

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

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[FRONTISPIECE]

The authors of the volumes in this series of histories prepared under the supervision of the **War History Branch** of the Department of Internal Affairs have been given full access to official documents. They and the Editor-in-Chief are responsible for the statements made and the views expressed by them.



Moving into the line at Faenza

Moving into the line at Faenza

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

[TITLE PAGE]



Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45 28 (Maori) Battalion

J. F. CODY

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1956**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

WINDSOR CASTLE – FOREWORD

WINDSOR CASTLE

Foreword

**Lieutenant-General Lord Freyberg,
VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO**

I AM proud to be asked by the Maoris to write a foreword to the history of their Battalion, partly because they had such a distinguished fighting record, but also because they were such excellent wartime comrades. Speaking of their military record overseas—I believe that when this history is published, it will be recognised more widely that no infantry battalion had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or, alas, had such heavy casualties as the **Maori Battalion.**

In this history you will read the whole story—how they went overseas from New Zealand in 1940, with the Second Echelon to England, to take part in ‘The Battle of **Britain’. When the threat of invasion diminished they re-embarked for the **Middle East**, and arrived in time to take part in the disastrous campaigns in **Greece** and Crete. Later they fought in the 1941 Libyan Campaign and in the battles in 1942 in defence of Egypt. Later, when the tide changed, they took an active part in the victorious Western Desert Campaign, under Generals Alexander and Montgomery. They finished the war in **Italy** on the 2nd May 1945.**

In all these many campaigns this Battalion took a great part, often a decisive part, in the fighting, as in the counter-attacks at **Maleme and 42nd Street in the Cretan Campaign, or again in the Battle of **Tebaga Gap**, where gallant and young **Ngarimu** gained his posthumous Victoria Cross, or in the capture of **Takrouna**. But as glorious as these battles were, and as gallant and brave as was the Maori part, it is not only of their bravery that we wish to write. We want to record what fine fighting comrades they are.**

To know and appreciate their great qualities you must understand their background and their tribal traditions. The Maoris are a fighting race, and according to their traditions and in keeping with the laws of New Zealand, they did not come under the National Service Act, which called up men when they reached the military age. The Maori was always a volunteer. For them it was an honour to serve, an attitude strongly supported by their tribal leaders.

In this book you will discover that the Maoris are fine men and fine soldiers. They were a great joy to be associated with. They were ideal comrades in arms—high-spirited, happy and brave. They had a further great military virtue—their sense of humour never failed, they always saw humour even in the most difficult situation.

The Maori Battalion was raised from all over New Zealand. During this war the **Maori Battalion** made Maori history on two occasions. As a Battalion they were commanded in battle for the first time by Maoris. Some great leaders, such as Colonels **Tui Love**, Baker, **Charlie Bennett**, Keiha, **Peter Awatere** and Henare, were produced from officers of Maori or part-Maori blood. And Maori history was made when **Ngarimu** won the Victoria Cross.

I know that the Maoris would wish to record how much the **Maori Battalion** owed to their Pakeha leaders. They will always remember with affection such COs as Colonels **Dittmer**, **Dyer**, **Fairbrother** and Russell Young.

This is a fine story of one of the great fighting infantry battalions of World War II. I hope that it will be widely read by the Pakeha as well as the Maori, and especially by the people here in Great Britain.

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor,

Windsor Castle

16 December 1955

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

PREFACE

Preface

IT is not always easy to see things as others see them—the obstacles multiply when there is a difference in racial outlook. The writer, a pakeha, approached the job of writing the Official History of 28 (Maori) Battalion with some trepidation. The story, at both divisional and battalion level, is as accurate as careful research and detailed checking by officers of the **War History Branch can make it, and my thanks are due to them. But there are occasions, the bayonet charge at 42nd Street is one of them, where no amount of probing could reconcile the stories of the participants, all of whom are quite definite that their version is the correct one. I have taken the middle course, the course in which lies the greatest amount of accord. I have been fortunate in inheriting a considerable amount of work done by **Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett**, **Captain Wikiriwhi**, and **Sergeant-Major Nepia**; particularly the last, who was battalion historian in **Italy** and who has placed on record the particulars of actions as soon as possible after the events took place. In this connection I am grateful to the officers, junior and senior, who took so much trouble in answering my questionnaires and who made their diaries available to me. **Lieutenant-Colonel Baker**, chairman of the 28th (Maori) Battalion unit history committee, was most helpful both in his official capacity and as an actor in much of the drama up to the time of his evacuation when wounded.**

I have felt it a privilege to write the history of this magnificent battalion.

J. F. CODY

WELLINGTON 29 February 1956

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*Kaye)
New Zealand
Army (G. F.
Kaye)*

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*New Zealand
Army (G. F.
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The Senio stopbank

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*New Zealand
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28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 1 – FORMATION AND DEPARTURE

CHAPTER 1

Formation and Departure

Haere ra E Tama, kia tupato, kia whakaaro nui ki Te Matua i te Rangi.

THE second war with **Germany** in the twentieth century did not come like a thunderbolt but rather with the inevitability of gradualness—crisis after crisis, appeasement after appeasement, and an exultant **Hitler** announcing with appropriate stage management that this demand, that démarche, would be positively the last. Finally came the German attack on **Poland** and the consequent declaration by England and **France** that a state of war existed with **Germany**.

Months before the historic 3 September 1939, **Sir Apirana Ngata**, a foremost Maori personality of this time, foreseeing that there must be a second recourse to arms, advocated the formation of a Maori military unit following the precedent of the Maori Pioneer Battalion of 1914–18; Ngata was jealous that his race be not submerged in a New Zealand at war any more than it had been submerged in a New Zealand at peace.

Even before the **New Zealand Government** had authorised the raising of an expeditionary force, two Maori members of Parliament, Messrs E. T. Tirikatene (Southern Maori) and P. K. Paikea (Northern Maori), made public demand that their race be represented in any force that might be formed. Their lead was followed by organisations and individuals throughout Maoridom.

The Government did not decide immediately to add another unit to the division it was proposing to raise, particularly as the demand was that the Maori force, whatever its constitution and size, be composed entirely of Maoris. Something more than lip service had been given in New Zealand to the concept that the Maori people were, economically as well as politically, entirely equal to the pakeha, but there were hesitations about a completely Maori military unit. On 4 October the Government announced its decision to embody an infantry battalion

recruited from the Maori race for service as combatant troops within or beyond New Zealand, but it reserved the right to appoint European officers and non-commissioned officers to key positions. The policy, however, would be to replace the Europeans as soon as possible.

Objections to the reservation were immediate and widespread. The necessity for a pakeha commander was conceded, but in the Maori view there was no need whatever for pakeha company commanders or NCOs when there were Pioneer Battalion veterans from the First World War, Territorials, young men with college and university training, as well as others of outstanding ability to choose from.

The objection to pakeha direction was not so much antipakeha as pro-Maori and the manifestation of the urge in all self-respecting peoples not to accept an inference of racial inferiority; this was particularly so in regard to warlike activities, for in Maori history there had been only one generation—the one born after 1870—that could not speak of war from first-hand experience.

Arawa and Ngatiporou were particularly emphatic in their protests and asked for an immediate pronouncement that the **Maori Battalion** would be officered entirely by Maoris. The Government's reply reiterated that key positions would at first be filled by specially selected Europeans.

Implementing this decision, the Director of Mobilisation announced that command of the battalion had been given to **Major G. Dittmer**, MBE, MC, NZSC, ¹ and that **Lieutenant-Colonel G. F. Bertrand** ² of the Reserve of Officers, the Taranaki Regiment, who was of part-Maori blood, would be second-in-command with the rank of major. Both had served overseas in the First World War; Dittmer was a regular soldier with the reputation of being a firm disciplinarian.

Army area officers were advised that a small number of European officers would be required for appointment to the **Maori Battalion**, and were asked to forward the names of any who were willing to serve and

who were considered suitable; full particulars were also required of any Maori officers or ex-officers who volunteered and were passed medically fit, likewise the names of any Maori recruits considered suitable for training as commissioned or non-commissioned officers. Dittmer was at the same time instructed to visit mobilisation camps and select prospective officers and NCOs from the Maoris serving in First Echelon units, and to offer to the others the choice of remaining where they were or of transferring to the **Maori Battalion**. It was never intended that Maoris should not serve in other units, as they did, but rather that the **Maori Battalion** should be reserved for Maoris only.

To produce the battalion requirements of officers and NCOs 146 trainees reported to Army School, **Trentham**, at the end of November and were followed by replacements as **Major Dittmer**, in command of the group, weeded out the less promising material.

Included in the draft were six officers of the Maori Pioneer Battalion whose experience of active service could be expected to promote confidence in the younger men. Amongst the others were few who had had any previous military training. The conditions upon which they entered camp were that all officers, with the exception of the CO and second-in-command, were regarded as student officers, and the balance as student NCOs with the prospect of approximately twenty being recommended for commissions at the termination of the course.

Within a fortnight of assembling a request was made by **Sir Apirana Ngata** that a guard of honour one hundred strong be made available for the opening of the Maori court at the Centennial Exhibition. The request was approved by Army Department though many were dubious as to the ability of the Maoris to supply a ceremonial guard in so short a time. But they underestimated the capacity of the trainees. Major McCulloch, ³ Chief Instructor at Army School and known to every student who entered its gates as 'the Screaming Skull', made the affair a personal matter and the resultant guard of honour commanded by Captain Rangi Royal ⁴ would not have disgraced any fully-trained unit. It was a particularly meritorious performance because members of the

guard had also to keep abreast of the syllabus for the course and only a small number of periods set aside for drill, rifle exercises, and ceremonial drill were devoted to special training of the guard of honour. During the ceremonies at the Maori court **Sir Apirana** presented the battalion officers with carved drill sticks.

In addition to the military pageantry there was also a haka party, led by Private Anania Amohau, ⁵ which carried out the traditional welcoming dances and added a Maori atmosphere to the occasion. Private Amohau had provided the **Maori Battalion** with its famous marching song before there was a battalion, and this is how it came about.

With the approach of 1940, the centennial year of the Treaty of Waitangi, with all its implications for the Maori people, New Zealand-wide celebrations were being planned for the opening of meeting houses and the unveiling of monuments. The Arawa Services League was already training a guard of honour, known as the Arawa Maori Contingent and composed of young men of **Rotorua** with a sprinkling of returned soldiers. They practised under the eye of Captain Royal after their daily work and Private Amohau found the theme of a song running through his head. Words and music gradually took shape; first he whistled it, then he sang it; Captain Royal had some copies typed and soon the Arawa Maori Contingent was singing its own marching song. **Rotorua** provided its quota of trainees and the men found that their song, now called ' **Maori Battalion**', had preceded them to **Trentham**. Lieutenant Pike, ⁶ bandmaster of the Trentham Camp Band, arranged the music for a military band and the marching song of the **Maori Battalion** swept the country.

Recruiting for the battalion opened in the second week of October and by the end of the month had resulted in nearly nine hundred enlistments. Enlistment was voluntary and remained so all through the war—an achievement probably unequalled by any race or people drawn into the conflict. Maori recruiting officers were appointed to districts

with a Maori population and, working in close co-operation with tribal authorities, saw to it that the battalion was never short of replacements.

At first, volunteers were required to be single and between the ages of 21 and 35, but the opportunity to enlist was later extended to married men with not more than two children within the same age group. It was decided that the battalion should assemble at the Palmerston North Show Grounds on 26 January 1940, and the Army School trainees moved in two days earlier to prepare the camp.

The drafts arrived at **Palmerston North** throughout the day, accompanied in some cases by their chiefs and tribal elders and in others by companions and relatives who had, characteristically, come along without enlistment authority. They could not understand why their friendly co-operation was frowned upon and why they were not regarded as *ipso facto* members of the battalion. In addition, many of the volunteers were under age.

Major Dittmer was at the station to meet the first draft and it would be interesting to know what he thought when he saw his first recruits. Many had ukeleles, accordions and banjos, and nearly all were dressed in the bright colours of their Sunday best. It is said that the Major went a little pale.

The battalion was to be organised on a tribal basis, and to this end men from **North Auckland** (the Ngapuhi and subtribes) were marched into A Company lines; B Company received the men from **Rotorua**, Bay of Plenty, Taupo, and the **Thames**-Coromandel areas, mostly from the Arawa confederation and Tuhoe tribes; C Company comprised the tribes of the East Coast from south of **Gisborne** to the East Cape, Ngatiporou, Rongowhakaata, and sub-tribes; D Company, unlike the others, which were from compact areas with a closely-knit tribal organisation, extended from the **Waikato**-Maniapoto confederation area south of **Auckland** and included the Taranaki tribes, the **Ngati Kahungunu** of Hawke's Bay-Wairarapa, the Wellington Province, the whole of the **South Island**, the Chathams and Stewart Island, and odd men from the **Pacific**

Islands. Headquarters Company, when formed, was also composite but was drawn chiefly from the surplus of A, B, and C Companies.

The chief appointments in the battalion at this stage were:

CO: Major Dittmer, MBE, MC

Second-in-Command: Major Bertrand

Adjutant: Lieutenant D. Curtis, NZSC

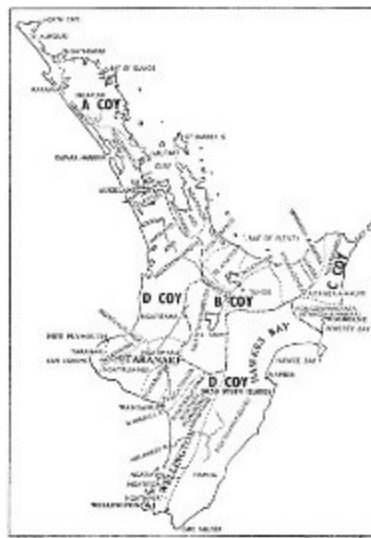
Quartermaster: Captain G. H. Weir

Medical Officer: Major W. B. Fisher

RSM: WO I A. C. Wood

RQMS: WO II G. L. Burke.

After initial adjustments, the following company commanders were appointed: **Captain E. Te W. Love, Headquarters Company; Captain L. J. Bell, A Company; Captain R. Royal, B**



Tribal areas and company boundaries, 28 (Maori) Battalion

Company; Captain A. T. McL. Scott, C Company; Major H. G. Dyer, D Company.

From the outset **Dittmer**, promoted lieutenant-colonel on 29 January, insisted on strict discipline for both officers and men, and any inclination to treat the camp as a holiday resort was instantly repressed. The CO's influence remained with the battalion long after his return to New Zealand in February 1942 as a result of wounds suffered in the Second Libyan Campaign.

Training began immediately the preliminaries of marching in, the issue of clothing, and the organisation of platoons were completed. The raw material of the battalion was very malleable and very inexperienced; even the long train journey was to a large number something of an event, but they brought with them a philosophical outlook and a carefree cheerfulness. Events were to show that this typical Polynesian disposition seldom failed the Maori soldier. One advantage the Maoris had over the pakeha trainees was that, living in close proximity to their fellows in their own communities and being used to sharing amenities, they did not have to become accustomed to camp life.

The battalion command was faced with a multitude of problems arising from the fact that the Maori is predominantly agrarian and that consequently all specialists had to be trained—medical orderlies, mechanics, clerks, drivers, radio technicians, signallers, and other tradesmen necessary in a modern battalion. Incidentally, it was a problem that continued throughout the war and the wonder is that the men were able to obtain enough practical experience to perform their various functions efficiently. Another anxiety was that the unit had entered camp a fortnight after the rest of the Second Echelon and there was a lot of leeway to make up; but this was made good by the keenness of the troops who gave themselves mutual instruction in elementary drill before and after regular parade hours. Training time was also lost through the abnormal amount of work required to make the men dentally fit, and three dental officers were kept fully employed; and, as if that were not enough, the Medical Officer was faced with long queues parading with sore feet—happy-go-lucky recruits who had tried to make Maori feet fit into pakeha boots. A wider-than-usual last was necessary

for men who seldom wore boots in youth and, to get the width, boots several sizes too big were issued by the perplexed Quartermaster. This led to further complications. The RSM, inspecting a company before parade, was once stopped in his tracks by the sight of a man with his boots on the wrong feet.

The QM had other worries also for, after fitting out the First and Second Echelons, there was an acute shortage of uniforms. The Maoris had therefore to make the best of the situation and a civilian tailoring firm worked long hours making alterations.

Less important, but symptomatic of the Maori 'all for one and one for all' attitude, was the way the men performed each other's duties and borrowed each other's equipment. The right number of men would parade for a fatigue, but not necessarily the right men if there was something they wanted to do more than attend that particular parade. Serial numbers on equipment were not important, and so long as everyone had a rifle and bayonet why make a fuss over who had which rifle or bayonet? It was the same with clothing. To be charged for shortages discovered in kit inspection when the article was probably being put to good use by somebody else was, in the opinion of the Maori recruit, an erratic pakeha custom.

Training, continually interrupted by dental treatment, medical inspections, and departure of promising material to Army School courses of instruction, the selection of men for specialist platoons and all the other teething troubles of a new unit, was suspended almost entirely within a fortnight of entering camp by the departure of 500 all ranks to the centennial celebrations at Waitangi.

When the question of a special Maori commemoration of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi was first mooted, the details of tribal representation at the gathering were discussed with the Government by the Maori members of Parliament. The suggestion was made that, as the **Maori Battalion** was to assemble at **Palmerston North** in January 1940, it would be very fitting if the tribal representatives were taken from that

body. The Government agreed and the contingent attended the centennial celebrations as members of the **Maori Battalion** and as representatives of the various tribes from which the battalion was drawn. In the absence of **Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer**, who was in hospital suffering from an attack of influenza, **Major Bertrand** was in command of the contingent.

Four days' valuable training time had been lost, but such was the keenness of the Maori recruits that after a ceremonial parade on 19 February Major-General Duigan, ⁷ Chief of the New Zealand General Staff, told the battalion:

As a man who has had a very long experience in the Army, not far off forty years, I can tell you this: that if I had been informed that in such a short time you would reach such a very high standard in your drill and your movements, I would never have believed it.

The General did not mean to infer that the troops were fully trained but he recognised that they had made a remarkably good beginning. Their proficiency in arms and elementary footdrill was partly a coalescence of observation and practice and partly a natural aptitude developed in their ancestors. In former days the use of patu and taiaha called for the highest degree of muscular and visual co-ordination and entailed a drill not unlike, and probably even more precise, than that demanded by the parade-ground exercises of modern training.

This proficiency was not, of course, spontaneous but was the result of the influence of the Army School of Instruction on the officers and NCO trainees and the insistence on a high standard by **Colonel Dittmer** and the RSM, **'Ace' Wood**. ⁸ These two regular soldiers were regarded as the glasses of fashion and the moulds of form, and their every mannerism of voice and deportment was studied and copied by the entire battalion. The progress in weapon training and platoon movement was not of the same order of merit, but route marching held a ready appeal, particularly as there were always spectators in the **Palmerston North** streets.

By the first week in March the battalion had consolidated and a spirit of rivalry inherent in tribes once intermittently at war was skilfully sublimated into company *esprit de corps*. The situation was reminiscent of but not so serious as that in the '45 rebellion when Bonnie Prince Charlie led his Highlanders against England and had the greatest trouble in keeping the rival clans from each other's throats.

Important in this connection was the appointment to the battalion of Padre K. Harawira ⁹ and Mr W. R. Taylor, of the **YMCA**, who adequately met the spiritual and social needs of the troops. Both had had overseas war service and could meet the men on common ground. This was particularly true of Padre Harawira, an old Te Aute College boy, who had been wounded on **Gallipoli** and had ultimately returned to New Zealand with the rank of sergeant-major before being ordained in the **Church of England**. The social engagements actually put a severe strain on the time available. The 'social activities' file of the battalion while in **Palmerston North** contains many letters wherein **Colonel Dittmer** regrets that he is unable to accept invitations for the troops to attend functions in their honour or in connection with the centenary celebrations then being held throughout New Zealand.

The hospitality extended to the battalion by the citizens of **Palmerston North** was continuous and cordial and did not stop when the troops left for overseas—gift parcels and small comforts arrived regularly in England, in the African desert, and in **Italy**. Socially it was the same—concerts were held weekly and pictures frequently.

Formal functions were a ball tendered to the battalion by the mayoress and women of **Palmerston North**; a combined concert held in the Opera House when the Ngati Poneke Club of **Wellington**, the Otaki Maori party, and the men of the battalion entertained the citizens of **Palmerston North**; ¹⁰ a farewell ball given by the troops on the eve of their departure. Military occasions of note were a parade and inspection by the Governor-General, **Viscount Galway**, and a ceremonial drill display at a combined air and military pageant at the Milson aerodrome.

But perhaps the most impressive was the 1940 Anzac Day march through the streets of **Palmerston North** and the addresses after forming up in the Square.

The 28th (Maori) Battalion was declared on active service on 13 March and on the same day went on fourteen days' final leave. Five more weeks' training brought the troops to 1 May and embarkation.

Officers who embarked with the battalion were:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col G. Dittmer

Second-in-Command: Maj G. F. Bertrand

Adjutant: Capt H. D. Harvey

QM: Capt G. H. Weir

IO: Lt F. Baker

MO: Maj W. B. Fisher

Padre: Rev K. Harawira

Headquarters Company

OC: Capt E. Te W. Love

Signal Platoon: 2 Lt H. M. McDonald

Anti-Aircraft: 2 Lt W. Herewini

Mortars: 2 Lt T. Rangi

Carriers: 2 Lt G. R. Bennett

Pioneers: 2 Lt W. T. Ngata

Transport: 2 Lt F. T. Bennett

A Company

OC: Capt L. J. Bell

Capt H. W. Leaf

2 Lt D. Urlich

2 Lt W. Porter

2 Lt H. Wiremu

2 Lt C. Sorenson

B Company

OC: Capt R. Royal

Capt W. H. Werohia

2 Lt C. M. Bennett

2 Lt H. R. Vercoe

2 Lt H. O. Stewart

2 Lt T. Manahi

C Company

OC: Capt A. T. McL. Scott

Capt P. Tureia

2 Lt W. P. Karaka

2 Lt H. Te O. Reedy

2 Lt K. A. Keiha

2 Lt H. K. Ngata

D Company

OC: Maj H. G. Dyer

Capt C. J. Blomfield

2 Lt H. P. Te Punga

2 Lt W. H. McKay

2 Lt J. T. Gilroy

2 Lt A. G. Ormond

2 Lt G. A. Te Kuru

Officers with no Maori blood.

Officers who assisted with the training but who did not leave with the battalion were Captain P. P. Tawhiwi, Lieutenants D. Curtis (NZSC) and H. Te K. Ferris, and Second-Lieutenant **Te K. Te H. Karaitiana.**

It was almost noon on 1 May when the battalion marched out of its **Palmerston North camp for the last time. Not only the citizens but hundreds of the men's friends and relatives lined the route to the railway station, and there were poignant scenes as the troops passed from the open streets for a quick entrainment and departure—followed by a stream of cars—to **Wellington**. On arrival the train, with shuttered windows and guarded doors, passed on to Aotea Quay, which was then closed against the crowd ¹¹ that had gathered there in the hope of a last few words with the troops. Platoon by platoon the men detrained and climbed the high gangway on to the ***Aquitania*** and were led by the advance party to their quarters deep down on 'F' deck. **Colonel Dittmer** had temporarily relinquished command of the battalion to **Major Bertrand** upon his appointment as OC Troops in the ***Aquitania***. Similarly, **Major Dyer**, ¹² appointed ship's quartermaster for the voyage,**

had relinquished command of D Company to Captain Blomfield. ¹³

Other units embarked during the night and soon after daybreak the *Aquitania*, with nearly three thousand troops plus a detachment of the RNVR on board, moved out into the stream. The Maori Battalion's last close contact with its own people was the sight of the crowd allowed on the wharf at the last moment, and the sound of the Ngati Poneke girls singing farewell songs as the distance widened between ship and shore.

