Point 63;²² in the third the armour was to exploit to Abyad.

The two New Zealand brigades packed up, embussed, and began their advance at 5 p.m. on the 11th. They were visible to the enemy, who shelled them very heavily. The infantry debussed, advanced steadily on foot and took up their positions.

Ready to go forward when required to consolidate on Ruweisat, 4 Company stayed in reserve on wheels in [5 Brigade's](#) debussing area. After going about three miles, 2 Company waited most of the night before despatching two platoons to

support 4 Brigade infantry (on the left). '... it was dark & as we didn't know the country & the infantry were still trying to advance we rested with the intention of getting into position just before dawn,' explains Newland. 'Our infantry had made top of the [[Alam Nayil](#)] ridge without trouble but on proceeding down the slope on the northern side came under terrific arty fire and had to go to ground.' At 3.30 a.m. Johansen left with 5 and 6 Platoons to go into position with the infantry. 'Couldn't find them & wandered all over the desert, contacting all sorts of people & units. Finally found [4 Bde](#) infantry at eight & put 5 Pl on [19 Bn](#) flank & 6 Pl on [20 Bn](#) flank.'

The attack on Ruweisat, after being contemplated for first light on the 12th, was postponed, and for nearly three days the New Zealanders waited in suspense under steady shellfire, of which 4 Brigade bore the brunt. There were many casualties.

The 13th was remarkable for the almost complete absence of air attacks. The Luftwaffe must have been busy elsewhere, but returned next day. This time the machine-gunners with Reserve Group (which had moved into position behind 4 Brigade and north of Deir el [Muhafid](#)) were badly hit. Private Humphreys (3 Platoon), one of those wounded, had dug his slit trench 'on the top side of a hill.... We were unfortunate, however, in that the ack ack chose to site their guns quite close to us. In the late afternoon some one said casually, here come our Bostons again. They looked fine flying in that formation we knew so well, but as they got closer we heard them, there was still a doubt, but as they were almost above they peeled off one by one, and came in at us (Stukas had fooled us). We were horrified to see the bombs dropping from these 14 Stukas ²³ coming straight at us. We scattered and dived into our holes, cursing the ack ack for bringing this load of hate down on us. All the planes got away with it and really plastered us.' Corporal Hore, ²⁴ Lance-Corporal Stagpoole, ²⁵ and Privates Hakaraia ²⁶ and Glasson ²⁷ were killed, and several wounded; two of 1 Company's trucks were hit and two Vickers lost.

The attack on [Ruweisat Ridge](#) (operation bacon) was finally ordered for the night of 14–15 July. The two New Zealand brigades, the 5th on the right and the 4th on the left, were to advance about six miles on foot without artillery support until first light, by which time it was expected that they would be on their objectives.

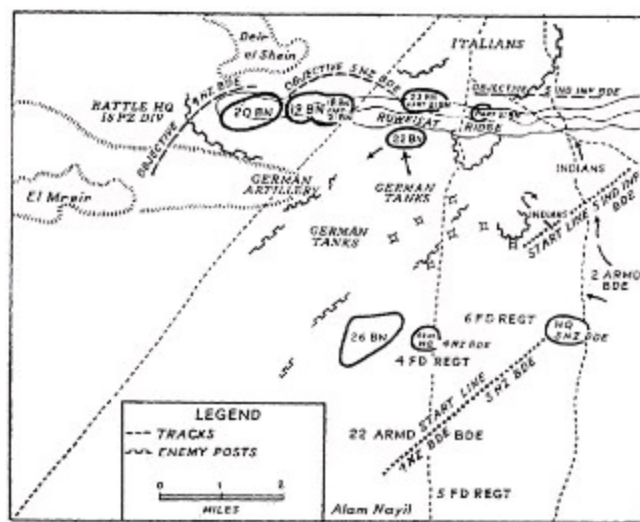
In some preliminary reorganisation 18 Battalion relieved the Maoris in 4 Brigade, and 26 Battalion, brought forward from [6 Brigade](#) (still at [Amiriya](#)), replaced

the 18th in Reserve Group; the Maoris were sent back some 13 miles to the rear to prepare defences at [Alam Halfa](#), a curious role on the eve of an attack.

The leading infantry crossed a start line at 11 p.m. and after going about two miles encountered a minefield. The enemy put up flares and opened fire, mostly with machine guns, but the two brigades fought their way through with rifle, bayonet and grenade, and pressed on to their objectives, leaving some posts unsubdued. On 5 Brigade's right 23 Battalion reached the ridge without much trouble; on the left 21 Battalion cut its way through a strongpoint, destroyed a couple of tanks, killed the crews of two more and overran some artillery, but broke up into several separate groups; the reserve battalion (the 22nd) reached the southern slope of the ridge. On 4 Brigade's right 18 Battalion attacked the enemy wherever he was found, and like the 21st lost cohesion; 19 Battalion veered from the left to the right, but arrived intact on the ridge, and by dawn the reserve battalion (the 20th) was on the left flank.

Fourth Brigade transport had been divided into two groups before the advance began. Some of the engineers, anti-tank guns, 4 and 5 Platoons and Defence Platoon followed 20 Battalion; the rest of 2 Company and the engineers, also the carriers and mortars, waited at B Echelon for orders to join the assaulting troops. Major Johansen and Lieutenant Newland accompanied 4 and 5 Platoons.

After the first opposition was met, the transport made many halts while the infantry cleared the way. 'During one of these halts we suffered two serious casualties [Privates Gordon ²⁸ and Carswell ²⁹] who were immediately evacuated,' says Newland. '... one truck received a splinter in the tyre which we were able to change before the convoy moved on again.... The



Ruweisat Ridge, 15 July 1942

Ruweisat Ridge, 15 July 1942

infantry was starting to thin out badly, some fallen by the wayside [and others escorting prisoners].... fighting had been too severe. Just before first light as we neared the objective we were caught in some nasty fire coming from our left flank....'

'Four enemy MG posts and possibly three tanks all opened fire together,' says Brigadier Burrows. 'I had gone forward to the head of 20 Bn ... and felt somewhat dismayed at the new development. Our A Tk vehicles looked an easy mark for tanks. I shouted to the 20 Bn to go straight in with the bayonet and heard Charlie Upham³⁰ leading C Coy forward in grand style. His Coy must have dealt immediately with two posts. The tanks were hard to see but were moving away. A Tk vehicles were now moving over the crest of the Ridge. Still being fired on by two enemy machine guns the infantry unfortunately tried to get over in another spot and were faced with wire. However our MG officer [Johansen] saved the day. He dismounted two of our MGs and took on the remaining two German guns, one of which was about 400 yds away and the other about 700 yds. In very short time he quietened them both and had set fire to a couple of vehicles.'

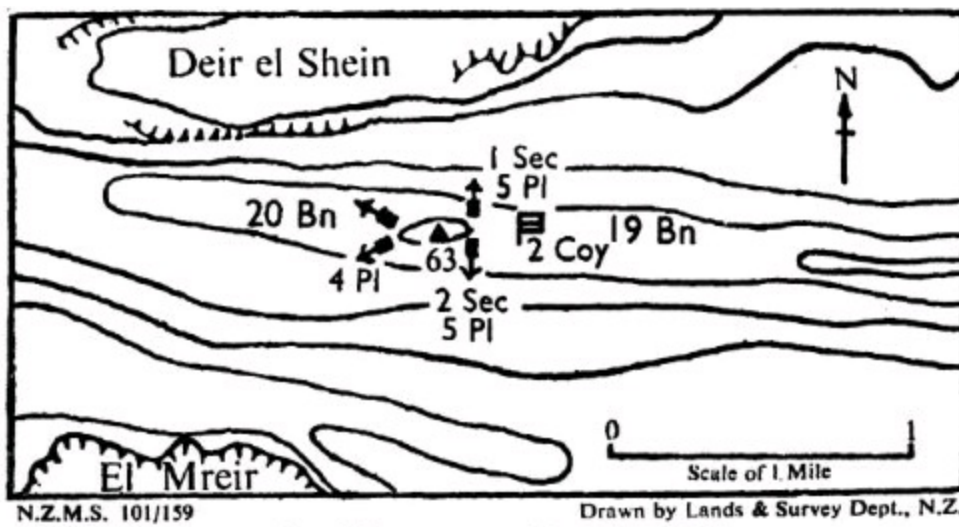
Johansen, who had been walking in front of his own vehicles so as to keep in touch with the infantry, says 'we had about 200 yards to go ... we went to ground. I bawled to the guns to fire at the origin of the tracer....' Sergeant Jessep³¹ (4 Platoon) says he 'ordered No 1 Sect into action.... L/C Herrington³² and I think Cpl Millar were the No 1's on the two guns.' They opened fire immediately over open sights. At the first glimmer of dawn, Johansen continues, 'to our horror we saw two

or three tanks.... I gave the embus signal.... I jumped onto the bumper of the first truck [Jessep's] and clung to the radiator cap.... We headed for the saddle [east of Point 63]....'

By this time 5 Platoon was able to give this section excellent supporting fire while it was making for cover, which it reached safely. Later in the morning Brigadier Burrows sent a message expressing his thanks 'to those concerned for such an excellent job.'

On Ruweisat, which was found to be almost solid rock, the men scratched shallow holes in the few inches of sand and gravel and built small stone sangars. The machine-gunners went into position around Point 63, where they covered all approaches to the western end of the ridge. On the high ground just south-east of the point No. 2 Section 5 Platoon was able to fire to both the north and the south, and on the northern slope No. 1 Section had an arc of fire from the north-east to the west; 4 Platoon, west of Point 63, had arcs of fire extending from the north right round to the west and the south.

The Vickers 'constituted the main defence of the brigade and their gunners earned high praise for the manner in which they kept their guns in action ... they were under continuous fire from captured 25-pounders and also probably from 5.9-inch guns whose shells burst in the air. Notwithstanding their exposed positions and casualties, the Vickers gunners engaged enemy machine-gun and mortar posts and, at extreme range, the enemy's heavier guns and transport. They did much to sustain the brigade in most trying hours,' says [J. L. Scoullar](#) in [Battle for Egypt](#).



4 and 5 Platoons on Ruweisat Ridge
4 and 5 Platoons on Ruweisat Ridge

'It was inspiring to see the M.G. boys putting up such a grand show and to watch their calm deliberation as they spotted target after target and destroyed it. Theirs was an effort of utmost gallantry,' an anti-tank gunner later told an interviewer. 'One vivid impression of mine,' says another anti-tank gunner, 'was of a lone machine-gunner firing his Vickers. He was really annoyed and was firing very long bursts almost of belt length.'

To conserve ammunition (which ran out early in the afternoon) Johansen issued orders that the guns were to shoot only when they were certain to kill.

Hundreds of prisoners had been taken during the advance and sent back to the rear, and many Italians were still trying to give themselves up, but some of the captured men escaped or were released by the enemy still holding out south of the ridge. Shortly after eight o'clock a long column of men was seen marching westwards a mile or two to the south. At first they were thought to be Italians who had been recaptured or rescued by the Germans, and the Vickers were ordered to fire on them, but before they did so the troops were identified as British under enemy guard. It was not known then that these were 350 men from 22 Battalion who had been overrun by German tanks at dawn and were being marched into captivity.

Johansen spent most of the afternoon assisting Brigadier Burrows at his advanced brigade headquarters, and Newland 'carried on what little could be done with the Coy.' Communications with the B Echelon group (which included Company Headquarters and 6 Platoon) had been cut and 'we patiently waited for someone to

get through to us fetching sorely needed ammo etc,' says Newland. 'The infantry were just about out of grenades, the MMG Pls wanted their remaining troops up quickly having had several guns knocked out as the shelling grew more severe.' A few rounds were collected here and there, but not enough to keep the Vickers going. The heat haze, shimmer, and the dust and smoke raised by the shellfire made observation difficult. The inadequate trenches and sangars gave no protection from the sun, and the empty water bottles could not be filled. The flies were maddening, and the stench in the filthy pits recently vacated by the Italians was almost overpowering.

These conditions were especially trying for the wounded, among them Privates [Gilmour](#)³³ and [Mangham](#),³⁴ who could not be evacuated. No doctors or ambulances were available, but Sergeant Morgan and Private [Luxford](#)³⁵ enlisted the aid of the drivers to make an RAP, which Privates [Reichel](#)³⁶ and [Yeatman](#),³⁷ medical orderlies, were called upon to run. Under Morgan's and Luxford's guidance, the wounded were brought in for attention. Before long primuses were boiling water commandeered from various sources, the wounded were washed and bandaged, and each provided with shade and shelter. Luxford also distributed tea and ammunition to 5 Platoon's gun team. Under such hazardous conditions this was, says Lieutenant Price, 'a voluntary effort worthy of the highest praise and recognition.'

Towards dawn on the 15th [5 Brigade](#)'s support weapons—the anti-tank guns, carriers, mortars and Vickers—were waiting with Brigade Tactical Headquarters for the order to go forward to the infantry on the ridge. The Brigade Defence Platoon had been sent out to deal with some enemy posts interfering with the column's advance, but the hostile fire had not been subdued and the platoon had not returned. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) was somewhere up forward. It was getting late, so the Brigade Major ([Major Fairbrother](#)³⁸) told Lieutenant Frazer to try to get through to 23 Battalion with his (11) platoon and some carriers and two-pounders. The main column turned about and withdrew a mile and a half to the shelter of a slight depression (later known as [Stuka Wadi](#)). On the way back Private [Drennan](#)³⁹ was killed by machine-gun fire.

Small-arms and tank fire passed over and through Frazer's small group of vehicles as they traversed a zigzag track on a forward slope, but they got clear of

this without casualties and continued on, striking a minefield but skirting it safely, and then coming upon two German tanks about 200 yards away. Sergeant Homer, noticing the tanks swing their guns, 'directed us very speedily to a very shallow depression—only a large sized saucer—on our right where we set up the guns,' says Corporal MacLean. 'It wasn't even deep enough to look like hiding the trucks (15 cwts).' Fortunately the tanks, apparently unable to recognise the New Zealanders in the murk, did not fire at them. Two Crusaders arrived on the scene and knocked out one of the German tanks, and the enemy in turn shot off the tracks of one of the Crusaders.

The Vickers opened up on four guns which were in action about 3000 yards away and although his OP was in a very exposed position, Sergeant Cross directed his section's fire with telling effect. The artillery also registered on the guns, forcing the crews to abandon them, and the Vickers, shooting at the retreating enemy, knocked out one of their trucks.

Cross remembers watching a two-pounder anti-tank gun, still on its portée, engaging two tanks. 'The 2 pr crew were magnificent and I'm sure were instrumental in saving us from being overrun ... although they were forced to withdraw.... We felt a bit lonely and out on a limb...'

An Italian medical orderly came in to say he had wounded who needed attention. 'So he brought one or two in, under escort (by us),' says MacLean. 'We were surprised how close they were. The Ities started converging on us in droves. If they rushed us, we wouldn't have had a chance. I think we counted roughly 150. Then in the distance several grey jerseyed and khaki shorted figures approached headed by 2 German officers.' This might have been a German ruse to get close enough to shoot the machine-gunners. The 'grey jerseyed and khaki shorted figures', however, were [5 Brigade's](#) Defence Platoon. Lance-Corporal [Bertinshaw](#)⁴⁰ went forward to bring them in. One of the German officers said he realised [Germany](#) had lost the war.

Cross escorted the prisoners to Company Headquarters at [Stuka Wadi](#), where 'the Stukas came over and I unfortunately observed a direct hit on a Bofors gun crew.' On the way back to 11Platoon Cross saw a wounded New Zealander in a minefield, went to his rescue and took him to a doctor who was with the Crusader

tanks parked in the depression forward of the zigzag track.

Going farther forward, 11 Platoon passed through large groups of Italians and a few Germans who were wandering around apparently just waiting to be picked up. About midday the platoon arrived among Italian sangars near the top of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), set up its guns, and not long afterwards had a 'short sharp taste' of 25-pounder fire. 'Luckily the Ites had dug deeply and no direct hits were recorded,' says Cross. 'The "daisy-cutter" effect of the 25 pr fragmentation was terrific and would have wiped off everyone above ground.'

In the afternoon 5 Indian Brigade (on the right flank) made contact with 5 NZ Brigade, which opened up a route for some anti-tank guns, carriers and mortars to get through, but only a few carriers had succeeded in delivering ammunition to 4 Brigade; the other vehicles were unable to reach the ridge from the south. When at last the enemy strongpoints began to surrender and the British tanks were reported to be advancing, it was too late.

After a day of 'extreme anxiety and frustration' Sergeant-Major Macartney (2 Company's CSM) learned that some trucks intended to try to get through early in the evening, so went out with his three-tonner loaded with ammunition and supplies in the hope of joining up with them. 'We had moved only a short way, when we met men and vehicles streaming back towards us, and some of the men told us the show had collapsed.'

The men on the ridge had seen the enemy getting ready to counter-attack, but had been powerless to do anything about it. Just on five o'clock armoured cars had struck swiftly against 20 Battalion from the south-west. 'Although a great effort was made by all to stop them by fire,' says Newland, 'the enemy came on & before long had taken the ridge where 5 Pl had been in posn.' Tanks, self-propelled guns and half-tracked vehicles carrying troops attacked from the west. The defending anti-tank guns, after getting away a few shots, were either destroyed or driven back, and the infantry surrounded and forced to surrender. 'The [19 Bn](#) likewise was being rolled up. A stand was made at [advanced] Bde HQ & on the ridge where the engineers were in position. Both these efforts were of no avail, the enemy closing in from all sides.' Nevertheless the Germans were turned back by the British tanks before they could penetrate as far as [5 Brigade](#).

Newland and thirty-one men of 2 Company were among those who evaded capture; they took with them two Vickers and tripods and one pick-up. The company lost two officers (Johansen and Price), forty-one other ranks, some of whom were wounded, six guns and tripods complete with equipment, one pick-up, four 15-cwt trucks and three three-tonners. Twenty-six of the missing men were from 4 Platoon, only eight members of which escaped.

No. 1 Section 5 Platoon, on the forward slope of the ridge and not dug in, was compelled to abandon its equipment. No. 2 Section made a praiseworthy getaway. 'Taking their gun with them one sub-sec made off a little distance before coming into action being covered by the other gun of the section. As soon as the two guns were in action the more forward one pulled out under cover of the other gun. After making progress in this manner for some distance Cpl Fraser found a truck that had been left by the Italians earlier in the day, collected both guns & the gun teams & made off to safety, picking up stragglers of several other units on the way.'

Among the individuals who made their own way back was a wounded driver (Private [Okey](#) ⁴¹ who got away in the failing light and reached the New Zealand lines some thirty hours later.

After being captured Brigadier Burrows and Major Johansen escaped and were about to lead a party along the northern side of the ridge to safety when they were joined by Lieutenant-Colonel [Hartnell](#), ⁴² who had also escaped. They had not gone much farther, however, when an armoured car appeared in the dusk. The Brigadier, Hartnell and another man slipped away, but the rest of the party were taken prisoner.

Corporal Millar and Private [Lord](#) ⁴³ stayed hidden in their gunpit for about an hour and a half after others of 4 Platoon had been rounded up by the Germans. 'Jack and I,' says Millar, 'were lying in this gunpit hardly daring to breathe when several Germans appeared above us and began to look menacing. We got out.... I managed to collect my water-bottle (empty), my small haversack, and an old blanket which we had had over the Vickers to keep the sun off us. Each one of these items proved themselves of tremendous value later on. As indicated by the Germans we were now to start to catch up on the large body of prisoners taken before us who were now half a mile away across the desert. There was no chance for us to disappear for

there were enemy troops everywhere, but on the way we searched a number of abandoned Italian trucks and a few of our own for water to fill up our bottles but we were out of luck—although there were water-tins all around they were all empty. We finally joined on the tail of our fellow prisoners and carried on marching—or should I say—shuffling, for everyone was almost done, very thirsty, affected by the hot sun, and the desert here was very soft deep sand. It was an effort to drag one foot after the other....

`At one stage we had to pass right under the muzzles of a battery of heavy artillery which was still in action....

`Just as it was getting dark our column stopped for a rest; everyone fell down as if dead.... While we were still resting a squadron of the [RAF](#) came over and despite terrific fire from the a/a came in to drop their bombs on the German transport. For us sitting out in the open it was a most unhappy experience....

`The column started to move again soon after that. We kept going until about ten or eleven o'clock.... I was amused once when the fellow next to me said, "It won't be long now for I can smell water." I told him I would believe it when I saw it. Anyway it must have been another hour before we came to the water—it turned out to be a vague black shape in the darkness —merely a dump of water cans. As I was for once at the head of the queue, I was lucky to have an issue of water which although only less than half a mug and we could have drunk several water-bottles full, was better than the misfortune of some of our fellows who did not get any.... we just lay down to sleep where we were; I thought I had never been more tired.

`We woke up late next morning much refreshed and though we had another small water issue, were soon very uncomfortable with thirst, and also the heat of the sun was beginning to become very trying. Allan [[Parker](#) ⁴⁴] luckily had acquired an Italian groundsheet, and this we moored at each corner to the stunted sage bushes growing there to make some kind of a shelter. The sheet was only a few inches from the ground, and all the same we lay under it feeling most grateful for this small mercy, for most of the men had no shelter at all....

`As time went on most of us became almost delirious with the thirst and would get up and wander around for no reason at all. Many times fellows like this would

imagine they saw trucks coming across the desert with water for us, they would call this out and everyone would spring up, only to find it was a dream....

'Some time after midday a fleet of Opal trucks did arrive and as soon as they had stopped we staggered over to them in search of water, which, I am happy to say, was there on each vehicle. It was actually their emergency ration, but I will say the Germans were good with it and gave us all we wanted almost. Very soon after we got aboard them the trucks moved off in column.

'Towards the evening we arrived at [Daba](#) where we entered a POW compound which had originally held Italian prisoners during the first Libyan campaign in 1940. It was a little ironical.' The New Zealanders were taken back in stages through [Mersa Matruh](#), [Sidi Barrani](#), [Tobruk](#) and [Derna](#), and reached [Benghazi](#) on 20 July. Later, after weeks of hunger in filthy compounds, they were shipped to [Italy](#).⁴⁵

When the Germans counter-attacked [Ruweisat Ridge](#), 11 Platoon was unable to bring its fire to bear on the armoured cars because they were on the other side of the ridge, and many New Zealanders were 'mixed up in it all.' After dark, when all was quiet, 11 Platoon (under Sergeant Homer) moved farther east to spend the night near the Indian brigade and the British tanks, while Lieutenant Frazer, accompanied by Sergeant Cross (who knew the route well after having already made the trip twice), went back to Headquarters 4 Company to report on the situation on the ridge. When Frazer and Cross returned to the ridge, they could not find their platoon, and as they were required to guide the surviving infantry of 4 and 5 Brigades to Headquarters [5 Brigade](#), they could only hope their own men would follow. Early next morning 11 Platoon turned up, looking 'none the worse for having been deserted in this way.'

Their conduct during the battle won Frazer the MC and Cross the MM.

[Ruweisat](#) cost the Division over 1400 casualties. The machine-gunners' losses,⁴⁶ apart from those on the ridge, included men killed and wounded air attacks. Several raids, one of them by more than thirty Stukas, caused one or two casualties in 1 and 3 Companies (which were with Reserve Group south of the ridge) and one killed (Private [Morgan](#)⁴⁷) and three wounded in 6 Platoon (with 4 Brigade's B Echelon). Headquarters 4 Company suffered more severely. The Stukas 'came in out of the

setting sun,' says Lance-Corporal Lawrie. 'Another large truck came along and unfortunately stopped next to our LAD vehicle —and made this a sitting shot.' Privates [Single](#)⁴⁸ (an ordnance man) and [Tipa](#)⁴⁹ received injuries of which they later died; the CSM's truck, loaded with ammunition, was destroyed and [Sergeant-Major Booker](#), Lance-Corporal [Lawton](#)⁵⁰ and Private [Brooks](#)⁵¹ were killed and at least six wounded.

The Division reformed in the vicinity of [Stuka Wadi](#), with [5 Brigade](#) on the right and Reserve Group on the left. Fourth Brigade, with the greatly depleted 19, 20 and 22 Battalions, was sent back to [Maadi](#) to refit and reform; [6 Brigade](#) was brought forward from [Amiriya](#) to take over in Reserve Group's sector, and the Maoris came back from [Alam Halfa](#). The platoon and a half that remained of 2 Company joined 4 Company, which continued to support [5 Brigade](#); 3 Company stayed with Reserve Group (in which 18 Battalion replaced the 26th); 1 Company joined [6 Brigade](#).

Raiding parties and infantry patrols were sent out to harass the enemy at night, and the troops were little disturbed in the daytime except by the dive-bombing and shellfire. The machine-gunners had further casualties during the next few days of Stukas, shelling, dust, heat, flies and stench.

¹ 2 Coy with 4 Bde, 4 Coy with 5 Bde. Div Res Gp ceased to exist when 18 Bn (with which 1 Coy remained) reverted to the command of 4 Bde and 6 Fd Regt to 6 Bde, but shortly afterwards Div Res Gp (again including 1 Coy) was revived with the role of protecting Div HQ.

² Sgt J. B. Midgley, MM; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 15 May 1919; accountancy student; wounded 2 Jul 1942.

³ 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; comd 2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commandant Southern Military District 1948–49; QMG Army HQ Nov 1951–Aug 1955; CGS Aug 1955-.

⁴ Maj N. G. Blue; [Strathmore](#); born NZ 12 Jun 1917; clerk.

⁵ Pte G. H. Humphreys; Hamilton; born NZ 3 Nov 1913; farmer; twice wounded.

⁶ Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; CO 22 Bn Feb–Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

⁷ Brig S. F. Allen, OBE, m.i.d.; born Liverpool, 17 May 1897; Regular soldier; CO 2 NZEF Sigs Sep 1939–Sep 1941; 21 Bn Dec 1941–May 1942, Jun-Jul 1942; comd 5 Bde May–Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁸ Pte P. J. O'Donoghue; born Gisborne, 1 Dec 1916; salesman; died of wounds 26 Jul 1942.

⁹ Pte G. A. Muir; born Thames, 25 Nov 1916; tailor; died of wounds 5 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ Pte A. M. McColl; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Nov 1914; floor sander.

¹¹ Pte W. R. Lovett; born Wanganui, 30 Dec 1918; cleaner.

¹² Pte L. S. Dewar; born NZ 11 Apr 1910; fibrous plasterer; died of wounds 22 Jul 1942.

¹³ Capt W. D. Murie; Christchurch; born Timaru, 12 Apr 1905; company director.

¹⁴ Lt J. C. Evans; born New Plymouth, 20 Nov 1913; auctioneer; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

¹⁵ Pte G. H. E. Carswell; born Masterton, 17 Feb 1916; carpenter; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

¹⁶ Pte L. J. Sciascia; born NZ 24 Jun 1918; carpenter; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

¹⁷ Capt W. R. Price; Rotorua; born Hamilton, 11 Aug 1912; dry cleaner; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

¹⁸ Sgt D. R. Fraser, m.i.d.; born Feilding, 18 Nov 1915; clerk; killed in action 24 Mar 1943.

¹⁹ Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens, DSO, m.i.d.; Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Hawera, 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO 27 (MG) Bn 29 Feb-8 May 1944; 26 Bn May-Jun 1944; 24 Bn Jun 1944-May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

²⁰ Infantry Brigadier, p. 154.

²¹ Sgt R. B. Boyle; Hastings; born Glasgow, 28 Dec 1907; carpenter; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

²² Shown on some maps as Pt 64, it is about half a mile south of Deir el Shein and a mile north of the eastern end of the El Mreir depression.

²³ A 3 Coy report says there were 17 Stukas.

²⁴ Cpl L. B. Hore; born Napier, 23 Jun 1915; draper; killed in action 14 Jul 1942.

²⁵ L-Cpl D. L. Stagpoole; born NZ 3 Feb 1907; clerk and cashier; killed in action 14 Jul 1942.

²⁶ Pte W. Hakaraia; born NZ 25 Apr 1917; farmer; died of wounds 14 Jul 1942.

²⁷ Pte S. H. Glasson; born NZ 28 May 1907; labourer; killed in action 14 Jul 1942.

²⁸ Pte H. Gordon; Ohinewai; born Northern Ireland, 24 Sep 1904; farmer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

²⁹ Pte J. K. Carswell; Masterton; born NZ 23 Apr 1912; labourer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

³⁰ Capt C. H. Upham, VC and bar, m.i.d.; Conway Flat, Hundalee; born Christchurch, 21 Sep 1908; Government land valuer; wounded May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³¹ WO II P. A. Jessep; Patunamu Station, Wairoa; born Christchurch, 19 Jun 1916; medical student.

³² L-Cpl R. D. Herrington; Wellington; born Dannevirke, 1 Jan 1918; driver; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³³ Pte W. S. H. Gilmour; British Columbia; born Canada, 24 Jul 1918; mechanical engineer; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³⁴ Pte R. G. Mangham; Martinborough; born Marton, 6 Feb 1918; labourer; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

'After the German troops took over our R.A.P.' says Mangham, 'they put a captured 256 Pdr on each side. We were there for 6 days before being moved to Fuka.'

³⁵ Pte R. L. Luxford, m.i.d.; born NZ 13 Jul 1916; labourer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; died 24 Dec 1956.

³⁶ Pte F. Reichel; Upper Hutt; born Wellington, 29 Oct 1913; gardener; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³⁷ Pte M. G. Yeatman; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 10 Jan 1917; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³⁸ Brig M. C. Fairbrother, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23 and 28 Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; GSO 2 2 NZ Div Jun–Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base 2 NZEF Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Editor-in-

Chief, NZ War Histories.

³⁹ Pte [D. T. Drennan](#); born NZ 28 May 1915; grocer's assistant; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁴⁰ L-Cpl [D. R. Bertinshaw](#); Auckland; born [Wellington](#), 19 Dec 1917; clerk; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

⁴¹), Pte [S. I. Okey](#); Eltham; born [New Plymouth](#), 25 Jan 1918; farmer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁴² Brig [S. F. Hartnell](#), DSO, ED, m.i.d.; [Palmerston North](#); born NZ 18 Jul 1910; carpenter; CO [19 Bn](#) and [Armd Regt](#) Oct 1941–Apr 1943; comd [4 Armd Bde](#) 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; [5 Bde](#) Feb 1944.

⁴³ Pte [J. L. A. J. Lord](#); born [Waihi](#), 28 Jun 1918; farm labourer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁴⁴ L-Cpl [A. Parker](#); born [Lyttelton](#), 22 Feb 1907; manager tractor business; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁴⁵ Nearly two years later, eight months after [Italy](#) capitulated on 8 Sep 1943. Millar was among those who regained their freedom. After dodging the Germans for some months in northern [Italy](#), he entered [Yugoslavia](#) and was eventually flown to [Bari](#), in Allied Italy.

⁴⁶ As far as can be ascertained, [27 \(MG\) Bn](#)'s casualties on 15 Jul were six killed (including an attached ordnance man), 13 wounded and 43 prisoners (including several wounded).

⁴⁷ Pte [M. E. Morgan](#); born NZ 9 Apr 1911; farmhand; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁴⁸ Pte [F. A. Single](#); born NZ 30 Oct 1905; motor mechanic; died of wounds 16 Jul 1942.

⁴⁹ Pte P. T. Tipa; born NZ 9 Oct 1917; lorry driver; died of wounds 16 Jul 1942.

⁵⁰ L-Cpl W. Lawton; born Invercargill, 7 Dec 1911; engine driver; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁵¹ Pte E. G. Brooks; born NZ 4 Dec 1916; storeman; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 11 – EL MREIR

CHAPTER 11

El Mreir

In another night attack the New Zealand Division was to capture the eastern end of [El Mreir](#) depression, while 5 Indian Division again attempted [Ruweisat Ridge](#); 1 Armoured Division was to protect the southern flank and 'frustrate any enemy counter-attack,' and debouch to seize a line farther west.

For the assault [6 Brigade](#) was given the support of the whole divisional artillery, a medium regiment and [5 Brigade's](#) mortars and machine guns (4 Company); 18 Battalion was to cover the left flank with mortar and machine-gun fire (from 1 and 2 Companies). 'This must have been the machine-gunners' night out,' wrote Newland, 'some 120,000 rounds being fired in about 3 hours.' Eight guns of 1 Company and the six of 5 and 6 Platoons (which moved from 4 Company to 1 Company) fired on an enemy-held ridge about two miles south of the depression, and then lifted to maximum range for harassing tasks farther north. At the same time the twelve guns of 4 Company brought down fire on the eastern end of the depression.

Frazer says that prisoners taken after this attack 'referred to one of these combined shoots as "whispering death". They had no warning of its coming (the noise of the guns themselves was frequently lost among other noises) until the air was suddenly full of the horrid whispers and twittering of bullets coming from half a dozen different directions.'

Each battalion of [6 Brigade](#) had under its command two Vickers guns from 3 Company mounted on Bren carriers. 'Before the show,' says Captain Hains, 'Brig Clifton asked me if it was possible to mount MMGs on Bren carriers. I thought it was a good idea for some tasks and spent two days fitting one on and trying it out. Quite satisfactory.' Each carrier had a crew of two machine-gunners and the driver (an infantryman). ¹ Two guns and four men from 8 Platoon were allotted to 24 Battalion, and four guns and eight men from 9 Platoon to 25 and 26 Battalions. The rest of 8 Platoon, together with 7 Platoon, with six guns on 15-cwt trucks, were to follow with Advanced Brigade Headquarters.

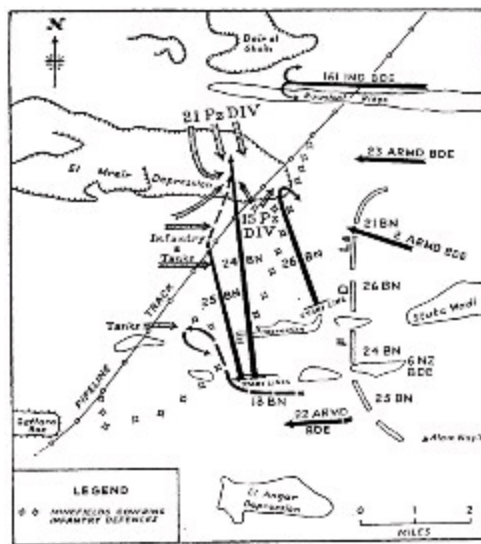
All three battalions reached [El Mreir](#). On the right the 26th crossed the start line at nine o'clock and in less than an hour the leading infantry were on the slope

leading into the eastern end of the depression. The vehicle column—anti-tank portées, mortar carriers, ammunition trucks, and the two carriers with the Vickers (Corporal Winfield and Private Dudman in one, Privates Collis and Nevin² in the other)—followed close behind the infantry.

They came up against tanks. A two-pounder portée and Winfield's carrier were told to creep up on one immediately in front, the Vickers to fire around the turret to keep it closed, and the two-pounder to knock out the tank. 'We inched up and when only about 100 yards away fired a long burst with the Vickers,' says Winfield. 'The tank replied with MG fire which dented the plating of the carrier and pierced some water cans. A few seconds later the 2-pndr fired a shot. Almost immediately an answering shot from the tank scored a direct hit on the 2-pndr—which put paid to that lot.' An ammunition truck had been set on fire and 'was well alight before we and the 2-pndr had a go at the tank. We must have been perfectly visible to Jerry all the while because we were between it and the tank whilst firing.... The whole outfit drew back to get up speed before making a dash through. We made the dash. There was a terrific explosion. Collis's carrier had either struck a mine or been knocked out by anti-tank fire.'

Winfield's carrier got through, but was completely on its own. Its three occupants could hear the infantry fighting but not a sound from the other vehicles. Winfield told his driver to circle to the left and back towards the burning ammunition truck. They met nobody until they came upon Collis's carrier. Collis was standing up, his face blackened by the explosion, and was trying to get his gun and tripod off the carrier. His gun and crew, including the injured driver, were transferred to Winfield's carrier.

After moving about for a while they met an armoured car, some officers from the Indian Division, and one or two carriers and portées. It was getting on towards daybreak, so they decided to get back through the minefield. Collis and Nevin walked



El Mreir, 21-22 July 1942

El Mreir, 21-22 July 1942

ahead to guide them, and realising they were heading diagonally into the minefield, changed direction. Winfield's carrier, having gone a couple of yards off course, backed before turning, but the carrier immediately behind cut the corner and hit a mine.

Winfield's party returned to headquarters, but did not learn for some hours what had happened to the infantry. The 26th Battalion, unable to make contact with the rest of 6 Brigade at El Mreir, and having encountered tanks, against which it could not defend itself, had withdrawn to 5 Brigade.

In the centre of the attacking force 24 Battalion got away at 8.30 p.m., and almost immediately ran into machine-gun fire, but quickly crossed a minefield, subdued the Germans beyond it, and reached the objective. The engineers cleared a gap through the minefield, and by 2.30 a.m. the transport was also on the objective.

Only one carrier-borne Vickers (with Corporal Burtenshaw³ and Private Pearse⁴) got through to support 24 Battalion; the other carrier (Corporal Pye and Private Green⁵) 'developed a fault and would go only into high gear. The driver reported this to the carrier officer,' says Pye, 'and as we were under shellfire and also a bombing raid at the time the officer ordered us to go back. Being the senior cpl I offered to change places with Cpl Burtenshaw but he decided to stay where he was and was taken POW.'

The advance, says Pearse, 'proved quite a nightmare as apart from the heavy

shelling, etc., we had great difficulty in maintaining contact with the infantry who were virtually strangers to us and moved much more rapidly in the darkness through the depressions and minefields encountered. At times we were quite lost. Early in the show we came across Lieut Cliff Rollinson [1 Company] with his Vickers guns lined out in a depression doing what appeared to be a perfect indirect shoot....

'After passing through the gap in the minefields we found ourselves for a short time together with a few other vehicles and an anti-tank gun or two. Later in the flashes and flare- lights we saw what appeared to be enemy gunners working round a field gun some three or four hundred yards away; I fired several bursts from the Vickers at them and no more was heard from that direction, but in the intense dark it was difficult to tell what was the result. It was too dark even to see the gun sights except by the gun flashes and we dearly wished we had a few rounds of tracer. This was our only target for the night. The driver then had a few anxious moments getting his carrier out as he could not get his machine into gear. The cartridge cases had piled round or into the gear selectors somehow but we eventually got going again and finally reached our objectives.... We searched round for a long time to find 24 Btn HQ....We were then detailed to attach ourselves to some anti-tank guns nearby to give support until further orders. We crawled into some enemy slit-trenches at 3 a.m. to sleep until dawn.'

On 6 Brigade's left rear 25 Battalion was shelled and machine-gunned in its assembly area and during its westward advance of about a mile in daylight to the start line, but got away to the north on time (8.30 p.m.) and by one o'clock had reached its objective, on the pipeline track about a mile south of the depression. The transport—including the two Vickers in carriers (Sergeant Cox and Private Beckingham with one, Privates [Daly](#)⁶ and Hambling with the other)—encountered mines soon after crossing the start line. A track was cleared and the column got through, but veered off course and might have headed into enemy country had it not been redirected by an infantry patrol.

Advanced Brigade Headquarters and the transport of the support weapons—including Captain Hains's company head quarters, 7 Platoon and half of 8 Platoon—followed 24 Battalion to the depression. Private Ross⁷ remembers the clatter of the Vickers shooting with 18 Battalion, behind whom they passed early in the advance. 'We had heard nothing like it in the Libyan campaign and we had high hopes that the

attack would be a success.... There was a terrific explosion not far from us....' One of the Defence Platoon's trucks had been blown up on a mine. 'Well after midnight we halted and dug slit trenches....'

About 4 a.m. Captain Hains reported to Brigadier Clifton, who 'was at the blower of one of the liaison tanks ⁸ and impressing their HQ with the necessity of tanks being up at first light. From what I gathered he was assured that the tanks would either be up with us or at least at the wire. I assumed that the Brig was worried about the noise of the tanks and wanted supporting tanks.... Soon after we arrived we heard tanks and one of the three liaison tanks went out west to investigate. It came back—with what information I do not know.'

When Brigadier Clifton learned that 24 Battalion was not in touch with the 26th on the right, he called up the 25th from the left rear with the intention that it should go into the 26th's position at dawn. During the 25th's move to the depression 'we hadn't the faintest idea where we were, had been, or were going,' says Beckingham. 'This situation went on all night; at daybreak we had travelled what seemed to me about 100 miles, but actually we must have gone about four or five during our gyrations.' When this group arrived about five o'clock, there were altogether some 600 men, twenty-one carriers, ten three-inch mortars, ten six-pounders, fourteen two-pounders and nine Vickers guns in the area originally taken up by 24 Battalion.

It was still dark, just before dawn, when the 25th moved out to take up a position on the right of the 24th. 'We advanced about 300 yards when all hell broke loose.'

Enemy tanks in hull-down positions were shooting into the depression. They soon set fire to an anti-tank portée, but the crew very quickly put out the flames which were showing up the other vehicles, guns and troops. Before long, however, most of the transport was on fire. The anti-tank guns were still on their portées, and most of them were knocked out before they had a chance to fire a shot. For about twenty minutes the Germans saturated what seemed to them to be a surprisingly compact target area. 'It was impossible to do anything but crouch low in our slit trenches while the whole area was swept with intense machine gun fire from the enemy tanks,' says Ross.

During a lull some of the New Zealanders attempted to get away to the south or east, but the Germans reopened fire and their tanks came down over the rim of the depression, followed by a few guns and small parties of infantry. In what was now broad daylight and in open desert, few managed to escape.

Captain Hains's pick-up tried to get away eastwards to the Indian Division's lines, 'but had only travelled about 100 yds when we ran into a group of enemy tanks at very close range,' says Private [Martin](#),⁹ the driver. 'The truck was riddled, Prvt [Brott](#)¹⁰ and myself were wounded....' Hains, Martin, Brott and [Laird](#)¹¹ took cover in an Italian trench, and a few minutes later saw a jeep approaching; it too was shot up by the tank, and Brigadier Clifton and one or two others baled out and dived into the same trench. Not long afterwards the Germans rounded up [6 Brigade](#). The Brigadier, having removed his badges of rank, helped a medical orderly with the wounded and subsequently made his escape.

Private [Forrest](#)¹² (7 Platoon) says his truck was set on fire and the gun crew captured. The other gun crew of this section tried to make a dash for it, but was also caught. During the lull in the firing the platoon commander (Lance-Sergeant Brown) and the other section decided to move back a short distance to a nest of unoccupied slit trenches. 'By this time the firing had resumed and we embussed and moved back another short distance to await developments,' says Ross. 'No other trucks or men appeared to be able to escape and at daybreak the whole area behind us was burning furiously to the accompaniment of machine gun fire.'

They decided to return to their own lines. Brown's truck led the way. Fire from two or three tanks appeared to be going over the tailboard of the second truck, in which Private [Burr](#)¹³ was hit. The small convoy kept going, and while heading along a lane with wire on each side, this truck exploded a mine and was immobilised. While [Caple](#)¹⁴ and two others took shelter near the minefield, Ross, [Arundel](#),¹⁵ [Huddleston](#),¹⁶ [Henty](#)¹⁷ and [Hopkins](#),¹⁸ several of them carrying Burr on a blanket, made towards Brown's truck, which had continued out of the minefield and stopped on a slight rise. 'Two Jerry tanks headed into the depression from the left of us but did not open fire,' says Ross. 'We thought this was because we were carrying a wounded soldier but upon nearing the Sgt's truck [we] found the reverse slope in the hands of German infantry.' Brown's truck had been machine-gunned, and he had

been killed and Lance-Corporal Helm wounded.

'Our first job as P.O.Ws. was to bury a number of 18 Bn boys who, after advancing across a wide wadi, had been killed in front of the German position. One British tank advanced into this wadi in the morning but retired after being fired on by Jerry anti-tank guns. Later we were machine gunned by our own tanks when burying our dead. Towards midday Pte Burr died as a result of his wound. In the afternoon the position was plastered for some time by 25 pounders but no further casualties were suffered.'

While some of these shells were landing close and the Germans were taking shelter, Arundel and Bain¹⁹ 'made a bolt for it but after a lot of dodging about and finally sheltering in a Jerry dugout with three Jerries who said they would surrender to us, we were picked up in the evening by the Germans returning to their dugout.'

Caple and his two companions found themselves surrounded by tanks until mid-morning, and were pinned down by shellfire from both sides for the remainder of the day. At dusk they walked out and asked the way from some infantry, who provided a truck to take them back to their own headquarters.

The section of 8 Platoon fared no better than 7 Platoon. 'The position looked absolutely hopeless from the start,' says Corporal Evans.²⁰ 'We stuck it out for about half an hour, and by that time it was obvious that there were only two courses open to us. Either to stay in our slit trenches till Jerry came and picked us up or make a run for it. Our platoon commander Lt Gumbley was not very keen on the running idea to begin with, but when the tanks started to move towards us, he changed his mind.'

Sergeant Bartlett²¹ says he counted at least thirty tanks. 'Very shortly we were told to get out the best way we could. Our truck had one tyre blown out and was heavily laden with our equipment. "Baldy" Hanley²² our driver told me he would give it a go to get away.' This three-ton truck was hit several times by armour-piercing tank shells, but was still 'serviceable' when Hanley reached his own lines.

The remaining fifteen men of 8 Platoon tried to get back on foot. It appeared to Evans 'that there were between two and three hundred soldiers doing their best to get away on foot. All went well for a time, then more tanks appeared on both sides

of us. Then some more showed up directly in front of us....' Evans and Bartlett stuck together and kept going. The smoke of a burning vehicle gave them cover, under which they reached some infantry Bren carriers, which took them back to Company Headquarters. These two NCOs and Hanley were the only members of the section who evaded capture.

Burtenshaw and Pearse (also of 8 Platoon), with their Vickers in the carrier supporting 24 Battalion, 'were obliged to surrender with the rest of the Kiwis around us.'

Cox's carrier was 'right on the outskirts'. Cox sheltered in a small slit trench while Beckingham and the driver took the carrier some distance away behind a small hillock. When Cox saw the infantry being rounded up in the depression he ran to this hillock, and realising that the position was hopeless, decided to take his section back to headquarters. 'In front of us and barring our way was a minefield. However I decided to risk it and led the way across the field with Daly's carrier following. When we had gone a short distance we noticed an anti-tank portee in the middle of the field. I directed Beckingham to drive the vehicle.'

Beckingham says that when he reached the portee an officer was sitting in the driver's seat trying to start the motor. 'He asked me if I could drive and I replied in the affirmative. He then asked me if I would turn around and go back with him and see if we could get a shot or two in to maybe give the Inf some support. I agreed but was not too happy as I had seen the rest of the portees blown to pieces. We only moved about twenty yards in the direction of Jerry when either we hit a mine or Jerry lobbed a shell under the front wheels because I can remember seeing one of the front wheels going sailing through the air. I was knocked silly for about 30 seconds, and when I recovered myself I found that the officer was missing.'

Beckingham appeared to be unhurt when he rejoined Cox's carrier. Noticing that Daly's carrier was no longer following his own when it was clear of the minefield, Cox decided to go back to see what had happened, 'but our driver refused to go back into the minefield. However Beckingham came to the rescue and took over the driving, although I don't think he had ever driven a carrier before. Then we found ourselves out of petrol, once again our luck was in, and we found a tin, which was poured hurriedly into the tank.

'We then set off back into the minefield, following the tracks we had made previously. About in the centre of the field we came across the missing carrier stopped with Daly wounded and the others fairly groggy. We picked them up, turned around and headed out of the field.' Apparently a mortar bomb had landed on Daly's carrier.

Beckingham 'then drove like merry hell for our own lines.' The carrier went through an artillery regiment and passed some British tanks heading in the opposite direction— miles too late of course!—and pulled up near an RAP, where Beckingham collapsed. 'We delivered him and Daly to the Medicos, and Hambling and myself went back to platoon headquarters,' says Cox. Beckingham was awarded the MM.

The battle of [El Mreir](#) cost the New Zealand Division over 900 casualties. Three men from 3 Company (Sergeant Brown and Privates Burr and [Olsen](#) ²³ were killed), a dozen wounded and twenty-eight captured; ²⁴ the company lost half its guns and several vehicles. Some of the survivors were transferred to 2 Company to replace 4 Platoon (captured on Ruweisat) and to bring 5 Platoon up to strength. The remaining thirty-six men, under Lieutenant Beard, were sent back to [Maadi](#), where the company was built up again under Major Tong with men recruited from Headquarters Company, pay office, post office and other base units. After a brief, intensive training, including two days' field shooting, 3 Company returned to the Division on 13 August.

The [24th Battalion](#), which had lost the greater part of its rifle companies, also went back to [Maadi](#) to reorganise. Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam relinquished command of the 27th on 25 July to replace Lieutenant-Colonel Greville, killed at [El Mreir](#), as its CO. Lieutenant-Colonel Robbie, who had been waiting impatiently at [Maadi](#), assumed command of the 27th and 'set about the problem of getting myself back to the Bn.

...Fortunately for me Gen Inglis, who was in command whilst [Gen Freyberg](#) was convalescing, was agreeable for me to assume my command at [Alamein](#).' But the 'large and cumbersome' Battalion Headquarters was not welcome; only the CO and the Adjutant (Captain Hume), each with his driver and batman, the whole party in two vehicles (a car and a 15-cwt), were permitted to return (on 2 August), 'so we didn't clutter up Div HQ and get under their feet.' The two officers efficiently con

trolled and administered the battalion. Robbie attended the [Divisional Headquarters](#) conferences, and his batman (Private [McLean](#) ²⁵ did his map work and telephone and signal work.

¹ Lt Gumbley says: 'The guns were mounted in the front of the carrier, part of the armour plating having been cut away to allow the gun to be mounted. Once mounted the gun had a very limited traverse, it was certainly mobile but against that it presented a very large target and could only be used for direct fire.'

² [Pte J. H. Nevin](#); born NZ 29 Jan 1915; clerk; died on active service 19 Dec 1943.

³ [Cpl K. A. Burtenshaw](#); [Nelson](#); born NZ 30 Jul 1913; slaughterer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁴ [Pte R. W. Pearse](#); [Temuka](#); born NZ 24 May 1919; farmer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped 8 Sep 1943.

⁵ [Cpl H. J. Green](#); born NZ 26 Jun 1915; labourer.

⁶ [Pte L. D. Daly](#); [Pareti](#); born [Timaru](#), 17 Aug 1910; school-teacher; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

⁷ [Pte W. F. Ross](#); [Kanieri](#); born [Hokitika](#), 29 Dec 1916; mental hospital attendant; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped 17 Mar 1945.

⁸ Three liaison officers from the armoured units detailed to protect [6 Bde](#) against counter-attack accompanied Brig Clifton's advanced headquarters, two of them in tanks and the third in an armoured car

⁹ [Pte V. R. Martin](#); [Golden Downs](#); born NZ 9 Dec 1917; farm labourer; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ [Pte L. S. Brott](#); born NZ 9 Dec 1904; launch man; wounded and p.w. 22

Jul 1942.

¹¹ Pte W. T. Laird; Hikurangi, North Auckland; born Scotland 23 Jul 1918; coal miner; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped Sep 1943; recaptured Jan 1944.

¹² Pte C. R. Forrest; Ashburton; born Timaru; cabinet maker; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹³ Pte A. S. Burr; born England 22 Apr 1901; timber worker; died of wounds 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁴ Pte J. W. Caple; Nelson; born NZ 26 Jul 1914; farmhand.

¹⁵ Pte R. Arundel; Motueka; born NZ 14 May 1907; electrician; wounded 25 Nov 1941; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped 12 Sep 1943.

¹⁶ Pte H. R. Huddleston; Rakaia; born NZ 16 Dec 1913; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁷ Pte J. S. Henty; Tapuhi, North Auckland; born 26 Apr 1910; farmer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁸ Pte J. E. Hopkins; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 15 Oct 1921; truck driver; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁹ Pte H. A. Bain; born NZ 5 Dec 1918; shop assistant; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

²⁰ Sgt E. B. Evans; Wainui, Banks Peninsula; born Timaru, 28 Dec 1911; farmhand; wounded Jul 1942.

²¹ Sgt R. P. Bartlett; Ashburton; born Waimate, 7 Jul 1917; farm-worker.

²² Pte A. Hanley, m.i.d.; Balclutha; born NZ 8 Feb 1916; labourer.

²³ Pte G. V. Olsen; born NZ 22 Jan 1917; lorry driver; killed in action 22Jul 1942.

²⁴ The New Zealanders captured at [El Mreir](#) were taken by Italian trucks to [Benghazi](#), where some 1300 troops were 'crowded onto an acre or two of ground under some palm trees.... conditions were appalling.' says Pearse. Three weeks later '500 of us were ... herded at tommy-gun point' into the hold of a cargo vessel, the Nino Bixio. On the second day at sea the ship, although escorted by two destroyers and aircraft, was hit by two torpedoes, one in the engine room and the other in the hold in which the men were packed. The ship did not sink, but was taken in tow by a destroyer. Among the 118 New Zealanders who died were six machine-gunners: [Cpl R. A. Ripley](#) and Ptes H. Lang, P. M. MacPherson, E. W. Polhill, H.L. Small and W. H. Windle.

²⁵ Sgt P. D. McLean; [Nelson](#); born Ashurst, 24 Dec 1915; draper's assistant.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 12 – THE NEW ZEALAND BOX

CHAPTER 12

The New Zealand Box

The Division, its infantry strength reduced by the disasters at Ruweisat and El Mreir to little more than one brigade, settled down in what became known as the **New Zealand Box**, south of **Ruweisat Ridge** and facing the enemy between El **Mreir** and the **Kaponga Box**. In the southern part of this sector 1 and 2 Companies supported 6 **Brigade**; in the northern part 4 Company remained with the 5th. ¹

The Division faced the enemy across a no-man's-land no more than half a mile wide at the northern end of the front, and two miles wide at the southern end. The forward positions were under constant observation, and men moved cautiously and as little as possible in daylight; they spent long hours in their slit trenches swotting the flies, cleaning their weapons, gossiping, reading, sleeping, or 'sitting just waiting for something to happen'. The mid-summer heat reached its peak; there was no natural shade, and the slightest wind raised the dust.

At night the engineers laid mines and assisted with their compressors and explosives in the excavation of weapon pits and dugouts in the hard, rocky ground; vehicles brought up rations and water (each man received a bottleful a day for all purposes—shaving, washing and drinking); patrols went out to reconnoitre and raid the enemy. Before daybreak the engineers and transport went back to the rear and the patrols returned to their own lines. The front was quiet again, except for occasional exchanges of shellfire or perhaps an air raid.

The machine-gun companies needed telephones, signal equipment, and spare parts for their guns. Eventually these and other necessities were obtained: when four tripods arrived on 3 August, 1 Company was complete with twelve guns for the first time since 28 June. But most of all they needed reinforcements. A company could function fairly well with 126 men (twenty-nine fewer than establishment) and could only just manage in a static position with 105, provided that at least sixty of these were gun numbers. At one stage 4 Company had fewer than 100 and 1 Company was nearly as weak. Company strengths were built up to 120-odd, but some of the unfit men should not have left Base. Dysentery and jaundice depleted the ranks; desert sores festered and took ages to heal.

Scarcely a day passed without some shelling, but towards the end of July Newland observed that 'we only get three or four bombardments a day now, each probably averaging about 8 to 10 shells at a time'; and later he remarked, 'What damage Jerry thinks he is doing we don't know; for about a month now he has been giving us a tickle up each day and in that time has collected no vehicles and only about ten men wounded, we ourselves having only one.'

That casualties were so few is surprising, for the machine-gunners were not idle. Together with the mortars and artillery they supported patrols and fired regular harassing tasks. 'Brigadier Clifton called us "my killers" and delighted in sending us ... out through the minefields in the early hours to harass the enemy at dawn,' says Clemens, of 4 Platoon.

The Brigadier mentions the machine-gunners in his own diary: 'Out at 0632 [on 31 July] to shoot up Hun fwd posts, with 4 Vickers and 16–25 prs. Had a grand half hour. Got them so rattled that they fired off all their defensive fire in every possible direction....' About the same hour a couple of days later he watched a shoot by the field and medium guns and the Vickers on [Kaponga Box](#): 'all ticked over nicely.' That evening he 'sent 8 Vickers out from Geoff Kirk's [1] coy to shoot up [[Kaponga](#)] Box.... they had a good run and actually got five tanks shooting back at them!'

When the Brigadier went out on 5 August to the Point 104 locality, about two miles out from the south-west corner of the [New Zealand Box](#), he 'met M.G.'s coming back—Geoff and four guns—who had helped rotate the area shot by [field] guns. Enemy arty def. fire all over the place.... More shooting at night [on 10 August] with Vickers and 25 prs. Took on enemy strong point at 3500 yds at 2200 hrs and got good shooting. ... Excellent show at 0645 [on the 23rd]. MMGs Arty and Inf from 26 [Battalion's] area. No casualties our side and prob. 30 Boche....'

For one of these shoots 4 Platoon set out at half past four in the morning and opened fire a couple of hours later at a group of men who left their anti-tank guns to collect their breakfast. The enemy broke and fled. The artillery joined in and raised so much dust that it was impossible to tell what damage had been done, but next night a patrol found enemy dead at the abandoned target area.

On a similar task a few nights later the platoon came under small-arms fire and

'considered ourselves lucky to get out with no casualties. Like all our other night shoots, no sooner do we open up and Jerry lets go in all directions, disclosing his positions. Boys get a great kick out of this, just so long as it is going the other way—tonight most of it came the wrong way, at us, more by accident....'

One morning 4 Platoon's fire fell right on the target 'and a couple of bodies were seen to be dragged away.' Brigadier Clifton was 'also nearly dragged away as he was forward of the guns observing and unfortunately some of our shots fell short and around him. Own Inf. upset about this also as they were forward of guns and were kept in their holes by our own fire. On investigation ammo. was found to be faulty and barrels also beginning to key hole.' Some thought the Mark VIIIIZ ammunition was causing the heavy wear and tear on the guns, but the barrels themselves may have been faulty.

Second-Lieutenant Wells ² (5 Platoon) went out before dawn one day with an artillery OP protected by an infantry patrol; his platoon had been all night in a forward position. 'At dawn,' he says, 'I found a great target (about 20–30 men) but before I could get the guns firing the Arty had messed things up by smoking the area.' Two mornings later, when Sergeant Gainey ³ had the guns forward and Wells was again with the OP, the artillery waited until the Vickers had fired a good burst. A group of men who appeared to be getting up from their slit trenches went to ground, but Wells saw that the first bursts and the subsequent fire landed right among them. The OP party was detected and hotly engaged by small arms and mortars, so called for rapid fire by the machine guns and smoke from the artillery, and beat a hasty retreat. Everybody got back safely.

When Second-Lieutenant Blue (6 Platoon) also did some indirect shooting by wireless from an OP, the Vickers fired on a group of men who could be seen moving about, and although the artillery—'in for their chop'—obscured the target two minutes later, the shoot was declared a good one indeed; casualties were claimed with the first burst.

Meanwhile 1 Company (less 1 Platoon, with 2 Company) had been withdrawn on 5 August into divisional reserve for a much-needed rest, and four days later had become part of Reserve Group, under Lieutenant-Colonel Robbie's command; on the 13th this group was joined by 3 Company from [Maadi](#). The medical officer (Captain

Adams) and [Padre Underhill](#) arrived at Battalion Headquarters.

'We will fight the enemy where we now stand; there will be NO WITHDRAWAL and NO SURRENDER. Every officer and man must continue to do his duty as long as he has breath in his body,' declared General Montgomery, who replaced General Auchinleck as Army Commander on 13 August. Eighth Army barred the way to [Cairo](#), [Suez](#) and [Alexandria](#), and was to stand fast; later it was to take the offensive and destroy the enemy. If the Army wanted to retreat, it would have to do so on foot. All troop-carrying transport and all vehicles not essential for reconnaissance, supply and maintenance were sent a long way back to the rear, the New Zealand transport 45 miles to the 'Swordfish' area. This left each machine-gun company with a pick-up, a 30-cwt and a three-tonner for its headquarters, and one 15-cwt for each platoon. ⁴

[General Freyberg](#) resumed command of the Division, which was strengthened by the inclusion of a British brigade (the 132nd) and the return of 22 Battalion. Because 132 Brigade was new to the desert, some men were attached to corresponding New Zealand units for indoctrination. Several machine-gun officers and NCOs from a company of 6 Battalion Cheshire Regiment spent a day or two with the New Zealand machine-gunners. 'The object,' wrote Captain Newland, 'is for them to get some "local colour"—they'll get it too if they listen to some of the yarns that our fellows put over.'

The [New Zealand Box](#) was organised for defence in depth, strongly mined and wired. On 22 August 4 Platoon was with- drawn from 26 Battalion (which 5 Platoon was to support as well as the 18th) to prepare new gun positions farther back. With only one truck, the platoon had to move in relays. It worked strenuously in the heat of the day in an endeavour to make some impression on the digging. 'Toughest ground we have struck so giving it up until compressor arrives.' When the compressor arrived the platoon worked all night, and it was not until the 27th that it completed the gunpits.

Early next morning Lieutenant Morgan took No. 1 Section along what appeared to be an easy track to 18 Battalion, but the truck strayed into a minefield and was blown up, fortunately without damage to the men and guns, and the journey had to be completed in a borrowed pick-up. At 18 Battalion each gun was mounted on the back of a carrier, facing to the rear, the idea being that the carrier would back up a

slope until the gun just cleared the crest. At daybreak, when the two carriers were in position, the Vickers fired at troops carrying rations. The patrol returned without a casualty.

A squadron of 46 [Royal Tank Regiment](#) (thirteen Valentines and two Matildas) came under the Division's command 'to prevent a small break through on our front by enemy tanks turning into a rout,'⁵ and trained for its counter-attack role with six anti-tank guns towed by portées, two platoons from 3 Company, and six Bren carriers. Major Tong and the squadron commander worked out a method for carrying a Vickers gun, an NCO and two gun numbers, with sixteen belts of ammunition, on the back of a tank, and practised the drill with 7 Platoon riding on the tanks and 9 Platoon accompanying them in trucks. The squadron then rehearsed with [6 Brigade](#). On receiving a call from the infantry, the tanks and attached weapons went forward swiftly; the tanks dropped the Vickers at selected spots, went up to hull-down positions behind a minefield to cover the supporting weapons while they took up position, and then retired through them to rally farther back. [General Freyberg](#) and Brigadier Clifton appeared to be impressed, but the latter recorded in his diary: 'Still carrying MGs on back [of tanks] which is poor in my opinion. Too slow and too vulnerable. We'd rather had two 30 cwts.' This technique of the machine-gunners riding on tanks was not tested in battle.

Before dawn on the 26th two companies of Maoris raided the eastern end of the [El Mreir](#) depression, exterminated two companies of Italians and took thirty-five prisoners. Early in the afternoon of the following day 'we were subjected to the heaviest shelling any of my [11] Pln or for that matter any of the Maori Bn. had experienced,' says Lieutenant Gardiner.⁶ 'It lasted over an hour and caught very few. The damn things landed all round my HQ., not one but dozens, with three or four within 15 yards. And holes—they were over one's knees in solid rock. I guess it was our lucky day.'

Frequently 3 Platoon sent a section of guns to Point 104, outside the Box. Usually the section left before dawn, stayed out there all day and returned at dusk. A shallow, disc-shaped wadi rose to a low ridge, which gave cover for the vehicles; Point 104 was a lump on this ridge commanding a view of part of the enemy lines.

'What good it did, I don't know, but we fired a lot of ammo,' writes Private

Andrews. ⁷ 'We used to see some good targets, but mostly out of range. Most of our shooting was done just at dawn, & again at dusk, when we judged the enemy would be having their morning & evening meal, hoping to catch them above ground, & be of considerable nuisance to them. Then, again we would sometimes do a planned shoot in support of both large & small raids by the Infantry. We went out so often, that I know our constant dread was that Jerry would forestall us with a large patrol, and be waiting for us some morning. Luckily, he didn't, because he could have killed, or captured the lot of us, before we got our guns off the trucks.... I don't think any one of us relished the idea of going—too much like being out on a limb.'

In the evening of 30 August, when 6 Brigade raided Deir Umm Khawabir, 2, 4 and 5 Platoons went forward with infantry patrols and mortars to assist, and 3 Platoon went out to Point 104 with a strong patrol which also included infantry, two anti-tank guns, three mortars and some carriers. The Vickers fired many thousands of rounds (up to 12,000 a platoon) in less than an hour; the mortars fired over 4000 bombs, the 25-pounders 4000 shells, and the medium guns another 400 on and around the raiders' objective. Sixty-eight men from 18 Battalion passed through the minefields and assaulted the sangars and weapon pits, killed or wounded forty of the enemy, and captured a German paratrooper and thirty-two Italians. The enemy shelled the New Zealand positions, concentrating mostly on the artillery.

After midnight the patrol at Point 104 could hear vehicles approaching. The mortars and other weapons opened fire, upon which all sounds of movement ceased. The enemy, who had gone to ground, soon directed a concentration of mortar, anti-tank and small-arms fire at Point 104. The patrol was ordered to withdraw.

After firing a few belts from Point 104 earlier in the night, 3 Platoon had retired about a quarter of a mile and had gone to bed; it had intended to stay until the first light of dawn. 'We were woken by the sound of foreign voices nearby,' wrote Private Bell. 'I'll be blowed if it wasn't a party of Jerries or Ities digging in. Then shelling and mortar fire began all round us. We thought we were cut off. Anyhow Russ. Brown ⁸ decided to try and go back to our lines.'

'I have some very vivid recollections of that night,' says Andrews. 'All hell seemed to have broken loose, & we packed up and made a run for it down the wadi. It was the first time the Enemy airforce used parachute & "Xmas tree" flares over us,

& the wadi was lit up as bright as day, making us feel mighty conspicuous. There was a mighty rumbling of massed enemy tanks & transport moving up, mostly on the [[Qattara](#)] depression side.... The wadi was heavily mined, and the sappers, not knowing we were out there, had just finished closing the gaps. However, we convinced the sappers we weren't Huns, & they lifted some mines & let us back through.'

That same night 5 and 132 Brigades completed changing places, the New Zealanders going to the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge on the southern side of the box and the British troops to the sector facing [El Mreir](#), as a preliminary to the intended relief of the New Zealand Division by [44 Division](#). Advance parties arrived from the Cheshires, who were to take over from the New Zealand machine-gunners. The relief, however, was cancelled. Not long after 1 a.m. the codeword twelvebore was received: Rommel had begun an offensive.

As had been anticipated, Panzerarmee's attack came round [Eighth Army's](#) southern flank, through the minefields south of the [New Zealand Box](#).

The box, a rectangle of minefields, was solidly dug in and had ample stocks of ammunition. The three brigades (seven New Zealand and three British battalions) were supported by four field regiments (about ninety-six 25-pounders), probably a dozen medium guns, thirty ack-ack guns, 140 two-pounder and six-pounder anti-tank guns, at least 150 two-inch and three-inch mortars, and between fifty and sixty Vickers guns. Artillery stationed outside the box could also shoot on the New Zealand front.

A Cheshire machine-gun company supported 132 Brigade on the western front facing [El Mreir](#); 1 and 2 Companies were with [6 Brigade](#) in the south-west corner of the box, and 4 Company with [5 Brigade](#) on the southern front; 8 Platoon was with A Squadron Divisional Cavalry covering the easternmost minefield running south from the box, and the rest of 3 Company with the squadron of Valentine tanks, the mobile counter-attack force.

News of the enemy's approach reached the Division before 2 a.m. on 31 August, and an hour later the artillery and 2 and 6 Platoons opened fire on several hundred Italians in Deir el Angar, about a mile and a half from 6 Platoon. The Italians dug in,

and when daylight came were seen moving about their sangars; 6 Platoon cut short this activity. The Vickers had some excellent shooting.

The Italians were protecting the flank of the columns advancing through the minefields farther south. These minefields were a far more serious obstacle than the enemy had expected. His tanks made very slow progress, and after emerging into open country next day were further delayed by soft sand; they were bombed mercilessly by the [RAF](#) and constantly shelled by the artillery along their flank. By evening, when they had covered only about 24 miles in twenty-four hours, they faced the [Alam Halfa](#) defences and three brigades of British tanks. The panzer divisions did not have sufficient fuel to manoeuvre or advance farther—they had barely enough to take them back to their own lines. The ships bringing the promised supplies of petrol from [Italy](#) and [Greece](#) had been sunk or turned back. Before the battle was properly joined, Rommel decided to withdraw.

During the morning of the 31st the New Zealand artillery shelled the targets to the south, and some sporadic fire was returned. The shelling died away about midday, when a dust-storm prevented observation, and the troops rested as best they could in the heat and dust.

In mid-afternoon one of Divisional Cavalry's mobile columns operating south of the box withdrew through 8 Platoon's position, and was followed by a few shells. 'About this time,' says Lieutenant [Gibson](#),⁹ 'we were advised that the main enemy thrust was south of Deir Muhafid.' His platoon was overlooked by the high ground north of [Muhafid](#), so was pulled back and dug in on a ridge about 1000 yards south of the box. A Squadron's tanks and carriers were in hull-down positions behind it.

That night some vehicles drove up close to the wire about half a mile from Sergeant Homer's section of 11 Platoon (with the [Maori Battalion](#)), and a hundred men debussed. The Maoris opened up with rifles and Bren guns, and the enemy replied with small arms and light anti-tank guns. The Vickers fired on fixed lines and dispersed troops who could be seen in the moonlight. The enemy retired.

Next morning (1 September) some Germans drove up in a captured pick-up flying a [Red Cross](#) flag. 'It fooled us for a while,' says Gardiner, 'but when it appeared to be getting too inquisitive, we opened up. So also did an anti tank gun, and how

they [the enemy] got back goodness only knows.'

It looked as though the enemy was trying to work his way between the British armour and the eastern side of the New Zealand Box. He was discovered digging in on the reverse slope of a ridge about 2000 yards south of 8 Platoon, which engaged vehicles whenever they came within range on a track along the top of the ridge and stopped two trucks and forced a light gun to pull back off the crest. [General Freyberg](#) visited the platoon and complimented the gunners on their shooting.

There was a lull during the usual midday dust-storm, but in the afternoon German and Italian tanks, guns and troop-carriers, advancing north from [Muhafid](#), were engaged by British tanks and scout cars, British and New Zealand artillery, and Divisional Cavalry. A spandau in a well-concealed position sniped ineffectually at 8 Platoon, and a captured two-pounder on a portée kept popping up on the ridge to the south and sniping at the tanks until discouraged by a few bursts from the Vickers.

Several enemy tanks crossed the ridge, and about half past four a company of infantry began moving slowly over the crest. As they advanced they were engaged by 8 Platoon and A Squadron's light tanks. After a while Gibson received a message from the commander of the tank troop asking when his platoon was pulling out. Squadron Headquarters had ordered a withdrawal, but had forgotten that 8 Platoon was without wireless. It was quickly arranged that the tanks should cover the platoon, and the machine-gunners grabbed their guns and equipment and made off at high speed.

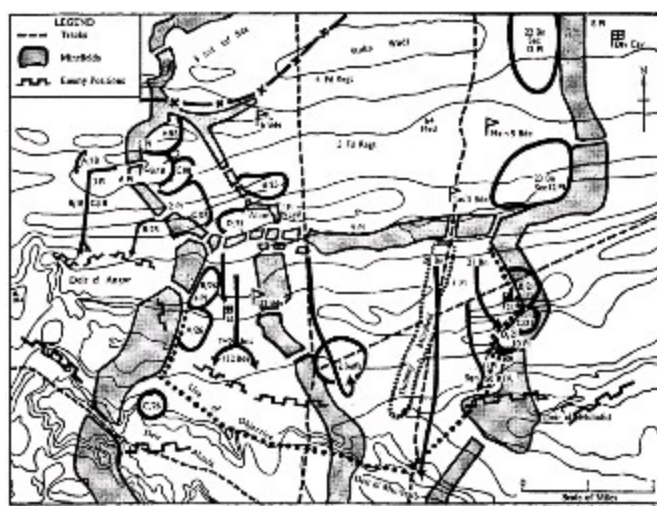
Little happened during the next day or two. A Junkers 88 which had been set on fire by the ack-ack crashed onto a 4 Platoon truck parked in a vehicle pit and destroyed the truck and its contents. A fighter, flying low into a wadi in front of 11 Platoon, was brought down by Vickers fire. 'There had been a slight sand-storm during the night & the majority of the gunners had their guns stripped for cleaning,' says Lance-Corporal Bertinshaw. 'Fortunately the No. 2 gunner, Pat [Paul](#),¹⁰ & myself had just re-assembled our gun when a German Messerschmitt dived away from a dog-fight, apparently out of ammunition, for it appeared to be undamaged, and headed for home along the wadi. We did not have to elevate the gun. I fired perhaps 60 to 80 rounds as I followed it along. Pieces flew off the plane & it crashed in a

cloud of dust about a mile beyond. It did not catch fire.’ The pilot made off towards his own lines.

Eighth Army planned a southward advance from the New Zealand Box to the northern edges of the **Alinda**, Munassib and **Muhafid** depressions, which would threaten the enemy's supply route and line of retreat. The attack was to be launched on the night of 3–4 September by 132 Brigade (on the right) and 5 NZ Brigade, with 26 Battalion covering the 132nd's right flank.

The enemy began his retreat. He directed the full weight of his air force on the British positions north of his withdrawal route, and of course the **New Zealand Box** came in for most of this. The bombs, including ‘butterfly bomb’ canisters, were dropped indiscriminately, and the strafing seemed to be aimless. Parachute flares lit up the desert, and aircraft with sirens screamed overhead. It was a noisy, sleepless night, but little damage was done.

At 11 p.m. two companies of 18 Battalion set out on a diversionary raid on the Italians on the northern edge of Deir el Angar, where they killed and wounded many and took 50-odd prisoners. Everything did not go according to plan for 3 Platoon,



Deir el Munassib, 3-7 September 1942

Deir el Munassib, 3–7 September 1942

which went out through the minefield gap to give covering fire for the raiders. ‘We went forward about a mile thru’ heavy shellfire,’ wrote Bell. ‘After an agonizing delay, while Mr Brown located the gun positions, one belt per gun was fired—rapidly

— as ordered. Then we dived for the trucks, anxious to get out of the area, but Jerry had other ideas. His shelling became intense. All we could do was lay down and hope for the best. Shrapnel tore everywhere. We found a trench finally and waited till things eased off, then we headed for home.’ Andrews, wounded, was the only casualty.

The raid on Deir el Angar and some harassing fire by 2 Company were supposed to distract the enemy while 132 Brigade formed up for the attack. Unfortunately the brigade was late in getting started; while the troops were passing through the minefield gaps and forming up on the start line they were bombed and shelled by an enemy who had been brought to the alert. The brigade began its attack, but met opposition on a ridge north of [Deir Alinda](#) and fell back without having reached the objective.

The role of supporting 26 Battalion, on the 132nd's right flank, was allotted to 4 Platoon. ‘We were told there would be no Artillery support, there was a good track through the minefield which would be lighted & taped by the [Provost Corps](#), & the enemy would not be able to cover it,’ says Corporal Clemens. ‘Things went OK for a time & then we came upon apparently the 132 Brigade jammed nose to tail ahead of us & there we sat for a time while Jerry really plastered us.’

The rifle companies of 26 Battalion managed to get through one of the two minefield gaps, and the transport and support weapons (including 4 Platoon), diverted from the other gap, also got clear. Two rifle companies reached their objectives on the eastern edge of the westernmost minefield running south, but the third company was out of touch. The support weapons stood by Battalion Headquarters. At first light Brigadier Clifton arrived and set out in his jeep to look for the missing company. ‘We watched him go, not to return,’ says Clemens. The Brigadier was captured by the Italians. The missing company, after fighting its way through some outposts, found the enemy on all sides and was eventually overrun.

Meanwhile 4 Platoon was told to bed down and be prepared to move up at dawn to support the infantry. After dawn Lieutenant Morgan went forward to a large vehicle pit which made a good observation post. While going up with Sergeant Gould to report, Lance-Sergeant Tritt was killed by a mortar bomb, and Clemens was called on to take his place. Gould set about getting a section of guns into position on the

left flank.