The troopship did not leave harbour immediately but waited until the rest of the convoy, the *Empress of Britain* and the *Empress of Japan*, were ready, and it was during this period that the Governor-General circled the ship in a launch. The Maori Battalion sang its farewell song 'Po Atarau' ¹⁴ in reply to the compliment, and soon afterwards the convoy moved down **Wellington** harbour and out into Cook Strait.

No time was wasted before training began. Platoon and section rolls were compiled and every leader from the newest lance-corporal to OC Company was lectured by **Major Bertrand** in organisation and administration, words which up till then had had no military significance for the great majority. A company commanders' conference was held each day without exception throughout the voyage and was followed by company and platoon conferences, with the result that at the end of the voyage every officer and most NCOs knew their job and where they fitted in to the complex organization of a modern battalion.

The troopships, guarded by HMAS *Australia* and HMS *Leander*, were joined by HMAS *Canberra*, escorting the *Andes* with troops from the **South Island**. The weather was rough for the first two days and the unpleasant novelty of seasickness was added to the list of experiences of most men of the battalion. The poor attendance at the mess tables indicated that all was not well, but before the **Sydney** heads were sighted on 5 May the majority were taking an interest in the meals and the canteens. The convoy turned south as soon as the *Queen Mary* and *Mauretania*, with an Australian contingent aboard, took station and the following day passed through **Bass Strait**, where the *Empress of Canada*

from **Melbourne** was picked up.

Shipboard routine followed much the same pattern throughout the voyage. The day began with reveille at 6 a.m., followed by the first breakfast sitting; a three-hour training period followed; then came lunch and another two periods of training. Evening mess started at 5.30, after which there were frequent concerts, community sings, and other social activities in which the Maoris played no small part. Officially the only gambling permitted was 'Housie-housie' to a threepenny limit, but it is suggested—probably not without reason—that of an evening and throughout the ship many strange and illegal cults could be heard reciting a formula which included 'Heads a pair' and 'Two B's on bikes'. The tohunga of these ceremonies was very often a Maori.

Fremantle was reached on 10 May with four thousand miles safely accomplished. Owing to the size of the *Aquitania* and *Queen Mary* these two ships had to anchor two miles off shore, and, because of lack of ferries and the weather risk, it appeared likely that there would be no leave for the troops on those transports. **Brigadier Hargest**,¹⁵ commanding the New Zealanders, made urgent representations to the port authorities, and the following day the services of a pleasure steamer, a tug, and a Dutch oil tanker were obtained to transport the troops from the *Aquitania* to the wharf. Leave was granted until midnight and the men received a rousing welcome from the hospitable Australians. It was so rousing that many, both Maori and European, had difficulty in finding the wharf again, but when the convoy sailed in the morning there were no absentees from the battalion.

Colombo was known to be the next port of call, but during the evening of 15 May when the convoy was near Cocos Islands (the grave of the *Emden* which fell to the guns of the *Sydney* in 1914), direction was altered towards the south-west. This started a spate of rumours: there were German raiders in the **Indian Ocean**; the troops were needed in England to repel a German landing; **Italy** was about to declare war and close the **Red Sea**. In point of fact the last was nearly correct: the destination of the convoy had been under consideration for some time

and the Italian attitude was the deciding factor. The troops were still debating their new course a week later when other interests intervened—the appearance of the ship's magazine *Te Waka O Tu* and the issue of identity discs and field dressings—and these in their turn started a new crop of rumours. By this time the Maoris were heartily sick of looking at two lines of ships ploughing through an endless ocean and were consequently thrilled to see, early on the 26th, the flashes of a lighthouse, followed an hour or so later by the city lights of **Capetown**. The Maoris were excited but apprehensive about their probable reception in a country where the colour bar is rigidly observed. They had already been told by **Major Bertrand** that their reception would probably be cool, and that if they were turned out of shops or had any other indignity thrust upon them they were not to make a fuss. It was the custom of the country and the Maoris would have to abide by it. For some time it appeared that the question of the Maoris' reception in **Capetown** would be entirely academic for the two big ships were again unable to berth, and the sight of the others moving in to the quayside while they anchored off shore was galling in the extreme.

The pakeha units aboard the *Aquitania* made their displeasure known in no uncertain terms and the words 'H.M. Prison Ships' were chalked in sundry places on sides and decks. Arrangements were made to take the troops ashore next day, but the seas were too heavy and the project was cancelled. Early the next morning the two big ships moved to the naval base at Simonstown, and although the pakeha troops were given leave, there was, much to the disgust of the other units, no leave for the **Maori Battalion**. The Maoris, however, had not been forgotten by their Brigadier, for in view of the restrictions imposed on them **Hargest** had cabled the **New Zealand Government**, which had granted a sum of £50 for the transport of the battalion to the city. On the fourth day, therefore, they were permitted ashore and, tight-lipped and nervous, were loaded on buses and taken to **Capetown**. The men were again warned to be circumspect in their relations with the local native population. They passed through a section of South Africa not unlike New Zealand—hilly, with many trees and well-grassed fields. The familiar

wooden houses were missing for all building were of white-painted stone, and unfamiliar, too, were the miles and miles of grape-vine stumps. On arrival the men were marched to a drill hall where they were served with a light luncheon by the mayoress and ladies of **Capetown**. In return, the Maoris sang 'Maori Battalion' and 'Po Atarau'.

During the meal the ladies were introduced to the officers and a number of the men. In bidding farewell to **Colonel Dittmer** they remarked on the splendid physique of the troops, their courteous manners and their delightful singing. Before the convoy left South Africa the CO sent a letter of thanks to the mayoress and a donation of £10 from the battalion for some organisation similar to the New Zealand Plunket Society.

Up to lunch the trip had been a parade, but the troops were then dismissed until the buses were due to return at 2.15 p.m., which left the men with less than an hour to see the city. The troops strolled quietly around and were received in the shops with civil curiosity and in the hotels right royally. Not only were no incidents of any kind reported but all the troops were accounted for when the convoy sailed.

Major Clifton, ¹⁶ Brigade Major of 5 Brigade, in a brief history of the early days of that brigade, wrote:

After lunch they [the Maoris] went round the shops for a couple of hours, and then returned by bus to Simonstown—none missing, none drunk. Their behaviour and bearing created a great and lasting impression which, I feel sure, will remove the objection to Maoris being included in our Rugby teams for South Africa. I understand the 28 Battalion is the first native regiment ever allowed in **Capetown**. They were a credit to their people and a marked example for the remainder of our troops.

The convoy left **Capetown** on the last day of May and headed north into the heavy swells of the South Atlantic. It was generally agreed among the troops that England was their destination, although a body of

opinion held that Egypt via Gibraltar and the **Mediterranean**, where the First Echelon was training at **Maadi Camp**, was still possible. **Italy** was bellicose but not as yet belligerent.

Eight hot and clammy days after leaving **Capetown**, the convoy anchored off shore at **Freetown**. There was no leave, and nowhere to go if there had been any, and the troops spent most of their spare time dickering with the natives who swarmed round the transports in canoes loaded with fruit. When cash ran out their suggestion, 'You give'm shirt, I give'm coconut', seemed a happy solution to the currency problem. Singlets, hats, and deck shoes were also discovered to be good media of exchange, but the ship's officers were not amused to see their blankets being exchanged for shoddy souvenirs and turned hoses on the canoes. They also got the shore authorities to recover the blankets.

The big ships pulled out with the tide in the morning and waited while the others completed loading water and stores. They sailed in the afternoon of 8 June and everybody was glad to breathe again the fresh air of the open seas.

The news that **Italy** was in the war on the side of **Germany** was published in the ship's daily news sheet on 10 June. Mussolini had decided to rush to the aid of the victors for the Allied armies were clearly in a bad way. The wireless reports were noncommittal, but the beaches of **Dunkirk** had been black with soldiers waiting for the little ships from England to risk submarine, storm, and air attack and carry them back home.

The only difference Mussolini's decision made to the troops in the convoy was to tighten up the anti-aircraft and submarine precautions. To them the war was still intangible. This sangfroid began to vanish when it was seen that the convoy was no longer moving straight ahead but was changing course every few minutes. The sea was scanned with a new interest and life-jackets assumed a new importance—the word submarine has a different significance when you are on dry land and when you are at sea, particularly so when your sleeping quarters are well

below the water-line and you feel that at any moment a torpedo may explode against the ship's side.

The convoy continued on a course between the Canary Islands and the Azores, and on 14 June the naval escort was strengthened by a battle cruiser (HMS *Hood*), an aircraft carrier, and six destroyers. A feeling of confidence engendered by their presence diminished somewhat the next morning when the *Aquitania* passed through an area covered in oil, drifting timber, and other wreckage, including a lifeboat—empty. That was only the start of an exciting and frightening day. Just before lunch the troops saw, in the distance, a ship half submerged and blazing, and that threatening sight was followed by the jangling of submarine alarms. Then the distant thud of exploding depth-charges was heard. There were men on deck who swore that a torpedo had crossed their bow, and the story grew in detail as the night drew its darkness across the Irish Sea. Sleep did not come as easily as usual to the Maoris in the bowels of the *Aquitania*.

The Scottish coast was a welcome sight and by early afternoon on 16 June the *Aquitania* dropped anchor behind the boom defences of *Gourock*, a few miles from Glasgow. The Royal Navy had successfully shepherded the convoy for 17,000 miles and delivered it safely at its destination. The Navy departed on other jobs and probably forgot all about the convoy—but the convoy did not forget about the Navy.

‘Farewell my son. Take care of yourself and always remember your Father in Heaven’—a Maori mother's farewell to her son.

¹ **Brig G. Dittmer**, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1939-Feb 1942; wounded 23 Nov 1941; 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; Camp Commandant, Papakura Military Camp, 1946; Commandant, Central Military District, 1946–48.

- ² **Lt-Col G. F. Bertrand**, OBE, ED; **New Plymouth**; born Urenui, 9 Feb 1891; school-teacher; Wgtn Regt, 1914–19 (three times wounded); 2 i/c 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1939-Oct 1941; CO 2 Maori Bn and Maori Training Unit, 1942–44.
- ³ **Maj G. F. McCulloch**, MBE; Manurewa; born Crieff, **Scotland**, 28 Jun 1902; Regular soldier.
- ⁴ **Maj R. Royal**, MC and bar; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 23 Aug 1897; civil servant; served in Maori Pioneer Bn in First World War; 28 (Maori) Bn 1940–41; wounded 14 Dec 1941; 2 i/c 2 Maori Bn (in NZ) 1942–43; CO 2 Maori Bn May-Jun 1943.
- ⁵ **WO II A. Amohau**; born Whakarewarewa, 13 Jun 1915; labourer and photographer.
- ⁶ **Hon Lt C. Pike**; born NZ 11 Dec 1894; furniture manufacturer.
- ⁷ **Maj-Gen Sir John Duigan**, KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Mar 1882; served South Africa 1900–1; **1 NZEF** 1915–18; Chief of General Staff, NZ Military Forces, 1937–41; died 9 Jan 1950.
- ⁸ **Capt A. C. Wood**, DCM; Wakefield; born **Nelson**, 24 Aug 1916; Regular soldier; wounded 11 Jul 1942.
- ⁹ **Rev K. Harawira**; **Auckland**; born Te Kao, **North Auckland**, 31 Jul 1892; Anglican minister.
- ¹⁰ The charge for admission totalled a considerable sum which was applied to the cost of transporting children of the district to the Centennial Exhibition.
- ¹¹ In recognition of their work in entertaining the troops, the Ngati Poneke Club girls were taken by bus on to the wharf before daylight the following morning.
- ¹² **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.

¹³ **Capt C. J. Blomfield; Auckland; born NZ 25 May 1894; solicitor.**

¹⁴ **'Now is the Hour'.**

¹⁵ **Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; Member of Parliament, 1931–44; Otago Mounted Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn, Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. Sidi Azeiz, 27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, France, 12 Aug 1944.**

¹⁶ **Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and 2 bars, MC, m.i.d.; Porangahau; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); CRE 2 NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer 30 Corps, 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped, Germany, Mar 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1949–52; Commandant, Northern Military District, Mar 1952–Sep 1953.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 2 – ENGLAND

CHAPTER 2

England

is a small town built on a point where the Holy Loch joins the Firth of Clyde. It has had its moments of fame for kings have sailed from there, and some time between Tasman's discovery and Cook's exploration of the New Zealand coast the citizens of **Gourock** discovered that herrings could be cured by smoking, there by introducing the red herring to English breakfast tables. There were Scottish names on the **Maori Battalion's** nominal roll, for **Scotland** had done its part in the colonisation of New Zealand, and for these men the Hills of Cowal in the distance were of a surpassing loveliness. To the rest of the battalion they were just hills, but, after six weeks at sea, likewise surpassingly lovely.

The afternoon passed in looking around, first from one side of the ship and then from the other, and in listening to welcoming addresses relayed over the loudspeaker system. Brigadier Falla, ¹ representing the High Commissioner for New Zealand, and Brigadier Miles, ² speaking for **General Freyberg**, welcomed the troops to Great Britain. The GOC Scottish Command delivered a message from His Majesty King George VI:

To the officers commanding the Australian and New Zealand contingents—A few months ago we sent a few words of welcome to the First Echelons of the 2nd Australian and New Zealand Expeditionary Force when they disembarked in the **Middle East**. It has fallen to your lot to take your place beside us. You will find us in the forefront of the battle. To all I give a warm welcome, knowing the stern purpose that brings you from your distant homes. I send best wishes and look forward to seeing you soon.

GEORGE R.I.

The Maori Battalion was to disembark in the morning and there was much to do—packing up, parading for pay, receiving and stowing rations in case the train was bombed or delayed, seeking and saying goodbye to

members of the crew, and trying to reconcile the army day ending officially at 9 p.m. with the fact that it was still light enough to write a letter two hours after lights out.

After breakfast the troops were ferried to the quay where reporters, newsreel cameramen, and the **BBC** recording unit were all busy in their different ways. Some personal messages and the battalion's rendering of ' **Maori Battalion**' were recorded. These items, when released, were the first direct news of the battalion's whereabouts and, for that matter, of the Second Echelon's.

Shortly before midday the troops had entrained and were on the way to the **Aldershot** command area in the South of England. Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, **York**, Reading—there were some who wished that they had paid more attention to their history and geography lessons at school. While daylight lasted the Maoris from lake and riverside pa, the bush clearings and the steep back-country of New Zealand, feasted their eyes on fields and meadows that looked like parks, on trim country cottages where people waved to the arms and shoulders in the carriage windows, and on built-up areas where houses stood for miles, it seemed, side by side. After twenty hours in the train and a five-mile march to Camp 49B, **Ewshott**, the **Maori Battalion**, a little stiff and very hungry, found that an RAMC detachment detailed for the purpose had partially prepared the camp and had breakfast ready and waiting—a portion of porridge and a slice of bacon on fried bread; the troops looked hopefully around for the main course but looked in vain.

The RAMC detachment stayed with the unit for a fortnight and was most helpful to the battalion cooks struggling with what were, to them, hopelessly inadequate rations. The feeding of the biblical multitude with a few loaves and fishes was, the cooks considered, child's play compared with satisfying a horde of hungry Maoris with rations as provided by the British Army. The hard-eating Polynesians got used to the English ration scale in time, but in the interim the **NAAFI** ³ canteens had a lot of steady customers for pies and cakes.

The original intention had been to locate the Second Echelon where it could proceed with collective training, but with the collapse of resistance in **France** an attempted invasion of England had to be contemplated, possibly in the immediate future. One of the counter-measures was to deploy the New Zealanders in general headquarters reserve.

General Freyberg cabled the **New Zealand Government** that the military advisers in England were sure that the **German High Command** would make the attempt, but for his part he felt that the Germans would not risk such a hazardous operation which, in his opinion, was doomed to failure. He reported that there was a desperate shortage of equipment, and for some time the troops would be short of many weapons, but he felt that the New Zealand troops must be prepared to accept battle on uneven terms in the defence of Great Britain.

Steps were accordingly taken to organise the Second Echelon as a small division and this came into effect on 29 June. It comprised:

A covering force, consisting of a squadron of Divisional Cavalry, a machine-gun company, artillery and anti-tank units armed and employed as infantry, commanded by Brigadier Miles.

5 Infantry Brigade, commanded by **Brigadier Hargest**.

A mixed brigade composed of 28 (Maori) Battalion and a composite battalion formed from the reinforcements attached to the 5 Brigade battalions, commanded by Brigadier Barrowclough. ⁴

The division was commanded by **General Freyberg**, and in his absence by Brigadier Miles. Brigadier Barrowclough, with his 6 Brigade Headquarters staff, was in England through the accident of having travelled with the Second Echelon.

There was four days' leave to **London** before the troops settled down to training. The Maoris spent a lot of time on the underground railway system, partly for the novelty of it and partly because they could get

around better that way without losing themselves. The general opinion was that **London** was huge, old, a little dingy and very expensive. If they were overwhelmed by the size of the buildings and the crowds in the streets they refused to acknowledge it, for when the men in the first party returned to camp and were asked what **London** was like they answered offhandedly, 'Just like **Wellington**, only bigger.'

Anti-gas training and route-marching, the latter to harden the men's feet, had a prominent place in the syllabus. In any case there was practically no equipment to train with for the British Army had returned from **France** with rifles and very little else, and its rearmament was the first consideration. Factories were working the clock round and convoys were zigzagging across the **Atlantic** with vital military stores from **America**, but these had not yet arrived in any quantity. So, while **2 NZEF (UK)** was being organised into a force capable of being handled tactically, the Maoris saw something of the heather and pine woods of Hampshire. The officers also had some good training in map-reading as all the road signs had been removed and the population warned against giving directions or distances no matter who the inquirer might be.

Fields and meadows were being strewn with old cars, carts, and any other thing on hand that would make it difficult for planes to land; road junctions were being mined and barbedwire barricades handily placed for immediate use. England was preparing for invasion.

Roads and lanes for miles around **Ewshott** echoed to the marching songs of the 'Moo-rees', which was as near as the local population could get to pronouncing the three vowels in the word 'Maori'. On the other hand, the Maoris had some difficulty with the varying county accents spoken by the other troops they met. Lieutenant H. Ngata ⁵ wrote: 'We have found that the English can't speak English—in fact everywhere we went we heard comment about the beautiful English the "Moo-ree" boys speak. We've heard all sorts of dialects since we've been here, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cockney and Scottish, and I am convinced that our chaps can speak their language better than they can themselves.'

The Maoris, in common with the rest of the Second Echelon, had got used to, but were not happy with, their ill-matched serge uniforms and were consequently very pleased indeed when the easy-fitting battle dress was issued to them in the first week of July. The subsequent issue of the worsted 'New Zealand' shoulder flashes removed the anonymity caused by the fact that the characteristic peaked hat was not worn with battle dress. The puzzled glances to which the Maoris were getting accustomed were replaced by a quick glance at the defining flashes and a friendly nod to the wearer.

The first week of July was also a week of official calls. **Viscount Bledisloe**, who had been deservedly popular with the Maori people during his term as Governor-General of New Zealand, paid the battalion a visit. On 6 July His Majesty King George VI inspected the New Zealanders. The King, undeterred by intermittent rain, carried out a thorough inspection of the Maori troops, who were doing arms and close-order drill. He paused for a while to listen to a sergeant detailing the movements necessary to bring a rifle from the ground to the shoulder and heard the overawed instructor's final plea—'And for Goodness' sake don't drop your rifle.' The order was executed smartly, no rifle was dropped, and His Majesty moved smilingly onward. He later made special mention of the battalion in an Order of the Day issued by **General Freyberg**:

His Majesty the King at the conclusion of his five hour inspection of the units of the NZEF has asked me to issue an Order saying how he enjoyed being among New Zealanders again and what a good impression he formed of the training. His Majesty during his visit showed the greatest interest in all he saw. He was especially pleased with the smartness of the close order and arms drill of the **Maori Battalion** and was impressed by the fine physique, keenness and determined demeanour of men in all units. His Majesty wishes you good luck wherever you may serve and hopes you are enjoying your visit to the Old Country. God Save the King.

The battalion packed up on 9 July and moved to the Mixed Brigade

camp about five miles away and close by the hamlet of Dogmersfield. It had made its first close touch with English history, but as Dogmersfield did not have a public relations officer the troops were not told that the big house in the park was that in which, about two hundred years after the ancestors of the **Maori Battalion** had come to New Zealand, Henry VII and his son, Prince Arthur, met the young Catherine, Princess of Aragon, who eventually became the first wife of the much-married Henry VIII. Nor were they told that the equally small village of Odiham a mile distant was mentioned in the Domesday Book and was a small village centuries before the Great Migration brought the Maoris from Hawaiki to Aotearoa. Two days were spent pitching tents under trees, digging slit trenches, and in being carried in relays to Bisley rifle range where the full weapon course was fired. Thereafter training went on day and night, seven days a week, and as equipment trickled in so the scope of the syllabus was extended.

The second recorded radio broadcast was made by the battalion about this time and took the form of a full thirty minutes' programme of hakas, action songs, and short messages to the tribes. The German monitoring system probably had some trouble with the translation of this broadcast for Maori is not spoken much in **Europe**, but the difficulty was removed a little later when a member of the battalion figured in a **BBC** feature 'Why I joined up'.

On this occasion the German radio was heavily sarcastic, and in the best propaganda tradition commented on a sentence taken out of its context:

The **BBC** boasts of Maoris. To boost the morale of the public, the **London** radio has now brought a native of New Zealand, a Maori, to the microphone. This descendant of former cannibals and headhunters made a well paid statement on this occasion that all Maoris who are in the British Army had volunteered. In the same breath, however, he said that when Maoris were commanded they had of course to obey. He has thus contradicted his own balderdash. The English should in our opinion congratulate themselves on having found in these savages from New

Zealand suitable allies against Nazi barbarians. The English radio seems to consider news of allegedly volunteer Maoris as very promising. It has no greater consolation for its listeners than this.

Invasion was in the air and mobility was essential in the event of a German landing in England. Exercises involving quick moves by MT were carried out in preparation for a tactical deployment that envisaged an enemy landing near Seaford and an attempt to capture Newhaven. The Mixed Brigade moved by bus from Dogmersfield, passed through Guildford to Wych Cross, and took up a defensive position wherein section posts were dug and weapons sited for all-round defence. Heavy rain during the night added reality to the operation. The next day was spent in improving positions, and the following day the Maoris took over from 23 Battalion and prepared another defensive position against attack from the south. The final day of the exercise was occupied in an MT move and the establishment of strongpoints from which parties could be sent to deal with enemy troops landed by plane or parachute. The return to Dogmersfield was made partly by bus and partly by route march.

After this exercise there was much to-do about the alleged disappearance from the manœuvre area of a full-grown pig and the battalion received a bill for £12 from New Zealand Force Headquarters. It was inferred that the Maoris had given it burial in the time-honoured manner, and the money was to compensate the farmer for his loss. Colonel Dittmer had to make two trips to Force Headquarters and produce an unsuspected flow of oratory before he could convince the officer responsible that his battalion would never dream of kidnapping a strange pig. Were there no other troops in the vicinity with a liking for pork? The account was withdrawn and the Colonel's mana, already high, rose even higher with his troops. It was a very nice pig.

Routine training was interrupted by another tactical exercise at the end of July, but this time the Mixed Brigade changed sides and became the enemy who had effected a landing on the south coast and had

advanced as far as Ashdown Forest, where they were being contained. D Company (**Major Dyer**) and a detachment from the Composite Battalion formed a forward screen while the rest of the battalion dug weapon pits and camouflaged them with nets. Some of the air of reality was lost when an irate farmer refused to permit C Company (Captain Scott) ⁶ to dig in on his already 'battle-scarred' farm. Again the return to Dogmersfield was made partly on foot and partly by transport.

August opened with a six-day route march and tactical operations. The daily routine was the same—first a march of approximately 16 miles, then a lift by MT to the bivouac area—a village green or a private park. The names have music in them—Arundel Park, overlooking the **English Channel**; through Storrington to Partridge Green; from Partridge Green to Sheffield Park; through Freshfields and Cowfold to Grimstead Park; through Coolham and Petersworth to Pheasant Copse; from Pheasant Copse to Dogmersfield—and at every village a warm welcome to the singing Maoris.

The rest of August was taken up with hard training and liberal leave, both local and to **London**. Farnham was not far away, a quaint town at the foot of a hill crowned with a ruined castle, and with its High Street shops and pubs built with great beams of timber that came ashore from the wreckage of the Spanish Armada. Invading England has always been a difficult business. Farnham, ancient enough in other ways, possessed a modern swimming bath and the Farnham Swimming Club advertised a carnival at which teams from British, Canadian, and Australian units were going to compete. **Major Bertrand** felt that New Zealand would be worthily represented by the **Maori Battalion** and entered for all open events. The team, with two exceptions, were all from the lake-dwelling B Company and upheld the honour of their country by winning every event against all comers. In the relay race two teams were entered and it was a walkover, or rather a 'swimover', for they finished in first and third places.

There followed an exercise designed to determine the standard of training achieved by the New Zealand formations. The Germans, so the

orders said, had landed in **Sussex** and deployed on the bare, chalky hills of the South Downs; progress reports were received from the invasion area and the Division was required to counter-attack without any more information than would have been available had the affair been real. The Maori Battalion's part was to move by night in buses to Partridge Green, dig in, and wait for further orders. Breakfast arrived at an opportunity hour, whereupon the enemy was reported to be holding firmly in Eston Hills with advanced elements pressing forward.

A battalion exercise in attack followed, then two days of manoeuvre by the Division and return to Dogmersfield, a discussion by battalion commanders and leave as usual for the victors. The Maoris were given the credit of being the best unit in the exercise. During the month the battalion had lost its first senior officer when Major Fisher ⁷ marched out to 5 Field Ambulance and Lieutenant Mules ⁸ became RMO.

September was ushered in with a divisional review and march past at Bulkney Camp on the 4th. It was by way of a graduation ceremony for the Division had been judged fit for front-line duty in the event of invasion. The Prime Minister of the **United Kingdom** took the salute and then addressed the troops in a characteristic Churchillian speech. He ended:

We in this island are now bearing the accumulated weight of the malice and tyranny of the enemy. We do not feel unequal to it. We are sure we shall prove ourselves not unequal to the task of once again being the champion and liberator of **Europe**. We do not feel lonely when the sons of our great Dominions overseas—lands where they breed the finest fighting races—come back here or come to other parts of the British Empire, where they bear their parts in this great contention. I wish you well. I wish you great good luck. May God protect you. I am sure you will crown the name of New Zealand with honours, with a lustre which will not fade as the years pass by. Of all the wars we have ever fought, none has been more honourable, more righteous than this. None has been more unsought by us. In none has greater weight been thrown upon us.

From none shall we emerge with a greater sense of duty done. May fortune rest upon your arms. May you return home with victory to your credit, having written pages into the annals of the Imperial Army which will be turned over by future generations whenever they wish to find a model for military conduct.

September was the beginning of the mass raids on London and they were considered to be the opening moves of the invasion attempt by ‘that bad man’, as Mr Churchill mockingly termed the Fuehrer of the German Reich. In the past weeks occasional bombs had been dropped in the battalion area, not so much from malice as from the advisability of unloading the aircraft before going home; the bombs had done little more than emphasise the importance of slit trenches and steel helmets. Warning orders for the move of the New Zealanders to Egypt were cancelled and, together with other formations, NZEF (UK) came under command of 12 Corps and was instructed to take up a position covering the Folkestone- Dover area with the tasks:

- (To counter-attack vigorously any enemy landing in London Division a) area (Sheerness-Dymchurch redoubt) especially in the area north and north-west of Dover and Folkestone.**
- (To re-establish the line of the Royal Military Canal eastwards of Main b) Street.**
- (Concurrently with the above, to deal with any hostile airborne c) landings in the area Sittingbourne-Faversham-Charing- Maidstone.**

The Mixed (now the 7th) Brigade was in support of 5 Infantry Brigade.

The battalion left four OCTU candidates behind—Sergeants Jim Tuhiwai, ⁹ Ruhi Pene, ¹⁰ Henry Toka, ¹¹ and Rangi Logan. ¹² They reported to Aldershot Barracks and joined sixteen other New Zealand NCOs in a short preparatory course of instruction. Ten were selected for Sandhurst and were followed, a fortnight later, by the other ten. In the first draft were Logan and Tuhiwai, who were thus the first Maoris to enter that august institution. All passed out with credit, Second-Lieutenant Logan in particular being classified ‘A Outstanding’.

The Maoris moved by transport in the afternoon of 5 September and, after an all-night drive through Farnham, Guildford, Reigate and Hollingbourne, debussed at Doddington in **Kent** in the morning and immediately dug themselves in. This was, perhaps, the real thing and the battalion waited hopefully for the Germans or lunch. It was lunch.

It was during this night move that the battalion suffered its first fatal casualty when Private Pokai, ¹³ a battalion despatch rider, was run over by a vehicle and killed. He was a Ngatiporou and one of three brothers serving with the unit. He was buried with military honours in the **Maidstone** cemetery; the ceremony was conducted by Padre Harawira, the address was given by the Rt Rev Bishop Gerard, ¹⁴ and a funeral oration in Maori was delivered by Captain Werohia. ¹⁵ The first changes in the battalion's company commanders occurred at this period when **Captain Love** ¹⁶ went to **Milforce**, as the covering force had been named, **Captain Baker** ¹⁷ took command of Headquarters Company, and **Captain Blomfield** left the unit on transfer to New Zealand General Base Depot.

If the invasion attempt was to be made it would have to be before the October gales lashed the **English Channel** and prohibited the use of landing craft, so the Maoris pitched their tents under the elms, ash, and alder trees and waited. Route marches helped to pass the time and the troops saw something of Kent. Overhead were frequent dogfights between English and German pilots, while from every rise on the South Downs stretched a panorama of lanes twisting between red-brick villages clustered around red-brick churches; of farmhouses surrounded by orchards; of hop-fields and round, steep-pointed oast-houses for drying the gathered hops; of hedges of hawthorn, holly, and crab-apple surrounding meadows whose boundaries were traced in the **Doomsday Book** and are still as traced there. It was a country worth defending.

The weather, which had been perfect, broke after a few weeks, and early in October the men moved from their muddy tents to billets—C Company to Wichling, B Company to Doddington, D Company into the

hospital, A Company to Eastling, and Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company to Stalisfield. They were all villages in 7 Brigade's area.

Summer had changed to autumn, the nights had become cooler and the pale green leaves darkening through summer turned the countryside to flames of red and copper, gold and amber, brown and yellow, with patches of sepia that were the branches denuded of leaves. The invasion threat faded and the troops turned, between field exercises, to Rugby and hockey, at which sports the battalion maintained an unbeaten record. Seventh Brigade ceased to exist on 8 October; its components returned to their parent units and the **Maori Battalion** was attached to **Milforce**. **Colonel Dittmer** took command of **Milforce**, then consisting of the Maoris, C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, a company of medium machine guns, and a squadron of **8 Royal Tanks** attached for operations only.

C Company acquired a mascot about this time, or rather the mascot acquired C Company. 'Spittie' was a little dog of doubtful pedigree and very fond of chocolate. She was called 'Spittie' because her decision to live with C Company occurred at the same time as a Spitfire came down in a nearby field of turnips. The plane was shot to pieces but the pilot was unhurt, although his nationality was a disappointment to the troops who had rushed over hoping to capture their first prisoner. 'Spittie' took to a soldier's life with great gusto and never missed a route march but could not understand the etiquette that attaches to a parade. This was very noticeable when **Colonel Dittmer** inspected the company and 'Spittie', with much barking and cavorting, insisted on doing the inspection with him. When she inspected the CO's car and signified her approval in the usual canine manner, formality was very nearly lost.

Air activity decreased markedly towards the end of October but on the 25th, when the chance of an enemy invasion was heavily discounted, an electrifying message was received at Battalion Headquarters. It came in at ten minutes to three on a cold wet morning: 'Stand to and report when ready to move.'

There could be only one meaning for such an urgent order. The Germans had come at the last minute. Despatch riders went rushing off into the night with messages, the sleeping troops packed their gear in pitch darkness, and at twenty minutes to six the last company reported itself ready to move. Transport was due to arrive at twenty minutes past seven, but instead of transport a staff officer arrived and inspected the extent of the battalion's readiness to move, whereupon the troops were stood down as the whole operation was a snap trial. The Maoris took being turned out of bed in the middle of the night much more philosophically than some other units, whose comments were couched in language suitable to the occasion but quite unprintable.

The New Zealanders left Kent on 4 November and returned to the Aldershot Command area, where they went into winter quarters. The Maori Battalion was dispersed in permanent buildings two miles south of Farnham and consisting for the most part of stately old English manor houses—A Company at Goldhill Manor, B Company at Averly Towers, C Company at Hill House, D Company at Bradshaigh on Gong Hill, Headquarters Company dispersed around Boundstone, Pine Ridge, Thornhill and Chedley, and Battalion Headquarters at Malwa. The battalion officers' mess where most of the officers were billeted was at 'Whitecroft', Lower Bourne. Conveniently in the centre of the area was the Cricketers' Inn.

The Maoris stayed there for two months and suffered the onfall of winter, the coldest and the wettest they had ever known or believed possible. They were well housed, but the weather was so cold that when not marching or otherwise employed they sat around such fires as were possible on limited fuel rations in greatcoats and mufflers, gloves and balaclavas—and still shivered.

The pattern of training was a route march every second day, with companies taking different routes as laid down by Battalion Headquarters, the firing of weapon training courses and field-firing practices. One half-day each week was devoted to sport. New and

interesting experiences were a dive-bombing demonstration by a squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force and the observation of the effect of the combined fire of platoon weapons. Formal occasions were parades for the Governor-General designate of New Zealand, Sir Cyril Newall, and for His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester; less formal, the dances given by the officers and men in appreciation of the open-handed hospitality of the residents of Gong Hill and vicinity.

An invitation was received from the Welsh Rugby Union for a Maori team to play a Welsh fifteen at Llangley Park, where the All Blacks were defeated by a disputed try in 1905. With the sanction of **Brigadier Hargest** the invitation was accepted and a team under the managership of **Major Bertrand** went forth to do its best. Some thousands of Welshmen saw their team win 12–3. After the spectators saw the Welsh referee give a very doubtful decision against the Maoris early in the game, they nearly all changed allegiance and barracked for the visitors. Welsh hospitality has to be experienced to be believed and the team had a wonderful time before returning to the battalion. Within the week **Colonel Dittmer** received several other requests for games from other Welsh centres, but because of the expected early departure of the battalion they could not be complied with.

The welcome news that the battalion would soon be moving to a warmer climate was received on 29 November. No definite destination was indicated but the only reasonable one was Egypt, where the rest of the New Zealand Division was concentrated. Activity was varied and immediate; all vehicles were painted with the yellow desert camouflage that was to become so familiar but which at that time looked so incongruous against the snow-covered countryside; the men cleaned and pressed their uniforms, waited in deficiency parades for lost or worn clothing, and were issued with tropical kit.

An advance party—69 men from the transport and carrier platoons, commanded by Second-Lieutenants F. T. ¹⁸ and G. R. Bennett, ¹⁹ and an anti-aircraft section from C Company of 13 men, commanded by

Sergeant Te Kawa ²⁰—left on 16 December with the vehicles and unwanted baggage.

On Christmas Day the battalion celebrated its first white Christmas. At home the pohutukawa was in full bloom and the land was drenched in sunshine, while here in England there was rain, sleet and snow, and naked trees straining under the lash of winter winds. Even the collecting of stones suitable for the hangis that were to cook the Christmas dinner in traditional style did little to convince the troops that it really was Christmas. The battalion 'Q' staff, assisted by a generous allocation from regimental funds and the innate Maori ability as a painstaking forager, filled the hangis with the carcasses of pigs and a kinaki of potatoes, cabbages and poultry, but it was not until the earth, sacking, and leaves were removed that the proceedings assumed an air of reality.

How many regulations were broken to obtain the *pièce de résistance* of the dinner—pork cooked the Maori way—is a subject for speculation. Ration ordinances prohibited the killing of meat of any kind except by authority, but a certain amount of finesse and the presence of an agricultural college in the vicinity had something to do with the smile of satisfaction on the face of the battalion second-in-command as he surveyed the result of his labours.

Owing to the dispersal of the unit there were four hangis—one for A Company at Goldhill Manor, one for B Company at Averly Towers, one for Headquarters Company at Pine Ridge, and one for the rest of the battalion at Bradshaigh. When the troops were assembled at their mess tables they were, to their obvious delight, served by mess orderlies drawn from the officers and senior NCOs. The afternoon was free and the Cricketers' Inn provided a fitting climax to a memorable day.

The last days of December were spent in fighting off an epidemic of influenza, transporting the battalion baggage to the railhead, and cleaning with scrubbing brush and mop every room and building used by the unit. Inspections were frequent and thorough and the troops felt that if cleanliness was next to godliness the second state was a very

exalted one indeed.

The battalion marched out quietly and unobtrusively on the evening of 3 January. The men were glad to leave behind the cold, wet English winter but sorry to part, without a final handshake, with the people among whom they had made so many friendships. They entrained at Farnham and travelled all night across England in unheated carriages, and were almost frozen before the train shunted into the Canada Docks at Liverpool.

Captain Baker, replaced as OC Headquarters Company by **Captain Love**, was ship's quartermaster in the *Athlone Castle* and the troops found everything ready for them. They filed into their new quarters knowing little of what was before them. All they knew of Egypt was that it was mostly sand and flies—no more hedges and green grass; no more church spires, inns, and villages at every crossroad; no more **London**—and no more shivering in the damp cold of an English winter.

¹ **Brig N. S. Falla**, CMG, DSO, m.i.d.; born Westport, 3 May 1883; managing director Union Steamship Coy; NZ Fd Arty 1914–19 (Lt-Col comd 2 and 3 NZ FA Bdes); comd 2 NZEF Base, Feb 1940–Jun 1941; NZ repve on Ministry of Transport, **London**, 1941–45; died 6 Nov 1945.

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

³Navy, Army, and Air Force Institute.

⁴Maj-Gen Rt Hon Sir Harold Barrowclough, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre (Fr); **Wellington**; born **Masterton**, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 7 NZ Inf Bde in **UK**, 1940; **6 Bde**, 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.

- ⁵ **Capt H. K. Ngata; Gisborne; born Waiomatatini, 19 Dec 1917; radio announcer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**
- ⁶ **Capt A. T. McL. Scott, ED; born Wellington, 5 Aug 1902; warehouseman.**
- ⁷ **Col W. B. Fisher, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born New Plymouth, 21 Jan 1898; Superintendent, Waipukurau Hospital; RMO 28 (Maori) Battalion Dec 1939-Aug 1940; 2 i/c 5 Fd Amb Aug 1940-May 1941; actg CO 6 Fd Amb May 1941; CO 21 Lt Fd Amb (NZ) Nov 1941-Dec 1942; 6 Fd Amb Feb 1943-Aug 1944; CO 1 Gen Hosp Aug 1944-Feb 1945; died 17 Jan 1956.**
- ⁸ **Capt C. M. Mules; Dargaville; born Woodville, 24 Oct 1909; medical practitioner; RMO 28 Bn Aug 1940-May 1941; wounded 23 May 1941.**
- ⁹ **Capt J. Tuhiwai, m.i.d.; born Tolaga Bay, 19 Feb 1910; shop assistant; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.**
- ¹⁰ **Capt R. Pene; Rotorua; born Whakatane, 1 Feb 1912; foreman, Maori Affairs Dept.**
- ¹¹ **Lt P. H. Toka; Auckland; born NZ 2 Sep 1905; engineer and carpenter.**
- ¹² **Maj F. R. Logan, m.i.d.; Hastings; born Hastings, 3 Jul 1916; farm cadet; wounded 22 Jul 1942.**
- ¹³ **Pte T. Pokai; born Ruatoria, 22 Aug 1918; labourer; accidentally killed 5 Sep 1940.**
- ¹⁴ **Rt Rev G. V. Gerard, CBE, MC, m.i.d.; Rotherham, England; born Christchurch, 24 Nov 1898; Lt, The Buffs, 1918-19 (MC); SCF, 2 NZEF, 1 May 1940-Nov 1941; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; repatriated 26 Apr 1943; SCF, 2 NZEF (IP), 2 Apr-3 Dec 1944.**
- ¹⁵ **Capt W. H. Werohia; born NZ 28 Aug 1894; shepherd, Native Dept; died Tauranga, 25 Jun 1952.**
- ¹⁶ **Lt-Col E. Te W. Love, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter;**

CO 28 (Maori) Bn May-Jul 1942; wounded 22 May 1941; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.

¹⁷ **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-.**

¹⁸ **Capt F. T. Bennett; born Rotorua, 11 Jan 1909; driver; wounded 31 May 1941.**

¹⁹ **Capt G. R. Bennett; Wellington; born Taihape, 9 Apr 1911; mechanic-driver; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**

²⁰ **Lt N. Te Kawa; born NZ 11 Jan 1908; share-milker; died Rotorua, 25 Jan 1954.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 3 – THE MIDDLE EAST

CHAPTER 3

The Middle East

It was a different **Maori Battalion** that embarked on the *Athlone Castle* from that which had sailed from **Wellington** in the *Aquitania* eight months earlier.

Before leaving New Zealand the battalion had been in camp for approximately three months, of which at least one month had been devoted to equipping and clothing parades, dental work, inoculations, the visit to Waitangi and final leave. Little training was possible on the crowded troopship other than that designed to keep the men fit, and consequently they arrived in England having received only elementary training and some instruction in minor tactics. They left nearly fully equipped, graded 'Fit for war', and with as good a knowledge of infantry weapons as was possible until those weapons were used in anger.

From the point of view of discipline it was also a different battalion. Firmly guided by the CO and RSM and ably assisted by the company commanders, the unit had now reached the stage when it realised the necessity for discipline of a high order. The reputation of the battalion was now the concern of the many rather than that of the few. There were, of course, military offences but they were mostly of a minor character and of the type that occur in any unit where the men are fit, healthy, and full of spirit.

Under the conditions surrounding the selection of prospective NCOs prior to the all-too-short course at **Trentham**, it was to be expected that as the battalion grew in experience and efficiency some would be found wanting. There were not many and they reverted to the ranks, usually at their own request.

Colonel Dittmer spared no effort to ensure that the junior officers commissioned after the course at **Trentham** received the necessary guidance, training, and instruction to mould them into efficient and responsible leaders. They were repeatedly reminded that control and

leadership was the only way to prevent unnecessary casualties in action. The CO was as satisfied with his junior officers as he was with the rank and file of the **Maori Battalion**, which was now a compact, well-trained unit that had been tactically disposed to meet an enemy, and which would have given a good account of itself if the British Navy and the Royal Air Force had not dissuaded that enemy from attempting the **English Channel**.

The troops thoroughly approved of the **Athlone Castle**. She had been a luxury liner and her decks were easy of access—a pronounced advantage after the harrowing gangway climbing of distant but obnoxious memory. The first meal under the then novel cafeteria system was also very reassuring, while the wet canteen was nicely placed and plentifully stocked.

The **Athlone Castle** was still at the quayside in the morning, which was a Sunday, and after church parade the Maoris found they were sharing her with 23 Battalion, 7 Field Company of the New Zealand Engineers, and a company of 5 Field Ambulance. A convoy was assembling and the **Athlone Castle** was not due to move for some days, but shipboard training began at once. A whole deck had been allotted to the unit, and with the prospect of battle at the end of the voyage bayonet work figured largely in the syllabus, which also provided for a route march of several miles around the deck each day. At the end of the voyage the Maoris estimated that they had really marched from England to Egypt, with the deck as a convenient medium for the performance of the marathon.

They left Liverpool on 7 January and, with several other ships and an escort, anchored in wide, deserted Colwyn Bay in North Wales for three more days. The next move was to Bangor, in the Belfast Lough, where the convoy was concentrating. Finally, on 12 January all twenty-one ships and their naval escort departed under a protective umbrella of Hurricanes and Short-Sunderland flying boats. Lifebelts were worn and steel helmets carried continuously while the convoy was within striking distance of German long-range aircraft, and a number of Bren guns were

mounted as additional anti-aircraft protection. On the second day there was only one Sunderland overhead and on the third morning that had disappeared. Almost daily the naval escort dwindled until only two destroyers were left.

The influenza which had been claiming new victims daily showed no signs of abating as the ships made a wide detour around the north of **Ireland** and far out into the **North Atlantic**. It was nearly a week before overcoats were discarded and there was a full muster parade. With days growing warmer the troops took an increasing interest in the swimming baths, where the favourite pastime was to play at submarines and troopships, a game in which the good swimmers torpedoed the poorer ones, much to their discomfort.

The second acquaintance with **Freetown** was made on 25 January, one day short of the battalion's first anniversary; since leaving New Zealand in May 1940 the battalion had been at sea on two out of every five days. This near anniversary was marked by an interesting but disappointing experience, for as the convoy was moving into the river port the shore guns let loose at an unidentified high-flying plane. It, or another plane, often came down the river from French territory farther north, and sometimes the batteries fired at it and sometimes they didn't bother. This time they bothered; but the refusal of the plane to come within range of their Bren guns was very disappointing to the ship's anti-aircraft crew.

Four days were spent off shore at **Freetown** taking on water and fuel, and when the troops tired of watching the barges they turned to the fleet of canoes keeping a respectable distance from the ship's hoses. The battalion had been warned against trading, and with the memory of deficiency fines for kit shortages after their previous call the troops did very little. However, the antics of a black diver whom the men remembered provided endless amusement, and they discovered striking resemblances between 'Charlie Blackout', as he was christened, and some of their officers. Yells of 'How are you Mangu?' and 'Hello Whetu'

invariably produced appreciative laughter from the men lining the rails.

The tropical heat was aggravated at night by the necessity for closing all portholes because of malarial mosquitoes; sleeping on deck was forbidden for the same reason and there were no regrets at leaving **Freetown**. Before it left the malarial African coast A Company lost its mascot, a little dog the men had managed to smuggle aboard at Liverpool. How they got it on the ship undetected is a Ngapuhi secret, but the ship's authorities sportingly permitted its retention under conditions that included frequent washing, airing, and exercising. Company Headquarters went further and provided for its mascot a history sheet and a file like any other member of the company. Offers to exchange the mascot for a monkey were indignantly spurned—not all the monkeys in **Africa** could buy that small dog. However, somebody on the ship didn't like dogs. When the loss was discovered the descendants of Hongi Hika were definitely on the warpath but the culprit was never found.

Ten uneventful days at sea saw the troops over the Equator, out of dangerous waters and in sight of **Capetown**'s Table Mountain. Part of the convoy went on to **Durban** while the rest, including the ***Athlone Castle***, berthed in **Capetown**. The Maoris, remembering their last visit, reminded themselves of what they had forgotten in England—that they had omitted the precaution of being born Europeans. **Brigadier Hargest**, officer commanding New Zealand troops, immediately got in touch with the local civic authorities and asked what restrictions would be imposed on the **Maori Battalion**. He was informed that the battalion would be treated in exactly the same manner as any other British soldiers.