When Clemens arrived Morgan told him to look down into a depression below them. 'There must have been 500 troops milling about & I thought laying minefields,' says Clemens. 'I was a bit slow in the uptake & took it for granted they were ours. Mr. Morgan soon put me wise & told me to get my two guns up on the high ground about 50 yds to his right & get stuck into them. We had little trouble finding vacant sangars & here we set the guns up. Jack Collis and Jack Caple were the No. 1s.... There was no need to give fire orders—it was Gun Control with swinging traverse. Well, they fired rapid, belt after belt & caused consternation below.... I doubt if a better Machine Gun target appeared during the whole war....

'Unfortunately Caple's gun developed a persistent stoppage & he lost valuable firing time clearing it. There was an RAP truck in the midst of the target & the Itis who had been hit rushed around it for protection. One of them climbed up on it to hold out the Red Cross Flag. At my orders we momentarily stopped firing, I thinking that perhaps they were an Ambulance Corps of some description....

'We commenced firing again but almost simultaneously mortars commenced falling all around us, fired from some higher ground than ours on our flank. So severe was the mortaring & so persistent that we dared not raise our heads above ground. The remains of our dream target soon disappeared under this protective fire & from then on to dark we were pinned down by mortars right on the spot but which caused no casualties.'

Gould's section, some distance away, did not see the target engaged by Clemens's section.

The two assaulting battalions of [5 Brigade](#), after passing through the southern minefield of the [New Zealand Box](#), were to advance down a corridor between two minefields, [28 Battalion](#) to the northern edge of Munassib and [21 Battalion](#) to the northern and western edges of [Muhafid](#). Until called forward, their transport and support weapons and a squadron of 50 [Royal Tank Regiment](#) waited near the minefield gap.

A report reached Brigade Tactical Headquarters that [21 Battalion](#) was on its objective, and its transport and support group—anti-tank guns, mortars and 10

Platoon—set off about 1.30 a.m. They met anti-tank and machine-gun fire, which fell short or passed a few feet overhead without doing any damage. When they reached Battalion Headquarters, they were told that the success signal had been fired prematurely and because the radio telephone was not working the battalion had been unable to tell them that it was too soon to go forward. They were sent back out of the fire they had encountered until it was time to guide them forward again. 'We were hardly under way,' says Lieutenant [Halkett](#),¹¹ 'when enemy aircraft screamed overhead dropping flares, 2 KG incendiaries and light anti-personnel bombs. The latter were going off like fire crackers all around us. Some confusion resulted but we were soon moving forward again, having had a fright but no casualties to 10 Pl.'

Halkett learned that 21 Battalion had met more resistance than had been anticipated and had not captured the whole of its objective; it was not in contact with the [Maori Battalion](#) on the right. 'As daylight was near I suggested that 10 Platoon go forward to our planned positions or as near to them as it was reasonable. We had only gone forward about 250 yards when we met 2 or 3 men of D Coy 21st who informed us that they were the most forward section of D Coy in the area. As daylight was close 10 Pl selected a platoon position, unloaded and proceeded to dig in into what proved to be hard going. The platoon trucks were sent back to our previous area (under Sgt [Hellyer](#)¹²). At first light we were able to speed up our digging and before any enemy action occurred we were about 2 ft. down.'

The platoon opened fire about 6.30 a.m. Two German officers, about 1000 yards away, were scanning the area through their glasses, and made a most undignified retreat when the four Vickers began shooting at them. Much to everyone's disgust they escaped. The Vickers fired intermittently at scattered infantry and an observation post under a knocked-out 88-millimetre gun. 'Some of our spare numbers did a little rifle work at a few individuals as close as 300 yards.'

The Maori Battalion's attack went too far. The Maoris charged down the slope into the Munassib depression and disposed of all the enemy who stayed to fight; they took over a hundred prisoners and maimed and killed several hundred Germans and Italians. But at daybreak they were still disorganised and too far forward.

The squadron of tanks and the support group (including 11 Platoon) were still

waiting to go forward about 2 a.m. 'We were all getting concerned in case the lateness of start would not let us get dug into our proposed positions in Enemy territory before first light,' says Lieutenant Gardiner. 'During this period the area was constantly lit up by parachute flares and we were subjected to Air Burst shelling. There were no 11 Pln. casualties but several Maoris were killed and wounded.'

About half past two the tanks, having negotiated the minefield gap, set off along the line of lights the provost had laid to mark the route; they were led by a jeep containing Captain [Bennett](#)¹³ (liaison officer at Brigade Headquarters) and another Maori officer, and were followed by the support weapons and transport. They unexpectedly came to the end of the lights, but continued to advance on a compass bearing. It became clear to the crew of Gardiner's pick-up, in which a tank compass had been installed, that they were swinging well off their course. The column stopped. 'I went up to see what was happening,' says Gardiner, 'and it was admitted by the leaders that we were lost.' The column reported to Brigade Tactical Headquarters by wireless from one of the tanks. A few minutes later the [Maori Battalion](#) came on the air and was asked to fire flares as a guide. Two white flares went up. They may have been fired by the Maoris, but some believe the enemy overheard the wireless conversation and fired them.

'Anyway we got back into our vehicles and proceeded towards where the flares went up.... We had not gone a great distance when we ran into what appeared to be a perfect ambush. A veritable hail of tracer met us in the quarter light at extremely close range and looked for all the world like the waterfall act on the usual 5th November show.... We all dived out of our trucks into the sand to make ourselves as scarce as possible until organised. I went across to the Tank leader to see what he proposed and his words were "We will charge the bastards" which he proceeded to do almost immediately, standing up in the turret of his tank. They had gone no distance before he stopped one front on. I understand they were done over pretty severely. However with our thin skinned stuff there was very little we could do. I went around the gun crews and told them to get back on to their trucks and beat it back to an area at the right of the opening in the wire where we could reform and then decide what to do, as we were quite useless where we were.'

The pick-up and two gun trucks got back, but the other two were missing.

Gardiner set out in a carrier to look for them. 'The anti tank stuff had died down but there was still plenty of Spandau and rifle fire about. We got back into a shallow depression a little way removed from the ambush where we found the other two trucks helping to pull each other out. They were almost on hard stuff when I arrived and despite the fact that there was nothing I could do they seemed very pleased to see me.

'When I got the whole team together and incredibly enough completely intact—not even a puncture and only an odd bullet hole—we found ourselves alongside [21 Bn.](#)' Gardiner told his story to the CO (Lieutenant-Colonel [Harding](#) ¹⁴), who said the platoon had better dig in with the 21st. 'It was then getting light so I sorted out a gun line [near Point 100] which of necessity had to be in a hollow and started the lads digging. The Hun then started to do us over and believe it or not some shrapnel actually hit shovels and we suffered no casualties.

'Sgt. Mel. Homer assisted me in digging and organising an O.P. on the ridge immediately to our front from which it would be possible for me to conduct an indirect shoot and still give the Maoris some support, as well as supporting [21 Bn.](#) We were actually in a minefield (the O.P.). We were hardly set when the Maoris started pulling out on foot bringing their wounded back with them. At this stage [Brig. Kippenberger](#) drove up the hill in a jeep and we had to wave vigorously and run like mad to stop him driving on to the minefield.'

The Maori Battalion was withdrawn from a very exposed and isolated position, going back behind a line taken up by 22 Battalion, and 11 Platoon was ordered to return to Company Headquarters.

Enemy activity to the south and south-east increased after 11 Platoon's departure. Halkett reconnoitred to the right of Point 100, the immediate vicinity of which seemed to be cluttered up with an artillery mobile observation post and some soft-skinned vehicles. When he returned to 10 Platoon's gun positions he found that [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) had left orders for the platoon to move up to the Point 100 area where, he had said, some good shooting could be had.

Sergeant Hellyer, who had heard the guns firing and anticipated their requirements, drove up with ammunition and rations. The Nos. 1 and 3 gunners of

each team went ahead to change some enemy sangars to the south-west of Point 100 so that they would face in the opposite direction. No. 2 Section's guns were loaded on Hellyer's truck and were about to be signalled up when the enemy put down very heavy shellfire, which cleared Point 100 and made it impossible for the section to move. Halkett decided to abandon the attempt to occupy the sangars until dark. While the men were coming back Private [Dixon](#)¹⁵ was wounded and the medical orderly made a 300-yard dash under fire to attend to him.

Evidently this shellfire was in support of a counter-attack. Enemy troops began to advance from the south onto the ridge near Point 100, and some tanks came into the sangar area. No. 1 Section opened fire while No. 2 unloaded its guns and went into action in its former position. 'The enemy infantry were most persistent and advanced group after group into the fire of our 4 guns at 1000 to 1200 yards ranges,' says Halkett. 'His determination was to be admired. The survivors of these group attacks all fled ... and disappeared over the crest.' By one o'clock the counter-attack had been completely defeated by the machine-gun and mortar fire and some heavy artillery concentrations. The Vickers, which swept beyond the crest over which the enemy had retreated, fired over 8000 rounds altogether.

'We had had rather a hectic time and the presence of the tanks on the right of Point 100 was disconcerting,' says Halkett. 'However 4 were promptly knocked out by our anti tank guns and we experienced very little fire from any of them.'

Hellyer left for the ADS with Dixon and some 21 Battalion wounded. Shellfire gave them a lively trip.

In mid-afternoon infantry, tanks and armoured cars assembled on the ground between the Munassib and [Muhafid](#) depressions for another attack on [5 Brigade's](#) southern front, but the troops and vehicles who approached were soon beaten off by the mortars and 10 Platoon, which fired only 2000 rounds this time. The enemy did not press the attack after a heavy artillery concentration was brought down on him.

Although these counter-attacks had been so crushingly de- feated, the Division had not secured its full objective, and a lodgment short of the rim of Munassib served little purpose. It was decided, therefore, to withdraw after dark. With 26 Battalion 4 Platoon returned to [6 Brigade's](#) sector. The 151st (British) Brigade was

brought into the box to take over 5 Brigade's former position on [Alam Nayil](#) ridge, and 3 Company, which had gone there early in the day as part of the counter-attack force, ¹⁶ came under 151 Brigade's command. Fifth Brigade went farther back to the eastern perimeter of the box, where 10 Platoon rejoined 4 Company next day.

About half of the battalion's casualties in this battle had occurred in 3 Company when Lieutenant [Mathews](#) ¹⁷ and Private [Horn](#) ¹⁸ had been killed and two or three wounded during a dive-bombing attack by thirty aircraft.

By the evening of 5 September the enemy had retired into the minefields between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat, a hill that stood out on the skyline farther south. Two or three days later the battle was called off. Rommel's final attempt to break through the Alamein Line had ended in the gain of four or five miles of desert on the southern flank, and he had no chance now of reaching the [Nile Delta](#).

The next few days were tedious and trying. The heat was excessive, and the flies, despite all the measures taken against them, seemed as bad as ever. The shelling continued, and the [RAF](#) and [Luftwaffe](#) were both very busy.

While patrolling with Divisional Cavalry in the area where 132 Brigade had failed in its attack, 8 Platoon picked up an abandoned British gun truck complete with a Vickers gun and stores. After taking over 8 Platoon's role with Divisional Cavalry, 10 Platoon participated with the artillery in a shoot intended to make the enemy reveal his dispositions south of Point 100. 'We did a hit and run show,' says Halkett, 'and fired 8000 rounds in 10 minutes ... and got away without retaliation. The retaliation came when we were clear and drove some of our light tanks from the area [near Point 100] from which we had fired.' The enemy also shelled a ridge which until then was believed to be in his hands.

Rumours had been rife since the end of August that the New Zealand Division was to be pulled out of the line. When an officer from the Cheshires arrived at 2 Company in the afternoon of 8 September to make arrangements for taking over the machine-gun positions next day, the company diarist recalled the previous visit by officers of this unit for this purpose: 'We wonder whether this will be like the last one, however we retired [to bed] that night full of hopes.' Next morning was

heralded by a salvo from the enemy artillery, 'but today we didn't mind, although the awful thought was in the back of our minds, be a b— to be hit on the last day.'

The Division handed over the [New Zealand Box](#) to 44 Division and proceeded to the coast between [Burg el Arab](#) and El Hammam. The troops unloaded their transport (which went back to 'Swordfish' group) and settled down comfortably in the sandhills near the sea. Those who did not go on leave to [Cairo](#) for four days or to [Alexandria](#) for the day bathed and relaxed on the beach; it would be hard to say who benefited the most.

¹ 2 and 3 Pls with [25 Bn](#), 5 and 6 Pls with [18 Bn](#), 4 Pl with [26 Bn](#), 10 Pl with [21 Bn](#), 11 Pl with [28 Bn](#), and 12 Pl with [23 Bn](#).

² Lt H. S. Wells; [Wellington](#); born [Lyttelton](#), 23 Jun 1916; civil servant; ADC to GOC 2 NZEF May 1943.

³ Sgt S. C. Gainey; [Wellington](#); born [Invercargill](#), 24 Sep 1912; clerk.

⁴ The approved scale of transport for a company at that time was two pickups, 15 15-cwts, three 30-cwts, four three-tonners and six motor cycles.

'The Bn possessed its complete transport only for March and April 1941 (only 3 weeks in action), for another 3 weeks in October-November 1941, and not at all in 1942,' says K. H. Hume. 'It had no jeeps till October 1942. In 1941, Pl comds. did recces in Dodge PUs! All the rest of the time till Oct 1943, its tpt group was scratching for equipment, using second hand or worn out vehicles or trying to make one three tonner do the work of three 15-cwts!'

This 'lack of transport of a suitable type,' says R. I. Blair, 'seemed to be with us throughout the war and consequently had a great bearing on just how much we could achieve.'

The machine-gun battalion, of course, was not the only unit which suffered from the lack of proper equipment and transport.

⁵ Statement by [Gen Freyberg](#) on 16 Aug 1942.

⁶ Capt N. F. Gardiner, DSO; Auckland; born New Plymouth, 3 Nov 1910; farm appraiser.

⁷ Sgt H. B. Andrews; Kaipara Flats, North Auckland; born NZ 26 Feb 1918; farm assistant; twice wounded.

⁸ Lt R. S. Brown; born NZ 17 Aug 1914; journalist; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

⁹ Maj C. M. H. Gibson, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Romford, England, 11 Sep 1919; clerk; DAQMG HQ BCOF (Japan) 1947–48; Area Officer, Timaru, 1954–56; GSO 2 Trg Army HQ 1956-.

¹⁰ Sgt P. J. Paul, MM; Lower Hutt; born Petone, 2 Jan 1911; wool classer; wounded Jun 1942.

¹¹ Capt J. T. H. Halkett, MC; Greymouth; born NZ 22 Sep 1908; clerk.

¹² WO II G. A. Hellyer; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 10 Sep 1920; grocer's assistant.

¹³ Lt-Col C. M. Bennett, DSO; Wellington; born Rotorua, 27 Jul 1913; radio announcer; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1942–Apr 1943; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

¹⁴ Brig R. W. Harding, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, North Auckland; born Dargaville, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; Auck Regt 1916–19; CO 21 Bn 1942–43; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr–14 May and 4 Jun–23 Aug 1943; twice wounded.

¹⁵ Pte F. H. Dixon; born NZ 31 Mar 1907; machinist; wounded Sep 1942.

¹⁶ When A Sqn 46 RTR left to support 132 Bde's attack, Maj Tong assumed command of what remained of this force: 3 MG Coy (1, 7 and 9 Pls), two troops (later three) of anti-tank guns, six carriers and A Sqn's B Ech.

¹⁷ Lt D. B. Mathews; born NZ 20 Jun 1915; school-teacher; killed in action 4

Sep 1942.

¹⁸ Pte C. A. S. Horn; born Bannockburn, 1 Jul 1915; tent maker; killed in action 4 Sep 1942.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 13 – THE BATTLE OF ALAMEIN

CHAPTER 13

The Battle of Alamein

Eighth Army built up a powerful striking force and prepared to take the offensive. Thousands of reinforcements arrived from the [United Kingdom](#), ¹ 300 Sherman tanks from the United States, and hundreds of field and anti-tank guns and thousands of vehicles of all kinds from overseas or the repair workshops; enormous stocks of ammunition, petrol and food were accumulated. The enemy of course was aware of this growing strength and expected an attack, but elaborate precautions were taken to prevent him from guessing where and when the blow would fall.

After about a week of leave and relaxation the New Zealand Division, reinforced by 9 British Armoured Brigade, ² moved south into the desert to rehearse its role as one of the assaulting divisions. The rehearsal was conducted under conditions as similar as possible to the actual attack. Minefields were laid in positions corresponding to those expected to be found on a ridge in the enemy's defences; the field guns were moved forward during darkness to surveyed positions and were dug in and camouflaged; the two infantry brigades advanced at night behind a creeping barrage in accordance with a timed artillery programme, and tracer and smoke were fired to assist the troops in keeping direction; the sappers blew gaps in the wire with bangalore torpedoes and lifted the mines (which they had laid themselves); lanes were marked and lighted, and the anti-tank guns, Bren carriers, mortars and machine guns were guided through. Before daylight the infantry and supporting weapons consolidated on the objective, in front of which the sappers laid a defensive minefield, and the tanks were brought forward in support.

Brigade manoeuvres and other exercises followed. Wireless communication, provided for the first time between the machine-gun platoons and company headquarters, worked very satisfactorily.

The First Echelon veterans celebrated the third anniversary of their arrival at [Burnham Camp](#), and to mark the occasion 4 Company had a 'big flare-up'. The cooks, who had built an oven, turned on a very good dinner, and the hilarious evening was succeeded by a dismal grey morning with numerous hangovers, but a company route march 'straightened out a few of the kinks.'

Two sergeants of the Army Field Photographic Unit, who wanted photographs of the 'real thing', visited 10 Platoon, and by the judicious use of gelignite cunningly sited to simulate shellfire obtained some effective still and moving pictures.

The New Zealanders returned to bivouac areas on the coast, where a sandstorm was followed by very heavy rain and a high wind. A few bivouac tents were flooded. Lieutenant-Colonel White, having recovered from the wound he received in November 1941, assumed command of the battalion on 16 October, and Major Robbie became his second-in-command. The next few days, says the new CO, 'were spent in a welter of conferences, studying of orders and maps...' He attended a conference of unit commanders at which General Montgomery explained the plan for the offensive. 'He said that the Hun could and would fight hard but that if we kept up the pressure he would crack in 10 to 14 days—we were not to expect immediate spectacular results.' Later the story was passed on to the company commanders, and then to the platoon commanders, and two days before the battle the men were told. By that time the LOBs (including the seconds-in-command) ³ had left for 'Swordfish' area, and the trucks had been packed. Once again the transport was heavily laden; the companies held six days' reserve of rations and water.

On the night of 21–22 October the Division moved up towards the front, the northern part of the Alamein Line, and for the next two days 3 Company (with 6 Brigade) and 4 Company (with the 5th) lay doggo in their slit trenches in an assembly area; the rest of the battalion (which together with an anti-tank battery and two companies of engineers formed Reserve Group under Lieutenant-Colonel White's command) was in a staging area about 15 miles farther back.

The evening of the 23rd was still and clear and illuminated by a full moon. Reserve Group, the last of the operational troops, moved forward along its allotted track, ⁴ and when held up by the traffic in front of a 25-pounder gunline, was 'politely told to shift away a bit or the muzzle blast might prove annoying, as the barrage was due to start.' At 9.40 p.m. the whole of Eighth Army's artillery, 908 field and medium guns, simultaneously opened fire. 'I could never imagine a more infernal racket. The concussion made your whole body vibrate....' The ground shook and the flashes were incessant all along the horizon.

Eighth Army held the Tell el Eisa ridge, a mile or two from the coast, and

intended to secure the [Miteiriya Ridge](#), a long, gently sloping, narrow feature farther inland; flanked by these two ridges, four infantry divisions of [30 Corps](#) were to make a breach six miles wide in the enemy defences, through which two armoured divisions of [10 Corps](#) were to pass to engage the enemy armour. In operation lightfoot 9 Australian and 51 Highland Divisions, advancing due westwards, were to form a corridor for the passage of [1 Armoured Division](#); 2 New Zealand and 1 South African Divisions, advancing south-westwards onto [Miteiriya Ridge](#), were to form another corridor for the passage of [10 Armoured Division](#). At the same time [13 Corps](#) was to make diversionary attacks farther south.

While the artillery was shelling the enemy batteries, 23 Battalion ([5 Brigade](#)) on the right and 24 Battalion ([6 Brigade](#)) on the left advanced into no-man's-land. At ten o'clock the guns began to bombard the enemy's foremost defences, and twenty-three minutes later the barrage began to lift forward 100 yards every three minutes. Keeping close behind the bursting shells, the infantry crossed ground sown with mines and booby traps and met hostile fire, but overcame German and Italian strongpoints and reached the first objective, about two miles from the start line.

The second phase of the attack began at five minutes to one. The opposition grew stronger, but on the right [5 Brigade](#), advancing approximately another two miles, captured the whole of its final objective; 21 and 22 Battalions both exploited beyond the ridge. Sixth Brigade was partially successful: 26 Battalion reached the forward slope of the ridge, but the 25th (on the left) stopped short of the crest with about half a mile to go. Mortar and machine-gun fire came from the left flank, where the South Africans were well short of their objective, and shellfire came from [El Wishka](#) ridge farther west.

Behind the infantry the sappers, sweeping with their mine-detectors and assisted by Scorpions (tanks fitted with chains which threshed the ground in front of them), cleared two lanes through the minefields in each brigade's sector for the passage of the anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns, which waited for the infantry success signals.

'We are only a hundred yards in front of our 25 pounders,' wrote Lieutenant Halkett (10 Platoon). 'The flash and concussion is terrific and we are much too close for comfort.... We are packed nose to tail almost and we are lucky nothing lands in

our area. We are off trucks hugging the ground. This sort of waiting is most trying on the nerves of all of us. Cordite fumes and smoke have now spoiled a perfect night and visibility is becoming poorer as we wait.

'At 0315 hours success signals are reported and we climb aboard our gun trucks and they start to grind slowly forward. We pass through our own minefields and then the first enemy ones. The track is well taped and the lights are excellent. As we [21 Battalion's A Group] near the first objectives of the infantry enemy shelling starts, some falling fairly close. Harassing stuff which was intermittent for the remainder of the darkness....

'We pass through the first wave of our infantry who are reversing the captured enemy positions and consolidating the gains to here. On to the next mined area where we get our first check as the minefield is not cleared yet; but our engineers are confident that the check will be slight. This is serious for us as the tanks are to come through almost on our heels and trucks cannot argue with 40 ton tanks.... The shelling is thickening up and is unpleasantly close. While waiting we scratched shallow slitties to shelter in by lying flat. The tanks start to arrive so everybody clambers aboard truck or stands in his shelter.

'We are now in the way of the tanks who have priority and 21 Bn A Group are ordered out; to go back and make their way in through the Highland Div area on our right flank.... First light is near as we start to follow the Scotties' taped route. Scottie casualties are in evidence. Theirs was a hard fight. The track is well marked and is being widened by the Scottie infantry. We are making good time and just before sunrise we are waiting orders on the right rear of 21 Bn HQ in a booby trapped area. Fortunately when the sun comes up it shines in the enemy's eyes. We are starting to be shelled and mortared heavily. There are some casualties in A Group but none in 10 Pl. 21 Bn HQ orders us out as we have no chance of getting into position in daylight and the infantry are partly protected by our tanks.

'We return through the Highland Div area, making a run for it. When clear of the track we turn South but when passing through an old mined area my third truck goes up on a mine. A dirty black cloud of smoke with figures staggering about in it... Leitch ⁵ is badly wounded and the truck is a write off. Loads are readjusted and we rejoin A Group.'

The 22nd Battalion's support group was also delayed in the minefields and arrived late, and only two two-pounders could get into a forward position; the rest of the anti-tank guns and 11 Platoon stayed behind the ridge. Back on the first objective 12 Platoon was with 23 Battalion. Two of 4 Company's trucks had been knocked out and six men wounded, of whom Private Jennings⁶ later died.

The sappers working on the lane to 26 Battalion cleared a gap in a minefield on the northern side of the ridge, but were told not to go on to the minefield on the other side because it would soon be daylight. The tanks of the Warwickshire Yeomanry, in support of 6 Brigade, attempted to pass through the last cleared gap at the same time as 26 Battalion's transport, which caused some confusion and delay, and as it was then too late to send the support weapons to the infantry on the forward slope, a gunline was formed along the crest and the reverse slope.

'We arrived at our likely position later than expected,' writes Lieutenant Gardiner (8 Platoon). 'Dawn had broken. As a result we were under fire—M.G. shell etc—and had to get below ground as soon as possible. I was instructed to cover the minefield and take up a forward position in the [600-yard] gap between 25 & 26 Bns. A quick recce showed a position on the crest & of course just our side of Miteiriya Ridge.

'I instructed the lads where to put the guns & they needed no urging to get the holes dug. While this was going on I moved out forward to find out what I could i.e. who were on flanks, field of fire etc., and in lieu of a Tommy Gun which I did not have, took a rifle and bayonet. Huns were here & there in odd shell holes but they had no fight left in them & were actually sheltering as much as possible from their own fire being on the forward slope. With the stuff floating about it was difficult to get them out of the holes—to say nothing of language difficulties. However they seemed to understand a few well known Australian adjectives and once on their feet, I had to run to keep up with them as they soon appreciated the fact that it was much safer on our side of Miteiriya ridge than the exposed side.' Gardiner brought in five prisoners.

On the left flank of 25 Battalion 7 Platoon went into an indirect fire position, while back at the first objective 9 Platoon was with 24 Battalion.

Two squadrons of the [Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry](#), in support of [5 Brigade](#), reached the ridge at dawn, and although some tanks were blown up on mines, a dozen or more crossed the ridge and were joined by others from [10 Armoured Division](#). They engaged a strong force of German tanks—which did not close in on the New Zealand infantry as they had done so often in the past. Many of the British tanks were knocked out or blown up on mines before the survivors retired behind the ridge.

Reserve Group dug in its guns to form a defensive position in the 'middle distance', covering a gap in the first enemy minefield in [5 Brigade's](#) sector. In the smoke and dust little could be seen of what was happening out front: glimpses of tanks hull-down behind the ridge, burning vehicles, and occasional bursts of flame. Some shells came over but did no damage.

All day bombers in formations of eighteen flew over, dropped their loads while still within sight and then returned to the rear. Few enemy aircraft were seen until next night, when 'We were dive-bombed by planes with screamers on,' wrote Lieutenant-Colonel White. 'You should have seen the reception those planes got, and heard it. Tracer of all colours was going up from all directions.'

Reserve Group would not have an operational role until the break-through had been achieved. The CO was convinced that, had he been permitted, he could have found useful employment for his guns. 'As the first day developed,' he says, 'it was obvious that the attack was held up & it seemed to me that we in the Div Res Gp could be of effective assistance even from where we were with the range of our VIIIIZ Ammo. Clearance offered no problem. [Miteiriya Ridge](#) as is well known was only a slight swell in the general flatness. Plentiful stocks of ammo. were held. If we were brought into action our planned role (now seemingly remote) need not be jeopardised. I made my way to Div. H.Q. & suggested to one whose job it was to know about such things that I could be of assistance....' The offer was not accepted.

Reserve Group moved back two nights after the attack began to a less exposed location where the transport could disperse.

The troops on [Miteiriya Ridge](#) were shelled, mortared, machine-gunned, sniped at, and occasionally bombed, but they were not counter-attacked, although it

appeared that they might be when enemy infantry came forward and spread out along the front.

At daybreak on the 24th 8 Platoon was still digging in when about 120 tanks came up to within 20 or 30 yards of the crest of the ridge. Gardiner says 'they were hull down to fire just over the crest (& through our gun line)... When the Hun started to fire at the tanks and they retaliated we became useless. However we couldn't withdraw as a gap would have been left if the Tanks retired. We therefore dug holes in the soft sand by the Tanks and sat tight leaving a man to each gun pit more or less on guard.'

'Gardiner, together with his rangetaker (Private [Black](#)⁷), established an observation post in a derelict tank in the minefield 150 yards forward of his guns, and kept 26 Battalion fully informed of developments by wireless and telephone.

'Another factor which prompted me to retain my gun positions was that the [commander] of the Tanks was insistent that they were going to move forward—most likely in the early evening.

'From the activity I saw on the Hun front during the day, the bringing up of gear etc, one felt that they were getting ready for a set piece attack, in fact I will always remain convinced that our action in getting the tanks to sally forth eventually [next night] had a major bearing on the battle & certainly scotched any possibility of a counter attack in the Sector.'

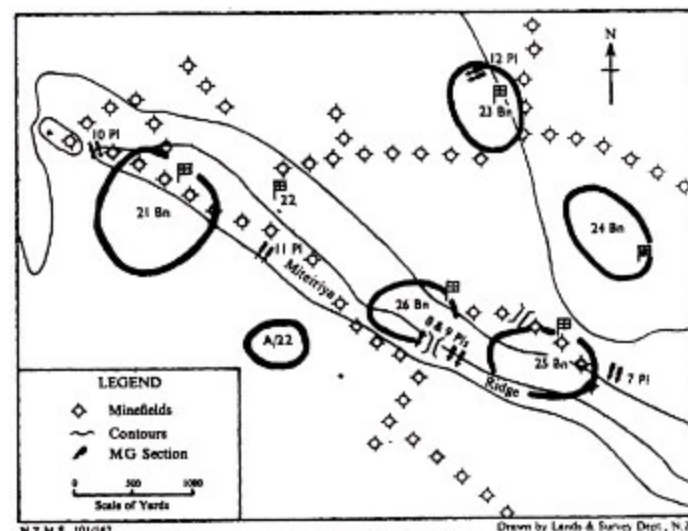
As there was no infantry near 7 Platoon and no sign of the South Africans, this platoon's guns had to shoot on the exposed flank as well as to the front, and to accomplish this Lieutenant Beard, accompanied by his rangetaker (Private [Brehaut](#)⁸) and batman (Private [McLeod](#)⁹), dug an OP forward in the minefield under mortar fire. Early in the morning the platoon began an indirect shoot at sangars and small groups of infantry about a mile away. It also knocked out the crews of two field guns and later destroyed the guns. Beard took some prisoners. About 1 p.m. a figure with a walking stick came in and identified himself as an officer of the [Cape Town Highlanders](#) (the South African battalion that was supposed to be on the flank). He was sent under guard to Headquarters 25 Battalion.

Late in the afternoon No. 2 Section went farther forward, where if necessary it

could fire on fixed lines across 25 Battalion's front, but no such fire was called for that night. Beard was injured when a tank ran over his OP in the darkness, and Sergeant [Read](#)¹⁰ assumed command of the platoon. Beard's driver (Private [Davis](#)¹¹) was mortally wounded by a ricocheting anti-tank shell.

Corporal Hunter died after an anti-tank shell, or part of one, struck him while he was standing in his slit trench; he had just made tea for the gun crews.

The Australians and Highlanders had gained only part of their objective, and the northern corridor was not yet open for [1 Armoured Division](#). The southern corridor had been cleared to [Miteiriya Ridge](#), but [10 Armoured Division](#) had not gone through. It was decided, therefore, to renew the attempt to get the tanks through both corridors on the night of 24–25



Miteiriya Ridge, 25 October 1942

October. The [26th Battalion](#) went back over the ridge before the barrage began at ten o'clock.

A supply column for [10 Armoured Division](#) was packed close together near a minefield gap behind the ridge—possibly it was going to refuel the tanks which had not yet gone forward—when a truck near the front was set on fire by a shell or mortar bomb. This attracted enemy aircraft, which came over singly to bomb the vehicles carrying ammunition, petrol and troops. A stick of bombs caught 9 Platoon, which had been ordered forward from 24 Battalion to support the 26th and had

dispersed on clear ground. A gun truck was destroyed and Privates Anderson,¹² Kidd,¹³ James,¹⁴ and Wood¹⁵ were killed, and Medland¹⁶ and MacMillan¹⁷ mortally wounded. The Vickers and tripod were saved. Two of the platoon's guns joined 8 Platoon in the gap between 26 and 25 Battalions.

The 100-odd tanks which had been shooting over the machine-gunners' heads during the day were still there, although Gardiner had expected them to leave at 10 p.m. and be clear by midnight. He made inquiries and eventually found four majors (probably squadron commanders); their CO was missing and they were arguing as to who was to lead the way. After listening for a while Gardiner told them 'most strongly that we had got our objectives with heavy casualties and if they with all their armour did not go forward that night we should most certainly lose the hard earned ground.'

The artillery barrage had stopped, but the tank commanders agreed to advance with the promise of covering fire from the Vickers. The machine-gunners placed guiding lights in the minefield gap on top of the ridge immediately in front of their gunline, and Private Black climbed on to the leading tank and guided it through. Dozens of tanks went through this opening; others went through another gap well to the north. When the last tank was clear, the six Vickers of 8 and 9 Platoons gave covering fire against anti-tank guns up to two miles away. During this shoot Corporal Farrell's gun (he was acting as a No. 1 gunner) exploded and blew out its breech, but miraculously he was not hurt.

The Vickers engaged every target that offered. One of the best shoots by Gardiner's six guns on the 25th was at forty men led by two motor cycles and followed by three trucks. Some of the enemy fell as soon as the Vickers opened fire and the others were not slow in taking cover; they did not advance again.

Early in the evening 9 Platoon was detached from 8 and took up a position about half a mile to the left. Both sections of 7 Platoon were now on the forward slope. The infantry was dug in behind the ridge, and the three platoons of 3 Company, therefore, were front-line troops.

Next day a battery of captured 25-pounders about two miles away was silenced by a quarter of an hour's fire from 8 Platoon. Lance-Sergeant Cattanach¹⁸ and

Private Black tried to stalk a machine-gun and sniper post, and although they failed to get it, the post did not fire again that day. Infantry advancing from pits were engaged by 9 Platoon, and when the artillery prevented the enemy from getting back the platoon raked the area with nine belts from each gun.

From the morning of the 25th until the night of the 26th the machine guns and the tanks held 6 Brigade's part of the ridge. 'I do think,' says Major Tong (who was at the gun positions), 'that credit should go to the Guns for the part they played in not giving the Enemy a chance to mount a counter attack.'

The tanks' penetration into enemy territory on the 25th probably disorganised any local counter-attack that might have been intended, but they did not get very far against the anti-tank defences. Those from 10 Armoured Division soon returned, and about forty from 9 Armoured Brigade were recalled later in the day. The attempt to exploit southwards was then abandoned and the main weight of the attack switched to the northern corridor.

Not until the night of the 24th–25th had it been possible to get most of 5 Brigade's support weapons into position. By dawn 10 Platoon, having returned by the original route to 21 Battalion and having been directed to a likely machine-gun position, was dug in ready for business in the minefield at the north-western end of the ridge. Halkett's OP, in the lee of a knocked-out Crusader tank on the forward slope, was connected by a field telephone with the gunline. 'The area was a machine gunners' dream,' he says. 'Targets everywhere. Guns, transport and troops in their vicinity. Our Vickers were slightly decrested and we did all our firing indirect as a platoon. Ranges 2000 yards to 4750 yards. We went to work methodically and soon had the enemy infantry and gun crews hunting cover. Observation was excellent and we took on the most active targets one by one. By midday good targets were scarce as the enemy had suffered quite heavy (observed) casualties.'

The platoon kept a reserve of ammunition in case the enemy counter-attacked, and when stocks were beginning to get low Sergeant Barclay¹⁹ opportunely arrived with a fresh supply. Visibility was very poor in the afternoon, when the platoon spent much of the time keeping under cover from overs, of which it seemed to receive more than its fair share, from the tank battle. Movement in the gunline, unless carefully concealed, attracted fire from a light machine gun towards the right rear,

where the Highlanders were supposed to be. Halkett's OP was rather prominent, 'and we almost got used to the odd spatter of LMG fire from a well concealed gun on our right front.' The rangefinder (Private Humphreys) and Private Forsyth,²⁰ who acted as runner-observer, were busy men, especially Forsyth, whose telephone line was cut several times by shell and mortar fire, which necessitated his carrying messages by hand.

Fifth Brigade had received a warning order in the evening of 24 October that it was to be relieved by 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade next day. No such relief took place, but the expectation that it might do so caused some confusion in which 11 Platoon became involved. Three rifle companies of 22 Battalion were withdrawn to the transport area near Brigade Headquarters in the morning of the 25th, and 11 Platoon went back with them; only A Company remained on the forward slope of the ridge. The machine guns were ordered back to the ridge in the evening and dug in on the forward slope about 150 yards in rear of this company. They did a successful shoot against what appeared to be engineers laying or clearing mines in broad daylight, and found other good targets during the next two days; they scored hits on men and vehicles with direct fire.

Sixth Brigade and the flanking South African brigade attacked south-westwards from [Miteiriya Ridge](#) on the night of 26–27 October to complete the occupation of their original objectives and straighten the line.

The plan required that 7 and 8 Platoons should move forward with 25 and 26 Battalions and also give supporting fire for the attack. After checking the gun positions with his platoon commanders, however, Major Tong was convinced that the task could be done more efficiently and with fewer casualties if the guns remained in their commanding position on the ridge, where they could support with overhead fire and engage known targets. He therefore arranged with Brigade Headquarters that they should not go forward.

The artillery barrage opened at ten o'clock in front of 25 Battalion, which exploited beyond its objective, and by two o'clock the supporting anti-tank guns and mortars were in position.

On the right 26 Battalion's advance was supported by artillery concentrations

and overhead fire from 8 Platoon and the three-inch mortars (which were under Gardiner's command for the purpose). The infantry met unexpected opposition. Two companies could not get forward and withdrew, and the third (B) held ground about a quarter of a mile to the right front. Gardiner considered that two or three spandau nests were responsible for the hold-up and suggested that the battalion use its Bren carriers to 'root' them out. The suggestion was not adopted, but seven carriers were brought up and disposed along the ridge near 8 Platoon.

Because of some talk of the strong possibility of a counter-attack, the Vickers were fully manned for the remainder of the night, and Hawkins grenades were on hand to close the minefield gap if necessary. The machine-gunners lighted the gap to assist the anti-tank guns through to support B Company. A Crusader tank came up to help, and Black got in with the tank commander to direct him forward if necessary. The hostile fire died down and the anti-tank guns went quietly into position.

The Vickers were in action again at dawn, when 8 Platoon's first target was a battery of captured 25-pounders, probably those the platoon had engaged the previous day; they had gone farther back, but their gun flashes were seen, and the tops of three trucks were in view above the crest. Immediately the Vickers opened fire the 25-pounders stopped and the trucks departed.

The spandau sniper whom Cattanach and Black had stalked the previous day began shooting again in the afternoon; he was too close for searching fire by the Vickers, but the mortars kept him quiet. A shoot of twelve belts from each of 7 Platoon's guns drove the gun crews from an artillery position. A group of infantry went swiftly to ground when 9 Platoon opened up, and later some of them were seen retreating.

The Maori Battalion relieved the 21st on the night of 6 Brigade's attack. Next morning an artillery OP officer from the Highland Division joined 10 Platoon, 'and we got together and did some combined shooting which completely silenced a group of 88s about 3500 yards out,' says Halkett. 'We made a good team until late morning firing at suitable targets, mostly gun positions. About midday the enemy started to withdraw his infantry from our left flank and beyond. During the next two hours we had a machine-gunners' picnic. Infantry in the open. We gave them all we had and

could see several tumble over every time we fired. We prevented them getting back and drove them across our front and forced the remnants to surrender to the Scotties on our right. We used 22,000 rounds to do this by indirect fire.

‘Continuous firing was having its effect on our platoon guns and barrels were short. All our gun water had been used and nearly all our drinking water had been used in the guns. It was fortunate that Sgt Barclay arrived at this stage with ammunition, water and our reserve barrels. During the lull which now developed our guns were overhauled one by one, sights and barrels getting special attention.

‘A little later the enemy LMG which had been well concealed on our right front and had caused the OP some unpleasant moments was located. Careful preparations were made to fix this pest for keeps. We opened up on it but one of our Vickers started to drop shorter with each burst and before we could stop its crew from firing its shorts struck the crest about 25 yards in front of its position. The Germans had tried hard to locate us and had kept searching the general area with shellfire. This was their chance and they took it. During the next half hour we had everything but the proverbial “Kitchen stove” thrown at us.... Ellis²¹ was badly wounded in the face and was evacuated by stretcher as soon as possible to 28 Bn RAP. Eleven shell holes over 2 ft deep were counted in the rocky ground between the two flank guns after this shelling, which was the heaviest I ever experienced during the [Alamein](#) affair.

‘Visibility had become poor and no more shooting was done by us.’

The following night (the 27th–28th) the New Zealanders were relieved by the South Africans on [Miteiriya Ridge](#) and went back into reserve at [Alam Onsol](#), about 15 miles to the rear, where they made up for the lack of sleep and the strain of the last four days and five nights.

In the fighting on [Miteiriya Ridge](#) ten machine-gunners had been killed and eleven wounded—not many casualties if compared with the losses at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and in other desert battles. This might be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that the fighting had been less mobile. The German armour did not get the chance to counter-attack as it had done at [Sidi Rezegh](#), [Ruweisat](#) and [El Mreir](#). Also the troops had better knowledge of what they were to do—information had been passed right down to platoons before the battle.

On [Miteiriya Ridge](#) Gardiner won the only DSO awarded to a New Zealand machine-gun officer in the Second World War, Halkett and Beard the MC, and Cattanach, Black and Forsyth the MM.

[Eighth Army](#) planned a fresh assault— supercharge—to breach the defences just south of the Australian sector. Under the control of the New Zealand Division, 151 (Durham Light Infantry) and 152 (Highland) Brigades were to advance 4000 yards on a front of 4000 yards, and [9 Armoured Brigade](#) was to pass through and penetrate the enemy gun screen at Tell el Aqqaqir. The [1st Armoured Division](#) was then to break out from the breach.

A preparatory step was for 6 NZ Brigade to relieve 152 Brigade in the line. Replacing 3 Company, 2 Company left [Alam Onsol](#) with [6 Brigade](#) in the early evening of 30 October and travelled along the main road past some artillery which had just begun a barrage in support of an Australian attack near the coast. The New Zealanders took over from the Highlanders, and the Vickers were dug in before dawn. After a couple of days of inactivity a machine-gunner complained of being 'filthy all over ... frightened to move lest he stops something, no thought of hygiene.'

For the attack the battalion, less 2 and 3 Companies, was placed under the command of 151 Brigade, which was to advance on the right of the 152nd. 'The first orders were for 1 and 4 Coys only to be under command of 151 Bde,' says Lieutenant-Colonel White. 'However I pointed out that, with 2 and 3 Coys already allotted to N.Z. Bdes, Bn HQ was free— Div Res Gp having ceased to be—and I suggested that we also should go to 151 Bde. By the time the orders were amended 151 Bde had already moved. Thus it happened that I was absent from the briefing.... We had considerable difficulty in finding the Bde HQ next day.'²²

Captain [Blair](#),²³ who had just taken over 1 Company from Captain [Joseph](#)²⁴ (who was ill), had no maps and 'was completely in the dark, not knowing what was afoot.' Before attending the conference at Headquarters 151 Brigade in the morning of 1 November, he went to [5 Brigade](#) to get the picture clear in his mind. Major Cooper and the platoon commanders of 4 Company were also at 151 Brigade's conference, which (Blair thinks) 'was the most amusing I ever attended and certainly the most unrehearsed.... I can distinctly remember the Brig. apologising for his staff who had incorrectly drawn an enlargement of the battle area and he asked the

conference to visualise the whole map "up another square".' None of the New Zealand officers was satisfied with the briefing.

After nightfall the troops who were to take part in the attack began the approach march to the deployment areas behind the start line, and the tracks filled up with the tanks and transport of the supporting arms. The scene resembled that on the evening of 23 October. Thirteen field regiments and three medium regiments fired barrages and concentrations, and at five minutes to one on 2 November the two British infantry brigades began to advance. New Zealand engineers, following the infantry, cleared lanes through the minefields. Just before dawn the three regiments of [9 Armoured Brigade](#) sallied forth, and despite great loss in tanks destroyed and damaged, charged and overran field and anti-tank guns, dug-in tanks and infantry posts. The [1st Armoured Division](#), however, did not succeed in breaking out into the open.

Behind the assaulting [Durham Light Infantry](#), Headquarters 4 Company and 10 and 12 Platoons moved along the well-taped and lighted Diamond track (the northern lane); they passed through the British and then the enemy minefields, and halted about 800 yards short of the infantry objectives. The shelling, which had been spasmodic, increased as time went by. The two platoons waited while Major Cooper went forward to contact 8 DLI's headquarters. 'We had an uneasy time of it,' says Halkett, 'but as daylight was near 2 Lt [Kaye](#)²⁵ and I decided that as Maj Cooper had evidently been delayed and as no further orders had been sent back to us we should select alternative positions in our present area and be dug in as far as possible by first light. We would then be able to undertake any tasks we might be called on to perform.

'Maj Cooper arrived back at first light and although he did not expect us to be dug in, he approved our positions and ordered them to be completed. This was in preference to our being caught digging in after daylight.' A slight mist prolonged the time for digging in and by half past seven, when visibility had much improved, the machine-gunners could discern the infantry positions some 600 to 800 yards in front of them. 'All our field of fire was slightly rising ground and would not be a good target area.... There seemed to be considerable confused movement on our front and our positions were fully manned in readiness to open up but until things became clear we could not fire.'

Enemy tanks approached from the right flank about half past eight and a tank battle developed. The infantry and the machine-gunners received a heavy dose of overs, and when the tanks reached the infantry positions, 10 and 12 Platoons and Company Headquarters came in for some heavy shelling. [Cramond](#)²⁶ (a First World War veteran) and [Elliott](#)²⁷ received wounds of which they both died that day.

'We were not able to deal with any of the targets, although if we had been able to fire we probably would not have done much good, as we ourselves were having a thin time of it,' Halkett continues. 'The Durhams ... were withdrawing some anti-tank guns and some of their infantry were drawing back. Over 20 enemy tanks came in amongst them. Shortly Maj Cooper (about 1300 hrs) gave orders for 10 and 12 Pls to withdraw. During the process all our trucks were spattered with splinters but fortunately we had no direct hits or casualties in 10 Pl. We drew back about a mile....

'Things were looking very sticky at this stage but the arrival of some of our medium tanks from our left flank changed the complexion of things smartly. They seemed to plough into the enemy flank and in as many seconds 3 enemy tanks were going up in flames. The following enemy tanks and infantry seemed to melt away and the whole enemy counter attack fizzled out with no great casualties amongst our tanks as far as we could see. Our tanks now formed a protective screen for the infantry.'

All contact had been lost with the Durhams, and 10 and 12 Platoons now had no tasks, so were ordered back to Battalion Headquarters. Dive-bombers knocked out one of 10 Platoon's trucks and wounded four men.

Lieutenant Morgan says that 11 Platoon, supporting 9 DLI (on the left of 8 DLI), 'walked into a proper shambles.' At dawn 'Gerry fired everything he had at us.' The guns were dug in under airburst shelling. The sections were about 30 yards apart and the trucks about 300–400 yards back. The platoon had no communication by wireless or telephone, and the only contact with the infantry was the Colonel himself, who wandered about in the open.

The crew of a nearby anti-tank gun were killed or wounded, and three stretcher-bearers who set out from an ambulance towards them received a direct hit by a shell

and left practically no trace. The machine-gunners also suffered casualties. Corporal Paterson was killed and Lance-Corporal Bertinshaw wounded. Lance-Sergeant Hatherly, leaving his trench to attend to Bertinshaw, ran to the ambulance, some 200 yards away, returned with stretcher-bearers, and despite the shellfire, mostly airbursts, evacuated the wounded man. Hatherly, who was slightly wounded, stayed with his platoon. He was awarded the MM.

The [Durham Light Infantry](#) withdrew through 11 Platoon's gunline, and the tanks also drew back, shooting as they went. Nobody appeared to be in front of the machine-gunners, who nevertheless held their position. They fired in the direction of the enemy, but the Colonel allowed them to shoot only for short spells 'because he thought we made too much noise.'

The third battalion of 151 Brigade (6 DLI) took up a position facing north on the northern boundary in rear of 8 DLI. Headquarters 1 Company and 1 and 2 Platoons, in support, were met by the transport officer on the Diamond track and guided to Battalion Headquarters. 'Everything was most confused at this time it being completely dark and many casualties lying around without any MO or orderlies available to assist them,' says Captain Blair. 'I got a general idea as to where the Inf. Coys were and set off to find them. I finally met up with a forward Coy Comd. who more than had his hands full but he gave me sufficient information to allow me to get the two platoons off trucks and digging positions. At this stage Enemy transport was still milling around and it was difficult to decide just who belonged to who....

'The digging was hard and not completed by daybreak and we then discovered that we occupied a position in the FDLs and could see no Infantry near us except an Anti Tank gun and crew, about 5 yards from my then Coy. Hq. At about 0700 we could see a number of Enemy moving towards us and ... both platoons had some very effective shooting at a range of approx. 600 yards and the result was that the Enemy movement stopped and then rapidly retired. About this time some transport loomed up in front of us and remained in view for some time and it was at this stage that we began to receive a little too many AP shells to be really comfortable. The Anti Tank gun in our area kept pointing in an easterly direction which appeared wrong to me and no amount of persuasion would alter their ideas, however one or two AP shells decided the issue shortly afterwards and no more interest in the battle

was taken by the gun or crew.

'Whilst the guns were engaged on the targets to our immediate front Lt [Titchener](#) ²⁸ [2 Platoon] came over to me and reported that he had seen the troops on our left flank leave their positions and withdraw and wondered what was going on. I told him to be prepared for anything and that I would go and find Bn. Hq. and see what the story was. I went back a short distance and fortunately found 6 DLI Hq.... I asked the CO if he had any information and told him some withdrawal had taken place on our left and he told me that he had received no orders to move so I went back to the platoon and we carried on.'

One of 2 Platoon's guns had been dug in in the darkness immediately behind some higher ground and could not fire with observation unless the No. 1 gunner stood up behind it. Titchener decided that this was a case for indirect fire and sent his runner (Walker) back to the trucks for the director, with which he attempted to zero the gun. He was wounded while standing in the open.

The trucks, which had not gone far from the guns before dispersing during the night, stood out conspicuously in daylight and were covered very effectively by 'a very brave Hun sniper' who remained hidden on the right flank all day. Some of the men who went back to get ammunition or for other purposes were pinned down for several hours. The company had no communications through the [Durham Light Infantry](#), and the OC's jeep driver (Private Riddell) did his despatch rider's work under very trying conditions.

Lieutenant [Crisp](#) ²⁹ and Private [Keyworth](#), ³⁰ of 1 Platoon, were wounded late in the morning. Corporal McInnes crossed the exposed ground to get his truck, and disregarding the shellfire and sniping, collected and evacuated both wounded and a German. He was awarded the MM. Crisp, who had received a slight head wound, returned to the company later in the day.

'When we had a chance to look around and take stock,' says Blair, 'we discovered a foreign jeep among our transport and Jack Crisp was not slow to get out and slap a black diamond on it, thus claiming it as Coy. Transport. It was completely deserted but was full of Hymn books and a typewriter.' A week or two later the jeep was returned to its rightful owner, a senior [Eighth Army](#) chaplain.

At nightfall on 2 November 10 and 12 Platoons were sent back to their former positions with 8 DLI, or as near as they could get. 'We had an uneventful trip back and arrived after dark to meet some infantry from the Durhams who were marching out,' says Halkett. 'I located the officer in charge and he said that they had received orders that the show was off and they had been ordered out.... As we were still under command 8 DLI we withdrew to 27 Bn HQ to conform.' That night **6 Brigade** relieved the 151st, and the two machine-gun platoons, therefore, were ordered forward again to 25 Battalion, which took over from 8 DLI. 'We reached our old positions which were now badly knocked about. It was quiet with only an odd enemy shell coming in. Some tanks and vehicles were still burning and this gave the area an odd effect.'

Having seen so very little of 9 DLI during the day, 11 Platoon was very relieved when 26 Battalion arrived to take its place.

The 6th DLI left its sector long before 24 Battalion arrived, and in the meantime 1 and 2 Platoons 'alone appeared to be holding the front.' About 1.30 a.m. some noise was heard out in front. 'I do not remember just who started firing,' says Blair, 'but I think I am correct in saying that our S.O.S. signal was a green very light and one of the Platoons put the signal



German tanks knocked out near 3 Platoon at Medenine

German tanks knocked out near 3 Platoon at Medenine

During the halt at Sousse: J. A. Forsyth, W. A. Briggs, E. R. Jeyes, A. A. McCunn. H. S. Wells



During the halt at **Sousse**: J. A. Forsyth, W. A. Briggs, E. R. Jeyes, A. A. McCunn. H. S. Wells



2 Platoon in front of Takrouna

2 Platoon in front of Takrouna

One of 2 Company's guns knocked out near Takrouna



One of 2 Company's guns knocked out near **Takrouna**



The confluence of the Sangro (on the right) and Aventino rivers.
The Division advanced into the distant hills on the left after
crossing the Sangro

The confluence of the Sangro (on the right) and Aventino rivers. The Division advanced into the distant hills on the left after crossing the Sangro

Packing supplies for 3 Platoon on the Orsogna front:
D. T. Grogan, H. I. C. Stuart and L. A. Atkinson



Packing supplies for 3 Platoon on the Orsogna front: D. T. Grogan, H. I. C. Stuart and L. A. Atkinson



One of 8 Platoon's guns facing Orsogna at a range of 2800 yards

One of 8 Platoon's guns facing Orsogna at a range of 2800 yards

On Sfasciata Ridge. The track in the snow leads to part of 2 Company's gunline



On Sfasciata Ridge. The track in the snow leads to part of 2 Company's gunline



Montecassino (on the left) and the snow-capped Monte Cairo. Route 6 passes the northern spur of Monte Trocchio before crossing the Rapido valley to Cassino

Montecassino (on the left) and the snow-capped Monte Cairo. Route 6 passes the northern spur of Monte Trocchio before crossing the Rapido valley to Cassino



12 Platoon pauses on the Pasquale Road about a mile from Cassino. G. T. J. F. Wright and W. E. MacLean standing on the road

12 Platoon pauses on the Pasquale Road about a mile from Cassino. G. T. J. F. Wright and W. E. MacLean standing on the road



In a mountain sector: P. W. Stevens and L. S. Jenkins of 11 Platoon

In a mountain sector: P. W. Stevens and L. S. Jenkins of 11 Platoon

A mule team about to pack rations and ammunition for the Platoons



A mule team about to pack rations and ammunition for the Platoons



The San Michele school (on the right) and the church in which
4 Platoon supported D Company 24 Battalion

**The San Michele school (on the right) and the church in which 4 Platoon supported D Company
24 Battalion**

In the hills south of Florence: B. A. McKenzie and G. P. Brown
of 3 Platoon



In the hills south of Florence: B. A. McKenzie and G. P. Brown of 3 Platoon



10 Platoon packing up to leave Bellaria, on the Adriatic coast

10 Platoon packing up to leave Bellaria, on the Adriatic coast

Digging a gunpit near the Fiumicino River shortly before the advance to Cesenatico: D. C. McMath and N. O. Steel



Digging a gunpit near the Fiumicino River shortly before the advance to Cesenatico: D. C. McMath and N. O. Steel



The village of Pioraco, in which the battalion was billeted

The village of Pioraco in which the battalion was billeted

Ceremony at the Pioraco cenotaph on the Italian day of remembrance, 4 November 1944



Ceremony at the Pioraco cenotaph on the Italian day of remembrance, 4 November 1944



Behind 10 Platoon's gunline across the Lamone River before
5 Brigade's attack, December 1944

Behind 10 Platoon's gunline across the Lamone River before 5 Brigade's attack. December 1944

Digging in near Celle after 5 Brigade's attack



Digging in near **Celle** after **5 Brigade's** attack



Carrying their gun into position near Faenza: H. Low, N. H. Jorgensen and J. L. Pearse of 1 Platoon

Carrying their gun into position near **Faenza**: **H. Low, N. H. Jorgensen and J. L. Pearse of 1 Platoon**

Training as infantry at Esanatoglia: W. D. Saunders, G. T. Holden and K. B. Morrall



Training as infantry at **Esanatoglia**: W. D. Saunders, G. T. Holden and K. B. Morrall



Waiting in Kangaroos before crossing the Senio River

Waiting in Kangaroos before crossing the **Senio River**



Searching a German prisoner near Sesto Imolese after crossing the Sillaro River

Searching a German prisoner near Sesto Imolese after crossing the **Sillaro River**



Two Panther tanks put out of action by J. L. Tucker,
16 April 1945

Two Panther tanks put out of action by J. L. Tucker, 16 April 1945

A Panther tank ditched after being attacked



A Panther tank ditched after being attacked



Captured nebelwerfers

Captured nebelwerfers

3 Company crossing the River Po



3 Company crossing the River Po



In the Castello San Giusto, Trieste

In the Castello San Giusto. Trieste

A march through Yamaguchi, Japan



A march through Yamaguchi, Japan



Lt-Col L. M. Inglis
Lt-Col L. M. Inglis



Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam
Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam



Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin
Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin



Lt-Col D. G. Steele
Lt-Col D. G. Steele



Lt-Col J. L. MacDuff
Lt-Col J. L. MacDuff



Lt-Col G. P. Sanders
Lt-Col G. P. Sanders

up and ... an enemy 88mm must have mistaken this for a friendly signal as the complete gun and crew drove right into our lines a little to the left of our positions and in a short time was burning fiercely. I learnt later that someone had slapped a sticky bomb on the vehicle and was most annoyed to learn this as the burning heap tended to attract attention.'

After 24 Battalion's arrival Blair decided to move his platoons slightly to give them better observation from their gunlines. Later the tanks moved forward, 'but appeared hesitant about going any further and we had a grandstand view of [as it appeared to Blair] a one sided tank battle in which we seemed to be losing heavily. The MMGs did not have much to do but the air was full for a few hours and we were very fortunate not to have suffered any casualties.'

The infantry were not so fortunate; nor was 4 Company. 'During the morning,' says Halkett, 'an enemy 88 made things very uncomfortable with "air bursts" which kept us in our slitties. Late in the morning one shell burst just short of one gun position.' Private [McCartney](#),³¹ who had left his pit to brew tea, was killed, and two or three wounded had to be evacuated.

It is remarkable that the machine-gunners' casualties on 2 and 3 November did not exceed six killed and fourteen wounded.

Detached from 1 Company, 3 Platoon supported 28 (Maori) Battalion, which attacked in the early hours of 2 November on 151 Brigade's right flank to give it additional protection. Lieutenant [Lowther](#)³² decided to go with the CO (Lieutenant-Colonel [Baker](#)³³) to reconnoitre for a suitable machine-gun position, and then to collect his platoon from the Maoris' B Echelon. 'Everything started off all right,' he says. 'I went in with Col. Baker and after about 15 minutes I saw a feature on the left which appeared to be what I was looking for and went to look it over. It was occupied by some of the enemy and I was pinned down for some time by them. Shelling then started. ... After two shells had landed very close, another must have been closer, as the next recollection I had was in our Australian Hospital.' Colonel Baker was wounded about the same time.

The Maoris, in one of their typically fierce assaults, captured the area west of Point 29.

Now without its commander, who had been reported missing at 1 a.m., 3 Platoon went forward with the mortars. 'We were stopping and starting and getting lost the whole bloody night,' wrote Private Bell, a driver. 'Shells bursting about us made things very unpleasant.'

'[We] had to take to holes every so often,' wrote Private Ffolliott-Powell.³⁴ 'The shelling was bad & got worse the closer we got to Jerry. His machine guns were busy too. We went here and there until we were properly lost. Eventually to our relief we found where we were to go & just managed to get dug in by dawn. Jerry artillery was giving us a very rough time but we were lucky & no one was hit. After dawn we discovered that some low heels were sniping at us but we couldn't locate them. All day we were shelled and sniped.'

Sergeant Taylor³⁵ and Corporal Hargreaves³⁶ went out to investigate some pits which were occupied by the enemy. The first pit was full of Germans, who promptly surrendered. Hargreaves was killed by a bullet and Taylor 'got a slight hit just after.... knocked me silly for a while.' He stayed with the platoon.

'Eventually some armoured cars came along & we got them to root out the snipers,' Ffolliott-Powell continues. 'I went around with my Tommy gun rounding up waifs & strays. To our surprise there were over 100 of the swines quite close to us. A typical Hun colonel was in charge of them. He had ordered them not to surrender.'

Late in the afternoon, while driving his truck up to the gunline, Bell noticed somebody lying in a slit trench. 'He was a Jerry, badly wounded, so I took him to the A.D.S. When I went back I found 6 more Germans, some wounded, crouched in a dugout. Then an enemy Spandau opened up, so I smartly joined the squareheads in the hole. One of them spoke English. He told me they were utterly sick of the war. I managed to get 'em on my truck while the Spandau gave us merry hell and drove them to the A.D.S. They were only boys.'

In the evening Major Bennett, who assumed command of the [Maori Battalion](#), reported to Brigadier Gentry³⁷ and was told 'to hang on till further instructions.' All three platoons of 2 Company and some anti-tank guns were sent to strengthen the Maoris' defences, and the sappers laid mines along the front. 'We were holding a very strong posn indeed,' wrote Bennett. 'Unfortunately the morning [3 November]

arrived only to find that the Enemy had evacuated during the night.'

¹ Eighth Army's strength on 23 October was over 220,000. No large reinforcement contingent arrived from New Zealand between Oct 1941 and Jan 1943.

² 9 Armd Bde: Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, Warwickshire Yeomanry, 3 Hussars; equipped (on 23 Oct) with 36 Sherman, 37 Grant and 49 Crusader tanks. Altogether Eighth Army had over 1100 tanks fit for action, twice as many as the enemy.

³ The officers of the battalion on 23 Oct 1942 were:

CO: Lt-Col A. W. White

2 i/c: Maj J. K. Robbie (LOB)

Adj: Capt K. H. Hume

QM: Lt W. D. Murie

MO: Capt A. B. Adams

Padre: Rev. F. W. McCaskill

1 Coy

OC: Capt L. A. Joseph

2 i/c: Lt D. G. Carnachan (LOB)

1 Pl: Lt J. E. Crisp

2 Pl: Lt H. D. Ball

3 Pl: Lt W. R. Lowther

2 Coy

OC: Capt I. S. Moore

2 i/c: Lt K. J. Frazer

4 Pl: Lt D. W. Farquharson

5 Pl: Lt K. Dixon

6 Pl: Lt N. G. Blue

3 Coy

OC: Maj E. J. Tong

2 i/c: Capt R. I. Blair (LOB)

7 Pl: Lt D. B. Beard

8 Pl: Lt N. F. Gardiner

9 Pl: 2 Lt T. K. Thomson

4 Coy

OC: Maj A. W. Cooper

2 i/c: Capt J. A. Snedden (LOB)

10 Pl: Lt J. T. H. Halkett

11 Pl: Lt L. Morgan

12 Pl: 2 Lt G. Kaye

⁴ Six tracks named (from north to south) 'Sun', 'Moon', 'Star', 'Hat', 'Bottle' and 'Boat', according to the sign indicating each one, ran parallel to the main coastal road from the assembly areas to the forward defences.

⁵ Pte J. P. Leitch; born NZ 23 May 1911; maltster; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁶ Pte T. H. Jennings; born NZ 9 Sep 1913; farmer; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

⁷ Pte J. A. Black, MM; Thames; born Auckland, 23 Aug 1918; newspaper agent; wounded 16 Jul 1942.

⁸ Pte H. J. Brehaut; Hastings; born Channel Islands, 6 Aug 1911; clerk; wounded 3 Jul 1942.

⁹ Pte E. K. McLeod; born NZ 26 Dec 1914; farm manager.

¹⁰ Sgt A. M. Read; Auckland; born Thames 26 Jun 1916; hardware merchant.

¹¹ Pte P. R. Davis; born NZ 29 Dec 1905; fibrous plasterer; died of wounds 25 Oct 1942.

¹² Pte S. R. Anderson; born Dunedin, 3 Mar 1916; grocer's assistant; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

¹³ Pte H. M. J. Kidd; born Pukekohe, 24 Nov 1918; butcher; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁴ Pte E. James; born NZ 12 Nov 1916; hairdresser; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁵ Pte F. G. Wood; born New Plymouth, 6 Jun 1917; cheese worker; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁶ Pte H. V. Medland; born NZ 16 Nov 1909; labourer; died of wounds 25 Oct 1942.

¹⁷ Pte R. R. MacMillan; born Timaru, 9 May 1917; cashier; died of wounds 25 Oct 1942.

¹⁸ L- Sgt W. J. Cattnach, MM; born NZ 18 Mar 1918; tailor; wounded 19 Oct 1944.

¹⁹ 2 Lt E. J. Barclay; Auckland; born Wanganui, 9 Sep 1918; electrician.

²⁰ Sgt J. A. Forsyth, MM; North Egmont; born Auckland, 13 Mar 1918; seaman; Regular soldier 1950–55.

²¹ Pte A. W. Ellis; New Plymouth; born Matamata, 30 Oct 1911; plumber; wounded 27 Oct 1942.

²² Lt-Col White and the Adj (Capt Hume) 'searched the battlefield all day on 2 Nov in my [White's] jeep occasionally coming across parts of our own companies and putting them on the right track for more ammo and so on, but it was not until we located some sort of HQ from which we followed a telephone wire to Bde that I was able to locate Bde HQ at last and formally report for duty.' There was no wireless link between Bn HQ and the companies. 'It proved a handicap on this occasion as 151 Bde could not get messages for me through to either 1 or 4 Coys and I had to rely on Coys sending messages back to me,' says the CO. 'When I tried to go forward and made arrangements to be met by guides from the Inf the guides were not there!'

²³ Maj R. I. Blair, OBE; Nelson; born Hastings, 21 Mar 1915; clerk.

²⁴ Maj L. A. Joseph, ED; Wanganui; born Dunedin, 19 Nov 1902; technician.

²⁵ Lt G. Kaye; Dunedin; born NZ 19 Nov 1914; hospital attendant.

²⁶ Pte J. Cramond; born NZ 26 Mar 1900; metal worker; died of wounds 2 Nov 1942.

²⁷ Pte R. M. Elliott; born NZ 22 Jan 1906; labourer; died of wounds 2 Nov 1942.

²⁸ Lt-Col W. F. Titchener, MC and bar; Ahmedabad, India; born Dunedin, 14 Dec 1907; public accountant; CO 27 Bn, Japan, 16 May 1946–31 Mar 1947; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

²⁹ Lt J. E. Crisp; Greytown; born NZ 24 Feb 1916; clerk; wounded 2 Nov

1942.

³⁰ Pte G. G. Keyworth; Rotorua; born Hastings, 17 Jul 1918; painter; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

³¹ Pte J. S. McCartney; born NZ 10 Mar 1919; hairdresser; killed in action 3 Nov 1942.

³² Lt W. R. Lowther; Hamilton; born NZ 16 May 1912; insurance manager; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

³³ Lt-Col F. Baker, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Kohukohu, Hokianga, 19 Jun 1908; civil servant; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jul–Nov 1942; twice wounded; Director of Rehabilitation 1943–54; Public Service Commission 1954–.

³⁴ Cpl R. Flolliott-Powell; Ngaruawahia; born Calcutta, 26 Mar 1911; transport driver; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

³⁵ Sgt D. Taylor; Te Kopuru; born Dannevirke, 9 Sep 1918; timber worker; twice wounded.

³⁶ Cpl C. Hargreaves; born NZ 16 Apr 1917; farm assistant; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

³⁷ Maj-Gen W. G. Gentry, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Bronze Star (US); Lower Hutt; born London, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO 2 2 NZ Div 1939–40, AA and QMG Oct 1940–Oct 1941; GSO 1 May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; DCGS (in NZ) Jul 1943–Jul 1944; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, 6 NZ Div and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; 9 Bde (in Italy) Feb 1945–Jan 1946; DCGS Jul 1946–Nov 1947; AG Apr 1949–Mar 1952; CGS Apr 1952–Aug 1955.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 14 – THE PURSUIT

CHAPTER 14

The Pursuit

The battle had been won. Rommel had begun to withdraw the troops he could extricate from the battlefield—which did not include thousands of Italians ¹ who were left stranded without transport—and on 4 November [Eighth Army](#) set out in pursuit of the fleeing enemy.

The break-out was thrilling. 'We were moving Westwards into the setting sun and at one stage the whole skyline was silhouetted with prisoners marching back,' says Lieutenant Gardiner. 'Actually thousands of them in long lines. It did one's heart good. We drove right through their lines and gun positions with all their arms on the ground and in their pits. If only we had time what loot we could have got.'

While the British armour was still confronted by the anti-tank screen behind which Rommel hoped to conduct an orderly retreat, the New Zealand Division was despatched on a wide sweep around the southern flank—actually the first of a series of 'left hooks'—with the object of blocking the road at [Fuka](#), 60 miles west of the Alamein Line.

The Transport Platoon had been busy throughout the battle recovering and repairing vehicles so that the battalion would be ready to leave when the order was given. Sergeant Pulford's resourcefulness in retrieving trucks, often under shellfire, from the minefields and during air raids won him the MM. Many of the vehicles had been through the 1941 Libyan campaign and with the battalion ever since and were due for engine changes, but still they were made to go. 'One group especially need favourable mention—the mechanics and fitters—they never seem to sleep, those people,' wrote the CO. 'Every little stop and they were tinkering about with something....'

Many of the troops had to embus on the battlefield; they then drove in single file along the dusty, congested tracks through the minefields, and deployed in the open desert. Fourth British Light Armoured Brigade, which came under the Division's command to lead the advance, did not get away until after midday, and then set off along a thrust line which the provost had marked with black diamond signs on iron pickets. Fifth Brigade Group (with which 3 Company travelled) left its bivouac area

near the [Alamein](#) station in the morning and was clear of the minefields by mid-afternoon. Sixth Brigade Group (2 Company still with it) handed over its section of the line to Highland troops in the morning, but did not get clear of the defences until six o'clock, by which time the armour leading the Division had reached a point well inland from [Daba](#), where it laagered for the night.

Behind [6 Brigade](#) came Reserve Group, which included the battalion less 2 and 3 Companies. The CO had been wakened at three in the morning to receive his orders. 'We were to get ready for the chase! Then followed a hectic day of trying to collect everybody and disperse everybody in some sort of order so as to be able to move out under control.' The group eventually got away without 4 Company, whose B Echelon vehicles did not arrive with the necessary stocks of rations and petrol until after six. As it was then getting dark, Captain Snedden, OC 4 Company (Major Cooper was now battalion second-in-command), decided to stay the night and moved his vehicles back out of the range of enemy guns. Next day 4 Company, together with three armoured cars, became the escort for the Division's second-line transport carrying petrol, rations and water.

Fifth Brigade pulled in behind [4 Light Armoured Brigade's](#) laager south of [Daba](#) about midnight, and an escaping party of Germans and Italians bumped the rear of the column shortly afterwards. In the wild shooting that ensued some fifty New Zealanders were killed, wounded, or captured, none of them in 3 Company.

Sixth Brigade and Reserve Group travelled all night to catch up. Next day's objective was the 300-foot [Fuka](#) escarpment. Still pushing on in front, the armour had several brushes with small groups of enemy. Occasionally one or two enemy aircraft flew over the widely dispersed transport, and when a few bombs were dropped Staff-Sergeant [Symons](#)² (3 Company) received wounds of which he died three days later.

South of [Fuka](#) the armour encountered a minefield (at least partly dummy), fenced off a lane, and went through. Enemy guns shelled the approaching transport, and the New Zealand artillery deployed to engage targets on the high ground to the north. The enemy shelled the minefield gap while [5 Brigade](#) sped through, but no damage was reported.

Fifth Brigade had been given the role of blocking the road west of the escarpment, but as darkness was falling and the armour and artillery were out of touch, the brigade took up a defensive position about ten miles from the road. The enemy who had defended the high ground—the New Zealand objective—with guns and tanks withdrew after dark.

Men of [6 Brigade](#) and Reserve Group, still the other side of the minefield, were standing about in the half-light at daybreak on the 6th when a strange column drove across the desert on their left. Lieutenant-Colonel White told some of his men to investigate, but before they had time to get going the enemy opened fire. Several anti-tank guns retaliated immediately from their laager positions and knocked out four or five vehicles. 'No. 1 Platoon,' says Captain Blair, 'dashed out with guns mounted on the trucks and fired on the convoy and Crisp had one mounted on his jeep, my driver and wireless operator piled into my jeep and we went out to join in the fun.' Some Bren carriers also gave chase. 'The MMGs certainly had some effective shooting and captured most of the prisoners, even my jeep rounded up a few....' Two lorries at the tail of the column were captured, and altogether 400 or 500 prisoners, mostly Italians, were rounded up, and fifty British troops who had been captured the previous evening were released.

That day the Division advanced to the plateau south of [Baggush](#). The [Baggush Box](#) was found to be unoccupied. The sound of gunfire could be heard farther west. Rain, which began in the morning, was falling steadily. Some men attempted to dig bivvy holes, but these soon filled with water; they then huddled rather miserably in the back of their vehicles. By mid-afternoon the desert was flooded, and by nightfall most of the transport was immobilised. It rained all night and was still raining next morning (the 7th). It was cold too. Some of the vehicles were pushed and hauled onto higher, firmer ground, and men rigged up more or less rain-proof shelters.

The desert became a swamp in which the New Zealand Division and the lorry-borne troops of the armoured divisions were bogged, while the remnants of Panzerarmee, saved from probable encirclement at [Mersa Matruh](#), fled away along the road to the west.

The Division was in urgent need of petrol. It had left the Alamein Line with what was estimated to be sufficient for 200 miles, but because of the heavy going in the

mud and the leakage from the flimsy petrol cans, the supply was enough for only half that distance.

The column of 200 vehicles carrying rations, water, and petrol for another 200 miles, accompanied by 4 Company and the three armoured cars, could not get clear of the [Alamein](#) defences until late in the evening of 5 November, and then halted for the night because many of the trucks had lagged behind in the dense dust and the darkness, and the numerous gunpits and trenches might have damaged many others. Next morning the column proceeded along the diamond track to [Alam Halif](#), about half-way to [Baggush](#), where supplies were to be issued. The B Echelon vehicles from the Division took two days to make the journey to this replenishment point and back again over the waterlogged desert.

The next issue of supplies was to be made at a landing ground south of [Baggush](#) in the afternoon of the 7th, but it was obvious that the supply column could not get there in time. 'Raining like hell—made very little headway,' wrote Corporal MacLean. 'Trucks bogged everywhere—spent 2 hrs about dusk endeavouring unsuccessfully to extricate Mr. Morgan's pick-up—axle deep in porridge. Wet as a shag—slept under tarp on wet ground.' The trucks were extricated from the mud in the morning of the 8th, and the Division received its petrol and rations that day.

British and American forces landed in French North Africa on 8 November. 'Great rejoicing when we learn the news,' a 2 Company man wrote in his diary. 'Looks as though Rommel is mafeesh and we will get a "Cooks Tour" through [Cyrenaica](#)—hope so.' But Rommel was not yet finished.

The weather improved and the ground dried out sufficiently for [Eighth Army](#) to resume the advance. While 7 Armoured Division was to go by the inland route south of the escarpment to the Libyan frontier, the New Zealand Division was to follow the main coastal road.

Passing within sight of the [Minqar Qaim](#) battleground, the Division concentrated south of [Mersa Matruh](#). Sixth Brigade (accompanied by 2 Company) was to remain at [Matruh](#) because of the increasing difficulty of supplying the pursuit force; the rest of the Division, led by [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#), passed through the minefield gap near [Charing Cross](#) on the 9th and headed along the main road to the west. The

armour clashed with a rearguard and was just short of [Sidi Barrani](#) at nightfall.

Still trying to catch up with Reserve Group, 4 Company reached Kilo 78 on the [Sidi Barrani](#) road that evening. Second-Lieutenant Kaye, sent on ahead next morning, found Battalion Headquarters at Kilo 109, but by the time the company got there the battalion had gone. Reserve Group was then speeding westwards. 'We started in desert formation,' says Lieutenant-Colonel White, 'but soon ran into the defences of [Sidi Barrani](#) where mines were suspected, and failing any instructions I took to the main Rd in single vehicle column and went flat out to get somewhere, but where I wasn't sure! However at [Buqbuq](#) I caught up with some of the leading elements which were held up by some Hun delaying action and so deployed my command off the road.... We were ordered on again, following the road on a three vehicle front. About 1400 hrs there was a hold up which looked like it might develop into an overnight stay.... There was a terrific mass of vehicles on the road.... some of my people just bivvied on the side of the road as they couldn't find out where I was....'

With [5 Brigade](#), 3 Company bypassed [Sidi Barrani](#) by cutting across the desert two or three miles south of the road, and then had trouble in squeezing in among the transport, including [RAF](#) convoys, that crowded the road. The brigade pushed on towards the foot of [Halfaya](#), on the way passing many destroyed and abandoned enemy vehicles, some still burning; much of this must have been the work of the [Desert Air Force](#).

The enemy still held [Halfaya](#) Pass, which had proved an exceptionally strong defensive position in earlier campaigns. This time, however, the garrison, mostly Italian, was taken by surprise by 110 men of 21 Battalion, without supporting arms, in an assault before dawn. Within a few hours, on 11 November, the only enemy who remained in Egypt were prisoners of war.

A large demolition completely blocked the road near the top of the 600-foot escarpment behind [Sollum](#), so everybody had to go by the only alternative route, up [Halfaya](#) Pass. 'There was a terrific traffic jam,' says White. 'Traffic was piling up behind and there were five lines of vehicles nearly nose to tail for several miles.... To add to the confusion many mines had been left by Jerry set indiscriminately and unmarked, and it was ordered that vehicles must not disperse. What an air target we

would have been. However all the air activity on Jerry's part was some machine gunning of the top of the pass by a few fighters about or before 0900. Later I didn't notice any of our vehicles knocked out so he couldn't have done much damage.

'We could see [Sollum](#) a few miles away across the bay. The day wore on with order gradually being restored [4 Company located Battalion Headquarters].... We got away at 1430. The sides of the road had been mined and it was a case of sticking to the centre of the road. We passed a few vehicles minus wheels through swinging too far off the beaten track.... We made good progress then until last light when we bivouacked in the open desert roughly south of [Bardia](#).'

Next day (the 12th), after a short move, the New Zealanders dispersed in the [Sidi Azeiz- Menastir](#) area. There they stayed while others pursued the enemy across [Cyrenaica](#) to [El Agheila](#).

With [6 Brigade](#), 2 Company entered [Mersa Matruh](#) on 10 November. 'We are camped in an area which apparently has been a complete Iti QM dump,' wrote Corporal Clemens. 'The boys are in smartly for loot but the place has been gone over before we arrive. We stumble across a ration dump which had been fired but find quite a lot of good stuff on the outskirts of where the blaze has been—should live very well for a time on Iti tinned tomatoes, green beans and peas.... Some of the boys find a dump of Iti short wave radios and by the time we are finished we should have a radio per truck.'

Tons of equipment and bulk stores of all kinds, including clothing, foodstuffs, wines and confectionery, had been abandoned by the enemy. The New Zealanders were employed in salvaging material and unloading supplies from ships. 'It has not taken our crowd long to get organized for there are about 6 big boats waiting to unload supplies,' Clemens wrote on the 11th. Two days later, when [Eighth Army](#) entered [Tobruk](#), ships were passing along the coast bound for that port—'further evidence we are right on the job this time.'

Sixth Brigade left [Matruh](#) on 20 November. 'They could not have picked a worse day to move.... Bitterly cold and sandy—grateful for our warm clothes.' The men had been issued with battle dress and winter underclothing a few days earlier. 'A very monotonous trip and it reminds me of the one we were undertaking a year ago

almost to the day but by night. What a lot has happened since then!!' The convoy passed a large bedouin encampment, crossed the Libyan frontier and headed northwards to the Division's bivouac area near Sidi Azeiz, which it reached on the 22nd. When 2 Company arrived the whole battalion was together again.

The Division had settled down for an indefinite stay in this locality. Bivvies had been dug in and football fields prepared. The wells round about were cleaned out, tested and fitted with pumps; the water ration was a gallon each day for every man, and extra was supplied for washing.

The Italians had left the small town of [Bardia](#) in a disgusting state. 'They will not cover their excreta—leave it everywhere— hillsides, houses, Moslem Mosque, Christian Church, even behind the altar.' In the harbour were a few sunken or beached barges and small vessels; huge dumps of ammunition and tinned food had been abandoned on the shore. 'Did we get into that smartly,' wrote Lieutenant Gardiner, who took a swimming party to the beach. 'We eventually came across the Iti Ration point and got all the tinned food and grog we could possibly handle. Most of the tinned food was our own which they must have got when [Tobruk](#) fell.... The grog comprised Cognac, wine and Zibib in barrels.'

The weather deteriorated. It was windy, dusty and cold, and there were heavy showers of rain, thunder and lightning. The New Zealanders were camped on a very flat stretch of desert, and many bivvies were flooded. The swimming parties were less popular, and football aroused great enthusiasm. The battalion's A and B fifteens won their matches in the divisional knock-out competition.

Corporal Gardiner, who had been captured at [Minqar Qaim](#) five months earlier, returned to the battalion on 25 November. He had managed to avoid being sent to [Italy](#) and had been admitted to hospital at [Benghazi](#) suffering from dysentery and malnutrition. He says he 'went through the wire on the night of 11th Nov with a jerrycan of water and some sugar I had looted from an Italian lorry during an air raid the night before. I hid in an old latrine outside and close to the compound walls. The next day a S. African friend strolled past and whispered that it was OK to come out as the Italians were evacuating the hospital and leaving us there with four days' rations. I returned to the compound that night. Next morning, the 13th, the Ites changed their minds and decided to move us out. They sent troops in to round us up

and I was doing my best to keep out of sight and close to my escape hole, when a long range recce Spitfire flew low over the hospital. The Italians in their usual style became slightly disorganised and I was able to get back into my latrine again. Stayed there for the next six days as Jerry trucks were calling a hundred yards up the road for fuel. Left hideout on the 20th to look for tucker and found a tin of blown Itie meat which I had just eaten when an armoured car of 11th Hussars came up the road. Had first cup of tea for 5 mths with the Rifle Bde.'

The [El Agheila](#) position, occupied by what remained of Panzerarmee, blocked the road to [Tripoli](#) along the shore of the [Gulf of Sirte](#). Protected on three sides by salt marshes, soft sand and broken ground, and on the fourth by the sea, this was a naturally strong position where twice previously a pursuing British force had been halted and turned back. This time a frontal assault was to be combined with a threat to the enemy's only line of retreat. While 51 (Highland) and 7 Armoured Divisions attacked the defences from the east, the New Zealand Division, with [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) under command, was to swing wide out around the enemy's southern flank in a 250- mile 'left hook' and block the coastal road near [Marble Arch](#), west of [El Agheila](#).

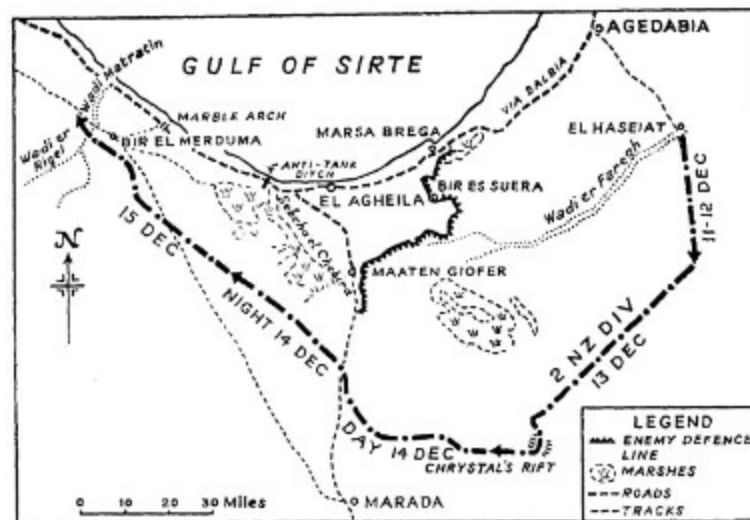
The journey of about 360 miles across [Cyrenaica](#) to El Haseiat, a track junction where the Division was to assemble before starting on the 'left hook', took about four and a half days. Sixth Brigade Group (which included 2 Company) set out on 4 December; a Divisional Group (including the battalion less the two companies with the infantry brigades) and 5 Brigade Group (including 1 Company) followed next day.

From [Sidi Azeiz](#) the route lay along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), where wrecked tanks, trucks and aircraft, and many graves revived memories of the 1941 offensive. 'We passed the Rezegh Blockhouse and Mosque,' wrote one of the men who had fought there with 3 Company. 'I am strangely stirred by their sight and could not get to sleep for ages tonight thinking of our scrap there just over a year ago....

'We passed through the [Bir Hacheim](#) area.... Mute but eloquent testimony is given of what a great and bloody battleground this was. I have never seen so much smashed up tanks and transport in such a small area. We had to take great care in negotiating several minefields. Neat cemeteries contain the graves of many gallant Frenchmen.' After that it was 'very monotonous sitting all day watching this dreary

desert.' The track lay through [Msus](#) to [Saunnu](#), 'a fortress advantageously built on high rising ground commanding a view of all the nearby countryside. I could easily imagine it as a French [Foreign Legion](#) outpost à la P. C. Wren.'

At Haseiat the Division paused until 11 December, a chilly, overcast day when a move farther south was made. Rain that night and again the next day settled the dust. Early on the 13th the Division, now totalling about 3000 vehicles and self-contained in supplies, set out into a trackless sea of sand and gravel. A suitable route had been found through the six miles of undulating sand in [Chrystal's Rift](#), and the heavily laden trucks packed the damp surface tight and hard as they followed each other through on three lanes.



The 'left hook' at El Agheila
The 'left hook' at El Agheila

An early start in a thick fog, which cleared later in the morning, was made on the 14th. The columns headed westwards over broken, stony, terrace country—'very like behind [Maadi Camp](#)'—across the [Agheila- Marada](#) track, and continuing by moonlight until nearly midnight, north-westwards into Tripolitania. Next morning the objective, the high ground south-east of [Marble Arch](#), was found to be occupied by the enemy, so the Division detoured farther west towards Bir el Merduma. By this time the Highlanders had entered [El Agheila](#) and [7 Armoured Division](#) was in action against the German rearguard at an anti-tank ditch west of the village. There was still a chance of cutting off the retreat of at least part of Panzerarmee.

The armour led, followed by [6 Brigade](#), Divisional Headquarters and Reserve

Group, and [5 Brigade](#) in that order. In the late afternoon [6 Brigade](#) passed Merduma, crossed Wadi er Rigel, and halted a few miles beyond. It was then ordered to advance northwards and attempt to cut the road. Fifth Brigade and the tanks were to hold the inland flank, and Reserve Group was to put out a gun line to protect [Divisional Headquarters](#).

Brigadier Gentry called his unit commanders to the head of the column. [General Freyberg](#) met them before they moved off, greeting them with the words, 'Gentlemen, we have a chance to make history.'

At dusk six Bren carriers from 24 Battalion were sent ahead to reconnoitre the coastal road, and because they did not return after a reasonable time, a second patrol was sent out with instructions to report back by wireless at the end of every mile. The first patrol actually reached a point near the road, along which the rumble of traffic could be heard, but on its way back passed the brigade column, which had deviated from its axis of advance.

The distance to the road was much farther than had been anticipated, and the going grew progressively worse. Captain [Moore](#)³ (OC 2 Company) says, 'we started off on the bearing of 45° which was supposed to cut the road close to a large roadhouse shown on the map. The Bde I. Officer, Capt [Ball](#)⁴ of 27 (MG) Bn, led the way in a P.U. followed by the Brigadier in a staff car. From my jeep close by I could see Capt Ball standing with his head and shoulders through the hatch in the cab of his P.U. trying to hold the compass steady and direct his driver on a course of 45°. As we were driving over a series of ridges this was very difficult....' The column veered to the east in [Wadi Matratin](#).

Brigadier Gentry and the battalion commanders reconnoitred in three carriers. Moore was told that there was not room for him and he would have to stay behind. 'At first I was not very pleased about this, but after a few minutes realised I was very fortunate as the carriers ran into quite a packet of trouble.' They had gone only a few hundred yards when they were fired on by an anti-tank gun which put one carrier out of action and compelled the party to return. The Brigadier reported to the GOC that he was in contact with the enemy about a mile and a half from the road, and being told to use his discretion, decided to attack.

In the very early hours of the 16th 24 Battalion charged the position from which the anti-tank gun had fired, and 25 Battalion advanced on its right. The 24th wiped out the crews of the anti-tank gun and several spandaus, and then came under machine-gun and mortar fire on the crest of a ridge. The assault was pressed home, and the enemy made off in trucks.

To help 24 Battalion consolidate on the ridge, 5 Platoon went forward with the anti-tank guns, mortars and carriers. 'Major Webb⁵ [the CO] informed me,' says Lieutenant Dixon,⁶ 'that owing to darkness only a cursory recce. had been possible and that he believed both his flanks were vulnerable, particularly his left flank...'. Dixon therefore placed No. 1 Section on the right flank and No. 2 on the left, where he understood two gullies converged. At dawn, however, the country presented a different picture altogether; even after No. 2 Section moved to higher ground, a ridge immediately in front obscured the road.

From the other flank No. 1 Section was able to engage targets on the road along which the enemy was still retreating. The only effect of the shooting that could be observed was the speeding up of the vehicles as they passed through the field of fire. The section had better shooting against a 50-millimetre anti-tank gun and a machine-gun nest about half a mile away. The crew was driven off the gun and the hostile machine-gun fire was kept to a minimum. The enemy directed his mortars against the Vickers, and before withdrawing laid a smoke screen across their front.

The 24th Battalion made a determined attempt to seize the ridge which obscured its view of the road, but was held up by a German counter-attack until all traffic on the road had ceased.

Back at Brigade Headquarters, farther inland, 4 Platoon had been given the task of protecting the rear and left (west) flank. 'At first light,' says Captain Moore, 'I had noticed some movement on a ridge about 2000 yds to the west which overlooked our position. Later when I saw the Brigadier & Lt Col Fountaine⁷ by the armoured command vehicle I asked them who these people were. Col Fountaine replied that it was a platoon of his. I suggested that I would go out there and see if a pn of vickers would be of any assistance, they seemed to me to be well out on their own. I left my driver behind and taking a member of nearest pn for company drove my jeep about 800 yd towards the ridge, where I found 2 carriers.... Their crews were trying to

identify the people moving about on the ridge. Suddenly we were fired upon and as our vehicles were in a hollow we couldn't understand how the Jerry could aim so accurately until I noticed that one of the carriers had a black pennant flying at the top of his radio aerial. The first shot had smashed the speedo in my jeep.... So I asked my companion to back the jeep so that I could get a shot at a couple of bushes on the overlooking ridge. "Sorry," he said, "I can't drive." On telling him to take the vickers which I had mounted on the back of the jeep he said that he had never fired a vickers. Finally we got cracking and several bushes on the ridge scattered as so much camouflage, showing up the long snouts of 50 mm anti tank guns looking our way.'

By this time Colonel Fountaine, convinced that the troops on the ridge were hostile, had ordered his C Company to attack. The 25-pounders fired a concentration, and as the infantry advanced, the two-pounders, mortars and one of 4 Platoon's sections began firing. The enemy retreated, leaving two scared Germans, five 50-millimetre guns and some equipment. Spandau fire came from a truck about half a mile away, and Moore raced up onto the ridge to engage it with the Vickers on his jeep. The enemy disappeared.

Meanwhile a gap of 10 miles—probably more like six— had been reported between 5 and 6 Brigades. Fifth Brigade, reinforced by units from Reserve Group, faced east and was supported by two field regiments, three batteries of six-pounders, and three machine-gun companies. The tanks were grouped on the right flank. Before daybreak Lieutenant-Colonel White set out for the gunline. 'I called in at HQ on the way,' he says, 'and was put on to another job, which was a redistribution of the MGs and A/T in my group for a daylight stand. I got the MGs going and was off to contact the A/T bloke when I was caught in a spot of shelling.' While moving to the left flank to support 21 Battalion, 4 Company was also caught. 'About 9 a.m.,' writes Corporal MacLean, 'our pln [No. 11] set off to take up new posns—necessary to drive through enemy barrage. ... Mel Homer (Pln sgt) was killed—shell burst in front of truck.'

Divisional Cavalry, pursued by German tanks, retired through 1 Platoon's positions (with 21 Battalion). 'The Panzers had a good look at us,' says Lieutenant Crisp, 'and after firing a few rounds discovered the gap [between 5 and 6 Brigades] and shepherded the main body of German Infantry (Trucked) through.' After the

tanks had gone, 1 Platoon fired several bursts at the trucks at a range of about 4000 yards, 'with no discernible result.' Although shelled by the artillery and pursued by the British tanks and a mobile column, which included 11 Platoon's Vickers in carriers, the German column escaped with very few losses.

The New Zealand Division, after deploying in the darkness on unknown ground, had been unable to prevent the enemy from breaking clear.

Early next morning (the 17th) the Division started off westwards again, with the intention of cutting off a strong enemy rearguard at [Nofilia](#) by another 'left hook'.

A brisk action began shortly before midday when tanks of the [Royal Scots Greys](#) and Divisional Cavalry encountered German tanks and guns near the village. Fifth Brigade swung round to the south of this fight, and about ten miles beyond the village was ordered north to the road, then about three miles away. The [23rd Battalion](#) was to get astride the road, the 28th was to cover its right flank, and the 21st was to cross the road to carry the line to the sea, which could be seen sparkling in the sunlight.

With 23 Battalion, 2 Platoon went over the crest of an escarpment and down towards the road, along which German transport was retreating at top speed. The battalion was shelled by a German flank guard near the road; the infantry debussed, but could make little headway. 'Took Pln up when called,' wrote Lieutenant Aislabie,⁸ '3 wounded ... too late to get in posn before dark.'

The Maoris, on the right, were ordered to halt facing towards [Nofilia](#), in case of an attack from that direction. Captain Joseph spotted an enemy observation post on high ground in front of the battalion and told 3 Platoon to engage it, but it had gone when the guns were in position ready to fire.

On the left 21 Battalion, the last to go down towards the road, had difficulty in getting through the soft sand, and also encountered a strongly held position. The accompanying 1 Platoon fired on a mobile observation post at extreme range on the left flank, with the result that it packed up and disappeared.

After dark 'There was quite a bit of firing from our own positions and quite a bit of milling about near the road,' says Joseph. 'A/A [Breda](#) used against our positions in

light scrub. ...' At daybreak all was quiet; the Germans had completed the evacuation of [Nofilia](#).

Before Eighth Army could resume the advance, sufficient stocks of ammunition, petrol and rations had to be accumulated, and these had to be brought overland from the ports of [Tobruk](#) and [Benghazi](#). The New Zealand Division, therefore, halted near [Nofilia](#). The engineers cleaned out and repaired the wells, in which the water was brackish and tasted strongly of the diesel fuel the enemy had used to pollute them. Trips were made to the beach, beyond a salt marsh and some sand dunes, but the sea and the wind were too cold to make bathing really enjoyable.

Christmas Day was bitterly cold. The brightest spot in the day was the sermon by [Padre Underhill](#), who came from 25 Battalion (to which he had been transferred) to take a full battalion church parade. At that time the machine-gunners were without a padre of their own, and as 1 and 2 Companies were still attached to the infantry brigades, this was a reunion. Christmas dinner, by company arrangements, included such items as oyster soup, roast pork and chicken, apple sauce, tinned potatoes, peas and beans, plum pudding and brandy sauce, fruit salad, and a bottle of Canadian beer. 'The "brass hats" have certainly treated us well considering the terrific lines of communication and the priority of war materials.'

It rained heavily that night and a cold wind still blew next day. 'We did not get up until nine and rather a surprise to go on a route march at 10—3 Christmases in the Desert now and a route march each Boxing Day.'

On New Year's Day the battalion A team lost to Divisional Signals in a semi-final of the Rugby competition; the final, between the signalmen and the Maoris, was to be played at [Tripoli](#).

On New Year's Day, also, 1 Company left with [5 Brigade](#) to construct an airfield for the [Desert Air Force](#) near [Wadi Tamet](#), about 100 miles west of [Nofilia](#). This was 'one of the most unpleasant jobs [5 Brigade](#) ever had to do,' wrote [Brigadier Kippenberger](#). An area 1200 yards square was bulldozed level, and the men had to pick up 'several million stones', load them into trucks and cart them away. A night of rain, thunder and lightning was followed by a two-day westerly gale and a severe dust-storm. The enemy's airfields were not far away, and although Spitfires, with the

pilots in their seats, and the ack-ack guns stood ready, it was impossible to prevent his fast fighter-bombers from making frequent attacks; there was seldom more than a second's warning, and the nearest slit trenches were at the end of the field. Forty-odd New Zealanders were killed or wounded, but 1 Company's only casualty was Private [Davis](#),⁹ who was wounded by an ack-ack shell which landed in the camp area about a mile from the airfield.

In the dust-storm on 3 January the rest of the Division moved about 10 miles inland from [Nofilia](#). The westward advance was resumed six days later, and [5 Brigade](#) rejoined the Division near [Wadi Tamet](#) on the 11th. The engineers bulldozed tracks into this huge dry watercourse, and ack-ack guns were posted on the escarpments while the transport went through. Enemy aircraft did not interfere. The advance was continued at night, and on the 14th the head of the Division was about 20 miles from the [Gheddahia- Bu Ngem](#) track, on the far side of which enemy tanks and guns held some high ground.

The objective was [Tripoli](#). While [51 \(Highland\) Division](#) was to go by the main coastal road, [7 Armoured](#) and [2 New Zealand Divisions](#), advancing side-by-side with the New Zealanders on the left, were to take the more direct desert route.

The Division was reinforced by the [Royal Scots Greys](#), a regiment with forty-eight tanks (about half of them Shermans). Divisional Cavalry and the Greys led, followed by [6 Brigade](#), [Divisional Headquarters](#), Reserve Group, and [5 Brigade](#) in that order. The battalion, less 1 Company with [5 Brigade](#) and 2 Company with the 6th, was still part of Reserve Group. Vehicles carried petrol for 350 miles, and rations and water had been issued to last until midnight on 22 January.

The enemy resisted all day on the 15th at [Dor Umm er Raml](#), the high ground beyond the [Bu Ngem](#) track, but the New Zealand infantry did not have to deploy, and the machine-gunners were not required to fire a shot. They heard gunfire and bombing ahead of them, and saw several tanks burning. Next day the enemy fell back steadily, and late in the afternoon the Greys went into action against a rearguard a few miles south of [Sedada](#). The Division followed slowly through [Wadi Zemzem](#), remarkable for its tall scrub and 'some bushy topped trees thick as a man's waist'. Enemy aircraft reappeared, but with little effect. A landing ground north of [Wadi Zemzem](#) was completed on the 17th, and put into use almost immediately by

the [Desert Air Force](#). The stream of transport planes bringing supplies and equipment reminded some New Zealanders of the German occupation of [Maleme](#).

Steep banks, mines and demolitions made it necessary to go through [Wadi Nfed](#) in single file. Beyond [Sedada](#)—a fort, a few houses, some trees and crops—the country was very rough and rocky, and more mines, including many S mines, were encountered. The only possible route was the road into [Beni Ulid](#), a walled town with a fort perched on a cliff above an almost canyon-like wadi. Most of the Division saw [Beni Ulid](#) and its huge olive trees and tall palms in bright moonlight. A good, tarsealed road then led 'up hill and down dale, with high, steep, rocky hills all around—like parts of Otago Central.'

[Gebel Nefusa](#), a range of hills very precipitous on the northern side, formed a natural semi-circular barrier from the coast east of [Tripoli](#) to beyond [Garian](#) in the south-west; it was penetrated by only three roads: the one along the coast, another from [Tarhuna](#), and the third from [Garian](#). While the Highlanders pressed along the coast and [7 Armoured Division](#) fought its way from [Tarhuna](#), the New Zealand Division crossed a stretch of sand to [Tazzoli](#), an Italian settlement in the hills a few miles farther west. Fifth Brigade now travelled ahead of the 6th.

At [Tazzoli](#) the New Zealanders met their first Italian civilians. The settlement 'looked quite nice in the distance but we found the elegant white houses had been sadly neglected inside. Every house flying the white flag and the colonists seem a usual peaceful peasant type.... I think with the poor land at their disposal they have done well.'

The engineers bulldozed a track down a defile to the coastal plain, on to which the Division descended. The tanks, guns and lorries worked their way over sandy, humpy ground to the [Garian-Tripoli](#) road. Farther north, at [Azizia](#), this road passed beneath a small, solitary hill.

The enemy still held [Azizia](#) on 22 January. The Greys exchanged shots with German tanks which bobbed up and down among the sandhills, and the artillery also went into action. After dark [5 Brigade](#), with the [Maori Battalion](#) leading, drove up the road. When the head of the column was about two kilometres from the village, a flare went up from the top of the hill; it was followed instantly by a dozen others on

a front of half a mile on each side of the road; this was the signal for defensive fire, which crisscrossed on fixed lines across the front. If some of the weapons had been directed straight down the road, [5 Brigade](#) might have suffered severely.

[Brigadier Kippenberger](#) decided against putting on an impromptu night attack, and the brigade withdrew a few miles— all except a 30-cwt truck from No. 2 Section of 2 Platoon, which had broken down. 'Our vehicle—capable of slow advance could not cope with swift withdrawal & we very soon lost contact with our formation,' says Sergeant Mack. 'We dug in & at sunrise [23 January] with neither friend or foe in sight decided to proceed towards [Tripoli](#) (Some repairs having been made to truck ...). We made good progress & heartened by evidence that British tanks (tracks crossing road) had outflanked the town we eventually arrived when the day was still fairly young—The remainder of the morning was spent in sightseeing.'

These machine-gunners were probably the first New Zealanders to enter [Tripoli](#). The 11th Hussars, followed by the Highlanders, had reached the city earlier in the morning; the first New Zealand unit, the [Maori Battalion](#), arrived in the afternoon.

Fifth Brigade entered [Tripoli](#); the rest of the Division bivouacked outside the city. While reconnoitring near [Bianchi](#), where [6 Brigade](#) was to go, [General Freyberg](#), Brigadier Gentry and Brigadier [Weir](#) ¹⁰ (who was visiting the Division) were ambushed and fired on at very close range. The GOC, his ADC (Captain [Griffiths](#) ¹¹) and driver escaped and went to get help.

The battalion's Intelligence Officer (Lieutenant Gardiner) was leading a reconnaissance party from Reserve Group along a road in the vicinity when [General Freyberg](#)'s car drew up, its windscreen shattered by machine-gun fire. Gardiner was asked who he was, what his party was doing, whether he had any machine guns, and was told to 'go for your life. See if you can either get the Brigadiers back or contain the Hun at least, I will send up reinforcements.' Griffiths was to show the way.

Gardiner briefed his reconnaissance party—'a gang of cooks, bottle-washers, Majors, Captains, etc.'—and headed towards the crossroads where the ambush had occurred. He had a pistol-grip Browning machine gun set up in his pick-up, and with this 'loosed off a few bursts straight down the road—it was rather funny to see the

settlers run out of the various farm houses with pieces of white rag on sticks.'

When close enough to see smoke from a burning car, the party stopped and deployed to the right and left of the road. 'A small mortar bomb or something like it burst in the air but apart from that we heard and saw nothing.' Gardiner, accompanied by his driver and a corporal, then drove right up to the crossroads, where he captured an armed Italian; a German got away but surrendered later. '... it was clear the opposition had taken off so I moved back to the staff cars.... A driver who we later discovered was mortally wounded told me that he thought they had got the two Brigadiers and taken them off. Another with a wound in his leg said he saw them [the Brigadiers] beat it in the direction he was moving when he got hit and he was not sure whether they had made it or were picked up. He mentioned Hun armoured cars having gone on up the road to the West. There seemed to be only one thing for it— follow them....'

About half a mile farther along the road Gardiner and his two companions 'ran into two groups of Iti. Colonial Troops working on the road.... I decided to take some prisoners so loaded up the truck.... After going another three quarters to a mile we stopped again and as there was no sign of the Hun I acceded to my driver's suggestion—now made for the third time—"I think you had better put about Sir."

'We had gone back about a mile when over a hill on the road came a tank, straight at us. It was 3/400 yards away when it let off a burst of M.G. fire which appeared to come right at us. We stopped and all got off, most with hands up. It was the Div. Cav. in one of their light tanks. The Sergeant in charge swore and declared he did not fire at us, he was only clearing his guns....' This tank and another one continued the chase, but did not overtake the Germans.

When Gardiner got back to the crossroads he discovered that the two Brigadiers had not been captured after all. Brigadier Gentry said he had never run so far or so fast in his life; Brigadier Weir's comment was 'I'm too old for this, I'm too old for this.'

'Our Coy area,' wrote a 4 Company man, 'is set among low partly covered sand dunes surrounded by small farms each of which has a windmill pump and cistern.... So we've spent the day washing off 3 weeks' accumulation of dust and dirt from our

bodies and clothes, shaving, haircuts etc. It's great to feel fresh and clean again.... Great feed of fresh vegs for dinner. ... first fresh greens since—well, it's a hell of a long time ago....'

'Last night T— and I ventured forth to collect a turkey from a farmhouse,' a 1 Company man confided to his diary. 'The expedition was doubly successful. We brought home 2 bonzer turkeys. The luckless birds were beheaded and hung up overnight. Today the boys gathered a sackful of cauliflowers and carrots. Well, this afternoon we got to work. T— and R—boiled the turkeys and then roasted them. The vegetables were cooked. B— and I made an oven and baked a batch of very unsuccessful scones. Still, we were happy. The feed tonight was wonderful!! The best tuck in I've had in 3 years. The turkeys were delicious. My belly is full and all is well with the world.'

[Tripoli](#) itself was disappointing. 'Very few shops open—no large ones in sight—streets very dirty—no cafes open—no food available except sweets and dates for which the vendors ask exorbitant prices.... As there is little for the boys to spend their money on, two-up and crown and anchor are rife....' The money quickly gravitated into a few pairs of hands. Back in camp there was much carousing on the local vino rosso (1942 vintage).

The battalion assembled among the olive groves and orchards, in blossom, on the [Suani Ben Adem- Castel Benito](#) road; 1 Company returned from [5 Brigade](#), and 2 Company from [6 Brigade](#). Lieutenant-Colonel White relinquished command on 31 January to return to New Zealand; he was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin.

The whole Division paraded for the British Prime Minister, Mr Winston Churchill, who was not unmoved by the occasion and said: 'All are filled with pride for the Desert Army; all are full of gratitude to the people of New Zealand who have sent this splendid Division to win fame and honour across the oceans. By an important victory, the Battle of Egypt, the Axis Powers who had fondly hoped and loudly boasted they would take Egypt and the Nile Valley, found their armies broken and shattered, and since then, by a march unexampled in history for speed and for the force of its advance, you have driven the enemy before you, until now the would-be conqueror of Egypt is endeavouring to pass himself off as the deliverer of [Tunisia](#)....'

To the Highlanders' massed pipes and drums, the New Zealand Division marched past Mr Churchill.

A week or so later Captain Moore was ordered to provide a guard for a certain building in [Tripoli](#). 'When I asked what I was supposed to be guarding,' he says, 'I was told some sort of conference, very Hush! Hush! Lt Brown [6 Platoon] & I went in to have a look at the building. It was roughly about the size of the NZ Forces Club [Cairo](#) and there seemed to be a red cap looking out of every window. The main entrance faced the road which ran along the waterfront. Across the road from the main entrance there was a Cafe with a large dance floor, under which was a large kitchen full of yelling and gesticulating Italians. Through the kitchen and then through a tunnel under the road we went, and after climbing a flight of stairs we found ourselves in the foyer of the hotel we were supposed to guard. We were immediately surrounded by British Military police and their C.O. pounced on us and wanted to know how we gained entry.

'We told him.... Finally we found:

- '(a) There were four entrances.
- '(b) That a conference of senior allied officers was to be held in [Tripoli](#) and they were all to be quartered in the hotel.
- '(c) We were responsible for keeping people out.
- '(d) That all people quartered there must use the main entrance.'

Brown's platoon (twenty-seven men) were given every tommy gun the company could find, so that all the doors other than the main entrance, which had a sentry with a rifle, could be guarded by men armed with sub-machine guns. At night roving pickets supplemented these guards. So frequently did the men on duty at the main entrance have to present arms that they wore off the skin between the thumb and forefinger of their right hands, which they had to protect with sticking plaster. Moore says that Brown counted thirty-seven present arms in twenty minutes.

Brown was close to the main entrance when a large, red-headed sentry, a man who was well known for speaking his mind, was on duty. He presented arms when a British major went through the door.

'Don't bother saluting me,' said the major.

'I suppose you are just another one of the bludgers around here,' replied the sentry.

'Maybe you are right,' said the major, who was in the catering corps and fortunately had a sense of humour.

The same red-headed private was on duty at the main entrance when Brown was doing his rounds the following day. A slightly built general came in the door. The sentry presented arms with tremendous vigour. The general stopped, ordered him to slope arms and then to order arms.

'Very good,' he said. 'There will be no more presenting arms. You will only come to attention as a senior officer passes in or out.'

Brown breathed a sigh of relief: the sentry had not called General Montgomery a bludger.

This guard duty, which was taken very seriously, lasted nearly a week. When the senior Allied officers had dispersed, the whole platoon was treated to 'a real slap up meal complete with assorted drinks. Probably organised by the Major of the Catering Corps and the Scotty Col in charge of the Provost.'

British bombing before the capture of [Tripoli](#) had littered the harbour with derelict ships. Now the dock facilities were restored and supplies for the Allied forces brought ashore as quickly as possible. Gangs of New Zealanders, employed as stevedores, unloaded 44-gallon drums of petrol and other stores in record time. They also profited by the opportunities this work offered: 'Several cases of rum and whisky broached and half the boys get well lathered—much looting of foodstuffs and grog,' a machine-gunner wrote in his diary. Next day, without remorse, he added, 'The Naval authorities want NZs working on wharves as the ships get away very much quicker....'

Enemy aircraft attempting to bomb the port were met by a spectacular ack-ack barrage. Pickets from 1 Company were posted around the harbour to watch for any mines that might be dropped. The posts gave no protection against bombs—one or two landed uncomfortably close—and against the showers of metal from the barrage. There were no casualties, however: nor were any mines detected.

¹ About a third of the Axis forces succeeded in making their escape; an estimated 10,000 were killed and 15,000 wounded, and over 30,000 (including 10,000 Germans) were captured. [Eighth Army](#)'s casualties were approximately 13,500 killed, wounded and missing, and NZ casualties (between 23 Oct and 21 Nov) 380 killed, 1290 wounded and 41 prisoners of war.

² [S-Sgt W. B. Symons](#); born [Foxton](#), 29 Aug 1916; railway porter; died of wounds 8 Nov 1942.

³ [Maj I. S. Moore](#), ED, m.i.d.; [Mangere](#); born [Auckland](#), 11 Aug 1909; dairy farmer; wounded 21 Apr 1943.

Moore had a Vickers gun mounted in the back of a jeep. He writes: '... it was possible to clamp the tripod to the floor with the front legs in almost vertical position behind the back seat. The ammo box was held in a metal carrier which hooked on to and moved around with the gun. It was placed on the back so that if fired upon it was possible to drive into the nearest hollow, back up and fire gun without showing any of the vehicle.'

L. H. Lynch says 'Dinty [Moore] had the aforementioned Vickers mounted, complete with tripod, in the back of MY Jeep. From then on life was hectic. Dinty chucked his bedroll aboard and lived off my ration box for the next 6 months. I usually had a dozen handgrenades under the seat and a few sticky bombs in the back of the jeep; that was Dinty's luggage!!'

⁴ [Capt H. D. Ball](#); born [Auckland](#), 20 Feb 1913; clerk; died of wounds 28 Mar 1943.

⁵ [Lt-Col R. G. Webb](#), ED, m.i.d.; [Pukehou](#); born [Stratford](#), 5 Aug 1906; schoolmaster; CO [24 Bn](#) Nov–Dec 1942; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1942; headmaster, [Te Aute College](#).

⁶ [Maj K. Dixon](#); [Wellington](#); born NZ 9 Sep 1914; warehouseman.

⁷ [Col D. J. Fountaine](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Westport](#); born [Westport](#), 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO [26 Bn](#) Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jun–Oct 1944; Adv Base Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 19 Nov 1941.

⁸ Capt W. R. Aislalie; [Wellington](#); born [Gisborne](#), 18 May 1910; civil servant.

⁹ Pte R. E. Davis; [Blenheim](#); born NZ 16 Sep 1901; forestry labourer; twice wounded.

¹⁰ Maj-Gen N. W. McD. Weir, KBE, CB, m.i.d.; Legion of Merit (US); [Cambridge](#); born Heathcote Valley, 6 Jul 1893; Regular soldier; [1 NZEF](#) 1914–19; GOC 4 NZ Div 1942; attached HQ [2 NZEF](#) 1943–44; QMG Army HQ 1945; CGS 1946–49.

¹¹ Maj J. L. Griffiths, MC, m.i.d.; [Feilding](#); born NZ 9 Apr 1912; bank officer; ADC to GOC 1941–45.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 15 – TEBAGA GAP

CHAPTER 15

Tebaga Gap

After losing Tripoli—the last of Italy's African empire—the Axis forces withdrew across the Tunisian frontier to the Mareth Line, between the Gulf of Gabes and a range of mountains, the Monts des Ksour. Leaving these defences in the hands of an Italian garrison, the enemy struck northwards against the Allies in central Tunisia where he roughly handled 2 United States Corps at Kasserine; but he was unable to consolidate his gains, and threatened by Eighth Army in the south, returned to the Mareth Line. It seemed certain that he contemplated an attack to stave off the threat from that quarter. Eighth Army, therefore, formed a firm base at Medenine, against which General Montgomery expected Rommel to expend his strength in vain.

At very short notice on 1 March the New Zealand Division was ordered to Medenine, 200 miles west of Tripoli. About midnight, after rations, petrol and ammunition had been drawn and the other preparations completed, 4 Company set off with 5 Brigade, which travelled without stopping except for meals until it reached its destination late next day. Sixth Brigade and Reserve Group arrived on the 3rd, and by mid-afternoon the Division was ready for action, with 5 Brigade holding an eight-mile front west and south-west of the village, 6 Brigade in a reserve position, and 4 Light Armoured Brigade in support. Between NZ Division and the coast were 7 Armoured Division and 51 (Highland) Division.

If the Germans attacked, all the field regiments within range, on receipt of a codeword, were to bring their fire to bear on the threatened part of the front; the anti-tank guns were to hold their fire until the enemy tanks were at almost point-blank range. The mortars and machine guns covered mutually supporting infantry posts: sixteen Vickers, under Captain Blair's (4 Company) command, were disposed with 5 Brigade, 3 and 11 Platoons with the Maori Battalion, 10 Platoon with the 21st, and 12 Platoon with the 23rd; 2 and 3 Companies were under 6 Brigade's command, and the rest of the battalion in Reserve Group.

From 3 Platoon, situated just off a wadi which ran through the Maoris' right flank, it was possible to see several hundred yards to the immediate front and a long way to the right front; 11 Platoon, on a slight ridge on the Maoris' left, overlooked 3

Platoon and probably had the best view in [5 Brigade](#) of the whole front.

From 11 Platoon's headquarters Blair watched the enemy approach across the plain in the misty early morning of 6 March. 'It was a magnificent sight.... The attack was one of Tanks and mechanised Infantry with some tanks out in front and the Inf. following close behind and this was the position up until the Artillery commenced to fire. At this stage the Inf. transport appeared to halt due no doubt to the well directed Arty fire which fell in amongst them, and this may have created a bigger gap between tanks and Inf. than was actually intended.'

The enemy drove across [5 Brigade's](#) front, and some tanks came up the wadi towards the [Maori Battalion](#) and 3 Platoon, whose pits were on a forward slope. 'On each flank were the Maoris who were spoiling for a fight and to the left were two anti tank guns from a British regiment,' writes Ffolliott-Powell. '... The first sign of trouble was when a tank slowly came into sight about 4000 yds away, closely followed by a second. Turning in our direction they halted and the commanders began to make a leisurely survey of the country.... After what seemed to us an interminable period they came on and then we could see many others bringing up the rear. They were well spread out at this time but they converged into the wadi and it seemed to us that there were hundreds of them. I must say the cool manner in which they slowly came on had a very depressing effect on our morale....

'By this time we were able to make a count of the number of tanks and we made it thirty-two. They were mostly Mark 3's and 4's with a few small Italian tanks to their rear in company with one huge Tiger. This was our very first view of this breed and it was most discouraging. This big chap, however, stayed well behind the others. All our men were well down by now and it was only by a rapid peep now and again that we could see what was going on. The commander of the leading tank was still perched on his turret when only some five hundred yards off but a sharp burst by a Maori on his Bren gun made him take to the inside of his tank very rapidly. At this stage they were nearly up to the tapes marking the edge of a dummy minefield and we wondered what the deuce was going to happen next....

'It was they who began the firing, suddenly opening up with all the guns they possessed. Explosive and incendiary bullets with tank shells for good measure.... We fairly burrowed into our holes all the deeper. One of our spare men was hiding

behind a sangar, but not for long. A shell hit it and he stood not on the order of his going. He just went....

'The leader of the tanks then ... turned toward the left closely followed by three others. This was the signal for the anti tank wallahs to get going and this they did with the most remarkable results.... With their very first shots the gunners set the leader on fire. The other three got the same treatment in double quick time, two of them burning and the last one knocked out properly. As the crews of the flamers tried to get out we got going on them with the Vickers but they gave us the slip and dived into a small wadi just behind them.... the Hun had evidently had enough because he began throwing smoke bombs and started a retreat.... One fellow remained behind, however, and he engaged the two anti tank guns [while] his friends made off. This little duel ... looked for all the world like a tennis game with everyone peering over the edge of their slit trench watching the contestants. Then, he too made off.... A truly grand victory from the Tommy gunners.... The way in which they held their fire was an example to us all. The range when they began firing was only about 350 yards at the most.

'As the Hun went back up the wadi our artillery started up just to help them on their way. They were having no success until suddenly we saw a small tank get a direct hit and just disintegrate into small bits.'

Lieutenant Gibson and several others went out from 3 Platoon to examine the knocked-out tanks—Gibson says 'to count scalps and incidentally get ourselves some loot. We were bending over a wounded German when about a dozen Jerries rose up behind a stone wall 50 yds or so away. We were just wondering what the answer to that one was when a PI of 28 Bn came over the crest behind us and thanks to their timely arrival the prisoners came quietly.'

'I am not too sure,' says Corporal Gardiner, 'that we had the situation under control [before the Maoris arrived] ... a German officer pulled the trigger on Lieutenant Gibson, but the pistol, a small automatic, was jammed with dirt.'

Later in the morning 3 Platoon opened fire on what appeared to be German infantry forming up in dead ground about 2000 yards up the wadi. To the Maoris' disappointment, no attack developed from that direction. A group which started off

at company strength was 11 Platoon's target. 'This company, or rather the survivors,' says Cramond, ¹ 'took shelter in and behind a large white building which, according to my fire control chart, was 750 yards from our guns. As this could mean trouble, 11 called up Arty. fire. No further bother was experienced.'

Aircraft dodged and dived overhead and bombed 'all over the place. Damned hard it was, too, distinguishing his planes from ours,' wrote Ffolliott-Powell. 'About 3.30 20 MEs & 16 Stukas came over together & dropped all their bombs away over to our right. Just after, a big mob of our fighter bombers went over & gave him a taste of his own medicine.'

Cramond assisted the artillery during the day by observing and correcting its fire. In the late afternoon, when the enemy attacked again, the whole divisional artillery concentrated on a large body of German and Italian troops with devastating fire. Corporal MacLean, who was with 11 Platoon's left-hand section, saw 'masses of infantry debussing from trucks or troop carriers' on the forward slope of the ridge about 2000 yards away. 'We were not supposed to open fire till enemy infantry were practically on top of us but I'm sure we opened up on these when the arty got on to them. It looked a real massacre. Most of those who got away left the way they came, but a few kept on running till they disappeared from view under a crest.'

Private Andrews, who was in the right-hand section, says, 'I fired 2 belts at them before they went to ground behind a ridge. All were disappointed that they didn't come on for we'd have slaughtered them.'

'This time,' says Ffolliott-Powell, '[the enemy] left the wadi severely alone and came in to our left and right. We left them alone till they were about 2000 yards off and then began firing. Naturally they took all the cover that could help but they had to come over several slopes and each time they appeared they ran right into our fire. We kept two men very busy bringing up more ammunition for half an hour and then the artillery took a hand in the fun. Our guns were getting quite hot by this time so we stopped firing for a while.... [The artillery] put down a lovely barrage.... their range was perfect. We had the box seat and saw them search out every little wadi and reverse slope. Then we spotted Jerry trying to set up an O.Pip so we switched to that and gave them the works and broke up that huddle. Truly these Vickers are a grand job in such cases. By this time, however, the artillery had done so much firing

that the target was totally obscured so we stopped firing again and left them to it.... The advance stopped with [the enemy] hardly firing a shot other than with their Spandaus, whose bullets we could hear whistling over our heads.

'Jerry had had enough.... He stayed where he was and dug himself in. All night we could hear him and cursed him for disturbing our sleep. With the dawn we fully expected a renewal of the attack but like the Arab of old he had stolen off in the middle of the night, apparently only leaving parties to dig graves for his dead. When we went out front later there was plenty of evidence of the accuracy of the artillery's shooting. Also one of the boys picked up a helmet with nearly a dozen holes in it, so we, too, must have done our share of the slaughter.'

That night, when the enemy withdrew to the fortifications of the [Mareth Line](#), he left fifty-two tanks and many men on the battlefield. In this one-day battle—considered to be a model defensive battle—the only Vickers that did any shooting were those of 3 and 11 Platoons. Only one man in 4 Company (Private [Mottram](#)²) was wounded, and he stayed with his unit.

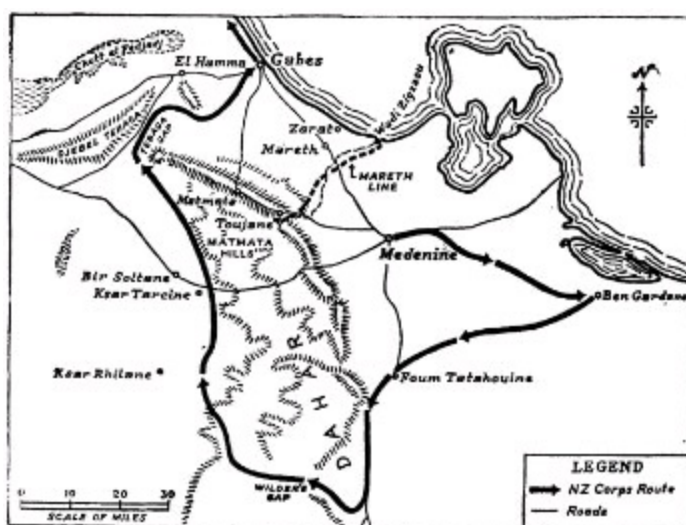
Next morning, during a fighter bomber raid, Private [Switzer](#)³ was killed and four wounded in 1 Company.

In his last battle before he left North Africa, Rommel had failed in his attempt to interrupt [Eighth Army](#)'s preparations for an offensive against the [Mareth Line](#). Thirtieth Corps was to deliver the frontal attack, and the New Zealand Division—built up and titled [New Zealand Corps](#)—was to make a wide turning movement around the enemy's western flank, a detour of 180 miles. The [Long Range Desert Group](#) had found a passage (Wilder's Gap) through the [Monts des Ksour](#) south-west of [Foum Tatahouine](#); from Wilder's Gap the 'left hook' involved a long trek northwards to [Tebaga Gap](#), a defile about two miles wide and four miles long between [Djebel Tebaga](#) and [Djebel Melab](#). To outflank the [Mareth Line](#) the New Zealand Corps would have to force its way through [Tebaga Gap](#), where the enemy was known to have disposed those troops he could spare from his main position.

Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin, at short notice, was given command of the reconnaissance party which was to go through Wilder's Gap and lay out the Corps' assembly area on the other side. He set out in his car on 9 March, accompanied by

the Intelligence Officer (Lieutenant Pleasants) with a Vickers gun in a jeep, the battalion provost in a 15-cwt, and a section of Divisional Provost. Next day they reached the turn-off point on the road south of **Foum Tatahouine**, but had great difficulty, because of the many steep-sided watercourses, in finding a suitable track through the pass. One of the provost trucks following the machine-gunners' three vehicles was blown up on a mine.

They met some of General Leclerc's Fighting French, who had had a brush with the enemy in this area the previous day. McGaffin and Pleasants, in the jeep (driven by Private **Miles**⁴), went out into the open country beyond the pass, where they saw what appeared to be a German reconnaissance car about half a mile away. Wisely they lay low.



The 'left hook' at Mareth
The 'left hook' at **Mareth**

By 11 March some engineers had cleared the mines from the route, the provost had put out the diamond signs, and the assembly area had been marked out a short distance beyond the gap. Sixth Brigade arrived that night and was under camouflage by daybreak, and the other formations came in during the next few nights. Although a German reconnaissance plane flew over, the enemy was unaware that the Corps was assembling in this locality.

In country ablaze with a profusion of wild flowers, the troops rested and trained. One hot day, when 1 Company, every man loaded with equipment or ammunition, marched for three hours, occupied a position and did a practice shoot, many were so

fatigued that they had to make their way back to camp independently. 'But it did nobody any permanent harm,' says Captain Joseph.

With the armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards and Divisional Cavalry leading [8 Armoured Brigade](#), the New Zealand brigades and the Fighting French, the Corps began its northward dash in the evening of 19 March. Despite the rough going over wadis and dunes, the pace was fast, and by nightfall on the 20th the leading troops were within sight of Tebaga Gap.

The tanks were held up next day by minefields and an anti-tank ditch stretching across the valley at its narrowest point. These defences ran more or less parallel to an old Roman wall, in front of which a hill (Point 201) covered the approaches. [General Freyberg](#) decided to breach the line with an infantry assault and to push the armour through.

Although he had been told that 2 Company's Vickers would not be required for [6 Brigade's](#) attack that night, Captain Moore in his jeep (driven by Private [Lynch](#) ⁵) followed 'at a discreet distance' when the brigade orders group was reconnoitring. After they had returned to Brigade Headquarters, Brigadier Gentry asked Moore if he knew where the start line was to be. Moore said he did, and was told that, as the Intelligence Officer (Captain Ball) was not about and it was getting dark, he had better guide the provost who were to mark the route to the start line with lights.

'So my driver & I set off followed by a Provost truck with steel posts and lamps. Having gone about a mile we met our own tanks coming back for the night. Then after a couple more [miles] the Provost ran out of lamps and had to go back for more. We pushed on to the start line where we found Capt Ball and his party laying tape along where [25 and 26] Bns were to start.'

The Brigadier, who came up in his dingo, decided that he wanted to use the machine guns after all, but not before 11 p.m. in case they should add to the vehicle congestion. Moore sent Lynch back to bring up the company, and while waiting, 'decided to go up with the inf. for a certain distance to get the lay of the land. After the preliminary arty bombardment the inf. moved forward in silence as there was no answering fire from the enemy.... I heard one of the engineers who was responsible for cutting the wire yell out. Give me a B— Bangalore! Then the enemy opened up

with about 150 ⁶ machine guns. These were firing to cover their front in a perfect pattern of interlacing fixed lines. However the silly fools were using so much tracer (one in five) that all they did was pin down our fellows for about 15 mins. Then they crawled under the lines wherever there was a hollow in the ground. Located the guns by tracer and rooted them out with bayonet and grenade. The two battalions captured Point 201 and the defences south of the Roman Wall, together with over 800 prisoners.

Moore and the brigade transport officer (Captain [Bethell](#) ⁷) were asked to deliver a message to the commander of 8 Armoured Brigade requesting that the tanks should go through the minefield as soon as possible to exploit [6 Brigade's](#) success. 'Dick Bethell,' says Moore, 'took me in his P.U. over to the Armour which were about 2 miles to the rear of Bde HQ. The tanks of HQ were drawn up in a tight circle. When we had penetrated this on foot we found a number of folding camp stretchers set up full of sleeping officers. I called out asking if the Brigadier was there and one of the figures sat up in bed and said he was the Brigadier. I passed the message making sure that I was understood. Then he replied that he had had his orders and he would move his tanks forward at first light. As the message was in the form of a request we could not press the point. We were both rather disappointed when we saw him lie down again and pull the clothes over his shoulder.'

By dawn the enemy had brought artillery into position facing the breach [6 Brigade](#) had made in his line. The British armour passed beyond the Roman Wall, but was prevented from going farther by 88-millimetre guns firing at long range and other anti-tank guns closer to the breach. Groups of German tanks appeared, and it was confirmed in the afternoon that 21 Panzer Division had arrived on the [New Zealand Corps'](#) front.

Meanwhile, after delivering the message to the tank commander, Moore returned to Brigade Headquarters and called at the ADS nearby, which was being shelled. A padre was very concerned because there would not be enough blankets for the wounded who were being brought in. When 2 Company arrived, the men stripped some of their blankets from their bedrolls, and while they were doing this, Brigadier Gentry called, 'Moore, have your MGs arrived yet?' The Brigadier in his dingo immediately led 5 and 6 Platoons to 25 Battalion (on the left), and Moore took

4 Platoon over to the right flank of the 26th.

On the northern slope of Point 201, 6 Platoon heard voices while digging in with the 25th, and at dawn saw the enemy on a ridge 1500 yards away. The enemy opened up with 47-millimetre guns, but was forced to retire behind a fold in the ground by fire from all four Vickers, which also engaged vehicles up to two miles away. In mid-morning a Crusader tank occupied the ridge in front of the platoon and blew up one of the 47-millimetre guns, whereupon 200 Italians surrendered. On the eastern slope of Point 201, 5 Platoon, in support of A Company 26 Battalion, also found targets among enemy positions and vehicles. As soon as it was light, 4 Platoon, with B Company 26 Battalion on two hillocks on the right flank, opened fire on four 75-millimetre guns on a hill about a mile away; these enemy guns managed only one or two shells in retaliation during the day.

Moore found the infantry of B Company 'very busy trying to make a number of captured Italian Machine Guns work. ... We managed to get about thirty functioning. Also in our area were four 75 mm guns complete with unlimited supplies of both A.P. and H.E. ammo. As this flank was rather exposed and overlooked from the right I thought it would be a good idea to man these guns and let the boys have some practice firing at some sangers dotted about a ridge on the right at ranges from 1000x to 1500x. As far as we knew the sangers were empty.

'After about fifteen minutes of what we thought was only target practice there was a sudden waving of white flags from our targets. So two infantry boys with tommy guns walked out and covered by the Ity guns and m.gs and Lt Titchener's pn [4 Platoon]. They had only gone about a couple of hundred yards when the whole hillside seemed to vomit men. About 200 Itie prisoners.'

In the evening [6 Brigade](#) occupied the ground won by the armoured brigade during the day. While 4 Platoon gave covering fire for half an hour, B Company 26 Battalion advanced towards a high ridge on the eastern flank. Before reaching the objective the company heard what were believed to be tanks and infantry moving along a wadi, and took cover to await developments. After the agreed time had elapsed, 4 Platoon, thinking that the infantry was on the objective, went forward to help consolidate. The platoon's six trucks drove to the foot of the hill, and Lieutenant Titchener, Sergeants Pye and Evans, and Private Woodhall began the stiff climb to

reconnoitre. Although surprised to find none of the infantry at the top, Titchener continued towards a field gun. He was challenged by an Italian sentry, whom he shot, and he and his party, with cries of 'Infantry—where are you?' and 'Come out you bastards!', rounded up thirty-five Italians and captured four 75-millimetre guns and two Bredas.

'The cream of the story to my mind,' says Sergeant Gould, who arrived on the scene soon afterwards, 'is the picture of Shorty Woodhall with 20/30 Ities lined up in front of him while the rest look for more, mouthing terrible threats and threatening them the while with nothing other than the Verey pistol which contained the green flare to bring the boys up the hill with their guns.'

By the time the infantry arrived the situation was completely in hand. For this action and his subsequent handling of his guns at [Tebaga Gap](#), Titchener was awarded the MC.

Meanwhile 5 Platoon went a short distance forward of Point 201 with A Company 26 Battalion, and later moved to C Company, which occupied a position between A and B Companies, about half a mile beyond the Roman Wall. The [25th Battalion](#) pushed out the brigade flank farther to the west, and 7 Platoon (as well as 6) was placed in its support.

The enemy approached on the eastern (right) flank in the early hours of the 23rd. Two infantry sections posted on the southern side of the Roman Wall, assisted by 4 Platoon firing on fixed lines, pinned him down until dawn, when it was discovered that he had dug in on the other side of the wall. He began sniping, and with well-directed mortar fire, compelled 4 Platoon to move its guns, and most of B Company to take cover on the southern slopes of the ridge. The machine-gunners, before they left, blew up with sticky bombs the four field guns they had captured the previous evening. Although the mortar and small-arms fire made 4 Platoon change its position again in the afternoon, its guns continued to engage the enemy and strengthen the flank.

That evening 24 Battalion moved into the line on the left of the 25th, and was joined there by 9 Platoon. As 8 Platoon had gone to 26 Battalion earlier in the day, all six platoons of 2 and 3 Companies were now supporting [6 Brigade](#). Next day they

engaged any targets they could find, including observation posts and the crews of anti-tank guns.

Late in the afternoon of the 24th Sergeant Fraser and Private [Mulcahy](#),⁸ of 5 Platoon, set out to reconnoitre a steep hill (Point 184). 'Bob and I,' says Mulcahy, 'got the shock of our life when after climbing up ... we spotted the top half of 2 Hun heads in a slit trench about 25 yards away and on the backward slope. We just walked firing with our Tommy Guns from the hip, towards the trench. Bob stopped about 10 yards short of the trench went down on one knee to re-load and I went on and persuaded one of the occupants to step out of the trench—about 4' 6' deep—a bit of a contract so I helped him and his cobber came too. Apparently the firing woke all the other residents up and an officer showed himself about 40 yards away and he had a few pot shots at us. For shelter if nothing else we walked backwards and had our "new finds" walking towards us until we were all below the crest of the hill. The main thing worrying me was the empty magazine on my Tommy Gun. I took the Huns⁹ down to the base of the hill and Bob after coming part way down decided to go back and get the officer chap. Bob almost reached the crest when a shot rang out and he dropped like a stone.'

In the evening, when two platoons of D Company 26 Battalion attempted to capture Point 184, Captain Moore and Mulcahy went to see what they could find out about Fraser. 'From a short distance away,' says Moore, 'we saw D Coy [26 Bn](#) walk in single file up a clearly defined track. They were met near the top by a sustained burst from one MG.' The attack did not succeed. It was another twenty-four hours before Moore and Mulcahy were able to get up on to the narrow ledge where Fraser's body lay.

Thirtieth Corps' frontal assault on the [Mareth](#) Line had not gone well, and by 23 March General Montgomery had decided to switch his main thrust to [Tebaga Gap](#). Headquarters 10 Corps and [1 Armoured Division](#), therefore, were ordered to that front. [New Zealand Corps](#) was to blast a passage through the Gap for [1 Armoured Division](#), which was to capture El Hamma. For this operation, supercharge II, 1 and 3 Companies were allotted to [6 Brigade](#), and 2 and 4 Companies to the 5th.

First of all the enemy had to be cleared from Point 184, which gave observation over the whole front and enfiladed the proposed start line. The [21st Battalion](#), with

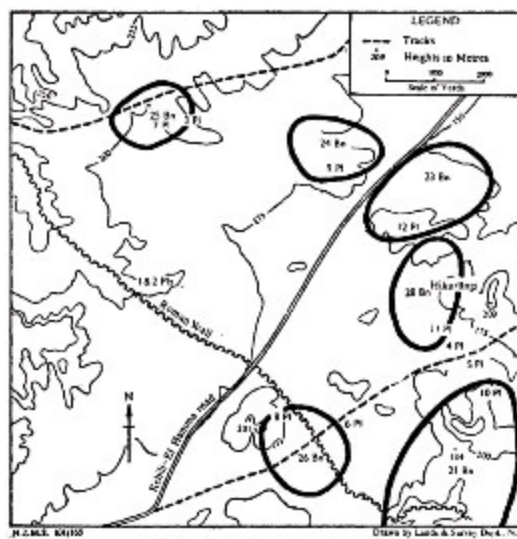
very strong artillery support, attacked at 1 a.m. on the 26th and within two hours secured the whole objective.

The mortars and machine guns (10 Platoon) then went up to help consolidate. Lieutenant Wells says the platoon 'moved forward over rough country as close to the feature [Point 184] as our trucks could get. We debussed with the minimum of gun gear and personal equipment, but with every round of ammo we had, as an infantry counter attack was considered a certainty.' The trucks were dispersed in a wadi, a picket was left with them, and the rest of the platoon carried all the ammunition and equipment up the steep slope. 'This was a hard job well done.' The sections were sited about 50 yards apart, on a forward slope in very broken ground, with the infantry on both flanks and also between them. The digging was in almost solid rock, but after getting down a few inches and building up with rocks, and with some natural camouflage, the gunners were quite confident of their ability to deal with a counter-attack on their front.

'With daylight came a real do-over by the enemy, shelling, machine-gunning and mortaring. This went on almost without a break all day and there was little chance of doing much shooting as it was a case of "heads down".' Corporal Rawson ¹⁰ was wounded in the head, but was able to make his own way out. Aircraft strafed the platoon's transport and set fire to a gun truck, which became a total loss. The shelling continued until dark, and then 'an uneasy and uncomfortable night was spent and false alarms of enemy attacks were frequent.'

The main attack, which began in the afternoon of the 26th, has been described as the perfect blitzkrieg. The Desert Air Force began to bomb and strafe the enemy trenches and gun emplacements at half past three; a barrage by over 200 guns

opened at four, and the Sherman and Crusader tanks of 8 Armoured Brigade, accompanied by Bren carriers and advancing in two waves, with the sun behind them, were followed by three battalions of infantry, the Maoris on the right, the 23rd



Tebaga Gap, 26–27 March 1943

in the centre, and the 24th on the left. A constant procession of fighters, bombers and 'tank-busters' gave the closest support the desert war had seen.

The [25th Battalion](#), which made a diversionary attack on the left flank to draw hostile fire from the 24th, was supported by overhead fire from 1 Company, whose guns had joined the battalion the previous night. 'We did not arrive in [25 Bn](#) area until after dark and it was about midnight by the time that the C.O. (Tom [Morten](#) ¹¹) was located,' writes Captain Joseph. 'He showed me 2 pl. posns. on the ground and I left Aislabie [2 Platoon] and Rollinson [1 Platoon] to dig in & camouflage while I went back with Gibson [3 Platoon] to his posn. Morten wanted a pl. to support an inf. pl. occupying a small elevated feature further to the right. At first light I found ... that Aislabie & Rollinson were on the forward slopes of the ridge in full view of the enemy. Fortunately, their camouflage was good & I had them both on telephone. I told them to "lie doggo" until the attack started. As soon as things started, Gibson, who now had no task, was brought forward and went into action on the crest of the ridge....'

Gibson's platoon did not have time to dig in and came under fire. 'The noise is terrific, shells are dropping all around also small arms fire,' wrote Sergeant Taylor. 'One dropped a yard from one of my guns, badly wounding Pete [Henry](#) ¹² & Ffolliott-Powell....'

'The arty barrage stirred up so much dust that observed fire was not on,' adds Joseph, 'but we peppered the ridge behind the enemy FDL's to some effect. We

couldn't see what was going on to our right, if we had been able to, I have no doubt that we would have had some good shooting.'

About half an hour after the attack began 3 Platoon, whose vehicles were handy, was sent to the battalion's right flank, where the advance was reported to be held up by tanks and infantry. 'The two tanks withdrew just as we arrived,' says Gibson, who placed one Vickers section on the ground and went forward himself with a machine-gunner and a section of infantry, under covering fire from the two guns, to what appeared to be an abandoned infantry position, where forty or fifty Italians, who had been deserted by their officers, were only too pleased to surrender.

The Germans put up a determined fight in the centre of the Corps front, but 23 and 24 Battalions reached their objectives and by 6 p.m. the blitzkrieg had succeeded. The 1st Armoured Division passed through the breach, and when the moon rose, began its advance to [El Hamma](#). [New Zealand Corps](#) was to rejoin the armour in the Hamma area, but first had to destroy the enemy who still held out in the hills.

The Maoris had been checked by a strongly defended hill (Point 209) on the right flank, and a fierce struggle for the possession of a lower feature (which the Maoris called 'Hikurangi'), on the western side of 209, lasted through the night; it was there that Second-Lieutenant [Ngarimu](#)¹³ won the VC.

Elsewhere the enemy appeared to be retreating in the morning of the 27th. From daybreak 10 Platoon (with 21 Battalion near Point 184) found many good targets from 1500 yards to extreme range, and its three Vickers (the fourth had been knocked out by shellfire) and one Bren gun were busy shooting at infantry, observation posts, mortar and machine-gun nests, motor cycles, trucks, troop-transporters, self-propelled guns, staff cars, anti-tank weapons in tow, and armoured cars. 'At one stage,' says Wells, 'we kept the crew of a big assault gun pinned to the ground for about an hour, thus preventing them from coming into action against our transport. Opposition was not very heavy and we certainly kept the enemy quiet.... Total ammunition expended was 26,000....'

After repeatedly counter-attacking the Maoris on Hikurangi, the Germans eventually fell back to Point 209. From its dug-in position south-west of Hikurangi 11

Platoon could see the enemy on 209 and had some good shooting at ranges of about half a mile until the margin of safety was reached. Unfortunately the barrels of one or two guns were worn, and the bullets began to fall among the Maoris, who of course asked the platoon to stop the shoot. To give the Maoris additional machine-gun support 4 and 5 Platoons were put in line with 11 Platoon 'along a low ridge so that they could cover Pt 209 and yet be slightly decentered from it.' They went into action at daybreak.

The artillery fired several devastating concentrations on 209. Soon after this the Maoris were ordered to cease fire while a German doctor and three stretcher-bearers, all wearing Red Cross armbands and carrying a large Red Cross flag, were led into Headquarters 28 Battalion, where the doctor explained that he had ninety badly wounded men on the other side of the hill and had run out of bandages and medical supplies. Arrangements were made to bring the German wounded into the Maori Battalion lines, and about midday a long procession of men, some walking and some on stretchers, arrived safely. The wounded were followed by about twenty Germans who were not wounded but wanted to surrender; they said that others wanted to surrender but were afraid of being shot if they came over, and that the garrison of Point 209 was short of ammunition and supplies. Colonel Bennett decided to attack immediately.

The assaulting company of Maoris was forced to ground by sweeping machine-gun fire, but with the assistance of a Bren carrier mounting a machine gun on each flank, and supporting fire from the Vickers below, charged the hill. The Germans soon began to surrender; any who attempted to continue resisting were dissuaded by the machine-gun fire.

This included fire from 12 Platoon, which had deployed on 23 Battalion's right flank at the final objective (north of Point 209) but had been forced to retire before it could go into action in that position. It then went back behind a small hillock, where it was able to bring fire to bear on Point 209 for about twenty minutes, but before the guns could be dug in there they were outflanked and came under fire from three tanks. The platoon then took up a third position, which proved satisfactory, despite shell and mortar fire, and with indirect fire covered Point 209 from end to end shortly before the Germans surrendered.

The machine-gunners had few casualties. Private [Gordon](#) ¹⁴ was killed and four men wounded, Private [Chisnall](#) ¹⁵ fatally, in 9 Platoon, which had gone into position with the infantry on 24 Battalion's objective. The enemy guns, says Corporal [Nunnerley](#), ¹⁶ 'were trying to get a squadron of tanks that were passing the entrance to the wadi that we were in. The shells were going over the tanks, who were moving up towards the German lines, & were falling in our positions.... we were just pulling out in the morning after breakfast, we had left our dug in positions to take our gear back to the trucks ... when the shelling started.'

While out in front in a Bren carrier at dusk, Private [Carter](#), ¹⁷ of 11 Platoon, received two bullet wounds and died shortly afterwards.

A strong gunline checked [1 Armoured Division](#) two or three miles short of [El Hamma](#), and the enemy kept open the Hamma- [Gabes](#) bottleneck long enough to extricate the greater part of his forces from the [Mareth](#) Line.

[New Zealand Corps](#) began to advance from [Tebaga Gap](#) on 28 March; [5 Brigade](#) Group moved separately as a flank guard on a more easterly route. After the Corps had gone a few miles along the [El Hamma](#) road, however, plans were changed and it was directed towards [Gabes](#), on the coast, which meant going around the south of [Djebel Halouga](#). Progress was slow along very dusty tracks through very broken country. Aircraft bombed and strafed the column more than once. The brigade halted south of [Djebel Halouga](#) in the late afternoon while the tanks were in action against the retreating panzers. Next morning the enemy had gone and the advance was resumed.

Fifth Brigade Group cut across the front of the main Corps column, and led by [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) with an advanced guard— [Robertson Force](#), consisting of one 17-pounder anti-tank gun, some six-pounders, 5 Platoon (accompanied by Captain Moore) and two armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards— made a fast pace along the road to [Gabes](#). A screen of carriers could not keep up.

'We carried on until we could see the palm-groves round [Gabes](#) and in the distance the sea and the road from [Mareth](#),' says the Brigadier. 'To my disappointment the road was empty. Directly ahead was a long ridge topped by a line of prominent pill-boxes, the defences of [Gabes](#). It was a day for taking risks so I

lined up my six-pounders and machine-guns on a parallel ridge 1,000 yards away, just as if it was the battle of [Waterloo](#). ... we opened fire on the pill-boxes with great gusto.... the six-pounders scoring hits with every shot....' ¹⁸ The Vickers also fired a few bursts, but the enemy had gone. Moore says 'we were very relieved to find that these concrete emplacements were not manned.' The armoured cars moved off at high speed through the pill-boxes and on into [Gabes](#), followed by the rest of the advanced guard; they were the first [Eighth Army](#) troops to enter the town, the first to liberate an Allied town. They were just too late to stop the fleeing enemy from demolishing the bridge over a stream. Soon, however, the townspeople, many of whom were French, were happily at work building a stone causeway.

'Just after passing through [Gabes](#),' says Moore, 'we came to a crossroad. The road ahead was built up on an embankment for a couple of miles, through what seemed to be a salt pan or mud flat. At a distance of 2 to three miles away we could see the road disappear into a grove of date palms. That stretch of road was without any form of cover. So we decided to make a gun line of the Vickers & 6 prs while the armoured cars had a look at the grove across the swamp. As they pushed on Mjr [Robertson](#) ¹⁹ and I saw approx 30 vehicles moving from our left across our front on a low ridge about 2000 yds off. On going to engage them we found that we had one Vickers and one anti-tank gun available as the remainder of our vehicles had been held up at the blown crossing some distance back.

'We fired at the trucks but all the result as far as we could see was their sudden acceleration.

'After waiting for some time after the remainder of our guns had arrived and had been put in position we decided to pack up and push on.' The vehicles were all drawn up on the crossroads when two armoured cars were seen approaching along the road on the right. They were about 100 yards away. 'For a moment we thought that they were our own cars returning by a different route. However they were Italians who fortunately thought we were Germans. We did not at the moment realise this and the long barrels of their 20 mm Bredas looked anything but friendly.'

Lynch leapt out of the jeep to assist unhitch a six-pounder and Moore drove out to the right in an attempt to divert the enemy's attention. The first six-pounder shot, at seventy paces from the gun muzzle, set fire to the second armoured car. Although

also hit, the other armoured car went flat out to the corner, turned right and opened fire with twin tail guns as it drove past the column of vehicles. By this time Moore had gone into action with the Vickers on his jeep. 'Then another 6 pdr came up by me and fired a few shots. Another "brewup". However both crews got out though one poor devil ran across the road without his feet.'

The next vehicle to come from the rear was a staff car containing Lieutenant-Colonel [Romans](#).²⁰ 'We told him the score and warned him of the mines. He set off at a good pace across to the grove of date palms, he got about two thirds across and then came back at an even better pace. As we had suspected, enemy elements had let our armoured cars go through and were waiting with MGs for soft skinned vehicles. Later the artillery put over a few rounds and we were able to cross.'

¹ [Capt A. R. Cramond](#), m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Dunedin](#), 1 Sep 1910; stock agent.

² [Pte J. F. Mottram](#); [New Plymouth](#); born [Gisborne](#), 29 Nov 1915; bushman; wounded 6 Mar 1943.

³ [Pte W. B. Switzer](#); born NZ 9 Feb 1921; garage assistant; killed in action 7 Mar 1943.

⁴ [Pte D. L. Miles](#); [Waimata](#), [Waihi](#); born [Petone](#), 26 Aug 1910; farmer.

⁵ [Pte L. H. Lynch](#), m.i.d.; [New Plymouth](#); born [Waitara](#), 20 Jul 1916; carpenter.

⁶ Over 100 machine guns were listed among the weapons captured in this attack.

⁷ [Capt R. Bethell](#), MBE, m.i.d.; [Culverden](#), [Amuri](#); born [Christchurch](#), 17 Oct 1905; farm manager.

⁸ [Sgt C. S. Mulcahy](#), m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Wellington](#), 19 Feb 1919; clerk.

⁹ They were reported to be the first two Germans captured in this sector.

¹⁰ 2 Lt D. H. Rawson; [New Plymouth](#); born NZ 28 Feb 1915; clerk; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

¹¹ Lt-Col T. B. Morten, DSO; Little River; born [Christchurch](#), 30 Sep 1913; shepherd; CO 25 Bn Jan 1943–Feb 1944; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

¹² Sgt P. J. Henry; [Whakatane](#); born [Whakatane](#), 23 Dec 1917; exchange clerk; twice wounded.

¹³ 2 Lt Te M. N. Ngarimu, VC; born NZ 7 Apr 1918; shepherd; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.

¹⁴ Pte M. G. B. Gordon; born Hastings, 1 May 1915; labourer; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.

¹⁵ Pte R. W. D. Chisnall; born NZ 23 Jun 1916; farm assistant; died of wounds 27 Mar 1943.

¹⁶ Cpl S. G. Nunnerley; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 25 Mar 1918; clerk; twice wounded.

¹⁷ Pte C. Carter; born England, 16 Aug 1918; talkie operator; died of wounds 27 Mar 1943.

¹⁸ [Infantry Brigadier](#), pp. 291–2.

¹⁹ Maj D. J. Robertson; [Timaru](#); born NZ 17 Dec 1906; manufacturing representative.

²⁰ Lt-Col R. E. Romans, DSO, m.i.d.; born [Arrowtown](#), 10 Sep 1909; business manager; CO 23 Bn 1942–43; twice wounded; died of wounds 19 Dec 1943.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 16 – VICTORY IN AFRICA

CHAPTER 16

Victory in Africa

The enemy fell back to prepared positions at [Wadi Akarit](#), a formidable obstacle about 20 miles beyond [Gabes](#). New Zealand Corps, having completed its task of forcing Tebaga Gap, was disbanded on 31 March. This time 51 (Highland) and 50 (Northumbrian) and 4 Indian Divisions were to make the assault, and when a bridgehead had been won across the wadi, the New Zealand Division was to go through and exploit.