The Maoris were paid in South African currency, given leave, and went ashore in an uncertain state of mind, half defiant and half fearful of their reception. It was soon apparent that their apprehensions were unnecessary, for the hotels, restaurants, and shops not only did not discriminate but made them civilly welcome. The Maoris on their side were polite to all who spoke to them and treated the coloured people as they would have treated anyone else. There are, after all, grades of

society in every country, and those coloured people who looked respectable and made a proper approach were received at face value. Hospitality was extended by and accepted from all sections of the South African community, but the announcement that the **Maori Battalion** was, with official approval, to be the guest at a ball given by the coloured people of **Capetown** put the whole colour question in proper perspective and the event was eagerly awaited.

It was the only time the Maoris were entertained by a coloured people and it was the first (and possibly the last) time the **Capetown** coloureds were permitted to mix with British troops. In the event it was a very happy affair; the Maoris were fussed over as never before, and, with stiffness and formality a thing of the past, they almost felt they were back home again. In the morning they had been taken on a sightseeing trip by train, so by and large it was a full day.

The troops left **Capetown** with pleasant memories and a large supply of water-melons and corn-cobs. It had been a common sight to see a man struggling up the gangway with a huge water-melon under each arm. The largest cost a shilling and the men were robbed at the price, but the flavour made the cost appear negligible. Less prominently displayed but illustrating the Maori liking for kaimoana ¹ were the dozens of crayfish taken aboard and, in some cases, kept alive for days in baths filled with salt water.

The voyage up the east coast of **Africa** was hot, uncomfortable, and without incident. The Gulf of **Aden** was entered on 25 February and the convoy passed through the **Red Sea**. Two short ceremonies on 2 March marked the virtual end of nearly eight weeks at sea. The first was a presentation by the **Maori Battalion** of carved paddles to Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Hill, Commodore of the convoy, and to Commander A. Alderton, master of the ***Athlone Castle***; the carving had been done on the trip by Second-Lieutenant Toka and the presentation was made by Captain Royal. The second ceremony was the presentation by Colonel J. S. Hughes, OC Troopship, of trophies won in a sports meeting held while

ploughing through the **Indian Ocean**. Unlike on the first voyage, the Maoris did not make much of a showing.

The voyage ended in **Tewfik** harbour at the entrance to the **Suez Canal** in the afternoon of 3 March. As the ***Athlone Castle*** took her station among the mass of shipping, the Maoris looked in turn at the balloon barrage overhead, the flat-roofed buildings of Egypt, and the barren hills beyond the town. They were hazily aware that Egypt was an ancient land of deserts, pyramids, camels, and Arab sheiks riding white chargers, but from the ship there were neither pyramids, camels, nor sheiks to be seen. Perhaps they were all behind those hills.

The noise of distant bombing in the night was reminiscent of **Kent**, but the Maoris were not prepared for the sights that were their introduction to Egypt when they stepped ashore next day from the tenders: indescribably filthy children and adults dressed in what looked like dirty white nightshirts and brimless red hats, all of them chanting 'Gibbet baksheesh' and fighting like mad dogs when a coin was thrown among them; wharf entertainers with their bags of assorted tricks; vendors of Egyptian cigarettes, 'Orangee, very nice', sticky sweets, and 'Eggs-a-cook, very cheap'.

The troop train left at 6 p.m. after much shrieking of whistles, yelling, and waving of arms by the Egyptian guards. While they were passing through **Suez** the troops caught sight of minarets and mosques and smelt the sundry unwholesome odours of the East. The country varied from dreary miles of desert and dilapidated mud villages to stretches of cultivated land on which the fellahin and his oxen looked like pictures out of Sunday School books. Night falls quickly in Egypt and the troops were not sorry to detrain somewhere in the desert in the early hours of 5 March. The Maoris were met by 27 (MG) Battalion, embussed in its trucks and transported to their camp at **Garawi**, about three miles out of **Helwan**, which in turn is 20 miles from **Cairo**. A hot meal also prepared by the machine-gunners was waiting, and for a brief period some quartermaster's staff stayed with the battalion until it found its way around in its new surroundings.

Ordinarily the arrival of the Second Echelon would have completed the concentration of the New Zealand Division, but the situation had changed since it left England. While it was being disembarked at **Suez**, the rest of the Division was preparing to embark for an unknown destination at the other end of the Canal.

To the Maoris the first few days in Egypt were full of interest. There were no sheiks riding camels but the desert and the pyramids were real enough, and there were the intricacies of Egyptian coinage to be mastered, **Cairo** to be explored, the first mail for three months to be read, and reunions to be held with approximately 300 reinforcements who marched into the battalion from the 4th Reinforcements. After replacing the wastage from sickness and bringing the battalion strength up to the new higher establishment, the surplus men were formed into a reinforcement company under the command of Captain Baker, now back with the unit after supervising the unloading of the *Athlone Castle*.

Cairo was still a novelty when the battalion entrained for the transit camp at **Amiriya**, near **Alexandria**, on 18 March. **Amiriya** was a desolate spot with limited amenities, but obviously the troops were not to be there long and they threw themselves into the ceaseless hardening-up training. March is the season of dust-storms, and the newcomers learnt the capacity of the fine dust to penetrate anything not hermetically sealed. Their conception of a desert as a stretch of golden sand with swaying date-palms surrounding a well of cool water, and with possibly an Arab caravan in the distance, was finally shattered at **Amiriya**. The daily route marches revealed the Egyptian desert as rolling country with the grass and trees removed, areas of sand of varying depths, and areas of stony flats where small clumps of scrub grew, apparently without the aid of water. There was no leave to **Alexandria**, but the Maoris managed to entertain themselves in their own way. One of the ways was a cross-country run over the sandhills; another was an impromptu sports meeting, which included a donkey race with the company commanders as jockeys. There was no tote, which was fortunate because the donkeys

did not seem to realise there was a race on, in spite of every assistance from their backers, who pushed and pulled but could not overcome their reluctance to move. Finally, in desperation, one of the steeds was lifted and carried bodily around the course.

The day ended with a concert provided by an AIF entertainment unit and attended by all units in the neighbourhood. On 25 March the Maoris entrained for **Alexandria**, which was reached within the hour, and the battalion embarked on the transport *Cameronia*. There was not much room for the battalion was sharing her with 23 Battalion, units of artillery, engineers, medical staff, nurses attached to 1 General Hospital, and 5 Brigade Headquarters staff. She sailed with one other ship in the evening, and in the morning the troops were told officially what was already common knowledge. They were bound for **Greece**. A special order issued by **General Freyberg** at the beginning of March was read to all troops. ² It ran:

Before leaving Egypt for the battle front I had planned to say a last word to you. I find that events have moved quickly and I am prevented from doing so; I therefore send this message to you in a sealed envelope to be opened on the transport after you have started on your journey.

In the course of the next few days we may be fighting in the defence of **Greece**, the birthplace of culture and learning. We shall be meeting our real enemy, the Germans, who have set out with the avowed object of smashing the British Empire. It is clear therefore that wherever we fight them we shall be fighting not only for **Greece**, but also in defence of our own homes.

A word to you about the enemy. The German soldier is a brave fighter so do not underestimate the difficulties that face us. On the other hand, remember that this time he is fighting with difficult communications, in country where he cannot use his strong armoured forces to their full advantage. Further, you should remember that your fathers of 1st New Zealand Expeditionary Force defeated the Germans during the last war wherever they met them. I am certain that in this

campaign in **Greece** the Germans will be meeting men who are fitter, stronger, and better trained than they are. I have never seen troops that impressed me more. You can shoot and you can march long distances without fatigue. By your resolute shooting and sniping and by fierce patrolling by night you can tame any enemy you may encounter.

A further word to you, many of whom, I realise, will be facing the ordeal of battle for the first time. Do not be caught unprepared. In war conditions will always be difficult, especially in the encounter battle; time will always be against you, there will always be noise and confusion, orders may arrive late, nerves will be strained, you will be attacked from the air. All these factors and others must be expected on the field of battle. But you have been trained physically to endure long marches and fatigue and you must steel yourselves to overcome the ordeal of the modern battlefield.

One last word. You will be fighting in a foreign land and the eyes of many nations will be upon you. The honour of the New Zealand Division is in your keeping. It could not be in better hands.

Officers of 28 (Maori) Battalion who sailed from Egypt to **Greece** were:

CO: **Lt-Col G. Dittmer**

2 i/c: **Maj G. F. Bertrand**

Adjutant: **Cap H. P. Te Punga**

IO: **2 Lt C. M. Bennett**

MO: **Capt C. M. Mules** **Wounded, Crete**

Chaplain: **Rev K. Harawira**

HQ Company

OC: **Capt E. Te W. Love** **Wounded, Crete. Remained with unit**

2 Lt H. M. McDonald **PW, Crete**

2 Lt A. Te Puni

2 Lt T. Rangī **PW, Greece**

2 Lt G. R. Bennett **PW, Greece**

2 Lt W. T. Ngata **Wounded, Crete**

2 Lt F. T. Bennett **Wounded, Crete**

QM: Capt G. H. Weir

A Company

OC: Capt L. J. Bell

Killed in action, Crete

Capt H. W. Leaf

Killed in action, Crete

2 Lt W. Porter

Wounded, Crete. Returned to unit

2 Lt D. Urlich

2 Lt H. Wiremu

PW, Greece

B Company

OC: Capt R. Royal

Capt W. H. Werohia

Evacuated Greece direct to ypt

2 Lt H. R. Vercoe

Killed in action, Crete

2 Lt R. Pene

2 Lt H. O. Stewart

Killed in action, Crete

C Company

OC: Capt A. T. McL. Scott

Capt P. Tureia

Evacuated sick, Crete

2 Lt H. Te O. Reedy

PW, Crete

2 Lt J. Tuhiwai

2 Lt K. A. Keiha

D Company

OC: Maj H. G. Dyer

2 Lt G. A. Te Kuru

Killed in action, Crete

2 Lt A. G. Ormond

Wounded, Crete

2 Lt F. R. Logan

2 Lt J. T. Gilroy

Evacuated Greece direct to Egypt

Reinforcement Company

OC: Capt F. Baker

Wounded, Crete. Returned to unit

2 Lt W. Herewini

PW, Greece

2 Lt W. H. McKay

Died of wounds while PW, Crete

2 Lt H. K. Ngata

PW, Greece

2 Lt H. Hokianga†

PW, Greece

Commissioned in England.

† Ex 4th Reinforcements.

The Maoris did not know much about the situation in Greece except that the Italians had invaded the country through Albania and were being systematically thrown back there again by the valiant but under-

armed Greek forces. It is not the function of a battalion history to go very deeply into the events that led to the despatch of the New Zealand Division to **Greece**, but briefly this was the background.

While the Italian venture was making some headway against the astonished Greeks, the Germans contented themselves with consolidating their position in **Europe**, and early in 1941 were established in Roumania. The rough handling General Wavell had given the Italians in **Libya**, and the mauling the Greeks were giving them on the frontier mountaintops, suggested that German help was necessary at least to create a diversion. To the British High Command that diversion appeared likely to be the occupation of **Bulgaria**, which did not seem averse to being forcibly aligned on the Axis side. Such a move would have been a threat to the Greek Army already fully engaged with the Italians on **Greece's** western frontier, and an offer was made of certain forces to counter the possibility of having German troops disposed on the Greek border with **Bulgaria**. The original offer of British help was declined on the ground, among others, that the forces available were insufficient and more likely to provoke than prevent a German attack; eventually the British War Cabinet decided to curtail the operations against the Italians in **Libya** and send the largest possible force to counter the threat of a German advance into **Greece** through a complacent **Bulgaria**.

The Greek Government accepted the offer and 1 Armoured Brigade, the New Zealand Division, 6 and 7 Australian Divisions and the Polish Independent Brigade were ordered to prepare for embarkation. ³ So much for grand strategy.

The voyage from Egypt to **Greece** was short and uneventful. Curious eyes watched the coast and the island of Salamis a little to the left draw closer as the ships passed between the breakwaters that protect the port of **Piraeus** from the open seas. Greek history is not a parade-ground subject and there were no guides aboard to tell the Maoris that between Salamis and **Piraeus** a sea battle was fought that changed the course of history. In 480 BC the Greeks destroyed the Persian fleet at the battle of

Salamis following the defeat of the Greek army at [Thermopylae](#), a battleground with which the Maoris were to become familiar.



Greece

The [Cameronia](#) berthed at midday on 27 March near the three-domed church of St. Nicholas, the Grecian patron saint of seafarers. The architecture was a variation from the spires of England and the minarets of Egypt, but the Maoris had little time to discuss the peculiarities of eastern churches for they disembarked almost immediately and marched through [Athens](#) to a staging camp at [Hymettus](#), about nine miles distant.

It was their first march on asphalt roads since leaving England, and ordinarily there would have been a big sick parade with sore feet after it—but this was no ordinary occasion. That march to the pine-clad slopes of Mount Hymettus, southeastern bastion of the ancient city state of [Athens](#), will never be forgotten by those who took part.

This time it was no mercenary Egyptian rabble that met them but a people who smiled and waved to the stalwart Maoris swinging along as if the heavy packs they carried were weightless. Often flowers and kisses were thrown to them, and sometimes it was a verse of the latest Greek war song that greeted them. The words were sung to the air of the then-popular ‘Woodpecker Song’—it was called ‘Kereite Mussolini’—and every

time the hated name was mentioned two fingers would be drawn across the throat. The Maoris have action songs of their own, and they did not have to understand Greek to catch the meaning of this one.

The battalion bivouacked at **Hymettus** and made plans for investigating **Athens** where, with the great crags of Mount Lycabettus for a background the modern city is built around the **Acropolis**, itself crowned with stately relics of an ancient greatness as unique in their own way as the pyramids of Egypt.

In the morning the Reinforcement Company marched out to the advanced base at **Voula**, a holiday resort about 12 miles from **Athens**. There was leave in the afternoon and the troops, with strange coins in their pockets for the second time within a month, proceeded to explore the Greek capital. Next day, 29 March, they entrained for north-eastern **Greece**.

While the train climbed the hills that border the Athenian plain, the Maoris sang their songs and thought maybe of other hills and valleys of a newer land that had no enemy frontiers. All through the night the train rumbled, climbed, and twisted along the passes that shear the Greek mountains, and about midday stopped short of the small farming centre of **Katerini**. Every time the train stopped a curious crowd would gather, and although they spoke in Greek it was plain that they were puzzled about the nationality of the Maoris. Those with a little English would ask who they were, and on being told 'New Zealanders' would shake their heads and say: 'You mavro, others aspro.' ⁴ If the Maoris had understood Greek they would have considered that *mavro* rather overemphasised the degree of Polynesian pigmentation.

The battalion marched into **Katerini** and was billeted in empty buildings. All around it were green crops and orchards, and behind, stretching westwards across **Greece**, was the **Olympus** range with its highest peaks covered in snow. Northeast across the Gulf of Thermaikos was **Salonika**, the second city of **Greece**. And barely 200 miles farther east was **Gallipoli**, where the Maori battle cry 'Kamate! Kamate!' was

first heard on a European battlefield. Did the toa who fell there join the shades of their ancestors who fought with mere and taiaha and wonder how their descendants would comport themselves against men armed with the strange new weapons? They were soon to know that the honour of the Maori people was in safe hands.

Forward of 5 Brigade, to which 28 (Maori) Battalion had come under command on 5 March and which was in divisional reserve, were 4 and 6 Brigades digging positions south of the **Aliakmon River**. The Division was for the first time concentrating and operating as a complete entity, and was holding the right of a defensive line that stretched from the **Aegean Sea**, east of **Mount Olympus**, for a hundred miles west and north to the Yugoslav frontier. On the New Zealand left 6 Australian Division was taking up positions but was not fully deployed. Further left again were Greek forces.

The line would have been difficult to break through, but it could be outflanked through **Yugoslavia** via the **Monastir Gap**, then down an easy valley to the **Servia Pass**, some ten miles farther west of **Mount Olympus**. At the time the Maoris arrived in **Katerini** the political situation had altered to our advantage, for a coup d'état had deposed the pro-German Yugoslav regent and it was hoped that the defence of the **Monastir Gap** was in competent hands. Farther west, the Albanian border was held by the Greek army, but in the east along the Bulgarian frontier only lightly manned permanent defences covered **Salonika**.

Fifth Brigade was to prepare and occupy reserve positions covering the two passes north and east of **Mount Olympus**. The inland pass was the most important for over it ran the main road from the north-east provinces. It was called by several names but that used by the troops, **Olympus Pass**, will be used here to avoid confusion. The **Olympus Pass** road climbed across the shoulder of the mountain and through a deep gorge with a steep approach and wooded, precipitous sides. Within a distance of ten miles the road passed from sea level to a height of nearly 4000 feet. It was narrow, scarcely wide enough for two vehicles to pass, and there were many hairpin bends, while in wet weather the surface

was greasy. There were also lengths cut along the rock face of the mountainside, with sheer cliffs on one side and a sheer drop on the other.

B Company moved out from **Katerini** on 1 April and took over a position partly prepared by D Company 19 Battalion in the actual **Olympus Pass**. The battalion transport, which had come up by road, passed B Company to a barrage of banter about their tardy progress but the drivers were not short of suitable replies. They were still relishing the taste of a vegetable they thought native to New Zealand but which was found growing in **Greece**. **Major Bertrand** describes the incident:

I took our transport by road from **Athens** to **Katerine** in company with all other 5 Brigade transport.... The journey took three days. At the midday lunch and maintenance halt I happened to be near a Greek village surrounded by fields with heavy crops of grain. In the fields I saw aged men and women weeding the crops as I thought. They were taking some sort of weed from the ground and putting it into bags which they wore slung from their waists. Upon going over to see what was what I found to my surprise that they were gathering Puha, ⁵ which they told me was a much prized vegetable with them. So!

The rest of the battalion followed the next day and debussed at the entrance to the pass at the road junction to **Skotina** village. After a wayside lunch the troops marched by winding mule tracks to their allotted areas high up in the foothills above the **Katerini** plain. Ranges hedged them in on three sides, with Mount Brusti immediately behind them. B Company was moved forward a thousand yards to cover a side road from a sanatorium to the gorge, and the battalion position was then: B Company, as described, with a patrolled gap between it and 23 Battalion; A Company carried the line westwards on forward slopes facing the road to **Katerini**, with its right flank about a quarter of a mile from the road and its left on the steep Mavroneri Gorge; C Company was on the end of a ridge west of the Mavroneri Gorge and behind the village of Kariai, while D Company was further west behind Haduladhika village.

Work had been done on both these positions by 26 Battalion. Battalion HQ was in a cherry orchard at Zazakon village between the forward troops and **Skotina**. The brigade area was thus held by two battalions—22 Battalion was on the **Aliakmon River** and 21 Battalion was still in **Athens**.

It was wild, mountainous country with the poorest of communications. The only motor road to D Company at Haduladhika—the Maoris called the place How-do-you-like-her—entailed a six-mile trip towards **Katerini**, then a three-mile detour along a road so potholed and corrugated that the maximum speed was fifteen miles an hour. There were secondary roads in A and B Company areas, but internal communications were by tracks cut through the thick undergrowth. The weather was ideal, the surroundings not unlike a New Zealand backblock farm, and the troops enjoyed themselves.

Waterfalls cascaded down the mountainsides, wild flowers grew under the trees, and there was always the sound of bells where little flocks of sheep and herds of cattle grazed in the valleys. Less welcome sights were the snakes in the bush and around the rocks and even in the creeks, but they appeared to be more frightened of the Maoris than the Maoris were of them. Green lizards, the sight of which to old-time war parties was regarded as the worst possible omen, were more than plentiful, but on account of their numbers the ancient superstition was disregarded—a new angle on the old proverb of there being safety in numbers.

While the rifle companies dug pits, carried coils of wire and boxes of ammunition up the mountainsides and erected entanglements around their positions, Headquarters Company was equally busy. The signal platoon cut tracks up and down gorges for its telephone wires, the stretcher-bearers prepared evacuation tracks for casualties, and the mortar platoon manhandled its weapons and ammunition into position. But of all the specialists perhaps the most arduous time was had by **Lieutenant C. M. Bennett**⁶ and his 'I' section in reconnoitring mountain tracks and stream beds. Their most important reconnaissance, although

it did not seem so at the time, was the marking of a track from Battalion Headquarters in Zazakon over the Balaourea Range, along the eastern flank of Mount Brusti, and down on to the main road near **Ay Dhimitrios**.⁷ (In passing, it is interesting to note that the battalion Intelligence section, totalling one officer and seven other ranks, at that time contained a future battalion commander, **Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett**, DSO, a company commander, **Captain Wikiriwhi**, DSO, MC,⁸ an adjutant, **Lieutenant Vercoe**,⁹ and a Victoria Cross winner, the late **Second-Lieutenant Ngarimu**.¹⁰)

April the 5th was payday, and a ration of bottled beer of a brand known to most Aucklanders was available to those who wished to buy. A hot meal of Greek lamb, green peas, and new potatoes was issued; training for war in the Greek mountains was not unendurable. But everything was different in the morning.

¹Seafood.

² **General Freyberg** had arrived in **Greece** on 7 March.

³Owing to force of circumstances neither 7 Australian Division nor the Polish Independent Brigade Was sent to **Greece**.

⁴In Greek *mavro* is black and *aspro* white.

⁵Puha is the Maori name for sow thistle, *sonchus oleraceus* It is a common European plant and was first mentioned as occurring in New Zealand by Dieffenbach in 1843 and was well known to the Maoris, who used it freely. It is possible that it came to New Zealand as a stowaway in the canoes of the early migrations.—Information supplied by Dr H. H. Allan, Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

⁶ **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.

⁷Ay is a contraction of **Ayios**, meaning **Saint**.

- ⁸ **Capt M. Wikiriwhi, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Pukekohe; born Rotorua, 4 Apr 1918; shepherd; twice wounded.**
- ⁹ **Lt W. Vercoe; Rotorua; born Rotorua, 27 Sep 1913; farmer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.**
- ¹⁰ **2 Lt Te M. N. Ngarimu, VC; born NZ 7 Apr 1918; shepherd; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 4 – THE CAMPAIGN IN GREECE

CHAPTER 4

The Campaign in Greece

delivered an ultimatum to both **Greece** and **Yugoslavia** and followed up its rejection with an attack against them on the morning of 6 April 1941. By this date only a part of two of the promised three divisions and a much smaller proportion of Air Force units had arrived in **Greece**. The New Zealand Division, supported by 1 Armoured Brigade, was deployed on a very wide front; west of the New Zealanders, 12 Greek Division was waiting relief by 6 Australian Division; further west, 20 Greek Division was widely spread towards the Yugoslav frontier, and it was still hoped that the Yugoslavs would safeguard the **Monastir Gap** and the Allied left flank; in **Macedonia** the Greeks were defending their Bulgarian frontier against a combined German air and ground attack.

It had been agreed that the New Zealand Division could not, for any length of time, defend its position north of **Katerini**. Nevertheless, it must remain there for the time being, to delay any immediate enemy thrust while Australian Corps headquarters worked out a plan for switching it back to the **Olympus** passes and linking up with the Australians.

The Maoris were not displeased with the dramatic turn of events and went on digging and wiring with a new interest although the possibility of having to fight there seemed remote. This view was not shared by the Higher Command who knew something of German blitzkrieg methods and of the ill-armed Greek forces facing the invaders. That night, the Reinforcement Company back at **Voula**, near **Athens**, was to receive a convincing demonstration of German air power when the dock area at **Piraeus** was bombed for two hours. Six merchant ships, a tug, and twenty lighters were burnt and others sunk; another, with a cargo of explosives, blew up and added to the destruction. The Maoris and a party of gunners were despatched on salvage duty and worked all day in the burning and collapsing harbour buildings. Thereafter they were retained on security patrols or to guard an adjacent airfield.