Almost 500 guns began their barrage at 4.15 a.m. on 6 April, and the fighting went on all day. The New Zealanders edged forward, waited, and listened to the constant thudding of the artillery. By daybreak on the 7th the enemy had gone. The Division went through the gap and out onto the plain of central [Tunisia](#). Pressing hard on the heels of the retreating enemy were the Highlanders on the main coastal road; the New Zealanders, two armoured divisions and the Fighting French were farther inland. Two machine-gun companies (2 and 4) were with [5 Brigade](#), 1 Company with the 6th, and the rest of the battalion in Reserve Group. Lieutenant-Colonel Robbie had taken over command from Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin on 3 April.

When the Division halted for the night, [5 Brigade](#) formed a gunline while 23 Battalion went on ahead to attempt to get astride a road which ran across the front. After an extremely rough journey the battalion was just short of the road early next morning (the 8th). The six-pounders and 5 Platoon's Vickers opened up on the traffic on the road, destroyed eight vehicles, and captured some Germans and equipment.

The advance continued in fits and starts over rough country on 8 April, and in places the bulldozers, which had been indispensable since the 'left hook' at [El Agheila](#), were called upon to improve the tracks. After nightfall a battle group—8 Armoured Brigade, followed by the [Maori Battalion](#) (with 4 and 11 Platoons under command), Divisional Cavalry, and the rest of [5 Brigade](#)—crossed the [Mahares-Maknassy](#) railway, and without meeting any opposition went some distance through olive groves and fields of wheat and barley and brilliant wild flowers. A bitterly cold wind and frequent halts made it an outstandingly unpleasant trip. At daybreak

enemy columns, apparently taken by surprise, were seen streaming away to the north.

The Division drove up to the [Sfax- Sbeitla](#) road, still held by the enemy on the 9th, and the artillery deployed to engage some tanks which counter-attacked but were driven off. Half a dozen Stukas released their bombs near [5 Brigade](#), and fighters strafed the column without doing much harm. A shell from a Bofors, which was firing too low, hit 2 Company's quartermaster's truck and injured three men. A patrol including a Sherman tank, some carriers, anti-tank guns and 2 Platoon, sent out to investigate a report that there were Germans on the right flank, scoured the countryside and captured two Italians (one of them an officer) with a diesel truck. Just on dusk the six-pounders knocked out two German tanks, whose crews escaped.

It was proposed to cut off the enemy's retreat north of [Sfax](#), but before the Division got away in the morning of the 10th a report was received that British armoured cars had entered the town. The enemy, apprehensive about being caught by another 'left hook' had slipped away again. The Division drove through immense olive groves to [La Hencha](#). The troops were living well: 'Lamb chops for breakfast ... the spoils of war.' 'A bit of cunning work enabled us to have chicken, mashed spuds and broad beans for tea.'

The Division was away again in the afternoon of the 11th, still through olives, fields of grain and wild flowers, and past the colosseum at [El Djem](#). A patrol of the King's Dragoon Guards entered [Sousse](#) early next day, closely followed by some New Zealanders. The Germans, who had left the town only a few minutes earlier, were pursued along the road towards [Enfidaville](#).

Fifth Brigade tried to bypass [Sousse](#) by a secondary route, but the traffic became horribly congested in narrow lanes between cactus hedges, trees and stone walls. A long and exceedingly tedious journey brought the [Maori Battalion](#) to [Sidi Bou Ali](#), and in the very early hours of the 13th the accompanying 4 and 11 Platoons planted their Vickers in a wheatfield about a mile beyond the village before going to bed. MacLean (11 Platoon) wrote that '2 or 3 tank "overs" land nearby while we're in our blankets but too tired to care.... Up again at 5 AM after 2 hrs' sleep, to the tune of nearby shell-bursts....'

Tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade**, probing towards **Enfidaville** on the 13th, were hampered by olive groves which obscured the vision of their crews. The **21st Battalion** was despatched to give local protection, and its Bren carriers and 6 Platoon reconnoitred with the tanks. The battalion formed a gunline (including 10 Platoon's Vickers) behind which the armour laagered for the night about five miles from the town.



Gabs to Enfidaville

The enemy withdrew into the broken, mountainous country behind **Enfidaville**, and in the hope that it might be possible to 'bump' him out before he had time to settle in properly, **5 Brigade** set out to capture the 1000-foot massif, **Djebel Garci**, and then advance on **Enfidaville** from the west. Led by **23 Battalion** the brigade emerged from the cactus hedges and olive groves onto open ground in full view of the enemy. **Brigadier Kippenberger** decided, however, that **Garci** was at least a divisional objective, so directed the attack on a 600-foot rocky outcrop, **Takrouna**, between it and **Enfidaville**.

The **23rd Battalion** had gone only a few hundred yards in this direction when shells began to fall among the trucks, which sped forward to a patch of cactus and some native hovels on rising ground (Point 70), where the troops debussed. The battalion prepared to attack, but the Brigadier decided that the attempt to 'gate crash' this strong position would fail and ordered the battalion to dig in. A small stream, **Wadi el Boul**, lay about a mile ahead, and beyond it, about four miles away, the crag of **Takrouna**, crowned by a mosque and some other buildings, rose abruptly

from the plain.

The supporting Vickers went into position, 12 Platoon on the 23rd's right flank and 5 Platoon on the left; later, when the [Maori Battalion](#) joined the 23rd, 4 and 11 Platoons also went into position. The machine-gunners had several successful shoots against troops and vehicles beyond Wadi el Boul.

The [21st Battalion](#) rejoined [5 Brigade](#) and in the evening of the 14th crossed Wadi el Boul on foot to take up positions just south of the [Enfidaville- Pont du Fahs](#) road, where 10 Platoon dug in. At daybreak it was discovered that the enemy had direct observation from Point 121, a small, bare knoll about a mile north of the wadi, which made movement almost impossible. The infantry captured the knoll, on which 6 Platoon dug in before dawn on the 16th. Still overlooked from higher ground the knoll was shelled intensely, and during the next four days the platoon took a hammering without being able to hit back. One of its guns was knocked out by a mortar bomb which landed under the barrel.

By this time [6 Brigade](#) had moved up towards [Enfidaville](#). Attempts to enter the town and to outflank it from the coastal side were unsuccessful, so 25 and 26 Battalions went into positions astride the railway less than two miles to the south, with their supporting arms, including the three platoons of 1 Company, sited to cover the front.

The 1800-mile pursuit from [Alamein](#) had ended. The Axis forces were hemmed in on the broad promontory of northern [Tunisia](#) by [Eighth Army](#) in the south and [First Army](#) and the United States Corps in the west. [Eighth Army](#), still 50 miles from [Tunis](#) and with mountain ranges athwart its line of advance, was to pin down as many of the enemy as possible on its front while [First Army](#) and the Americans, in country more suitable for the deployment of armour, launched an offensive intended to bring about the final surrender of the enemy in [Africa](#).

[Eighth Army](#), therefore, was to attack the [Enfidaville](#) positions on 20 April, two days before the offensive in the north. The New Zealand Division was to strike into the hills beyond the town, and 4 Indian Division, on its left, was to attack Djebel Garci; [50 Division](#) was to cover the coastal flank, and 7 Armoured Division the inland flank.

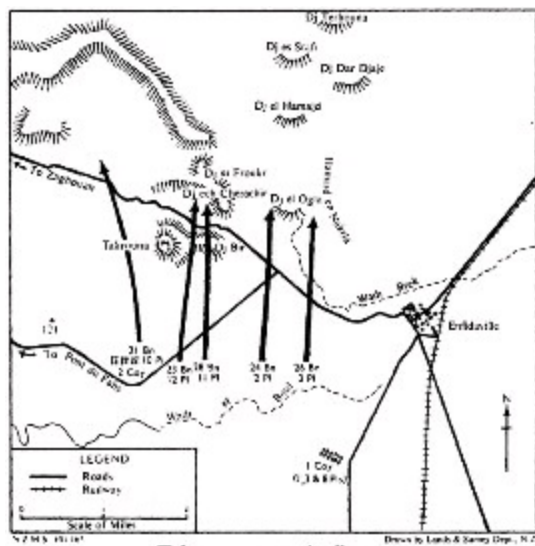
After [201 Guards Brigade](#) took over from 25 Battalion in the coastal sector on the night of 16–17 April, 26 Battalion (with 2 and 3 Platoons among its supporting arms) was the only battalion of [6 Brigade](#) in the line. The Maori Battalion was withdrawn for a rest, and 4 and 11 Platoons went back to camp in country where the grass, weeds and wild flowers were knee high.

Swarms of mosquitoes, though fortunately not the malaria carrying kind, were 'giving us perfect hell. We're almost bitten to death—they are even on the job at midday. No let up. Even wearing balaclava, scarf, gloves etc makes little difference.' Sleepless nights aggravated the fatigue and strain.

Sixth Brigade's objectives, a long ridge named Hamaid en Nakrla and a roundish hill, Djebel Ogla, were to be taken by 26 and 24 Battalions, and a composite machine-gun company (1, 3 and 8 Platoons), under Captain Joseph's command, was to give neutralising fire on 26 Battalion's open right flank. A preliminary reconnaissance was impossible in daylight, but direction pegs were placed on a corrected bearing, and the twelve guns dug in in the evening of the 19th without being detected.

Fifth Brigade had a more difficult task. In the first phase 28 and 21 Battalions were to capture [Djebel Bir](#) and the ground on both sides of [Takrouna](#). [Takrouna](#) itself was to be the Maoris' responsibility, but the 21st was to help if the opportunity occurred. In the second phase 23 Battalion was to cross the [Enfidaville- Zaghouan](#) road, beyond [Takrouna](#), and attack the jagged ridge of Djebel Froukr. The three platoons of 2 Company were to support 21 Battalion on the left flank.

Captain Moore, Lieutenant Titchener and Second-Lieutenant [Power](#)¹ went forward to place the pegs for the three platoons. 'We had been informed that the enemy was getting short of ammunition,' says Moore. 'Well! for the next hour, though there were only three of us, he chased us around every time we moved with such concentrations of shell fire that one would think he had unlimited ammo. Finally we separated and finished the job.'



Takrouna, 19–20 April 1943

After dark 6 Platoon left Point 121 to join 2 Company's gunline; it replaced 10 Platoon, which withdrew and stood by ready to go forward with 21 Battalion.

At zero hour, 11 p.m., the artillery began its barrage and concentrations in support of the advancing infantry, and the Vickers also went into action. Joseph's twelve guns did a timed shoot for thirty-two minutes, followed by harassing fire until midnight, and used 41,000 rounds. 'During the whole time we were in action,' he reported, 'there was no return fire, and after 10 mins. no fire was observed coming from the village [[Enfidaville](#)]. 26 Bn reported that they were not fired on from their right flank during the whole attack. A recce, the following morning indicated that the target areas had been effectively engaged.'

With no great difficulty both 26 and 24 Battalions reached their objectives, and before daybreak 2 and 3 Platoons were established in forward localities with them. One of 3 Platoon's guns was hit, temporarily repaired, and later replaced.

During the first forty minutes of the attack 2 Company shot away 44,500 rounds in support of 21 Battalion. The Vickers' task, says Moore, 'was to start 300x ahead of the Arty Barrage and move forward along the left flank of [Takrouna](#). So that there could be no mistake about timing the lifts I had all three pns connected by phone to Coy HQ and gave the time from there. As [21 Bn](#) had not been warned ... that we were giving overhead fire they found the noise confusing....

'After the timed shoot I intended to go across to Lieut Brown whose slit trench

was only about 50 yds away from mine. On lifting the phone however I heard Lieut Brown and Titchener talking together and Brown seemed on top of the world. "We gave the Bs Hell," he said. Checking all pns and finding no casualties I decided to report to 5 Bde HQ which was only about 150 yds away. This I did and while I was at Bde HQ one of the men came over and told me that a stray shell had landed in Lieut Brown's slit-trench." He was killed instantly.

Moore was ordered to put two platoons on Point 121, but this was impracticable because the knoll was still under enemy observation, and there was not sufficient time to dig in in the solid limestone. Before dawn, therefore, 4 and 5 Platoons dug in to the rear of Point 121, where they could protect the left flank. They were shelled and had several casualties.

The three platoons of 4 Company were intended to help 5 Brigade consolidate on its objectives. The Maoris suffered many casualties, including most of their officers, from artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire; booby-trapped minefields, cactus hedges, trenches and ditches added to their difficulties. They were held up on the lower slopes of Djebel Bir, in the valley between Bir and Takrouna, and on the slopes of Takrouna itself. Next day, therefore, 11 Platoon remained in a barley field near the start line. On the western side of Takrouna 21 Battalion, after an extremely difficult and costly advance to the Zaghuan road, was withdrawn to its original position, and consequently 10 Platoon went back to disperse near Brigade Headquarters just before dawn. The 23rd Battalion, which was to attack Djebel Froukr whether or not the 21st and 28th were successful, broke through the valley between Bir and Takrouna, crossed the road, and reached the top of Djebel Cherachir, immediately south of Froukr. But no supporting arms could get there; after making three attempts 12 Platoon was pulled back to B Echelon.

Takrouna gave observation over the ground that had been won and also the artillery positions on the open plain below; its capture, therefore, was absolutely essential. Two whole days and nights of extremely stubborn fighting and individual gallantry were to elapse before it was finally secured by 28 and 21 Battalions.

The Maoris captured Djebel Bir on the morning of the 20th. Lieutenant Cramond, Sergeant Hatherly and two others of 11 Platoon, going out in the afternoon to reconnoitre for machine-gun positions, were pinned down by shellfire

for an hour and a half behind a low sloping bank before making a very hurried departure. After dark the platoon occupied a position near Headquarters [28 Battalion](#), below [Takrouna](#) and facing towards [Enfidaville](#). The men dug in deep and had some rest despite the rain, wet blankets and hordes of mosquitoes.

Sixth Brigade's reserve battalion (the 25th), which relieved the 23rd on Djebel Cherachir that night, wanted machine-gun support. Captain Moore was told that if he went round the right flank of [Takrouna](#) he would find a guide who would take him to the battalion. 'I had half an hour to daylight,' he says. 'On the previous night I had told all except skeleton gun crews and piquets to get a good night's rest. So by the time I had awakened Lieut Power's pn [5 Platoon] and they had packed all their gear on their trucks it was daylight. And we had about 3 miles to go....

"When we came to the foot of [Takrouna](#) on the right flank there was no guide to be seen. However I found a Maori Officer who told me where to go. Over the saddle and about 800 yds along the track which goes through the minefield. "The track is covered by a jerry MG," he said. So I left the six pn trucks in a olive grove which at least gave a certain amount of cover from view, and drove forward to [25 Bn](#) with my sigs Cpl. I noticed a certain amount of sniping coming from a hump on the right that was supposed to be cleared. Finding [25 Bn](#) I left my Sigs Cpl in ditch by the road and moved back to Pn. called for sec comds. Told them that we would move through minefield at 100 yds apart, debuss at a point I would show them, turn the trucks and move out to our coy area with [25 Bn](#). I moved forward in my jeep and watched them come on. I saw the German machine gun bullets hit the side of their trucks. ... I must give credit to the drivers who kept their distance and allowed the trucks ahead to unload before they arrived on the short piece of road where we debussed. German MG gave a perfect example of a swinging traverse along the piece of road where we were and it was only a ditch about 6 ft wide and 2 ft 6 in deep in which we took cover that saved us.

"Then he really went to town on us with his rocket propelled [multiple] mortars or Nebel Werfers. Noisy brutes especially as he was using them at that stage in Batts of three so that eighteen bombs arrived almost at once. Like a fool I ducked and a piece of the bomb casing bounced off my face. This was rather disconcerting as though I was conscious I could not see. Sgt [Ball](#) ² ... wrapped me up with a couple of shell dressings, and the sight about strength one came back into the left eye so I

was able to guide a member of No. 5 pn who acted as my driver back to Bde HQ... I went over to the ADS where some well meaning chump gave me a shot of morphine. I will never forget the effort needed to stay awake for 20 minutes until Titchener [who became acting OC 2 Company] came and I could give him the score as to where No. 5 Pn was and how to get to them.'

Lieutenant [Wylie](#)³ assumed command of 4 Platoon. After handing over the gunline to 10 Platoon, 6 (now commanded by Lieutenant [Brooks](#)⁴) took over the position vacated by 5 on the left flank. Next day 5's commander (Power) was wounded, and a Vickers knocked out; in the evening this platoon was relieved by 4.

There was little that the machine-gunners could do in any of these positions, for (as MacLean wrote) they had to take cover from 'about heaviest enemy shelling I've ever seen—mostly big stuff and very spectacular... Intense arty barrage on both sides ... booming and concussion in our slit trenches is most uncomfortable. Nothing to do but lie (flat out) ... till dark.' Tanks from a regiment of [8 Armoured Brigade](#) were observed cleaning out enemy gun nests.

After going into position on the northern side of [Takrouna](#) during the night of 21–22 April, 12 Platoon 'suffered extremely heavy fire from mortar and shells, being forced to leave gun positions and take cover. No casualties but lost one gun, this being completely written off.' Next evening 11 Platoon relieved 12 in this position, getting there 'without incident, to our surprise and relief,' and 12 went to the southern slope.

Meanwhile, back at B Echelon, Sergeant Knox and Private [Drury](#)⁵ were killed by a stray shell.

From daybreak on the 23rd 11 Platoon, for the fourth successive day, was confined to slit trenches, gunpits or any other shelter the men could find. 'We occupied a position on a forward slope [about half-way up the hill], giving good view & coverage of the enemy positions, on a long, low ridge below us,' says Private Andrews. 'However, we were fully exposed too, and any movement on our part was readily seen. We set up our guns in a sort of open court-yard, behind a low stone wall ... As it got lighter, we could see what a shambles the place was, it had been plastered and blasted to hell....' A cave formed by a huge slab of fallen rock 'stank of

Wogs & goats. ... The Ities had made a bivvy of it too, and they had added to the refuse & stench. However we shovelled all the rubbish out, then filled ammo boxes & sandbags, with rocks & dirt, & stacked them across the doorway to prevent shell blast & splinters.'

Enemy troops could be seen moving boldly about their dugouts, and shaking their blankets, less than a mile away. The Vickers had not been shooting in case they drew return fire on such an exposed position, but Andrews obtained permission to 'give them a little hurry-up with one gun at least.... we soon had a lot of blokes diving into holes smartly.' The gun, which had been placed in a freshly blown hole in the wall, raised the dust when it fired. Within a few minutes 'a battery of field arty opened up on us with admirable accuracy, their first ranging shell screaming head high over our gun, to burst on the rock cliff face behind us.

'Needless to say our "shoot" packed up without orders, and with one accord we all piled into the cave, about 7 or 8 all told, and mighty thankful we were for it, for we really got a pasting. At 1.30 [p.m.] a shell landed smack in our doorway, and burst on the cliff face about 3 ft from us.... The whole cave was temporarily blacked out, with dust, soot, smoke & bits of rock.... I seemed to be the worst hit, although I think every man had minute bits in him somewhere. It was typical of Mark Hatherly, that he supervised putting a field dressing on my shoulder, before disclosing the fact that he was quite badly hit himself....

'All that afternoon we were pinned down to that little Wog rock-hole.... Even though we were shelled practically incessantly ... on two occasions Bob Steel crawled outside and lit a fire, to brew up a billy of tea for us." In the evening a Maori medical orderly evacuated Andrews and Hatherly in a captured German car.

That night, when [5 Brigade](#)'s sector was taken over by 51 (Highland) Division, the machine guns were withdrawn, 2 Company to Battalion Headquarters in Reserve Group, and 4 Company with [5 Brigade](#) to its rest area. The infantry had numerous casualties during the changeover, but only one machine-gunner (Woodhall) was wounded.

The Indian Division had a very fierce struggle for Djebel Garci, and it was obvious that any further attempt in this mountainous region would be at too great a

cost. The policy adopted, therefore, was to deepen the coastal salient north of [Enfidaville](#) with [201 Guards Brigade](#) (now under the command of [56 Division](#)) and 6 NZ Brigade, the latter with the Vickers of 1 and 3 Company at its disposal.

Sixth Brigade advanced without opposition to the next line of ridges, 24 Battalion to Djebel Hamaid and the 26th to Djebel Dar Djaji, in the evening of 23 April. The supporting arms followed close behind the infantry, and 1 Platoon dug in on Hamaid and 8 Platoon on Dar Djaji. Corporal [Barraclough](#) ⁶ and Private [Stroud](#), ⁷, both of the latter platoon, were killed by shellfire next morning.

A second night advance was made by 26 Battalion. This time intense shell, mortar and machine-gun fire were encountered, and posts had to be taken with rifle and grenade. Djebel Terhouna was secured, and 9 Platoon and the other supporting arms, brought up just before dawn on the 25th, were sited on the southern slopes. At Djebel es Srafi, farther west, the infantry held on uneasily to the southern slopes, and it was impossible to get the supporting weapons there before dawn. The 25th Battalion, supported by 3 and 7 Platoons, moved up in rear to deepen the defences. Tanks accompanied by a few infantry went over the crest of Srafi later in the day, and by dusk the anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns were in position and the Guards Brigade in line on the right flank. The hostile fire scarcely diminished.

Sixth Brigade handed over its sector to troops of 51 and 56 Divisions on the night of 26–27 April and withdrew to the Sidi Bou Ali area; 3 Company went back with the brigade, and 1 Company joined Battalion Headquarters in Reserve Group. For the next few days everybody, or nearly everybody, lazed in the sun, fought the mosquitoes, cleaned equipment, went to [Hergla](#) beach to bathe, watched flight after flight of fighters and bombers pass overhead, and listened to [BBC](#) broadcasts for news of how the war was going. [Padre Underhill](#) (from 25 Battalion) conducted a very well attended church parade on the 30th, and the Minister of Defence, the Hon. F. Jones, came in the afternoon.

That morning Major Kirk, OC 4 Company, suddenly collapsed while stooping to tie his boot laces; he had been struck in the back of the head by a .303 bullet carelessly fired into the air by some unknown person in the neighbourhood. He died four days later.

The northward thrust, which had progressed about five miles beyond [Enfidaville](#), was abandoned, and [Eighth Army](#)'s role became that of holding the existing line and keeping up pressure by limited attacks while [First Army](#) delivered the coup de grâce farther north.

The New Zealand Division was ordered to the western flank, south-west of [Djebel Garci](#), and on 4 May [5 Brigade](#), with 4 Company (now commanded by Captain Rose) in support, led the way to [Djebibina](#). In the evening 10 Platoon went into the line with 21 Battalion and 12 with the 23rd, while 11 stayed in reserve with the [Maori Battalion](#). During the next two nights the infantry pushed a mile or two into the hills without much interference other than spasmodic shelling and mortaring.

The weather deteriorated; a cold wind reached gale force and very heavy rain fell; Fifth Brigade, bringing the [Maori Battalion](#) into the line, worked forward again in the darkness, with the idea of persuading the enemy to give up [Djebel Garci](#). The enemy showed no intention of going.

While visiting 12 Platoon early in the morning of 8 May, Rose was caught in some heavy shelling and wounded. Captain [Hume](#) then became 4 Company's third OC in a week. In the evening 11 and 12 Platoons changed places; 11, going into position near 23 and 28 Battalions, was shelled most of the night, 'including about a dozen salvoes from Wurlitzers (Nebelwerfers) —like the rush of an express, or an approaching tornado.'

[Tunis](#) and [Bizerta](#) had fallen on 7 May. The Axis forces facing [Eighth Army](#) were almost completely surrounded; and yet they continued to resist. The Division returned to the [Enfidaville](#) sector, where it was proposed that 169 Brigade of 56 ([London](#)) Division should make a fresh attack. Supported by a few anti-tank guns and sixteen Vickers (1, 2, 3 and 8 Platoons), 25 Battalion replaced 169 Brigade in the line on the night of 9–10 May. The attack was not successful.

A Fighting French division, in [5 Brigade](#)'s old sector around [Takrouna](#), captured [Djebel Froukr](#), and 2 Platoon, which had a grandstand view of this attack, moved 1000 yards farther forward. The enemy guns, mortars and nebelwerfers, obviously shooting away their stocks of ammunition, sprayed the countryside indiscriminately. Our artillery retaliated with the heaviest counter-battery programme of the whole

campaign, and the bombers lent a hand. The enemy showed white flags, but apparently was not prepared to walk through his own minefields to surrender. In the evening of the 12th Lieutenant Aislabie's platoon (2) was called upon to silence machine-gun fire from Point 141, and 'gave it a doing over—no more trouble....' This was the Vickers' last shoot against the enemy in [Africa](#).

On 13 May the battle was over. [General Freyberg](#) received the surrender of Marshal Messe, commander of [First Italian Army](#), and the last of more than a quarter of a million Axis ⁸ troops laid down their arms. From first light prisoners appeared in hundreds from wadis and dugouts all over the place. Aislabie's men, in search of loot, found "Jerry gear all broken up & mines everywhere.... Enemy seemed glad it was over—we were.'

Small leave parties visited [Tunis](#); other individuals, some way or other, also managed to see the city. Sightseers risked death or injury from the booby traps which abounded on [Takrouna](#).

The Division began the 2000-mile trek back to [Maadi](#) on the 15th, and the battalion, 545 strong ⁹ in 116 aged vehicles, departed with [6 Brigade](#) in the second flight next day. Travelling by easy stages the convoy passed through [Kairouan](#) (a walled holy city), [Mareth](#) and [Medenine](#) to [Suani Ben Adem](#), where there was a day's halt and the LOBs and reinforcements joined the battalion; along the coastal road, past the culverts and bridges blown during the Axis retreat, the minefields, burnt-out tanks and lorries, and roadside graves; past [Nofilia](#), [Marble Arch](#) and [El Agheila](#) to within a few miles of [Benghazi](#), where another day was spent in rest and maintenance of vehicles; up the steep and winding passes onto the fertile [Gebel Akhdar](#); through Italian colonial settlements deserted except by the native [Senussi](#); down a spectacular, precipitous zigzag to the pretty little coastal town of [Derna](#) and up a similar zigzag the other side; through more fertile land gradually dropping to sea level near [Gazala](#), and back into the desert again; past huge junk heaps of derelict vehicles, tanks, guns and aircraft, more minefields and wire, [Tobruk's](#) graveyard of ships, and [Bardia](#), [Sollum](#), [Buq Buq](#), [Sidi Barrani](#), [Mersa Matruh](#), [Baggush](#), [Fuka](#), [Daba](#) and [Alamein](#), all for the last time, to [Amiriya](#) (not for the last time); and then [Cairo](#)—'Great reception from the Wogs ... no doubt in anticipation of baksheesh'—and [Maadi](#) Camp, reached on 1 June.

The announcement that 6000 men with the longest service were to return to New Zealand on furlough was greeted with jubilation by those who were soon to sail with the ruapehu draft, and unsettled the veterans of the first three echelons who missed out in the ballot—but their turn came later.

The Division was to absorb its reinforcements and reorganise at [Maadi Camp](#) after a month given mostly to rest; so great was the exodus on leave to [Cairo](#) and Palestine that scarcely sufficient men could be found to carry on camp duties and fatigues.

Training was resumed in the first week of July. It was mid-summer, fearfully hot, and the route marches intended to harden the men after their holiday soon had them wringing wet with perspiration. Some of the old-timers, perhaps a little intolerant, were not very impressed with the latest reinforcements; one NCO declared they were 'lazy and incompetent ... not used to roughing it, or perhaps I should say "wogging" it.' Nevertheless, some newcomers were very enthusiastic. When [General Freyberg](#) visited the battalion and was introduced to the officers, a subaltern wrote in his diary: "I was never prouder to shake anybody's hand. He told us about the Div. organisation, which is the strongest and most mobile in the world, and with as many weapons ¹⁰ as two panzer divs. together. Apart from its weapons it has the most intelligent soldiers of any fighting unit.'

The companies went out on exercises in the rugged desert east of [Maadi](#); they took up positions, did live shoots and set-piece attacks, and bathed in the tepid, very salty [Red Sea](#). On 13 September 1 Company was attached to [5 Brigade](#) for three days' manoeuvres in the Bir Gindali region, between [Maadi](#) and [Suez](#). Two days later the remainder of the battalion, attached to [6 Brigade](#) and under the temporary command of Major Joseph, left [Maadi](#) for [Burg el Arab](#), and on the 19th 1 Company followed with [5 Brigade](#). The officers of this company farewelled Lieutenant-Colonel Robbie, who was returning to New Zealand and was to be succeeded as CO by Lieutenant-Colonel [MacDuff](#). ¹¹

The battalion debussed at the 40-kilometre post (near [Mena](#)) on the [Cairo-Alexandria](#) road, and on each of seven successive evenings marched 20 kilometres (approximately 12 ½ miles) on the bitumen, and at the end of each lap the men pitched their bivvy tents alongside the road. Some fell out with blistered feet, but

the majority 'maintained a good swinging stride of 112 to the minute right throughout.' They boarded their trucks at the 180-kilometre peg and, passing through [Amiriya](#), drove to their camp area among the white sand dunes on the [Mediterranean](#) shore.

The month closed with 3 and 4 Companies on exercises with [6 Brigade](#) and 1 Company with [5 Brigade](#) in the desert south of [Burg el Arab](#). [General Freyberg](#) explained the manoeuvres to the officers and NCOs, and spoke of future movements —'left us guessing as to our destination.'

On 3 October the battalion (less 1 Company and the vehicles, which were to follow on different dates ¹²) moved in two groups, A and B, to [Ikingi Maryut](#) transit camp, [Amiriya](#), and two days later to [Alexandria](#). Group A embarked on the *Reina del Pacifico* and Group B on the *Dunottar Castle*, the men staggering like overloaded packhorses under their blanket rolls, winter and summer clothing, personal gear, weapons and ammunition (including the Vickers plus 1000 rounds for each gun), respirators, emergency rations, anti-malarial ointment and tablets, one bivvy tent between two men, and an empty water can for each man.

The ships sailed under escort early next morning, and shortly afterwards the troops were told that they were bound for [Italy](#). [Italy](#) had surrendered the previous month, but the Germans still occupied the greater part of their former ally's country.

¹ Lt J. H. W. Power; [Cambridge](#); born [Gisborne](#), 24 Sep 1913; farmer; wounded 22 Apr 1943.

² L-Sgt C. G. Ball, m.i.d.; [Lyttelton](#); born NZ 28 Apr 1906; motor mechanic

³ Maj W. C. Wylie, m.i.d.; [Dannevirke](#); born [Dannevirke](#) 14 May 1905; barrister and solicitor.

⁴ Capt L. V. Brooks; [Lower Hutt](#); born [Wanganui](#), 9 Apr 1909; civil servant.

⁵ Pte J. N. Drury; born [Hawera](#), 6 Jul 1916; factory employee; killed in action 22 Apr 1943.

⁶ Cpl L. F. Barraclough; born NZ 25 Mar 1916; clerk; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

⁷ Pte J. G. Stroud; born NZ 14 Sep 1912; labourer; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

⁸ Total Allied casualties in Tunisia were less than 60,000.

⁹ The battalion's casualties since leaving Alamein (14 killed and 53 wounded) included five killed and 13 wounded at Tebaga Gap and six killed and 21 wounded in the Enfidaville line.

¹⁰ When 2 NZ Div left Egypt in Oct 1943 it had 167 Sherman tanks, 9 Stuart tanks, 60 Staghounds, 170 armoured cars and scout cars, 129 carriers, 72 25-pounder guns, 12 17-pounder anti-tank guns, 88 six-pounder anti-tank guns, 36 Bofors ack-ack guns, 39 three-inch mortars, and 60 Vickers medium machine guns.

¹¹ Lt-Col J. L. MacDuff, MC, m.i.d.; Nairobi, Kenya; born NZ 11 Dec 1905; barrister and solicitor; CO 27 (MG) Bn 24 Sep 1943–29 Feb 1944, 25 Bn Feb–Jun 1944, Adv Base 2 NZEF Jun–Jul 1944; Supreme Court judge, Kenya.

¹² 1 Coy (with 5 Bde) embarked in tow groups on the Aronda and Egra, which sailed with a large convoy on 19 Oct. The vehicles, under Captain Halkett's command, left later

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 17 – THE SANGRO RIVER

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The Sangro River

The convoy entered [Taranto](#) harbour on the morning of 9 October and at midday the troops began to disembark by lighter. They dumped their baggage and two-gallon water cans before marching in single file through the dirty, narrow streets. Their camp site, about three miles from the port, was on an old feudal estate covered by acres of olive groves. There had been rain a couple of days previously and it was good to smell damp earth again.

The advance party, Captain Aislabie and Sergeant-Major Quirk,¹ who had left [Burg el Arab](#) at very short notice on 24 September, had marked out the battalion area and obtained some 44-gallon drums for ovens, firewood, and a 700-gallon tank for water. A Group's baggage party did not arrive before nightfall, so many slept in their greatcoats under the olives. Fortunately the weather was fine, but the mosquitoes were troublesome; proper precautions would have to be taken against malaria.

Bivvies, cookhouses and orderly rooms were erected next day. Italians came into the camp to sell sweet white grapes for about threepence (five lire) a pound, dried figs at a shilling a pound, and wine at four lire a pint—'very poor stuff, rather sour and stains the teeth and tongue a bright blue.'

The guns arrived and training was started on the 11th, but was interrupted by rain. During a thunderstorm the lightning exploded many of the barrage balloons over [Taranto](#); they flashed brilliantly before sinking in flames. A sudden, brief deluge brought water into many bivvies and set their occupants scurrying about in the mud diverting small streams. Another violent storm destroyed more barrage balloons; the lightning flashed and flickered, the thunder cracked, boomed and roared, and the torrential rain flooded the camp, washed out many bivvies, soaked bedding and clothing, and held up training for two days.

Platoons and companies went for route marches and long carries across country, among a network of low stone walls and through olive groves where the green wheat was shooting up among the trees, and sage and thyme scented the air. At the villages the marchers were followed by hordes of indescribably filthy children

begging for cigarettes and matches. 'We clattered through, hobnailed boots sliding on the greasy stones, scattered fowls and pigeons right and left.... Goats, dogs and pigs disappeared into dark doorways.'

Men visiting [Taranto](#) on leave explored 'a maze of uneven cobbled alleys about twelve feet wide, which wind up and downhill and meander aimlessly among the buildings.... Over all there was that familiar smell which is a concentration of the odours of cooking, unwashed humanity, roasted nuts and sweetmeats, bedding, olive oil and general airlessness and lack of sanitation and drainage.'

On 22 October 1 Company arrived after 'holidaying' at [Burg el Arab](#) and [Amiriya](#), but the vehicles, which were unloaded at [Bari](#), did not begin to appear until the end of the month

[Naples](#) had fallen to the United States Fifth Army (which included a British corps), and in early November, when the New Zealand Division moved north to [Eighth Army](#) in the Adriatic sector, the German winter line stretched across the narrowest part of the peninsula from the mouth of the Garigliano River (north-west of [Naples](#)) over the [Apennines](#) to the northern bank of the [Sangro River](#). The Division was to relieve 8 Indian Division near [Atessa](#), which would allow [5 Corps](#) to concentrate near the coast preparatory to forming a bridgehead over the [Sangro](#). If the attack went well, the New Zealanders were to push northwards to [Chieti](#), which would open the way for a westward drive on [Rome](#), the objective of both Eighth and Fifth Armies.

The trucks were still trickling in from [Bari](#) on the 15th when 4 Company set out from [Taranto](#). As soon as they were loaded, the trucks were sent away in groups to a staging area near [Corato](#), beyond [Altamura](#), and next day the complete company continued on through [Foggia](#), which had received a battering, and past [Lucera](#) to join [6 Brigade](#) at [La Torre](#).

Most of the places passed on the way were 'a mass of signs and numbers with arrows painted all over the walls and boards nailed up to posts and trees. Every unit,' Second-Lieutenant [Moss](#)² observed, 'seems to have independently marked the route from [Taranto](#) to the front line with its own hieroglyphics and occasionally we had quite a job sorting out our own black diamond.'

Sixth Brigade had to extricate many bogged vehicles before it could get away on the 17th, and then made very slow progress on wet, narrow and crowded roads. The enemy had demolished the masonry bridges, and there were maddening delays at the one-way Bailey bridges erected in their place. After bivouacking for a few hours near [Gissi](#) (about five miles beyond [Furci](#)) 4 Company was away again on the 18th.

'We are up in the hills now with clumps of oats dotted over the grassy slopes,' wrote Moss. 'After putting chains on the rear wheels of all the vehicles ... our rate of advance is even slower than yesterday.... With the country getting steeper and more broken the roads are becoming tortuous and the gradients stiffer. Jerry demolitions are more frequent and in a couple of places where viaducts have been blown our engineers have constructed a diversion at the maximum grade, some trucks with rear axle drive only requiring to be winched up. This morning a few enemy shells were coming over onto a bridge which had been left intact, but now that battery seems to have been silenced. The gun trucks arrived at their destination [near [Atessa](#), about 5 a.m. on the 19th] after covering about 20 miles since 8 the previous morning. They are on the forward slope overlooking the [Sangro](#) so they won't be able to move much in daylight.'

At dusk [6 Brigade](#) moved into the line to take over part of 19 Indian Brigade's sector. Because of the state of the roads it was impossible to use vehicles and everybody had to go on foot; this was especially exacting for the mortar and machine-gun platoons, which had to carry their weapons five or six miles. The Vickers accompanied each battalion, 10 Platoon going with the 24th on the left, 11 Platoon with the 25th in the centre, and 12 Platoon with the 26th on the right; they were established along the line of the [Strada Sangritana](#), the road which runs along the lower slopes of the hills on the southern side of the valley. The narrow river flat in front was thickly cultivated with olive groves, vineyards and orchards; the river itself, unbridged in this vicinity, ran swiftly in several channels between shingle banks; on the other side, beyond marshy ground, was another road, overlooked by steep hills and in places almost vertical cliffs.

The first shots by the New Zealand machine-gunners in [Italy](#) were fired by 10 Platoon in the afternoon of 21 November. It was too hazy to observe the result of 4000 rounds fired in half an hour at a hill across the river where patrols had located

spandaus. The artillery was also in action, and the enemy guns retaliated. In the evening, when 12 Platoon did a shoot on selected targets, the sound, which echoed in the hills and gullies, could be recognised easily as Vickers fire but was very hard to locate.

Meanwhile the remainder of the battalion moved up towards the front, and 2 Company also came under 6 Brigade's command. It was intended that the brigade should cross the Sangro on the night of 23–24 November, but heavy rain had brought a rise in the level of the river and a 24-hour postponement was ordered. The water continued to rise until it was neck-high in places and so swift that men, while patrolling, were swept off their feet. The attack was cancelled. Fifth Brigade, with 1 and 3 Companies in support, was then brought into the line on the right (east) of the 6th.

The cancellation of 6 Brigade's attack meant that 2 Company could be used for another task: it was to cross the Sangro on 24 November to support 19 Indian Brigade (on the Division's left flank) in the Sant' Angelo- Altino area.

Major Moore examined the approaches with Lieutenant- Colonel MacDuff. The only way for trucks was a road running parallel with the river as far as a blown culvert, where the German guns had knocked out half a dozen vehicles. It would be necessary to walk another 2000 yards to a large bridge upstream from the confluence of the Sangro and Aventino rivers. Half of this concrete bridge had been demolished and was lying in the water without being covered by it; the remaining spans had been knocked about by the shelling and the decking was about two feet wide in one place. The troops the machine-gunners had to support were on a hill about half a mile beyond the bridge, on which the German artillery was still dropping concentrations.

The OC and Lieutenant McLenaghin ³ (5 Platoon) and Second-Lieutenant Macartney (6 Platoon) set off from the company soon after midday, followed not long afterwards by these two platoons. Their gear was ferried in jeeps as far as the blown culvert. The men, who had cut down their personal gear to a bare minimum— one day's rations and a waterproof cape— and distributed the loads so that each carried 60 pounds of equipment and ammunition, walked along the road in single file at good intervals.

'As we started to scramble over the bridge,' says Moore, 'Jerry got to work, and threw unpleasantness of assorted types at us. ... I was proud of those boys, many of them new reinforcements, but laden as they were with no show of taking cover, they calmly kept their distance apart....' After crossing the rubble of the demolished spans they had to climb ten feet to the decking. There Corporal [Dryden](#)⁴ kept them moving between shellbursts and assisted them to clamber up. When Corporal [Laurence](#)⁵ and Private [Mitchell](#)⁶ were hit, he helped them to safety. His coolness in a situation that might possibly have led to panic earned him the MM.

'When I arrived at the top of the hill,' Moore continues, 'I just about tripped over half a dozen Tommies and about twenty yards further on six Huns all stiff. So I wandered on up the track in the direction where the unit I was to contact was supposed to be. About a hundred yards further on came across another bunch of about twenty assorted corpses. Couldn't help thinking it would be nice to find someone who was alive and could tell you what was what. However found the unit [an Essex battalion] soon afterwards and proceeded to get settled in. The poor devils of Tommies had just about had it when we arrived, they'd done a grand job, but had been rather severely mauled.'

These two platoons of 2 Company were the first New Zealand troops to be established across the [Sangro](#). They dug in on the hillside near Sant' Angelo, and next morning moved to less exposed positions, where they were shelled and mortared during the next two or three days. The rest of the company (including 4 Platoon), back at [Perano](#), was also shelled and lost a vehicle or two. Carrying parties took rations and ammunition up to 5 and 6 Platoons at night.

The Division was ordered to establish a bridgehead across the [Sangro](#) on the night of 27–28 November and later to exploit north-westwards to the main road (Route 84). Each of the five



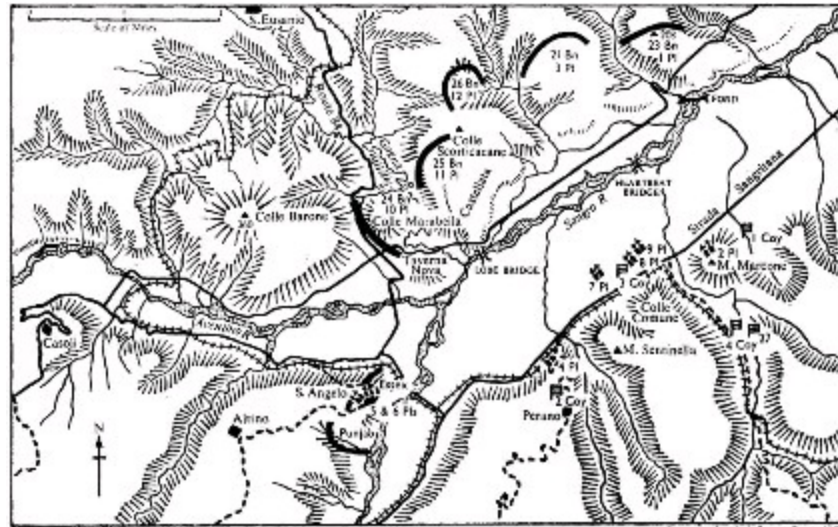
ITALY MAP No.1

assaulting battalions was to have a machine-gun platoon: ⁷ 1 Platoon with the 23rd, 3 with the 21st, 10 with the 24th, 11 with the 25th, and 12 with the 26th. Until the attack had made some progress, 2 Platoon was to stay with the **Maori Battalion** south of the river. The five forward platoons would have to manhandle their guns and equipment across the river and up the slopes beyond; riflemen were to carry ammunition for them.

'In common with most other units this was to be the baptism of fire for over a third of **1 Coy**,' says Captain Gibson. 'The Ruapehu Draft had taken all the veterans including most of the senior Section Comds and these had been replaced by reinforcements from 3 Div and New Zealand who had seen little action if any. In addition many of the NCOs in the Coy had been recently promoted and the Coy organisation had been so altered that it was anticipated that it would take at least one action to settle the Pls down.'

Before the attack began the infantry and attached machine-gunners had to reach the start-line, the lateral road on the northern side of the **Sangro**. The level of the river had fallen sufficiently for this to be possible with the assistance of ropes. 'We moved off in the dark behind A Coy [24 Battalion] about ten thirty,' wrote Moss (10 Platoon). 'It was almost pitch black with a low overcast sky and we had considerable difficulty in keeping contact with the hurrying infantry ahead.... The idea of crossing the river had been worrying us for the last few days, as patrols had been coming back with tales of swift water running breast high, but it was not so

bad as that. It was mostly a little below waist deep and by stepping carefully it was easy to avoid being overbalanced by the current. The holdups were



The crossing of the Sangro River, 27-28 November 1943
The crossing of the Sangro River, 27–28 November 1943

the worst part when we were forced to remain standing in the icy water for half an hour or so at a time. There were five separate channels to cross and after they had been negotiated we moved to the start line and waited for the barrage to commence.’ The sticky, Sangro mud ‘builds up on your boots until you look like some club-footed Frankenstein ... and if you try and kick the stuff off it nearly takes your leg as well.’

At zero hour, 2.45 a.m., the artillery began its covering fire programme, and 3 Company, reinforced by 4 Platoon, from positions forward of the Strada Sangritana, and 2 Platoon, from Monte Marcone, engaged enemy strongpoints and other targets in the hills across the river. The field-gun flashes illuminated the low cloud. The Vickers could be heard during lulls in the gunfire.

The infantry, followed closely by the supporting machine-gunners, took some time to climb the cliffs, and met their first opposition, mortar and small-arms fire, in the high country beyond. A spandau which troubled 3 Platoon while it was struggling up the slippery tracks was silenced by Sergeant Adair,⁸ a reinforcement NCO who was commissioned in the field a few weeks later.

On the extreme right 23 Battalion occupied the hill (Point 208) which was its

objective. 'To reach 208 & D Coy,' wrote Second-Lieutenant [Grace](#)⁹ (1 Platoon), 'we had to proceed ... for 1200 yds, all up hill. The first 150 yds was just sheer & it was 2 hrs before the last man had got to the top owing to having to cross 2 deep ditches & make headway on slippery ground. At 0530 hrs we finally reached D Coy HQ & every man was exhausted.... Then followed frenzied digging in before first light.'

Grace was told that there was an infantry platoon on the right of Point 208 and another on the left, and agreed to send a section of Vickers to each to help beat off any counter-attack. He was also told that two Bren guns to the left of the church at the top of the hill and the mortars on the reverse slope could cover some dead ground in front.

By 6.45 a.m. No. 1 Section was dug in on the right of the church, where it covered the battalion's open flank, and No. 2 Section on the western (left) side with an arc of fire across the flanking 23 Battalion's front. When there was sufficient light to see the ground, Grace discovered that only two infantry pits were with No. 1 Section, which was on a forward slope, and the rest of the infantrymen were on the reverse slope 'with a field of fire of anything up to 20 yards'; nor could the two Bren guns cover the dead ground in front. He immediately reported this to 23 Battalion's CO (Lieutenant-Colonel Romans), and it was agreed to move the Vickers section at dusk.

Captain Gibson had just reached 23 Battalion and was about 50 yards from the church on his way to inspect No. 1 Section when he heard a burst of firing over the ridge and half a dozen men 'popped out of the church and charged down towards me yelling "counterattack". I beat a hasty retreat over to the left where the other section was desperately trying to turn its guns around to face the threat, and then as the firing had stopped, moved further around until I could see across the forward slope, arriving there just in time to see the unfortunate [No. 1] section escorted by about four jerries disappearing into cover at the foot of the hill. No. 3 Pl [on 21 Battalion's right flank, with a good field of fire to the front and across a gap to the 23rd] then opened up on two of the patrol who were apparently covering the withdrawal. One of these appeared to roll over as they too disappeared but I could not say whether he had been hit.'

Corporal [Harnett](#),¹⁰ one of the captured machine-gunners, says that Sergeant

Baume, ¹¹ in charge of the section, had been under the impression that the church was occupied by an artillery OP and a mortar officer who would warn them of any threat from that quarter. The section had been troubled by machine-gun fire from some houses about half a mile in front. 'We engaged a couple of targets & then there was odd firing ... which we couldn't locate ... while trying to do this we were surprised from the rear area that the house [church] was in so we could only conclude the OP officer & mortar officer hadn't arrived there.'

The German patrol had approached unobserved, rushed the infantry pits, killing three men and capturing one, and swept round from the left directly behind No. 1 Section. In the ensuing skirmish Privates Farndon ¹² and Aylwood ¹³ were wounded, and they and ten others were taken prisoner. ¹⁴ 'It was a brilliant piece of patrol work,' says Gibson, 'and no doubt iron crosses were duly issued all round.' Only one man escaped; utterly exhausted after the night's exertions, he had slept soundly in his hole right through the action.

Meanwhile 12 Platoon had gone into position with 26 Battalion on Colle Scorticacane, 11 with the 25th on a ridge between Castellata and the Gogna stream, and 10 with the 24th on Colle Marabella. To reach this hill 10 Platoon walked along the road, avoiding some S-mines on the way, and crossed the bridge over the Gogna. While the infantry were completing the occupation of Taverna Nova (south of Marabella), the machine-gunners captured seven Germans who were trying to escape: when Marabella had been cleared, they dug in on the eastern slope and fired a few belts at some Germans retreating up the Gogna valley and 'gave them a hurry up.'

By midday, when 3 Company was ordered to cross the river, the engineers had erected a Bailey bridge ('Heartbeat' bridge), but the German guns and aircraft made it a place to avoid. The company's vehicles were withdrawn from the vicinity and unloaded, and the men began a long carry. Some of them crossed the bridge safely; the others had difficulty in fording the river with their guns and stores, and one gun was lost.

While reconnoitring for gun positions Lieutenant Campbell ¹⁵ was killed, Sergeant Wood ¹⁶ mortally wounded, Major Hume (OC 4 Company, also in the party) wounded, and Lieutenant Blue slightly injured by an S-mine explosion.

Captain Pleasants's wireless truck and Sergeant-Major Johnstone's ammunition truck, the latter loaded to capacity, set out to cross the river early in the evening, and after an exhausting struggle in the mud, eventually reached their destination before dawn. By midnight on the 29th, after the route had been altered and repaired, the gun trucks were also across.

The enemy had been able to see the [Sangro](#) bridges and direct his fire on them from the 1000-foot [Colle Barone](#), west of Marabella, until the afternoon of the 29th when 24 Battalion occupied this hill. Towards dusk 10 Platoon carried its guns to the top and occupied a really commanding position, overlooked only by the snow-capped, 9000-foot [Montagna della Maiella](#) several miles to the west.

The 19th Indian Brigade was withdrawn from the Division's western flank on 30 November, and 2 Company was left holding the area that had been occupied by the Essex and Punjab battalions. In an infantry role 4 Platoon was brought across the river from [Perano](#), and Lieutenant Titchener arranged his patrols and posts to suit 5 and 6 Platoons' fire positions.

Early in the afternoon a patrol of eight men, with Titchener in command and also including Lieutenant McLenaghin, set out for [Casoli](#). They wore no badges of rank and carried no papers that might give away information; they were armed with two Bren guns, four tommy guns and two rifles, plus two grenades for each man. Titchener had been told, correctly or not he did not know, that an Indian patrol had been captured in [Casoli](#). 'I might add,' he declares, 'that as we were Machine Gunners this patrolling business did not appeal very much.... Before we set out an Italian who spoke English, informed us that the Germans had vacated or were vacating [Casoli](#), and he offered to take us there by a back-road. I accepted his offer and we proceeded. There were no enemy in the first village [[Altino](#)] so we moved to [Casoli](#).' The Italian led the way, with Titchener armed with a tommy gun immediately behind him, 'waiting to deal with him if the whole thing was a trap.'

The patrol descended a steep hill and then climbed what McLenaghin describes as 'an incredibly steep hill which we had to do in stages marvelling all the while at the untiring pace of our guide a short stumpy man.... At last on reaching the top we were greeted by a farmer and his family, offered chairs and given a glass of wine each.... We moved on again however, and, refusing further repeated offers of wine

and food came within the environs of the town. We walked quietly down the main street—it is a big town of 9000 inhabitants—each of us covering the opposite side of the street with our Tommy Guns, and at first the people did not seem to realise who we were. Then suddenly it struck them. They rushed out, shook our hands and as we neared the centre of the town started clapping, cheering and many of the women wept. I felt damned embarrassed.

‘We made our way through the ever thickening crowd ... and finally arrived at the centre of the town.... After posting a sentry we climbed [a tower] and saw before us the Aventino and a tributary running across our front. The Jerry was apparently just across the river a couple of thousand yards away.... We suddenly heard the old express train of an approaching shell and a smoke went off over on our left front. Another struck our right front so we decided that there were too many of us on the tower so leaving one man on watch we came down.’

The patrol went beyond the town and saw that a bridge on the road leading towards the enemy lines had been destroyed, but one across the Aventino and another across the tributary were still intact. ‘We could see about six German Engineers on the left hand bridge preparing to blow it up—kneeling down and placing the charges. We had a swift council of war and reluctantly decided that we could not afford to take the risk of making an attack against the engineer people in view of the local people's report of Spandau nests just above it. On reflection too we realised that the destruction of that particular bridge was of little importance to our advance so, after finding out as much as possible in the way of information about gun positions etc we withdrew to the town again. Here we decided to stay the night.’

Titchener sent Sergeant Wallace ¹⁷ and two men back to 2 Company to bring up a wireless set, more men and an artillery OP so that the guns could shell the German working parties. Titchener's patrol was too small to prevent the enemy from re-entering [Casoli](#). ‘I was informed,’ he says, ‘that the anti-Fascist inhabitants had been placed in jail. Through the Baron orders were given that these anti-Fascists were to be released and any Fascists to be put in Jail. The anti-Fascists were then used as patrols on the outskirts of the village. Exactly how all the weapons were produced I cannot explain nor did I enquire. These patrols continued until late in the night.’ Titchener and his men dined with the baron and his family.

Wallace returned with a message that the patrol was to withdraw immediately. 'I had estimated that the patrol would be back by 1500 hrs,' says Major Moore. 'You can imagine my feelings when at 2100 Sgt Wallace brought me the news that they had gone as far as [Casoli](#) about 12 kilos away, and wanted me to reinforce them. I rang [Div HQ](#) and asked what I should do and was told to withdraw the patrol at once. I had previously found out from P.O.Ws and Italians that came in to us that afternoon that two villages to the north & west of us each had about 90 German paratroops. Our strength at that time was 90–100 across the river.... we were as thin as smoke on the ground we had to cover.'

Titchener's patrol, therefore, arrived back at the company in a very early hour on 1 December.

Later that day 2 Company was withdrawn across the [Sangro](#). Some 5 Platoon men commandeered two handcarts to take their gear to the river. Unfortunately one of the carts ran over a mine and the explosion killed Private [Hewlett](#)¹⁸ and wounded four others.

The New Zealand infantry infiltrated farther into the hills north of the [Sangro](#), and after each fresh position had been taken up, the supporting Vickers platoons were dug in and ready to fire at the earliest possible moment. This was a fairly easy time for 3 Company, which was used mainly in counter-penetration roles. Its platoons went into the gunpits vacated by the platoons attached to the battalion. 'This saved our boys a lot of digging,' says Captain Pleasants. 'Also earned them some abuse from those who left the pits knowing they were to dig others the same night.' By keeping in close touch with the battalion commanders, 3 Company was able to assist with some shooting. Lieutenant [Barwick](#)¹⁹ (9 Platoon) was severely wounded by shellfire.

Fourth Armoured Brigade was to advance along Route 84 and the road towards [Guardiagrele](#), and [6 Brigade](#), supported on its right by the 5th, was directed across country to Castelfrentano.

While on the way up the [Gogna](#) valley to rejoin 24 Battalion, 10 Platoon was pinned down by a shower of 88-millimetre shells near an exposed stretch of road. 'We just dropped flat in the gutters or where we could, it was so unexpected.... Why

half of us were not killed I don't know,' says Private [Baddeley](#),²⁰



Sangro River Orsogna area

Sangro River- Orsogna area

the medical orderly. Corporals [McConnell](#)²¹ and [Gibb](#)²² were wounded. Despite the shellfire, [Baddeley](#), with two others who went to his assistance, managed to get [Gibb](#) to a house and attend to his wounds, but he died that evening.

Before dawn on 2 December 24 Battalion occupied Castelfrentano, and 10 Platoon was ordered to a position on the other side of the town. Moss arranged for the guns and ammunition to be taken in a captured German tracked vehicle, while the men went on foot. In the town the people 'cheered and saluted and gave the V sign, and old ladies even kissed our hands ... they brought out vino and plates of figs and apples and made us feel quite embarrassed with their attentions.'

The platoon went into position to support a further advance, which was unopposed, and later in the day was relieved by 7 Platoon. Meanwhile 11 Platoon had joined 25 Battalion, which reached Route 84 west of [Castelfrentano](#), and 12 Platoon the 26th, which moved up to the outskirts of the town on the eastern side; after climbing a precipitous slope, 1 and 3 Platoons went into position with 23 and 21 Battalions on a plateau north-west of the town, and later 2 Platoon was brought up with the [Maori Battalion](#) to that locality; Battalion Headquarters was established in a house in [Castelfrentano](#), and 2 Company also crossed the [Sangro](#).

¹ WO II M. R. quirk; Taumarunui; born [Western Australia](#), 8 Jun 1913; clerk.

² Maj B. C. H. Moss; born NZ 14 Oct 1919; clerk; accidentally killed 1955.

³ Lt H. E. McLenaghin, m.i.d.; Upper Hutt; born NZ 16 Sep 1917; fitter; wounded 7 Dec 1943.

⁴ Sgt J. W. Dryden, MM; New Plymouth; born NZ 1 Apr 1913; casual labourer; wounded 8 Jan 1944.

⁵ Cpl T. A. Laurence; Uruti; born NZ 2 Feb 1918; bush labourer; wounded 24 Nov 1943.

⁶ Pte J. E. Mitchell; born NZ 4 Mar 1922; baker's assistant; died of wounds 26 Nov 1943.

⁷ The officers of the battalion on 27 Nov 1943 were:

CO: Lt-Col J. L. MacDuff

2 i/c: Maj L. A. Joseph

Adj: Capt C. A. Newland

IO: Lt O. J. Hatton

QM: Lt R. L. McIntyre

Sigs: 2 Lt E. T. Couch

MO: Capt A. W. S. Ritchie

Padre: Rev. A. H. Finlay

1 Coy

OC: Capt C. M. H. Gibson

2 i/c: Lt D. B. Beard

1 Pl: 2 Lt M. P. Grace

2 Pl: Lt E. Y. M. Hutchinson

3 Pl: 2 Lt W. S. Nicol

2 Coy

OC: Maj I. S. Moore

2 i/c: Capt W. R. Aislabie

4 Pl: Lt W. F. Titchener

5 Pl: Lt H. E. McLenaghin

6 Pl: 2 Lt L. C. Macartney

3 Coy

OC: Capt G. B. C. Pleasants

2 i/c: Capt J. T. H. Halkett

7 Pl: Lt N. G. 'Blue

8 Pl: Lt L. W. Campbell

9 Pl: Lt B. C. Barwick

4 Coy

OC: Maj K. H. Hume

2 i/c: Capt D. W. Farquharson

10 Pl: 2 Lt B. C. H. Moss

11 Pl: Lt A. R. Cramond

12 Pl: 2 Lt M. C. Sellars

att: 2 Lt M. K. Hanan, 2 Lt J. H. Jackson, 2 Lt I. R. Watson. Lt L. Morgan soon afterwards succeeded McIntyre as QM.

⁸ Capt W. B. Adair; Auckland; born Auckland, 18 Sep 1921; clerk.

⁹ Lt M. P. Grace; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 30 Sep 1917; clerk; wounded 9 Dec 1943.

¹⁰ Cpl N. E. Harnett; Otakairangi, Whangarei; born NZ 11 Oct 1918; garage attendant; p.w. 28 Nov 1943.

¹¹ Sgt T. W. Baume; born England 14 Sep 1908; labourer; p.w. 28 Nov 1943; killed while p.w. 8 Dec 1943.

¹² Pte L. H. Farndon; born Whangaroa, 26 Nov 1908; labourer; twice wounded; p.w. 28 Nov 1943.

¹³ Pte J. B. Aylward; born NZ 13 Apr 1919; labourer; wounded and p.w. 28 Nov 1943.

¹⁴ While the prisoners were being loaded into cattle trucks at [Aquila](#) on 8 Dec 1943 the [RAF](#) bombed the station. Sgt Baume and Ptes I. B. Anderson, C. W. Guinness, L. A. Hickman and C. Smart were killed. The others made off into the hills but were recaptured.

¹⁵ Lt L. W. Campbell; born Dunedin, 19 Nov 1907; clerk; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.

¹⁶ Sgt F. H. Wood; born Auckland, 10 Feb 1919; linesman; died of wounds 28 Nov 1943.

¹⁷ 2 Lt J. M. Wallace; Masterton; born Whangarei, 23 Apr 1921; bank clerk.

¹⁸ Pte C. L. Hewlett; born NZ 10 Jan 1918; labourer; wounded 24 Mar 1943; killed in action 1 Dec 1943.

¹⁹ Lt B. C. Barwick; Wanganui; born Akaroa, 23 Aug 1920; electrician; wounded 30 Nov 1943.

²⁰ Sgt J. R. Baddeley, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born NZ 20 Jul 1906; farmer.

²¹ Cpl A. J. W. McConnell; Whakapara, North Auckland; born NZ 26 Oct 1916; share milker; wounded 1 Dec 1943.

²² Cpl A. Gibb; born Wanganui, 21 Jul 1911; civil servant; died of wounds 1 Dec 1943.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 18 – ORSOGNA

CHAPTER 18

Orsogna

Beyond the [Castelfrentano](#) ridge was another on which was situated the town of [Orsogna](#); these two ridges converged at the village of [Guardiagrele](#), on the road to which 4 Armoured Brigade was held up by demolitions and gunfire. The 25th Battalion was ordered to attack through [Orsogna](#) at dawn on 3 December and exploit to [San Martino](#) (north of [Guardiagrele](#)), to which 4 Brigade had been directed.

The 25th set out on foot at 1.30 a.m., forded the [Moro](#) stream in the intervening valley, and reached the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road on [Brecciarola Ridge](#). The leading company entered [Orsogna](#), but when half-way through was counter-attacked by German tanks and infantry, and after losing many men killed and captured was obliged to retire. Sergeant Paul's section of 11 Platoon, which stayed on an exposed flank in the outskirts of [Orsogna](#) to cover the withdrawal, inflicted casualties among the Germans. The Vickers gunners were under fire from tanks and mortars, and when ordered to leave, 'we were lucky enough,' says Paul, 'to get out of a bad spot without losing a man.' His conduct in this action won him the MM.

The [26th Battalion](#) began to move up at dawn, but on learning that the assault had failed, halted and dug in north of the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road. The transport, including 12 Platoon's vehicles, was shelled on the road to [Castelfrentano](#), and 10 Platoon, nearby on the reverse slope, got the overs. Although most of the men rushed into houses, the drivers were caught unawares at their vehicles. Private [Bryan](#)¹ was killed instantly, three others wounded, and six vehicles damaged. Next day 12 Platoon, using mules to carry the guns, went into position on a spur south of the [Moro](#).

Patrols explored around [Orsogna](#), and after the artillery and 11 Platoon's Vickers had put down fire to soften the German defences, 25 Battalion attempted before dawn on 5 December to occupy [Sfasciata Ridge](#), north-east of the town, with a standing patrol, but found it too strongly held. To oppose the German posts there, 3 Company (with 8, 9 and 10 Platoons) went into position near the crossroads about two miles north of [Castelfrentano](#)—'down a forward slope with Jerry overlooking us 2000x away,' wrote Moss—and fired frequent harassing tasks during the night. Next

day a dense mist reduced visibility to about 50 yards, and light rain began to fall. In the evening 2 Company relieved 3 as flank guard; 10 Platoon returned to 24 Battalion, and 8 and 9 went as far forward as they could get on [Brecciarola Ridge](#), ready to support another attack on [Orsogna](#). Farther back, 7 Platoon was well placed to cover the road and fire harassing tasks.

[General Freyberg](#) decided to capture [Orsogna](#) by a daylight assault on 7 December. The only practicable approach, along the steep-sided [Brecciarola Ridge](#) from the east, was narrow, exposed and easy to defend. The two infantry brigades were both to attack on a one-battalion front: while the Maori Battalion was to secure [Cemetery Ridge](#) by advancing up Pascuccio, the 24th was to enter the town from [Brecciarola Ridge](#) and consolidate beyond its western outskirts. At the same time 23 Battalion was to occupy [Sfasciata Ridge](#).

To assist the 23rd, 2 Company fired 60,000 rounds on Sfasciata Ridge, while 3 and 4 Companies (less 10 Platoon) supplemented the artillery barrages for 28 and 24 Battalions. The total ammunition expended exceeded the 120,000 rounds the Vickers had used during [6 Brigade's](#) attack at [El Mreir](#) in July 1942. 'And by the way they [the Germans] answered the harassing it would appear they knew our positions,' says Major Moore, who believes the enemy had located the guns by sound before the attack. The gunlines were severely shelled. Sergeant Partridge ² was killed, and the nine wounded included four officers: Captain Pleasants, Lieutenant McLenaghin, and Second-Lieutenants [Jackson](#) ³ and [Hanan](#), ⁴ of whom all except Hanan were evacuated. Captain Halkett commanded 3 Company until Pleasants's return six weeks later.

Without meeting any enemy infantry but coming under shell and mortar fire from the direction of [Poggiofiorito](#), 23 Battalion established a line along the crest of [Sfasciata Ridge](#), and 1 Platoon, carrying its guns on mules over the steep gully from [San Felice Ridge](#), placed them in support. 'The experience gained in [Syria](#) with mules paid dividends here,' says Grace.

The Pascuccio spur, up which the Maoris (with 2 Platoon under command) had to advance from San Felice, was steep-sided, razor-backed, and dotted with farm buildings; it lay almost at right angles to the steep escarpment along which ran the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road. The Maoris destroyed a whole series of German posts,

climbed the escarpment, and dug in across the road. After dark German tanks (one of them a flame-thrower) attacked down the road, but retired towards Poggiofiorito after one or two had been destroyed. Five times German infantry tried in vain to penetrate the Maoris' position. The Maoris had to be withdrawn before dawn because it was impossible to get the supporting anti-tank guns there, and because [6 Brigade](#) had failed to take [Orsogna](#).

Meanwhile 10 Platoon waited all night ready to move immediately the capture of 24 Battalion's final objective was reported. By listening on their own No. 18 wireless sets to the infantry's No. 38 'walky-talky' sets, the machine-gunners were able to follow the progress of the battle. In the centre of the town the infantry encountered German tanks, which made further progress impossible without tank support. The New Zealand tanks were delayed by demolitions and then found their only approach blocked by a concealed Mark IV. From this hopeless situation 24 Battalion was eventually extricated.

The only territorial advantage gained, therefore, was 23 Battalion's salient on [Sfasciata Ridge](#), to which 4 Platoon was despatched before dawn. Both platoons with this battalion (1 and 4) were frequently shelled and mortared, but had few casualties. Private [Opie](#),⁵ 4 Platoon's cook, 'set up his cook shop forward of the gun line—and forward of our FDLs in a casa—the first we had dared to enter,' says Sergeant [Knowles](#).⁶ 'Here we could hear the hydro burner roar above the noise of the battle. Opie was killed while he stood outside the back door at the well—the noise of the burner drowned the sound of a mortar.'

Meanwhile 3 Company manned its guns day and night ready to fire 'stonks' (on fixed lines) or harassing tasks. After one of 7 Platoon's shoots the enemy mortared the gunline until it was pockmarked with craters three feet deep and four feet across, and scored a direct hit on a Vickers. 'It was the most completely destroyed gun that [3 Coy](#) ever had,' says Captain Halkett. 'The water jacket was completely gone, Dial sight spare parts case were never found and the ammunition belt was left smouldering with occasional rounds bursting with the heat.' The two men in the gunpit were eventually evacuated suffering from burst ear drums and the after effect of the concussion. 'If ever there was a miraculous escape this was it.'

To harass [Orsogna](#)'s eastern approaches, 8 Platoon left Brecciarola Ridge for

Colle Chiamato, south-east of the town, where it did several shoots which annoyed the Germans, who answered with spandau fire on fixed lines. The German artillery and mortars searched 8 Platoon's ridge and shelled almost every possible place short of the gun positions—which were shelled and mortared the day after the platoon left. Three mules were 'borrowed' to assist with the supplying of the platoon, but the track was too slippery for them, so Sergeant [Mayfield](#)⁷ and his men preferred to pack the supplies in on their own backs.

Another frontal attack on [Orsogna](#) obviously would be a waste of men and time, but the town might be outflanked by gaining access to the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road from the Sfasciata Ridge. During the next few days, therefore, the engineers built tracks and improved the crossings over the [Moro](#) stream to this ridge for the passage of the tanks, guns and supplies.

Both 5 and 6 Platoons took up fresh positions, across the [Moro](#) from [Sfasciata Ridge](#), to give covering fire if required— it was not—for a Northampton battalion of 5 British Division, which came into the line on the New Zealanders' right on the night of 13–14 December. Next night 2 Platoon joined these two platoons (under 2 Company) in readiness for another attack. Major Moore placed the twelve guns of 2, 5 and 6 Platoons in a line close enough together for their beaten zones of fire to overlap. 'I was determined to use them as a coy, firing on call from the Inf Bns on any Arty Df Task within our effective range 4500 yd,' he says.

The Division's third effort against [Orsogna](#) was fixed for the early morning of the 15th. Fifth Brigade was to get across the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road and isolate the town by seizing some high ground behind it.

The machine guns supplemented the artillery barrage.⁸ Nearly half of the ammunition they used that day, 170,500 rounds, was fired by 2 Company, whose task was to give supporting fire on the right flank, where the Northamptons were to occupy a group of buildings near [Poggiofiorito](#) and establish contact with 5 Brigade. Moore says his guns were to 'fire on the road beyond [Poggiofiorito](#) traversing to the right during the attack, which was to coincide with 5 Bde up [Sfasciata Ridge](#), with the idea of stopping any enemy reinforcements coming along the road from the right. Just beyond [Poggiofiorito](#) was a crossroad and on getting a call over the radio "Pogo" we were to fire on it with the 12 guns as a D.F. task.

'On the evening before the attack Lt Col [McElroy](#)⁹ and his Adj came to where my guns were, wanting to find out where the nearest elements of the British Unit on their right were. I took them over and found that the British Bn HQ had moved over the [Moro](#). When we were moving back and about a hundred yards in front of my guns they suddenly opened fire. Somewhat annoyed I asked them why? It appeared they had contacted the British Unit and told them they were in position ready to fire, and were told to go ahead, and having fired were told that they did not mean them to fire [just then]....'

The barrage began at 1 a.m. and before dawn the two assaulting battalions of [5 Brigade](#), the 21st and the 23rd, were on their objectives across the road after some very hard fighting. On the right flank, about half a mile from [Poggiofiorito](#), 1 Platoon supported the 21st with defensive and harassing fire; in the centre 4 Platoon, after going almost to the road, dug in under small-arms and shell fire, and harassed the slopes of the [Orsogna](#) ridge, about a mile away; on the 23rd's left flank 11 Platoon accompanied B Company 25 Battalion, which dug in covering the head of the gully between the Pascuccio and Sfasciata ridges.

The casualties were so numerous in 23 Battalion that many of the wounded could not be taken back until more stretchers were obtained. Private [Carey](#),¹⁰ a medical orderly with 4 Platoon, during the next two or three days went to the aid of at least thirty wounded, mostly infantrymen, in the open and under fire; he undoubtedly saved the life of a man who had a severed artery, and probably saved others. He was awarded the MM.

The Germans counter-attacked from the direction of Poggiofiorito and [Arielli](#) in the early hours of 16 December. They were beaten off with no great difficulty on 23 Battalion's front, but the main weight of their attack came against 21 Battalion. Moore received a call from Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy for maximum machine-gun support on one of the artillery defensive-fire areas in front of the infantry. These target areas, each identified by a code-name, were usually 1200 yards wide and about 200 yards deep. 'I asked him left, right or centre as I could only cover the width of my gun line 250 yd approx. He told me and said that he wanted fire for approx 5 min.

'We gave him five belts rapid. The target was at 4250 yds. ... Then to my horror

I found that the Inf FDLs were 3850 yd from my guns. As the normal safety precautions do not permit shooting over our troops when they are more than 3800 yds away the five minutes that they took to fire the five belts seemed to me about five years. When I called Lt Col McElroy on the radio he said "Good!! Do it again." This we did but after that I had to bring the rate of fire down to normal as the initial two periods of 5 belts rapid had heated up the guns more than somewhat.'

All six platoons of 1 and 2 Companies were in action at various times—2 Company's guns at 3.30, 4.6, 4.19, 4.24, 4.43, 5.2, 5.30 and 7.40 a.m.—with results that were reported to be very satisfactory. The artillery fired many concentrations, and 18 Regiment's tanks were also very busy. The attack lost momentum, and by half past eight the Germans had withdrawn in the direction of [Poggiofiorito](#). They left many dead and four of their six tanks (including two flame-throwers).

That morning [20 Armoured Regiment](#) and the [Maori Battalion](#) attempted to exploit along the road from the cemetery, which was being violently shelled. The infantry were soon pinned down, and the tanks, hotly engaged, went on ahead half a mile or so before they also halted. Several went up in flames, and the rest were ordered back. Had this attack succeeded, 24 Battalion was to have entered [Orsogna](#), and [19 Armoured Regiment](#) and 22 (Motor) Battalion were to have thrust past [Guardiagrele](#). Now, however, all attempts to exploit were abandoned; the Division was to hold the ground it had won, the mile-wide salient across the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road.

The weather was bitterly cold, and the rain and fog so reduced visibility that bombing and shelling were unprofitable. For a while the only Vickers that did any shooting were 3 Company's, which harassed the approaches to [Orsogna](#) and the town itself from time to time.

The [23rd Battalion](#) was relieved by the 28th, and after a day (the 17th) with the Maoris under shell and mortar fire, 4 Platoon was replaced in the evening by 2 Platoon, whose commander (Lieutenant [Hutchinson](#) ¹¹) says his guns 'were situated in very exposed position & we were severely mortared for some time. Only the soft nature of the ground saved us from considerable damage.... During lunch one day we had an unpleasant diversion. A Jeep came tearing up through the olive grove, struck a mine & the driver [a Maori officer] was blown high in the air right in front of us. He

died instantly.'

After three days' hard work in support of 21 Battalion, 1 Platoon went back to [Castelfrentano](#) on the 18th for a rest, and 3 Platoon left San Felice to take its place. Sixth Brigade's decision to give each battalion a spell out of the line also allowed the attached 4 Company platoons to have a rest.

The weather cleared sufficiently on the 22nd for the bombers to attack [Orsogna](#). Men occupying houses a mile or so from the town 'rushed outside,' wrote Moss, 'to see successive waves of Baltimores and Bostons, approaching ... six at a time. Our arty put green smoke shells down in the area where the bombs were wanted, and as the planes went overhead we saw a green flare from the leader and then the bombs—four from each aircraft—drop out in a shower. We watched them plummet down in the dense mass of houses, and the great belching eruptions of black and orange which followed. Lumps of masonry were hurled hundreds of feet into the air and seemed to take minutes to rain down again.' This raid and others, although spectacular, probably achieved very little; the Germans were too well protected in their cellars or solidly dug in on the spurs.

[Eighth Army](#) decided on yet another attempt to break the line before the winter snows began. Fifth British Division was to capture [Arielli](#) and the high ground around it, and the New Zealand Division the heights north and west of [Orsogna](#). Fifth Brigade, with 21, 26 and 28 Battalions, therefore, was to take [Fontegrande Ridge](#), west of the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road, and another unnamed ridge beyond it; it was expected that the next phase of the advance, to the Feuduccio and [San Basile](#) ridges, would induce the enemy to evacuate [Orsogna](#).

In the morning of 23 December 2 Company moved up the muddy tracks to an open space on [Sfasciata Ridge](#) to support [5 Brigade](#) more closely, and that night 12 Platoon accompanied 26 Battalion on a gruelling march into [5 Brigade's](#) sector, while 9 Platoon, using sturdier mules than the three 'borrowed' earlier, and with Italian muleteers, carried its guns over Colle Chiamato to [6 Brigade's](#) left flank, a miserably bleak position with a commanding field of fire, where it was to lie doggo and shoot only if it had a target of Germans trying to escape from [Orsogna](#) by the 'back door'.