Within forty-eight hours the general situation was critical—the Greek defences on the Bulgarian frontier had been pierced, **Salonika** was threatened and Yugoslav resistance had collapsed. Nothing could prevent a German junction with the Italians in **Albania**, but an Australian brigade group, with half 27 NZ (Machine Gun) Battalion, had been sent to **Vevi**, the southern exit of the **Monastir Gap** and the historic invasion route into **Greece**.

Instructions issued by **Brigadier Hargest** made it clear to the Maoris that this time they were really in the war and without an **English Channel**, the Royal Air Force, and the Navy between them and the enemy. The Brigadier's instructions stated that little was known about the enemy but the pass was to be held to the last man and the last round. In other words, the Maoris might have to stage another Orakau and with the same defiant cattle cry, 'Ka whawhai tonu matou, ake! ake! ake!', ¹ that Rewi Maniopotō had thrown back at General Cameron demanding his surrender.

It was a busy day for the battalion. Tents were struck and only the flies retained for shelter; reserve rations and ammunition were carried into each company area; B Echelon moved back to the new Brigade B Echelon area near **Kokkinoplos**; Captain Royal was warned that 22 Battalion was taking over his and part of 23 Battalion's area and that his company would move to a new position in the morning.

A trickle of civilians that had begun to move through the pass developed into a stream and B Company was ordered to set up a check post, examine all vehicles, and turn back Greek soldiers who were becoming a noticeable proportion of the refugees. The possibility of Germans in Greek uniforms was not to be discounted and the reported cutting of telephone wires did something to substantiate the rumours that grew wilder as the day wore on. The fancy that some enemy were infiltrating and the fact that the wires were being cut led to the introduction of a password and answer that were peculiarly New Zealand. They were based on the parody of a haka known to every school boy. If

the challenge 'Halt! **Timaru!**' was not answered by ' **Waipukurau!**' it would be safe to assume the challenged was no New Zealander.

Further afield oil installations were fired in **Salonika** and later the engineers with the Divisional Cavalry blew the bridges over the **Aliakmon River**. The **21st Battalion** came up from **Athens**, where it had been guarding vital points, and occupied the approaches to the **Pinios Gorge** at **Platamon** on the extreme right of the **Olympus** position.

Captain Royal handed over to **22 Battalion** the next morning and **B Company** began another system of defences on **Petras Hill** in the rear of **22 Battalion's** left flank. There was a good view of the pass approaches, and **Second-Lieutenant Brant** ² with an attached machine-gun section and **Lieutenant Rangit** ³ with the battalion mortars were there together with an artillery OP.

Salonika fell during the day (9 April) and the commander of the Greek East Macedonian Army capitulated to the Germans, whereupon the signal was given for the immediate retirement of the New Zealanders behind the **Olympus Pass** positions. **Fourth Brigade** passed through the **Olympus** defences en route to the **Servia Pass**, with the role of covering the withdrawal of Greek and Australian forces from the **Vevi** area and acting as a pivot for later consolidation on a line running west and east through **Servia**; **6 Brigade** followed after dark to a position in divisional reserve, and the only troops forward of **5 Brigade** were the **Divisional Cavalry**, with some artillery and machine-gunners, and a group of unit carrier platoons.

Another forty-eight hours and grave decisions were being taken. The Germans in **Salonika** had regrouped and were feeling for crossings on the lower **Aliakmon**, where the **Divisional Cavalry** was still screening the vacated New Zealand lines and the occupied positions on the **Olympus** range. In the west the enemy had debouched from the **Monastir Gap** at **Vevi**, had joined up with the Italians in **Albania**, and was attacking the Greek flank; **4 Brigade** was holding the **Servia** defile in the same manner as **5 Brigade** at **Olympus**, but there was the extreme likelihood of the

whole British force being encircled by an enemy thrust towards the upper Aliakmon, where General Papagos was endeavouring to deploy what Greek forces he could withdraw from **Albania**.

The Maoris went on with their digging, wiring, and track cutting until the 12th, when instructions were received to vacate C and D Companies' positions and withdraw behind the Mavroneri Gorge facing west. When they had been first placed it had been the intention to hold the **Olympus** position with both 5 and 6 Brigades but events had moved too quickly. It was no longer possible to have a continuous line from **Olympus** to **Servia** and 5 Brigade was now merely to delay the enemy and then withdraw.

The troops accepted the position philosophically—they had done the same thing often enough in England and apparently it was part of a soldier's life to dig a weapon pit and then leave it. As the new line was where the Maoris stood and fought their first engagement a more detailed description of the terrain is necessary.

From the edge of the fenceless **Katerini** plain, wooded spurs, the foothills of Mount Brusti, to the south-west, and **Mount Olympus**, to the south, began abruptly and rose rapidly. The lower slopes were covered in scrub where charcoal burners had deforested the country; next came a belt of oleanders, sumac, bay, arbutus and chaste trees with fairly thick undergrowth; above this was a forest of mixed oak and beech with a more open undergrowth of fern, wild pear, and the mauve-flowered Judas tree as characteristic of Greek as the rata is of New Zealand bush; highest of all were the black pine ridges with little growing between them except an occasional hawthorn or juniper bush.

Winding through the ridges were deep gorges where plane trees grew as tall as any New Zealand white pine, with their feet in the water and their branches reaching up to the sun.

It was along one of these gorges, the Mavroneri, that the Maoris were placed. This gorge, beginning at **Skotina** village and twisting in a north-

easterly direction for four miles, debouched on to the plain, and along its side was a good metalled road that joined the pass road in front of 22 Battalion. There was a sawmill at **Skotina** and the road was substantially built to carry the timber wagons.

Behind, or rather south-west of **Skotina**, the road continued as a timber track for about eight miles along the side and over Mount Brustli, leaving a gap of five miles to the rear exit of the **Olympus Pass** road. Substitute Ruatahuna for **Skotina** and the rest falls naturally into place—typical Urewera country.

The **22nd Battalion** lay astride the **Olympus Pass** road in front of the actual pass, with its D Company on the left flank facing **Katerini** and sited on a shoulder around which the **Skotina** road curved. A Company (Captain Bell), ⁴ the right flank company of 28 Battalion, faced in the same direction on a sector of wooded spurs diagonal to the main mountain mass with a clear view towards both **Skotina** and the main pass roads. The immediate front was covered with scrub, and further forward some broken country offered good cover for infiltrating infantry. There was a 400-yard gap between 9 Platoon (commanded by Captain Leaf, ⁵ vice Lieutenant Wiremu, ⁶ evacuated sick) and the left of 22 Battalion, while three-quarters of a mile west 8 Platoon (**Lieutenant Urlich**) ⁷ was on the edge of the Mavroneri Gorge. No. 7 Platoon (Lieutenant Porter) ⁸ was in company reserve. B Company's new (and fourth) position was on a hillside, covering the gap between A Company and the left flank of 22 Battalion, and facing north-west across the gorge with 10 Platoon (Lieutenant Vercoe), right, and 12 Platoon (Lieutenant Stewart) ⁹, left, spread along half a mile of front. No. 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Pene) was assigned a special duty by **Colonel Dittmer** and will be dealt with later, but the result was to leave Captain Royal with no reserve platoon. This deficiency was compensated for by placing A Company's reserve platoon in such a position that besides fulfilling its role as a reserve to A Company it could cover part of B Company's front with enfilade fire if the enemy attempted to attack from the northwest.



Olympus Pass Positions, 13-17 April 1941

Battalion Headquarters left its cherry trees below the road and moved to the top of a saddle of the ridge about a mile to the left and above B Company. There was another of the countless foot tracks through B Company area along to Battalion Headquarters, with a branch which led behind A Company towards the rear of 22 Battalion. From Battalion Headquarters there were other tracks that led by devious routes down to the pass road near Brigade Headquarters. They were to become very important to the **Maori Battalion.**

The way was then clear for D Company (Major Dyer) to take its position on the left of B Company and further left along the Mavroneri Gorge. The weather, hitherto perfect, had broken and the track down to the flat, and thence to a ford at the bottom of the gorge, was difficult for men laden with as much reserve ammunition and stores as they could carry.

Major Dyer placed 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Ormond) ¹⁰ straddling a spur and separated from B Company by a small gully, and 17 Platoon (Lieutenant Logan**), likewise on a spur, with a section (Corporal Wipiti) ¹¹ somewhat detached but in a position to enfilade part of the half-mile front. No. 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Gilroy) ¹² was in reserve between and above the forward platoons. The mortar platoon and machine-gunners remained on Petras Hill, where they could switch to each front and**

support A, B or D Companies.

The troops immediately began to dig themselves in while some Greeks, whose services were obtained by **Colonel Dittmer**, arrived with mules laden with ammunition and wire. Snow began to fall, and while the men made frantic efforts to pile their gear and ammunition into heaps the Greek muleteers curled up in their black-hooded cloaks and went to sleep.

Three miles farther south at **Skotina**, Lieutenant Pene, with 11 Platoon detached from B and under command of D Company, was preparing to hold the tracks leading into **Skotina** in case the enemy made a wide outflanking movement. It will be seen that **Major Dyer** held a long and thinly occupied line with a worrying, though extremely precipitous, gap between Lieutenants **Logan** and Pene.

The sun shone again in the morning (13th) and the troops dried out after their night's work in the snow and rain. C Company (Captain Scott) moved back and was placed in reserve on the ridge behind B and D Companies in such a position that if required it could move north-east down a ridge to A Company or to the gap between A Company and 22 Battalion; or straight down north-north-east to B Company; or nearly due north to D Company.

While the Maoris improved their positions and placed a few strands of barbed and some concertina wire along the mill road below them, German bombers passed high overhead. Heavy smoke clouds hung in the air over **Salonika** and the Divisional Cavalry was falling back after blowing bridges and road blocks.

For the first time genuine night patrolling was carried out by 28 Battalion. The Mavroneri riverbed was thoroughly combed but no enemy was reported, although Brigade had sent a warning message that action might develop in the morning. Soon after daylight the first sign that the approaching enemy was taking a close interest in the **Olympus** area was the appearance of a reconnaissance plane which circled the brigade

positions. A signal from Brigade Headquarters advised that immediate artillery support would be provided upon the firing of coloured flares in the order green-red-green, and that all friendly armoured fighting vehicles approaching from **Katerini** would be flying khaki shirts as a sign of identification.

The Divisional Cavalry, its supporting carriers and other arms, moved over the pass in the afternoon (14 April) and 5 Brigade stood to confront the enemy. It did not feel unequal to the task although 28 Battalion, excepting A Company, had had little enough time to prepare for the occasion.

On the eve of battle **Brigadier Hargest** issued a special message:

Units LUXA [code name for 5 Brigade] holding front line. Every precaution against losses from enemy action will be taken. Movement day forward areas restricted to minimum. Sentries will be posted all sec posts day and night. Wherever possible patrols both standing and moving will be established and offensive action taken. MILK [Divisional Cavalry] has witnessed uncanny enemy infiltration methods. This will be guarded against. Do not give away position of posts by aimlessly discharging weapons. We are in excellent positions. With skill and courage easily defeat enemy.

The **22nd Battalion** drew first blood when a motor-cycle patrol was stopped by a blown bridge at the foot of the pass and was shot up. The **21st Battalion** at **Platamon**, on the other side of **Olympus**, had halted an enemy force making an unexpected drive along the shortest but worst route to **Larisa**. **Anzac Corps** was making new dispositions to deal with this eastern threat. And at ten in the evening **Brigadier Hargest** was told that the Division was going to give up the **Olympus Pass** and dig in for good and all at **Thermopylae**, a hundred miles or so farther south, where a line from coast to coast could be held with or without the aid of Greek forces.

At first light on the 15th all eyes in A Company were on the road

from **Katerini** and at 10.30 a mixed column was seen approaching the Boomerang, a point half-way between Kato Melia and the **Skotina** road junction. As soon as it came within range of 5 Field Regiment's guns, winched into positions on peaks that would have made the hair of the gunners on Anzac stand on end, harassing fire was brought down and the vehicles scattered. This was evidently not expected in the German plan of operations for the spotter plane again closely inspected the area, quite disregarding the fire of ack-ack, Brens. The rest of the day passed in sporadic artillery activity, with Lieutenant Brant's machine guns and Lieutenant Rangi's mortars firing at extreme range whenever a target presented itself. Late in the afternoon the enemy opened up with guns of a heavier calibre sited beyond the range of the 25-pounders. A few shells fell in the vicinity of Battalion Headquarters, and some snakes which did not relish the concussion smartly vacated the area.

Occasional shelling in A Company's area resulted in the Battalion sustaining its first battle casualties when Sergeant Hare ¹³ (Mortar Platoon) was wounded and Private Ellison ¹⁴ shell-shocked from a near miss. The only damage to materials was caused by a shell near A Company's cookhouse which destroyed some rations.

Quartermaster-Sergeant Peter Samuel, ¹⁵ after surveying the damage to his stores, sent an invitation to as many as could be spared to come down and eat the punctured tins of bully beef and condensed milk.

Much the same situation existed on the rest of 5 Brigade's front, but over where 21 Battalion was holding the **Platamon** tunnel a day-long battle raged, with the battalion still holding at dusk and five enemy tanks immobilised in no-man's-land.

In the meantime company commanders had been called to a conference at which **Colonel Dittmer** announced that 5 Brigade would be pulling out that night behind 6 Brigade, then preparing a delaying position at **Elasson**. The battalion order of march would be Headquarters, C, D, A, and B Companies. The route was along the **Skotina** road to the track leading to Km 42, where Sergeant Vercoe ('I' Section) would

establish a check post. All troops must be clear by 10 p.m. and would march to Kardaras, seven miles south of Battalion Headquarters and four miles past the alpine village of **Ay Dhimitrios**, where 22 Battalion would be astride the road by midnight. The **23rd Battalion** on the right would conform. Each company would have four pack mules for carrying out reserve ammunition, tools, cookers, signal and other equipment. The mean would carry twenty-four hours' rations and the rest would be destroyed. The machine guns, 3-inch mortars, and any sick would move forthwith.

These orders were relayed to platoons but were later postponed for twenty-four hours to allow the withdrawal of 5 Brigade to be co-ordinated with that of other British formations.

The postponement was wirelessly clear by Lieutenant Bennett, but if the enemy picked up the message he would not have been able to do much about it for the instructions were in Maori.

The first day in action ended, as far as 28 Battalion was concerned, with no actual contact with enemy infantry and two casualties; but the sight of lighted vehicles moving after dark along the road to Haduladhika suggested that the spotter plane had found the Brigade flank.

There was little sleep that night. B, C, and D Companies had listening posts along the river but heard nothing; A Company, the nearest to the enemy, had an anxious time with finger and trigger never far apart. An enemy patrol did reach the company's right flank, but Captain Leaf was an old soldier and had tied petrol tins along the wire which gave the alarm, and the intruders departed.

The morning of 16 April dawned grey with rain threatening. **Lieutenant Urlich**, looking down on the **Katerini** plains, wrote: 'Could see road from katerine black with enemy vehicles. They advanced right under us and then our 5 Fd [Regiment] 25 pounders opened fire and picked vehicle-tank after vehicle-tank until Jerry found it too hot. Staff

car came up part of the way and lasted one minute and a half before it was blown to Hell.'

The machine-gun section and the battalion 3-inch mortars joined the gunners, but the spotter plane still overhead directed fire on to them in retaliation and Sergeant Katene's ¹⁶ mortar section was forced to move to alternative positions until ordered to withdraw in accordance with his instructions.

The enemy attempted to force the pass road with tanks supported by mortars, but 5 Field Regiment and 22 Battalion were equal to the occasion although, through a request from 22 Battalion, 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Tuhiwai) was sent down into support on the pass side of Petras Hill as a precautionary measure. It was not needed and returned to C Company.

A fog at midday reduced visibility to a few yards and the enemy probed the brigade positions. A party bumped into 8 Platoon but sheered off again when fired upon. Later, enemy could be heard in the Mavroneri Gorge working towards B Company. It was dead ground, but Lieutenant Porter put his platoon mortar on to the area and also borrowed **Urlich's** mortar for the same purpose.

It should be mentioned at this point that **Colonel Dittmer**, when the enemy closed in on his left front, was apprehensive about the ability of one platoon to prevent an outflanking move through **Skotina**, so cutting the pass road behind him and the remainder of the brigade front.

A battalion of 6 Brigade was to have taken up a position about **Skotina** village westwards, but as this did not happen, 13 Platoon (Lieutenant Reedy) ¹⁷ was sent from C Company to reinforce Lieutenant Pene. Later, **Major Dyer** was requested to send Lieutenant Te Kuru ¹⁸ and twenty men half-way between his left flank and **Skotina** as a link between D Company and the two isolated platoons.

When B Company scouts reported noise in the gorge below them, Captain Royal was busy with the preparations for the withdrawal. The

men's packs and the company tools had already been stacked at Company Headquarters but the mules and their attendants had disappeared. The cooks and batmen had therefore to carry this equipment up to Battalion Headquarters themselves. Late in the afternoon the mist cleared sufficiently to disclose enemy troops, widely dispersed, moving down a bare ridge on the far side of the gorge. Fire was opened at 1200 yards but was apparently ineffective. Lieutenant Stewart went through his wire to shorten the range but the swirling mist came down again and hid the target.

The enemy had, in fact, worked down a ridge that led into the gorge below Porter's position, but, blocked by a cliff on the Maori side, was moving up stream with the intention of attacking Point 917 behind A Company and 22 Battalion and near Km 42. The approach to B Company area, after the cliff had been passed, was up easy bush-covered slopes for about 600 yards, then through the wire defences covering the road. As soon as the wire was reached, B Company, with cleared lanes giving a view, brought all its fire to bear and this, plus the A Company mortars, convinced the enemy that the shortest way to Point 917 was not necessarily the easiest. No. 12 Platoon reported by runner that six enemy dead were lying outside the wire, and Lieutenant Bennett, who happened to be at B Company headquarters at the time, left to acquaint **Colonel Dittmer** with the situation in the gorge. The enemy withdrew from sight but B Company, assisted by C Company above it, continued to plaster the opposite side of the gorge on the blind. Their fire had quite unexpected results, as will be seen later on perusal of the German commander's report which says that one-third of his force was pinned down.

Major Dyer had been kept informed by **Colonel Dittmer** about the situation on the brigade front and, with the knowledge that the enemy was doing what was expected of him in feeling for the flanks, visited Lieutenant Pene covering the tracks into **Skotina**. The platoon had already seen scouts on the distant hills evidently keeping the village under observation. The inhabitants of **Skotina**, nearly all women and

children, were standing in groups in front of their houses, and an old man was beating a woman who was having hysterics. While **Dyer** was returning to his company Lieutenant Reedy and his platoon from C Company were clambering down a spur to reinforce Pene.

Later, as previously mentioned, **Major Dyer** was ordered to send a platoon approximately twenty strong to form a connecting link with **Skotina**. The men were taken from the reserve platoon with Lieutenant Te Kuru in command, and Company Headquarters details took their places in the more important weapon pits.

D Company's first close contact with the enemy is described by **Major Dyer**:

When the enemy were seen advancing on the mountain face opposite us I sent Jack Tainui, ¹⁹ my best scout, and another down to the bottom of the gorge to observe the enemy as it was possible to cross the river by leaping from rock to rock. As the enemy, Austrian mountain troops I think, ²⁰ started to cross, he picked them off at close range. I believe he shot three. He told me that one man was only wounded and started to crawl away. He raised his rifle to finish him off and then found that he could not do it. He withdrew in front of the enemy, and in the middle of the main action which followed immediately, he reported to me and then with a grin said he was going down (a matter of about thirty yards) to give the boys a hand as they seemed to be having a tough time.

Warned by the firing on its right, D Company was peering into the mist and the enemy was concentrating on the flat where Battalion Headquarters had originally been established. Suddenly, Private Harold ²¹ in 16 Platoon took careful aim and fired. An enemy scout who had reached the road fell on his back. Harold turned to his mate, 'Old Horse' Martin, ²² and said shakily, 'Old Horse, I've killed him.'

'Oh,' said 'Old Horse', looking for a target, 'Don't you worry about that, Tihora, we'll soon kill plenty more.'

A patch of fog covered the road and a salvo of mortar bombs fell in D

Company area, followed by machine-gun bullets cracking through the trees. The actual attack came in against the right flank of D Company and the forward section of 16 Platoon received the brunt of it. The post was commanded by Corporal Taituha, ²³ who had asked to be relieved of his job as orderlyroom sergeant when action seemed pending and reverted to the rank of corporal to be in the fighting. The first rush was halted with grenade and tommy gun and the enemy withdrew to shelter below the road. An attempt to find a gap further right was frustrated by Corporal Harrison's ²⁴ section, and still further right a probe was halted by fire from B Company.

The next effort was more determined. The enemy charged through the wire on the top side of the road firing their automatics and shouting, 'Frightened! Run!' Some of the newlyjoined men wavered but were reassured by the others and a confused mêlée took place at close quarters in the mist. Maori yells answered the shouting enemy but the forward section, immobilised in the pits, was overrun. Corporal Taituha took cover behind a tree, and it was his determined stand that permitted his section to pull back. He kept on shooting until the butt of his rifle was blown off and he was himself so seriously wounded that he was later left for dead.

Private Ropata ²⁵ refused to move and fought on until he was mortally wounded; Harold and 'Old Horse' Martin likewise stayed in position and fulfilled the latter's prediction that they would soon kill plenty more.

Major Dyer, only thirty yards from the fighting, could get no clear picture of the situation until Private 'Chook' Fowler ²⁶ reported with a message from Lieutenant Ormond that part of his area had been overrun. **Colonel Dittmer** was informed and was asked for reinforcements. He was also told at the same time that although the position appeared bad the company had no intention of retiring. Help was promised, and **Dyer** then sent Fowler to Lieutenant Gilroy with orders to face right and clear the area with the bayonet. They stalked

from tree to tree but the enemy had gone. Corporal Harrison had, in fact, already restored the situation. Reinforced by some of Taituha's men, he had poured such a volume of fire into the vacated area that the enemy refused to face it and withdrew.

As soon as **Major Dyer's** request for help was received Captain Te Punga ²⁷ (Adjutant) collected some spare Headquarters details, mortar platoon, and machine-gunners, and with about forty men then took up a position behind D Company, not so much to restore the front posts as to prevent anything more than a local penetration. This was quicker and simpler than getting a message to C Company which, further down the ridge, was already in a good position to stop a deep penetration.

It was getting dark and the battalion was due to withdraw in a short time. The company did, however, receive an addition to its strength for Private (Brownie) Tapuke, ²⁸ the battalion clerk, appeared at **Major Dyer's** elbow and said quietly: 'Just come down to be with the boys, sir.' Scouts went forward after the firing ceased and reported that the enemy had retired into the gorge again, whereupon the company arrangements went forward for the withdrawal.

It is clear from the Battle Report of *2 German Infantry Regiment* that the Maoris had wrought better than they knew:

At 1000 hrs 3 companies of II Battalion were sent up to relieve I Battalion with orders to press forward past Karia [Kariai] and capture Pt. 917 from the west. It was quite impossible to send A Tk guns, infantry guns, or indeed any kind of guns up this way as the route was too mountainous for any but foot troops, and it had not been thought necessary to equip a Pz division with mules. The force had reached a stream bed NW of the steep slope of Pt 917 with no sign of the enemy. Fire was then opened from the slopes of Pt 917 whereupon 7 and 9 Coys rushed across the stream and attacked on a wide front. 8 Coy was pinned down north of the stream by the fire. The attackers went forward with no interruption as far as the mountain track leading up to Pt 917. Here 7 Coy was held up owing to the impossibility of silencing enemy

MGs firing on its flank from the east. Here also the enemy was in fortified field positions with excellent camouflage, and fired only at close range at observed targets. Three officers of the battalion (including the commander and the adjutant) and several OR were wounded. Another attempt to send 7 Coy further out around the left flank failed as a number of new enemy MGs opened up and inflicted more casualties. The knocking out of several enemy MGs in the thrust through the first belt of wire had also failed to diminish the volume of fire. The acting battalion commander therefore decided to take advantage of the gathering dusk and pull back to the high ground opposite. This decision was strengthened by the failure of 8 Coy (further east) to make any headway against the MG and mortar fire.