Fifth Division encompassed [Arielli](#) in the afternoon of the 23rd, and at four

o'clock next morning the barrage opened for the New Zealand attack. The whole of the southern horizon was lit by the continuous flashes of the guns and (a machine-gunner observed) 'the air shook with the storm of shells passing overhead.... Jerry kept shooting up flare after flare to try and find out what was going on. The area sounded to be alive with spandaus.... They are spiteful sounding weapons.... I bet our old Vickers though doesn't sound any nicer to Jerry, and it throws over ten times the amount of stuff.'

By daylight both 21 Battalion (on the right) and 26 Battalion (in the centre) were firmly on the first objective, the Fontegrande ridge, and their supporting Vickers (3 and 12 Platoons) were dug in with them. Only two rifle companies, one from each battalion and both much below strength, had succeeded in crossing the [Arielli](#) stream to the next ridge, where they clung precariously to the reverse slope. The very steep, slippery ground, as much as the tenacious enemy, had prevented the infantry from gaining more than a foothold on the final objective. It was miserably cold and there were frequent heavy showers of rain.

On the left the [Maori Battalion](#) (with 2 Platoon under command) secured the neck of land where the Cemetery and Fontegrande ridges join, which enabled the tanks of 20 Armoured Regiment to get along a road onto Fontegrande to support the infantry. The Maoris were held up short of their final objective. The ground in front of them was swarming with Germans, and several times during the day urgent concentrations of artillery, mortar and Vickers fire were called for to break up incipient counter-attacks.

Whenever 10 Platoon (which had taken over from 9 Platoon on San Felice ridge) was called upon to fire, wrote Moss, 'We would get the codeword for the particular target and everyone would tear out to the gun pits, put the setting on the dial sights, level the bubble and swing onto the lamp. The sec comds would report "Guns ready to fire" and I would yell "All guns—FIRE" and there would be a simultaneous roar as 200 nickel slugs went out in the first six seconds. We would give them the remainder of the first belt rapid and then two more normal, pull the guns through and go back to our hut. It would take us just five minutes to freight 3000 rds over to the Jerry lines and although we couldn't see the results of our shooting, being behind a ridge, it was gratifying to have the Maoris ring up on two occasions and report that our fire, in conjunction with that of [7 and 8] platoons of [3 Coy](#), had broken up two

counter attacks.' Also 2 Company, which fired 86,000 rounds that day, was told that it had helped to repel the Germans.

On the right flank, as on the left, the fighting continued, with the infantry engaged at close quarters and assisted by the tanks and all the supporting fire available. The [21st Battalion](#) was due for a rest, and it was decided to relieve it with the 25th. After much difficulty in negotiating the muddy tracks, 11 Platoon arrived with 25 Battalion in the evening and took over from 3 Platoon, which went back to [Castelfrentano](#). The operational command was transferred from [5 Brigade](#) to the 6th.

Christmas Day 1943, the New Zealanders' first in [Italy](#), was foggy, cold and miserable. Nevertheless most of the machine-gunners managed to have a very good dinner: pork and turkey, plum pudding, fruit salad and cream, oranges, figs and nuts, and two bottles of beer for each man. One 'felt positively revetted with good food and slept like a python after eating a gazelle.' A parcel mail and a National Patriotic Fund parcel for every man had arrived a day or two earlier.

Padre Finlay, ¹² who visited the companies whenever he could, was taken by jeep to 3 Company a day or two before Christmas and held brief services, with a quietly sung hymn, at each platoon headquarters.

The front was fairly quiet on Christmas morning, some light shelling and mortaring being the only activity. Sixth Brigade's mortars and the Vickers of 2 Company and 7 and 10 Platoons fired at some German mortars which were annoying the Maoris, but could not silence them. It appeared that the enemy might be about to make another counter-attack, but the defensive fire put an end to any such possibility.

When a battalion of 2 British Independent Paratroop Brigade took over from 24 Battalion, which at that time was the only New Zealand battalion directly facing [Orsogna](#), the platoons of 3 Company on Brecciarola and [Colle Chiamato](#) came under the paratroops' command, and 10 Platoon went out with 24 Battalion for a short rest.

Boxing Day was another unpleasant day, with drizzling rain. Twice before midday 25 Battalion asked 2 Company to fire on Germans who could be seen moving

about freely, and later reported very satisfactory results. Early in the afternoon 5 and 6 Platoons again engaged this target area, which was quiet for the rest of the day. This was a busy day for 2 Platoon, which fired 33,000 rounds on targets selected by the [Maori Battalion](#). After dark next day, when 24 Battalion returned to the line to take over from the Maoris, 2 Platoon was relieved by 10.

The days that followed took much the same pattern. Both sides mortared each other's foremost posts, harassed each other with machine-gun fire, and shelled roads and tracks farther back. The front line consisted of a series of platoon posts in farmhouses, usually with nearby slit trenches which were occupied at night. The enemy had good observation, so patrolling and the bringing up of food and ammunition (by mule) were confined to the hours of darkness.

The building shared by 7 Platoon's headquarters and 3 Company's advanced headquarters gave a grandstand view across a gully to the Brickworks corner, about half a mile away on the road to [Castelfrentano](#). 'The Germans had this [part of the road] under good observation and one of their 88s kept our traffic moving nicely,' says Halkett. 'Idle Vickers gunners invariably watched our vehicles running this gauntlet and many a quiet bet was made as to whether the next vehicle would make the hurry distance of 200 to 300 yards. Occasionally a vehicle was hit and stopped and the resulting scramble of driver and/or passengers for the ditch and safety was considered highly amusing to watchers at a safe distance.' But it was not in the least funny when nobody got out of the vehicle.

Heavy rain fell in the afternoon of the 31st, and after dark a bitterly cold wind was accompanied by sleet and hail; later, when a rising gale shrieked around the farmhouses, snow began to fall. Visibility was soon reduced to a few yards. The pickets shivered in the gunlines, and even the men in the houses had little sleep. Next morning, New Year's Day, the countryside had been transformed: ground which had been rutted by tank tracks and pocked with shell holes was now a shining white expanse, broken only by the twisted trunks of the olive trees.

The whole Division set to work digging itself out: gangs of men shovelled snow off the roads and tracks; signalmen repaired broken telephone lines; men who had been sleeping in dugouts or bivvies found shelter in houses. Many of the Vickers had been completely buried in the snow and had to be dug out; they were placed at

ground level, ready to fire if necessary, in front of their waterlogged pits. Furniture, ladders, door frames, rafters, and everything else that was combustible was fed into braziers and fireplaces around which the men huddled for warmth.

The weather cleared and during a succession of fine days, interrupted by one or two fresh falls of snow, a partial thaw turned the roads into morasses and the surrounding countryside into slush covered by a thin crust of snow. All movement, except on the beaten tracks, was exceedingly difficult.

In these conditions there was no question of continuing the offensive on [Eighth Army's](#) front, but in the more open country on the other side of the peninsula [Fifth Army](#) might still be able to drive towards [Rome](#). It was decided, therefore, to transfer some divisions from [Eighth Army](#) to the Fifth. The first to go was 5 British Division. In the resultant regrouping 2 Independent Paratroop Brigade (still under New Zealand command) took over the [Poggiofiorito](#) sector from a brigade of 5 [Division](#).

The paratroop brigade had its own machine-gun platoons for the immediate support of its battalions, and these were given counter-penetration tasks; they were to fire only in the event of a threatened break-through. The brigade was also supported by 1 Company, which left [Castelfrentano](#) and after waiting at some brickworks near [Lanciano](#) while reconnaissance parties



The winter line, 11 January 1944

went forward, took over from British machine-gunners on 6 January, with 3 Platoon in the outskirts of [Poggiofiorito](#) and 1 and 2 Platoons about half a mile to the east astride a deep gully that descended from the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road to the [Moro](#) River. They were to give defensive fire on call in front of the brigade, as well as depth to the defences.

The ground was still partly covered with snow when the company arrived. The slush hampered the diggers, and life in the pits was damp and cheerless. As the snow thawed Company Headquarters and 1 Platoon found they were in an area thickly sown with S-mines. A dump of these mines and booby-trap mechanisms was discovered under a haystack. Engineers from the paratroop brigade were summoned, and after a hurried course (self-taught) on the mines, 1 Platoon assisted in the clearing. For some time after that it was not safe to go near the platoon: disarmed S-mines, if set off by the unwary, would leap into the air without exploding.

The paratroops sent patrols out each night, and for that reason the Vickers were not allowed to do harassing shoots, except one night when the patrols reported vehicles moving around the [Canosa](#) crossroads.

The paratroop brigade's former positions near [Orsogna](#) and farther south were taken over by a company of Maoris, 22 (Motor) Battalion and Divisional Cavalry. On [Brecciarola Ridge](#) D Company 28 Battalion was closely supported by 3 Company less 7 and 9 Platoons (8 Platoon replacing 7); in the Colle Chiamato- [Colle Bianco](#) sub-sector 22 Battalion had its own machine guns; and on the left flank, in the [Colle Bianco](#)-Colle Barone sub-sector, Divisional Cavalry was reinforced by some anti-tank gunners and by 7 Platoon near the peak of Colle [San Biagio](#) and 9 Platoon on the western outskirts of Fontana Ascigno.

Only between late afternoon and mid-morning was the waist- deep snow on Colle San Biagio firm enough to carry a man's weight; 7 Platoon had an exhausting time manhandling its stores over the last mile or so. The posts at [Fontana Ascigno](#) were fortified with wire, and getting the wire there (according to a Divisional Cavalry report) was another exhausting business 'with the bloody mules stumbling and slipping in deep drifts of snow, packs slipping, and the Ites yelling and tugging.'

Fifth Brigade replaced the 6th in the Fontegrande- [Orsogna](#) sub-sector. Staying

in the same position, 10 Platoon was now to give immediate support to the [Maori Battalion](#), 11 to the 21st, and 12 to the 23rd, while 2 Company's three platoons, on [Sfasciata Ridge](#), when called upon, were to support the brigade with defensive fire and harassing and fixed-line fire.

Barely half a mile back from the infantry, 2 Company had its twelve guns across the centre of an open space about 300 yards in diameter. 'When the CO asked me why I had picked such a place,' says Moore, 'I told him that I didn't think that the methodical Germans would consider us such fools as to put our guns on an open space like that. And so it worked out for when the jerries got annoyed with us after any particular shoot, and they often did, they would shell and mortar the gullies on either side of the ridge.

'We stayed in this position [from 23 December] until the div. was withdrawn and fired 430,000 rounds. All the Coy Personnel were during that period 2 hrs. on and four off around the clock. The average time from getting the task to guns firing was 2 minutes on any target in an 160° arc up to 4500 yd. Barrels for this work became a vital question.' The battalion armourer, who had the only .306 gauge with which to check the barrels, had to make the long trek from Battalion Headquarters to do so. Brigadier Barlow, a British small-arms expert who inspected the company's guns, agreed that it would be a good idea for each section sergeant to have a gauge and arranged for .306 plug gauges to be issued to the battalion. 'To be able to measure breech wear with these plug gauges after every 1000 rounds fired ... and to be able to tell if they were fit to fire another 1000 rounds was a tremendous relief to me,' says Moore.

'One afternoon soon after taking up our positions I returned to the house where I had my HQ and found in my room five telephones other than my own Coy phone. All the units around had put in individual phones each with a different number of rings meaning [2 Coy](#). I took this as a great compliment and while we stayed there ... averaged about 2 hrs sleep in the twentyfour.... I made a habit of contacting the Inf COs each morning to find what enemy positions their patrols the previous night had located. Together we would work out the harassing fire for the next night. Using all 12 guns for short periods and at irregular intervals firing approx 20,000 rds a night.... when I heard a German spandau firing, I did on several occasions ring the nearest Bns, get bearings from their forward elements. Then using 12 guns quietened the

Jerry gun. I don't say we hit him but I do say that a Coy of 12 guns can give a heck of a scare.'

When several men from 2 Company were selected to go to [Bari](#) on leave, Captain Aislable took them in his truck back to B Echelon at [Castelfrentano](#) for their pay and changes of clothing. 'Happy party going; back to my quarters for their tea,' he wrote. 'Got about 600x down road when shell landed beside us.... Ran 50x to house for medical aid & got 20x when second shell came in beside truck.... Of 5 men for leave one left.' Privates [Mackintosh](#)¹³ (the driver) and [Maurice](#)¹⁴ were killed, [Shand](#)¹⁵ mortally wounded, and [Farnell](#)¹⁶ and Corporal Dryden wounded.

On 'Jittery ridge', across the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road, it was most dangerous to move near the front in daylight because observation posts and snipers in houses, in places only about 200 yards away, could bring down immediate fire. At night both sides sent out patrols. A German raiding party wearing white clothing caught some Maoris asleep, entered their house unchallenged and inflicted several casualties. Next night another patrol, reaching one of 23 Battalion's houses unobserved, inflicted casualties and took a prisoner. After that, however, the New Zealanders were not caught unawares.

Alternative positions well forward with the [Maori Battalion](#) were selected by 10 Platoon. A section was to go up at night, do a shoot and pull out while it was still dark. In the evening of the 7th the machine-gunners set out for one of these positions, near a house beyond the cemetery. The thin crust of snow supported the man who trod carefully, but every now and then somebody fell up to his knees in a concealed slit trench or tank track. The road and railway, although they would have given easier going, were avoided because spandaus were set to fire on fixed lines down them.

The Maoris gave the machine-gunners a cup of tea. 'After we'd drunk it,' wrote Moss, 'we put on our improvised snow clothing, and went forward to the positions. Everyone knew that concealment of the pits would be a very desirable factor in daylight tomorrow, so we carefully cleared the snow away before throwing out the earth.... The ground was very wet and sticky and in an hour we were not much further down than a foot. Suddenly 300x out to the left, hell broke loose round the church. Grenades and bombs cracked and flashed, spandaus purred and positive

fences of tracer sped over the snow. For a moment we thought we had been discovered, but the spitting of a tommy gun and a bren gun stuttering told us that it was someone else's party. Jerry mortared and spandaued, but every time he stopped, the bren would give another short burst, further back each time as the enemy patrol was driven off. We dug with renewed vigour, finishing about midnight after painstakingly covering the fresh earth with snow and obliterating tracks....

'Up at six this morning [the 8th] and put the guns and ammo in the pits and then went back to the house. We heard that the Maoris in the church killed five out of the seven Huns in the patrol last night.' After that the Germans made no serious attempts on the New Zealand forward posts.

About four o'clock Moss and his men left the house to occupy the gun pits 'and found to our disgust that they had about eight inches of ice-covered water in them. There was some shelling about 300x away and bits of shrap were kicking up puffs of snow all around us.... The gunners of course had to stand in the water so I decided to get the shoot over without delay. Our most prominent target was a large three-storied house which overlooked the whole area and was probably used as an O.P. We opened the ball by giving it a belt rapid and a good many bullets must have found their way into the windows and breaks in the walls. After we opened fire only three more shells landed. We didn't know whether there was any special significance behind this or whether the Jerry arty. had just stopped to try and locate us by sound. Anyway nothing more came our way at all. We shot up every visible house in the Jerry lines and then traversed back and forth at different ranges for good measure. Every now and then we came back to the big house and gave it a few more bursts to keep its eyes shut. We got away about ten belts a gun without incident and then pulled out one at a time.'

A couple of mornings later 10 Platoon did a dawn shoot at [Orsogna](#) from one of these direct-fire positions. 'We fired at buildings from which we had seen spandau tracer, into the village square, on the Guadiagrele road and also did a traverse of the whole place. We did one good thing by provoking an automatic anti tank gun to fire and disclose its position. It sent some tracer shells bouncing down the road on our right and we pinpointed it nicely. Later we got the 4.2 [mortar] onto it with blockbusters and it has not fired since.'

About twenty German fighter-bombers, the first seen since Christmas, appeared suddenly in the afternoon of the 11th and made a hit-and-run raid on [Poggiofiorito](#). 'They came out of the sun from a great height and going like hell. They hastily dropped their bombs which fell over about two miles of territory and tore off smartly ... one apparently receiving a direct hit on its bomb, because it disappeared in a puff of smoke the size of a gasometer, which hung in the air for half an hour.'

Next day [Orsogna](#) was the target for the [RAF](#). 'The bomb bursts all mushroomed up to form an opaque pall of dust over the village, and after it had dispersed the Kittys [Kittyhawks] went in again and strafed it with their .5's. When they had gone the arty. plastered the place and covered it with another cloud of dust and smoke. The Maori mortars were not to be outdone of course and added their contribution to the inferno.'

If the [Maori Battalion](#) was in favour of harassing fire from the Vickers, 23 Battalion certainly was not. For several days 4 Company was not allowed to do any shooting in case it drew retaliatory fire. The Maoris' CO (Lieutenant-Colonel [Young](#) ¹⁷) rang 10 Platoon on 14 January to say that he had not heard its 'familiar rattle for some time', and when told why, said he would ring Brigade Headquarters. Not long afterwards Company Headquarters ¹⁸ advised 10 Platoon that it 'could fire if the Maoris wanted it', and about three o'clock Colonel Young asked it to fire for the rest of the afternoon. Soon after the platoon engaged its first target in [Orsogna](#), however, 23 Battalion demanded that it should stop, and although it was affirmed that 10 Platoon was under [28 Battalion](#)'s command, the Vickers were not permitted to do any more shooting.

Already 4 Indian Division had begun to relieve the New Zealand Division on [Eighth Army](#)'s front. That night (14–15 January) 2 Company was replaced on [Sfasciata Ridge](#) by an Indian machine-gun company, and two nights later 4 Company and 8 Platoon handed over their positions to the Indians, as also did 1 Company in the [Poggiofiorito](#) sector.

For the impending move to [Fifth Army](#)'s front all identification markings were removed, but as on all other such occasions, few could have mistaken the New Zealanders. The Division departed in groups: 2 Company went with [6 Brigade](#) on 15 January, Battalion Headquarters and 1 and 4 Companies with the artillery on the

18th, and 3 Company with Divisional Cavalry on the 20th.

The long convoys snaked back over the [Sangro](#) and down to the mouth of the river, turned south along the Adriatic coast and inland again to the first staging area, near [Casalbordino](#); they then continued on past many familiar landmarks to the second staging area, on the road to [Lucera](#), and through new country, south-westwards into the mountains along a fine highway through [Ariano Irpino](#), where streams of refugees lined each side of the road, most of them heading in the direction of [Naples](#). The numerous villages passed on the way usually occupied pinnacles or sharp bends round cliffs, and the greasy cobbles of their steeply ascending main streets tested the heavily laden vehicles. 'We saw many precipitous snow capped peaks mostly about the 6000' mark.... On emerging from the hills we immediately recognised a distant cone with its crowning plume of smoke, as the famous [Vesuvius](#).' The convoys went on to another staging area, near [Cancello](#), and then entered the [Volturno](#) valley, where in due course 2 and 3 Companies reverted to the battalion's command at Sant' Angelo d' [Alife](#).

There was plenty to do on arrival: erecting tents, stacking ammunition, digging sump holes and drains, cutting firewood, overhauling vehicles and guns, repairing camouflage nets, and other tasks. Italian women washed clothes, usually for about five lire a garment; children with tin billies swarmed around the cookhouses for scraps of food. When darkness fell Catherine wheels appeared all over the camp while men whirled the charcoal braziers which were to heat their tents.

'Speed' [Whelan](#),¹⁹ an orderly in 4 Platoon, 'jacked me up a bed,' says Knowles. 'When I saw him sleeping on a coffin lid I inspected my own bed—to find I had the coffin. He was upset when I sent him back [to the nearby cemetery] with it—after all he had emptied the corpse out of it.'

During the next fortnight the machine-gunners settled down to route-marching, range practices, gun drill, map reading, camouflage, training with mines and booby traps, and so on; they also played football, and made trips to [Pompeii](#).

Since its arrival in [Italy](#) the battalion had suffered sixty-five casualties: twelve killed, forty-one wounded, and twelve prisoners of war (of whom five were subsequently killed in an air raid).

¹ Pte L. G. Bryan; born NZ 10 May 1919; farmhand; killed in action 3 Dec 1943.

² Sgt J. L. Partridge; born NZ 23 Jul 1908; bank officer; killed in action 7 Dec 1943.

³ Lt J. H. Jackson; Wellington; born Wanganui, 24 Feb 1917; salesman; wounded 7 Dec 1943.

⁴ Lt M. K. Hanan, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born NZ 24 Mar 1917; farmer; wounded 7 Dec 1943.

⁵ Pte A. A. Opie; born NZ 1 Apr 1921; electrical apprentice; killed in action 20 Dec 1943.

⁶ Capt J. L. Knowles, ED; Wellington; born NZ 20 Oct 1920; bank clerk; now Regular soldier.

⁷ Sgt G. E. C. Mayfield; born England, 1 Jun 1904; orchardist and farmer; died of wounds 29 Jul 1944.

⁸ 1 and 2 Companies were under command 5 Bde and the remainder of the battalion under 6 Bde. 1 and 3 Pls were under command 21 Bn and 4 Pl under 23 Bn; 2, 5 and 6 Pls were to support 5 Bde. 7 and 9 Pls were kept in reserve on San Felice Ridge in case of a counter-attack, and 10 Pl was in a mobile role ready to exploit with 24 Bn past Orsogna if the town fell.

Shellfire destroyed two guns on 14 Dec, one in 7 Pl and the other in 11 Pl, and next day damaged one of 4 Pl's guns.

⁹ Lt-Col H. M. McElroy, DSO and bar, ED; Auckland; born Timaru, 2 Dec 1910; public accountant; CO 21 Bn Jun 1943–Jul 1944; three times wounded.

¹⁰ Sgt H. K. Carey, MM; Auckland; born Amberley, 20 Dec 1908; bank clerk.

¹¹ Capt E. Y. M. Hutchinson, m.i.d.; Manutuke, Gisborne; born Gisborne, 17 Apr 1905; farmer.

¹² Rev. A. H. Finlay; Palmerston North; born Hamilton, 24 Feb 1913: Baptist minister.

¹³ Pte I. F. Mackintosh; born Wanganui, 12 May 1918; herd tester; killed in action 8 Jan 1944.

¹⁴ Pte S. K. Maurice; born England, 31 Oct 1918; printer; killed in action 8 Jan 1944.

¹⁵ Pte P. A. Shand; born Oamaru, 9 Nov 1915; labourer; died of wounds 12 Jan 1944.

¹⁶ L-Cpl F. A. Farnell; Havelock, Marlborough; born NZ 19 Jan 1907; labourer; wounded 8 Jan 1944.

¹⁷ Lt-Col R. R. T. Young, DSO; Richmond, England; born Wellington, 25 Jun 1902; oil company executive; CO School of Instruction 1943; 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1943–Jul 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; wounded 26 Dec 1943.

¹⁸ Lt Cramond was acting OC 4 Coy from 4 Jan (when Capt Farquharson had been taken ill to hospital) until 13 Jan, when Maj Hume, having recovered from his wounds, resumed command.

¹⁹ Pte M. J. Whelan; Auckland; born NZ 20 Oct 1907; painter.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 19 – CASSINO

CHAPTER 19

Cassino

Fifth Army hoped to reach Rome by the direct route along the Liri valley—the Via Casilina by which Hannibal had marched on the city over 2000 years ago—but the entrance to the valley was closed by the Germans' Gustav Line, which followed the western bank of the Rapido River through Cassino to the confluence with the Liri River. Cassino, the key to the line, was 'as strong as any position could be without being impregnable.'¹ Route 6, the main highway between Naples and Rome, passed through the town, and the railway ran within a mile of it. Steep-sided mountains, dominated by Monte Cairo, over 5400 feet high, descended to the 1700-foot Montecassino, which directly overlooked the town and was crowned by the ancient, massively walled Benedictine monastery. From these heights the enemy looked straight down Route 6 and enjoyed an uninterrupted view of every approach.

The Americans had tried to cross the Rapido south of Cassino and had been driven back with heavy losses; they had made some progress in the mountains north of the town, but both town and Montecassino remained firmly in the enemy's grasp.

This was the situation on 3 February when 2 New Zealand Division and 4 Indian Division were formed into a corps under General Freyberg's command. The 2nd United States Corps was to deliver another attack on Cassino from the north, and if that succeeded, New Zealand Corps was to exploit up the Liri valley.

Fifth Brigade (with 1 and 2 Companies under its command) relieved 36 US Division in the line south of Route 6. The New Zealand trucks drove up the main highway as far as Mignano and then followed the railway line, which had been converted into a two-way road and passed around the southern side of two isolated hills, Monte Porchio (the smaller) and Monte Trocchio.

The wrecked assault boats which lined the bank of the Rapido, the damaged weapons and equipment left in the trenches, the K rations, clothing and medical stores strewn about were testimony of the casualties the Americans had incurred in their attempt to cross the Rapido.

In the evening of 5 February 3 Platoon joined 21 Battalion, which had gone into

position the previous night about 300 yards from the river. A few nights later a German patrol tried to break into the house which Platoon Headquarters shared with a rifle platoon, but withdrew after an exchange of fire.

Before going into position to support the [Maori Battalion](#), which arrived on 21 Battalion's right on the 6th, 2 Platoon was shelled and suffered the machine-gunners' first casualties on [Fifth Army's](#) front: Private [Dwyer](#)² killed and three men wounded. The platoon occupied positions on high ground south of [Monte Trocchio](#), where it overlooked the river and covered the Maoris' front; this was an unhealthy spot, under direct observation by day and heavily mortared at night.

The rest of the battalion at this stage was in reserve near Porchio or farther back along the railway but still within range of the enemy's larger guns.

On the night of 10–11 February 3 Platoon, which had fired a few belts at houses across the river, was relieved by 6 Platoon, in support of Divisional Cavalry, which came into the line as infantry and took over from 21 Battalion. The other two platoons of 2 Company went into positions in front of Monte Trocchio, which rose abruptly 1000 feet from the plain and overlooked [Cassino](#), about three miles away; they were to harass Route 6 in the direction of the town and the [Cassino-Sant' Angelo](#) road on the other side of the river.

Very heavy rain fell. The two platoons had to unload their trucks and ferry their guns and equipment in jeeps. 'Walk about mile through "dry" creek,' wrote Private [Ross](#)³ (5 Platoon). 'Water up to our knees. Arrive about 8.30 & bed down. Rotten night. Water all round me.' The ground was too wet to dig in, so 4 Platoon placed its guns in the open and began a harassing shoot. After the first belt or two, however, spandaus replied, and because of the 'iffy set up in front' Captain Aislabie asked Brigade Headquarters for permission to cease fire. He drew Brigade's attention to the fact that there was no infantry opposite the Germans in this area for about 800 yards. 'Bde I.O. had wrong dispositions and a rearrangement was quickly made.'

The guns were dug in on the rocky hillside and next night the harassing shoots were begun in earnest, one platoon firing between nightfall and midnight, the other between midnight and dawn. Thereafter they got away between 15,000 and 20,000 rounds each night. The men carried their guns up to the pits in the darkness, and

when the task was completed, took them back to the houses in which they lived.

At the same time 1 Platoon, going out each night from behind Porchio to the holes it had dug south of the railway, harassed Sant' Angelo and the roads in the vicinity.

The 2nd US Corps fought its way to the last defences of [Montecassino](#), but its very depleted and exhausted divisions could go no further. Now it was the turn of the New Zealand Corps. While the Indian Division was to take over from the Americans and clear the enemy from the heights above [Cassino](#), the New Zealand Division was to cross the Rapido below the town. Two companies of Maoris were to capture the railway station and the engineers were to bridge the river so that the tanks could cross and, together with the Maoris and 23 Battalion, attack [Cassino](#) from the south.

It was reluctantly decided that the Monastery, the hub of the German offensive system, would have to be bombed. Founded by Saint Benedict in the sixth century, it had been sacked by the Lombards, rebuilt, destroyed by the Saracens, restored again, wrecked by an earthquake and raised a third time. Its prodigiously thick walls could not be breached by gunfire. The bombardment was delayed until fine weather and then, on 15 February, wave after wave of Flying Fortresses and medium bombers, 265 aircraft altogether, reduced the buildings to ruins. The Indian Division's assault, originally intended for the night after the bombing, could not be mounted before the night of the 17th–18th. Despite the most valiant efforts it failed.

For their attack on the railway station that night the two companies of Maoris were supported by a great number of heavy, medium and field guns, mortars, and the Vickers of 2, 4, 5, 6 and 10 Platoons (10 had arrived in the Trocchio area the previous night). The Vickers engaged the Maoris' objectives, the road on the far bank of the Gari stream (which flows into the Rapido) and German infantry positions; they expended 66,000 rounds during the night and almost as many the following day, when they received frequent requests for defensive fire.

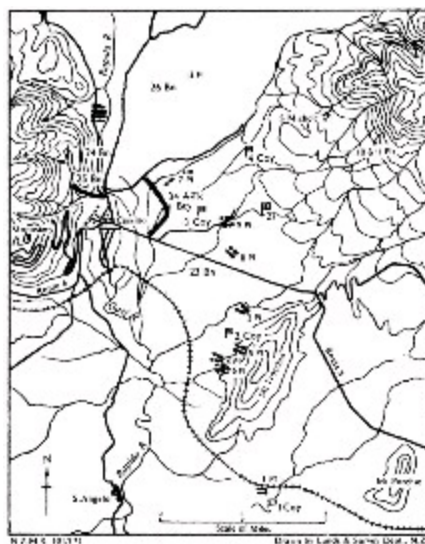
Much of the flat, low-lying land near the river was water-logged, and the [Mignano- Cassino](#) railway embankment provided the only firm access for the tanks and anti-tank guns. The Maoris, advancing under fire from [Montecassino](#) and the

town, crossed the streams and sodden fields, which were sown with mines, and gained possession of the station before dawn, but when daylight came the sappers had not been able to bridge or fill in all the gaps in the railway embankment, and the tanks and anti-tank guns, therefore, could not get through. The Germans counter-attacked with tanks and infantry, and eventually the Maoris, who were without supporting arms, were withdrawn. Only a third of the original 200 got back.

The whole plan of attack was changed: the town was to be assaulted from the northern side after the heaviest possible bombardment, and in preparation the Americans still in the line north of Route 6 were to be relieved by [New Zealand Corps](#).

After the Maoris' withdrawal the command of the Rapido River sector facing the railway station passed to 24 Battalion, which in turn was replaced by the 23rd (10 Platoon being relieved by 1 Platoon at the same time) on the night of 19–20 February. The following night 3 Company and 34 Anti-Tank Battery, acting as infantry under [5 Brigade](#)'s command, took over from an American reconnaissance battalion between Route 6 and the hamlet of [San Pasquale](#), and the night after that 6 Brigade (with 4 Company under command) relieved a regiment (equivalent to a brigade) of [34 US Division](#) on the other side of the [Pasquale Road](#) and in the northern outskirts of [Cassino](#).

The temporary infantrymen of 3 Company and 34 Battery created a ring of outposts 300 to 400 yards from the Rapido, and sent out patrols to gain information about the enemy and the stretch of river on their front. Corporal [Tanner](#)⁴ and two men went down to the riverbank in the evening of the 22nd, ploughing their way through a foot of mud for the last fifty yards, and found that they could not cross the river in the



Cassino, 25 February 1944

vicinity. Twice that night Corporal Gill⁵ and two men went along Route 6 to the demolished bridge over the river and fired a machine gun from several places in an attempt to draw return fire and thus confirm a suspicion that the Germans had an outpost on the opposite bank. On both occasions, however, there was no reply.

The front was strengthened by the arrival of 2 Platoon in the evening of 4 March. The same evening Second-Lieutenant Hanan led three men to the demolished bridge to report on the river and its approaches and to listen for enemy movement. Small-arms fire clipped the tops of the trees the patrol was passing through. The road was reported to be in excellent state right up to the demolition, which was about thirty feet wide; the ground on each side was covered with water, but no mines were seen.

From 7 March onwards 3 Company established a listening post at the demolished bridge each night between 9 p.m. and midnight. One evening the post became aware of an enemy party just across the river. A tommy-gunner shot a German and the 3 Company men withdrew just in time to escape a heavy concentration of mortar and machine-gun fire from Cassino. Fifth Brigade called down artillery fire on the enemy weapons, and soon afterwards the patrol went forward again. Captain Pleasants, who was leading, was fired on by a machine gun and found that 'the water in the ditches there was mighty cold.' Another artillery concentration was called down, and when all was quiet, the patrol went to a position farther from the bridge, where it spent the rest of the night.

The company heard digging on the riverbank one evening, and suspected that it might be a minelaying party. Machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire soon stopped the digging. Several times 8 and 9 Platoons harassed enemy mortar positions at the foot of [Montecassino](#) and on [Castle Hill](#), directly behind the town. Occasionally, mostly at night, the enemy shelled or mortared and machine-gunned the company.

Meanwhile New Zealand Corps was strengthened by 78 British Division, and one of the newly arrived British brigades replaced Divisional Cavalry on the southern flank. East Surrey machine-gunners took over from both 6 and 1 Platoons. By the time 6 Platoon was able to leave, in the evening of 23 February, Divisional Cavalry's armoured cars had churned every track into a creek of liquid mud with ruts two feet deep. The trucks bellied every few yards and almost had to be carried for a mile or so. The platoon, covered in mud and utterly exhausted, finally emerged on the railway at dawn and later joined the rest of 2 Company in front of Trocchio.

Now that 2 Company's three platoons were available for the harassing tasks, one was allowed a night's rest while the other two fired the normal 20,000 rounds. 'Each Pln,' says Aislabie, 'had a casa of a sort to live in, but movement was under observation in daylight—hence the men were more or less cooped up all day & came out like owls at night.... With the amount of shooting being done barrels were wearing out rapidly but each Pln. Cdr. had a barrel gauge and a careful check was kept on all guns and barrels to maintain accuracy and safety. ... A British Brig (ordnance) who inspected stated that 27 [Battalion] gunners were the most experienced in the British army especially as to mechanics and amounted to junior armourers.'

Lieutenant-Colonel MacDuff left 27 (MG) Battalion on 29 February to command 25 Battalion, and Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens, formerly second-in-command of the 25th and just back from furlough, became the machine-gunners' new CO. Two months later, when Hutchens left to command 26 Battalion, he was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel Steele, an original machine-gun officer who had commanded the New Zealand squadron of the LRDG and 22 (Motor) Battalion.

The next attack on [Cassino](#) (operation dickens) was originally fixed for 24 February, but heavy rain set in the previous day, and day after day it went on remorselessly, making the countryside even more of a morass than it was already.

For nearly three weeks the New Zealand and Indian troops waited ready to advance when the word was given, while the enemy perfected his defences and brought his best troops in [Italy](#) (I Parachute Division) into the sector where he correctly anticipated the attack would come.

The long spell of waiting was especially disheartening for the infantry of 24 and 25 Battalions in the outskirts of [Cassino](#): they could not appear in the open in daylight because of their proximity to the enemy, and most of the time they were confined to dirty quarters underground. The reserve areas and the roads away from the town were shelled and mortared, and 4 Company (10 and 11 Platoons with 24 and 25 Battalions' rear echelons, 12 Platoon with 26 Battalion north of the town, and Company Headquarters with Brigade Headquarters near the Pasquale- [Portella](#) road) came in for some of this.

In the evening of the 14th, after a couple of fine days, Fifth Army declared that dickens would begin next morning. The forward infantry withdrew a distance of a thousand yards from the fringes of the town, and at 8.30 a.m., in bright sunshine, the first bombers arrived. No fewer than 338 heavy bombers and 176 mediums took part, and with brief intervals the attack was maintained for four hours. Altogether nearly 1100 tons of bombs were dropped, and unfortunately not all of them were aimed at the target. [Venafrò](#), at least 12 miles away, was three times mistaken for [Cassino](#), and our own troops were bombed.

Nearly all of the aircraft made their bombing run over the ground occupied by 3 Company. 'On the morning we had withdrawn all posts 800 yds to allow for any bombs which may have been dropped short of the target,' says Captain Pleasants. 'By midday we had withdrawn a further 1000 yds and were still getting the unders. Coy was fortunate in that it suffered no casualties but a substantial number of bombs fell in the Coy area.... At the time all pls were quartered in houses but before the morning was over everybody was outside as far away from any house as he could get, hugging the ditches.'

Second-Lieutenant Moss, one of those in 4 Company who had a grandstand view of the bombing, wrote in his diary: 'Mitchells, in a long column of groups of three ... weren't much above 3000' & in the clear air we could see the four bombs detach themselves from each plane and go plummeting down in a shower. It was easy to

follow the 1000 prs. right to the ground, where an enormous geyser of black and orange mud and debris leapt into the air, and fell back again while the pillar of smoke unfolded. After about sixty Mitchells had passed, a deeper roar made us look round and we observed several great flights of Fortresses in formations of about six at a time... A big percentage of their bombs [six from each plane] fell ... in front of the town where they did not appear to be doing any good.... Groups of Forts had been coming over for about twenty minutes and another lot was coming in a long column of threes when we became aware of a terrific rushing sound behind us.... two 1000 prs. burst on the hill. ... Everyone who had been grandstanding hurled themselves into our little gully as the remaining four bombs of the stick crashed into the olives about six hundred yards away.'

Some of them had landed among 11 Platoon's transport, and Lieutenant Bern's ⁶ truck had been hurled in the air and dumped heavily on its back, bending it into a V shape; one of the gun trucks had been damaged but was repairable, and one man slightly injured. The craters were about sixty feet wide and twenty feet deep. Scornfully 11 Platoon erected a notice on the edge of the crater nearest the road: 'American Precision Bombing. [Cassino](#) 3 Miles.'

Later came formations of Liberators, at least two-thirds of whose bombs appeared to fall on the flat ground outside [Cassino](#), and then 'very tight formations of six Bostons each. Their efforts were the best of the lot, the whole cluster of 24 eggs each time falling square in the village and completely flattening an acre of buildings. This did as much damage as nearly all the rest of the bombers put together.'

Next day, in the afternoon, 11 Platoon was bombed again. While idly watching Mitchells heading up towards [Piedmonte](#), a village five miles west of [Cassino](#), Moss 'saw three of them turn off and come in our direction. I put the glasses on them in time to see them begin releasing their bombs eight hundred yards down in front of us. They looked like 100 lb. anti-personnel bombs and sewed a great crackling seam of flame a thousand yards long through the olives across the gully in front. ... The "stick" had landed almost exactly along the path of the 1000 prs. the day before but had done far more damage. One of the bedfords was blazing furiously and [two trucks] had been peppered with shrapnel.... A nearby Indian three tonner was also blazing and the 6 pr. ammo it contained was exploding at intervals....' In 11 Platoon

Lieutenant Bern and Corporal [Hoggard](#) ⁷ were killed and six men wounded.

The bombing of [Cassino](#) was followed at midday on 15 March by the heaviest artillery bombardment the New Zealanders had known in the Second World War. While close on 900 guns and howitzers, supporting [New Zealand Corps](#), pounded the shattered town and the slopes of [Montecassino](#), the artillery of the [French Expeditionary Corps](#), in the mountains to the north, and of 10 (British) Corps, on the Garigliano River to the south, also shelled every known German gun position.

During the morning's bombing 2 and 3 Companies had been required to fire on any movement they saw in the town, but there had been very little sign of the enemy. During the first forty minutes of the artillery barrage 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 Platoons fired on selected targets in the town south of Route 6 (which cut through from east to west) and on the slopes of Montecassino; these targets included machine-gun and mortar posts, pillboxes, the railway station area and the Amphitheatre. For the remainder of the day the Vickers fired on request or whenever they saw any movement. 'We had a grandstand view of the show & contributed our modest share,' says Aislabie.

Behind the artillery barrage, 25 Battalion, supported by a squadron of Shermans, advanced into the town, while 24 Battalion stood by ready if necessary to assist the 25th in capturing its objective or to occupy the town. The 25th was to take the



Cassino
Cassino

part of the town north of Route 6, and 26 Battalion and 19 Armoured Regiment, following through, were to clear the rest of it. The only machine-gun platoon to enter [Cassino](#), 12 Platoon, was under the command of 26 Battalion.

The fantastic chaos of rubble and bomb craters made progress slow, and the German machine-gunners and snipers emerged from the cellars of the wrecked houses to resist fiercely. Nevertheless 25 Battalion captured [Castle Hill](#) and much of the northern part of the town. The [26th Battalion](#) entered at dusk, and some hours later was pinned down by machine-gun fire a short distance beyond Route 6.

Carrying all its guns and equipment, 12 Platoon had started off at 1 p.m. and then had waited a long time on the Pasquale Road. The weather broke. 'We restarted about 8 P.M.,' wrote Sergeant MacLean in his diary. The platoon had no tea and it was as 'dark as hell, raining steadily, only gas capes over battle-dress. Got lost near town about 10 P.M. after crossing Rapido on foot—hung round for hours in mud and slush—very miserable—huge bomb craters delay passage of tanks. Eventually contact 26th about 2 A.M. & dig guns in in rubble.... Inftry casualties very heavy. No sleep. Town in shambles. Imposs. to trace layout. Enemy inf very close.' MacLean's section was in a house with Headquarters B Company, by the Post Office in the centre of the town and opposite the advanced infantry RAP. Platoon Headquarters and the other (Sergeant Hunt's ⁸) section were in another house a hundred yards away.

'Expected counter attack at first light [on 16 March] did not develop—cold as hell—feet like ice—& wet clothes. Bright at first but later deteriorated to rain & bitterly cold wind—no hot food & very little of it.

'Indians [5 Indian Brigade] & our chaps clearing mountain side & houses of spandau posts. Enemy snipers everywhere. Tunnels connect cellars of houses & complicate the job. House 150 yds away offers very stubborn resistance—tanks assist with their 75's at pt blank range & mg's. Enemy shelling very frequent and heavy all round us. Monastery has not yet fallen—being continually obscured by our smoke shells to deny observation.

'Our shelling of Monte [Cassino](#) last night was most spectacular—like a spangled shirt on the stage.'

Watching the battle from outside the town, Moss thought the face of the hill looked like 'a gigantic board closely studded with electric bulbs which were being intermittently flashed on and off all over its surface.' Many ack-ack weapons of all calibres, including American multiple machine guns, were concentrated near the bridges and in the hills on the eastern side of the valley. When enemy aircraft appeared the ack-ack bursts would fill the sky with a fleecy smoke cloud.

In the evening of the 16th MacLean and three others met the ration party, 'who have done a great job in bringing up hot tea, bread & cheese. Rest of our rations incl. hot stew still on truck 1 ½m. away on Route 6. Bomb craters make road impassable. But men too done in to ask them to do a 3 m. trip. So maleesh till tomorrow night. Another uncomf. night without greatcoats or blanket. The cold gets right into one's marrow....

'Shelled and mortared steadily all day [the 17th] right to within a few feet away—shrap. flying all round us—damnably uncomfortable. Snipers extremely busy—spatter pillars above our heads when we expose ourselves—from several directions—watched tanks blasting them out. Our inftry (26th) have to run the gauntlet across an open space of 25 yds or so immed. in front of us & suffer very heavy cas's—even after the area well smoked, the spandaus fire on same area on fixed lines—our inftry do a wonderful job—should get more consideration than any other unit in the Div but out of action they're only the PBI. Bill May⁹ & I help a couple outside our bldg to RAP. very badly wounded—snipers get many stretcher bearers.'

In the western and south-western parts of [Cassino](#) a still numerous enemy fought with extraordinary stubbornness. Route 6, after passing through the town, turned sharply southwards along the foot of [Montecassino](#), and on the corner a large building, the Continental Hotel, and another a few hundred yards south of it, the [Hotel des Roses](#), continued to be centres of resistance despite all the efforts of 24 and 25 Battalions. Before nightfall on the 17th, however, 26 Battalion had struck southwards and secured the railway station and the Hummocks.

Meanwhile, for the first thirty-six hours of the battle, 4 Company did not know where 12 Platoon was or how it had fared. Lieutenant-Colonel [Richards](#)¹⁰ (CO 26 Battalion) said his headquarters was not in touch with it. Captain Halkett entered the town by the [Pasquale Road](#) route and found the platoon 'holed up in the

basement of two demolished buildings. They were "remarkably comfortable" in water ankle deep (when wanting to move about).¹¹ Halkett and Sellars located Headquarters 26 Battalion and learned that the platoon was to be guided to a position where the guns would get a limited field of fire. The machine-gunners were to lie doggo unless a counter-attack came which they could deal with, and were to be ready to occupy the positions proposed for them in the Hummocks area when the enemy had been winkled out of the town.

The platoon set out about midnight. Sellars injured his ankle and was evacuated, so MacLean, taking command, followed a telephone cable to C Company, at the station, and was redirected to B Company, about 130 yards away. 'Just as we reach a stone bldg nearby,' he writes, 'we get a terrific plastering by Nebelwerfers for ½ an hour. Miraculously no cas's....

'Get guns set up in windows of R/way Hotel just at first light [18 March]. Enemy patrol attacks C Coy at Stn Engine sheds—tank behind our building lends a hand. Patrol eventually beaten off with cas's. I believe they heard us go to C Coy & called for stonk on us.

'Then our building suffered a terrific stonk—shelling and mortaring for about an hour very worrying as I did not know what our building could take but it stood up to it well—we vacated front & retired to rear rooms—get tank to call for defensive stonk.... Further food & ammo brought up by Tom Ford's ¹² party in evening. A visit from Capt Halkett.... Our greatcoats & jerkins arrive about 4 AM. Thank God.'

Hangman's Hill, just below the Monastery, was captured by the Indian brigade, but its isolated garrison had to be supplied from the air by parachute. The Germans now held very little of the town, but it was the most vital part astride Route 6. The Maori Battalion moved into [Cassino](#) during the night of the 18th–19th, and fighting from house to house, reached the corner of Route 6. Although the Maoris took over a hundred prisoners, the Continental Hotel stronghold still defied them.

MacLean reported 'very heavy—shattering—shelling of enemy FDL's by our 105's. Only 3 or 4 hundred yds away and blast shakes our joint—also R.A.F. fighter bombing very close to us but they are most accurate. Spent most of afternoon working out M.G. stonks on approach areas.... Our new off [Second- Lieutenant

Wilson ¹³ arrived with Captain Halkett at night....

'Have scarcely seen the sun for days [on the 20th] owing to smoke and dust. We smoke flat and hill all day to deny observation to enemy. Both sides lay a heavy barrage & as part of ours lands less than 100 yds (much less at times) from us, we get it both ways—rocks our bldg. A great deal of enemy bombing and shelling is directed at Bailey bridge over Route 6. Huge bomb craters still hold up approaches to town & passage through it.'

Men from 3 Company smoked the Bailey bridge erected on Route 6 over the Rapido. The canisters which emitted the smoke were heavy and awkward to carry, and fresh ones had to be lit every ten minutes. The men had to work in the open without cover against accurate shell and mortar fire; fortunately the flooded ground was soft and the shells tended to bury themselves before exploding; otherwise there would have been many casualties.

A change in wind direction on the first morning meant that the bridge had to be smoked from the town side. The enemy was shelling some tanks which had crossed the bridge and stopped on the road within 50 yards of it. Private Bishara, ¹⁴ who had brought up a further supply of smoke generators in his jeep, was mortally wounded. Private Tucker ¹⁵ carried him over to the jeep, turned the vehicle on the narrow road and drove back to the first aid post in an attempt to save his life.

None of 12 Platoon's guns did any shooting in Cassino. They saw none of the normal Vickers' targets. 'If we had sprayed masonry thought to harbour snipers,' says MacLean, 'we would have defeated the purpose for which we were there.... Vickers guns betray their presence at short ranges & all the time we were within easy range of small arms fire. Before a projected enemy counterattack, we would have been blasted to hell, together with the infantry around us.

'We did a lot of sniping with our rifles, chiefly at cracks between masonry which we, by continued observation, believed to conceal an enemy sniper. It was most frustrating & infuriating to be continually sniped at, particularly in our first position, & never knowing exactly where the shot came from.'

One night MacLean had to go some distance through the infantry in the piles of

rubble. 'Picking my way rather uncertainly back again in the darkness every few yards, it seemed I'd hear the faint metallic click as a rifle or tommy gun was being cocked, I'd freeze in my track and hiss 'Chota and/or peg' [the passwords] through my teeth, every second expecting a bullet in the belly either from a Jerry or a trigger happy Kiwi. I was mighty glad to locate our own crowd.'

The artillery's defensive stonks on the Baron's Palace, Colosseum and Amphitheatre were 'a real hell—I still remember a line of 'airbursts' exploding simultaneously & all exactly the same height above ground. A lot of the shrapnel was striking our building.'

A large group of Germans, headed by a [Red Cross](#) flag, marched in an orderly manner along Route 6 from the direction of the Continental Hotel towards the Baron's Palace. 'They were probably walking wounded but appeared to be alright from our distance. There were a lot of urgent requests and discussion to open up on them as many considered that Jerry was using the [Red Cross](#) flag to relieve the troops in the town. However when they were about 50 yards from the Baron's Castle several shells burst on the hillside above them. All semblance of orderliness vanished on the instant & there was a mad scramble for the safety of the Baron's Castle, much to our amusement, if chagrin.'

The last two infantry battalions available, the 23rd and the 21st, were brought into the town, but their attempts to clear the south-west corner of it were no more successful than those previously made. The Germans had been driven from all but this fringe of [Cassino](#), but the deadlock had to be acknowledged, and on 23 March it was decided to abandon the offensive for the time being and hold the present gains.

That evening 12 Platoon was relieved in [Cassino](#) by machine-gunners of the [Kensington Regiment](#). 'Shortly after 9 P.M. Capt Halkett arrives with glad news that we are to be relieved. ... So pack up in the dark, plant relieving guns & walk out per railway route without incident. Breathe freely at last.'¹⁶

[New Zealand Corps](#) was disbanded on 26 March. Sixth Brigade then held the front from [Castle Hill](#) through the town to the railway station and the Hummocks, and [5 Brigade](#) from there southwards until the night of 29–30 March, when it handed over this sector to [1 Guards Brigade](#); three or four days later [5 Brigade](#) relieved the

6th in the town sector. While 4 Company continued to support the New Zealand brigade at [Cassino](#), 1 Company went back to rest near [Venafrò](#) and the remainder of the battalion came under the Guards' command.

Still at Trocchio, 2 Company regularly harassed the approaches to the town. It assisted with defensive fire when 26 Battalion repelled a counter-attack on the station and Hummocks. The [Welsh Guards](#), south of the station, asked for close support by a section of guns; Captain Aislabie reconnoitred to the demolished railway bridge to select a position for overhead fire, and on successive nights a section went out to this spot.

When it was his section's turn, Ross (5 Platoon) wrote in his diary: 'Leave about 8 o'clock. Jeep collects guns & we walk. Get guns in position on elevated road in very exposed position. Spandau fire makes us keep very low. Shell lands among some 23rd chaps [23 Battalion had relieved the 26th]. One killed four wounded. Help to carry them out.... Lend our great coats & do freeze for rest of night. Jerry shells in front of us all night & makes us dive for cover very smartly.... The guns out about 5 o'clock. No excitement except one long burst of fire.... Get back to house about 6 & go straight to bed.'

The weather was milder: the snow gradually receded up the slopes of [Monte Cairo](#). The cherry and almond blossom began to open, and the wild flowers—primroses, violets, periwinkles, grape hyacinths, buttercups and a host of others—dappled the fields. On clear, still mornings the smoke from the generators hung in a thick fog around the bridges and the river flats.

Responsibility for the [Liri](#) valley and [Cassino](#) sectors passed from [Fifth Army](#) to the Eighth, which was to renew the offensive with [2 Polish Corps](#). The New Zealand Division was relieved by 6 British Armoured Division and joined [10 Corps](#), under whose command it was to take over part of the Apennine mountain sector at the northern end of the Rapido valley to protect the Poles' flank. By 8 April, therefore, 2 and 4 Companies had handed over to British troops, and the whole battalion except 3 Company (which spent another fortnight in the Rapido line south of the railway) assembled near [Venafrò](#) in the [Volturno](#) valley. 'Pleased to be relieved,' wrote Aislabie, whose company had fired well over a million rounds in eight weeks.

While supporting the Guards Brigade 3 Company was employed with the artillery and mortars on very well organised 'aggressive defence'.

'Each day we would select the targets for the night, taking into account all the information available [from aerial photographs and patrol reports],' says Captain Pleasants, who was assisted in this work by Captain Halkett. 'Gun sites would be selected, weapon pits dug and night firing lines laid out. With the aid of the Fd Svy Bty and Met telegrams ranges and angles would be determined to the last yard.' If possible two platoons were placed where they could enfilade the target from different angles, and the third platoon well back so that the higher trajectory of its fire at the longer range could 'dig' into the enemy trenches. 'For the same reason [maximum fire effect] we also hit the target with as many guns as possible identically. The idea being to get as many bullets as possible into the area in the first few minutes to cause maximum confusion.' The targets were harassed at different times during the night.

The Guards sent out listening patrols to observe the enemy's reaction and captured a German patrol who admitted when interrogated that the explosives they were carrying were to destroy the houses occupied by the machine guns. They were mistaken, of course, in believing that the Vickers were in houses.

¹ [Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 353. The book ends with this extract from the author's diary: ' March 2nd. Corps Conference at 1400 hours. Went with Frank Massey up Mount Trocchio afterwards and, coming down, stepped on a mine and had one foot blown off, the other mangled and thumb ripped up. Frank slightly hurt. Picked up by very plucky party of 23rd and amputation done at A.D.S. by Kennedy Elliott. Saw General and Jim Burrows before operation....''

W.E. MacLean expresses the real sense of loss & regret we all felt ... when we learned during the trying period of waiting [before the attack on [Cassino](#)] that [Kip](#) had trod on a mine. I can say with absolute truth & sincerity that we in 12 Ptn considered it a major calamity.'

² [Pte T. Dwyer](#); born NZ 22 Sep 1922; leather worker; killed in action 5 Feb 1944.

³ Pte C. Ross; Ngaroma, Hastings; born Dannevirke, 6 Oct 1912; farmer.

⁴ Sgt N. H. Tanner; born Tauranga, 6 Jul 1920; butcher; killed in action 29 Jul 1944.

⁵ Sgt N. H. Gill; Nelson; born Nelson, 20 Mar 1920; clerk; wounded 15 Apr 1945.

⁶ Lt B. B. Bern; born Dunedin, 18 Oct 1912; clerk; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

⁷ Cpl A. E. Hoggard; born NZ 11 Dec 1920; gumdigger; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

⁸ Sgt J. P. Hunt: Te Aroha; born Te Aroha, 23 Oct 1917; farmer.

⁹ Pte W. E. May; Raetihi; born Raetihi, 20 Dec 1904; farmhand.

¹⁰ Lt-Col E. E. Richards, DSO, m.i.d.; Nelson; born Kumara, 6 Dec 1915; civil servant; CO 26 Bn Dec 1943–Apr 1944.

¹¹ Capt M. C. Sellars; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 27 Jun 1921; clerk.

¹² Sgt W. T. Ford; born Waimate, 22 Sep 1910; hairdresser.

¹³ Capt M. T. Wilson; Auckland; born NZ 16 Jun 1909; insurance inspector.

¹⁴ Pte A. R. Bishara; born NZ 3 Sep 1918; truck driver; died of wounds 17 Mar 1944.

¹⁵ L-Cpl J. L. Tucker, m.i.d.; born NZ 18 Apr 1906; carpenter; killed in action 16 Apr 1945.

¹⁶ Miraculously 12 PI had no casualties in [Cassino](#). The ruined building which MacLean's section had occupied near the Post Office received a direct hit by a heavy shell the day after the machine-gunners left, and all its occupants were either killed or wounded.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 20

Cardito, Terelle, Balsorano

When 6 Brigade, with 2 and 4 MG Companies under command, relieved a Polish brigade on 12 April in the mountain sector astride the [Cardito- San Biagio](#) road, about ten miles north-east of [Cassino](#), the changeover was complicated. Captain Aislabie wrote that the Polish interpreter who accompanied him on the reconnaissance before 2 Company's arrival 'knew about as much English as I knew Polish.... Pushed on with guide up thru hellish hills—snow on most.... Poles wouldn't show us much ... no idea of area & hope for the best when we go in at night.'

From the [Volturno](#) valley the convoys climbed a winding road through steep-sided valleys and small villages to the point where the guns and equipment were transferred to mules, and after dark the men and mules, with Indian muleteers, struggled up the very steep, zigzagging tracks which rain had made extremely slippery. A 4 Company man, hearing a group talking in what he mistook for German, shot at them with his rifle and missed his platoon commander's head by inches. A sudden, violent hailstorm saturated everything, and 'balls of ice the size of peas stung like BB shot.'

'Remained in our sangers all day,' wrote Private [Sherlock](#)¹ (10 Platoon) on the 12th. 'It was necessary to keep in them all day on account of direct observation.... these sangers are stinking with foul food. It came on to rain during the afternoon. Our sanger proved far from water proof and consequently got wet through as we could not even move outside to pull a bivy tent over it.... It was not until the following night when occupying our gun position that a foul smell polluted the keen fresh air—a dead Pole lay unburied not two yards from our position.'

Both 10 Platoon, on the [San Pietro](#) ridge, and 11, across the deep gully on its eastern side, supported 25 Battalion on the right flank, while 4 Platoon was with the 24th facing Monte San Croce in the centre, 5 with the 26th on Colle dell Arena on the left, and for defence in depth 12 on Colle Belgiovane and 6 on Colle San Eustacchio. Between San Pietro and San Croce the road ran through the pleasant, cultivated valley into which the Rapido River descends; away beyond the intervening hills [Montecassino](#) and the ruined Monastery were plainly visible.

The sector was described as a quiet one, but was overlooked from the mountains to the east and north and also the higher of the two humps of San Croce (the New Zealanders occupied the lower), where 4 Platoon was soon called upon to do some shooting. The exchanges of fire were not infrequent; mortar bombs sometimes came uncomfortably close, but the shells usually passed safely overhead. On one occasion 'Jerry got jittery and had a little war with himself.' He shot off flares and kicked up a din with grenades, a spandau and a light mountain gun; he probably had been startled by a rock rattling down a slope.

Captain Blair (who had recently taken command of 4 Company) and Sergeant Doyle were shelled while visiting 10 Platoon. 'We took refuge under a terrace,' says Private [Lister](#), ², the driver of their jeep, 'and when we decided to go found that a shell had blown all the steering wheel away but one spoke; and as we had over six miles of shelled road, around steep hills, it was a bit of a job.' Doyle says he will never forget that drive. 'I don't know what scared me most, [the risk of] going off the greasy road or the shells. However we reached Coy HQ safely.'

'Tom Doyle & I had another close shave one night ...,' says Lister. 'We were taking in three new men & our usual rations & ammo. and as the road was within 3,000 yds of jerry we could only travel at night, & he used to plaster it heavily, and this night we landed in the middle of one of these plasters, so took cover in a ditch for a while, and he landed a big shell about 20 yds in front of us, and completely blocked the road, actually blew it out. Tom & I got to and filled it up again, near enough to get our jeep & other trucks over.' Meanwhile their passengers had taken cover and it was some time before they could be found. 'We couldn't go without them, as they didn't know where to go.'

After about a week in this sector [6 Brigade](#) was relieved by 2 Independent Paratroop Brigade. While 2 Company went back to rest near [Collemacchia](#), where Battalion Headquarters was, 4 Company stayed to support the paratroops. Taking over 6 Platoon's counter-penetration role, 10 Platoon crossed from [San Pietro](#) to Colle San Eustacchio, a succession of wooded knolls overlooking the Rapido.

At the same time 1 Company, reinforced by half of 3, went with [5 Brigade](#) to the [Terelle](#) sector, four or five miles north of [Cassino](#) and previously held by a British infantry brigade. They drove up the eastern side of the Rapido valley to the ridge-top

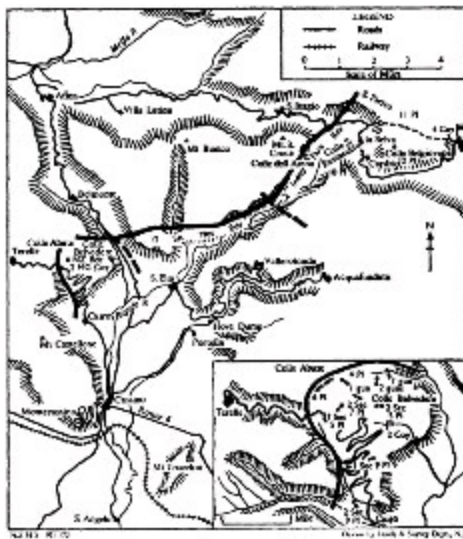
village of [Portella](#), descended to cross the river, and then, at night without lights, the loaded jeeps climbed very steeply up a series of hairpin bends on the road which led towards the enemy-held mountain village of [Terelle](#).

From near the top of the hairpin bends 1, 2 and 3 Platoons and No. 1 Section 7 Platoon, assisted by mule teams, carried their guns and gear to the positions where they were to support 21 Battalion in the [Colle Abate](#) salient and 23 Battalion on [Colle Belvedere](#), while 8 Platoon stayed near the bottom of the hill to guard the approaches.

'No sooner had we arrived when Jerry put three mortars among us,' says Lieutenant Hutchinson (2 Platoon). 'I found myself hard up under a mule's tail listening to the cries of a wounded Tommy up the hill a bit. We carried our gear to the new position without incident & I took over the H.Q. a small stone hut with no roof. The poor Tommy officer had had it properly. The Jerry shells had been just clearing his H.Q. for some time. The place was filthy & the sangers stinking....'

On the reverse slope of [Colle Abate](#) 3 Platoon was accommodated in sangers which [Gladstone](#)³ says 'smelt to high heaven & it was difficult to move in darkness without setting up a hell of a clatter among the empty tins that covered the ground.... The infantry sangers were on the brow of the hill as we saw it [from about fifty yards down the slope] although I believe in fact the ground rose again shortly beyond their positions.... At the foot of the hill in a fairly sheltered position on our right was a group of 3? mortars. We could almost look down the barrels because of the steepness of the slope.'

'The range of the guns was ridiculously low,' says Sergeant Knowles. '... During the day a German band could be seen and heard in [Terelle](#) square—but no shooting allowed—even if it were possible to fire without retaliation from our rear.' It was impossible to move in daylight because German positions on the slopes of the towering [Monte Cairo](#) overlooked the



The mountain sectors, 6 May 1944

platoon from the left rear. In fact, much of the sector was overlooked from this mountain and from the high ground around [Terelle](#). Patrols prowled at night, and once or twice the Vickers were called upon to fire on fixed lines against attempts to infiltrate.

Each night supplies were brought up from [Hove Dump](#), in a gully near [Portella](#), by jeep trains which left at dusk and made a nightmarish dash over the [Terelle](#) 'Terror Track', unloaded at the jeephead (where the mules waited) and raced back again. While returning to Hove one night 1 Company's ration jeep was destroyed by a shell, and the driver (Private [Brice](#)⁴) seriously wounded; the first aid he received from Sergeant Mayfield, who was himself injured, saved his life.

Gladstone says that 'the manhandling of the daily rations from the jeep head to the No. 3 Platoon HQ was no picnic either. The HQ was in a semi ruined house at the base of [Colle Abate](#) and because of it being close to the foot of the hill seemed to have escaped the destruction meted out to the houses on the ridges which led to [Colle Abate](#). The track to the jeep head led along a very stoney ridge back to where 2 platoon had their positions in and rear of a very much ruined casa. Thence back to a further house occupied by a section of 28 Bn who I think were in reserve. From here a fairly steep sided gully led down to the roadway and the jeephead. The trip was always made turn about in pairs as soon as it was dark enough and the eeriness was quite impressive. Every sound seemed to echo for miles. The trip down with empty containers was easy enough although it was prudent when approaching the

vicinity of the held casas to have ears well strained for a semi whispered challenge.' The return journey 'was a very stiff climb especially with a good load up and was usually made more interesting by the occasional annoyance shell which the Hun used to throw ad lib all over the area.'

Fifth Brigade handed over responsibility for this sector to the 6th at the beginning of May, and at the same time 2 Company, plus 9 Platoon and No. 2 Section 7 Platoon, replaced 1 Company and the other half of 3 Company; the new arrivals took over all the gear and blankets of the men going out.

Shortly after 6 Platoon relieved 3 on [Colle Abate](#) on the night of 1-2 May the Germans attacked immediately in front. Lieutenant [McLennan](#) ⁵ had gone up to inspect the gun positions and while returning was slightly wounded by a splinter; he was able to remain with the platoon, but Sergeant [Stuart](#), ⁶ who was with him, was badly wounded and had to be evacuated. The infantry were compelled to vacate some of their posts, but the enemy could not hold his gains and withdrew soon afterwards. By that time, of course, it was impossible to put the machine guns in place before daylight. Two of 6 Platoon's reserves had 'got tangled up' in an infantry counter-attack and one of them did not return until the following night.

'A brilliant moon tonight which made the relief of gun teams a bit risky, but by changing over by two men at a time we got away with it,' McLennan wrote on 3 May. 'Nevertheless our track is well taped & the odd mortar keeps crashing on it.... The whole area is pockmarked with shellholes.... About 0300 [5 May] a fair stonk came down & a general little war started. There was lashings of SA fire and my No. 2 Sec got away 2000 rounds on a call from [24 Bn](#) on our right. We had moments of anxiety but everything died away at daybreak....

'Our Mor [mortars] lobbed over quite a lot of stuff but Jerry didn't return very much, though some were damn close to the house [occupied by Platoon Headquarters]. Geoff [Hall](#) ⁷ and Bob [Bly](#) ⁸ got wounded by a Mor landing on their sangar & were evacuated.' The platoon was not in suitable machine-gun positions, and 'with the best will in the world' could not use the Vickers in its proper role. Private [Brew](#) ⁹ was killed, Private [Green](#) ¹⁰ wounded and a gun chopped to pieces. 'All the result of a direct hit by an 88 (?) on one sangar. Same one as was hit yesterday.'

When one of 4 Platoon's guns, on Belvedere, also received a direct hit, Sergeant [Spotswood](#),¹¹ a former LRDG man who had just returned from furlough, and Private [Downing](#)¹² were killed and Private [Crawford](#)¹³ wounded.

[Hove Dump](#), where vehicles, ammunition and supplies were crammed together, was 'knocked to hell' on 6 May. A shell landed in a stack of ammunition, which raised a column of smoke visible for many miles, and before long the German guns set fire to other parts of the dump, which became an inferno of exploding ammunition and bursting petrol cans. The jeep train was saved and went up the [Terelle](#) Terror Track as usual that night; the B Echelons were transferred from Hove to [Acquafondata](#).

The Allies completed their regrouping— [Fifth Army](#) between the coast and the [Liri](#) valley and [Eighth Army](#) continuing the line through [Cassino](#) into the mountains—in preparation for the battle that was to turn the Germans out of their Gustav Line and open the way to [Rome](#). The New Zealand Division's role was to hold its mountain front with the British paratroop brigade, a Canadian brigade (later replaced by a South African motor brigade) and [6 Brigade](#).

The Vickers of 2 Company in the [Terelle](#) sector were to fire, if called upon, in support of the Polish brigade on [6 Brigade](#)'s left, but were not asked to do so; in the [Cardito](#) sector 4 Company was to assist the paratroop brigade in two simulated attacks towards [San Biagio](#) to persuade the enemy to retain on that part of the front as many of his troops as possible.

Two thousand guns, about twice as many as at [Alamein](#), began their counter-battery fire and barrages at 11 p.m. on 11 May; they sounded like kettle drums. Three hours later the artillery began a 42-minute barrage on [Monte San Croce](#), and the mortars and Vickers (including 12 Platoon and a section of 11) opened up in support of the paratroop brigade's feint. 'Going flat out to fire 26000 rounds, 2000 short of our task— by 0302 hrs—programme too ambitious,' wrote MacLean. Each gun was expected to fire a belt every three minutes for the first forty-two minutes and then rapid (a belt a minute) for twenty minutes.

This was 10 Platoon's task in the second feint, which began at 2 a.m. on the 14th. 'It was hot work for the guns, which had to be filled half-way through, and even then, towards the end clouds of steam were pouring back into the gunners'

faces,' wrote Moss.

The Poles' first assault on [Montecassino](#) did not succeed, but the British crossed the Rapido south of the town, while the French, with the Goumiers (Moroccans) in the van, made astonishing progress through the [Aurunci Mountains](#) south of the [Liri](#) valley, and the Americans pushed along the coastal strip. The 19th NZ Armoured Regiment, under the command of a British division, reached Route 6 beyond [Cassino](#) on 17 May. The Poles launched their second attack on [Montecassino](#) and on the morning of the 18th raised their standard triumphantly above the ruins of the Monastery, while the same day British troops searched the town, from which the enemy had gone.

Fifth Brigade relieved the 6th in the [Terelle](#) sector, and 1 Company, still reinforced by half of 3, replaced 2 Company. Lieutenant Hutchinson, whose 2 Platoon took over from 6 on [Colle Abate](#), says, 'The fact that the crest in front was only about a chain away made this a very nerve wracking position to hold... One weird feature ... was hearing the approach of our 25 lb shells coming up from the valley far below. 2 Pln did no firing here but were glad to move out. We had to lie very close. Finally the Jerry pulled out & my boys went looting & came back with some interesting but rather smelly souvenirs.'

Fifth Brigade entered [Terelle](#) village at daybreak on 26 May, and in the next five days pursued the retreating Germans through the mountain pass to [Atina](#) and across the [Melfa](#), Mollo and Fibreno rivers to [Sora](#), which opened the way into the upper [Liri](#) valley.

There were few opportunities during this pursuit for 1 and 3 Companies, which accompanied the brigade. 'We were constantly on the move—Jerry was falling back fairly rapidly,' says Major Luxford (who had recently taken command of 1 Company after a long absence from the battalion). 'It is a wonder to me that there wasn't more shelling because I can remember one or two bottlenecks at bridges, when masses of transport was held up and we waited there sweating....'

After a stiff fight 21 Battalion secured the hilltop villages of [Alvito](#) and [Vicalvi](#) on the right flank. No. 2 Section 3 Platoon, under the command of this battalion, left a skeleton crew on its guns 'and the remainder joined the infantry for the assault on

[Alvito](#) and the ridge beyond,' says Knowles. 'Successfully completed without casualties.' With a 'scratch force' of infantry, tanks and armoured cars the section rushed along the road which ran eastwards from [Alvito](#) to [San Donato](#). 'This was quite an exciting chase but Gerry [who numbered about 300] took to the hills beyond. He returned at nightfall and the force was recalled in the darkness. It had to fight its way out in a short mobile engagement.'

When the Germans were reported to be infiltrating in strength to [Posta](#), beyond [Vicalvi](#), 3 Company was ordered to hold a stretch of road in the vicinity. 'When nobody worried us we went into the town looking for them,' says Captain Pleasants. 'The town was empty so we moved in that evening with some British troops [from an [RAF](#) regiment]....' The only excitement was caused by a box which the [RAF](#) had collected as loot and left in the building shared by their headquarters and Company Headquarters. Somebody heard the box ticking. It was exploded by rifle fire and did an incredible amount of damage.

Meanwhile, after leaving the [Terelle](#) sector, 2 Company joined Pleasants Force (22 and 24 Battalions and Divisional Cavalry) in the Division's central sector, between Sant' Elia and [Vallerotonda](#), which had been occupied previously by the South African motor brigade. The company did not stay there long, however; on 25 May it was withdrawn for a short spell before returning to the [Cardito](#) sector where, together with Battalion Headquarters and 4 Company, it came under 6 Brigade's command for the pursuit.

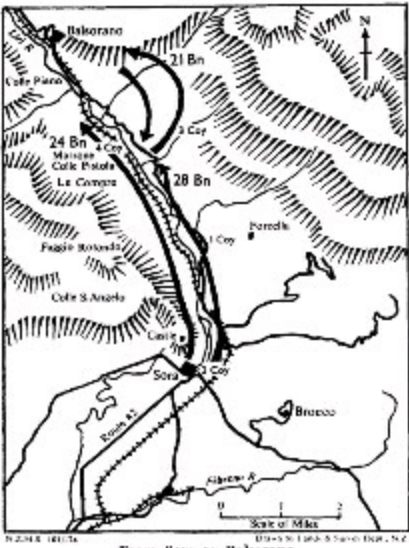
Since the fall of [Cassino](#) the paratroop brigade had been holding this sector with one battalion; 10 Platoon was protecting the left flank on Colle dell Arena, 11 was in 10's former position on Colle San Eustacchio, and 12 in the same place on Colle Belgiovane. When the paratroops occupied Monte San Croce on 27 May, the 4 Company men could walk freely about their gunlines in daylight for the first time in the six or seven weeks they had been there.

Sixth Brigade took over from the paratroops and advanced along the [San Biagio-Atina](#) road, on which every culvert and bridge and corner round a cliff seemed to have been blown. The machine-gunners with the brigade passed through [Atina](#) on 31 May and halted not far from [Sora](#).

Beyond this town the main road (Route 82) and a railway followed the narrow, mountain-flanked valley of the upper [Liri](#) for 20-odd miles before branching off to [Avezzano](#). The New Zealand Division was to drive up this valley.

After taking a hill surmounted by a castle immediately behind [Sora](#), 24 Battalion led [6 Brigade](#) along the western side of the valley, while the [Maori Battalion](#) of [5 Brigade](#) conformed on the other side, and tanks of [20 Armoured Regiment](#) pushed over the easier ground near the railway on the valley floor.

Behind 24 Battalion the platoons of 4 Company, following a track on the opposite side of the river from Route 82, leapfrogged from spur to spur. '12 [Platoon] went in first and then we [10] went in about another thousand yards ahead,' Moss



From Sora to Balsorano

wrote on 2 June. 'We had a good commanding view of 24 & 28 moving up each side of the river and had a couple of shoots. We spotted a couple of Huns sitting in the mouth of a cave near a ruined building ... and gave them two belts. Later on some flashes on a Jerry occupied hummock attracted our attention and we traversed the area. Our gun positions were right among a number of cherry trees, and the fruit, some white and some black, was just right.... 11 went ahead this afternoon to Colle Pistola, the next spur past us, and put a couple of belts into [Balsorano](#). Jerry put a sudden stonk down in their area a little later, but did not catch anyone. In the late afternoon 12

went through to [Casa Alfonso](#) and we came out of our positions and back on wheels.'

Below [Balsorano](#) the river, Route 82 and the railway threaded through a narrow gorge between Colle Piano (on the western side) and a rocky escarpment, beyond which the enemy was entrenched on the plateau containing the town; the mountains rise abruptly to about 6000 feet on both sides. Two blown bridges and a crater on the road halted the tanks. Mortar and shellfire fell on the leading infantry and around the demolitions; some trucks, including one or two of 4 Company's, were hit.

Accompanying the [Maori Battalion](#), 2 Platoon 'carried all gun gear, ammo, packs, bedrolls for miles, up and down steep slopes,' according to Private [Butt](#),¹⁴ whose section did one or two shoots during the advance and then set up its guns 'right in the Maori front line.... After an all-day carry we had had enough.' With orders to seize [Balsorano](#), 21 Battalion (supported by 7 Platoon) was brought up through the 28th, but was unable to clear the escarpment that night. The rest of 3 Company had also entered the valley and was in reserve with the Maoris.

The 25-pounders had moved up audaciously close to the front and were engaging targets over open sights. 'A troop of guns is about 100 yards behind us [10 Platoon] and nearly stun us when they fire....'

'About mid-afternoon,' says Captain Halkett, 'our 25- pounders, who had occupied hasty positions just forward of 9 Pl's carefully camouflaged vehicles, were heavily shelled by enemy self-propelled guns and suffered quite a few casualties.' Some artillery vehicles moved into 9 Platoon's area for cover, and during the ensuing shelling one of the machine-gunners' trucks had a direct hit and was completely gutted by fire.

'Have to keep under cover all day—enemy on 3 sides of us— fire a few belts & then retire behind the knoll until the retaliatory mortar stonk is finished,' wrote MacLean (12 Platoon) on 3 June. 'I thought we would have a joy ride to [Rome](#)....'

The Vickers harassed the places where the enemy might have observation posts. 'It was a case of selecting any likely positions ... and hope that some of our shots were striking home,' says Captain Pleasants. 'We were unable to assess the

value of this work as the targets selected were to the rear of the enemy lines.'

During the night of 3–4 June the guns on the eastern side of the valley fired harassing tasks in support of an attempt by 21 Battalion to form a strongpoint on the escarpment. Both 8 and 9 Platoons were ready to go forward to place their guns with the leading troops when they had secured their objectives, with the object of being able to pick up opportunity targets at first light. Unfortunately the attack did not succeed.

Plans were made for 24 and 26 Battalions to continue the advance beyond Colle Piano. In support, 4 Company's Vickers were to fire for 107 minutes at the rate of a belt from each gun every five minutes, and 10 Platoon was to go up onto Colle Marrone for this task.

'I wasn't too keen on moving the vehicles in daylight,' Moss wrote, 'but as we had to be in position by 2200 with a minimum of 21,000 [rounds] up at the guns, it was unavoidable.... So as not to make too much of a show I sent the vehicles up at two minute intervals, but Jerry had just finished shelling the troop of guns behind us and must have still been looking in our direction. My truck and the two one-section trucks had arrived and unloaded and [another] truck had just pulled in. I couldn't send any vehicles back until the last one was up, because the track was too narrow for passing. We were all standing round among the gear when a 75 [millimetre shell] came in with the long hiss it makes like boiler steam from a faulty valve. It whanged into a wheat patch about two hundred yards away and was quickly followed by two or three more. The gun then lifted to the right and beyond, and sent about three more whistling straight overhead to explode about three hundred yards past. Then he dropped the range and went to town on us properly.'

One driver managed to get his truck away, but the other three vehicles and most of the men, with all their gear unloaded, were caught. Everybody went flat behind the trucks and a light tank parked alongside a bank. 'The shells screamed in as fast as three guns could put them over and to give the Hun due credit, his shooting was hellish accurate.' Private [Johnson](#)¹⁵ was killed and four men wounded. All the vehicles and one Vickers gun were damaged.

Moss collected his men and gear and started up the hill. 'It was a trying carry up

a rocky track to the position.... It began to rain hard before we got there ...a short 25 pr. just cleared our heads and burst beyond.... I decided it would be worth- while lugging the gear a little further uphill to a large house. It proved a lucky find.... About this time we had word that the attack was off but we did three shoots before midnight....'

[Fifth Army](#) had entered [Rome](#). Sixth Brigade's attack was no longer necessary: the enemy would have to withdraw in any case.

Moss got word that his platoon would be pulled out after dark next day (the 5th) and could shoot off all its ammunition. 'Accordingly we worked out an all day "reprisal" for our pasting the day before. Every forty minutes or so, we would go out and let go two or three belts. We picked on tracks, groups of houses and reverse slopes mainly, and interspersed with our shooting the platoons of [3 Coy](#) and [4 Coys](#)' other two did their own hates. During the whole of the day he got intermittent fire from 24 MMGs and he didn't like it much at all. ... The arty. gave him some wicked stonks in reply to his counter battery fire.'

The German guns and mortars were still active, however. 'Enemy has O.Pips in mountains on both sides of us—not safe to move from slit trench,' wrote MacLean. 'A small house about 20 yds from us [[12 Platoon](#)] is used as [D Coy 24th Bn H.Q.](#) Heavy shell lands at back door collecting about 10 of them. ... I learn anew the meaning of the term "a shocking sight".'

The three companies which had participated in the fighting near [Balsorano](#) were withdrawn through [Sora](#) to the vicinity of the Fibreno River. Next morning they heard that the long awaited Second Front had been opened: Allied troops had landed in [Normandy](#).

After about a week's inactivity at [Sora](#), disturbed occasionally by shellfire, [2 Company](#) joined in the pursuit. First of all, [5 Platoon](#) was sent up to the infantry on the eastern side of the valley for a very brief harassing shoot. By 6 June the enemy had gone from [Balsorano](#), and early next day [26 Battalion](#), supported by [2 Company](#), a troop of tanks and some engineers, set out for [Avezzano](#). Beyond [Balsorano](#) the enemy had demolished the very many culverts and bridges along the road, and had left mines and booby traps. For several tedious days, therefore, progress was

exceedingly slow.

On 8 June 4 Company drove up past [Balsorano](#) to the villages of Castronuovo and [Rendinara](#), where MacLean says the Italians 'gave them a wonderful reception—strewn the streets with flowers, deluged them with vino & invitations to their homes. ... The countryside here is quite enchanting at this time of year. Thickly wooded terraced slopes—vineyards, wheat & barley fields, masses of scarlet poppies, roses etc—it would do me for life.' The company stayed a week. Dozens of escaped prisoners of war came down from the hills where they had been sheltered by the Italians.

Meanwhile 2 Company, still with the 26th, reached Capistrello, where Route 82 leaves the [Liri](#) valley and crosses the hills to [Avezzano](#). The bodies of about thirty Italians were found in a large bomb crater. Believing the Germans had gone, they had brought their hidden stock down from the hills, only to have it commandeered; they had objected and had been shot.

The Germans were now miles away. [Avezzano](#), an important communications centre which had been heavily bombed, was found deserted and was occupied by an infantry platoon on 10 June. Next day the machine-gunners went to have a look. A large plain, which at one time had been a lake, was covered by crops; the villages perched on the surrounding hills. Captain Aislabie 'pushed on down road & into a village. One hell of a commotion—first allied troops to go there—viva'ed & vinoed —band turned out flag waving & great to do. Jeep decked out with flowers & flags—we bowed & waved—conquering heroes. The wine was good though.'

For the next two or three days it was 'free & easy—visited some more villages with same result.—Many escaped Brit P.O.W.s about, some married to Iti girls ... seem to have been well treated & lots of tears when they left.... Countryside beautiful—1000's acres of wheat barley maize grape vines etc & quite a lot of stock being brought down from mountains plus women & girls—bells rung in villages as we passed thru to warn them to return.... Chaps had a good tour round & well behaved—Sjt Wallace gave an "official" speech with interp. at one place—everyone immensely tickled.'

The Division, having completed its share in the battles for [Rome](#), withdrew to

camp and train in pleasant surroundings near the town of [Arce](#), where Route 82 joins Route 6 about 20 miles from [Cassino](#). Many rumours circulated, among them that the Division was to be got fit for action near [Florence](#), that such rigorous training (including frequent route marches) must be preparation for an invasion of [Greece](#), that the Division was being kept fit while waiting to go to [Algiers](#) to take part in a landing in the south of [France](#), and that 'we are going route marching because they don't know what else to do and even Tiny doesn't know what's happening to the Div.'

The four machine-gun companies were back under battalion command. In the fighting at [Cassino](#) and in the mountains and the upper [Liri](#) valley the battalion had suffered thirteen killed and forty-eight wounded. Total New Zealand casualties in this period were almost 2400.

The route marches took the platoons to many places, even up the sharply zigzagging roads to hilltop villages; they also picnicked along the banks of the [Liri](#). The weather was really hot. Showers and sudden thunderstorms cleared the air and drenched the camp.

Leave parties went to [Rome](#) for the day, visited Saint Peter's and the city's ancient monuments, and bought souvenirs. The high prices were attributed to the affluent Americans' willingness to pay whatever might be asked. One of the most palatial hotels, the Quirinale, was taken over as a New Zealand club and met with universal approval.

Excursions were made to [Cassino](#), where the machine-gunners saw at close quarters the targets they had fired on for weeks in February and March. New Zealand infantry searched among the ruins for their dead comrades; there were many gruesome sights. 'I can't see [Cassino](#) ever being rebuilt. I predict that it will be fenced off for its tourist value,' wrote a man who had fought there with 12 Platoon. Years later, however, both town and Monastery were rebuilt.

¹ Pte [T. A. Sherlock](#); [Nelson](#); born NZ 20 Jan 1922; jeweller.

² Pte [L. N. Lister](#); [Ashburton](#); born [Ashburton](#), 21 Jun 1920; transport driver; wounded 3 Jun 1944. (His brother, [Pte H. A. Lister](#), was wounded on 23

May 1944.)

³ Sgt A. E. Gladstone; Nelson; born Alexandra, 12 Jul 1921; clerk.

⁴ Pte W. E. G. Brice; Levin; born England, 4 Jan 1908; fitter; wounded 25 Apr 1944.

⁵ Capt I. McLennan; Napier; born Napier, 12 Sep 1914; clerk; wounded 1 May 1944.

⁶ Sgt H. I. C. Stuart; Cambridge; born Cambridge, 17 Jul 1903; painter; wounded 2 May 1944.

⁷ Sgt G. M. Hall; Greenmeadows; born Napier, 5 Aug 1911; clerk; wounded 6 May 1944.

⁸ Pte R. A. Bly; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 19 Jul 1921; wicker worker; wounded 5 May 1944.

⁹ Pte D. G. Brew; born Auckland, 24 Feb 1922; agricultural student; killed in action 6 May 1944.

¹⁰ Pte K. A. Green; Terongo, Rata; born NZ 18 Dec 1920; farmhand; wounded 6 May 1944.

¹¹ Sgt R. O. Spotswood; born Carterton, 8 Jan 1914; plumber; killed in action 4 May 1944.

¹² Pte P. J. Downing; born Hastings, 24 Jun 1922; timber worker; killed in action 4 May 1944.

¹³ L-Cpl L. M. Crawford; Hastings; born Hastings, 16 Oct 1909; motor trimmer; wounded 4 May 1944.

¹⁴ Cpl E. B. Butt; Sherenden, Hastings; born NZ 27 Jan 1922; farmhand; wounded 15 Apr 1945.

¹⁵ Pte L. P. Johnson; born Wanganui, 15 Jul 1922; storeman; killed in action 4 Jun 1944.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 21 – FLORENCE

CHAPTER 21

Florence

After about a month at [Arce](#) the Division was ordered unexpectedly to an assembly area near [Lake Trasimene](#), over 200 miles away, preparatory to reinforcing [13 Corps](#) for an attack to break through the German defences south of [Arezzo](#). On this secret move 2 Company, departing with 6 Brigade very early on 10 July, drove through [Rome](#), across the Tiber and along Route 3, which was dotted at intervals by wrecked German vehicles, and staged for the night near Civita Castellana. Next day the road climbed into the hills before descending to [Narni](#), in a gorge. 'Yawning gaps had been torn in three huge arched bridges by the Jerry engineers but most of the road damage had been caused by our own bombing. At least once in every mile or so the road and railway had been straddled by sticks of bombs.... At [Orvieto](#), which the bombers had ploughed into earth and rubble, we left Route 3 and turned up the metalled Route 71.... every few hundred yards lay the burnt-out rusting skeletons of Jerry transport.... we caught glimpses of the blue Lago Trasimeno....' Beyond the lake [6 Brigade](#) was to clear the hills overlooking the Chiana valley, through which [6 British Armoured Division](#) was to advance on [Arezzo](#).

The machine-gunners joined the infantry they were to support, and in the evening of 12 July 5 and 6 Platoons accompanied 25 and 26 Battalions up Route 71 past [Cortona](#) and [Castiglion Fiorentino](#). The Vickers and other equipment were loaded on mules, and the troops climbed up into the wooded hills. On [Monte Castiglion Maggio](#), where the 26th relieved a battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 6 Platoon was in position before midnight. Two or three miles farther to the north-west, where 25 Battalion relieved the King's Royal Rifles on the slopes rising towards the summit of [Monte Lignano](#), No. 1 Section 5 Platoon was shelled and mortared next day; Private [Marshall](#),¹ in action for the first time, was killed, and two men wounded.

The [26th Battalion](#) attacked [Monte Spino](#), to which No. 2 Section 6 Platoon completed a long carry. 'Couldn't harass [Lignano](#) from where we were as it was out of range,' wrote Lieutenant McLennan, 'We got in position with all the gear, but not dug in, when Jerry counter-attacked. The Inf left us on our own, bullets were whistling all round, a devil of a stonk came down, we couldn't use our guns, & as we

were only 13 (!!) strong withdrew to the previous feature. Then it rained! We stood by for the rest of the night waiting for the position to stabilize so that we could move forward & get on with the job.' In the morning the peak was firmly in New Zealand hands.

The 24th Battalion, with 4 Platoon in support, was brought into the line to attack Monte Camurcina, between Spino and Lignano, but was unsuccessful until 25 Battalion had captured Lignano, which gave a view of Arezzo and made the enemy's withdrawal inevitable. The way was now clear for the British armoured division to enter Arezzo. Sixth Brigade withdrew through Castiglion Fiorentino, and the New Zealand Division again went into reserve. By this time the remainder of the machine-gun battalion had arrived near Cortona.

Some long-service men, mostly 4th Reinforcements but including two (Captains Pleasants and Newland) who had left New Zealand with the First Echelon's Advance Party, were marched out to Advanced Base (at Bari) on the first stage of their homeward journey with the TAUPO furlough draft. 'There has been so much hand shaking and back slapping in the past few days,' reported the battalion news sheet (The Emgee Express ²), 'that we found it rather confusing as to who really was going.' Sergeant-Major Cato of 2 Company was a harassed man: 'The root of the trouble seems to be that only two 4ths from the Coy made the TAUPO grade, and now he has to administer to the wants of a band of 15, known as the Furlough Platoon.'

At this time, also, Private Hodge, ³ who had been captured at Ruweisat Ridge two years earlier, returned to 2 Company after having escaped twice from the Germans. After two or three months in prison camps in Cyrenaica he had been taken to a small camp near Latisana, in northern Italy, where he had been employed on agricultural work among civilians and had learnt to speak Italian. He had escaped after the Italian armistice and, dodging from farm to farm at night, had lived with the peasants. Heading towards the Allied lines he and a companion reached Padua, where they had asked the wrong man for a meal—a captain in the fascist Republican Army who had a section of infantry billeted in his home. After much interrogation Hodge had been sent to barracks in Trieste which the Germans used as a collecting depot for recaptured PWs, displaced persons and forced labourers before taking them to Germany. Luckily he had arrived just after a draft had left

'I realised that this was my last chance of getting out again,' he writes. The barracks were surrounded by a high stone wall with a steel netting fence on top of it, and the building in which he was imprisoned was enclosed by a heavy barbed-wire entanglement. Some fifty servicemen of all ranks and nationalities were confined in part of the basement, and civilian internees occupied the upper floors. Hodge and his fellow prisoners, by forcing doors and locks, gained access to the rest of the basement and set up a chain of listening posts and lookouts to study the habits of the sentries who patrolled the wire entanglement. Hodge made a pair of wire clippers with which he cut a hole in the wire, through which he, another New Zealander, three South Africans and a Russian escaped. The next man, a New Zealander, was surprised by the guards and mortally wounded. Hodge's party got clear of the barracks wall and headed out of the city into the mountains, where they met a patrol of Tito's partisans. After a security check at a British military mission they were despatched down a courier route in [Yugoslavia](#) and then flown to [Bari](#).

The enemy was preparing to stand for the winter on the [Gothic Line](#), in the mountain barrier across the Italian peninsula from the [Gulf of Genoa](#) to [Pesaro](#) on the Adriatic. Eighth Army's immediate objective was [Florence](#), required as a base for an offensive against the [Gothic Line](#). [Florence](#) had been declared an open city but the Germans had defences about 20 miles south of it.

The New Zealand Division was to attack northwards from [Castellina in Chianti](#) towards [San Casciano](#) in the Val di [Pesa](#) and was to seize crossings over the River Arno at [Signa](#), a few miles west of [Florence](#), while 6 South African Armoured Division, on the right, was to strike straight for the city, and 8 Indian Division was to give flank protection on the left.

The Division began to move up to [Castellina](#), about ten miles north of [Siena](#). Fifth Brigade, with 1 Company among its supporting arms, left on 21 July; 2 Company with [6 Brigade](#) and the rest of the battalion ⁴ in a divisional group followed next day. The road was extremely dusty. 'Vehicles and occupants were covered with a chalky grey powder which gave them a ghostly unnatural appearance. Occasionally we had to drop to crawling speed because the swirling clouds limited visibility to the end of the bonnet. The route took us through the foothills of the Chianti mountains which were thickly wooded at first later becoming barren and wind eroded as we

made towards [Siena](#) ... enclosed by a high and massive wall of brick... over the top we could see several domes and spires.'

Fifth Brigade advanced rapidly on a two-battalion front, 23 Battalion to [Sambuca](#), on the Pesa River, and the Maori Battalion to [Tavarnelle](#), on Route 2, west of the [Pesa](#). The 23rd crossed the river at [Sambuca](#), but was repulsed at [Fabbrica](#), which Italian civilians had said was unoccupied. From its position on a forward slope overlooking the river valley 1 Platoon saw the infantry pulling back. The Vickers fired at long range at enemy movement in the village. Some tanks nosed over the hill behind the platoon and also did some shooting, which attracted the enemy's attention. In the shell or mortar fire which ensued Corporal [Hendra](#) ⁵ and Lance-Corporal [Barlass](#) ⁶ were killed, Private [Gower](#) ⁷ fatally wounded, and four others, including Lieutenant Rollinson, wounded.

Second-Lieutenant Knowles, who had been relieved by Rollinson only six hours earlier—'my turn for LOB at base, but did



Advance to [Florence](#), 23 July–4 August 1944

not make it'—resumed command of the platoon. 'Bob Cochrane ⁸ the medical orderly did a fine job here,' he says. 'He took over control during the shambles—evacuated the gun line— carried out the guns himself and mounted them in an alternative position. At this stage he started cooking a meal and handed over to me.'

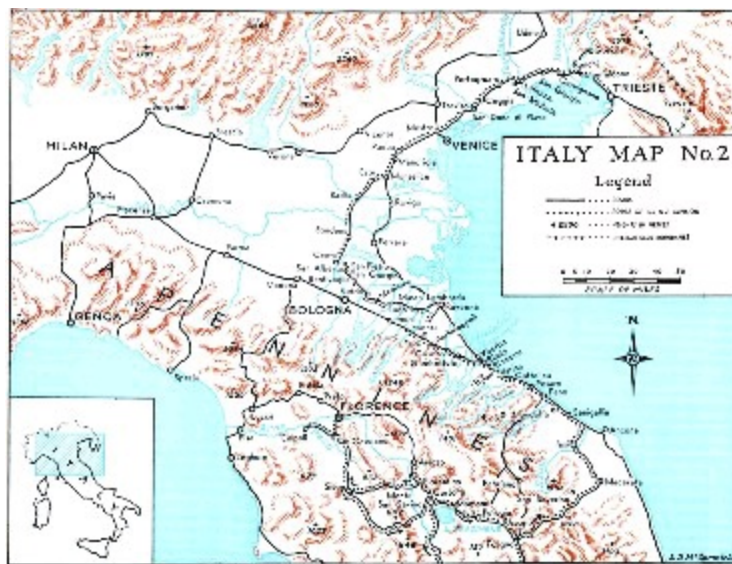
The Division's flank east of the river became the responsibility of [Arm cav](#) (a

composite force of tanks, armoured cars and infantry, with 1 Platoon among the supporting arms). By 25 July Armcav, 21 Battalion (which had taken over from the 23rd) and the 28th were on the line of the [San Casciano- Montespertoli](#) road.

At dusk and again later in the evening parties of Germans counter-attacked the Maoris at [Podere Belvedere](#) (near [Poppiano](#), midway between [San Casciano](#) and [Montespertoli](#)), and were beaten off each time. The CO (Lieutenant-Colonel [Awatere](#)⁹) reported: 'As D Coy reached the objective after much fighting, hand to hand, in the open among the olive trees, the enemy immediately counter attacked from the right flank, with tank and inf. The MMGs [2 Platoon, under Lieutenant Hutchinson] fired very severely at the enemy killing many.... It stopped and completely broke up the counter attack.'

The following night, when 2 Platoon (reinforced by a section of 3) supported the advance with harassing fire, 21 Battalion occupied [Poppiano](#) and 5 Brigade's other objectives south-west of the [Pesa](#), and 26 Battalion, leading 6 Brigade, crossed the river to secure a bridgehead at [Cerbaia](#). In the morning (the 27th) [Armcav](#) entered [San Casciano](#), against which 1 Platoon had been firing.

So far only 1 Company had taken part in the advance; 2 Company had begun to move forward with 6 Brigade on 24 July, and the rest of the battalion was back near [Castellina](#). 'We are on the estate of a well-to-do Italian count who has an English wife and a town residence in [Florence](#),' wrote Lieutenant Moss (4 Company). 'A very striking thousand yard avenue of upright Italian cypresses runs from the main gates up to the residence.... The final two hundred yards leading to the house is flanked on either side by groves of fine old ashes,



ITALY MAP No.2

beeches and maritime pines.... Outside the gates of the house is a large aquarium about 25X long and nearly as wide which the Count has permitted us to use as a swimming bath.' Battalion Headquarters and 3 and 4 Companies held a swimming carnival at the aquarium, a highlight of which was a race for bald-headed men over thirty-five.

About a hundred members of the battalion paraded for the King on 26 July. Parties of 'incredibly clean and washed looking Kiwis' went to the assembly area. 'Representatives of the various units were spaced along one and a half miles of road at 200 yd. intervals. We lined each side of the road, and after [we had been] waiting for a long time, a jeep full of redcaps drove past announcing that the King would pass in half an hour. We fell out and then in again, as the sound of cheering was heard further down the road.' The King stopped to shake hands with the CO, with whom he spoke for several minutes.

The men returned to camp to learn that they were to move in about half an hour. By the evening of the 27th 3 Company was established in [San Casciano](#), which was severely battered by shellfire. All three platoons fired harassing tasks.

The final barrier to the advance on [Florence](#), the [Paula Line](#), was based on the semi-circle of wooded hills fronting the city. Sixth Brigade was to attack northwards into these hills from its bridgehead at [Cerbaia](#), while [4 Armoured Brigade](#) was to thrust up the right flank from [San Casciano](#).

Several roads led into the hills from [Cerbaia](#): one north-eastwards to [La Romola](#), two miles away; another to San Michele, a straggling little village which overlooked [Cerbaia](#) from the north; another up the ridge between [La Romola](#) and [San Michele](#). Sixth Brigade's first objectives were to be reached by this middle road. The attack on the final objectives, on the hilltops between [La Poggiona](#) and [Pian dei Cerri](#), was to be postponed until 4 Brigade should have made sufficient progress on the flank.

The [24th Battalion](#) crossed the [Pesa](#) and moved into Castellare on 26 Battalion's left, and was joined there by No. 1 Section 4 Platoon. 'After crossing the river,' writes Lieutenant [Freeborn](#),¹⁰ 'We struck a road running to [Castellare](#) where we halted under cover of a high bank which protected us from the high velocity stuff which was flying about. Going ahead on foot to find out where [24 Bn](#) HQ was round the next bend I walked into one of our Armoured Cars who was having a point blank duel with a German tank.... I was directed off the road up a drive to a big isolated house where I found [24 Bn](#) busily engaged in fighting round the other side of the building. After things became stabilised the trucks moved up and were dispersed round the rear of the building.'

Delayed at the start of its attack, which was scheduled for 1 a.m. on 28 July, A Company 24 Battalion was unable to reach its objective in the hills before dawn and halted on the ridge about half a mile east of [San Michele](#). C Company 26 Battalion, on the other hand, went beyond its objective, but could not hold an isolated position in daylight and later withdrew to the vicinity of the house which the 24 Battalion men had occupied.

No. 1 Section 6 Platoon was intended to support C Company 26 Battalion. 'Got mortared, and one truck bogged on the way, but by 0230 hrs had our guns loaded onto a Sherman just North of [Cerbaia](#),' wrote McLennan. 'Followed the tks after the Inf and just before first light ran into a small Jerry patrol. Our guns were off loaded, & we went to ground until the trouble was cleared up. Then moved forward to a house with A Coy of 24 instead of C Coy 26 who had pushed further on. This was fortunate, as they were forced to withdraw—we'd never been able to bring out our guns. The rest of the day & night were simply hell. We were particularly severely stonked & c/attacked—at one stage were completely surrounded. However we killed and wounded many Weiner—our Arty couldn't give us much sp—the whole posn was

very grim.'

No. 1 Section 4 Platoon was ordered back across the [Pesa](#) from [Castellare](#) to assist in breaking up this counter-attack. 'We could see the road on the other side of the river being regularly stonked but took the chance and ran the gauntlet unharmed,' says Freeborn. None of the trucks was hit, but while reconnoitring for gun positions Freeborn and his signals orderly were pinned down in the open by a stonk which also caught and wounded Corporal [Walsh](#)¹¹ and Private [Davidson](#).¹² The section was unable to get its guns into position and returned to [Castellare](#) after dark.

In support of the reserve battalion (the 25th), which was made responsible for the existing bridgehead at [Cerbaia](#), 5 Platoon was unable to go into position south-east of the village in daylight. 'Leave about six o'clock for positions but Jerry chases us out,' wrote Private Ross. 'As we go up hill shells land behind. Fortunately don't get hit.... Stay in village rest of day. Leave about 9 o'clock in carriers & get into position. Bed down in large villa [at [Montepaldi](#)].... About 200 refugees also taking shelter.' The platoon fired harassing tasks during the night.

[San Michele](#) would have to be captured before the advance could be continued. In the very early hours of 29 July, therefore, D Company 24 Battalion fought its way in and set up strongpoints in the church, the school and some houses. 'Though we did not know it at the time,' says Freeborn, 'the infantry had moved in direct from [Castellare](#) to [San Michele](#) and had not cleared the road which ran to the left and made a semicircular approach to the village. Consequently the vehicles [including those of No.1 Section 4 Platoon] must have driven through enemy held territory because at one part we came under close spandau fire. At dawn I looked for gun sites on the ground but was told that there would not be any infantry in support so because of this & lack of time for digging in the section took up a position in the school which was better suited for Light Automatic weapons.' Platoon Headquarters was with D Company Headquarters in the church.

The Germans counter-attacked [San Michele](#) repeatedly; they mortared and shelled it continually, and their self-propelled guns and tanks engaged the occupied buildings at close quarters. The two or three Sherman tanks which entered the village were driven back, and the four six-pounder anti-tank guns which arrived were

knocked out.

Nevertheless the men in [San Michele](#) beat off all assaults. They were helped by heavy artillery stonks on the enemy forming up outside the village and by flanking fire from No.1 Section 6 Platoon. 'Jerry c/attacked D Coy [24 Battalion] with Inf & tks, and my guns opened up on him,' wrote McLennan. 'Though we didn't know at the time, we've been told now that we must have killed at least one hundred. Was a murderous fire, range only 1000 yards. Our Arty also got among him, & the total dead is reckoned to be 300/400. [The Germans actually had fewer casualties.] Nett result is that though most of us area little bomb happy all posns are held firm. We're nearly out of amn though.'

The Germans made several determined attempts to enter the [San Michele](#) church. Some of the artillery defensive fire whistled uncomfortably close, and when one shell nicked a buttress, the wall of the room occupied by the headquarters fell out. When a Mark IV tank approached, an infantryman, although concussed, staggered up from the basement, manned a Piat gun and fired four shots at the tank at a few yards' range, compelling it to back away out of sight. Eventually the front of the building collapsed and formed an effective barricade.

All communications were cut and the strongpoints were isolated. The commander of the infantry platoon in the lower part of the village ran the gauntlet to the church to report verbally to Company Headquarters. 'A move to get out of San Michele was suggested and it was then that I slipped down into the basement and burnt any papers which might have been of use to the enemy,' says Freeborn. 'When I came back he had gone and then it was decided to hold on. Some of the infantry from lower down the village did get away and checking up afterwards I think that must have been when Pte Davidson was taken prisoner.'

The strongpoint in the school held out against persistent attacks. About 9 p.m., when thirty Germans and a tank closed in, Sergeant [Burgess](#)¹³ and Private [Herbert](#)¹⁴ carried a Vickers gun upstairs and mounted it on a marble table. While the NCO held onto the legs of the tripod, Herbert, ignoring the machine-gun and tank fire, opened up from a window; he wiped out all the enemy within sight and silenced three spandaus. This won him the MM.

[San Michele](#) appeared to have been lost, so was attacked again, this time by a company of 25 Battalion. The preliminary bombardment fell heavily on the village. 'The Church got its fair share,' says Freeborn, 'and the only consolation we got as we huddled for shelter under a stone staircase was that it would not be for long and that having sampled the enemy's shellfire it could not compare with ours.' Under this bombardment the school soon began to crumble and collapse. The occupants, most of whom were in the cellar, had to dig their way out. By the time 25 Battalion arrived the Germans had gone from San Michele.

The New Zealand casualties in this miniature [Cassino](#) were remarkably few, less than thirty, including only one machine-gunner; the German losses were estimated to be at least two or three times that number.

The following night No. 1 Section 4 Platoon, which had lost all its gear, both guns and three trucks, ¹⁵ returned to B Echelon, and No. 2 Section relieved the forward section of 6 Platoon. 'Our blokes wonderful but done at end ... looked dreadful.... Huns must have good troops to fight like they did,' Captain Aislabie wrote in his diary.

'We've had no sleep, no rations, & very few smokes,' wrote another. 'Have come out of a little undiluted hell where we lived with farm animals in the stable, & existed on vino and Jerry cigarettes.... One sense of gratification though is that we did a good job, and from Bde down are in receipt of fulsome praise. And the loot we got!!'

While 2 Company assisted [6 Brigade](#) in the hills beyond [Cerbaia](#), 3 Company came under command of 4 Armoured Brigade to support 22 (Motor) Battalion. Its three platoons went into position at [San Casciano](#) on the night of 27–28 July, when they fired some 24,000 rounds, and during the next few days supported the advance to [La Romola](#). The company came under some heavy shell and mortar fire. Sergeant Tanner was killed, Sergeant Mayfield mortally wounded and several others wounded in 8 Platoon.

On the right flank, across the Greve River, the South Africans were held up about eight miles south of [Florence](#); on the left flank the Indian Division had reached the south-west bank of the [Pesa](#). Preparatory to continuing the advance into the hills

south-west of the city, the New Zealand Division regrouped on a three-brigade front: [5 Brigade](#) was brought across to the right; [4 Brigade](#) was then in the centre and [6 Brigade](#) on the left.

Accompanying [5 Brigade](#) on this move, 1 Company went into positions in the [Casa Vecchia](#) area south of [Faltignano](#), on a ridge between [La Romola](#) and the Greve. Both 1 and 3 Companies supported the attack by 4 and 5 Brigades on a narrow front on the night of 30–31 July; between them they fired 108,000 rounds in conjunction with the artillery barrage.

Captain Halkett, who took command of 3 Company at very short notice when Major Snedden was invalided out, says that 22 Battalion's CO (Lieutenant-Colonel [Donald](#) ¹⁶) gave him a free hand to co-operate direct with the company commanders. 'Arranged concentrated fire on targets selected and timed by the Inf Coys,' he writes. 'This concentrated fire by the Coy's 12 guns under direct control of 3 Coy HQ was very effective and was the pattern for the remainder of this battle and was very encouraging to the Vickers Gunner.'

After some very fierce fighting 22 Battalion broke into [La Romola](#) and 23 and 28 Battalions took the [Faltignano](#) ridge. Major [Hutcheson](#), ¹⁷ a company commander in the 22nd, saw many dead Germans whom he said were 'mute testimony to the effectiveness of the overhead fire of 27 MG Bn.' Another company commander, Major Hume, who had transferred from 27 to 22 Battalion, observed that 'many dead Huns found next day were bullet (not shell) casualties.'

'During the attack...,' wrote [28 Battalion's](#) CO, 'MMGs [2 Platoon] first fired direct flank support for A Coy on the left because that flank was open.' Later they were given the task of harassing by indirect fire the likely routes of withdrawal or escape for the Germans. 'After the A Coy inf passed over these routes and after the attack, many enemy casualties, including dead, were discovered among the olive trees.'

During the morning of 31 July, says Halkett, ' [22 Bn](#) had its patrols out trying to locate enemy [positions] preparatory to their next attack. These had progressed as far as prudent, but further information was required. [The CO] called up [3 Coy](#) by W/T and with an improvised code requested fire to be brought in 2 areas. We promised it in 15 minutes and [3 Coy](#) opened up with concentrated fire of 12 Guns.

This caused Jerry to cut loose with his spandaus and disclose their positions to the infantry patrols...

'This shows the pitch to which [3 Coy](#) had brought its training ... a standard that was seldom reached, requiring co-operation with the infantry and high standard of signals personnel and of course map shooting.'

So much 25-pounder ammunition had been used in this phase of the battle that the next attack, intended for the night of 31 July–1 August, had to be postponed twenty-four hours.

The men of 7 Platoon, attached to 22 Battalion, were billeted in a mansion whose lavish furnishings included a Bechstein Grand piano 'beautiful in appearance and tone'. A huge dugout near the gun positions sheltered at least forty Italians, among them a singularly attractive girl who was said to be an opera singer from [Florence](#). How she came to be there remained a mystery, but she readily accepted an invitation to sing.

The girl's father accompanied her at the piano. 'It would be impossible to comment on all her songs,' writes Private [Gain](#),¹⁸ 'but the item which stirred us most was her rendering of that lovely prayer, Schubert's "Ave Maria". It was magnificent and, before the lads were in any way satisfied, she had to repeat it twice. Her whole performance—and she was very liberal with her items—was flawless and it was not hard to realise that we had in our midst a singer of note....

'Now and again it was necessary for our artiste to have a breather and "fill-ins" were provided firstly by trios from Vic, Scotty, and Butch, and later by the platoon choir whose efforts seemed to please our guests not a little. The inimitable Scotty provided further items and, altogether, the evening was a huge success.... our snowy-headed cook, George.... provided our guests with a tasty supper. Coffee, served in a set which was probably next to priceless, was thoroughly enjoyed by all who were fortunate enough to secure a cup and the tomato sand wiches were a very popular addition to the fare of army biscuits....

'While all this was going on, the war continued to be fought all around us and, on occasions, the exploding of a shell nearby almost blotted out the singer's efforts, but she carried on with a disregard for Heinie seldom seen amongst the local

inhabitants and she appeared so wrapped up in her singing that she became oblivious to everything except her song.'

That night (1–2 August) the Division attacked the hilltops which were the last obstacle before [Florence](#). Five infantry battalions, advancing on a narrow front between the Greve River and [San Michele](#), were assisted by creeping artillery barrages, timed concentrations and counter-battery programmes, and by machine-gun fire wherever possible. During the night and the following day 1, 2 and 3 Companies expended over 200,000 rounds (3 Company nearly half of this total) to supplement the artillery and harass the known positions of German mortars and machine guns.

'The previous support of [3 Coy](#) had been so encouraging to everybody that during this attack [3 Coy](#) expended 94000 rounds,' says Halkett. 'We again repeated our closely controlled concentrated fire on Infantry selected targets at times which they stipulated and again we had the satisfaction of hearing the infantry of [22 Bn](#) express their appreciation. Later received a letter of thanks from their Col. which was read to the Coy when they withdrew from the line for a rest.'

On the right, between the Greve and [La Poggiona](#), 2 Platoon gave overhead fire for the [Maori Battalion](#)'s advance. 'I took my truck forward in search of the 28 Bn, having placed my guns on a rise,' writes Hutchinson, '& on rounding a bend in the road came under small arms fire. We sheltered our truck behind two tanks, & only by a fluke noticed some Maoris running into a house up a long driveway just up the road. This was lucky for us, as we would have done what Brig [Stewart](#) ¹⁹ did....' The Brigadier had set out at daybreak to visit the battalion, but had seen no sign of its headquarters and had gone too far. Later the German wireless announced that he was a prisoner.

The [21st Battalion](#), which was to have gone through the Maoris, did not succeed in its attack and had to make another effort the following night. In the meantime 2 Platoon did a direct shoot on some Germans who could be seen digging in— they dispersed in a great hurry—and engaged other targets with excellent results.

The [22nd Battalion](#), advancing from [La Romola](#) towards La Poggiona, and 25 and 26 Battalions, advancing from near San Michele towards the neighbouring

heights, reached the hilltops which gave a view over the lower ground around [Florence](#). This success finally decided the battle for the city.

Before dawn 3 Company went up to [La Romola](#), where its three platoons continued their harassing role. Going out beyond [Cerbaia](#) in daylight, 5 Platoon, according to one of its gunners, was 'right under Jerry's nose. Goodness only knows why he didn't go us, but [we] get dug in without drawing fire. Shot all afternoon and night.'

On the night of 2–3 August 1 and 2 Platoons gave supporting fire for 21 Battalion's attack, which secured the hills east of [La Poggiona](#); 3 Platoon, which went up to support the battalion against the counter-attack expected at dawn, did not have to shoot. Already the enemy had begun to retreat. The 28th and 23rd Battalions and tanks of [4 Armoured Brigade](#) passed through to exploit down the road to [Florence](#), but were impeded by rearguards and demolitions. In the evening 2 Platoon was sent up to support the Maoris.

The troops not participating in the drive on [Florence](#) pulled back out of the hills. Some of them, crowding into [Cerbaia](#), were shelled by long-range guns in the afternoon of 3 August. 'At approx 1630 hrs Jerry started in suddenly and did over the village well and truly,' wrote McLennan. 'Caused quite a few casualties, and burnt & KO'd many vehicles. My [6 Platoon's] only knock was a poco hole in [a truck]—very lucky indeed.'

'Take cover in large shop & have to stay there as Jerry pounds show for three hours solid.... Trucks hit everywhere,' wrote Ross (5 Platoon). 'Wally [[Frohlich](#) ²⁰ our rangetaker wounded pretty badly. Our trucks knocked about a bit with shrap.... Leave in hurry about 8 oclock & very glad to do so.'

The South Africans, whose progress had been assisted by the New Zealanders' capture of the dominating hills, were the first to enter the outskirts of [Florence](#) before dawn on 4 August. The Maoris appear to have won the race with 23 Battalion to be the first New Zealanders there. They were joined by 1 Platoon just short of the outskirts. The machine-gunners and a troop of tanks had some difficulty in crossing a canal south of the city. 'Gerry opened lock gates somewhere and lifted the level of the water,' says Knowles. 'As a start only one of my trucks got over and I left the Pl

Sgt and the drivers battling with the others. Moved 4 guns onto the one truck and caught up the Maoris in time to join Peter Awatere's triumphal entry into town. Altho' Florence was technically an open city there was spasmodic shooting and the two sections spent the first night in large buildings right on the river giving cross fire defence. At dawn I moved to the grounds of the Villa Bellosguardo and from my vantage point on the rise kept up a steady harassing fire on escape routes to the N and NW of the city. To help out the Maoris "stole" some Mk VIIIZ ammunition ... to keep me going.'

All the bridges over the Arno had been destroyed except the Ponte Vecchio, the approaches to which had been blocked by the demolition of some houses. An attempt to force a crossing in the neighbourhood would have made a battlefield of the city. An Italian partisan woman, with a covering scout from 1 Platoon, showed the South Africans where the Germans had placed mines in the approaches at both ends of the Ponte Vecchio.

The New Zealand Division relieved 8 Indian Division, which had secured the high ground above Montelupo and opposite Signa, west of Florence. All three brigades went into the line, and except for 1 and 2 Companies, which remained with 5 and 6 Brigades, 27 Battalion was under 4 Brigade's command.

Facing Signa, which was held by the enemy, 3 and 4 Companies (the latter being given a job for the first time since leaving Arce) took up positions with 22 (Motor) Battalion. A day or two later 4 Company moved with Steele Force (27 Battalion less the other three companies, a company of infantry, three anti-tank batteries in an infantry role, and detachments of tanks, mortars and engineers, under the CO's command) to 26 Battalion's position in a bend in the river east of Montelupo, to permit that battalion to strengthen 5 Brigade's sector farther west. The Vickers did harassing shoots at night—one night 7 and 8 Platoons fired 35,000 rounds—and were slightly involved in one or two skirmishes with German patrols which came across the river. The enemy, with good observation from high ground, accurately shelled the roads and tracks.

South of Montelupo 2 Company placed its guns well forward with 6 Brigade. At Fobbiana, a deserted village only 200 or 300 yards from the enemy, 4 Platoon spent an anxious time without local infantry protection. The silence of the empty village

was uncanny, while nearby in no-man's-land the inmates of an asylum were heard yelling at night. [Fibbiana](#) had little to recommend it.

[Empoli](#), a town on the southern bank of the [Arno](#) about 15 miles west of [Florence](#), was strongly held by the enemy. While with [5 Brigade](#), which relieved an Indian brigade in this sector on the night of 7–8 August, 1 Company expended large quantities of ammunition, sometimes well in excess of 50,000 in a night, harassing supply routes and river crossings.

'Early one evening,' writes Knowles, whose 1 Platoon was about 3500 yards from the river, 'I went to chat the infantry and in doing so reached a listening post overlooking the bend in the river at dusk. The light was still fair and I could see a number of Gerries walking on the water. It dawned on us that it was a sunken bridge. From the map I switched the guns and we caught what must have been a company crossing. The slaughter was terrific and proved to me once again that map shooting with MK VIIIIZ was the most advantageous system of shooting to adopt.'

All three platoons supported an attack by 23 and 26 Battalions on the night of 10–11 August to gain possession of the approaches to the river near the town, and paid particular attention to the bridge. Subsequently 23 Battalion captured three Germans from a company of panzer grenadiers which was intended to counter-attack but had lost twenty-two killed and forty wounded by machine-gun fire while crossing and forming up. Lieutenant-Colonel [McPhail](#) ²¹ told Major Luxford that one reason why the infantry had had so few casualties was because the machine guns had done so much softening up beforehand.

'Good results were recorded,' says the company diary on the 12th. 'Infantry reported much enemy confusion on the Highway which was harassed. Enemy vehicles were moving in all directions and much shouting was heard.... No. 2 Pl in conjunction with 28 Bn's mopping up process of [EMPOLI](#) [next day] fired HF on Northern banks of River ARNO.... All pls carried out further HF tasks as per previous nights. Spasmodic enemy Spandau fire returned.'

The days were beginning to shorten. The fruit was ripening on the trees. 'We have sampled some delightful pears, peaches and even some apples, and always have fresh stewed fruit for dessert at night,' wrote a 4 Company man. 'The grapes

are at last making some progress to our impatient eyes, and many of the bunches are deceptively purple already. They are still bitter though and only about half size, but I expect some of the boys will get the gripes through not being able to wait for them to ripen fully.'

They did not get the chance to wait. After the Division had been about a week on the [Arno River](#) front it was relieved by an American division. The machine-gun companies went back over the dusty roads to [Castellina in Chianti](#), where they returned to the command of their own battalion headquarters. ²²

Another furlough group departed, and leave parties went off to [Rome](#) and [Siena](#); a few even managed to get into [Florence](#).

Mr Churchill paid his third visit to the Division. ²³ As they had done for the King, the troops lined a stretch of the road while the Prime Minister drove through in a staff car. But they had to wait two and a half hours before he arrived. They sat in the hot sun on the roadside and were thickly powdered when each vehicle drove past in a cloud of dust. 'There was no organised cheering as when the King came and no one felt like starting ... so the result was a succession of faint cries like those of drowning men in the distance or Kiwis volunteering for fatigues ... no one was going to be the only man yelling. ... A jeep full of our provosts which tailed the procession was loudly cheered by the troops who had to give vent to their feelings somehow.'

¹ [Pte A. S. Marshall](#); born NZ 29 May 1923; butcher; killed in action 13 Jul 1944.

² Subsequent issues were headed [The Cortona Clarion](#), [The Siena Sun](#), [The San Donato Standard](#), [The Sambuca Star](#), and so on.

³ [Cpl M. R. Hodge](#), m.i.d.; Kuaotunu, Whitianga; born [Rotorua](#), 5 Dec 1915; labourer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped 12 Sep 1943; recaptured 3 Feb 1944; escaped 9 Mar 1944; arrived Allied Italy 13 May 1944.

⁴ The officers of the battalion were:

CO: [Lt-Col D. G. Steele](#)

Adj: Lt O. J. Hatton

QM: Lt L. Morgan

Sigs: Lt E. T. Couch

TO: 2 Lt J. Wade

MO: Capt J. P. Board

Padre: Rev A. H. Finlay

1 Coy

OC: Maj J. H. R. Luxford

2 i/c: Capt C. M. H. Gibson

1 Pl: 2 Lt J. L. Knowles

2 Pl: Lt E. Y. M. Hutchinson

3 Pl: Lt W. S. Nicol

2 Coy

OC: Capt W. R. Aislabie

2 i/c: Capt R. J. Mason

4 Pl: Lt J. S. Freeborn

5 Pl: Lt I. R. Watson

6 Pl: Lt I. McLennan

3 Coy

OC: Maj J. A. Snedden

2 i/c: Capt J. T. H. Halkett

7 Pl: 2 Lt C. V. Martyn

8 Pl: Lt E. Sanders

9 Pl: 2 Lt F. Howe

4 Coy

OC: Maj R. I. Blair

2 i/c: Capt A. R. Cramond

10 Pl: Lt B. C. H. Moss

11 Pl: Lt J. R. Johnson

12 Pl: Lt M. T. Wilson

⁵ Cpl T. H. Hendra; born Dunedin, 9 Aug 1905; accountant and schoolmaster; killed in action 23 Jul 1944.

⁶ L-Cpl J. D. Barlass; born NZ 10 Jun 1916; labourer; killed in action 23 Jul 1944.

⁷ Pte M. V. Gower; born Tasmania, 6 Apr 1921; hairdresser; died of wounds 23 Jul 1944.

⁸ Pte R. L. Cochrane, m.i.d.; born NZ 24 Oct 1919; farmhand.

⁹ Lt-Col A. Awatere, DSO, MC; Rotorua; born Tuparoa, 25 Apr 1910; civil servant; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jul–Aug 1944, Nov 1944–Jun 1945; twice wounded.

¹⁰ Capt J. S. Freeborn; Christchurch; born NZ 10 Aug 1909; clerk.

¹¹ Cpl W. P. Walsh; born NZ 23 Sep 1919; draper; died of wounds 30 Jul 1944.

¹² Pte M. G. Davidson; Ashburton; born NZ 14 Mar 1922; tractor driver; wounded 28 Jul 1944; p.w. 29 Jul 1944.

Although slightly wounded he remained with his platoon and was captured next day—the last NZ machine-gunner to be taken p.w. in the Second World War.

¹³ Lt W. N. Burgess; born Dunedin, 18 Jun 1913; labourer; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

¹⁴ Pte J. Herbert, MM; Kaeo; born Kaeo, 22 Oct 1921; farmhand.

¹⁵ Within half an hour they were re-equipped, 'even down to razors, shaving brushes, toothbrushes, etc.', by the 2 i/c (Capt Mason). 'Where he got a lot of the items at such short notice is beyond me,' says Freeborn.

¹⁶ Lt-Col H. V. Donald, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Masterton; born Masterton, 20 Mar 1917; manufacturer; CO 22 Bn May–Nov 1944, Mar–Aug 1945; wounded four times.

¹⁷ Maj K. R. Hutcheson; born Wellington, 25 Jan 1914; school-teacher; twice wounded; died 1956.

¹⁸ Cpl L. V. Gain; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 26 Oct 1903; accountant.

¹⁹ Maj-Gen R. L. Stewart, CB, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); Kerikeri; born Timaru, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 NZEF 1917–19; GSO 1 2 NZ Div 1940–41; DCGS 1941–43; comd 5 Bde Aug–Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde Nov 1943–Mar 1944, 5 Bde Mar–Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd 9 Bde (2 NZEF, Japan) Nov 1945–Jul 1946; Adj-Gen NZ Military Forces 1946–49; CGS 1949–52.

²⁰ Pte W. Frohlich; born Australia, 11 Oct 1913; waiter; died of wounds 9 Aug 1944.

²¹ Lt-Col A. E. McPhail, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Ashburton; born Wanganui, 31 Dec 1906; bank official; CO 23 Bn May–Jun 1944, Aug–Oct 1944, 21 Bn Oct 1944–May 1945; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

²² The battalion's casualties since leaving Arce were nine killed, 22 wounded and one prisoner of war.

²³ His previous visits were at Alamein and Tripoli.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 22 – THE ROMAGNA

CHAPTER 22

The Romagna

Another secret move. On 27 August 2 Company departed with 6 Brigade and 1 Company with the 5th; the rest of the battalion followed next day. They went back through Siena, did a dusty trip to Castiglione, skirted Lake Trasimene, silver in the moonlight, and branched off on a highway that led through the university city of Perugia to Foligno, where they rested before setting out on the second stage of their 220-mile journey, through wooded gorges and over a 3000-foot saddle in the Apennines; on the Adriatic side they turned north to their destination, a mile or two beyond Iesi and not far from the coast.

The Allied offensive against the Gothic Line had begun. Obviously something was under way: the roads were crowded with vehicles, and aircraft passed back and forth continuously from dawn to dark. 'There are a number of Greek officers about, exchanging battle notes with our chaps ... the prophets reckon we are to make a landing in Greece ... there hardly seems to be a job for us at present.'

The divisional artillery and units of 4 Armoured Brigade assisted 1 Canadian Corps (which also included 3 Greek Mountain Brigade) in a highly successful drive up the narrow strip between the mountains and the sea to Rimini. The only machine-gun company with a task in this phase of the offensive was 3 Company, which was placed under the command of 28 British Brigade to lay smoke on tracks and bridges near the front.

This was 3 Company's second experience of 'smoke duties', and 'remembering our experiences of Cassino,' says Captain Halkett, 'we were not particularly pleased.' The company was provided with 10,000 drums of smoke and a Canadian transport platoon consisting of twenty-eight jeeps and trailers and four three-tonners, and was organised in three mobile groups equipped with extra wireless sets.

'On the 17th we did our first and only smoke job. The area of 28th Bde HQ and the approach routes to it. Jerry had been doing some accurate shelling in this area and we were to deny him observation. We had two interruptions, first in the morning when the 5.5 heavy arty complained that the trig points they were using were obscured and later in the afternoon when 28th Bde and our Coy HQ were heavily

shelled. Of course our smoke was to blame. After each interruption we received frantic orders to carry on from a higher authority. By the end of the day we were nicely browned off. Had we not been interrupted we would have done a good job. As it was our transport was not caused any real bother.'

A few days later the company came under the command of 12 Canadian Brigade. 'The platoons were moved forward to an area just behind the Canadian Infantry and preparations were made to support their third attack with smoke. Smoke is a tricky thing especially when used from drums which burn for 20 minutes and cannot be controlled once lit. From our previous experience we knew that we could use smoke for this purpose only if the wind was blowing in the correct direction and in this case the wind would not oblige so we just sat.'

Eighth Army broke through the **Gothic Line** and entered the broad and level **Romagna** plain, closely cultivated country which was to suit the enemy's purpose of delaying the Allied advance just as well as had the mountains in the south. A dozen or more rivers, confined in places between high floodbanks, were separated by low-lying ground cut by innumerable irrigation canals, drains and ditches, and the many farmhouses and villages could be used as strongpoints and snipers' posts. Rain dissolved the **Romagna** soil into a morass in which men sank to their boot-tops and vehicles to their axles. The enemy's staunchest ally was the weather: already it had begun to rain. Route 9 (the **Via Emilia**, the old Roman road, which ran as straight as a die from **Rimini** to **Bologna**) and Route 16 (the coastal highway from **Rimini** to **Ravenna**, **Argenta** and **Ferrara**) were on embankments and safe from flooding, but the other roads of the **Romagna** plain were little better than cart tracks.

When the Canadians reached the Marecchia River on 21 September, it was time for the New Zealand Division to embark upon the pursuit. The **22nd Battalion** and tanks of 4 Brigade pushed about a mile along the coast from **Rimini**, at the mouth of the river, and at short notice 4 Company was sent into the deserted, wrecked town, where it was on call but did not do any shooting. Fifth Brigade's leading infantry (21 and 28 Battalions, supported by 3 and 2 Platoons respectively) crossed the narrow, shallow river farther upstream. When **5 Brigade** had reached the **Scolo Brancona** (a watercourse) and 4 Brigade had progressed farther along the coast, 12 Platoon went to a ridge beyond the Brancona, where it was able to shoot (expending about 30,000 rounds in two days) in front of **6 Brigade**, which passed through the 5th to exploit to

the [Rio Fontanaccia](#). At that stage 4 and 5 Platoons (with 24 and 25 Battalions) came forward to take over 2 and 3 Platoons' role. Two men were injured when one of 2 Platoon's trucks was blown up by a mine while withdrawing.

The artillery and the machine guns of 12 Platoon and 22 Battalion—which also had Vickers—harassed targets at the mouth of the Fontanaccia stream, as well as on 24 Battalion's front, Route 16, tracks and the railway. The 24th and 25th Battalions attacked astride Route 16, while 22 Battalion conformed on the coast. They met stiff opposition from the start and were hindered by many ditches and other obstacles; only the 25th reached its objective, about a mile beyond the Fontanaccia. The guns of 4 and 5 Platoons shot at targets selected by the infantry, and 6 Platoon came up into the line with 26 Battalion. The enemy then retired, and [6 Brigade](#) advanced almost without opposition to the meandering Uso River (reputed to be the [Rubicon](#)), but did not get far beyond it.

'Arrive at house & put in guns,' wrote Private Ross (5 Platoon) on 24 September. 'Our billets full of Ities. Cow of a night with Itie women nattering & two kids howling. Not much sleep. The other section have a quieter night but our medical orderly brings a kid into the world. Dr. came in morning & said he'd made a good job.'

The Greeks, who came up on the coastal flank, were assisted by 10 Platoon. 'After lunch we received orders to move forward behind the Greek infantry,' wrote Private Sherlock on the 27th. 'Our trucks were loaded in quick time and we were on our way. This is excellent country to move into the F.D.L.'s by M.T. as there are high trees and the ground is flat. We crossed the river [USO](#) and moved into [Bellaria](#), a small inhabited place. The Greeks seemed amazed as we drove up in our 15 cwt. We moved in behind the forward tanks and decided it was far enough. Greek infantry are still fighting small arms fire a few hundred yards in front. Mac [Second-Lieutenant [McCracken](#) ¹] contacted the forward Greek Coy commander and we moved our guns into two high buildings, which are practically on the water's edge of the Adriatic coast. Our section placed our guns on the second floor, with guns mounted out the windows. No. 2 Section have their two guns on the top of the block of flats on our left. Platoon Headquarters occupy a garage and our trucks are able to be housed there. We are only two hundred [yards] to the road and we are doing our best to convince ourselves that it is the road that he is endeavouring to shell and not

us. We fired three times during the night on the F.D.L.'s at ranges from 1700 yds–2000.'

Sixth Brigade was relieved by the 5th, which pushed on to the line of the Fiumicino River in heavy, penetrating rain on 28 September. Most of the tanks became bogged, and even jeeps were hopelessly stuck. Consequently there was little activity in the next few days except by the artillery, mortars and machine guns of both sides.

The Vickers expended so much ammunition that the NZASC was hard pressed to meet their demands. They harassed targets along the line of the Scolo Rigossa (a canal beyond the Fiumicino) and the roads and tracks leading down to the river, including one which the enemy was suspected to be using at six o'clock each evening to bring up rations; they also helped to beat off patrols which attempted to penetrate 5 Brigade's front. A shell which landed two or three feet from the front door of the house occupied by Headquarters 1 Company wounded Major Luxford, who was standing in the doorway.

When an enemy force attempted to penetrate 23 Battalion's front, 1 Platoon gave excellent support. 'The radio link with the Inf was very good and I had a complete running commentary and targets from both forward company commanders,' writes Second-Lieutenant Knowles, who 'opened fire with all 4 guns—under control Pl HQ even although separated by half a mile. Targets were worked individually and fire concentrated. Time was approx. 2300 hrs. The attack was finally beaten off some time after 0100 the next morning and the inf sent a "thank you" message. In the approx 2 hrs I recall our ammunition expenditure was 89,000 between the four guns and all were still working perfectly. Keith Watson ² [the platoon sergeant] had delivered a fresh supply of amn at 2100 that evening and as things started he returned for a second load—arrived back about 0030 hrs. I later checked casas etc in the target areas and found evidence of Mk VIIIZ bullets. Both Jack Wooffindin ³ and "Hori" Spence ⁴ [the two section leaders] did a great job—especially the latter who had barely been placed on the ground [after a move] and who was working short handed while amn was being carried forward. I can thoroughly recommend the use of an artillery table and artillery No. 9 protractor. I was as busy as a one armed paper hanger. All my figures were checked by orderly Tom Scott ⁵ to ensure that we didn't shoot the inf ... in the hurry.'

Still at [Bellaria](#), 10 Platoon was cleaning its guns when two civilians put out to sea in a small boat. 'The three guns with the exception of mine that was not ready for firing opened fire ... with a range of 2000 yds and caused the occupants to evacuate the boat,' says Sherlock. 'It was a regrettable show as they turned out to be two Italian Partisans making their way out to rescue an airman that had crashed out to sea.... Fortunately they were not harmed and returned to the shore thinking that the hun had opened fire on them. The plane survivor was picked up by a flying boat.'

[Eighth Army](#) intended to reduce the German defences on the other side of the [Fiumicino](#) as soon as the weather permitted. Sixth Brigade, which was to make the assault on the New Zealand front, relieved the 5th on the night of 5–6 October, and 2 Company took over from 1 Company, which had fired a quarter of a million rounds since crossing the [Marecchia](#). [Wilderforce](#) (Divisional Cavalry and anti-tank gunners as infantrymen), which came into the line between the Greeks and [6 Brigade](#), was supported by 11 Platoon.

The attack was postponed and the plan modified because of the sodden state of the ground. The first objective was to be the [Rio Baldona](#) (between the [Fiumicino](#) and the Scolo Rigossa), and the second the crossing of the Rigossa. After further torrential rain, however, not even this modified wet weather plan could be put into operation.

'While in this position,' says Second-Lieutenant [Newell](#) ⁶ (6 Platoon), 'we were kept well occupied with "defensive tasks" & harassing fire tasks in the area around Sant' Angelo. Our infantry showed great confidence in our shooting, as they would not hesitate to call on us to engage targets & enemy posts along the front. We had a lot of attention from Jerry's mortars & the Nebelwerfer at times gave us some anxious moments, one night the corner of the house we were occupying was blown off. We were in this area for about ten days & expended 160,000 rounds of ammunition.'

Although the Canadian Corps had come to a standstill on the waterlogged plain, 5 British Corps was still making progress in the foothills south of Route 9, where the rains had less effect. This British corps was to continue its outflanking advance which

would loosen the enemy's grip on the lines of the various water obstacles on the plain. After the Canadian Corps had regrouped and extended to the south, 1 Canadian Infantry Division was to attack astride Route 9 in the direction of [Cesena](#), with the New Zealand Division as its flank guard in the poorer going on its right, and [Cumberland Force](#) (3 Greek Mountain Brigade, [Wilderforce](#) and the Royal Canadian Dragoons) watching the flooded country nearer the coast.

Sixth Brigade, therefore, was relieved by the Royal Canadian Dragoons, with whom 4 and 5 Platoons remained, while 10 Platoon stayed with the Greeks in the coastal strip, and 11 Platoon with [Wilderforce](#). Fifth Brigade, accompanied by 1 Company, entered what was now the central sector, just north of the [Rimini- Cesena](#) railway.

During its first night (10–11 October) in this sector 1 Platoon opened fire on [Gatteo](#), across the [Fiumicino](#), but was ordered to stop because infantry patrols had crossed the river in several places. The lack of hostile fire against these patrols, the sound of traffic and an increase in nebelwerfer fire (presumably to cover this noise) indicated that the enemy was pulling out. This was confirmed next morning when [5 Brigade](#) established bridgeheads over the [Fiumicino](#) without opposition.

The weather was fine and warm. The tracks dried out quickly, and the vehicles began to raise the dust. The 28th and 23rd Battalions advanced to the [Scolo Rigossa](#), and the artillery, mortars and machine guns harassed [Gambettola](#), across the canal on 23 Battalion's front. Captain Dixon formed a gunline with all twelve Vickers of 1 Company and engaged all the tracks leading to and from the village. When a strong German patrol penetrated 23 Battalion's front in the evening of the 13th, the Vickers laid down a heavy concentration where the patrol was believed to be, and the infantry later reoccupied the ground.



5 Brigade and Cumberland Force, 11 October 1944

At 5 Brigade's request 4 Platoon, which was in the Cumberland Force sector, harassed Sant' Angelo, on the brigade's right flank, where a company attack by the Maoris had been repulsed. Next night Dixon's twelve Vickers—which fired 214,000 rounds in two days—harassed the roads north and west of the Rigossa canal; together with the other supporting weapons they were intended to give the impression that an attack was going in towards Gambettola while the Maoris were making their second attack on Sant' Angelo. The German guns searched for Dixon's gunline but could not pinpoint it; they succeeded only in slightly damaging a truck. The Maoris captured Sant' Angelo and a patrol from 23 Battalion entered Gambettola, from which the enemy had gone.

By the evening of 16 October the leading troops of 1 Canadian Division were close to the Pisciatello River, and those of 5 Brigade a few hundred yards short of it. Next day 5 Brigade, after a week in the line, was relieved by the 6th, with 3 Company under command. It was intended that 4 Armoured Brigade should advance from the bridgehead which 6 Brigade was to secure across the Pisciatello.

The Canadians crossed the Pisciatello that night, and 6 Brigade launched its attack the following night (the 18th–19th). Five field regiments fired a creeping barrage for the two assaulting battalions (24 and 25), and a great number of medium guns assisted with concentrations and counter-battery tasks. With their eight Vickers in line 7 and 9 Platoons harassed the roads and crossroads on 24 Battalion's right flank, and 8 Platoon's four guns did the same on 25 Battalion's left;

altogether they fired over 57,000 rounds.

The infantry won a bridgehead, and in the morning 18 and 20 Armoured Regiments, with 22 (Motor) Battalion in support, crossed the bridges erected by the engineers and began their drive north-westwards over the flat farmlands dotted with houses and crisscrossed by narrow lanes. They made good progress until near the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road, about two and a half miles beyond the [Pisciatiello](#). In the afternoon 12 Platoon, under 22 Battalion's command, went into position behind the armour to shoot on call at selected targets. After joining [6 Brigade](#)'s infantry across the [Pisciatiello](#), 3 Company expended another 50,000 rounds on harassing tasks.

The Germans disengaged along the front from [Cesena](#) to the sea, and on 20 October the New Zealand tanks headed westwards towards the [Savio](#). They made slow progress over boggy ground and by evening were a few hundred yards short of the river.

The Division occupied a four and a half mile front with 22 Battalion and the three battalions of [6 Brigade](#). In support of a Canadian attack across the river on the night of 21–22 October all the available artillery, tanks, mortars and machine guns put down diversionary fire; 7, 8, 9 and 12 Platoons fired more than 90,000 rounds. Shell, mortar and spandau fire came back, but decreased as the Canadians won their bridgehead over the [Savio](#).

Meanwhile the Vickers of 2 and 4 Companies with Cumberland Force harassed roads and houses in the enemy lines across the [Fiumicino](#), quietened enemy machine-gun posts, helped to repel enemy patrols, and gave covering fire for the patrols sent out from their own side.

With its guns in houses 10 Platoon was more fortunate than 11 Platoon, which on one occasion after heavy rain had to bail out its gunpits every hour, but 10 Platoon, like the others, was shelled and mortared from time to time. 'Just before lunch we got it good and proper,' wrote Sherlock on 11 October. 'Shells and mortars burst about the house. A shell missed my gun upstairs by a few feet and scattered our ammunition everywhere ... we retired to the cellar until the commotion had died down.... During the evening [three days later] a strong patrol of huns attacked the Greek forward company on our right—the Greek Coy commander took it to be a full

scale attack and called on us for an all gun stonk Artillery mortars and M.G. fire. We really went to town on our F.D.L. tasks. Our signal line from Platoon Headquarters was cut by shelling and we were a little late in getting the word.... Bill J— almost tossed a grenade at our Platoon Sgt Tom Doyle, when he arrived with news to fire.... The guns went well and we soon received word that all was well.'

'Jerry gets stuck into us & shells our house for over an hour,' wrote Ross (5 Platoon). 'Three direct hits.... One lands six feet from [No. 4] gunpit. None of us hurt.... Three cows wounded & we have to shoot them ... if we stay here a few days we will have to bury them.'

The [Royal Canadian Dragoons](#), with covering fire from 4 Platoon, closed up to the Rigossa canal when the enemy fell back, but the enemy still held his [Fiumicino](#) line opposite the Greek brigade in the narrow coastal strip. The Greeks, who were required for service in their own country, were replaced by the Governor-General's Horse Guards (a Canadian armoured reconnaissance regiment) and by [27 Lancers](#) (which also took over from [Wilderforce](#)); 10 and 6 Platoons then served the Horse Guards, and 11 Platoon the Lancers.

The Dragoons and Lancers reached the Pisciatello River on the 19th, and the Dragoons, advancing up an inland route, were just beyond the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road next day. Before 4 Platoon could support with harassing fire, its trucks had to be towed over several demolitions and the guns carried the best part of a mile.

Crossing the [Fiumicino](#) near its mouth the Horse Guards entered [Cesenatico](#), which was found clear of the enemy. Demolished bridges, road craters and soft, marshy ground hindered the advance; Route 16 was impassable to vehicles. and even jeeps were unable to cross the Fiumicino. At the suggestion of the Guards' CO, McCracken decided to take 10 Platoon's equipment by sea in two DUKWs. ⁷

The gun gear, 15,000 rounds of ammunition and a day's rations were loaded on the DUKWs, and two men accompanied each gun; the rest of the platoon crossed the [Fiumicino](#) by a demolished pipeline and walked up the coast. The amphibians took to the water, and favoured by a clear, fine evening and a calm sea, completed the five-mile trip in about an hour and a half. The plan was to enter [Cesenatico](#) by a canal, but the retreating Germans had left a sunken craft at its entrance, so an

attempt was made to land on the north of it. There, however, the leading DUKW stuck in the mud. The other DUKW found a suitable landing place on the other side of the canal and drove into the town, where it unloaded. It then returned to the first DUKW, which was carrying most of the equipment, and eventually everything was taken ashore.

Next morning (21 October), when the Canadians continued their advance towards [Cervia](#), 10 Platoon again found a novel means of getting its guns forward in support. A gharry 'after a few repairs including the replacement of a wheel, was made sufficiently serviceable to carry guns and ammunition ... power was provided by gun numbers operating on the shafts and two ropes.' The platoon went into position some 3000 yards short of [Cervia](#), but in mid-afternoon was ordered to leave the Canadians and return to its own unit.

The Division was withdrawn from the [Savio](#) front and went back to rest near [Fabriano](#), in the [Apennines](#). For the move Major Blair,⁸ who acted as CO while Lieutenant-Colonel Steele was away on a fortnight's leave following his marriage to a New Zealand nursing sister, commanded a divisional troops group which included the machine-gunners, Divisional Cavalry, engineers and a field ambulance. They drove past notices erected by the Canadians: 'Kiwis—Goodbye all of you' and 'It's been nice working with you'; they followed Route 16 down the coast to the mouth of the Esino River, turned off on the highway through [Iesi](#), staged at [Fabriano](#) and two days later reached their allotted place in open farmland between [Matelica](#) and [Castelraimondo](#).

Much of the ground had been ploughed and was a quagmire after rain. There were few houses, and most of these seemed to be occupied by at least two families. Appalled by the prospect of spending a month in this locality, parties searched the countryside for suitable billets. Lieutenant Blue discovered [Pioraco](#), a mountain village of 1200 inhabitants, and Lieutenant Ross (who was to be the town major), Private Hodge (the escaped prisoner of war, who was to be interpreter) and the Intelligence Section organised the billeting.

[Pioraco](#), wrote Moss (the Intelligence Officer), was 'tucked into the gorge of the [Fiume Patenza](#), a lusty torrent which has been harnessed to provide electric power for the village and the local paper factory. Beetling grey stone cliffs rise sheer from

the town, on all sides save the west where the sun sets at the head of a narrow valley.... The village is exceptionally clean, with two neat little gravelled piazzas and a small tree lined park towards which face the cinema and the Gentlemen's Club.... The paper mill is a vast affair to find tucked away in a mountain gorge.'

Ross, who was seen from time to time 'striding swiftly along, or brandishing his stick or haranguing in English crowds of stupefied Italians', annexed the former fascist headquarters for Battalion Headquarters. As the livelihood of most of the villagers centred round the paper mill, no troops were accommodated there. Eventually 1 Company occupied the lower floor of the school, 3 Company the upper floor, 2 Company a disused granary, and 4 Company a large house. All quarters had electric light and running water. 'The Bn is now established in the best area we have had since being in [Italy](#).' The Gentlemen's Club was taken over as a canteen and [YMCA](#), and the cinema, which showed Italian films twice weekly, was available the rest of the time for films and concerts, including a performance by the ever popular [Kiwi Concert Party](#); church services and several dances were held there too.

The whole battalion paraded together for the first time in [Italy](#). The training, in the mornings only, kept the troops fit and prevented them from going rusty in their machine-gun work. Mountaineering enthusiasts made assaults on the nearby 4083-foot [Monte Prima](#). A boxing ring was erected in one of the piazzas and a tournament organised. Inter-platoon and inter-company football led to the choice of a battalion fifteen which had a couple of wins before being defeated by Divisional Signals.

'Yesterday and the previous evening there has been the first fall of snow in the area for the winter and has it been cold,' Private Sherrard wrote in a letter. 'Fortunately the snow didn't settle for long on the flats but the hills still have a good covering.... Yesterday the Battalion football team played a team of Engineers.... However just after the commencement of the game down came the snow once more and continued to do so until both teams agreed to call off the game just after half-time when it became so cold that the players could scarcely feel the ball and many were beginning to get cramp....

'Now all the locals are preparing hard for the worst of the winter and are laying in great stocks of firewood and fodder for the animals which will be kept under cover and hand-fed all the time. The lambing season is just about over now. Seems a

queer time of the year but that's the way here. The lambs will be carefully housed indoors over the coldest months.'

Some very happy occasions were reported in the battalion newspaper, which reappeared under the title of the Vickersville Verita, incorporating the Posta Pioraco. On Friday evening, 3 November, 'the glass doors of the Camera del Lavoro swung open & in poured an eager throng. At the door, list in hand, cane laid aside on this solemn occasion, stood the TM (Town Major or Toast Master). Passing beneath his scrutiny was like being X-rayed. In one lightning glance he noted Africa Star (faded), service chevrons (molti) and regimental number (piccolo). [About sixty] 1st Ech men were present and visitors included five 2nd & 3rd ech men and 7 ex-members of the Bn now in other NZEF units....

'The tables groaned (one even shrieked) under a load of delicacies produced by the cunning arts of Sgt Holmes⁹ whom everyone agreed excelled himself on this occasion. Oyster patties, hot dogs, sausage rolls so light they had to be tied down, scones, sandwiches and savouries formed a mouthwatering array....

'As the evening wore on, the Grim Digs, now only faintly discernible by the light of their Africa Stars, fought again the battles of old. [Tebaga Gap](#) was opened and closed, [Alamein](#) was broken thru, the [Kaponga](#) box was nailed down.... By 0200 hours the desert was swept clear of the enemy and a most enjoyable evening was brought to a close.'

Next day, the Italian Armistice Day, the battalion posted a guard at the war memorial and at eleven o'clock, while a guard of honour composed of the battalion's tallest men stood at the present, the mayor and Major Blair laid wreaths. This was appreciated by the Italians, who invited six officers to a reunion of their First World War veterans. Blair, with dictionary in hand, expressed the battalion's pleasure in being among such a happy and co-operative people. The Italians sang some of their First World War songs and two current partisan songs, and the mayor made a speech (in Italian): '[Pioraco](#)'s returned soldiers of the war 1914–18 salute with great enthusiasm the young fighters from New Zealand. In the present war, which you are fighting with faith and tenacity, the spirit of the Italian forces, reborn after many years of repression under the Fascist regime, takes and has been taking an active part in the form of Partisan activities. Today 4 Nov. finds the old and the new united

in one faith in the promise of a new and just social order. Towards all the Allied forces that fight for this ideal we extend our wishes for success and a rapid and complete victory.'

At first the villagers had been apprehensive about their young women, whom they had kept well out of sight. 'Anxious parents were not prepared to trust any troops and a certain amount of credence had been given to the enemy propaganda on our cannibalistic characteristics,' wrote Moss. 'It was not long however before the population was reassured and later there were few families in the village who did not have soldiers sharing their kitchen fire on most evenings. Many personal friendships were made and when the time came to leave again for the line the population was quite mournful. It is certain that the people were sorry to see us go as we were regretful to leave them, and we departed assured that the prayers of the Piorachese would accompany us through our next action.'

Lieutenant-Colonel Steele, who was to return to New Zealand, relinquished command to Lieutenant-Colonel Sanders,¹⁰ who came from 26 Battalion. The new CO addressed and inspected the machine-gunners on 22 November, and Padre Finlay, who was also leaving, held his last service with the battalion in the evening. Warning orders were received of an imminent move, and in the next few days advance parties left to reconnoitre staging sites near [Cesena](#); 1 and 2 Companies pulled out to join 5 and 6 Brigades, and Battalion Headquarters and 3 and 4 Companies joined the anti-tank gunners' convoy at [Matelica](#) as part of the divisional reserve group. At the end of the 130-mile journey 1 and 2 Companies went into the line with the brigades, and the remainder of the battalion, after a night in the concentration area, moved into better quarters in [Forli](#), the next large town beyond [Cesena](#) on Route 9.

While the Canadian Corps (on the right) was to seize [Ravenna](#) and continue its advance towards the [Santerno River](#), and the [Polish Corps](#) was to press on through the foothills on the left, Fifth Corps, which included the New Zealand Division, was to continue its attack along Route 9 and secure bridgeheads over the [Lamone](#), [Senio](#) and [Santerno](#) rivers.

The Division faced the [Lamone](#) on the right of Route 9, which crossed the river just before entering the town of [Faenza](#). Sixth Brigade, next to the highway, held a

narrow front with one battalion (the 26th) forward and the whole of 2 Company in support; 5 Brigade, on the right, had two battalions (21 and 22) forward, served by 1 Company. The first Vickers to open fire across the Lamone were those of 3 Platoon (with 21 Battalion), which began a shoot in the evening of the 26th and continued throughout the night; among its targets was a track which the enemy was believed to be using as a supply route. Spasmodic shell and mortar fire came back. Two nights later 2 Platoon harassed troops who appeared to be carrying out a relief in the enemy line.

It rained steadily. The machine-gunners lived in houses. 'There were times,' writes Captain Frazer (OC 1 Company), 'when Gerry would plaster one or other of the houses with heavy shellfire, particularly at the beginning of our stay in this locality. The occupants aroused from their slumber by the crash of a direct hit on the wall or roof would marvel that they were only pelted with lumps of concrete or tiles, while no shell splinters came in. Perhaps the most discomforting thing was when a gaping hole would appear in a hitherto raintight roof, necessitating a profane withdrawal by the occupants to the still dry parts of the house.'

Before its first shoot 2 Company built up its positions with ammunition boxes filled with mud and covered the gunpits with bivvies. After a visit to 4 Platoon Moss wrote: 'Jack Freeborn has a medium sized house which shelters his 38 chaps and another 18 Italians. It is not a bad location but is rather close to a troop of 4.25 which Jerry has taped to an inch. Fortunately the Jerry counter mortar fire is so accurate that 4 Platoon does not have to worry about overs, though they get plenty of shrap. Jerry is doing a great amount of harassing with automatics and most of our platoons have experience now of getting small arms fire round their positions.'

Two platoons of 2 Company and all three of 1 Company continued the harassing programme each night on the known positions of the enemy and the roads and tracks thought to be his supply routes. They engaged any movement heard on the far side of the river, often with effect: the New Zealand infantry reported shouts and cries from enemy working parties and supply parties when the Vickers opened up.

Frazer says that the platoons 'had alternative positions, at reasonable distances from the houses, so that Gerry would have to search the vineyards and orchards with his retaliatory shelling instead of dropping it in the bully beef stew back at the casa.