(signed) KOELITZ

Colonel Dittmer's biggest difficulty was how to get the Skotina detachment out, for clearly it would not be able to use the road back to D Company, if indeed it was able to move at all. There was no means of communication except by runner and it was not known if the detachment had been involved in the fighting. RSM Wood, with Private Hoko ²⁹ as guide, was sent to Skotina with orders for the platoons to wait until it was quite dark and then strike straight upwards to the top of the ridge behind them and then by the most direct route to the pass road. All arms and ammunition were to be carried out.

The position on 5 Brigade's front was that 22 Battalion had successfully prevented enemy infiltration after the morning efforts to force a breakthrough and 23 Battalion had had much the same experience as the Maoris, with the enemy feeling for a flank. The 21st Battalion at Platamon was attacked frontally by tanks and outflanked by infantry and had retired to a new position in the Pinios Gorge. Australian troops were being hurried to its assistance to hold until all British forces had cleared Larisa.

The Maoris' difficulties in disengaging were increased by a strong wind and driving rain that began at dusk, so that the time allowed for

moving by night along the now slippery tracks proved insufficient. The order of march was the same as originally planned. C Company, with Battalion Headquarters and the attached machine-gunners, started off and, as soon as the starting point on the track was cleared, waited for the next company to join up. This procedure was repeated until all sub-units had gained touch.

There were several tracks over the ridge and down to the pass road, but knowing that the battalion was now well behind the brigade timetable **Colonel Dittmer** could not risk descending to the pass road until it had left the main gorge. Some sections of the road in the gorge were hewn out of the side of precipices and the engineers had set charges to blow the road completely away, and he knew that this should have already been done.

The battalion 'I' section had reconnoitred many tracks that led to the pass proper as well as further to the rear, and **Dittmer** chose one that he had been over himself and which came out fairly well to the rear. After following the ridge that ran almost parallel to the pass for roughly a mile, he switched to another track bearing south. There was some delay while the second track was picked up, for although the 'I' section had marked the junction with pieces of rag and papers they were hard to find in the dark.

There was still some sporadic fire across the Mavroneri Gorge when D Company prepared to withdraw. Word was passed from man to man, mostly in Maori, to close in on the right and the platoons gathered at Company Headquarters. With the driving rain and complete darkness this took some time, and when at 8 p.m. the company was due to withdraw **Lieutenant Logan** had not arrived with 17 Platoon. It was nearly half an hour later before he reported with the information that Corporal Wipiti's section was missing.

The platoon had concentrated around the reserve section and a runner was sent to inform Corporal Wipiti. He returned to say he had not been able to find them in the darkness but had called out and got a reply

and had delivered the message. ³⁰ After waiting some time without any appearance of the section, it was assumed that it had moved up a track that had led from behind the section through the reserve platoon area to Company Headquarters. It was not there and yells of 'E Wipiti! Haere mai!' were unanswered. It was almost an hour behind time when D Company, with Corporals Matthews ³¹ and Tainui in the rear, spraying the darkness with Bren bursts, climbed up the ridge in Indian file.

A Company's move out was unmolested, but on account of the darkness and rain and boggy track it was about midnight before the last of the men was through B Company's area, from where it will be remembered there was a track up to Battalion Headquarters. Captain Leaf was a tower of strength right through the night. He was a man of powerful physique and he heartened the men with jokes, helped those who slipped and fell to regain the track, and on occasion threatened dire punishment to any who showed signs of panic. **Major Bertrand** and Sergeant Vercoe checked the last of A Company through and then followed behind B Company.

Sometimes two abreast, but more often in single file, the Maoris, with all their arms, packs, and ammunition, marched across the mountainsides towards the pass road and safety. In the pitch blackness and driving rain they maintained touch by each holding the bayonet scabbard of the man in front, and when anyone slipped he had to feel with hand and foot to regain contact.

All but the last road block, a bridge over a watercourse, had been blown by 3 a.m., and that would have been attended to long since had **Brigadier Hargest** not driven up and told the engineer in charge to hang on in the hope that the battalion would yet emerge from the blackness of the hillside.

A quarter past three and no **Maori Battalion**. The bridge was to be destroyed by 3.30 at the latest and the engineers were on the point of lighting the fuse when they heard the sound of marching men. Maoris or Germans? Maoris!

To **Colonel Dittmer** at the head of his battalion the road was apparently deserted and the inference was that all the demolitions on it had been blown and the last of the brigade departed. Faced with the prospect of meeting enemy infantry on the road or of marching an unknown number of miles, he sent word back that those who felt they could not carry their packs much further were to dump them over the edge of a bank on the left of the track. Within a few hundred yards the Colonel met the engineers and was told that the transport was still waiting about a mile further back.

The trucks, insufficient to take the battalion in one load, relayed the troops to a position behind the alpine village of **Ay Dhimitrios** where a hot meal and cigarettes were waiting. Then, without respite or sleep, the men began to prepare a holding position. When the last of B Company arrived a check-up disclosed that Lieutenant Te Kuru and his men had come in but that the **Skotina** detachment was missing. In actual fact they were not far behind B Company and had had an even more gruelling experience. They had not been engaged while D Company was fighting, beyond receiving a few light mortar shells and exchanging a few shots at extreme range with the enemy scouts still watching from the opposite hillside. The RSM and scout sent to guide them out arrived safely and the two platoons were concentrated preparatory to the withdrawal.

The RSM wrote later:

The trip out was unmitigated Hell. Intensely dark, heavy rain and strong wind. Visibility absolutely nil. No stars for direction, compasses useless owing to windings of track. Grade was terrific, I should say 1 in 3 or 4. Speed was no more than 1 to 2 miles per hour due to the above mentioned facts, and the further one that tracks had to be actually felt by one's feet as to direction.

Half-way up the ridge a fork in the track raised the question as to which way to go. Eventually some went to the left, some to the right; but soon it was found that the left track was the wrong one for it was

taking them down to the river again. They halted with a cliff on one side and the gorge on the other and determined to climb straight upwards. Lieutenant Pene remembers the climb:

We climbed this precipice packs and all by grabbing and clutching at trees and branches and hauling ourselves up foot by foot.... I don't think any of us will ever forget this night as long as we live.

By good luck the parties met again and, with the exception of three or four who were sure their party was still on the wrong track and were not seen again, eventually made the pass road. Even they were not the last for odd men who had been missed or had lost contact kept coming down the road during the day. Battalion strength returns disclosed 4 killed and 18 missing. Corporal Taituha was included among the killed, but he recovered sufficiently to wander in the hills for a week and was finally taken prisoner in a village when seeking a doctor.

A temporary line to seal off the exit from the **Olympus Pass** had been established by 22 Battalion, and 23 Battalion was similarly placed across a possible outflanking route at **Kokkinoplos**. Two battalions of 16 Australian Brigade were hurrying to the support of 21 Battalion in denying the road from the **Pinios Gorge** to **Larisa** until daylight on the 19th, by which time the **Anzac Corps** should be clear of the gateway to the plains of **Thessaly**.

C Company had eaten breakfast and was in position on the left of 22 Battalion by the time B Company arrived in the concentration area. The men had scarcely finished eating when they were ordered to a position on a hill about two miles forward astride another possible German route to the rear of **Olympus Pass**. A Company remained at the 'Breakfast Area' while D Company withdrew further to the rear in reserve. B Company felt that it was rather hardly done by as it had been the last out of the pass and, more important, had had the shortest time at breakfast, and the men voiced their comments in no uncertain language. Captain Royal rebuked them by quoting some lines of the 'Charge of the Light Brigade', slightly amended. He told them: 'Yours is not to reason why but

to do or die.' It was sufficient; they took up their gear, fell in smartly, and marched off in the still pelting rain.

About midday orders came that 5 Brigade would move through **Larisa** to a position south of a pass at **Lamia**, about 80 direct miles south but considerably longer by the winding roads. The 28th Battalion was to leave two companies as local protection to a troop of 5 Field Regiment and to delay the enemy should he attempt to press the withdrawal. A and B Companies were detailed for the task; B Company was to join A Company at the 'Breakfast Area' and withdraw at 4 p.m. while A Company and the artillery would leave half an hour later, whereupon both companies would tie in with the brigade column at **Larisa**, with **Volos** as the destination.

Across plain and high country for 30 miles the road was packed with vehicles, but the rain had grounded the German planes for the time being and there was no interference from the air. In passing, it should be mentioned that the **Larisa** airfield had been bombed until the **RAF** squadrons had been compelled to withdraw, first to **Athens** and finally to **Crete** and the **Peloponnese**, giving the enemy almost undisputed control of the air.

It was while passing through the barricaded streets of **Larisa** that the Maoris saw what unopposed air power could do. The town, previously damaged by an earthquake, was in ruins, soldiers and civilians were lying side by side covered with sacks or blankets, and bullet-ridden trucks were heaped along the side of the road. Outside the town were numerous dead horses, cows and sheep, slaughtered while the owners were taking them into the hills.

From **Larisa** the withdrawal plans were based on two roads, the only two roads south. The Australians and 1 Armoured Brigade were to use the main road to **Lamia**, while the New Zealanders were to move by a secondary road to **Volos**, then along the coast via **Almiros** to **Lamia**.

The head of the 5 Brigade column found that the road to **Volos** was

under repair and there were hours of waiting; the vehicles would have been sitting shots for German planes if they could have got into the air. Retreats under pressure, especially at night, are not conducted with the precision of a military tattoo and there were orders and counter-orders that made the following twenty-four hours something of a nightmare, not only for the battalion commanders at the time but later for the historian.

To return to the rearguard. The artillery troop had opened up on enemy troops feeling forward along the road at **Ay Dhimitrios** when B Company began its timed withdrawal and marched back a mile or so to the waiting transport. A Company and the artillery troop joined them and, after several tangles with columns coming down from the **Servia Pass**, caught up with the rear of the battalion near **Larisa**.

Added to the confusion of re-routeing 5 Brigade was the fact that the original instructions to the RMT carrying 28 Battalion were to offload it short of **Volos** and return for other formations while the troops marched the rest of the way. These instructions were countermanded but did not reach every vehicle, and when the battalion eventually moved off, 10 Platoon of B Company and the whole of A Company were taken part way along the road, were offloaded, and marched to **Volos**, where we will leave them for the moment.

Colonel Dittmer at the head of the column did not know he had again lost part of his command. In any case he had other worries, for prior to leaving **Ay Dhimitrios** he had received verbal instructions that 5 Brigade was taking up a delaying position at **Almiros** to cover the withdrawal of 21 Battalion and the Australians from the Tempe Gorge. This instruction still stood, but his altered route had made it impossible to get to his destination in time.

The main road, packed with Australian convoys, was now doubly congested and there were more hours of waiting while traffic jams were untangled. During one of these halts new orders given by an insufficiently briefed staff officer were to branch off at **Pharsala**, where a

secondary road connected with **Almiros**. On arrival at **Pharsala** it was learnt that the road was out of order for a convoy and the battalion continued on to **Lamia**. From **Lamia** a road ran east and north along the coast direct to **Almiros** and the battalion carried on to its original destination. In one respect the Maoris were lucky, for soon after daylight they were on the secondary coast road and enemy planes with nothing to oppose them were bombing the main road without let or hindrance.

The day was advancing when the battalion reached some high country south of **Almiros**, and Dittmer considered his task could be fulfilled by taking up a position there and getting dug in before dark. However, before anything more than a reconnaissance had been made, instructions were received from **General Freyberg** to return to **Lamia**. The rearguard was no longer necessary.

While halting briefly in **Lamia** the Maoris found to their great surprise that the local fish shops displayed 'kinas' for sale. These prickly sea-eggs were smaller than the New Zealand variety, but the Maoris bought the lot and later despatched them with relish.

The last lap of the journey was through the **Thermopylae** Pass south of **Lamia**, to the coast at **Ayia Trias**, north-west of **Molos**, where the companies dispersed for the night. In the morning the battalion was spread along a four-mile line from **Ayia Trias** across marshy plains to the **Molos** road, then west across the foothills south of the **Thermopylae** road. The troops dug themselves in and the missing platoons arrived in trucks that had been sent for them.

The troops were spurred to dig by the knowledge that the rest of the Division was retiring under pressure towards the **Thermopylae** line being prepared by 5 Brigade. Further west, the Australians were doing the same thing on the **Brallos Pass**. Once again it was a position with only two passes across a tank-proof range, but with the inestimable advantage of being a very much shorter line.

The enemy air force, possibly too occupied in harrying the roads

further north, did not molest the troops during the day. It was different the next day. Sixth Brigade had won through and was dispersed behind 5 Brigade; it now faced east along the beaches on guard against a possible sea landing from the island of Euboea. Fourth Brigade was further in the rear. Australian units, part of Divisional Cavalry, and 7 Anti-Tank Regiment were fighting a delaying action at **Dhomokos**. The planes were now free to attend to the troops digging in and proceeded to do so. From dawn to dusk the sky was seldom clear of aircraft bombing and shooting up the roads. There was no **RAF** to interfere, and it was the luck of the **Maori Battalion** to survive the day without casualties.

As a matter of record, what planes the **RAF** had still in action were fighting against odds in the air and were being shot up on the ground near **Athens**. All the troops knew was that the enemy was in undisputed possession of the skies above them.

They were, however, much cheered by the persistent rumour that Winston Churchill had stated on the **BBC** that 500 bombers were on their way from England, and at last light there appeared some evidence that the **RAF** could still hit back. Twenty enemy bombers, flying serenely past, broke formation and scattered. Then one, leaving a curving trail of smoke, fell into the sea and burst into flames. The troops lying hidden in the long marshy grass cheered the lone Hurricane that dived out of a cloud before vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. It was the last friendly plane the Maoris saw in **Greece**.

At Olympus the battalion had had to move as soon as it had completed its defences and it was the same at **Thermopylae**, for just as it was adding the final touches orders came to move. Sixth Brigade was coming into the line and 5 Brigade was to move over to its left. The move was partly by march and partly by transport, and by daylight on the 21st the Maoris were in position near the warm sulphur creek that gave the locality its name. On their left 23 Battalion was to link up with the Australians and 6 Brigade was on the other flank. The Maoris were thus in the same area as Leonides and his army had been when he held the pass in 480 BC against Xerxes and his Persians, until a fifth

columnist led the enemy by night over the heights by such a track as the Maoris knew on **Olympus**. In those far-off days the narrowest part of the pass was only 165 feet wide between the precipice and the sea, but earthquakes and deposits from the overflowing Sperkhios River had since then created the marshy plain wherein the troops had hidden for the previous two days. It is now crossed by a road and a railway line.

The battalion was tactically disposed with D Company right, B centre, C left, and A in reserve. B Company found itself digging in near warm springs and named the place **Rotorua** after its home town. To make it even more homelike there was a sanatorium with bath-houses and all the amenities that go with such an establishment. Unfortunately, the buildings were outside the defensive position, but many movable articles such as bedding went to make the lot of the soldier in the line as comfortable as possible.

The Maoris' task was urgent enough in all conscience with the weight of the victorious German Army bearing down on them, but not sufficiently urgent to prevent a hasty dip in a creek that reminded them so much of home.

Enemy transport could be seen near **Lamia** and a company of 18 Battalion was sent to help the Maoris prepare for their reception, but the night passed quietly. There was an artillery duel throughout the morning and reconnaissance planes tried to spot the guns, which ceased fire while they were overhead. Occasional shells fell in the battalion area but there was only one Maori casualty—the last in **Greece**. Staff-Sergeant Warihi ³² was wounded when the transport was dive-bombed.

In **Athens** momentous decisions had been made. On 22 April **Colonel Dittmer** returned from a brigade conference and called his commanders together; he told them that the Greek armies in the north, armies that had successfully fought the Italians in **Albania**, had capitulated to the Germans, and British troops were going to evacuate the country—if they could. Fifth Brigade would leave the line that night on the first stage of its journey to the embarkation port. All moves were to be made by night

and the troops would hide up during the day. Each man would carry his personal gear, equipment, and weapons, with 100 rounds per rifle and twelve magazines per Bren. Anything else was to be destroyed by any means other than fire or explosives. In the Maori view it was not much of a way to run a war by sneaking off in the night and being chased from one end of **Greece** to the other. As for carrying their personal gear, it was mostly lying in the **Olympus Pass**. They regained a little of their good humour by painting on ration boxes and the like exceedingly rude messages to **Hitler**.

The battalion was about to move out at dusk towards the road leading to the transport rendezvous when a group of planes made a most determined attack on the road. The attack continued for twenty minutes, but the sole result was that the battalion was delayed by that amount of time.

The column, less the carrier platoon which, with the carriers of 22 Battalion, was detailed to join the Divisional Cavalry and other units as a rearguard for **Anzac Corps**, did a slow 17 miles on account of congestion to the Konstandinos area, where it halted and dispersed. At first light it was found that Captain Scott, his headquarters, 13 Platoon, and some men of 15 Platoon on 13 Platoon's truck were missing. The instructions were to follow the truck in front, and the truck in front of Captain Scott kept travelling all night. When daybreak disclosed the position Scott decided to hide under the first cover available. It was a lucky decision, for hardly had the transport been parked under a clump of trees when a group of enemy planes came roaring down the road looking for targets. We will leave them there for the time being.

Fifth Brigade was dispersed and the vehicles camouflaged before dawn. The Maoris were bivouacked under olive trees near the village of **Ay Konstandinos** by the sea, and though planes were overhead most of the day the troops were not molested. The villagers had fled to the hills and the troops, with time on their hands, not unnaturally got into mischief. They found a distillery where quantities of what appeared to be

a white wine, but which was in reality immature cognac, were maturing. It soon became necessary for **Colonel Dittmer** to issue instructions for the destruction of any of this spirit found in the possession of the troops and to warn them of the consequences if any more of it was sampled. A patrol was given the thankless task of destroying any casks still intact, and the CO, who never did things by halves, made a personal inspection. He found one of his Headquarters staff weaving an unsteady path, and instantly commanded the destruction of a bottle hidden under one arm but was silent about a turkey struggling under the other. For once evasive tactics were adopted by the Maori officers and the CO never knew the havoc wrought by the over-potent brew. It is said that one truck spluttered happily along on the contents of a petrol tin that had had its proper spirit emptied and had been refilled with cognac. The locality was afterwards known in the battalion as Koniac Bay.

Early in the morning (23 April) **Major Bertrand** and Captain Werohia left the unit to report at **Athens**, where they were detailed to join the embarkation staff being organised to supervise the evacuation. En route they met Captain Scott, still wondering where he was and where was the rest of the battalion. **Major Bertrand** was able to advise him that he was on the main road to **Athens** and that the battalion would probably be passing during the night, whereupon Scott decided to remain under cover until the battalion passed and then rejoin the column. This was successfully accomplished in due course.

As soon as darkness fell the battalion, still without its carrier platoon, joined the convoy of 5 Brigade, **Divisional Headquarters**, engineers and field ambulances, and the drive of almost 150 miles commenced at 9 p.m. It was to be a non-stop journey along a narrow, winding road, and it had to be completed before dawn disclosed their whereabouts. Instructions were emphatic—nothing was to be allowed to interfere with progress. As the enemy had not employed his aircraft to any extent in the forward areas at night, most of the journey, except at such well-marked places as **Thebes** and **Athens**, was done at a good speed with headlights dimmed.

Seen from a rise in the road, the column looked like an endless glow-worm. Some trucks broke down but the unit was fortunate in having six spare trucks under command of the RSM for such a contingency; the halted vehicles were wrecked as much as possible in the time available and, in the hilly country, pushed over the side of the road into ravines while the troops climbed into the spare vehicles. Gaps caused by these delays were made good by an increase in speed, which in turn caused some concertina-ing at the rear of the column. It was in one of these periods that the trucks carrying the mortar platoon turned off the main road and failed to rejoin the unit.

In the grey, bleak dawn of 24 April the Maoris passed through the outskirts of **Athens**—an **Athens** waiting to be occupied by the victorious Germans. Because of a curfew the windows were shuttered and the streets empty, a different reception from the joyous clamour when the battalion had marched from **Piraeus** a few short weeks earlier. Another 15 miles north-east brought the troops to the shelter of a pine forest near **Marathon**—a well-named destination. Nobody was more pleased to be there than the drivers, whose skill, power of concentration, and endurance had brought 5 Brigade a little closer to safety.

Many beaches were to be used for embarkation, but the only one that concerns the **Maori Battalion** was near the fishing village of **Porto Rafti**, where **Major Bertrand** was in command. Bombers, twenty at a time, were searching for the troops but found no targets, and while the rest of the Division fought off planes, tanks, infantry, artillery, and the newest German arm—paratroopers—the Maoris occupied themselves with a soldier's occupations when not fighting—eating and sleeping. ³³

Orders were received in the afternoon for the final move to the beaches and the systematic destruction of vehicles began. Only sufficient for the last short run to the beach were kept and the rest rendered useless by draining the crankcases and running the engines until they seized. It was a heart-rending task for the drivers, for few of the trucks had run more than 2000 miles. The work of destruction was

completed by slashing the tyres and smashing what could be smashed with a hammer or screw-wrench.

Neither the carrier platoon, which had left the battalion at **Thermopylae**, nor the mortar platoon that had gone astray during the night had rejoined the unit, and no information could be obtained regarding their whereabouts.

The final move commenced at 9 p.m., when the troops were debussed and led down to the beach in groups as called for. The transports, on account of the depth of water, were a mile off shore, and besides the ships' boats the embarkation staff had hired two caiques that could shift eighty at a trip, and there was also an MLC that could take 500 at a load.

The operation went smoothly, but when the transports were due to depart at 3 a.m. there were still five hundred, mainly Field Ambulance and Headquarters Company 28 Battalion men, who could not be taken. They were loaded on the MLC and taken to an island about five miles away, where they and their craft hid up. The battalion was taken to the **Glengyle**, where the men were warmly welcomed by the crew with hot cocoa. They bedded down wherever space could be found and left the rest to the Navy. If they thought of anything it was summed up in the proverb:

He toa taua, he toa pahekeheke,
He toa mahi kai, he toa pumau. ³⁴

And perhaps some of them remembered those green lizards on **Mount Olympus**.

At this point it is necessary to forestall events by a few days and relate the adventures of the various parties of 28 Battalion that did not embark with the main body.

Captain Love and about forty men of Headquarters Company remained on the island until brought back two nights later and safely

embarked.

WO I Wood, bringing up the rear of the column with breakdown trucks, soon filled them and lost time repairing others to keep the stranded troops moving. When his party eventually arrived in **Athens** security was so tight that he could not find the battalion and was directed to the Reinforcement Camp at **Voula**. It was not until the following day that he was told that **Porto Rafti** was the embarkation beach for 5 Brigade, and on arrival found that the battalion had gone the previous night. He and his party, including **RQMS Burke**,³⁵ who had also missed embarkation, reported to an Australian officer who said he was in charge of the zone, and who 'put us to work by day and assisting embarkation by night. During the day we demolished trucks—set them going, put sand in the oil intake, drained the radiators and revved them up with a stone on the accelerators until they seized. Picks were then put through engine blocks, radiators, petrol tanks and so on.' This party also was safely embarked and joined the battalion in due course.

Lieutenant G. Bennett and the carrier platoon were detached from the rearguard and sent to the **Corinth Canal** to provide local protection in company with C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry and other units. They were overwhelmed by paratroops and forced to disperse. Only a handful escaped to **Crete** or Egypt.