When firing our normal harassing tasks we usually timed each platoon's shoot to start at least fifteen minutes after the previous platoon had finished its task. With platoons shooting in no particular order of rote and shifting two or three times a day between their alternative gun positions, Gerry seldom managed to locate them accurately with his artillery and mortars. We later saw one of his intelligence summaries, in which he observed that our HMGS (he always upgraded us from medium to heavy!) were obviously mounted on bren carriers, which changed their positions so frequently in the course of a night that it was difficult to locate and deal with them by counter battery fire. There were numbers of occasions when we did two- or three-platoon combined shoots, or with 2 Company as well, even more, but Gerry did not attempt to explain this phenomenon in his report.'

Because of a shortage of Mark VIIIIZ ammunition, much of the harassing fire had to be done at shorter ranges with Mark VII. Although there were thirty Vickers (including six in 22 Battalion), the CO considered bringing another company into the line to thicken up the fire on the Division's 7000-yard front. The Intelligence Officer drew a map showing the arcs and coverages with Mark VIIIIZ and Mark VII of 1 and 2 Companies' six platoons, which 'looked like the track system of a shunting yards.' It was decided that these two companies could carry out any tasks that might be called for.

The two companies in reserve at [Forli](#), about five miles behind the line, did some limited training and made the most of the entertainments the town had to offer, which included three picture theatres. Four or five German fighter-bombers paid a fleeting visit one evening and dropped a few bombs, which caused about forty casualties, nearly all civilians.

When 46 British Division, on the left of Route 9, attacked over the [Lamone](#) on the night of 3–4 December, the New Zealand Division assisted by simulating a crossing on its own front. The 25-pounders fired a creeping barrage on the enemy side of the river; tanks, anti-tank guns and mortars lent a hand; the infantry opened up with small arms, and the Vickers of 1 and 2 Companies fired belt after belt. Dummy wireless messages were passed between units and sub-units. The enemy retaliated vigorously with shell, mortar and small-arms fire. Messages were intercepted reporting that he was being attacked, and later that he had beaten off the attack. The British division secured its bridgehead, and two more feints were

made next day while it extended and consolidated its gains. The Poles also crossed the [Lamone](#), and the Canadians captured [Ravenna](#) and continued their advance towards the [Senio](#).

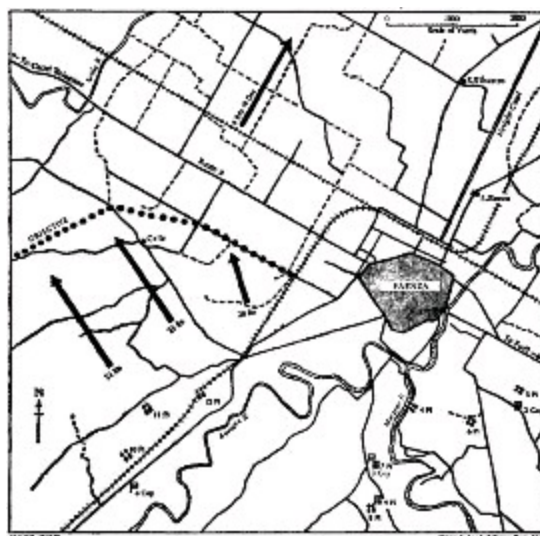
Fifth Corps regrouped: [10 Indian Division](#) (on the left) and the New Zealand Division relieved [46 Division](#). Fifth Brigade, brought around from the right flank, crossed the [Lamone](#) south-west of [Faenza](#), which was still held by the enemy; [6 Brigade](#), after side-stepping across Route 9, was on the other side of the river and south of the town. While 2 Company remained with [6 Brigade](#), 4 Company replaced 1 Company in close support of the 5th, and 3 Company also came forward to support this brigade from across the river.

Because of the churned-up state of the side roads and tracks, jeeps and trailers and Bren carriers were used to take 4 Company's guns into the line. 'It was a long day waiting around and it was not until five o'clock in the afternoon that we set off,' wrote Sherlock (10 Platoon) on the 11th. 'After travelling some eight miles we were held up owing to a one way road— odd shells fell over us and short of us throughout the trip—we arrived at our area at 12 o'clock in support of 23 Btn.—bedded down in a house for the night and at first light we set out to our gun line a half mile distant.... A slight drizzle fell all day [the 12th]. We are to have eight men and a section sgt at the gun line all the time. After breakfast we finished off the pits.... After dark the guns fired six belts per gun at 3000 yds. From the house we could plainly hear No 11 & 12 rattling away.... We are having difficulty in carrying ammunition to the gun line over muddy ground. It is not possible to procure a jeep as the ground has not been cleared of mines.'

Battalion Tactical Headquarters, which was to co-ordinate the machine-gun fire plan for the forthcoming attack, moved into a house a couple of miles south of [Faenza](#). The gunlines of both 2 and 3 Companies were closer to the town.

The Germans were paying particular attention to the supply routes in the vicinity. Shell and nebelwerfer stonks fell all around 3 Company Headquarters, which was in a house near a sharp bend. 'I particularly remember this house,' says the OC (Major Moore). '3 Coy H.Q. and Lieut Thomas' ¹¹ Pn. were in it. It was a large house 2 stories above and one in the form of a large cellar below ground level. The cellar was crowded by Ities of both sexes and all ages, most of them waiting to get back

into [Faenza](#). As there was only one entrance to the cellar, and as they did not show any wish to come out during the day —due to the shelling—we did not bother about checking them and I must say I was rather amused when an officer of a British unit which took over from us told me, later, that they had discovered a couple of Huns among the Ities. I must say a word of commendation here for the work done by the Coy signallers. They did splendid work in keeping the six lines that radiated from that house intact. I can remember one day when all six



5 Brigade's attack, 14-15 December 1944

5 Brigade's attack, 14–15 December 1944

lines were cut on 10 occasions. The three men who were wounded by the shell that hit the tree and burst downwards through a window were all sigs.'

The New Zealand and Indian divisions, each on a one-brigade front, were to secure the high ground dominating the [Senio](#) west of [Faenza](#).

The artillery barrage began at 11 p.m. on 14 December. 'I went outside to watch ... and to a second the horizon behind us blazed with the flashes of the artillery of [5 Corps](#),' wrote Moss. 'We had 450 guns doing the barrage on our narrow front alone.... The shells whizz overhead.... The air literally vibrates ... every loose shutter and window pane rattles continuously ... the earth is continually shivering with tremors from the hundreds of explosions ahead....

'When the barrage lifts and begins to creep forward the infantry come to grips and then all the smaller signs and sounds begin. Wavering yellow flares hover briefly

over the front, necklaces of tracer curve thru the blackness, single red sparks of our own red recognition climb vertically, red globes of Bofor speed out and then slow down before finally winking out, haystacks here and there become lit and blaze brightly for an hour or so illuminating the smoke above them and then smouldering redly for the rest of the night. Pauses in the barrage are generally filled by the insistent chattering of the Vickers guns, and here and there at scattered intervals one hears the smooth even BURRRR of the spandau, nearly always followed swiftly by a short stutter of bren or the clicking of tommy gun. Grenades pop, tank engines are roaring, Jerry mortar and shellfire crunches down, and every now and then the giant retching of a nebelwerfer is heard, followed by the moaning of the rockets before they explode in rapid succession.'

For the attack 290,000 rounds of Mark VIIIIZ ammunition had been released to the battalion, of which 170,000 was allocated to 4 Company and 60,000 each to 2 and 3 Companies. All three companies opened fire when the barrage began; while 2 and 3 Companies paid special attention to the roads to and from [Faenza](#) and the enemy's known positions, 4 Company, conforming with the creeping barrage, harassed the ground over which the infantry was to advance. When this programme was completed, the platoons stood by ready to give defensive fire on request from the infantry. The 'enemy's known positions' engaged during the barrage included houses which were visited during the subsequent advance. The machine-gunners found them 'well and truly shot up with Mk VIIIIZ bullets lying around in the rooms.'

Fifth Brigade, attacking with 28, 23 and 22 Battalions, pushed out a salient and captured the village of [Celle](#), a mile or two west of [Faenza](#). Throughout the morning 4 Company fired continuously on pockets of resistance to assist in the mopping up. All the guns engaged a counter-attack at 9 a.m., and the brigade commander (Brigadier [Pleasants](#) ¹² congratulated the companies on the part they played in breaking it up.

Altogether the Vickers expended 310,250 rounds of Mark VIIIIZ in the attack, more than half of which 4 Company fired in twelve hours. The Quartermaster (Lieutenant McLennan) recorded that between 26 November and 15 December the battalion had shot away 795,750 rounds of Mark VIIIIZ and 887,750 of Mark VII, a total of 1,683,500 in twenty days.

The enemy withdrew on the night of 15–16 December, and next day, while the Indian Division secured some ground on the left and a battalion of a Gurkha lorried infantry brigade cleared [Faenza](#), the New Zealanders closed on the line of the [Senio](#).

After twenty days with [6 Brigade](#), 2 Company was relieved by 3 and went back to [Forli](#). Still with [5 Brigade](#), 4 Company, carrying its guns and equipment in jeeps and trailers and a half-tracked vehicle, moved up to the vicinity of [Celle](#). 'It was truly a battle ground that we passed over—the dead lay where they had fallen—the infantry certainly bear the brunt of this war.' The shell holes were only a few paces apart and in some places the craters overlapped. Whole fields of maize had been cut down to little more than ground level. [Celle](#) was a shambles of turned earth, tottering houses and branchless, splintered trees.

Battalion Tactical Headquarters entered [Faenza](#), which had also been severely damaged, especially around the railway station. The towers or spires of nine churches which the Germans had used as observation posts had been shot to pieces. Shortly after the headquarters was established in a large building a counter-attack on the northern side of the town was halted only a few hundred yards away.

As the enemy still held the ground north of [Faenza](#) and could bring Route 9 between the town and the [Senio](#) under fire with all types of weapon, [6 Brigade](#) and the Gurkha brigade were to advance about two miles north-eastwards from the highway. Sixth Brigade (on the left) would have an open flank alongside the [Senio](#), and for this reason 1 and 4 Companies were to be employed solely on harassing and defensive fire across the river, while 3 Company was to support the brigade with fire on the roads which ran parallel with the line of advance. Before the attack 3 Company went into position between [Faenza](#) and [Celle](#), and 1 Company near 4 Company between [Celle](#) and the [Senio](#). All three companies began firing with the artillery barrage at 9 p.m. on 19 December, and by daybreak had expended 193,250 rounds. Sixth Brigade advanced with 24, 25 and 26 Battalions aligned from right to left in that order. At the outset one of D Company 24 Battalion's platoons ran into a minefield and suffered fifteen casualties; its place in the line was taken by the reserve platoon (No. 18) under Lieutenant Titchener, a machine-gun officer temporarily attached to the battalion for instruction in infantry tactics. With the dash that might be expected of him, Titchener entered a house, killed a German with his

tommy gun and chased out the others.

The attack was a success everywhere: both [6 Brigade](#) and the Gurkha brigade reached their objectives.

The offensive was brought to a halt for the winter on the line of the [Senio](#), which flowed between stopbanks twelve feet high. The enemy still held the bank on the New Zealand Division's side of the river, where he was dug in securely on the reverse slope, had observation over our positions, and was protected by a minefield.

Snow began to fall a couple of days before Christmas. Christmas Day 1944 was fine though very cold, and exceptionally quiet. The machine-gunners in the line—4 Company near [Celle](#) with [5 Brigade](#) and 3 Company with [6 Brigade](#) north of [Faenza](#)—celebrated as fittingly as they could under the circumstances; their cooks rose splendidly to the occasion. Those behind the line—1 Company had moved into [Faenza](#) and 2 Company had been brought up to that town from [Forli](#)—had as merry a Christmas as any spent overseas. An extra issue of beer was supplemented by generous quantities of wine and vermouth.

'Rather good tactics were used by the driver of the water- cart and his mate,' writes an officer. 'They were doing a recce with a view to acquiring "Plonk" for Xmas. They found a Vermouth factory, but to their disgust the Red Cap were there first. So while one engaged the Red Cap at the front door in conversation, the other drove the watercart to the rear of the building. No door, just one small barred window high up in the wall. Standing on the water cart he could just see down into a large vat of vermouth. In went the 3 inch hose connected to the pump for drawing water out of wells etc. He started up the pump and very soon reported back with a cartload of vermouth, picking up his mate, who was still arguing with the Red Cap, en route.'

Each night the two forward companies expended altogether 80,000 to 100,000 rounds, using almost entirely Mark VII ammunition. They harassed the stopbanks, the roads and tracks leading to the river and in the vicinity of [Castel Bolognese](#), a mile or two the other side, and the houses occupied by the enemy; they also covered the patrols sent out by our infantry, and fired on enemy patrols.

Towards the end of the year 1 Company relieved 4, which went back to [Forli](#), and 2 Company changed over with 3. On the night of 30–31 December 1 Company

fired 100,250 rounds (including only 500 Mark VIIIIZ), mostly in support of the [Maori Battalion](#), which called for fire to assist in driving off a strong German patrol. A few days later the ammunition shortage was so acute that the Vickers were permitted to fire only on call by the infantry and on special defensive-fire tasks. For the rest of January the total daily expenditure seldom exceeded 15,000 rounds and was often very much less.

Captain Frazer recalls a shoot 1 Company had during this period. 'A standing patrol of [23 Bn](#) was occupying a house, normally denied to us in daylight hours by virtue of its position in "no man's land", but very useful to us as a listening post at night. A strong Gerry patrol came over one night and attacked the post with grenades, small arms and bazookas. By an oversight they omitted to cut the telephone wire and Battalion H/Q was treated to a ringside description, round by round, of the ensuing 10 minutes. An Arty, Mortar and M.M.G. stonk was called down on the house at the request of its inhabitants, who then lay very low in the rubble of the semi-demolished building and waited, while Gerry prepared to rush them from all sides (anxious note in the telephone operator's voice). Within 5 minutes bullets from 1 Company's guns were singing and chirping among them, bringing Gerry to ground, blasphemously seeking cover. Within another minute the 25pdr shells and mortar bombs came down, around and on the house (telephone communicant from within the house jubilant, almost inarticulate: "Hells teeth its bloody perfect—you ought to hear the flap Gerry's in!"). Within another two or three minutes Gerry was gone, with casualties, leaving a collection of hastily discarded schmeisers and a bazooka.'

The Division took precautions against a surprise counter- attack: front-line and reserve units were constantly on the alert. The machine-gunners (3 Company) at [Faenza](#) dug gunpits in the outskirts of the town and were placed on two hours' notice by day and one hour's notice by night to occupy these positions for defence in depth. Demolition charges were placed on bridges, and the civilians were evacuated from the forward localities. Some of the Italians were taken out in army trucks and some on ox carts; others, carrying as much of their property as they could on their backs, had to walk.

After several heavy falls the snow was reported to be a foot deep. Some of the gun positions had to be built up above the ground, and only jeeps and half-tracked

vehicles could negotiate the tracks to the platoons. Frequent gun breakages were attributed to the colder weather, and the shortage of spare parts caused much anxiety. To prevent breakages the gunners removed the locks from their guns after firing, and even took their guns to bed with them.

After a week at [Forli](#) 4 Company changed places with 3 Company at [Faenza](#); about a week later 3 Company went forward again to relieve 2, which in turn went back to [Forli](#), and 4 Company relieved 1, which returned from the line to [Faenza](#).

When 2 Platoon (which had been supporting the Maori Battalion from positions about half a mile from the river) was about to be relieved about daybreak on the 15th, 'our arty started a mild stonking which must have got Gerry out of bed in a bad mood,' says Gladstone. 'Counter battery returns from his side of the [Senio](#) were fairly heavy and retaliatory measures were taken by our guns. Gradually the whole thing built up until in an hour or so there was a real "Chinese War" going on. Naturally the roads and crossroads around our area got their share and the changeover was delayed some hours in consequence.'

Actually German infantry, probably a strong patrol, did appear on [5 Brigade's](#) front that morning. When 1 Platoon was loaded up on its trucks and ready to depart, a call for defensive fire came from one of the infantry battalions on its right. 'We debussed—put the guns on the ground and opened fire using battle sights,' says Lieutenant Knowles. 'Range shortened to from 200 to 400 yds—but coming at a beautiful right angle to our [enfilade] fire.... a light fog covered his attack.... Situated as we were on the ground firing through light cover of a hedge, the tanks [probably our own] worried me—but the fog became a two edged weapon—our smoke was covered completely. The boys had the range—number one of No. 1 gun Ian [Cruickshank](#)¹³ was whooping like a redskin—the air was full of an electric hilarity—it was I think reaction to the "sack". [This was the platoon's last shoot before the battalion was converted into an infantry unit.] The attack was beaten off and we loaded up again—without a single casualty— and moved off. Sgt Mick Ball passed the remark "what a swan song".'

The relieving company (4) was to spend a fortnight in the line before it and 3 Company were also withdrawn.

'Our trucks left [[Faenza](#)] at quarter hour intervals commencing at nine o'clock,' wrote Sherlock (10 Platoon) on the 15th. '[We] proceeded up the main highway until we read a prominent notice "No vehicles past this point, Gerry can see you." We then turned right and relieved No. 3 [Platoon] without incident. Snow lies thick on the ground and it is necessary to bale the pits out as they are full of water. A heavy shelling stonk was laid down on the cross roads behind us soon after we were in position.... Gathered [fire] wood about the area and set out trip flares about the house. Our house is quite a secure one of two stories. Installed a fire place in our section's room.... Harassing task at 3-30 in the morning [a day or two later] at a range of 2000 yds.... we receive spandau fire in reply—Gerry was too soon in his reply as we had not time to get out of our pits and thus we were not caught in the open. ... Checked 16 belts per gun and at seven o'clock we fired eleven belts per gun in a mock attack. The idea was to find out where his defensive tasks are concentrated. We heard little in reply.... Checked 12 belts per gun and at seven o'clock in the evening we fired in another mock attack on a large scale— Mortars, Artillery—Piats—Brownings—Brens opened up with us—it was a real fire works but all in vain as Gerry remained very quiet only replying with the odd shell.'

The enemy was believed to be holding his front with a screen of machine guns backed up by some of his artillery.

'No 9 pln encountered enemy patrol at gun line at approx 0230 hrs,' reported 3 Company's diary on 19 January. 'Engaged enemy with Tommy gun, nothing more heard and pln understood patrol had made off. Warned neighbouring units. At 0440 hrs patrol once again encountered at gun line. After exchanging shots enemy patrol made off setting off one trip flare in their flight causing neighbouring units to also fire on them. First light revealed enemy's abandoned weapons in vicinity of gun line. 2 Bazookas 1 Schmeiser. Gun line of 9 pln shifted back 200 yds....' It was about half a mile from a bend in the river.

'This is our last day and night in the line as a machine gun Bn,' the diary stated on 31 January. 'Machine Gunners, old and new find this a sad day indeed.... However [3 Coy](#) have decided not to bow out without paying its due respect to friend Gerry and particularly the weapon he compares with our Vickers, the Spandau. A careful study of Sit-reps, reports from Inf Bn etc., since we have been in the line has enabled us to

plot Gerry's spandaus etc. and these will be dealt with to the extent of 50,000 rounds of Mk VII. The program commences from 1000 hrs 31st and finishes at 0430 on the 1st.... All firing was carried out throughout the period with only one incident. Gerry stonked 9 pln at approx 2200 hrs wounding Lt [Howe](#)¹⁴ and Pte [Watts](#)¹⁵— Fortunately not serious.'

These were 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion's last casualties in the Second World War. Two officers and eighteen other ranks had been wounded since the battalion first entered the [Romagna](#) in September.

All three platoons of 4 Company were also in action during the last night in the line. 'We really went to town and played all the latest tunes on them,' wrote Sherlock. 'Spandau fire fell about the area.' Next morning: 'Rolled up gun gear and withdrew the guns from the pits—our trucks arrived at 10.30 and we set off back to [CESENA](#) via [FAENZA](#) and [FORLI](#).... Cleaned gun equipment ready to hand in as we are now just P.B.I.'s.'

In the [Romagna](#) the battalion 'had fired more ammunition than in all the previous actions in [Italy](#) put together.'¹⁶ It had fired nearly 9,000,000 rounds in [Italy](#), made up as follows:

Sangro and Orsogna	997,000
Cassino	1,115,000
Terelle, Cardito, Balsorano	592,750
Arezzo- Florence	368,500
Rimini- Cesena	1,695,050
Faenza	4,138,600
	8,906,90

The battalion spent a week in the Savio River valley near [Cesena](#), where it was scattered over several miles of rather miserable country. The weather was bitterly cold, and a dank mist hung over the river flats; patches of partly thawed snow lay about and the roads were in a shocking state. The troops' chief concern was to keep warm in their billets.

On 3 February the battalion had its 'official' Christmas dinner, for which sixty-two turkeys were sacrificed. Many of the veterans were about to leave with the tongariro furlough draft. 'We had a final party.... It was the last occasion for all the officers of

the bn to be together,' wrote Moss on the 4th. 'The party went very well.... Dinty for the last time gave us his famous rendition of "Dangerous Dan McGrew".... Bill Ross also put over his equally famous hard luck tale of "Tony" trying to get a square meal in Dallas, Texas. It always brings the house down.

'Mon 5 Feb.—The boys leaving on the Tongariro scheme are away this morning. The General gave them a very good short farewell address beforehand.'

'On this parade Col. Sanders gave me—as senior officer of the Tongariro draft—the job of O.C. parade,' says Moore. 'Getting these fellows into a more or less tidy array was one of the most difficult tasks of the war. For the previous four or five days and nights they had been steadily working through a considerable quantity of assorted liquor.... With Bill Ross's assistance I was able to gently ease those returning into line a minute before the Gen. arrived. Whew! Any sudden order and I am sure a goodly proportion of them would have fallen on their faces. However the General's inspection passed without incident and he turned to me and said, "Your men had been in action a long time. They look very tired." I agreed, thinking of the casualties of the previous few days. After his address the General said he would like to shake hands with some of the old hands. When dismissed the whole group lined up to shake hands with the General. This was I think a little more than he bargained for.'

¹ Lt B. S. McCracken; Auckland; born NZ 17 Mar 1921; clerk.

² 2 Lt K. A. Watson; Te Puke; born Hunterville, 5 Jun 1921; plumber's assistant.

³ Sgt H. G. Wooffindin; Timaru; born Timaru, 5 Mar 1912; farmer.

⁴ Sgt R. G. Spence, m.i.d.; Opunake; born New Plymouth, 13 Aug 1921; carpenter.

⁵ L-Cpl D. T. Scott; Pukekohe; born Timaru, 4 May 1922; bank clerk.

⁶ Lt N. J. Newell, m.i.d.; Hairini; born Apiti, 29 Jul 1911; farmer.

⁷ DUKW: amphibian built around a 2 ½-ton six-wheeled truck chassis.

⁸ Blair was chief instructor of the MMG Wing of the Middle East Weapon Training School (where many of his suggestions were adopted and later incorporated in training pamphlets) before becoming a company commander in the Desert and Italy.

⁹ Sgt K. Holmes; born NZ 10 Nov 1909; cement worker.

¹⁰ Col G. P. Sanders, DSO, m.i.d.; Fiji; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; GSO 3 2 NZ Div 1940; BM 4 Bde 1940–41; GSO 2 2 NZ Div 1941; instructor Staff College and Army HQ (in NZ) 1942–44; CO 26 Bn Jun–Jul 1944, 27 (MG) Bn and 27 Bn 20 Nov 1944–9 Oct 1945, 27 Bn (J Force) 9 Oct 1945–16 May 1946; Director of Training, Army HQ, 1949–53; GSO 1 NZ Div 1954–55; Commandant Waiouru Camp 1955–56; Commander Fiji Military Forces 1956–.

¹¹ Lt H. J. Thomas; Pukekohe; born New Plymouth, 25 Mar 1909; company manager; wounded 12 Aug 1944.

¹²) Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn and Armd Regt Jul 1942–Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep–Oct 1944, 5 Bde Nov 1944–Jan 1945, May 1945–Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander Fiji Military Forces 1949–53, Northern Military District 1953–57, Central Military District 1957–.

¹³ Pte I. G. Cruickshank; Dunedin; born Te Kuiti, 29 Aug 1920; tyre vulcaniser.

¹⁴ Lt F. G. Howe; Darfield; born Timaru; 30 Sep 1921; clerk; wounded 31 Jan 1945.

¹⁵ Pte R. G. Watts; born Wellington, 12 Apr 1921; clerk; wounded 1 Feb

1945.

¹⁶ 27 Bn's Victory Souvenir, p. 7 (published in Sep 1945).

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 23 – MACHINE-GUNNERS INTO RIFLEMEN

CHAPTER 23

Machine-gunners into Riflemen

The conversion of 27 (MG) Battalion into infantry 'was the saddest thing that ever happened to the MG's in the opinion of some of the old hands,' says a [First Echelon](#) man (Sergeant Saunders).

The machine-gunners had taken their full share in every campaign in which the Division had fought. They had played their traditional defensive role in [Greece](#). Only the lack of equipment and ammunition had prevented them from fighting even more effectively in Crete. In the Desert they had demonstrated, when they had the opportunity, that their weapon still possessed the death-dealing capacity for which it had won its reputation in the First World War. In Italy they had been employed almost continuously on harassing tasks and had supplemented artillery barrages.

Some machine-gun officers believe that the battalion would not have been converted into infantry if the Vickers gun's capabilities of concentrated, indirect, overhead and enfilade fire had been fully appreciated and if it had been used more often to the best advantage. It cannot be denied, however, that the Division needed more infantrymen, and for this reason 27 Battalion together with 22 Battalion and Divisional Cavalry Battalion formed [9 Infantry Brigade](#). The Vickers gun was not discarded altogether: each of the Division's nine infantry battalions now had one medium machine-gun platoon of its own. The disadvantage of this, the experienced machine-gunners would argue, was that the Vickers could be used only in 'penny packets'; combined shoots by two or more platoons would be impossible.

With genuine regret the battalion said farewell to its Vickers. 'For five years,' says Victory Souvenir, 'successive gunners had lovingly kept them in the best mechanical condition.... Guns were more than just pieces of mechanism, they were individuals. Sub-sections could recognize their gun by its note.... Whenever the guns were in action they were on call for the infantry twenty-four hours of the day. It was our pride, when an "all arms" stonk was called for, to strive to be firing before the artillery, a feat often accomplished. We probably lost as much sleep as any supporting arms, and picquets on *casas* further back rarely completed a shift without hearing the long, spaced bursts of the Vickers somewhere out in the night....

'But as time wore on, and our new status became an accepted fact, a feeling of pride in the new job began to develop. Like all supporting arms, we had always felt an admiration for the infantry as the ones who really did the job of fighting the enemy, while we assisted from a safer distance. Now we were to become part of that infantry, and narrow indeed would have been our outlook had we felt it a "come down" to join the ranks of those whom we had always admired. The fact was, though most would have died rather than admit it, we were beginning to like the idea!' As a 'battle honour' the battalion was permitted to wear the machine-gunners' black triangle superimposed on 9 Brigade's red diamond distinguishing patch.

After handing in its machine-gun gear and surplus transport the battalion went back from the [Cesena](#) area to [Esanatoglia](#) on 7 February 1945 and spent the next few days settling into billets. ' [Esanatoglia](#), ' wrote Moss, 'is not such a pleasant little town as [Pioraco](#) being much older and occupied by farmers rather than industrialists. It is built along a narrow valley bottom and is extremely rambling having no regular street system at all. The main street, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, winds in serpentine fashion up a hill, swelling out in three places, into a small piazza. The remaining streets are canyon like little vias barely wide enough for jeeps and mostly too steep anyway. Also they are very dirty as the rubbish disposal is by way of the front door....'

Reorganisation began with the formation of Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Company and the specialist platoons, ¹ which were accommodated in the village. The remaining men were placed in one rifle company, which was billeted in a school about a mile from the village, and a weapon training and fieldcraft school to train prospective NCOs was set up in an empty villa.

With the arrival of reinforcements, including officers, NCOs and others who had served with 3 New Zealand Division in the [Pacific](#), the rifle companies were formed under the command of Major Frazer (1 Company) and Major Titchener (2 Company), both of whom were original machine-gunners and had been home on furlough, and Major [Bell](#) ² (3 Company) and Major [Bullen](#) ³ (4 Company), both from the disbanded 3 Division. Bullen had been awarded the DSO while serving as a company commander on [Nissan Island](#).

At first the training was repetitive and elementary, devoted to weapon handling

and individual, section and platoon tactics. The former machine-gunners had no difficulty in mastering the infantry weapons; most of their officers had done infantry courses, and some had had tours of duty with infantry battalions during the fighting at [Faenza](#). The men from [3 Division](#) of course were well grounded in fieldcraft and infantry tactics. Morale was high, the men were fit, and the cold temperatures which accompanied two or three light snowfalls gave zest to their work.

The companies practised street fighting and a dawn attack with live ammunition and tracer; they were instructed in mines, bridging, rafting and rubber boating by the engineers; they watched an anti-tank demonstration by 17-pounders and an artillery stonk and a 'murder' ('72 shells in three seconds crashed into a 30x diameter maelstrom'); they advanced behind an artillery barrage; they hunted tanks by night. An impressive demonstration with the bangalore torpedo was given by 4 Company men 'under the able direction of George Holden.... They not only disintegrated the apron fence but effectively cut the power lines of the village and blew in all the glass windows on one side of the hospital as well.'

The battalion made a mock attack on the village of Collamato, and also a daylight attack in co-operation with tanks. 'The Italians in the area had been warned about the manœuvres but some still remained working in the fields. One old woman calmly (it looked calmly from where we were) went on ploughing a strip of land with her two oxen while mortar and tank smoke shells burst just beyond her. We [the Intelligence Section] had a good grandstand view of the infantry advancing right up to their final objective, beyond which the tank shells had started a fire in the oak scrub.'

A brigade exercise began with a night attack by Divisional Cavalry and 27 Battalions, which 'went better than we expected. ... All objectives were attained by midnight. Digging in and consolidation was commenced immediately and though the Inf were secure by daylight the Sp arms were not. The single road forming the Bde axis was blocked for a period by an Armoured car in a ditch and daylight caught Atk gunners and MMGs improperly dug in and camouflaged.... During the day the "enemy" launched several counter attacks which were beaten off by Arty. Cold rain fell in the afternoon....'

The battalion Rugby fifteen, after an initial defeat, won every succeeding game,

and six of the battalion's players were included in the 9 Brigade team which defeated [Eighth Army](#) by 26-nil. Five of these six were then chosen for the [Eighth Army](#) side which defeated the [RAF](#) in a game in which the [27 Battalion](#) men scored all twelve points.

A highly successful gymkhana on the flats below [Esanatoglia](#) included shooting and grenade-throwing contests, athletic events, goal-kicking, and three races for which mounts were procured from a mule park at [Iesi](#). 'It was a shemozzle,' wrote Captain [Young](#),⁴ 'for practically all the boys got high on vermouth & in the last two races chased the leading mokes off the course & pushed the one that was running last over the line so that it won! Then there was a row for all those who'd put bets on the donks chased away, went mad....'

Leave parties visited [Pioraco](#), where the villagers had expected the battalion to return; they had arranged for the children to vacate the school again and had kept rooms clean and vacant in private houses. They gave the visitors a very warm welcome. There was some jealousy when another New Zealand unit was billeted in [Pioraco](#).

The spring flowers were reminders of April at [Cassino](#). 'Double buttercups were the first comers.... There are virgin white sprays of hawthorn in many hedges and the pink blossomed almonds have caught up with the plum trees.... Now the weather is becoming warmer the signorini also are coming out like spring flowers in brighter and prettier dresses.'

The last formal battalion parade was held on 1 April, and after a church service Brigadier Gentry spoke of his confidence in the units of 9 Brigade and briefly outlined the Division's probable role. Next day trucks were packed and billets cleaned; once again badges and titles were removed and fernleaf signs overpainted. 'Curious civilians were told that we were merely leaving for another manóuvre area, though few seemed to be convinced by this explanation.'

¹ The battalion's establishment was 32 officers and 741 other ranks organised in Bn HQ, HQ Coy (comprising signals, medium machine-gun, mortar, carrier and anti-tank platoons) and four rifle companies, each of three platoons of three sections.

² Maj G. H. Bell, DSO; Westshore, Napier; born Gisborne, 11 Oct 1908; school-teacher.

³ Maj A. B. Bullen, DSO; Papatoetoe; born Otahuhu, 25 Feb 1916; cashier; wounded 30 Apr 1945.

⁴ Capt A. J. Young; born Gisborne, 20 Mar 1917; Regular soldier; killed in action 18 Apr 1945.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 24 – THE SILLARO AND GAIANA

CHAPTER 24

The Sillaro and Gaiana

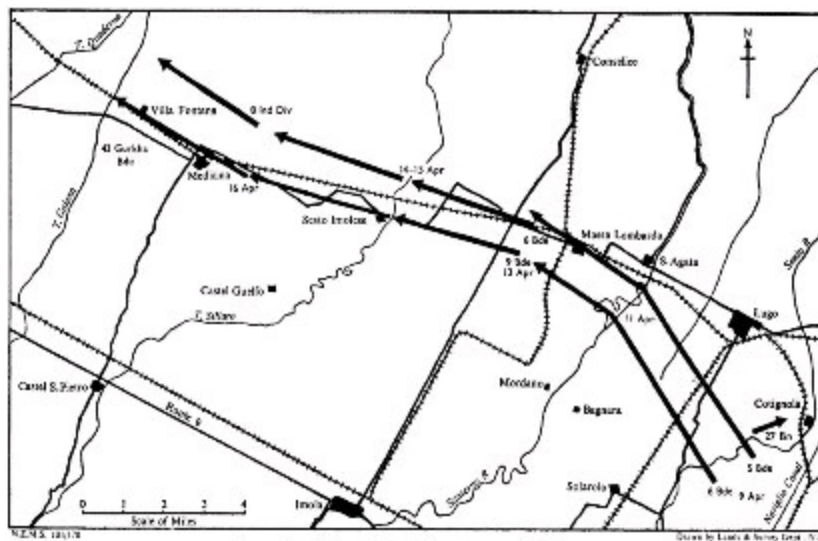
'The month of April,' states the war diary, 'was one of the most significant in the history of 27 BN. It saw the fulfilment of the purpose for which the Bn was reorganised and equipped....'

The battalion left [Esanatoglia](#) in the early evening of the 2nd and maintained a steady 20 miles in the hour along Routes 76, 16 and 9 to [Forli](#), where headlights were extinguished before taking a side road north of the town to the Division's concentration area behind the Montone River, which was reached shortly after midnight and where the men slept under canvas for the first time in 1945. The flashes of gunfire could be seen farther to the north.

During the next few days the companies trained with assault bridging equipment on the Montone, a typical [Po Valley](#) river between high stopbanks, and with armoured troop-carriers known as 'Kangaroos,' ¹

'As far as I can recall,' says Maj Bullen, 'the idea was to have three of these vehicles to a Platoon, and there were two for Coy. H.Q. so that a Kangaroo carried a section of a Platoon. Their cross country performance was admirable and they gave the advancing Infantry an excellent mobility coupled with protection from small arms fire. They were little more than a prototype at this stage and the infantry could be pinned inside by small arms fire and were extremely vulnerable as they debussed, as the only exit was over the top.' in which they were to make their debut as infantry.

The attack to break through the [Senio](#) defences was preceded by one of the heaviest air bombardments of the Italian campaign. [Eighth Army](#) was to cross the river with [5 Corps](#) and 2 Polish Corps; [5 Corps](#) (on the right), with [8 Indian Division](#) and the New Zealand Division, was to drive right through the [Senio](#) defences and secure a bridgehead over the [Santerno River](#) in the vicinity of [Massa Lombarda](#). To neutralise a small pocket between the New Zealand Division (on the left) and the Indian Division, [27 Battalion](#) was to break out of the bridgehead which 5 and 6 Brigades would establish in the initial stages of the attack, and was to capture the village of [Cotignola](#).



From the Senio to the Gaiana, 9-17 April 1945

From the **Senio** to the **Gaiana**, 9–17 April 1945

The Kangaroos arrived late in the afternoon of 9 April; the battalion embussed, and followed by the affiliated tanks of A Squadron **19 Armoured Regiment**, moved off at 6.30 p.m. to a lying-up position across the **Lamone**, where Battalion Headquarters and the Machine Gun Platoon transferred from their trucks to the Kangaroos. The whole battalion ² was then on tracked vehicles.

The order to move was expected about 1 a.m. 'Everyone was woken up by 0100 but it was still not time to move,' wrote Moss. "'Woodville" bridge, the bailey serving **5 Bde** was over, but the supporting arms of 21 and 28 [Battalions] had priority over us. Scraps of news coming through indicated that the Div was over the **Senio** along its whole front and still moving. After a few false starts we finally got moving at five o'clock. Knowing that we would probably arrive on the scene about six, the C.O. gave orders for "Plan White" which was the scheme for doing the attack in daylight.... this meant that on arrival at the assembly position the companies would proceed straight to **Cotignola** in the Kangaroos and take it. The move up in the 'roos was bitterly cold and there was a rime of frost on my map board even. We were first held up just over the Naviglio canal, where we struck the tail of a queue of vehicles waiting to cross the bridge. Daylight broke about then, and we could see bunches of Jerries coming back down the road. Some were under escort, some alone and carrying white flags and occasionally odd ones, who hadn't found anyone with enough time to take them officially prisoner of war. As we edged up to the river we saw the much disputed eastern levee of the **Senio** for the first time. It was pocked with craters and riddled on both sides with the foxholes of Jerry and us. Bulldozers

had torn a hole right through the stopbank and as we went through the gap we could see it was lousy with schu mines. As we crossed the Bailey I think everyone was surprised to see what a miserable little "torrente" had been holding us up all winter. The actual stream ran through a little muddy canyon which could almost have been broad jumped—provided one didn't have to do a preliminary run through a minefield. Across the river we saw the usual scene of desolation which always marks the Jerry lines after he has been in occupation for a while.... On arrival at the assembly position we learned the news that 78 Div observers had seen white flags in [Cotignola](#), and believing it abandoned were sending a coy to investigate. This meant that we could not bring artillery down on the village as the coys were sent in without fire support. I interrogated a civilian who stated that the Jerries had pulled out about seven that morning.'

The tanks formed a screen behind which 1, 3 and 4 Companies (followed by 2 Company in reserve) advanced in their Kangaroos. They collected about twenty prisoners, but did not enter the village, which was already in the possession of troops from [78 Division](#). On the CO's orders the companies proceeded independently to a crossroads south of [Lugo](#), where they took up positions as right flank protection for [5 Brigade](#). No call was made on them during the next two days.

Both 5 and 6 Brigades were over the [Santerno](#) when the battalion left in the early hours of 13 April for an assembly area south of [Massa Lombarda](#). The Kangaroos had been withdrawn by Brigade Headquarters, so the troops embussed in their own A Echelon transport and a platoon of RMT. 'I pulled my jeep out onto the road, to lead the column,' wrote Moss, who 'found a huge convoy of RHA vehicles coming down it. There was no hope of passing so we just had to wait. After about thirty vehicles had passed, a ham Staghound driver caught the canopy frame of the jeep and tipped it into a deep ditch alongside the road.... Further up the road a distraught Tommy officer was guiding the vehicles round a broken culvert.... The last vehicle was a breakdown which we waylaid alongside the ditched jeep.'

After the jeep had been extricated, the convoy made fairly good time until about a mile from the [Santerno](#), where it encountered tanks and stopped again. The tanks had rutted the road so badly that the first three-ton truck bellied; it had to be towed back and the crown of the road scraped off with shovels before the convoy could proceed. The companies reached the river after daybreak, crossed by the 'Spalding'

bridge, debussed and moved on foot to the assembly area, from which they were despatched immediately in rear of Divisional Cavalry Battalion.

Ninth Brigade had relieved the 5th and (with [6 Brigade](#) on its right) was to gain a bridgehead over the Sillaro, another canal-like river flowing between stopbanks. In the lead were 22 Battalion and Divisional Cavalry; [27 Battalion](#) was to follow Divisional Cavalry (on the left) with the role of protecting the exposed left flank and also mopping up any pockets of resistance that might be bypassed.

This flank 'was horribly open, the Poles being miles back and hardly over the [Santerno](#). The job was made easier by the fact that our left boundary ran along the [Molini](#) canal, a tank proof ditch with high stop banks. A check to Div Cav up ahead, halted our companies who dug in and watched the left to see whether Jerries or Poles would appear.... The companies received some fairly heavy stonking through the day, both shells and nebelwerfer rockets, but were well dug in against it.' This was the recent reinforcements' first experience of shell and mortar fire.

Divisional Cavalry and 22 Battalion had reached the Sillaro by early evening; the 27th set off on foot shortly after midnight and by daybreak had taken up flank-protecting positions, again behind Divisional Cavalry and about 2000 yards back from the river. The first fatal casualty occurred during this advance. 'Moving along the road we ran into mortar stonk,' wrote Corporal Butt (8 Platoon). 'Lost Andy [Sinclair](#) ³ ... & Doug [Thomson](#) ⁴ was badly wounded.' The companies were harassed by intermittent shell and nebelwerfer fire, which slackened off in the afternoon.

The attack over the Sillaro, at first intended for the night of 14–15 April, was postponed twenty-four hours to give more time for the artillery preparation. The Division was to break the line with two brigades, which were to exploit from their bridge heads as soon as the armour was across the river. Ninth Brigade (still with the 6th on its right) was to make the assault with 22 and 27 Battalions; Divisional Cavalry, through which the 27th was to pass, was to take over the latter's role of the previous two days and cover the left flank.

The company commanders visited Divisional Cavalry early in the afternoon to get information about the depth and width of the river and the nature of its banks, and to arrange for their men to pass through. The companies formed up behind the

near stopbank late in the afternoon; Battalion Headquarters and [Support Group](#) stayed a little farther back, ready to go quickly into the bridgehead when the Bailey bridges had been erected. 'Our gun line is some 500 yds behind the stop bank,' wrote Sherlock, of the Machine Gun Platoon. 'Aircraft strafed and bombed the hun at last light [after pounding him most of the day], which gave us ample time to dig good pits.... we open up with 14 belts per gun from this position.'

The barrage began at 9 p.m. and half an hour later, when it started to lift forward 100 yards every five minutes, the leading infantry of 1 Company (on the right) and 3 Company began to advance.

'As soon as the barrage lifted,' writes Lieutenant [Nicol](#),⁵ of 1 Company, 'we moved over the top [of the stopbank] and as the assault bridges had not been laid on for us we ploughed across through the water which was about 3' 6" deep. Luckily Jerry was not waiting for us over the other bank so forming up once again under cover of this we headed off towards the centre of the village [[Sesto Imolese](#)]. By now Jerry stuff had started to mix in and was making things confusing. However we reached the village without any trouble....

' [Sesto Imolese](#) was a single street village in the form of a semi-circle with the two ends touching the river and an open space in the centre. Our line of advance passed through the centre of this village which was our first objective and although the open space was reputed to be mined we decided to go straight through (we did not strike any as it happened).... We stopped on the far side to reform and wait for the barrage to lift. While waiting word came over the 38 set that Ken Frazer [the OC] had been wounded. I handed over the [7] Platoon to my Sergeant and moved back to Company H.Q. which was a couple of houses behind us. Found Ken sitting on a table nursing a nasty face wound, and although he insisted he was alright, I made him stay where he was and leaving an R.A.P. wallah with him collected the rest of H.Q. and headed off to start the show cracking again.

'The line of advance was reasonably well marked by Bofors tracer but as usual we were moving obliquely through grapevines and their fences slowing things down and causing much cursing when shovels and picks kept getting hung up in the wires. Other than mortaring and shelling we struck nothing until after we crossed a road just short of our objective. When moving to a casa we intended to make Coy H.Q.

we ran into a tank parked in the yard. In the heavy fog I actually walked into the side of it without seeing it. Just as I hit it, its motor started up with a roar and it took off in a tearing hurry out onto the road and disappeared off towards Fred Allen's ⁶ platoon. Called him up on the blower to warn him but it changed direction again before he could get at it.

'I sent a section of chaps around one side of the casa while I took another section around the other. While moving round heard a grenade go off and then a burst of Tommy. Found that twelve Teds had walked out of the house with their hands up but one of the last ones had thrown a grenade killing one of our boys. The burst of Tommy I had heard had settled him.

'In the meantime Fred Allen's and Doug Powell's ⁷ platoons had struck real trouble and were surrounded by a ring of Spandaus. This kept them busy for some time. The rest of the night was fairly quiet. At first light three of our Shermans joined us and made everything much happier. During the night and early morning several more lots of paratroop prisoners were brought in and despatched to Bn. H.Q. carrying our wounded. Around 0800 Capt. Gar Blue came up & took over the Coy.'

'Everything went according to schedule and at about 9.30 p.m. we crossed the bridge placed there by 4 Coy,' writes Major Bell, OC 3 Company. 'We advanced very close to the barrage, a policy which later paid a handsome dividend in that the Jerry tanks as soon as the barrage passed over them opened their turrets not expecting us to be anywhere near them.... Shortly after crossing the River a shell in the barrage fell short wounding 3 men of 14 pn....'

'Most of our casualties were from our own shellfire,' says Lance-Corporal Tanner, ⁸ of 14 Platoon (on the left flank). '... we ran into the German infantry screen, who were completely caught with their pants down, and were just beginning to dig in. They seemed to be stupefied, partly with the barrage, and partly with the shock of seeing us emerging almost out of the barrage itself. They took a lot of moving. Very sullen and stubborn. No wonder, they were one of Hitler's parachute divisions.... They were well armed and fanatical types, as we had seen to our sorrow in earlier battles. However after a lot of shouting and cursing in Italian and German, we managed to bustle them off and left them in charge of two or three men till the reserve platoon [13 Platoon] came up....'

After an advance of about 1500 yards the company halted on a pause line for twenty minutes until the barrage lifted forward again. A narrow road ran towards the front between 15 Platoon (on the right) and 14 Platoon and joined a lateral road a short distance ahead; near the junction of these two roads was a small group of houses. From the vicinity of another house, now in the rear of 14 Platoon, came the sound of a tank engine.

Major Bell describes an encounter with what he is convinced was a Panther tank. 'Coy HQrs,' he says, 'were immediately opposite a barn just passed by 14 pn. I heard the characteristic "whirr" of a tank starting up....' Private [Ness](#),⁹ one of the men with him, says 'we were close to the road [between 14 and 15 Platoons] where the Panther was making a turn, and one of the crew was visible standing up in the turret.... Major Bell moved towards the road leaving us to follow.' Bell claims 'I managed to get in 3—77 [phosphorus] grenades and I am reasonably sure I scored hits.' The tank made off, followed by Bell and his companions. In a few minutes they encountered some 14 Platoon men, who threw phosphorus grenades at the tank as it passed.

'When we first heard the staccato whirr and clatter of a track vehicle starting up,' says Tanner, 'we thought it may have been a Red Cross Bren carrier coming up to pick up our wounded from the barrage. Our doubts were rudely dispelled when we saw the huge bulk of a Jerry tank, seemingly right on the top of us. It turned abreast of us with its 88 M.M. gun pointing straight at us, and very slowly made to cross a paddock to the road....

'We acted very quickly. First thing I remember was Tucker asking me for a Piat bomb.... I suddenly realised with some shame, I had left the bracket of 3 bombs back at the starting point. Tucker immediately suggested phosphorus grenades. All this happened in a matter of seconds.... Tucker, myself and [one or two others] threw our first salvo of 77s.... At least 3 hits were registered on this tank [which Tanner thought was a Tiger¹⁰] The rubber tracks held the phosphorus and we were awestruck at the way it seemingly burst into flames....' The tank headed towards a house near the crossroads.

Tucker reconnoitred towards this house, and on his return Lieutenant [Sneddon](#)¹¹ and [McIntyre](#)¹² went forward with him along a hedge and a ditch. Sneddon

worked his way round to the left-hand corner of the house, while McIntyre took up a position behind the right-hand corner and Tucker behind a tree. After a few minutes Tucker crept over to McIntyre to tell him that there was a tank on the other side of the road about thirty yards away. By crouching down the two men could see its superstructure silhouetted clearly against the sky. They could also hear German voices. When a man raised himself above the turret, Tucker fired his Tommy gun and McIntyre his rifle. The German screamed and slid back into the hull of the tank.

While McIntyre kept up a steady covering fire, Tucker dashed forward along the hedgerow to where a path led from the house to the road. At the gateway he found a second Panther, which previously had been hidden from view by the hedge; it was less than twenty feet from him. He tossed a high-explosive grenade through its open hatch, and also threw a phosphorus grenade at the tank on the other side of the road. Flames immediately shot from the latter, and the crew of four or five rushed from it towards the house. 'Tucker and I,' writes McIntyre, 'went to where I saw them, and came across a dugout. Tucker called on them to come out but getting no response blasted it with HE grenades. It was then that about 8 Italians came out, we questioned them where the Huns were, but they were very hazy about everything. T'was then we heard another tank start up for a getaway. Tucker said to me keep them covered while I have a look. He immediately raced towards the crossroads and attacked it [this was another Panther].... at the time concentrated Spandau fire was raking the area from a criss cross angle.'

Apparently Tucker's first phosphorus grenade set fire to the rubber on the tank's bogies, for it made off along the lateral road whirling smoke and flame like a Catherine Wheel. By this time 14 Platoon and also 13 Platoon, coming up on the left, had reached a very deep ditch alongside this road. When the tank approached, Walker,¹³ who had brought up 13 Platoon's Piat, fired a bomb at it. He says the Panther was 'only about 30 yds away or less when I fired scoring a hit just below the turret.... Lt Sneddon was knocked out by the blast. He was just behind me and he rolled back down into the ditch.' The tank continued down the road and disappeared in the dark ness. It was discovered after daybreak in the ditch in front of a house.

Sergeant Ward,¹⁴ Tanner and McCoy¹⁵ went to a house on the far side of the crossroads, where they found another tank, probably a Tiger. 'It seemed to be smoking and appeared to have engine trouble, which led me to believe it had

already been attacked,' writes Tanner. 'We hit it and it tore off.... It stopped, we made another strike, whereupon it staggered off as we pursued it with the last of our phosphorus grenades. It took a desperate zigzag course across country and eventually burst into a great sheet of flame, where it could be seen next day, a gutted wreck....

'We returned to the last house to find Tucker.... He gave me instructions to make a quick search of the outhouses. His last words to me, or anyone else for that matter, were "Dont be more than a minute or two". So the 3 of us made a quick round while Tucker walked back to the platoon, via the Xroad. In a minute or two we followed. The Jerry's were more active now and several Very light flares caused us to duck as we reached the crossroads. It was here that Sgt Ward noticed a man lying right in the middle of the Xroad. I thought it was just another Jerry, but Ward insisted it was a Kiwi, so by the light of another flare I dragged the body off the road into the roadside ditch.'

Tucker had been killed by a bullet which had pierced a nail file, his paybook and a notebook. 'We couldn't believe it. Tucker seemed to lead a charmed life.... It was a very sore point with the men of 14 Platoon that this quiet spoken, dauntless, slim built, unassuming man of few words was not awarded the highest decoration for his unprecedented action in sealing the fate of three of these so called invincible steel monsters and their crews.'

Company Headquarters was established in the house along side the lane where Tucker had disabled the two Panthers. 'The C.O. brought down the emergency S.O.S. arty fire on our immediate front and from then on we had no further enemy activity from that direction,' says Bell. 'However a casa on our extreme left ... was pestering us with sporadic spandau fire. ... Lieut. [Hayes](#), ¹⁶ of 13 pn, took a recce patrol to investigate this enemy position. He reported back in due course that he considered it very strongly held.'

Men from 14 and 13 Platoons attacked two spandaus dug in under haystacks near the house in front of which the Panther had gone into the deep ditch. Lance-Sergeant [Burton](#) ¹⁷ remembers 'using up all the H.E. grenades we had between us, in order to silence the two "spandaus".... It was very open ground, and it was a matter of wriggle on one's stomach to within grenade range, as the intermittent fire from

Jerry was only inches above the hair on the back of one's neck. It was so dark at that hour that all you could see from ground level was the outline of the haystacks and the house behind.' At dawn about twenty-five prisoners were taken from the house without much opposition.

Bell had been unable to make contact with Lieutenant [Smith](#)¹⁸ (15 Platoon) on the right flank. 'This at the time was most disturbing as I was being asked by [2 Coy](#) [which was following 3] for the "O.K." to piat a casa somewhere on their right flank. I could not possibly give such an O.K. as Smith would be some where in the locality. Some time afterwards Sgt Ward did a good job in locating this pn.' It had met little opposition and had pushed on to the objective and dug in, but Smith had been separated from his wireless set and unable to report his position.

The company's casualties had been remarkably few: one killed and six wounded; on the other hand it had accounted for many Germans, and had captured three tanks and destroyed a fourth.

A Bailey bridge was completed over the Sillaro and the armour began to roll across at 4 a.m. The tanks were followed by the RAP carriers and the other supporting arms. 'It was a hectic crossing as by this time the bridge had been taped by his mortars & shells,' wrote Sherlock. 'Our 15 cwt trucks bedded down in the loose earth and we had Gods own job to get them out—it was a miracle that we had no casualties in our M.G. Platoon.'

About five o'clock the CO, who had gone ahead in a tank sent back word for Battalion Headquarters to follow. Moss, who was leading in his jeep, wrote: '[Sesto Imolese](#) was still smoking from yesterday's air attacks and a single German gun was sending one shell at a time into it. We drove through as fast as we could.... As it was we coincided almost perfectly with the arrival of one shell.... We fairly hurdled our way out of the village, over shellholes and charred beams.... The new HQ consisted of the command Sherman and the tottering shell of a casa behind which it was hiding. The place was still blazing merrily.... Damp mist lay about, and it was impossible to tell whether we would be under observation or not from some distant church tower, so we dispersed the vehicles rapidly. The sigs were driven back behind the house by a spandau which was splattering round the truck from well back.'

The advance was continued by 2 and 4 Companies. When 3 Company's attack came to a halt, Major Titchener obtained the CO's approval for 2 Company to pass through. 'It was necessary for my Company to turn left before we advanced because 3 Company's front had not been properly covered and we had gone a very little distance (it was now daylight) when we encountered the enemy on our right flank. The opposition was fairly strong.

'A daylight attack was necessary and after a barrage we took about 100 paratroopers as prisoners.... Those whom we encountered had plenty of fight.... Bill Fuller¹⁹ was killed by a sniper before the paratroopers surrendered and was actually standing up directing operations when he was hit.'

Against scattered resistance 4 Company pressed on up the [Sesto Imolese-Medicina](#) road. 'We married up with a troop of tanks,' says Major Bullen, 'took formation and had the pleasure of doing a real copy book tank-inf attack across flat ground, against a company of Germans, holed up in defensive position, astride a lateral road.... Good tank support, and the fact that the "Teds" hadn't had breakfast, contributed to a very tidy little victory, with a few dead enemy and about a hundred captured. We pressed on about a mile, and then dug in and had the extraordinary experience of watching battles going on in our left and right rear, while the tanks in support of the Coy. put down harassing fire as they pleased until a couple of 88's got our range at which stage tanks and infantry alike took up "hull down" positions.'

During this advance 'we could see a [Red Cross](#) flag being waved from a hole in the centre of the track some 300 yards distant,' Sergeant Saunders recalls. 'When we were up level with it Jim Quaid²⁰ went over and came back with the news that the Hun said "Well, you guys, this war is over for us!" in very [New York](#) city accents.'

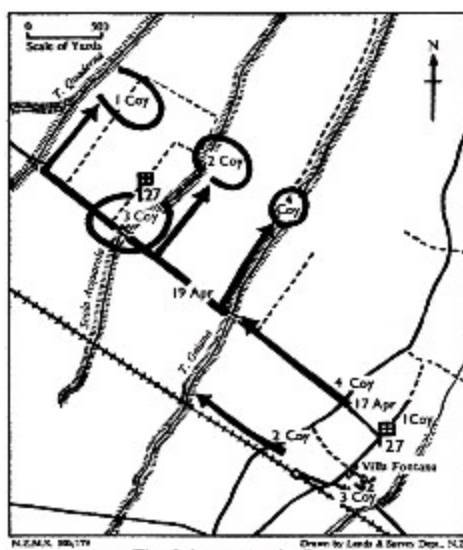
By this time the battalion had taken about 300 prisoners altogether, mostly from [4 Parachute Division](#). Its own casualties were less than thirty, including five killed.

The attack had passed right through the Sillaro defences and the enemy had disengaged. Half a squadron of Kangaroos arrived in the afternoon and were allotted to 1 and 3 Companies, which were to take the lead again; 2 and 4 Companies rode on A Squadron's tanks or on Battalion Headquarters' Kangaroos. The rate of advance was limited only by the time it took the accompanying engineers of the Assault

Squadron to provide crossings over the many canals and ditches. By sunset the battalion was on the outskirts of [Medicina](#).

Patrols who returned just before daybreak next morning (the 17th) reported that they had not seen the enemy. The tanks, which had retired during the night to replenish fuel and ammunition and to do the maintenance necessary to keep them in running order, returned 'all anxious for an advance,' writes Major [Wiseley](#),²¹ their OC, 'but delay with much bustle ensued owing to the late delivery of maps and codes and the necessity of getting such a large number of Kangaroo, tank and Inf [wireless] sets satisfactorily on link. The Battn. moved out an hour after first light with two troops of tanks leading, each with a company of Infantry in support in Kangaroos and the remainder of the tanks following Inf. and Tank H.Q. All but the two leading troops carried a smothering array of Inf.'

[Medicina](#) was already in the possession of the [Gurkhas](#) of 43 Lorried Infantry Brigade, so the battalion went on towards [Villa Fontana](#), a village about three and a half miles distant. A few Germans were winkled out from houses on the way. When the leading troops approached the village, a demolition went up with a big cloud of dust and cratered the road where it crossed a canal a short distance ahead. Some fifty Italians began working feverishly with shovels, buckets and baskets, but made little impression on the huge hole. Soon afterwards a



The Gaiana, 17–19 April 1945

Sherman-dozer arrived and to the Italians' amazement complete in ten minutes

what would have taken them several hours. Dismounted patrols found the village clear of the enemy before the battalion passed through. 'The people lined the streets, cheering and clapping. Had they known it then,' Moss wrote, 'they would not have been so enthusiastic. Our coming was no blessing to the "Fontanese" as Jerry shelled hell out of the village from the time we passed through.... We were amused ... to see the locals obliterating the "vive borghese" and "viva Mussolinis" everywhere and at the same time writing up "viva Neo Zealandese".'

The next bound brought the battalion to another canal, the [Torrente Gaiana](#), which (unlike the others crossed since the Sillaro) ran between stopbanks rising about twenty feet above the plain.

Titchener had taken a foot patrol to the [Villa Fontana](#) railway station, where he 'could clearly observe that the stopbank in front was held by the enemy. There was a perfectly flat approach with no cover ranging from 600 to 1000 yards. I had heard Bullen talking on the radio and he expressed quite rightly some doubts.... My observations were that the enemy was holding the stopbank but not very strongly. My guess was probably influenced by the general impression that the enemy was withdrawing fast....'

Titchener says that he told the CO that 'I was prepared to go (I did consider the chances good)....' His intention was to secure the far stopbank.

Just before midday, therefore, 2 Company Headquarters and 10 Platoon advanced parallel with the railway embankment, with a troop of tanks leading on their left flank. 'The plan was that provided we reached the stopbank successfully, I would call up the remaining two Platoons when we would proceed to cross the stream. We moved fast and undoubtedly surprised the enemy. In fact Company Headquarters and the Platoon arrived complete. The Platoon Commander (Burgess) was wounded shortly after we arrived. The remaining two Platoons were called up and they also arrived intact. In fact the only casualty apart from the tanks up to this stage was Burgess. I contacted the CO and was told to stop.'

The tanks held the enemy at bay while the infantry debussed from their Kangaroos. Second-Lieutenant Vasey ²² left his tank and dashed to the intersection of the railway embankment and the stopbank, made his observations under fire, and

returned to direct his troop's shooting on the German positions until his own tank was knocked out by bazooka and mortar bombs and he was seriously wounded. The tanks remained about 100 yards behind the infantry with their guns trained on the stop-bank. 'Vasey's work was of a very high order and the action was really a text-book move of infantry and tanks,' says Titchener.

The infantry debussed under the shelter of the stopbank. The enemy, who had dug in on the crest and the other side, threw grenades or rolled them down from the top. Lance-Corporal [Hutchison](#),²³ a section-leader in 10 Platoon, which was near the intersection of the railway embankment and the stopbank, decided to attempt to silence some enfilading small-arms fire from a party of Germans on the left flank. He climbed the bank, and after throwing a couple of grenades, rushed over the top. The Germans retired to their side, but one stayed behind a telegraph pole, apparently as a sniper. 'I was lucky enough to get him with a burst of Tommy gun fire. The rest of his section got clear without loss. As I was alone and finding that fire was now pretty hot plus the fact that I was by now on the edge of Jerry's side of the bank I thought it would be easier to take cover in one of his slit trenches than to try and dash back.

'I dropped into a slitty and noticed a Jerry in another a few feet away. I rolled over a grenade after letting it detonate first in order to cut down the time fuse. I followed it over and found he was badly wounded. In the next slitty again was a Jerry with a pistol and assuming that he might be an officer because of this fact, but being out of grenades I turned the tommy gun on him and jumped in beside him. He surrendered but didn't want to come back over the bank to our side because he said his friends would shoot him. The distance separating us from my platoon was the width of the stopbank—about 12 feet or so. However I threatened to shoot him there if he didn't dive over and so we both shot back over the bank where we arrived safely. He was right about his coppers—they did have a crack.' Hutchison's prisoner was a cadet-officer from a regiment of 1 Parachute Division (this regiment was under the command of [4 Parachute Division](#)).

The men had left their digging tools in the Kangaroos 'on my instructions as we expected to attack the far stopbank,' say Titchener. 'The Kangaroos had wisely departed and the question of digging tools then arose as it appeared that all was not going well on the right flank [where 4 Company was attacking]. ... A fairly hectic argument developed with the Kangaroos regarding returning the digging tools but

eventually they did bring them. The Germans had now reacted to the situation but not too violently in my sector. I reported the code word for my arrival but this was not given to our tanks on the left flank [where the Gurkhas were] who proceeded to shoot us up from the rear. The Germans then became more active and I instructed the Artillery Officer to bring the D.F. tasks closer and unfortunately there was somewhere a rogue gun. Also the barrage was so close that we had to accept the possibility of casualties. Most of our casualties at this stage had come from our own tanks and Artillery.

'It was at this stage that our sector should have been reinforced and I am quite convinced that if this had been done the far stopbank would have been secured. The position developed into a stalemate and continued for the rest of the afternoon. I tried to make contact with 4 Company and I think I collected at least two members one of whom Bob Steel had been wounded. The attack as such had completely stopped and the enemy seemed to be diverting his whole attention on 4 Company who unfortunately had been forced to use the road as an axis.'

Colonel Sanders says that 1 or 3 Company, or both, did not follow up 2 Company's success and go through to secure the far stopbank because 'the job would have been beyond them. ... as soon as [2 Company] got there it was obvious that the enemy was holding the Gaiana in such strength that a coordinated divisional attack would be necessary to secure both stopbanks and beyond. The battalion's intention was to secure the near stopbank as a spring-board.'

Titchener reorganised his company into two strong platoons, one with Company Headquarters based on a house in a bend in the stopbank near the railway and the other on the stopbank farther to the right. From the upper windows of the house, which commanded the banks on both sides of the canal for some distance, Titchener and two or three others retaliated against the German snipers, who already had killed or wounded several men. Hultenburg²⁴ accounted for at least five before he himself was killed while using a Bren gun as a sniping weapon. 'I cautioned him on several occasions to be more careful but unfortunately his enthusiasm and courage overcame his judgment. There certainly was some good shooting that afternoon. The rest of the afternoon we spent trying to keep the enemy from using the stopbank as an observation point. We used Artillery, 2? mortars, small arms fire, and

also called in the [Air Force](#) who did particularly good work with close support bombing.... It was only by the grace of God and a lack of aggressiveness on the enemy's part that 2 Company was not overrun. We were stretched in a thin red line along the stop- bank with both flanks open and a determined assault may have dealt with us very quickly. In fact I do not think the enemy realised we had one Company in that sector.'

The straight, dusty road (the road to [Budrio](#)) led to the canal about 600 yards to the right of the railway embankment. 'On rounding the right flank of [Villa Fontana](#),' says Major Bullen (4 Company), 'we were confronted with a flat expanse of field overlooked by a large stop-bank, and it was probably 4 Coy's bad luck to be about opposite the road that ran up to the centre of the bank.

'Things just looked too quiet and the troop leader of the Kangaroo that was carrying Coy. H.Q. agreed with me that it looked mighty bad.

'This snap appreciation was conveyed to Bn. H.Q. who ordered 4 Coy. to push one platoon up to the bank. 16 Platoon commanded by Paul [Whitelaw](#)²⁵ drew the marble....'

'I was ordered to make a reconnaissance of two houses to the right of the road leading to the stop bank,' says Whitelaw. 'One house was built partially on the stop bank & the other was a few yards away.'

Sergeant Saunders says 'we had been told by the Ities that there were "Molti Tedeschi" at the river and that they had been digging all night. In two Kangaroos we went fairly briskly down the road and when about 250 yards from it came under fire, we got the lot from small arms to the big Faust Patronen²⁶ bazookas thrown at us and were pleased to turn to the right off the road behind a casa right at the stop bank and de-buss.'

Several men were wounded while getting out of the Kangaroos. These included Whitelaw's wireless operator, who returned to Battalion Headquarters with his wireless in one of the Kangaroos. The other Kangaroo, its crew killed or wounded, remained by the houses for the rest of the day with its engine still running.

'We investigated the houses and were then pinned down by mortar and rifle

fire,' Whitelaw continues. 'There was some exchange of fire.... I myself had a go at a few German heads about 100 yards away, with a machine gun. I don't know if I scored any points but the heads were not again visible.... My platoon suffered heavy casualties—one killed and many wounded —only a very few were unwounded—while in these houses.'

Bullen says that 'the enemy who had appeared to have concentrated his force further to the right, opposite the approaching 22 [Battalion] column, did a quick switch of Infantry to the 27 front, and through my glasses I could see them diving across the gap in the bank where previously the [demolished] bridge crossed. With 16 Platoon out on a limb, the only thing left was to get my other two platoons to the bank and restore the position.'

Only 17 Platoon reached the stopbank and successfully dispossessed the enemy. While on top of the bank it was enfiladed from both flanks. 'Our only alternative to remaining there,' says Lieutenant Jessup,²⁷ 'was to retire [to the nearer side of the bank] where we were covered from enemy fire but decimated by ill-directed fire' from the supporting tanks and 25-pounders. The men had left their entrenching tools in the Kangaroos, and a most unfortunate stonk which was laid on while they were still within the beaten zone reduced their effective strength to three or four. Jessup himself was wounded, but after a period of unconsciousness continued the fight until much later, when he and the other wounded were carried to the RAP.

Meanwhile 18 Platoon, says Bullen, 'had been forced to ditch about 150 yards from the bank and was obliged to take shelter in a lateral ditch, which the enemy managed to range rather well with his mortars.' This platoon also had many casualties; its commander (Lieutenant Brigham²⁸ was among those wounded.

'Coy H.Q. meanwhile had joined Whitelaw's Platoon of whom the vast majority were wounded and all that could be said of the Coy's accomplishment was that we had mostly reached the bank and very precariously were holding our side.

'The right flank was wide open and remained so until 22 came up under cover of 25 pdr. smoke. Bren gun fire and the aid of a supporting tank had enabled me to subdue this flank meanwhile but it certainly wasn't neutralised.

'By the time Kangaroos had removed the wounded we found ourselves

theoretically occupying 350 yards of stop-bank with a coy. H.Q. and remnants of 16 Platoon, totalling 9 or 10 men on one flank and about 3 in Jessup's position on the other.... all the platoon cmds. were wounded; one sergeant wounded and the other two dead....'

The evacuation of the wounded had not been possible until late in the afternoon. The RAP man, 'Doc' [Flaherty](#), ²⁹ had been 'the only bright spot in 4 Coy's day.... On foot and carrying a pint sized red cross flag, he tended the wounded throughout the day, seldom under cover and more than once caught in the mortar stonks, which were accorded us at regular intervals throughout the day. His preservation that day was amazing, and his work in the highest traditions of the flag he carried.'

For the first three hours of the attack Battalion Headquarters was in a Kangaroo on a lateral road just beyond the village, where it was under heavy shell and nebelwerfer fire. So accurate was this that the presence of an observation post in the village was suspected, but a thorough search by 3 Company failed to discover anybody who could be assisting the Germans, 'so we had to accept the shooting as predicted, too damn well predicted we thought.'

The headquarters moved to the stable of a large house, but the German guns scored direct hits on the house almost at will. In the late afternoon, when the CO had been called away to a brigade conference, a shell came into a room, completely wrecked all communications, mortally wounded the Adjutant (Captain Ross) and injured several others.

No news had been received from 4 Company, which had gone off the air during the advance to the stopbank; no runner had reported back, and there was no hope of putting a line through to Company Headquarters. Obviously the company had run into serious trouble. The Intelligence Officer (Moss), sent in a Sherman tank to get information, arrived at the ruins of Company Headquarters' house to find 'Major Bullen surrounded by about nine of his boys.... He reckoned that the company would have to be relieved.... I went back flat out to report.'

The CO returned from Brigade Headquarters and called an orders group conference at which he announced the plan for an attack that night through [27](#)

Battalion, but this was postponed until the following night. Brigadier Gentry explains that the Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade, which was under the Division's command for the attack, had 'tried to cross the Gaiana in daylight.... It sustained rather heavy casualties and had to withdraw disorganized with only one fresh battalion available for the next operation. In the late afternoon Brigadier [Barker], the Brigade Commander, came over to see me and said he felt that his Brigade could not carry out the attack that night. ... After some discussion I agreed to go to Division to tell the Divisional Commander the story myself as I was convinced by this time that it would not be a good attack.... I arrived to find the General having dinner.... He accepted my advice to call the attack off for 24 hours.'

Meanwhile it was decided to send 1 Company to relieve 4, but before that could be done Bullen arrived at Battalion Headquarters to report that his men were all out of the line except for the dead left on the ground and the two or three who had joined 2 Company. 'Just on dusk,' he says, 'the enemy proceeded to bazooka the casa and in fact set it on fire. The complete absence of orders from Bn. since the attack started and the non reply to any messages relayed through my 38 set through the Arty., coupled with the total ineffectiveness of the Coy. as a fighting unit, persuaded me that there was little purpose in being cooked, so I gave orders for the remaining few troops to make a run for it. Which they did.' Bullen did not know until he arrived at Battalion Headquarters that 1 Company had been ordered to relieve 4.

The CO directed 1 Company—which had been in reserve to the right of the village, where it had been severely shelled and mortared but did not have any casualties—to go forward to occupy the stopbank when darkness fell. Apart from two casualties from a mine explosion on the way the company reached the stopbank without interference. Two platoons were established right on the bank, one each side of the road. Nicol says he sent out a two-man patrol from 7 Platoon (on the left) during the night: 'they returned with the information that the enemy was digging in around the bridge, and on the far side of the canal.' It was a comparatively quiet night.

Altogether the battalion's casualties on 17 April were nineteen killed and sixty-six wounded (two fatally); of the seventy-eight men of 4 Company who had gone into the attack on the Gaiana, ten had been killed and thirty-six wounded.

The RAP carriers toiled unremittingly and much of the time under fire. Private [Morris](#)³⁰ 'again and again drove through the mercilessly shelled streets to bring out our wounded and later went right up to the forward troops at the stop-bank under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire thence evacuating across open country to the RAP. He continued until the early hours of the morning and after short and twice interrupted rest was on the job again the following morning.... Though on occasions he was advised to wait until things were quieter he always went immediately, with determination and complete disregard of his own safety.'

Battalion Headquarters moved back into [Villa Fontana](#) at dawn on the 18th. 'The other place was getting too hot.... The spot [in the village] wasn't altogether peaceful however as Jerry commenced a continuous harassing programme, just one shell at a time on the village.'

An enemy observation post at the corner of the stopbank and the railway embankment could not be dislodged by 2 Company's weapons and was too close to be shelled by the artillery. Titchener's sharpshooters continued their duel with the German snipers and by the end of the day had claimed thirteen of them.

The tanks supporting 1 Company shot up an enemy-occupied house just across the canal and completely destroyed the upper part of the building. It was a difficult shoot because only the roof was visible and the clearance above the bank where the company was dug in was only about three feet. About an hour later (in mid-afternoon) the enemy was so quiet that a two-man patrol was sent out to investigate. This patrol crossed the stop-bank near the demolished road bridge and went 250 yards along the reverse slope in 2 Company's direction without seeing the enemy but finding trenches that had been recently vacated.

A larger patrol was then sent out by 2 Company. Hutchison says he 'was ordered to take a fighting patrol of 10 men and cross the canal, taking note of grenades, land mines, water depth-breadth, canal bottom etc and hold the far side of the river so that the company could cross. My patrol crossed the water breast high and we were just climbing [the bank on] the far side of the canal ... when Jerry opened up with small arms and mortars. I ordered a withdrawal and [we] were fortunate in being covered in our retreat by 2 Brens which I had left on our side of the canal. We arrived back without casualties.' After that the paratroopers were alert.

When darkness fell the two companies were withdrawn 500 yards so that the barrage for the attack that night could fall on both banks. While 1 Company completed its withdrawal without incident, 2 Company did not escape detection in the half light. The enemy brought down several stonks but no small-arms fire. The company went back by a devious route, and on the way found the bodies of Captain Young (the second-in-command) and Private [Carswell](#)³¹ (his driver) in a ditch. They had been shot by snipers earlier in the day.

The attack over the Gaiana was made by 9 Brigade and 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade. The 27th Battalion was to follow in the rear of Divisional Cavalry Battalion (which was on the right of the 22nd) and was to prevent infiltration on the brigade's right flank.

The German strength was estimated at a maximum of 1000, against whom 192 field guns (not including the medium artillery) were to fire 100,000 rounds—a hundred for each paratrooper. This barrage opened at 9.30 p.m. and lifted half an hour later to a line 500 yards ahead. The flame-throwers (Wasps and Crocodiles) then crept up to within striking distance of the canal. 'A huge red glow surged up into the sky all along our front as they opened up simultaneously,' Moss observed from an upstairs window. 'The fearful molten streams curved through the air and slobbered all over the river. Soon the levees were outlined in sizzling, licking fire and looked like walls of hot lava. At every fresh spout of the flaming fluid, the glare would light up the pillaring clouds of smoke giving the sky the appearance of a display of the southern aurora.'

'Despite all this,' wrote Geoffrey Cox,³² 'the parachutists did not give up easily. Though the prisoners who came back were dazed and horrified, they totalled less than 200. Their casualties on the ground appeared, in the dark, not very numerous.... It was only when I went forward to the river line itself early the next day that I realised.... the first count of enemy casualties had been too low. Along these banks in the stream, in their trenches, in houses and holes behind, lay the massed dead. Few battlefields in this war can have presented the picture of carnage which the banks of the Giana showed that day.'

When each canal in the open flat country beyond the Gaiana was captured, a company of [27 Battalion](#) went out to seal it off on the exposed flank. The first to go,

4 Company, set off along the road shortly after midnight and followed the Gaiana north-eastwards for about a kilometre, where it made contact with the enemy. The next to leave, 2 Company, crossed the Gaiana by a freshly erected Bailey bridge, and without making contact, took up a position facing north-eastwards astride the next canal, the [Scolo Acquarolo](#).