Lieutenant Rangi and the mortar platoon, after losing the battalion, joined a column being embarked on the *Hellas* in **Piraeus**. The *Hellas* was disabled by a bombing raid and the mortar platoon, some of whom had to swim for it, joined the Reinforcement Company at **Voula**. The Reinforcement Company, with string tied on its puggarees to distinguish the men from footloose refugees, was ordered to **Navplion** for embarkation and reached the port safely, only to find the transport it was to board lying burning in the harbour. The column, of which the company was a part, ultimately reached **Kalamata** on the 27–28 April and the Maoris took shelter in a Greek church. That night, as the thousands of New Zealanders, Australians, British, Greek, Cypriot and Palestinian troops were assembling, the advanced guard of a German

force that had crossed the **Corinth Canal** drove straight through the town to the waterfront. Fighting commenced as odd parties led by British and New Zealand officers cleared the town and captured about one hundred Germans. Besides the organised fighting, odd groups joined in on their own account and Sergeant Horopapera ³⁶ was wounded in the party led by Sergeant Hinton, ³⁷ who was later awarded the VC for his exploits that night.

Other Maoris who fought with distinction in the short and confused mêlée at **Kalamata** and who were mentioned in reports by either Major MacDuff, ³⁸ OC Reinforcement Camp, or Brigadier Parrington, who commanded at **Kalamata**, were Privates Mehana ³⁹ and Popota. ⁴⁴ Unfortunately, there were no particulars in the reports nor has it been possible to obtain any.

Kalamata was in our hands, but only one destroyer came into the harbour. A few hundred men, mostly wounded, were evacuated, and next morning the force was surrendered to the Germans. Lieutenant Herewini ⁴¹ describes the last hours of the Reinforcement Company:

We remained on the beach where we could see one of the destroyers quite plainly. Embarkation commenced but was restricted to about 600 sick and wounded. 2 Lt Hokianga ⁴² I understand was given then an opportunity of boarding the last boat but he sent one of his own platoon boys in his place. The latter was apparently a bundle of nerves. Later that night word came down the column that all ranks were to surrender. We all experienced a rather sinking feeling. We thought of escaping to the hills but after a brief conference decided to remain and face the music with our troops. Of the officers, there were Henry K. Ngata, George R. Bennett, Henry Hokianga, Tenga Rangi, Jim Wiremu and myself. Our decision to stay was made in view of the fact that we were uncertain of the fate of the boys were they left to their own devices with the Germans. The NCO's and other ranks were told they could make for the hills if they liked but nearly all chose to stay with us. Standard of morale and discipline was high right up to the time the destroyer

departed without us, then for a little while there was a slight wavering but very soon morale was high again as we all adopted the attitude 'To Hell with the Jerries anyhow.'

At 0530 hrs we became prisoners of war and were herded together like a lot of cattle—it was a pathetic sight. Officers and men felt closer together however and we all felt we were one big family together with our NZ pakeha friends. It wasn't long before **Kalamata** became known as 'Calamity Bay'.

Lieutenant McKay ⁴³ and a party of unknown strength was detailed in the confused hours before the evacuation of **Voula** to some duty that eventually ended on Crete, but with McKay mortally wounded in action at **Maleme** further particulars have not been obtainable.

In all, approximately forty Maoris were evacuated to Egypt by various chances—some strays joined Australian or British convoys going direct and some went with 6 New Zealand Brigade.

Maori Battalion casualties in Greece were:

Killed in action or died of wounds	10
Wounded	6
Prisoners of war	83
Wounded and p.w.	11
TOTAL 110	

¹We will fight on for ever and ever.

² **Maj P. A. M. Brant**, m.i.d.; **Malaya**; born **Durban**, South Africa, 3 Jul 1907; Regular soldier; wounded 20 May 1941; Captain, 1 Bn Fiji Inf Regt, **Malaya**.

³ **Capt T. Rangi**; born Ohinemutu, 27 Nov 1911; labourer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴ **Capt L. J. Bell**; born Skippers, 27 Jun 1905; grocer's assistant; killed in action 22 May 1941.

- ⁵ **Capt H. W. Leaf, MC; born Whirinaki, 16 Oct 1890; Supervisor, Native Dept, Inspector of Health (Native); Lt, Maori Pioneer Bn, 1914–19 (MC); killed in action 22 May 1941.**
- ⁶ **Capt H. Wiremu; born Kaitaia, 25 Jul 1912; nurseryman; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.**
- ⁷ **Capt D. Urlich; Kaitaia; born NZ 7 Oct 1914; storekeeper and truck contractor; wounded 27 Nov 1941.**
- ⁸ **Maj W. Porter, MC and bar; Kaeo; born Taumarere, 23 Aug 1915; taxi driver; twice wounded.**
- ⁹ **Lt H. O. Stewart; born Gisborne, 15 Oct 1907; killed in action 27 May 1941.**
- ¹⁰ **Maj A. G. Ormond; Wairoa; born NZ 23 Jan 1904; farmer; wounded May 1941.**
- ¹¹ **Cpl L. M. Wipiti; born New Plymouth, 16 Dec 1913; storeman; p.w. Apr 1941; died New Plymouth, 14 Jul 1947.**
- ¹² **Lt J. T. Gilroy; born NZ 8 Mar 1905; clerk.**
- ¹³ **Sgt W. R. Hare; born Kaikohe, 25 Nov 1902; engine driver, NZ Railways; died of wounds 26 Apr 1941.**
- ¹⁴ **Pte V. G. Te H. Ellison; born Dunedin, 19 May 1918; student; wounded 15 Apr 1941.**
- ¹⁵ **S-Sgt H. Y. T. Samuel; Awanui; born NZ 6 Feb 1904; motor driver.**
- ¹⁶ **Lt G. Katene, MM; born Porirua, 27 Sep 1915; labourer; wounded 27 May 1941; killed in action 7 Dec 1943.**
- ¹⁷ **Capt H. Te O. Reedy; born Whareponga, 16 Aug 1903; sheep-farmer; p.w. May 1941.**
- ¹⁸ **Lt G. A. Te Kuru; born NZ 22 Sep 1908; civil servant; killed in action**

21 May 1941.

¹⁹ Sgt J. Tainui, MM; born NZ 13 Oct 1917; labourer; killed in action 15 Dec 1941.

²⁰Actually 7, 8, and 9 Companies of 2 Infantry Regiment, 2 Panzer Division.

²¹Not traced.

²² Pte G. Martin; born Dannevirke, 14 Mar 1915; farmhand; killed in action 23 May 1941.

²³ Cpl H. P. Taituha; born NZ 4 Jan 1907; Native Land Dept; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; repatriated 5 Nov 1943.

²⁴ Sgt G. R. Harrison, m.i.d.; born Opunake, 23 Jul 1907; auditor; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

²⁵ Pte M. Ropata; born Wairoa, 28 Mar 1918; labourer; killed in action 17 Apr 1941.

²⁶Pte R. T. Fowler; born NZ 24 Jun 1918; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

²⁷ Maj H. P. Te Punga, m.i.d.; born Lower Hutt, 27 May 1916; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

²⁸ L-Cpl B. Tapuke; born NZ 25 Mar 1917; labourer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

²⁹ Pte W. Hoko; born Rotorua, 4 Dec 1916; labourer.

³⁰After repatriation it was found that Corporal Wipiti had faithfully obeyed his orders. He had been told to stay until he got word to move and had not heard the verbal messages. In the morning he found the battalion gone. The section was captured a week later while trying to rejoin the unit.

³¹ Cpl G. Matthews, MM; born Puketeraki, 1 Mar 1905; carpenter; killed

in action 23 Nov 1941.

³² **S-Sgt J. Warihi**; born NZ 16 Mar 1905; forestry worker; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941.

³³ German paratroops landed at the **Corinth Canal** at dawn on 26 April.

³⁴ Slippery are the pathways of fighting men,
Firm are those of the tillers of the soil.

³⁵ **WO II G. L. Burke**; born **Christchurch**, 3 May 1911; Regular soldier; died of wounds 23 May 1941.

³⁶ **Sgt T. Horopapera**; born **Rotorua**, 19 Nov 1906; labourer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated 5 Nov 1943.

³⁷ **Sgt J. D. Hinton**, VC, m.i.d.; Cobden, **Greymouth**; born **Riverton**, 17 Sep 1909; driver; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

³⁸ **Maj A. P. MacDuff**, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born NZ 29 Aug 1906; commercial traveller; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

³⁹ **Pte T. R. Mehana**; **Auckland**; born Ahipara, 10 Nov 1906; farmer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴⁰ **Pte P. P. Popota**; born Pamapurua, 7 Mar 1919; labourer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴¹ **Capt W. Herewini**; **Wellington**; born NZ 14 Nov 1914; clerk; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴² **Capt H. Hokianga**; **Porangahau**; born Hastings, 3 Aug 1911; farm labourer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴³ **Lt W. H. McKay**; born NZ 5 Apr 1907; journalist; died of wounds while p.w. 30 Aug 1941.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 5 – CRETE

CHAPTER 5

Crete

DAWN disclosed the decks of the *Glengyle* covered with khaki forms and out of sight of land, though not beyond the range of enemy aircraft. The weight and accuracy of the ship's anti-aircraft armament so embarrassed the German pilots who were soon overhead that no material harm was done to the convoy. In spite of the matter-of-fact attitude of the sailors operating the multi-barrelled, quick-firing 'Chicago Pianos' and the appearance of miraculously produced meals, the troops were very pleased indeed when they were beyond the range of the German fighters and under the protection of the **RAF** now based on Crete.

Where the British planes came from and where the *Glengyle* was going to was not as important to the Maoris as the fact that **Greece** was somewhere behind the horizon. By mid-morning hills, unsubstantial in the distance, began to take shape and substance. Soon everybody knew that they were nearing the island of **Crete** and, later, that they were to land there while the *Glengyle* went back for another load.

Early afternoon and the *Glengyle* was in harbour—a small harbour, but at that moment a busy one and, judging by the sight of the cruiser *York* sitting on the bottom in the bay with her front turret awash, not very safe. It was, in fact, the main harbour for the forces in **Crete**, although its single quay could accommodate only two ships at a time. **Suda Bay** was crammed with shipping, dotted with Sunderland flying boats, and alive with small craft dashing from ship to shore.

The troops, still in possession of the majority of the battalion's weapons, were loaded into ferries and directed by the landing authorities, plainly embarrassed by the multitudes, to a road that led to **Canea**, the capital, some three miles west.

The 28th (Maori) Battalion, marching along a hot and dusty road, was halted at a refreshment point near **Canea** where hot tea, cigarettes, an orange, and some chocolate were handed to each man by troops of

the **Welch Regiment**. Every man was very grateful to the **Welch Regiment**, not only for the refreshments its men were issuing but for the sense of stability and the sight of disciplined organisation it provided.

Another hour or so on the road and the visitors were directed to an open field with scattered olive trees, a part of the **Perivolia** plantation near the village of that name; rations appeared but no blankets and the Maoris spent a chilly night under the bright Cretan stars. In the morning (26th) the battalion shifted to another bivouac in the same plantation; it should have gone there in the first place but had been misdirected.

The next day it moved again—somebody had to defend **Crete** until reinforcements could be brought from wherever they were coming to replace the New Zealanders, who would embark on the empty transports. In the meantime, 5 Brigade was to protect the **Maleme** airfield in western **Crete** and also take care of the beaches as far as the **Platanias** River, about five and a half miles to the east of the airfield. The 28th Battalion as brigade reserve moved inland near **Aghya** village, south-east of **Platanias**, where a front of two miles facing south-west was allotted to it with instructions first to get comfortable and then to take up a defensive position. There was a belt of hills between the battalion and the coast and the company areas were situated on the southern spurs of the ridge. **Canea** was approximately nine miles away and the cafés beckoned to the more adventurous; others roamed the area and ate oranges, the biggest and sweetest the Maoris had ever seen. The fruit was cheap and plentiful, and through strict orders were issued that nothing was to be taken without payment the men would have been more than human if the edict had been strictly obeyed. Rations were restricted; was there not a proverb—Ka ki te puku, ka manawanui? ¹

After a few days spent in relaxation and settling in, **Colonel Dittmer** passed on very explicit instructions to his company commanders. These instructions included notice that platoon parades were to be held at intervals, stand-to morning and evening, and sentries posted by day and night.

The posting of sentries added complications not always the fault of leave parties returning from adjacent villages. There was, for instance, the night when the password was 'St. George' and the countersign 'For England'. A sentry whose biblical knowledge was better than his mythology forgot the password and held up a party because they had no answer to his challenge of 'St. John'. After some argument they were permitted to pass with the admonition that the countersign was 'The Baptist' and that they had better be more careful next time because some Maori sentries were quick on the trigger.

Minor changes in the battalion dispositions were made to conform to the pattern of the defence that was emerging as more New Zealand troops became available.

By this time **Captain Love** and his party had reported in as well as **Major Bertrand**, RSM Wood, **WO II Burke**, and, most unexpectedly, Captain F. Baker, who had a very exciting time which included being captured by the enemy and getting away again. He had been detailed to Megara Beach on an evacuation job similar to that of **Major Bertrand** and consequently knew nothing of the Reinforcement Company or its fate. After the **Megara** embarkations had been completed the beach staff was to have moved across the **Corinth Canal** to another embarkation point, but paratroops had already seized the **Corinth** bridge. The result was that the truck carrying Lieutenant-Colonel Marnham, RA, and Captain Baker was halted by a German patrol and the pair were constrained to join a convoy already in enemy hands. Soon after the column moved off the pair escaped by turning up a side road and disappearing smartly into an olive grove. After a series of adventures, which included finding a seaplane which he couldn't fly, a speed launch which he couldn't start, and a horse which he couldn't catch, Captain Baker eventually got a lift in a Greek truck and finished up at **Porto Rafti** as a liaison officer on the staff of 4 Infantry Brigade and thence to Crete.

He was posted as second-in-command to **Major Dyer** (D Company)

and Lieutenant Te Kuru took command of 18 Platoon vice Second-Lieutenant Gilroy, still thought to be missing but, through a set of fortuitous circumstances, actually in Egypt.

On the last day of April **General Freyberg** was given command of the forces in **Crete** and instructed that retention of the island was essential for the successful operation of the Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean. There was no likelihood of ground reinforcement and no further air support, although the Navy would do everything possible. He had approximately a fortnight to prepare and could then expect an invasion by airborne troops, plus a possible seaborne attack; conversely, he might be left alone and the enemy attack; conversely, he might be left alone and the enemy attack delivered against **Syria** or **Cyprus**.

The problem was how to hold a mountainous island 150 miles long and 40 wide at its greatest width, whose topography favoured the attack inasmuch as the few inadequate harbours, roads, and airfields were all on the north or enemy side.

General Freyberg had at his disposal 30,000 Imperial and 12,000 Greek troops, but a considerable portion of the former consisted of specialists such as gunners without their guns, cavalry minus vehicles, engineers lacking equipment, and line-of-communication troops, many unarmed. They certainly could not be called infantrymen, the role in which they were now required to function, but though some were sent away to Egypt before action started, many of the others did extraordinarily well as amateur infantry. The Greeks were newly conscripted, untrained, and practically unarmed except for rifles of differing makes and varying antiquity; nevertheless they fought creditably when the time came.

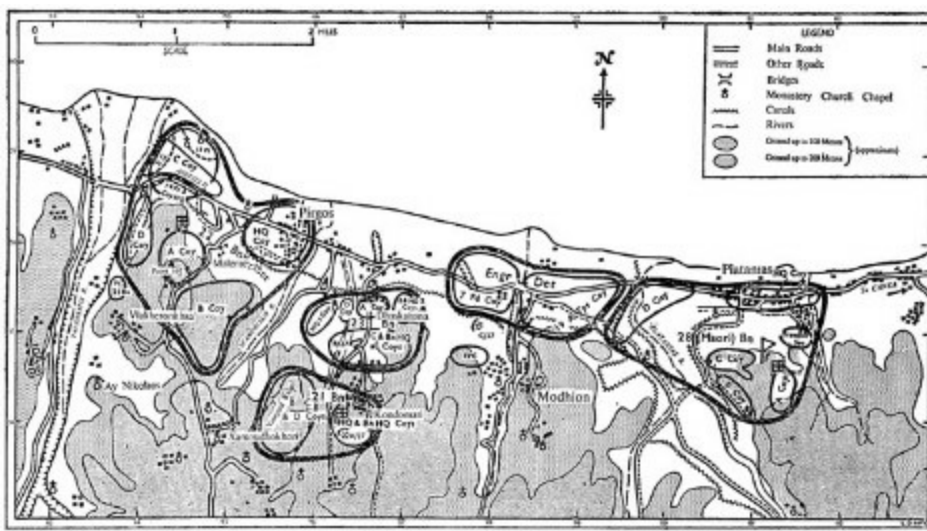
Brigadier Puttick, ² now commanding the New Zealand Division, was given the task of defending **Maleme** airfield and the western end of Crete. He had the seven infantry battalions of 4 and 5 Brigades (6 Brigade had gone direct to Egypt) and a third brigade, the 10th, made up of a composite battalion of Divisional Cavalry, gunners—'infantry'

they called themselves—and ASC, 20 Battalion, detached from 4 Brigade, and two Greek regiments.

Final locations were decided upon as follows: 10 Brigade in the **Galatas** area, 5 Brigade between **Platanias** and **Maleme**, and two Greek battalions west of **Maleme**. Fourth Brigade was in Force Reserve, deployed between **Galatas** and **Canea**.

The vital area in 5 Brigade's sector was the **Maleme** airfield with, secondarily, the beaches from **Maleme** to **Platanias** if the enemy elected to come by sea. There was the Navy to make the second method a hazardous venture but very few planes to oppose an aerial attack. The RAF and Fleet Air Arm made a gallant effort to protect what they could of **Crete** until only one Hurricane was left. It was ordered back to Egypt.

The Maoris moved over to **Platanias** in the evening of 3 May, when the brigade dispositions were, facing the sea: 28 (Maori) Battalion on the right flank in and west of **Platanias** village; two detachments of engineers from 19 Army Troops Company and 7 Field Company in front of **Modhion** village; 23 Battalion around **Dhaskaliana**, with 21 Battalion (less than half strength after **Greece**) on high country to its south and facing west; 22 Battalion around the airfield, with its western flank on the wide and pebbly bed of the Tavronitis River. In addition, some miles to the west at **Kastelli** two Greek battalions were being organised and trained by a small group of New Zealand instructors. Finally, round **Maleme** airfield were fourteen coast and antiaircraft guns manned by Royal Artillery, Royal Australian Artillery, and **Royal Marines**, but not under the control of **Brigadier Hargest**, who was responsible for the defence of the area.



FIFTH BRIGADE, MALEME, 20 MAY 1941

Fifth Brigade, Maleme, 20 May 1941



Crete

The road from **Platanias** to **Maleme** ran parallel with and about half a mile inland from the sea. Hamlets were scattered over the area and there were vineyards and olive groves and small cultivated fields criss-crossed by canals and irrigation ditches. Steep-sided riverbeds, dry for the greater part of summer, ran down from the hilly country only a mile inland.

The **Platanias** River, which was never dry, had its source high up in the **White Mountains**. The river itself was about a chain wide and varied in depth from a few inches to waist deep, while its valley was half a mile wide at the coastal strip. There were roads on each side of the river that

deteriorated as they led back into the hills and into the **Aghya** valley.

Headquarters Company (Captain Love) was placed along the road and beach covering **Platanias** village, which was three quarters of a mile east of the river; D Company (**Major Dyer**) was further west holding an extensive area which included the mouth of the **Platanias** River and the road bridge. South of these two companies the country rose rapidly and was studded with 600-foot-high peaks. Battalion Headquarters was placed in a gully on the northern slopes of one of these features. C Company (Captain Scott) was north-west of Headquarters and in rear of the two forward companies; B Company (Captain Royal) was on a ridge to the west of Battalion Headquarters overlooking the **Platanias** River, while A Company (Captain Bell) was on the other flank, mainly facing east, but it could also operate to the south—that is, to the rear of Battalion Headquarters and towards the left of B Company.

On the western side of the river were the two detachments of engineers facing the sea, with an irrigation canal running through their lines and **Modhion** village behind them. Due south of the right flank of 7 Field Company and situated on a rise above the canal was C Troop 5 Field Regiment (Captain Snadden), ³ and just south again was 5 Brigade Field Punishment Centre (Lieutenant Roach). ⁴ The former was in a position to cover the beach to its front and to the west of 28 Battalion, while the guards and prisoners of the latter commanded the left rear of the battalion area.

In **Major Dyer's** sector, where most of the early fighting took place, the ground was flat to undulating with scattered clumps of bamboo and odd poplar trees in addition to the inevitable grape-vines, olives, and patches of crops. The area was also traversed by the river and by a bamboo-lined millrace which carried water to a story-and-a-half-high mill near the river bridge.

No. 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Te Kuru) was the link between D and Headquarters Companies; 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Ormond) covered the road bridge over the river and the flat between the engineers and the

road; 17 Platoon (**Lieutenant Logan**) was on higher ground between and behind the forward platoons. The key to D Company's western front was a small plateau actually on the extreme right of the Engineers' (19 Army Troops Company) position. Fire could enfilade the whole front from there, and part of a section commanded by Sergeant George Te Hou ⁵ with two Brens was dug in on its northern edge.

Brigade Headquarters called for a return showing the numbers of tools, automatics, and other equipment in the possession of the battalions. It was the first return that had been requested since **Olympus** and the **Maori Battalion** unsuspectingly disclosed untold wealth to a Brigadier almost bereft of military necessities. In spite of orders to dump everything except arms at **Porto Rafti**, and to leave their automatics on the quay at **Suda Bay**, the Maoris' return showed four wireless sets, twentyeight Bren guns, a three-inch mortar, and a goodly selection of picks and shovels. It was a bitter battalion that saw its wireless sets taken by Brigade, nine Bren guns distributed to other units, and most of its tools to the same destinations. The three-inch mortar, which had been picked up by B Company on the **Olympus Pass** road and had been smuggled on to the **Glengyle** and finally to **Platanias**, was left with the unit.

With the prospect of action in the near future, Headquarters Company was reorganised as a rifle company with three rifle platoons commanded by Lieutenants W. Ngata, ⁶ **D. Urlich**, and F. T. Bennett respectively. The signal platoon retained its identity and another mortar platoon, commanded by Lieutenant McKay, was formed and armed with three 3-inch mortars.

The battalion's officers at this date were:

CO: **Lt-Col Dittmer**

2 i/c: **Maj Bertrand**

Adjutant: **Capt Te Punga**

IO: Lt C. M. Bennett

MO: Capt Mules

QM: Capt Weir

Chaplain: Rev K. Harawira

HQ Company

OC: Capt E. Te W. Love

Signals: Lt H. M. McDonald

Mortars: Lt W. H. McKay

Lt D. Urlich

Lt W. T. Ngata

Lt F. T. Bennett

A Company

OC: Capt L. J. Bell

Capt H. W. Leaf

Lt W. Porter

Lt A. Te Puni

B Company

OC: Capt R. Royal

Lt H. R. Vercoe

2 Lt R. Pene

Lt H. O. Stewart

C Company

OC: Capt A. T. McL. Scott

Capt P. Tureia

Lt H. Te O. Reedy

2 Lt J. Tuhiwai

Lt K. A. Keiha

D Company

OC: Maj H. G. Dyer

Capt F. Baker

Lt A. G. Ormond

2 Lt F. R. Logan

Lt G. A. Te Kuru

Two days after the move to **Platanias**, on the afternoon of 5 May, a truck drew up at Battalion Headquarters and deposited a pair of Maoris grinning through a week's growth of whiskers. They were greeted with yells of amazement for it was thought that they were behind the wires of a German prison cage. **Corporal Hayward**⁷ and Lance-Corporal Hakaraia⁸ brought the first news of the fate of the carrier platoon.