With the farthest to go, 1 Company turned off to the right just short of the [Torrente Quaderna](#) and went across country to a group of houses. 'Saw a Jerry dive into a house whereupon the boys opened up with everything, Brens, rifles, Tommies, Piats and 2 inch mortars,' says Nicol, whose 7 Platoon was on the left. 'Practically blew the casa to bits. One undersized young Jerry came out. Picked up some more prisoners at a house further along but struck nothing very solid. While digging in there was a bit of Spandau & mortar but it was fairly long distance I think. My left flank was on the stop bank & the boys there spent all day firing the Bren at parties of Jerries dashing across the canal about 600 yards away.... six more Jerries were found in the attic of the house we had as H.Q.'

During the morning Captain Blue decided to attack a group of houses 200 or 300 yards away, from which the enemy was firing small arms and bazookas. Shellfire from the supporting tanks forced fifteen Germans to bolt for the stopbank, and two Wasps then rushed up to flame the bank. This caused the Germans in the vicinity to panic. For 100 yards or so on each side of the flamed ground they discarded their weapons and fled into the open. A prearranged 25-pounder stonk was then brought down squarely among them. Later a paratroop captain walked in and gave himself up.

The enemy did not counter-attack, but stonked the whole battalion area. The tanks with 2 Company harassed the disorganised enemy parties who were trying to regain their own lines. A self-propelled gun and some mortars firing persistently from beyond the [Quaderna](#) were engaged twice by the tanks and finally quietened by the medium guns. By 3 p.m. all hostile fire had ceased.

Less than an hour later the reconnaissance group from the [Maori Battalion](#) arrived to arrange the relief of the 27th. Guides from each company—including 3 Company, which had gone forward to the [Scolo Acquarolo](#) in reserve—met the Maoris at nine o'clock and led them to their positions. The whole battalion then went

back in trucks to a rest area near [Medicina](#), where it was to spend the next couple of days under canvas.

Some reorganisation was necessary: since the start of the advance three officers and thirty-one other ranks (including nine NCOs) had been killed and six officers and 106 other ranks (including twenty-six NCOs) wounded.

¹ These were cut-down Sherman or Cromwell tanks with the turret removed and mounting two machine guns, one on a swivel and the other firing straight forward through an aperture. The crews of the Kangaroos attached to 27 Bn were from [4 Hussars](#).

² The officers of the battalion were:

Bn HQ

CO: [Lt-Col G. P. Sanders](#)

2 i/c: [Maj J. H. R. Luxford](#)

Adj: [Capt M. W. J. Ross](#)

IO: [Lt B. C. H. Moss](#)

QM: [Lt I. McLennan](#)

TO: [Lt J. F. Wade](#)

MO: [Capt E. K. McLeod](#)

Padre: [Rev J. Sands](#)

1 Coy

OC: [Maj K. J. Frazer](#)

2 i/c: [Capt G. F. R. Keith](#)

7 Pl: [Lt W. S. Nicol](#)

8 Pl: [Lt F. R. Allen](#)

9 Pl: 2 [Lt D. G. Powell](#)

3 Coy

OC: [Maj G. H. Bell](#)

2 i/c: [Capt E. Sanders](#)

13 Pl: 2 [Lt K. J. Pogmore](#)

14 Pl: [Lt B. R. Sneddon](#)

15 Pl: [Lt R. L. Smith](#)

HQ Coy

OC: [Lt M. T. Wilson](#)

Sigs Pl: [Lt E. T. Couch](#)

MMG Pl: 2 [Lt J. R. Gordon](#)

Mortar Pl: [Lt C. V. Martyn](#)

Carrier Pl: [Sgt A. W. Gadd](#)

A-Tk Pl: 2 [Lt P. Webb](#)

2 Coy

OC: Maj W. F. Titchener

2 i/c: Capt A. J. Young

10 Pl: 2 Lt N. J. Fuller

11 Pl: 2 Lt N. G. Tracey

12 Pl: Lt P. H. Warner

4 Coy

OC: Maj A. B. Bullen

2 i/c: Capt N. G. Blue

16 Pl: Lt P. E. Whitelaw

17 Pl: Lt R. W. Jessup

18 Pl: Lt R. C. Brigham

Capt A. E. Muir was OC Support Gp (which included the MMG, Mortar, Carrier and A-Tk Pls) for movement and operations.

³ Pte A. Sinclair; born Glasgow, 19 May 1921; moulder; killed in action 14 Apr 1945.

⁴ Pte J. D. Thomson; Bluff; born NZ 10 Dec 1923; labourer; wounded 14 Apr 1945.

⁵ Capt W. S. Nicol; Masterton; born Masterton, 16 Aug 1921; clerk.

⁶ Lt F. R. Allen; Auckland; born Invercargill, 9 Feb 1919; shop assistant; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

⁷ Lt D. G. Powell, m.i.d.; Paeroa; born Henderson, 14 Dec 1921; dairy farmer.

⁸ Cpl R. I. Tanner; Auckland; born Auckland, 30 Jan 1920; engraver; wounded Mar 1943.

⁹ Pte J. Ness; Christchurch; born NZ 23 Dec 1919; clerk.

¹⁰ The Tiger (Mark VI) tank weighed over 60 tons and mounted an 88-mm gun; the Panther (Mark V) tank weighed about 50 tons and mounted a 75-

mm gun. Tanner believes that the tank Maj Bell describes is the one that he and the other 14 PI men attacked with 77s.

¹¹ Lt B. R. Sneddon, MC; born Te Puke, 19 Nov 1919; bank clerk; wounded 29 Apr 1945.

¹² Pte D. C. McIntyre, MM; Bluff; born NZ 23 Dec 1914; slaughterman; wounded 15 Apr 1945.

¹³ Pte J. A. Walker, m.i.d.; Waimahaka; born Clinton, 4 May 1921; farm hand.

¹⁴ Sgt D. H. Ward; born NZ 30 Jun 1921; factory assistant; wounded 19 Apr 1945.

¹⁵ Pte T. H. McCoy; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 15 May 1922; steward.

¹⁶ Capt R. F. Hayes; Te Puke; born NZ 9 Mar 1920; clerk. (Hayes replaced 2 Lt Pogmore in 13 PI after the Senio crossing.)

¹⁷ WO II R. W. Burton; Paeroa; born Whitfield, 1 Jan 1922; farmer.

¹⁸ Capt R. L. Smith; born NZ 5 May 1916; salesman.

¹⁹ 2 Lt N. J. Fuller; born Australia, 25 Dec 1921; student; killed in action 16 Apr 1945.

²⁰ Sgt J. K. Quaid; Ashburton; born Ashburton, 3 Dec 1921; records clerk; twice wounded.

²¹ Maj J. M. Wiseley, m.i.d.; born Auckland, 14 Aug 1912; school-teacher.

²² Lt R. A. Vasey, MC; Awanui; born Awanui, 15 Oct 1917; driver; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

²³ Sgt C. E. L. Hutchison, MM; Wellington; born Wellington, 11 Feb 1921; insurance clerk; wounded 2 May 1945.

²⁴ Pte G. Huttenber; born Carterton, 5 Nov 1920; farmhand; killed in action 17 Apr 1945.

²⁵ Lt P. E. Whitelaw; Marton; born Auckland, 10 Feb 1910; bank officer; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

²⁶ The Faustpatrone was a 44-mm recoilless anti-tank grenade launcher. The German weapon similar to the American bazooka was the Offenrohr, which fired a hollow-charge rocket projectile.

²⁷ Lt R. W. Jessup; Howick; born Auckland, 1 Jul 1919; school-teacher; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

²⁸) Lt R. C. Brigham; Hamilton; born Auckland, 10 Jun 1913; insurance inspector; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

²⁹ Pte E. D. Flaherty; Dunedin; born NZ 2 May 1917; fireman.

³⁰ Pte J. R. M. Morris, MM; Green Island; born Dunedin, 18 Dec 1921; clerk; accidentally wounded 29 Nov 1943.

³¹ Pte N. A. Carswell; born NZ 25 Jan 1915; truck driver; killed in action 18 Apr 1945.

³² Geoffrey Cox, [The Road to Trieste](#), p. 131 (published in 1947 by William Heinemann Ltd). Maj Cox was GSO 2 (Int) 2 NZ Div at the time of the Gaiana attack.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

CHAPTER 25 – THE END OF THE WAR

CHAPTER 25

The End of the War

'On the Giana,' wrote Cox, 'we were able to bring down such a blow on the best German infantry on the Italian front that from then on, with steadily increasing speed, the way to the Po and the Alps opened up.'¹

Refreshed after two days in which they had been left largely to their own devices—washing their clothes, writing letters and relaxing—and two nights of uninterrupted sleep, the men of **27 Battalion** set out from the bivouac area near **Medicina** on 22 April in RMT lorries which crawled, nose-to-tail, through **Villa Fontana** and over the Gaiana again, along the **Budrio** road and a few miles beyond the Idice River, where a brief halt was made before they resumed their leisurely journey among swirling clouds of powdery dust. After eleven hours' travelling they stopped near the little village of **Argelato**, scarcely 20 miles in a straight line from **Medicina**.

Ninth Brigade was in reserve while 5 and 6 Brigades led the pursuit of the swiftly retreating German. After a short move late on the 23rd the battalion, which had nothing to do except move from one bivouac area to the next, settled down just south of a bend in the Reno River. 'The country round here is extremely prosperous looking and really beautiful,' Moss faithfully recorded. 'There are many trees.... The grapevines are all breaking into leaf and healthy looking wheat and lucerne is a foot deep everywhere.... another good night's sleep in what is really just a picnic tour for the battalion at present.'

It was nearly midday on the 24th when the battalion pulled out in the wake of Brigade Headquarters to cross the **Reno**, which **5 Brigade** had crossed the previous day. 'The move was maddeningly slow.... More and more Jerry stuff is beginning to litter the roads.... In an endeavour to make better time we left the official up route and did some cross country work over tracks and through back yards of casas.... Jerry had beaten it too fast to blow all the bridges over the canals so there wasn't much risk of being held up that way.... We arrived at the new location south of **Bondeno** on the Canale Napoleonico.... The latest news was that one of our battalions had had a patrol over the Po.' Before daybreak on the 25th (Anzac Day) troops from 5 and 6 Brigades had crossed the river in assault boats and had taken possession of the far

bank without casualties.

The battalion waited until about midday on the 26th for a break in the traffic on the one bridge over the Po. The RMT platoon had left on an urgent ammunition-carrying task, so the rifle companies would have to march. Battalion Headquarters, [Support Group](#) and the A Echelon vehicles went on ahead. The pontoon bridge, over 200 yards long, 'undulated like a sea serpent as we rolled over but was perfectly stable.... Across the river we followed the left bank upstream past [Ficarolo](#) which has a leaning tower tilted as much as the famous one in [Pisa](#).... We have Bn HQ situated in an extremely pleasant spot this time.' The first of the marchers arrived two or three hours later after a trek of about 13 miles.

Next day, when the RMT lorries had returned, the battalion drove to the [Adige River](#), beyond which the [Gurkhas](#) and 9 Brigade were to take over from 5 and 6 Brigades. The battalion crossed the pontoon bridge over the [Adige](#) early in the afternoon, and from a debussing point a short distance from the river 2 and 4 Companies advanced on foot without opposition. They pushed on into the night, which was dark and stormy, until halted by a canal about 30 feet wide and very deep. An assault bridge was thrown across, and a patrol, investigating along the road towards the small village of [San Vitale](#), returned before daybreak without having seen or heard the enemy. Soon both companies were across the canal.

To avoid several hours' delay while erecting a Bailey bridge, the rest of the battalion was diverted by a westward roundabout route to [San Vitale](#), which 2 Company had occupied. 'Rain poured down again while we were there, but all the civilians were out in the streets rejoicing and the band was playing some Italian marches. It was a treat to watch our chaps' faces as they drove into the village on tanks and RMT ... to find a band out to welcome them.'

The battalion was ordered onward again. 'The whole show had moved well up towards [Este](#) against no opposition and Cav were some miles up ahead.... It had been the "I" appreciation that Jerry would stand on the [Venetian Line](#) and as 1 Para was the Div in best condition we expected it to be opposite us. It seemed strange therefore to drive into [Este](#) under the eyes of the hills beyond and just be greeted with silence. The hills were certainly admirably suited for defence and the approaches to them were covered with anti tank ditches and weapon pits. Even after

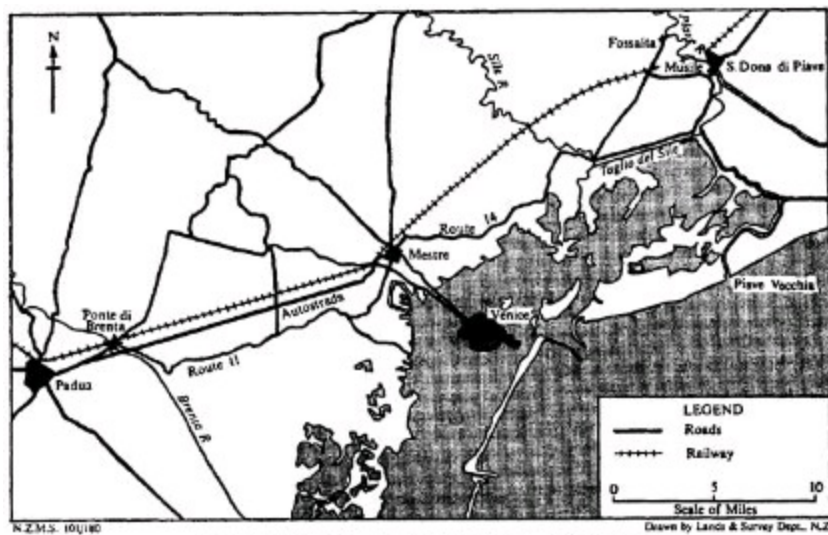
driving a couple of miles through the fringe of the [Venetian Line](#) one couldn't help casting an eye to the hills as if expecting to see gun flashes or hear spandaus rattle. We pushed on, being halted just before dark by coming up behind 22 [Battalion]. Div Cav was just ahead, having caught up with a horsedrawn Jerry convoy. A little later a big bunch of PW came back and further on we passed another hundred or so huns sitting on a bank. Their wagons had been knocked flying by the tanks and a shambles of supplies and equipment lay about. The chase was now on....'

The whole brigade raced, sometimes at thirty miles an hour, towards [Padua](#). 'When we reached the city Cav had gone through to the northern outskirts and stopped. To say the populace was delirious with joy is making a very mild statement ... the people went mad with enthusiasm. The entire population seemed to have lined the main streets and we drove through an avenue of wildly waving arms and flags. If a vehicle slowed down it was overwhelmed by surging humanity. We were kissed and hugged and buried with flowers and almost had our hands shaken off....

'The situation through the other side was pretty obscure and the best informed people seemed to be the "partigiani" [partisans]. After haranguing a few of these, we took a few aboard our jeeps as guides and went on. The bridge over the river which skirts the town was intact so we crossed and formed a perimeter on the other side. We had just got over when a loud siren began to blow from a building nearby, and small arms began popping everywhere, though mostly behind us, and a lot of flares went up also. For a few minutes we thought it may have been a pre-arranged ambush, but apparently it was just the "partigiani" relieving their feelings by discharging weapons into the air.'

The partisans, in fact, had gained control of [Padua](#) on the morning of 27 April and were holding several thousand prisoners there. [Venice](#), they declared, was also under partisan control.

The battalion was ordered to capture intact the two bridges over the Brenta River, about four miles distant. While it was still dark on the morning of the 29th, therefore, 1 Company was directed to the bridge on the autostrada to [Venice](#), and



From Padua to San Dona di Piave
From Padua to San Dona di Piave

3 Company (now commanded by Captain [Keith](#)²) to Ponte di Brenta on Route 11, about 1000 yards upstream.

The approaches to 3 Company's bridge were a shambles. 'A German column had obviously been heavily attacked from the air shortly before we arrived,' says Colonel Sanders. 'Dead and badly mutilated men and horses everywhere.' Before entering the village the infantry left their trucks to ride on the tanks of a troop of [20 Armoured Regiment](#), which dashed straight to the bridge and cut off the retreat of two companies of Germans and three armoured cars. 'We actually jumped into a whole bunch of them as we leapt off the tanks,' says Keith. 'I don't know who was surprised more.' A fourth armoured car was knocked out by a tank in the middle of the bridge, where it caught fire; it was still burning there when the troops crossed the bridge, and had to be cleared later by a Sherman-dozer.

While the tanks lined the riverbank and engaged some machine guns and two German tanks, which withdrew, 14 Platoon seized and held the bridge. Lieutenant Sneddon was wounded by a sniper, but continued to direct the platoon until ordered out. By dawn 3 Company had taken 230 prisoners and had captured intact two 105-millimetre field howitzers as well as the armoured cars.

After driving up to within a few hundred yards of the other bridge 1 Company advanced on foot with tanks in support. The Germans, although in superior numbers, showed little inclination to fight and surrendered after brief exchanges of small-arms fire. The company secured the bridge, which had been damaged sufficiently to

prevent its use by vehicles, collected about 200 prisoners, and consolidated on the far bank—it also captured a German field cash office which yielded something like £1000.

When Battalion Headquarters was about to leave for the river, two German officers (who had surrendered to Captain Keith while he was still busy securing his bridge) were brought in under a white flag; they wanted to go back and persuade their men to give themselves up. Major Titchener took a platoon to investigate and arranged the surrender of about 200 Germans, who were handed over to the partisans.

The battalion, preceded by [12 Lancers'](#) patrols, now led 9 Brigade's column towards [Mestre](#), the gateway to [Venice](#). Battalion Headquarters, [Support Group](#) and 2 and 4 Companies crossed the Brenta by the bridge 3 Company had captured, and had some difficulty in getting onto the autostrada, which ran above the surrounding country on a high embankment; eventually a place was found where the transport could climb onto it. Each company had its headquarters and leading platoon riding on a troop of tanks and the remainder of its men following in three-tonners.

'The disorganised enemy seen on either flank was only of passing interest to the column as we moved up the Autostrada as swiftly as the tanks would permit to [Mestre](#),' says Major Bullen. 'At [Mestre](#) the usual greeting accorded "Liberatores" of either side was offered by the "Ites" in the shape of cheering crowds, showers of flowers and volleys fired into the air by the Partisans with very little regard of safety precautions, as laid down in the manual. From [Mestre](#) the causeway to [Venice](#) could be seen and also the spires of [Venice](#) in the distance. Here and there the Hun was letting off air bursts in a last hate, but as it didn't come near the column it was not of great interest.' The battalion reluctantly turned away from the road to [Venice](#) and headed towards [San Dona di Piave](#), on the Piave River.

[Thodey Force](#), consisting of a company of 22 Battalion with a few tanks and armoured cars, was despatched to [Venice](#) (where they secured one of the best hotels, the Danieli, for use as a New Zealand Club). The 27th sped on. 'We were about four miles short of the [Piave](#) river which was laid down as the day's final objective,' wrote Moss, 'when some Ites rushed out of a casa and reckoned that there were molti tedeschi about four hundred yards out to a flank. They pointed out

an object moving parallel with us about half a mile away which we thought they meant was a tank.... The next moment there was a crash like a 170 landing and dust and rubbish showered all over the jeep. We bailed out wondering how the hell we had got away with it, and found that a Sherman had fired its 105 with the gun almost over the jeep. The blast tore the canopy, it was so close. The Sherman was firing at the so-called "tank", which binoculars showed to be a motor launch moving up a canal. The third shell landed on the deck creating horrible havoc among the Teds aboard. Immediately a white flag was raised and shortly afterwards more appeared all along the stopbank of the canal. Other tanks along our column were firing now, and before they could be stopped they dropped a few shells among the surrendering Jerries.... 1 coy was sent off to round up the prisoners and again they walked into a lucrative job. The Jerries were Kriegsmarinen of a coast watching unit and were wonderfully equipped. We got three launches out of that little scrap, a couple of hundred more PW's....'

The road forked a mile or two from the river; the main highway led to the small village of [Musile di Piave](#) and the other route to [Fossalta di Piave](#), another small village farther upstream. Partisans informed 2 Company, which was in the lead, that there were Germans in [Fossalta](#) who might surrender. Eventually a formal surrender was arranged and some 400 prisoners were marched back under escort.

The bridge over the deep and wide [Piave](#), between Musile and San Dona, had been destroyed by the [RAF](#) some months earlier. The battalion spent the night in Musile, which 4 Company found deserted. 'From the moment we set up headquarters,' Moss wrote, 'partisans kept coming in with reports of at least 2000 jerries about five kilos away towards the coast. Later reports had them advancing towards [Musile] as the partisans fell back. The boys were pretty tired from having been on the go since crossing the [Adige](#) so the Col was reluctant to stand the Bn to, possibly for no reason. He did however send [3 Coy](#) down to a canal on the east side to watch in the direction of the threat.'

Next day (30 April) the battalion fought a sharp action, the last on a battalion scale by the Division in [Italy](#), against a large pocket of Germans who had been halted by the [Piave](#) in their northbound retreat along the coast. 'The partisans in this area were fairly well organised and controlled, and were our only source of

information. From them we learned that a marine coast watching unit was between us and the sea, and it was being reinforced by stragglers retreating up the coastal strip from [Venice](#).' Reports indicated that these troops were ready to give themselves up.

At 7.30 a.m. 1 and 4 Companies were despatched to clear the area bounded by the [Piave](#) on the north and the Piave Vecchia (the old course of the river) on the south as far as a canal near the coast. While 1 Company took a course parallel with the river, 4 Company went along a road following the canalised Piave Vecchia.

They had not been gone long when the partisans reported that an enemy force was advancing up the road from the south towards Musile. This force, about 100 strong, surrendered after a brief fight with 2 Company and several tanks which knocked out a 40-millimetre [Breda](#) gun and set fire to two or three enemy-held houses. The booty included several heavy vehicles loaded with ammunition and rations, a few converted Fiat cars, the instruments of an orchestra, a radio transmitter and other signal equipment.

Protected on the left flank by three tanks, 1 Company debussed about a mile from where the enemy was suspected to be. When the leading platoons approached two large farmhouses, a troop of guns, apparently directed by a German on the roof of one of the houses, began firing from a range of little more than 200 yards. The tanks opened up, and a section of 9 Platoon charged the house, which was so strongly defended—'the Germans fought like tigers'—that the section was forced to take shelter in a drain about 30 yards from it. The other section of 9 Platoon occupied the second house without opposition and from it began to harass the crews firing four 88-millimetre ack-ack guns less than 1000 yards away. Fortunately these guns had been unable to depress their line of sight far enough to engage the tanks.

The first section of 9 Platoon was joined by 8 Platoon, and together they were about to close in on the enemy-held house when an explosion completely blew off one end of it. This sent them back to their ditch. Next time they tried to rush the building they came under all types of fire, which compelled them to take cover once more. They crossed into another ditch, where they were again pinned down and had to spend some time in the water which partly filled it.

A forward observation officer succeeded in directing the fire of his 25-pounders onto some 88-millimetre guns farther back which were causing most of the trouble at this stage. When this began to tell, 8 and 9 Platoons closed in on the foremost group, whose crews had begun to thin out, and wiped out all the able-bodied men who remained (except two who claimed they were non-combatant Poles). Private Mitchell³ was killed in this encounter and seven men wounded; about sixty Germans were killed or wounded.

The two platoons pressed on towards the rest of the battery, which showed little fight and abandoned its guns when engaged by the tanks. The battery command post was overrun and the commander was among those captured. These prisoners and the others taken that day were handed over to the partisans.

Along the Piave Vecchia canal 4 Company had 'a nasty little action—unexpectedly so. We had anticipated a job of rounding up—not a full scale action,' says the CO. The company's advance was hindered by enemy-occupied houses on both sides of the canal. The accompanying tanks expended much ammunition on these targets and sank several motor launches in the canal itself. The Germans, says Major Bullen, 'were Ack-Ack units, mostly from the S.S. and [had] very definite ideas that the war wasn't over. 4 Coy. who were inadvertently astride the main escape route for this Regt. ran slap into a barrage of fire from Anti-aircraft guns. A stalemate battle ensued for the rest of the day, as this hail of A.A. fire was like a curtain of air bursts, and attempts to get through it were not successful.

'Towards dusk, following heavy mortaring by Panzer-Fausts [rocket projectiles], and sustained Ack-Ack fire, the enemy put in an attack on 4 Coy, which dispossessed the Coy by sheer weight of numbers. The Coy withdrew and reorganised under cover of an arty concentration which had been brought down in emergency conditions. The guns, which had been on the move, had dropped their trails on the road, and as the target had been read off on 250,000 map, the accuracy of the shooting was amazing.' Bullen, who had been reconnoitring when the enemy counter-attacked, was wounded and had to extricate himself 'by some very personal close-quarter stuff'.

Orders had come from Brigade Headquarters for the battalion to withdraw to Musile and to be ready to resume the advance next morning. The 25-pounders had

been on their way back to the village when called upon to assist 4 Company. About 300 Germans, some of whom were armed with panzerfausts and bazookas, were working their way around 4 Company's left flank. The tanks, which had run short of ammunition, were compelled to withdraw out of bazooka range, but the artillery stonk, which came from an unexpected direction (the forward observation officer did not realise at first that the shells were from his own guns), protected the exposed flank.

Both 1 Company, which had lost contact with the enemy, and 3 Company, which had been sent to fill the gap between 1 and 4 (but could not get across to help the latter), had been recalled to Musile. After 4 Company had disengaged and withdrawn to where the RMT trucks waited to take it back to Musile, the Germans reoccupied a small village alongside the Piave Vecchia and demolished several partisan houses in reprisal.

The clearing of the coastal strip south of the [Piave](#) was to become [5 Brigade's](#) responsibility: 21 Battalion was to reoccupy at dawn on 1 May the ground from which the 27th had been ordered to withdraw. 'Prior to the arrival of 21 Battalion,' says Titchener, '2 Company maintained a position astride the road. We were informed by Partisans that the Germans were in some strength and were advancing towards us.' He made a request for 'a Troop of tanks and a Company to take over from me so that I could move forward and deal with the situation. This was refused.'

A German force of over 1500 men crossed the [Taglio del Sile](#) canal, which skirts the lagoon west of the Piave Vecchia, raided an unprotected group of New Zealand Engineers in the darkness, killed or wounded about thirty of them, set fire to several of their vehicles, seized half a dozen others, and made off with about forty captive engineers towards the Piave River.

Captain Wilson, OC Headquarters Company, was warned by the partisans of the German column's approach. 'I advised Bde. H.Q.,' he says, 'and we took up defensive positions awaiting their arrival. An Officer from Bde. H.Q. [Captain [Stewart](#)⁴] arrived and as the partisans advised that the Germans had halted, I went forward with him and some of my men.' Stewart and two others were in a jeep, Wilson and a few [27 Battalion](#) men in a 15-cwt truck.

'On arriving near the enemy,' writes Stewart, 'we left the jeep and our arms and walking toward the enemy we were immediately surrounded. A GERMAN Cpl who could speak a little English said we were POW but I told him I had come to speak with his CO and that I wanted his surrender. Approx ten minutes elapsed until the GERMAN CO arrived in one of the 5 Fd Park Dingoes with all his officers and driven by a KIWI.... I told him that he was surrounded and could not get away so I had come for his surrender. He then said that if I would give him safe passage over the river he would return all the POW and vehs which he had taken the previous night. I told him that I would not consider this offer and that he either surrendered to me or we fought it out. He then took his officers aside and held a short conference. He then came back, saluted, and said he would accept honourable surrender to me....'

Wilson adds that the Germans 'were not prepared to give up their arms until we had sufficient men to protect them from the partisans. We had marshalled them into some sort of order and were preparing to move them into a nearby field when a Coy of 21 Bn, some tanks and Col. McPhail arrived and took over from us.'

This exploit was probably the most remarkable in B Echelon's experience. Major Bell, the battalion's second-in-command, praises the B Echelon men whose less spectacular but nevertheless exacting performance in the collection and distribution of rations and petrol enabled the advance to proceed. 'Imagine the battalion off to a flying start, not knowing how far the advance for the day would be, nor how long the stop would be. The company supply trucks following as best they could after an almost "endless" stream of A [Echelon] vehicles, many with some sort of priority. Yet at each stop our company B ech would be there with meals and with petrol of which unbelievable quantities were being used.... Throughout the entire advance [they] worked like niggers keeping up with the coys to the last ditch—indeed a magnificent effort under great difficulties.'

'Doc' Flaherty and three other stretcher-bearers were captured during 4 Company's withdrawal in the afternoon of the 30th, but were prisoners of war for less than twenty-four hours.

They were carrying a wounded man when one of them was himself wounded in the arm, and while the other three were attending to him, the enemy arrived. The patient on the stretcher, who had been placed in the safety of a ditch, managed to

slip away. The four stretcher-bearers were led to a house, where they assisted in the bandaging of some German wounded, and were then sent to the rear. They had not gone far when they were caught in the 25-pounder concentration which was brought down to assist 4 Company, and as they hurried to the shelter of a canal they noticed panic among the Germans in the vicinity. The shelling caused some casualties and damaged trucks and horse-drawn vehicles.

The stretcher-bearers were taken to a German hospital, where they were very well treated. Convinced that there was no chance of getting back to [Germany](#), the doctor in charge arranged for the surrender of the hospital. Flaherty and his fellows were invited to a stable where 'with numerous other Gerries from various units they partook of plenty of good Italian Creme de Menthe'; by the time their rescuers arrived they were 'too contented and merry to feel glad or otherwise....'

Colonel Sanders, who wanted to press on across the [Piave](#) River, deputed Padre [Sands](#) ⁵ to go to the hospital with a German doctor who had arrived at Battalion Headquarters. 'There was a staff of 6 doctors and nine female nurses, and a number of male orderlies,' says the Padre. 'The Colonel in charge asked me to evacuate them and to accept the surrender of a small hospital ship at the mouth of the Piave River.'

'While I was inspecting this vessel ... the Partisans moved in on the hospital. By the time I arrived back the Partisans had taken watches and jewellery from the nurses and carried off all the instruments from the theatre. I was so mad that I said a few hard things to the partisan leader who ordered his men to return the stolen articles to the nurses. The local Italian doctor returned the instruments about 15 minutes later.'

'Using German transport and assisted by the partisans I began to evacuate the patients. First of all the seriously wounded, then our own men who were prisoners.... It took about three trips to get everyone away. I took them back to [Mestre](#) where they were interned. Here I also arranged for the navy to pick up the hospital ship from the Piave River.'

'After this my driver and I went for our life to catch up with the battalion.'

The battalion, now in brigade reserve, crossed the pontoon bridge over the

Piave River early on 1 May. 'Once over the river we began careering up the road again in the old style,' wrote Moss. 'The only delays were caused by detours where bridges on the main strada had been blown. We eased gently over a damaged one spanning the Tagliamento and then did a detour of several miles through a chain of small villages. All along the route again, in groups, out in the country and crowds in the towns, the civilians were out to welcome us. We met the same cheering, the same throwing of flowers and the same attempts by everyone to touch us as we went past....

'The next large river was the [Isonzo](#), and immediately on crossing the large concrete bridge we ran into Tito's Yugoslav partisans. They were a motley looking lot, dressed in Tedeschi. English and Itie clothing, and armed with a mixture of Jerry equipment and our own. Over this river there was no mistaking the fact that Tito's crowd was there. Almost every civilian was sporting a red star of some kind and it seemed to be the local emblem. Red stars were painted on buildings, sewn onto flags and cut out of every conceivable material to be worn as badges. We pulled into [Monfalcone](#) where some sort of patriotic demonstration was taking place. In the big procession which was marching through the town were several platoons of partisan girls. They were wearing FS caps with the red star in front, white blouses with long red ties and blue skirts. They were a very attractive looking lot on the whole. We passed through the town onto the far outskirts where Bde had allotted us an area. Div Cav & 22 were taking up positions astride the road leading to [Trieste](#) but we had no job....

'Beautifully fine this morning [2 May], and as usual we set off about eight but didn't really get into our stride until midday. 22 were advancing along the coastal road to [Trieste](#) and Cav along a parallel one a little further inland. They [22 Battalion] struck a little trouble at [Miramare](#).... After a small engagement the Jerries tossed it in and formally surrendered.... That coastal drive round the head of the Adriatic is very beautiful. You follow a broad macadam road round a steep bushy hillside about three hundred feet up from the sea ... we rounded a bluff and there lay [Trieste](#) about five miles away. The orange and white mass of buildings seemed to rise straight out of the blue water, and the whole stood out sharply against sombre rocky hills in the background. News was through that 22 had entered the city....'

West of the Isonzo River the war in [Italy](#) was over: the campaign formally concluded at noon on 2 May when representatives of General von Vietinghoff, Commander-in-Chief of the German [South-Western Army Group](#), signed an unconditional surrender. This happy event coincided with another, the radio announcement that [Hitler](#) was dead.

In [Trieste](#), however, the troops still stood to their arms. The [Yugoslav Fourth Army](#), after defeating the German forces in [Istria](#), east of the city, had entered its outskirts on the night of 29–30 April, but had not gained complete control of it when 9 Brigade arrived on 2 May. Seizing the chance of falling into British instead of Yugoslav hands, the German garrison in the [Castello San Giusto](#), the mediával fort on a hill in the centre of the city, surrendered to the New Zealanders, which annoyed the Yugoslavs, who considered the prisoners were rightly theirs.

Brigadier Gentry allotted sectors in the city to his three battalions, whose men were warned to avoid friction with the 'Jugs'. The Allied interest in [Trieste](#), they were told, was to secure it as a supply port for the Allied forces which were to occupy [Austria](#).

'We arrived at the outskirts shortly before dusk—had about half an hour to tie up with our tanks and no time for recce or planning,' says Colonel Sanders. In many streets they were greeted by cheering crowds; other streets, where the Partisans still skirmished with the Germans, were deserted. 'We were moving towards Piazza Garibaldi with Battalion Headquarters leading when there was some sporadic firing,' says Titchener. '... I was told to deal with the situation. We were being shot at from both sides and a party of Yugoslavs with an Artillery piece came on the scene and directed where the Germans were. They indicated to me where their own troops were and it was on this position that I instructed the tanks to fire as it was from this quarter that we were receiving most of the fire.' A shell from a tank's 75-millimetre gun clipped an overhead wire and exploded. The splinters wounded Lance-Corporal Hutchison, who was probably the battalion's last casualty in the war. ⁶

From the Piazza Garibaldi the CO directed 1 Company to the docks in the vicinity of the Savoia Baths, situated on a promontory, 2 Company to an area east of the Piazza Garibaldi, 3 Company to one east of the [Castello](#), and 4 Company to one overlooking the waterfront south of the [Castello](#). On the way 3 Company had a few

shots fired at it and had to debus and proceed cautiously on foot in single file.

'It was darkness by this time and I established a Headquarters in a building close to Piazza Garibaldi and sent the Platoons [of 2 Company] on patrol,' says Titchener. 'A little later a party of German officers arrived in vehicles offering to surrender themselves. There was quite a number and no arrangements had been made to deal with this eventuality. A Partisan officer appeared on the scene and demanded that the Germans be handed over to the Partisans. The position was getting a little difficult and I instructed the CSM [Cole ⁷ to load them into trucks and drive around the city for about two hours until I could find a place to quarter them. In the meantime, I located an Alpha Romeo garage where they were put under guard on their return. Incidentally this convoy lost its way touring around Trieste and was guided back to our Headquarters by the German Officers. At a later stage I received a request from them as to whether they would be permitted to telephone their girl friends in Trieste and advise them that they were quite safe! To my disgrace I refused!' Eventually the Germans were smuggled out to Divisional Headquarters.

Next day, when 9 Brigade regrouped, the battalion drew back towards the docks. Battalion Headquarters and 2 Company took over the Savoia Excelsior Palazzo, the city's principal hotel, right on the waterfront. Half the building had been gutted by fire, the result of a German naval vessel firing one or two broadsides into it while leaving the harbour, but the undamaged part was large enough to accommodate Battalion Headquarters and 2 Company. The CO had an Austrian arch-duke's private suite. 'When the water started running again in the bathrooms, the electricity came on again and the beds and mattresses were sorted out we made ourselves pretty comfortable let me tell you,' wrote Sergeant Sherrard.

The other companies enjoyed similar comforts in their billets; they had little to do apart from patrolling their sectors and guarding the dock installations. The civilians were very friendly. 'There are some really lovely women in Trieste.... They are very surprised to find we can speak and understand Italian...' The companies succeeded in procuring large quantities of the pleasant, almost non-intoxicating beer from the Dreher brewery.

But the men could not abandon themselves altogether to a life of luxury and

pleasure. 'The political situation today is tenser than ever,' Moss reported on 5 May, '... everyone is watching everyone else, finger on trigger.... During the day we have been unobtrusively noting the Partisan dispositions and headquarters. The biggest concentration is round the Piazza dell Unita.... There are 16 LMGs there and another seven in the Teatro Guiseppe Verdi. We have most of them taped now and if the balloon goes up most of the known positions will find separate parties organised for them. The unkempt Partisan army continues to patrol the streets in groups of about a dozen, every man carrying an automatic. They slouch past our chaps, who lounge round unarmed and outwardly disinterested, without a sign of recognition....

'Another thing which is liable to worsen the relations between ourselves and the P's is the attitude of the civilians to the latter. With the exception of a small minority, they are quite openly in favour of a total British occupation of [Trieste](#) and don't trouble to disguise their dislike of our rivals.... While I was down at Bde today a large parade of civilians came marching along the waterfront carrying a New Zealand flag, an American flag and numbers of Italian flags. As they marched they chanted over and over "Italia" "Italia" and finally halted in front of Bde HQ where they began singing a patriotic song.... Partisans appeared everywhere and began firing automatics from the hip over the heads of the crowd. No one was hurt in the immediate vicinity.... The crowd panicked and a large proportion fled for the Albergo Citta overwhelming our two sentries on the door.'

This was one of the many demonstrations and processions. Those in favour of Marshal Tito were looked upon tolerantly by the Yugoslavs, but those in favour of the Allies were dispersed with rifle butts and bursts of automatic fire in the air. The Yugoslavs appeared to be ready to go into action: they moved their Stuart tanks into positions covering the buildings occupied by the New Zealanders, who responded by bringing up Shermans. Some days later the Yugoslavs created a mild sensation by producing 20-odd Russian T34 tanks.

The higher command decided that an international representation in [Trieste](#) would be preferable to a solely New Zealand one. On 6 May, therefore, an American battalion relieved Divisional Cavalry and 1 Battalion [Scots Guards](#) took over [27 Battalion's](#) sector.

The next fortnight was the most pleasant of the battalion's stay in this part of

Italy. After handing over its sector to the **Scots Guards**, whose frequent saluting and dazzling white belts and gaiters were bound to impress the Italians and perhaps the Yugoslavs too, the battalion went to the outskirts of **Barcola**, a fashionable suburb on the coast north of the city, where 1, 3 and 4 Companies were billeted in private houses, and Battalion Headquarters, **Support Group** and 2 Company pitched their tents in the grounds of houses on the waterfront. In brilliantly fine weather the men relaxed and spent much of the time swimming and sunbathing.

VE Day (8 May) passed without scenes of wild rejoicing: the victory announcement came as no surprise. 'There was a rattle of small arms fire all round the bay from **Barcola** to **Trieste**. For a short while we thought the Partisans had clashed with our chaps but soon it was obvious that everything was being fired in the air. Streams of red and white tracer lanced the sky from all angles and every type of Jerry flare I have seen, seemed to be up in the air at once.... It was pretty while it lasted but died out in an hour or so.'

Although hostilities had ceased officially, Tito, who wished to incorporate **Trieste** and the surrounding country of Venezia Giulia in **Yugoslavia**, continued to move troops westward towards **Gorizia** and **Monfalcone** with the object of establishing a frontier along the Isonzo River. On VE Day a convoy of some 3000 horse-drawn and many marching troops passed the battalion.

A joint British and American note was delivered to Belgrade demanding the evacuation of the Yugoslav troops behind a line east of **Trieste** (the 'Morgan line'), and the Allies redeployed in case it should be necessary to enforce the withdrawal. The American and **Scots Guards** battalions were replaced in the city by Divisional Cavalry and **27 Battalion** on 20 May. That day **General Freyberg** said in a cable to the Prime Minister, Mr Fraser (who was in **San Francisco**): '... I want the New Zealand Government to know the fact that we are sitting at the point of greatest tension and that fighting may break out. If it does we must expect a number of casualties....' Three days later, however, he was able to advise the Government that 'the situation has eased considerably.... I believe that the matter will be solved amicably and it will then be possible for the New Zealand Division to be released from its operational role....'

When **6 Brigade** relieved the 9th in **Trieste** at the beginning of June, the

battalion went out to camp in the rocky, wooded hills near Sales, to the north, and a fortnight later it moved with 9 Brigade to the vicinity of [Basovizza](#), a pleasant locality a few miles east of the city.

Meanwhile the British, [United States](#) and Russian Governments exchanged views on the Yugoslav problem and negotiations slowly proceeded towards a settlement. The bulk of Tito's forces were withdrawn behind the Morgan line, and the few who stayed came under the command of Field-Marshal Alexander. After nearly six weeks of rule by the Yugoslavs, who had systematically looted the city, [Trieste](#) came under the control of the [Allied Military Government](#).

In less than five months since its conversion to infantry the battalion had absorbed a large number of fresh reinforcements, trained in infantry weapons and tactics, fought in the battle which had destroyed the German armies in [Italy](#), and participated in the difficult and aggravating occupation of [Trieste](#), where (the GOC reported) 'the conduct of the New Zealand troops was at all times exemplary.'

'The Battalion,' Brigadier Gentry wrote for the foreword of Victory Souvenir, 'had its full share of fighting during this period, and I am glad to be able to write that it fought with great courage and determination, distinguishing itself particularly in the attack across the [Sillaro River](#) and in the bitter daylight struggle for possession of the dominating stopbank of the [Gaiana River](#).'

Lieutenant-Colonel Sanders, CO throughout this period, and Major Bell, who commanded 3 Company at the Sillaro and later became the battalion's second-in-command, were both awarded the DSO; Major Titchener's bold leadership of 2 Company earned a bar to the MC he had won in [Tunisia](#). Lieutenant Sneddon, who commanded 14 Platoon at the Sillaro, where it accounted for four German tanks, and also in the successful action at [Ponte di Brenta](#), received the MC. The MM went to McIntyre, Hutchison and Morris.

Now that the war in [Europe](#) was over, the question arose of the future employment of the Division: its participation in the war in the [Pacific](#) was under consideration by the Government. The men with long service overseas could expect to go home; those with short service overseas (and some officers with longer experience) faced the possibility of being retained for the war against [Japan](#).

'There are all sorts of wild rumours going the rounds at present following [the Government's] statement that the 8th, 9th & 10th Reinf are going home as soon as shipping is available,' wrote an 8th Reinforcement officer. 'The ex-3 Div personnel wonder how they stand as some of them have been overseas as long as the Eighths.... No one knows the real story but it provides an interesting subject for discussion....'

Leave was granted on a more generous scale; parties were sent regularly to the [New Zealand Club](#) in [Venice](#), and others toured northern [Italy](#). Some men went to [Klagenfurt](#) in [Austria](#). 'Getting the hay dry enough to store must be one of the local farmers' big worries up here,' wrote one of these tourists. 'A common method is to erect poles six or seven feet high ... and on these the hay is draped, pointing downwards like thatch to shed the water.... we were fortunate in seeing some of the villagers out in the national costume. They must have extremely good dyes as the colours are wonderfully vivid.... A lot of the men wear little leather shorts ... and the Tyrolean hat.... We saw some incredible blondes with hair fairer than wheat straw.... There were plenty of Jerries about still in uniform, some with weapons and some without. They just seemed to be ignored.'

At least one party entered [Germany](#). 'After a look round Berchtesgaden, which charmed us with its clean cobbled streets and quaint houses and shops, we set off to have a look at [Hitler's](#) former residence. Before climbing the hill we looked up and saw a lone building breaking the skyline of a steep spur, thousands of feet up in the air. It was the "Eyrie" or "Eagle's Nest" to which Adolf used to retire when he wished to contemplate. It was a steep enough climb.... The RAF's attack on the place had certainly battered it about and every building, including those of the SS and [Gestapo](#) guards had been damaged. The room which contained the huge window was the one part of the building by which [Hitler's](#) home could be recognized. The remainder was just debris....'

Swimming was about the most popular activity, but other sports and entertainment helped to pass the time. A barbecue, organised by Padre [Falloon](#) ⁸ and his committee and attended by 500, including civilian friends and visitors from other units, was a huge success. A Maori concert party performed; the Maoris also roasted a heifer. Couples danced by the light of four large bonfires. Wine, ice-cream,

tea and cakes were served to the guests, who included the Brigadier.

After nearly three months' sojourn at [Trieste](#) the battalion departed on 22 July for a locality (reached three days later) on the eastern bank of the Tiber River and about five miles below [Perugia](#). During an overnight halt on the way some men visited [Pioraco](#) and [Esanatoglia](#), where they 'received a marvellous welcome from the people, who had been so good to us.... they were full of enquiries as to what had happened to us all during the last show.'

Prospective NCOs began a fortnight's course at a school run by Captain Pleasants, who had returned from furlough; the rest of the battalion was kept fit by early morning route marches and sport. Following the departure in August of the 8th Reinforcements—some of whom claimed to have seen more days in action than most other New Zealanders—the battalion was reorganised: 4 Company was absorbed in the other three rifle companies.

The announcement on 15 August that [Japan](#) had accepted the Allied demand for unconditional surrender was 'quietly celebrated', and a day or two later the whole battalion was given a week's holiday at a rest camp near [Senigallia](#), on the Adriatic coast. The men returned 'refreshed, contented and quite prepared to continue guarding the Tiber for the Italians until such time as the Government deigns to arrange our transport back to N.Z....' About a fortnight later, however, they had another week's holiday on the coast.

The departure of the 9th Reinforcements in September so reduced the strength of the battalion that [Support Group](#) was absorbed into the three rifle companies. Next month the battalion went into winter quarters at [Florence](#). About this time the first of several leave drafts for the [United Kingdom](#) departed by an overland route. Also, among the twenty-nine players selected for the 2 NZEF Rugby team to tour the [British Isles](#) were three from the battalion: Allen, [Boggs](#)⁹ and [Young](#).¹⁰ The 27th Battalion now entered upon a fresh phase in its history: in October it became part of [J Force](#), which was to participate, under the command of Brigadier Stewart (who succeeded Brigadier Gentry in November), in the Allied occupation in [Japan](#). Those men who were eligible for return to New Zealand were withdrawn and the battalion was brought up to strength again (with Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Company, Support Company, and four rifle companies) with men of the 13th, 14th

and 15th Reinforcements (most of whom had reached [Italy](#) after hostilities ended), as well as volunteers from earlier reinforcements. [J Force](#) paraded for [General Freyberg](#), who inspected the troops, presented decorations and delivered a farewell message.

During the next few weeks the mornings were devoted to training and the afternoons to sport; a welfare committee organised dances, concerts and other entertainments. On Christmas Day, 1945, the battalion's third Christmas in [Italy](#) and sixth overseas, 'Clueless', 'Corporal Simpkins' and 'The Two Types', personifying the characters in the service newspapers, and Father Christmas himself visited the [YMCA](#), and after each had spoken, cigarettes and rum were distributed.

The carriers, guns, transport and stores were despatched to [Bari](#) in mid-January to be loaded in the ships that were to take them to [Japan](#), and a month later the troops left by train for [Naples](#), where they spent a few days in a transit camp on the hills overlooking the city. While they were there the final Rugby match in [Italy](#) of the Freyberg Cup series, between Divisional Cavalry (the winners) and 25 Battery, was played 'on a very dirty field of chocolate coloured volcanic ash ... against a background of the barren slopes of gently smoking [Vesuvius](#).'

The battalion, together with other [J Force](#) units, embarked on the [Strathmore](#), which sailed on 21 February. Lieutenant- Colonel Sanders was appointed OC New Zealand Troops, and Major Newland acting CO. No shore leave was granted at [Colombo](#), [Singapore](#) and [Hong Kong](#) because of an epidemic of measles on the ship; 135 patients (sixteen of them from 27 Battalion) were taken to hospital at [Singapore](#).

The [Strathmore](#) steamed through the Inland Sea of [Japan](#), whose waters were confined by a host of small, partly wooded, hilly islands of all sizes, and at the end of an 8900-mile voyage which had taken a month, was secured to mooring buoys in [Kure](#) harbour. The troops disembarked on 21 March, were taken ashore by LST, and marched to the railway station. Their train, after following the coast for a while, passed through the outskirts of [Hiroshima](#), 'so we were able to see at first hand, the devastation wrought by the atomic bomb,' wrote Captain Moss (now OC Support Company). 'The area was just beginning to recover. Trees were budding again and grass and vegetables seemed to be growing normally.... a lot of improvised

dwelling, constructed out of wood and sheets of iron, were springing up.... We passed through numerous villages and small towns on the way.... The houses are almost universally made of wood with a roof of glazed tiles. Very few were painted. ... As in [Italy](#), all flat land was cultivated down to the last square yard.... We arrived at [Yamaguchi](#) station with an hour of daylight still in hand and were met by ... the entire local bus fleet to ferry us to camp....

[The camp] is an old Jap military barracks and was taken over by us from the Americans. There are seven main barrack buildings grouped round a large rectangular parade ground. ... Beyond the barrack buildings are smaller buildings for various purposes, including a chapel and a club room for the men.... Japs are going to do all the menial work and slushy jobs.... it will be quite some time before we get accustomed to the appearance of these people....

'We all enjoyed getting out of camp [for the first route march].... The quaint little houses with their up-curving corners look as though they were once straight but had since been exposed to some great heat which made the edges curl up. ... Each residence stands in its own little section of ground which is usually enclosed by an ornamental hedge.... Rice is the universal crop and only a very small percentage of the arable area round here is occupied by anything else. There are usually a few small plots of vegetables.... The famous cherry trees are just beginning to flower, and the clouds of pink blossom are conspicuous at present as the only colour in a rather drab winter landscape.'

[J Force](#) occupied the prefecture of [Yamaguchi](#), an area of 2000 square miles at the southern tip of [Honshu](#), the largest island of [Japan](#). In the central part of the prefecture 27 Battalion's area extended from coast to coast and contained the university town of [Yamaguchi](#). A company was despatched from [Yamaguchi](#) Camp to [Hagi](#), on the northern coast, and another to [Tokuyama](#), on the southern coast.

The accommodation was inferior: the buildings were mostly two-storied, flimsy, inadequately heated, wooden structures with a thin plaster shell; several caught fire, and at least one was burned to the ground. The reconditioning of old barracks and the building of new ones took many months because materials and labour were provided from Japanese sources, paid for by the [Japanese Government](#) and obtained under procurement. Lieutenant-Colonel [Gillespie](#) ¹¹ says this system 'led to irritating

delay, since all projects had first to be forwarded to BCOF Headquarters for consolidation. They were then passed on to American Eighth Army Headquarters for processing, as all service units in [Japan](#), American and British, had embarked on similar programmes. This called for immense quantities of materials of all kinds, from timber to household furnishings.' ¹²

'The question of procurement was a very sore point,' adds Lieutenant-Colonel Titchener (who succeeded Lieutenant-Colonel Sanders as CO on 16 May 1946 ¹³). 'The whole thing was so slow that pre-emption and not procurement became the order of the day.... In order to keep the troops happy and in a reasonable state of comfort some direct action was necessary. The Rest Camp at Golden Bay was a first class instance of pre-emption.' This camp, on the north coast, offered excellent swimming and was a great asset to the battalion.

Patrols systematically searched the battalion's sector for military installations and equipment or anything of a suspicious nature; the little that they found almost invariably had been destroyed by the Americans. They also investigated villages, schools and industrial plants. The Japanese appeared to be respectful and co-operative, and in the more isolated districts, in some of which they were seeing Europeans for the first time, they were timid. The company at [Hagi](#) patrolled along the coast in transport and on foot and in the coastal waters in a diesel launch, and rounded up and despatched to a Japanese repatriation centre many groups of Koreans who were being landed from small ships under cover of darkness. Most of the patrolling from [Tokuyama](#) was in heavily wooded country.

With the return of two drafts of men to New Zealand and the arrival of two replacement drafts, the composition of the battalion changed almost completely. This was accompanied by an improvement in morale. Titchener observed that 'war weary soldiers are not likely to make good occupational troops.' Gillespie decided that they 'were not vastly interested in demonstrating to a conquered people the democratic way of life.... Circumstances helped to provoke this attitude.... the drab and dreary barracks and camp areas.... Supplies were short. ... Troops could not enter public restaurants or hotels as they had done so freely in [Italy](#) to add change to a monotonous army diet, and for their own protection they were forbidden to buy Japanese foods, of which the Japanese themselves were acutely short. Apart from that the Japanese method of using human excreta as fertiliser for all growing crops

made the purchase of fresh vegetables most undesirable.... There were no leave centres ready [except of course the battalion's own rest camp at Golden Bay]....' ¹⁴
The later arrivals enjoyed much better amenities and were able to go regularly to holiday resorts. Their deportment was good.

The New Zealand part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force remained almost two and a half years in [Japan](#). during which time there were further replacements of troops and changes of command: Lieutenant-Colonel Titchener was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel [Hollis](#), ¹⁵ and the latter by Lieutenant-Colonel [Dawson](#), ¹⁶ under whose command on 7 August 1947, [27 Battalion](#), having shared the record with Divisional Cavalry of serving overseas longer than any other unit of [2 NZEF](#), changed its name to [3 Battalion New Zealand Regiment](#).

¹ [The Road to Trieste](#), p. 125.

² [Maj G. F. R. Keith](#); [Auckland](#); born [Wellington](#), 9 Jun 1912; solicitor; wounded 5 Oct 1943 (in [Vella Lavella](#), Solomon Islands).

³ [Pte A. Mitchell](#); born NZ 14 Dec 1912; labourer; killed in action 30 Apr 1945.

⁴ [Capt R. M. Stewart](#), m.i.d.; [Apiti](#); born [Feilding](#), 10 Aug 1920; farmer.

⁵ [Rev J. Sands](#); [Gisborne](#); born [Wombwell](#), England, 13 May 1908; Congregational minister.

⁶ One man had been killed and 15 wounded (including two officers) since the battalion resumed the advance from near [Medicina](#) on 22 April, which brought the battalion's total casualties since its conversion to infantry to 35 killed and 128 wounded.

⁷ [\] Wo I. R. K. Cole](#); born [Petone](#), 12 Nov 1922; shepherd.

⁸ [Rev G. D. Falloon](#), MC, m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born NZ 12 Nov 1911; student.

⁹ WO I E. G. Boggs; Papatoetoe; born NZ 28 Mar 1922; student teacher.

¹⁰ Cpl S. L. Young; Te Awamutu; born Rawene, 27 Mar 1923; farmhand; wounded 15 Apr 1945.

¹¹ Lt-Col O. A. Gillespie, MBE, MM, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Cust, 7 Apr 1895; script writer and historian; NZ Rifle Bde 1914–19 (wounded 1917); IO 8 Inf Bde Gp (Fiji) 1940; GSO 3 (Int) 3 NZ Div 1941–42; Cipher Officer 3 NZ Div 1942–44; ADPR BCOF, Japan, 1946–48; Director Public Relations BCOF 1948–50.

¹² Oliver A. Gillespie, *The Pacific*, p. 314

¹³ Maj N. B. Cowper commanded 27 Bn for a month while Titchener

¹⁴ *The Pacific*, pp. 312–3.

¹⁵ Lt-Col R. C. Hollis, MC; Lower Hutt; born Great Yarmouth, England, 25 Dec 1892; reader; First World War 1914–18 (16 Lancers); twice wounded; president Provost Courts 2 NZEF, Japan, 1947–48; CO 27 Bn 31 Mar–2 Jun 1947.

¹⁶ Lt-Col R. B. Dawson, DSO, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born Rotorua, 21 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; BM 5 Bde May–Sep 1941; Jan–Jun 1942; BM 6 Bde 1942–43; Senior Tactics Instructor, RMC, Duntroon, 1943–46; CO 27 Bn and 3 Bn 2 NZEF, Japan, 2 Jun 1947–1948; Director of Staff Duties, Army HQ, 1949–52.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

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27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

APPENDIX – THE VICKERS GUN IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

APPENDIX

The Vickers Gun in the Second World War

In the First World War the machine gun held 'the premier place among the death-dealing instruments of modern warfare'; ¹ against its concentrated fire the unprotected infantry, usually at fearful loss of life, had made short advances across the chaos of shell holes and swamp created by the artillery. Tanks, used at first in small numbers, were introduced to protect and support the infantry against the machine gun; later, in the Spanish Civil War, the Germans developed the technique of the blitzkrieg or swift break-through by many tanks supported by lorried infantry and dive-bombing aircraft—a technique perfected in 1943 by the British at [Tebaga Gap](#) in [Tunisia](#). The tanks, however, could not hold the ground they won; this was still the role of the infantry, who needed the protection of minefields, anti-tank, anti-aircraft and field artillery, mortars and machine guns.

In the Second World War the Vickers medium machine gun was capable of producing a greater volume of sustained, concentrated, small-arms fire than any other weapon. It was still an admirable defensive weapon: with a well-dug gunpit and an ample supply of ammunition it required few men to operate it, and it could be knocked out only by a direct hit. Groups of guns could be sited to gain the fullest use of enfilade fire; they could be mutually supporting, and could give depth to the defence.

The Vickers also could be used as an offensive weapon: it could give the infantry covering fire before, during and after an advance. With overhead, indirect and night fire it could harass the known and suspected enemy positions and lines of communication before the attack, support the attacking infantry by firing on roads, houses or other targets ahead of the artillery barrage, or along the flanks of the advance, and on call from the infantry could engage points which might be holding up the advance; it could go forward to support the reorganisation immediately the objective had been taken, and could help to break up any counter-attack the enemy

might attempt.

Nevertheless 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion was converted into infantry at the beginning of 1945. The battles of 1944 had shown the need for a higher proportion of infantry in the Division. Some machine-gun officers believe, however, that the change would not have taken place if the potentialities of the Vickers gun had been fully appreciated. They maintain that too often the pattern followed had been to allot a machine-gun company to a brigade and the platoons of that company to infantry battalions; that this decentralisation of control frittered away fire power and prevented the fullest use being made of the guns' capabilities. This decentralisation also denied the commanding officer of the machine-gun battalion a say in the tactical employment of his forty-eight guns; often he was further handicapped by being given other duties, such as the command of divisional reserve group, which left him practically no time to consider how his guns were being used.

A company commander who had a very long experience with the battalion believes that, while the Vickers gun 'has no peer' in defence when well dug in and served with ample ammunition, the technique of using it in mobile warfare had not been fully mastered. 'Whilst two men could carry the gun well forward into action, the portage of amn was another question. This meant that, for ample supplies of ammunition, it largely had to rely on getting its transport well forward and this transport had to compete with other much needed stores, anti-tank guns, etc, to be got forward. Faced with this problem, many commanders allotted low priorities to the gun trucks. Again many of our attacks were made in darkness and it is impossible to make the most of siting a gun until daylight gives some visibility. Many MGs have faced the task of digging in where they can, only to turn to and move the gun a small distance as soon as daylight gives visibility....

The 15 cwt truck, whilst a useful transport for the gun and crew, was somewhat cumbersome and was also a light skinned vehicle. Probably either a lighter or more mobile form of transport would be better, or one giving better cross country performance whilst providing some form of protection for the crew. ² One thing must be remembered, however: full value of the gun can seldom be realised until the gun is on the ground, well sited and very well dug in.'

It has been suggested that the tank could replace the Vickers gun, that it was

virtually a mobile medium machine gun and anti-tank gun, which could get into position so much earlier. Against this it can be argued that the tanks might be called away for another task just when their protection was needed and that they usually retired to the rear at night to laager and for maintenance and refuelling. Nor were they always in position so much earlier. At least they were not at [Ruweisat Ridge](#) (where the machine-gunnery was described as being the infantry's main defence until overrun by tanks and armoured cars), [Wadi Matratin](#), and the Roman Wall in [Tunisia](#), for example. When the Germans counter-attacked 5 Brigade at night at [Orsogna](#), the artillery, tanks and machine guns all helped to beat them off; the Vickers, with company shoots, were able to break up the concentrations of infantry following the enemy tanks.

When the Vickers were sited well forward in support of the infantry, some battalion commanders were reluctant to allow them to fire when all was quiet; their harassing fire might achieve no visible destruction, and the enemy almost invariably retaliated. Machine-gun platoons under the command of infantry battalions, therefore, sometimes did very little firing unless the battalion was actually attacked.

One of the virtues of the 4500-yard range of the Mark VIII Z ammunition was that the guns did not always have to sit in the midst of the infantry they were supporting; they could be sited in rear where they would not draw retaliatory fire on the infantry. Also, at the longer range the steeper trajectory enabled them to reach targets which otherwise would have been shielded.

Some infantry battalion commanders, who were all for hitting the enemy with everything available, encouraged the use of the Vickers gun whenever possible. One of them writes: 'where it was desirable, M.M.Gs. were requested and included in my plans. My views were not always acceptable.... following one request I was asked ... why M.M.Gs. were wanted and whether I had ever seen an enemy killed by M.M.G. fire. The simple answer is, to my knowledge, whenever M.M.Gs. were used, the enemy sought them diligently. There is so much M.M.Gs. can do that I fail to understand why they should be in the discard. ... for weight of firepower and cheapness of operation M.M.Gs. could not be bettered. An infantry battalion from its own weapons could not undertake the indirect and overhead fire tasks of M.M.Gs. With the standard of training achieved in the 2 N.Z.E.F. and attainable by any efficient unit, commanders could with confidence call for flank or overhead fire down

to safety angles on start lines, in D.F. & S.O.S. tasks and receive it, particularly the latter, in an amazingly short time.

'We tried to hit the enemy with all we had and the M.M.G. used at least by platoons but preferably by companies, was a weapon to be reckoned with.... I am a great believer in the fire power of the M.M.G. To you who supported us so often and so devastatingly I am most grateful.'

¹ J. H. Luxford, *With the Machine Gunners in France and Palestine*, P. 15.

² The MMG can now be carried by truck, jeep (Landrover) or carrier. There are few places where one or other of these cannot go; in such places pack mules may be used. The machine-gunners are not the only people who many have difficulty in carrying their equipment and ammunition into position; the crews of three-inch mortars and rocket-launchers have similar problems.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

ROLL OF HONOUR

Roll of Honour

killed in action

Capt A. J. Young	18 April 1945
Lt B. B. Bern	16 March 1944
Lt R. S. Brown	20 April 1943
Lt L. W. Campbell	28 November 1943
Lt T. W. Daly	23 November 1941
Lt J. C. Evans	5 July 1942
Lt D. B. Mathews	4 September 1942
2 Lt N. J. Fuller	16 April 1945
WO II K. B. Booker	15 July 1942
WO II A. D. Hunter	20 April 1941
Sgt R. E. Cottingham	3 June 1944
Sgt D. R. Fraser	24 March 1943
Sgt L. E. Green	2 November 1942
Sgt N. H. Hayes	17 April 1945
Sgt M. Homer	16 December 1942
Sgt B. W. Kain	25 May 1941
Sgt G. I. Knox	22 April 1943
Sgt M. J. Moore	17 April 1945
Sgt J. L. Partridge	7 December 1943
Sgt R. O. Spotswood	4 May 1944
Sgt N. H. Tanner	29 July 1944
L-Sgt J. K. Brown	22 July 1942
L-Sgt P. H. Tritt	4 September 1942
L-Sgt L. K. Vesty	17 April 1945
Cpl R. Adams	30 May 1941
Cpl L. F. Barraclough	24 April 1943
Cpl J. L. Deighton	17 April 1945
Cpl L. R. Dowding	12 April 1941
Cpl C. Hargreaves	2 November 1942
Cpl T. H. Hendra	23 July 1944

Cpl A. E. Hoggard	16 March 1944
Cpl L. B. Hore	14 July 1942
Cpl G. McC. Millar	2 December 1941
Cpl W. D. Parker	25 May 1941
Cpl A. Paterson	2 November 1942
Cpl W. R. Phipps	7 July 1942
Cpl D. L. Ralfe	23 November 1941
Cpl J. D. Sanson	16 April 1945
L-Cpl J. D. Barlass	23 July 1944
L-Cpl H. G. Beck	18 April 1945
L-Cpl R. R. Cleland	16 April 1945
L-Cpl J. Dougal	27 November 1941
L-Cpl W. Lawton	15 July 1942
L-Cpl E. A. Major	17 April 1945
L-Cpl A. E. Smith	23 May 1941
L-Cpl D. L. Stagpoole	14 July 1942
L-Cpl C. W. Tozer	25 May 1941
L-Cpl J. L. Tucker	16 April 1945
Pte M. L. Albanuff	13 April 1943
Pte S. R. Anderson	24 October 1942
Pte J. Blackburn	21 May 1941
Pte J. Boyle	28 November 1941
Pte D. G. Brew	6 May 1944
Pte E. G. Brooks	15 July 1942
Pte A. B. Brown	17 April 1945
Pte L. G. Bryan	3 December 1943
Pte G. H. E. Carswell	5 July 1942
Pte N. A. Carswell	18 April 1945
Pte H. L. Chinnock	16 April 1945
Pte J. O. Comer	20 April 1941
Pte B. J. Cosgriff	17 April 1945
Pte O. Dalziel	24 May 1941
Pte L. M. D'Auvergne	May 1941
Pte B. W. T. Davis	25 October 1942
Pte P. J. Downing	4 May 1944
Pte D. T. Drennan	15 July 1942
Pte J. N. Drury	22 April 1943

Pte T. Dwyer	5 February 1944
Pte H. W. Evetts	23 November 1941
Pte T. M. Ferguson	26 November 1941
Pte S. H. Glasson	14 July 1942
Pte R. N. Gobbe	28 November 1941
Pte M. G. B. Gordon	27 March 1943
Pte D. G. Greener	28 July 1944
Pte D. J. Greig	17 April 1945
Pte J. J. Hall	3 September 1942
Pte J. G. Hamlin	17 April 1945
Pte L. F. J. Hawke	17 April 1945
Pte T. R. Hawkins	28 November 1941
Pte D. A. Henderson	18 April 1945
Pte C. L. Hewlett	1 December 1943
Pte C. A. S. Horn	4 September 1942
Pte T. R. Horne	23 November 1941
Pte G. Hultenberg	17 April 1945
Pte E. James	24 October 1942
Pte L. P. Johnson	4 June 1944
Pte J. A. Johnston	23 November 1941
Pte A. M. Kerr	17 April 1945
Pte A. S. Kibblewhite	17 April 1945
Pte H. M. J. Kidd	24 October 1942
Pte W. J. Kitto	28 June 1942
Pte J. A. Lawton	27 February 1944
Pte A. W. Lee	23 November 1941
Pte W. C. Livingston	20 July 1942
Pte J. S. McCartney	3 November 1942
Pte L. MacDonald	24 May 1941
Pte J. S. McIntyre	17 April 1945
Pte R. McKay	18 April 1945
Pte I. F. Mackintosh	8 January 1944
Pte J. M. McKone	17 April 1945
Pte J. W. Macey	14 March 1944
Pte W. H. Malcolm	24 May 1941
Pte A. S. Marshall	13 July 1944
Pte S. K. Maurice	8 January 1943

Pte A. Mitchell	30 April 1945
Pte M. E. Morgan	15 July 1942
Pte A. H. C. Munro	1 December 1941
Pte M. T. Neill	27 November 1941
Pte K. A. F. Newman	21 May 1941
Pte S. C. R. Newman	26 November 1941
Pte J. T. O'Donnell	13 April 1941
Pte G. V. Olsen	22 July 1942
Pte A. A. Opie	10 December 1943
Pte V. M. Preston	5 December 1941
Pte E. H. Price	26 November 1941
Pte P. J. Ramage	22 April 1941
Pte H. S. Robertson	21 May 1941
Pte W. G. Robertson	17 April 1945
Pte C. J. Robson	12 April 1941
Pte R. A. Rolston	30 May 1944
Pte L. J. Sciascia	5 July 1942
Pte C. G. Seaward	17 April 1945
Pte E. W. Sherborne	20 May 1941
Pte W. J. Sherlock	18 May 1941
Pte A. Sinclair	14 April 1945
Pte J. C. Skudder	5 December 1941
Pte F. M. Spurdle	25 May 1941
Pte J. G. Stroud	24 April 1943
Pte W. B. Switzer	7 March 1943
Pte J. W. Taylor	23 November 1941
Pte D. H. Tuck	20 May 1941
Pte C. N. Walker	17 April 1945
Pte T. Wallbank	28 June 1942
Pte C. G. Watson	17 April 1945
Pte R. A. Wellington	25 May 1941
Pte F. G. Wood	24 October 1942

died of wounds

Maj G. C. Kirk	4 May 1943
Capt H. D. Ball	28 March 1943
Capt R. H. Howell	27 June 1942

Capt M. W. J. Ross	18 April 1945
Lt G. L. Lee	2 January 1942
S-Sgt W. B. Symons	8 November 1942
Sgt G. W. Clark	23 July 1942
Sgt G. E. C. Mayfield	29 July 1944
Sgt F. H. Wood	28 November 1943
Cpl C. H. Buckeridge	4 July 1942
Cpl A. Gibb	1 December 1943
Cpl R. Hunter	25 October 1942
Cpl W P. Walsh	30 July 1944
L-Cpl R. Morrison	25 May 1941
Pte H. E. Allnutt	11 July 1942
Pte A. R. Bishara	17 March 1944
Pte A. S. Burr	22 July 1942
Pte C. Carter	27 March 1943
Pte R. W. D. Chisnall	27 March 1943
Pte J. Cramond	2 November 1942
Pte P. R. Davis	25 October 1942
Pte L. S. Dewar	22 July 1942
Pte R. M. Elliott	2 November 1942
Pte W. A. Friar	27 June 1942
Pte W. Frohlich	9 August 1944
Pte M. V. Gower	23 July 1944
Pte W. Hakaraia	14 July 1942
Pte W. J. Hampton	1 December 1941
Pte E. W. E. Heaps	30 November 1941
Pte E. D. Hewlett	19 April 1945
Pte T. H. Jennings	24 October 1942
Pte L. J. McIver	30 November 1941
Pte J. A. McLean	31 August 1942
Pte R. R. MacMillan	25 October 1942
Pte H. V. Medland	25 October 1942
Pte J. E. Mitchell	26 November 1943
Pte G. A. Muir	5 July 1942
Pte P. J. O'Donoghue	26 July 1942
Pte R. F. O'Rourke	30 December 1943
Pte A. I. Roulston	17 April 1945

Pte P. A. Shand	12 January 1944
Pte B. K. Stewart	24 March 1944
Pte P. T. Tipa	16 July 1942
Pte T. F. Twisleton	27 November 1941
Pte W. L. Verdon	7 April 1941
Pte H. Wild	16 April 1945
died while prisoners of war	
Sgt T. W. Baume	8 December 1943
Cpl R. A. Ripley	17 August 1942
Pte I. B. Anderson	8 December 1943
Pte E. A. Brightwell	13 April 1945
Pte C. W. Guinness	8 December 1943
Pte L. A. Hickman	8 December 1943
Pte J. M. King	11 October 1942
Pte H. Lang	17 August 1942
Pte P. M. MacPherson	17 August 1942
Pte F. W. Polhill	17 August 1942
Pte H. L. Small	17 August 1942
Pte C. Smart	8 December 1943
Pte A. L. Steele	10 October 1941
Pte W. H. Windle	17 August 1942
Pte T. A. Wright	3 October 1942
died on active service	
Capt D. G. Carnachan	17 November 1943
Sgt G. R. Aston	27 March 1942
Cpl F. A. Anderson	1 July 1944
L-Cpl W. W. P. Wilson	9 June 1945
Pte W. B. Allen	19 April 1942
Pte N. J. Atkinson	30 July 1945
Pte B. H. Carter	6 July 1944
Pte D. H. Clarke	22 June 1940
Pte R. Jackson	21 October 1943
Pte N. T. C. Kavanagh	15 September 1942
Pte J. W. Lee	30 September 1941
Pte A. L. Meikle	9 September 1940
Pte J. H. Nevin	19 December 1943
Pte E. E. Robinson	9 February 1942

Pte E. E. Robinson	1 July 1944
Pte J. C. Wilkin	31 July 1941
Pte A. J. Wilson	23 July 1943

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Summary of Casualties

	Killed		Wounded		Prisoners of War	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
Greece 1941	—	8	1	12	3	30
Crete 1941	—	17	1	15	2	86
Libya 1941	2	22	2	45	10	27
Egypt 1942	3	47	5	117	4	82
Tripolitania and Tunisia 1942–43	3	11	3	49	—	—
Italy 1943–44	2	32	12	120	—	13
Italy 1945 [†]	3	32	8	118	—	—
total	13	169	32	476	19	238

The killed include men who were killed in action or who died of wounds and those presumed to have been killed in action; the prisoners of war include one officer and 27 other ranks who were wounded before capture and 15 other ranks who were killed or died of wounds or sickness while prisoners of war. One officer and 16 other ranks who died on active service are not included in the above casualties.

[†] †Included in these figures are one officer and one other rank who were wounded in 1945 before the battalion's conversion to infantry.

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Honours and Awards

distinguished service order

Lt-Col G. P. Sanders

Maj G. H. Bell

Lt N. F. Gardiner

order of the british empire

Maj R. I. Blair

bar to military cross

Maj W. F. Titchener

military cross

Lt D. B. Beard

Lt K. J. Frazer

Lt J. T. H. Halkett

Lt G. L. Lee

Lt W. F. Liley

Lt L. E. McAneny

Lt B. R. Sneddon

Lt W. F. Titchener

military medal

WO II K. B. Booker

Sgt W. J. Cattnach

Sgt M. W. Cross

Sgt T. E. Doyle

Sgt G. T. Holden

Sgt G. I. Knox

Sgt P. J. Paul

Sgt C. R. Pulford (NZOC attached)

Sgt E. J. Upchurch (NZEME attached)

L-Sgt D. M. Hatherly

Cpl J. W. Dryden

Cpl E. R. McInness

Cpl R. J. G. Mack

Cpl J. B. Midgley

L-Cpl C. E. L. Hutchison

Pte G. G. Beckingham

Pte J. A. Black

Pte H. K. Carey

Pte B. B. Carter

Pte M. W. Curtis (NZOC attached)

Pte J. Forsyth

Pte J. Herbert

Pte K. W. Lawrence

Pte D. C. McIntyre

Pte J. R. M. Morris

Pte M. J. Richardson

27 (MACHINE GUN) BATTALION

COMMANDING OFFICERS

Commanding Officers

Lt-Col L. M. Inglis	4 Dec 1939– 13 Aug 1940
Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam	13 Aug 1940– 25 Jul 1942
Lt-Col J. K. Robbie	25 Jul 1942– 16 Oct 1942
Lt-Col A. W. White	16 Oct 1942– 31 Jan 1943
Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin	31 Jan 1943– 3 Apr 1943
Lt-Col J. K. Robbie	3 Apr 1943– 19 Sep 1943
Lt-Col J. L. MacDuff	24 Sep 1943– 29 Feb 1944
Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens	29 Feb 1944– 8 May 1944
Lt-Col D. G. Steele	11 May 1944– 20 Nov 1944
Lt-Col G. P. Sanders	20 Nov 1944– 16 May 1946 ¹
Lt-Col W. F. Titchener	16 May 1946– 31 Mar 1947
Lt-Col R. C. Hollis	31 Mar 1947– 2 Jun 1947
Lt-Col R. B. Dawson	2 Jun 1947– 7 Aug 1947 ²

¹ Lt-Col Sanders was appointed CO [27 Battalion, 2 NZEF \(Japan\)](#), on 9 Oct 1945.

² On this date [27 Battalion](#) became 3 Battalion New Zealand Regiment.

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Archives Officer R. L. Kay

the author: [Robin L. Kay](#) was born at Waipawa in 1919, educated at the Gisborne High School, Christ's College and [Victoria University College](#), where he graduated BA, and was a reporter on the Times, [Palmerston North](#), before the war; he was with the 2 NZEF Public Relations Service in the Middle East and is now on the staff of the [War History Branch](#).

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