While the battalion was sheltering at **Marathon** the carrier platoon had spent the daylight hours hidden in olive groves at **Cape Knimis** and passed the time shooting at every plane that came within range. It was good clean fun and, though nothing was brought down, it was not from want of trying. After the **Glengyle** sailed the platoon was sent back behind 4 Brigade and some time during the night of 25–26 April was again diverted, this time in company with C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, to a new job on the **Corinth Canal** as local protection to anti-

aircraft guns in that locality.

Soon after daylight on the 26th it was in hull-down positions overlooking the canal near **Corinth**. Most of the crews were enjoying a much-needed rest after the all-night drive when a yell, 'They're coming down in parachutes!' sent the carriers into action. In **Corporal Hayward's** words: 'By this time the parachutists were coming down in dozens and gradually encircling us. At the same time we were being continually and systematically strafed with a string of ME 110's laying down a curtain of fire across the only gap that still remained as a possible escape route towards the hills.'

The sight of the Divisional Cavalry armoured cars already half-way to the hills decided **Hayward** to make a break through the gap while there was still time. There or four other carriers followed and, after charging through vineyards and over stone walls, got safely away. By this time two carriers had lost their tracks and it was decided to push the others over a cliff and march to an embarkation beach.

The party met a group of dismounted Divisional Cavalry men who had a map and a compass and a course was set for **Navplion**, in the Gulf of **Argos**, some 35 miles distant. They were there by dark and joined the tail of the column being taken aboard destroyers—and missed embarkation by a hundred yards of column. There was to be another embarkation the following night at T Beach, 15 miles down the coast, and the Maoris, now about a dozen, set off again. They waited all night but no ships came for the 1500 or so men waiting under the olive trees. By this time the Maoris had met Major Harford ⁹ of the Divisional Cavalry, who told them the Germans had already passed them on the main road.

Corporal Hayward continues:

I asked Captain [sic] Harford what was intended and he stated that he understood that the British officer in command had decided to surrender. I then asked him if he intended to surrender also. After a

short discussion it was decided that as many as wished should make a dash for the beach and try to get off in the small boats that we had previously noticed.

In the scramble that followed **Corporal Hayward** found himself in an 18-foot boat with Lance-Corporal Hakaraia, Major Harford, and ten others of his squadron, rowing hard for the open sea. They waited until dark in the lee of a small islet off shore, then rowed across the gulf and down the coast until the late afternoon, when they decided to risk landing on a point where there were a few houses. There they obtained half a goat, four gallons of water and some cheese, also the information that the Germans were rapidly taking over the country. The goat was grilled over an open fire, and after a meal and a rest they resolved to row to **Crete**, or North Africa if they missed the island.

For rations they had what was left of the goat and cheese, the water, some biscuits, and their emergency ration issue. There was only one pair of oars but by half-hourly changes and by rowing day and night they made another island off **Crete** four days later. A larger Greek caique loaded with refugees was sheltering there waiting for dark to make the last dash to **Crete**, and after some parleying the skipper agreed to take some aboard and tow the others at a price of £1 a head. The sea which had been clam until then got up and their chances of making the last 30 miles would have been slim had they tried to row; so heavily laden was their craft that it had less than a foot of freeboard.

Hayward and Hakaraia were closely followed by Privates Epiha ¹⁰ and De La Croix, ¹¹ whose adventures were much the same except that they rowed all the way and landed on the beach where the battalion was holding a bathing parade. These four were the only members of the carrier platoon to reach Crete.

Each company was given an offensive and a defensive role and training consisted of practice in repelling imaginary attacks by sea and land. Moves in support of D Company nearest the beach were carried out in turn by the other companies and times were reduced at each attempt.

Night patrols made the men acquainted with the terrain around their areas, while officers and NCOs reconnoitred alternative routes forward to the **Maleme** airfield. An outbreak of dysentery at this time took fairly heavy toll of the battalion; first B Company's OC was evacuated, followed shortly after by OC C Company and the battalion second-in-command, leaving **Colonel Dittmer** short of experienced commanders. It was not all work, however. The weather was perfect and time passed pleasantly enough; there was a little leave to **Canea**, although it entailed thumbing a ride on infrequently passing vehicles or a nine-mile walk each way. Nearer home the **YMCA** established a small depot in **Platanias** village where Mr McIvor gave excellent service while his stocks lasted. The village also boasted a pleasant wineshop with a very good radio, and the troops, especially Headquarters Company, thronged there nightly to sample the brew and listen to the **BBC** news bulletin. The Maoris rapidly acquired a little Greek and Lieutenant Wattie McKay, practising at every opportunity, became so proficient in the language that he acted as the battalion interpreter.

Bathing parades, a company at a time, were held frequently and had their moments of excitement, for on occasions a German plane would swoop out of the clouds and along the beach spraying bullets as it passed. There were numerous bombing raids on **Suda Bay**, but **Suda** was well away from the battalion area and in war you have enough troubles of your own without bothering much about those of others. This detached attitude altered somewhat after the CO's conference on the 13th. He told his hearers that the invasion threat was very real and that the attack could come in the next four or five days.¹² The procedure would probably be preliminary bombing and machine-gunning to clear areas for paratroopers to land, after which the planes would continue circling and firing to protect the enemy while they organised.

The battalion answer would be action by fire power only until it was certain that any attack was not a feint, whereupon the troops would leave their dug-in positions, deal with the situation, and return again to shelter; reserve platoons were to be concentrated and mobile while all

other positions were to be sited for all-round defence; firing was to be controlled as long as possible and only low-flying planes were to be engaged by the troops; trench sentries were to be responsible for operating a system of alarms, as follows:

A series of short whistle blasts—Slit trenches.

Long and short blasts—Battle stations.

White Very lights—Reinforce D and Headquarters Companies' area.

If the attack came from the beach, A Company would move behind and to the left of C Company. Facing west in rear of D Company, the formation would be B Company, left, C Company, right, A behind B, and the transport platoon behind C Company. If attacked from the east A Company would be on the right, C Company, left B in rear of A, and the transport platoon behind C Company.

Finally, in any advance, all tommy guns would go with the first wave so as to permit riflemen to get in with the bayonet.

Colonel Dittmer was even more explicit at his conference on the 16th. The invasion could be expected at any time within the next three days and would be carried out by a force estimated at 35,000, of whom 25,000 would be airborne and the balance by ship. Points likely to be attacked as far as the New Zealand Division was concerned were **Maleme**, **Canea**, and the **Aghya** valley. The attack would probably be preceded by a strafe from 500 bombers, which would come in waves of a hundred followed by 600 troop-carrying planes dropping successive waves of paratroops. The seaborne troops were to be escorted by the Italian Navy, Royal Navy permitting. Particular attention was to be paid by the Maoris to shelter from divebombers and to the screening of trenches, while company commanders were to have their battle headquarters in a pit near their company OP.

The CO closed the conference by ordering a full alter, every man to possess his quota of 100 rounds of ammunition and all to remain in

their fighting pits during the day. Nothing unusual occurred in the **Platanias** area on the 17th or 18th although, judging by the noise and smoke, both **Maleme** and **Suda Bay** were being 'done over' at regular intervals. In actual fact, an oil tanker in the bay was burning and a dozen other ships were lying disabled in the harbour. The noise was more continuous the next day and planes in dozens could be seen diving down on **Maleme**.

It was the opinion at stand-to on the dawn of 20 May that even more than the usual hate was being expended on the **Maleme** positions. The Maori are was again not generally included, although D Company was most annoyed at being machine-gunned at breakfast.

The men were sitting along the river bank when a group of yellow and black Messerschmitts swept down the **Maleme** road at tree-top height spraying the country with bullets. They were past with a rattle and a roar before the troops could dive for cover, but it was noticed that the bridge and miller's house were not molested. No doubt the bridge was needed for future operations.

At 8 a.m. **Private 'Monty' Wikiriwhi**, on duty in the 'I' section OP, reached for his pencil and wrote in the logbook:

0830 hrs.

It appears that the invasion is about to be launched. The area round the aerodrome is being most intensively bombed and machine-gunned by countless planes of all kinds. Clouds of dust are rising high into the sky turning the whole area into a real inferno of flying dust and metal and visibility was reduced almost to nil.

0830 hrs.

In the midst of all this pandemonium paratroops were dropped round the aerodrome.

0845 hrs.

Paratroops were dropped in the Agha [[Aghya](#)] valley area.

Some of these troops were dropped along the west bank of the [Platanias](#) River and beyond effective range but were optimistically fired on by A, B, and C Companies until they were hidden in the ground cover.

A parachute with a load that glistened in the sun floated down about half-way between the enemy and B Company and Private Tommy Duncan ¹³ volunteered to go out and investigate. He stalked the 'chute and found it contained a canister of weapons, field glasses, and grenades. He was dragging it back when he noticed a party of Germans also bent on retrieving his trophy, which he felt disinclined to part with. He shot two and the others disappeared. This and subsequent exploits won him the Military Medal.

But to return to [Monty Wikiriwhi](#) in the battalion OP:

0900 hrs.

More paratroops were dropped round the aerodrome and also in the re-entrant behind the 'drome.

0915 hrs.

A further batch of paratroops disgorged in the aerodrome area. About 200 troop-carrying planes have now passed along the Agha valley and made their way out to sea flying about 10 ft off the water. We estimate that 800–1000 troops have been dropped round the aerodrome with about the same number dropped in the valley of Agha.

0940 hrs.

More troop planes have discharged their cargo in the reentrant behind the 'drome. Sound of heavy fighting coming from the aerodrome area.

1030 hrs.

One troop-carrying plane effected a landing on the beach opposite D Coy lines. It was immediately set on fire presumably by Bren gun fire. ¹⁴ These enormous black troop-carrying planes are circling round and round the beach and above the aerodrome seeking landing places.

A glider landed on the beach about 200 yards ahead of the plane already on fire.

1130 hrs.

Enemy seen concentrating in a house near the beach.

Troops watching from the hills around **Platanias** saw with unbelieving eyes a new kind of plane hovering above the snarling, diving fighters. They were huge and without propellers and flapped backwards and forwards in an uncanny manner—troop-carrying gliders waiting their cue to crash-land their ten airborne troops.

Close behind the gliders came large, black, lumbering troop-carriers flying almost wing to wing, formation after formation stretching out beyond the horizon. Then the Maoris saw the sky filled with white, red, green, and brown parachutes to the east, west, and south of **Platanias**—paratroops and their equipment.

No enemy dropped in the Maori area, but some glider-borne troops were noticed concentrating at a house on the beach about half a mile west of D Company and Captain Tureia ¹⁵ was instructed to send a platoon to assist another from D Company in removing them. A composite Ngatiporou platoon commanded by Lieutenant Reedy joined 17 Platoon (**Lieutenant Logan**) and both parties under the command of Captain Baker prepared for their first action in Crete.

By the time they had worked to within 500–600 yards of the objective they were closely attended by several planes circling and gunning as they came round, but the Maoris kept on with fire and movement as practised in England. **Logan**, on the left, swung his platoon in an arc and closed in. The Germans were in twos and threes

around the house and, after seven or eight of their number had been killed, two officers and eight other ranks surrendered. The Maoris' casualties were two slightly wounded, so besides being very gratified at the sight of their captives disliking the attention of their own aircraft, the men felt that a reasonable amount of utu ¹⁶ had been obtained for the men killed in Greece.

The battalion was not involved in the fierce fighting that went on during the first day of the invasion and the only airborne enemy that came within range were two strays who dropped behind D Company. RSM Ace Wood and Lieutenant C. M. Bennett happened to be in the battalion OP at the time and tried their marksmanship at 400 yards. The quarry disappeared and the pair decided to stalk them. One was found slightly wounded in a place that would have made sitting uncomfortable and both surrendered quietly. The prisoners were relieved of automatics, knives, maps and aerial photographs, and escorted to Battalion Headquarters. The tally for the day was twelve captured and eight or nine killed. From the Maori point of view it was a satisfactory day, but it must be remembered that Platanias was not a German objective and that the battalion had not received the punishment taken by the troops around Maleme.

Probably the only members of the battalion not feeling satisfied with the situation were those, including Major Bertrand and Captain Scott, in 7 General Hospital near Galatas. They were shot up, bombed, and finally captured by a wave of paratroops who, with shouts of 'Hants oop!', gathered all the walking cases together. The party, Major Bertrand estimates about 300, was marched towards Galatas, which town, according to the German timetable, was due to be in their hands—and wasn't.

Major Bertrand reported:

By about 1500 hrs we had moved about a mile or more from 7 GH [General Hospital] and were, as we found, in the vicinity of 19 Bn who were occupying a position just south of the road leading to Galatas. Our

guards must have come into contact with 19 Bn as we were herded into as small a space as possible. Soon after this a patrol of one section could be seen through the olive trees moving down a ridge across our front about 100 yards away and separated from us by a slight scrub clad depression. I could hear the patrol talking as one of them said, 'There are no bloody Huns down here.' We dare not move to attract attention and in spite of a strenuous 'mind over matter' session the patrol slowly moved out of sound and sight.... About half an hour after their disappearance we heard them coming back and once more our hopes rose (one of the patrol fired a shot in the general direction of the prisoners and was answered by one of the guards). The patrol immediately swung into action, extended and moved across the depression under cover. The subsequent proceedings resulted in the killing of all our guards except one in our immediate vicinity.... He was severely wounded in the thigh. As he had been particularly good to us we took him along with us to 19 Bn for treatment.

The **22nd Battalion**, hard-pressed at **Maleme**, had asked for help and **Colonel Dittmer** was instructed to send a company to Headquarters 23 Battalion, where guides would be provided for the rest of the journey to 22 Battalion. B Company was given the job but Captain Royal, who had returned from hospital two days earlier, did not know the suggested round-about route and decided to use the main road and fight if forced to. The Arawa Company left at 7 p.m. and was unmolested until close to 23 Battalion area, when 10 Platoon (Lieutenant Vercoe) encountered a few paratroops who were cleaned up without much trouble. Very soon afterwards a larger body was met and the platoon was held up until 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Pene) reinforced it. The Germans, who had concentrated around a tree, shouted 'We surrender' and at the same time a grenade was thrown which wounded two Maoris. That grenade was the signal for, as far as is known, the first use of the bayonet by New Zealand troops in the war, for with a yell of 'Surrender be —' the Maoris charged and killed twenty-four Germans. Those not actually engaged assisted with hakas. A pocket a little further on yielded another eight dead Germans, after which B Company reached 23 Battalion without

further incident.

The firing and yelling had attracted the attention of Captain Moody, ¹⁷ who with a section of 5 Field Ambulance was also under instructions to report to 22 Battalion, and he joined his party to B Company.

The guides arrived after some delay for Colonel Leckie, ¹⁸ CO 23 Battalion, had also been instructed to send a company forward to 22 Battalion but had not been informed that the Maoris were likewise reinforcing.

Because of enemy in unknown numbers in the locality, the route was first south on to the ridge where 21 Battalion was dug in. Men could be seen moving about and, not wishing to be shot at in mistake for Germans, Captain Royal told his men to talk in Maori. The **21st Battalion** was amazed at the clamour but amused at the explanation.

After traversing Vineyard Ridge, as 21 Battalion had named its area, the Maoris were led down a road that took them on to the main highway, where they turned left towards the airfield until they were halted by wire along its perimeter. Captain Royal asked a shadowy figure behind the wire if he belonged to 22 Battalion and was answered with a grenade which luckily did little damage, slightly wounding one man.

The company began to deploy for action but its destination, a low ridge where trees could be seen against the skyline, was clearly in enemy hands, and the troops, though reluctant to depart without a fight, were withdrawn. Their instructions were to report to Headquarters 22 Battalion which had evidently departed, so the guide then made for **Pirgos** village, where the 22nd's rear headquarters was thought to be located. It was actually the Headquarters Company area, but it had been isolated all day and the company there was preparing to move out under cover of darkness. The Maoris saw vague figures who, as far as they knew, were probably Germans, but neither party molested the other and both left **Pirgos** by different routes.

B Company was taken across country then back on to the road from

Vineyard Ridge, where it finally met Colonel Andrew ¹⁹ with part of 22 Battalion moving back to a new position. When Royal told him where they had been, Colonel Andrew said, 'You are damn lucky to be alive' and then instructed him to return to his unit. The company followed the same route back and reported in after eleven hours' marching.

The position at the opening of the second day of the invasion was that, of the three airfields and the port of **Suda Bay, Maleme** was more than half lost and the others still holding; **General Freyberg's** communications, inadequate before the attack, were now extremely disorganised and the German commander had decided, preparatory to the landing of *5 Mountain Division*, to throw everything into the capture of **Maleme**.

The programme of the previous day was repeated but the captured Bofors guns were used against the defenders. More men were dropped near **Maleme**. Some troop-carrying planes landed west of **Maleme**, and after 5 p.m. began landing on the airfield itself. C Troop of 27 Battery, the only guns with direct observation, engaged the planes, but with gunsights made from chewing-gum and matchsticks did not have the accuracy for really effective fire.

About 1 p.m. Captain Baker was again instructed to clear the beach of enemy who could be seen concentrating near a house about half a mile beyond the scene of the previous day's exploit. His patrol consisted of 17 Platoon less one section (**Lieutenant Logan**) and half of 18 Platoon (Sergeant Jerry Smith). ²⁰ They reached the first house without incident, but just beyond it saw and shot three Germans. A few minutes later six more were captured and sent back to D Company under escort. Almost simultaneously with their departure another five were sighted, but while they were in the process of being put in the bag like the others a grenade was thrown which wounded a Maori, whereupon no prisoners were taken. By this time the patrol was within 200–300 yards of the house when it was fired on from points in and about the objective. The two platoons tried to close in under mutual supporting fire but were strafed from the

air and forced to take cover. When it was possible to move, Baker found himself separated from his party except for his runner and two wounded. Thinking that his force had moved back by the way it had come, he was about to do likewise when one wounded man said he had seen between five and six hundred paratroops drop into D Company and the general battalion area.

Captain Baker's intention to return to his company was frustrated by enemy machine-gunners in the house and both he and his runner took shelter in a drain. The position was further complicated by six planes landing on the beach between him and his hoped-for destination. Captain Snadden's battery was right on to them and only twenty men left the burning wrecks to run almost over the top of their two observers and take shelter in the scrub.

The estimate of between five and six hundred paratroops being dropped on the battalion was rather wide of the mark, but in actual fact 5 and 6 Companies of *2 Parachute Regiment* had jumped between **Platanias** and **Pirgos**. Of that number twelve plane-loads fell along the **Platanias** River and D Company had the job of disposing of them.

Either by accident or design a number landed on the plateau previously mentioned, and 19 Army Troops Company was forced to withdraw after losing some men. Two Maori Brengunners, Privates John Whare ²¹ and Matt Bailey, ²² climbed out of their covered pits and went for the parachutists. Both died standing.

Major Dyer, with almost half his company absent on the beach patrol, had his hands full. Fire was coming from his left rear, a most unexpected quarter, while the undulating country with its many bamboo clumps, olive and poplar trees, and grape-vines made ideal hiding places for any enemy not shot before landing. If left until darkness they could become a real menace.

They were not allowed to joint forces, for the Maoris hunted them, not without loss but with considerable success. Corporal Kopu ²³ put his

Red Cross brassard in his pocket, teamed up with one of the company cooks, Private Curran, ²⁴ and the pair went off together; Private George McDonald, ²⁵ a signaller who also had no right to be away from the telephone, returned with a grin on his face and his shirt covered in blood. 'They got me Sir but I can still mind the telephone', he told **Major Dyer**. He lay down beside the phone and kept in touch with Battalion Headquarters until he fainted from loss of blood.

Lieutenant Te Kuru soon had his area under control and, seeing Germans on the plateau where the Bren-gunners had been killed, acted on his own initiative and led a section in that direction. It dealt with a few enemy en route and deployed to clear the plateau. Te Kuru was killed—the first officer casualty—others were wounded, and the rest took cover. **Colonel Dittmer** was also taking steps to deal with the situation in D Company area: Lieutenant Tuhiwai and his platoon were sent from C Company to reinforce and Sergeant-Major Ropata ²⁶ brought a section along the road from Headquarters Company in case there were any strays between the two areas.

Lieutenant Ormond on the western side of the river was having difficulty in clearing the area 19 Army Troops Company had been forced to vacate, but when Lieutenant Tuhiwai reported, **Major Dyer** led a sortie that eased the position very considerably.

The CO's next move was to instruct the RSM to get his Battalion Headquarters defence platoon together and sweep down the valley towards D Company. The defence platoon was a shadow body made up of batmen, drivers, provosts, and the 'I' section, about twenty in all, organised into three sections commanded by Sergeant W. Vercoe, 'I' section, Sergeant Don Haronga, ²⁷ provost section, and Sergeant Manawatu, ²⁸ in charge of the stretcher-bearers.

This platoon was, by the nature of its duties, weak in combat training but was strong in fighting spirit. It dropped down into the valley, formed up with two sections forward and one in support, and advanced unopposed until it reached the corner where the western road

crossed the irrigation canal, at which point it was fired on. A brisk exchange of grenades and smallarms fire resulted in ten dead Germans on the road and others in the scrub with no loss to the makeshift platoon. After this successful action **Wood** carried on down to D Company and then back to Battalion Headquarters, passing en route a number of dead paratroops in front of C Company's lines. Ngatiporou had made the most of such opportunities as had come their way.

In addition, Lieutenant Keiha ²⁹ was instructed to make a reconnaissance in the opposite direction to that taken by the Headquarters defence platoon, that is, south into the **Aghya** valley. The platoon rounded up ten stray enemy before returning by way of the plateau, where the German probably responsible for the death of Lieutenant Te Kuru was found in the canal near Te Kuru's body and killed.

Captain Bell and his Ngapuhis were thoroughly disgusted with the whole affair for they were situated on that side of the battalion area where nothing was happening. Their only job was to see that none of the enemy who had landed in the **Aghya** valley came in by the back door. If they had, A Company's task would have been difficult, but though the Maoris looked hopefully towards the south they found no employment.

The second day closed with 22 Battalion tied in partially with 21 Battalion and partially with 23 Battalion. The enemy held the airfield, though it was still covered by a dwindling amount of fire, but a substantial enemy force had concentrated west of **Maleme** airfield. The **21st Battalion**, out of communication with Brigade Headquarters, was waiting instructions and wondering what was going on in the dust clouds below.

An all-in counter-attack at the earliest possible moment was essential if the vital airfield was to be recaptured, but poverty of communications and the impossibility of moving any body of men during the daylight made it imperative for **Brigadier Hargest** to wait until dark. The 28th Battalion was considered the sole unit in 5 Brigade fresh

enough for the operation and Brigadier Puttick could spare only one battalion from his reserve; **Colonel Kippenberger's** ³⁰ 10 Brigade was fully extended and might have to be reinforced, and intelligence reports predicted that the seaborne attack would come in that night.

The plan as finally worked out and sent to the forward battalion commanders after dark was: 20 and 28 Battalions were to carry out the counter-attack on **Maleme**; 20 Battalion would be relieved by an Australian unit and then taken by trucks to the assembly area immediately west of the **Platanias** River; the axis of advance would be the main road, with 20 Battalion on the seaward and 28 on the landward side, with three light tanks on the road itself. The task of 20 Battalion was to clear the airfield while 28 Battalion secured Point 107, where it would link up with 21 Battalion; after clearing the airfield 20 Battalion was to move back on to the ridge which dominated the airfield and also relieve the Maoris, who would return to **Platanias** before first light. The **20th Battalion** would then hold the highest hilltop in the area—Point 107, the original position of A Company 22 Battalion and the key to **Maleme**. No planes could use the airfield while hostile troops held Point 107, nor could the New Zealand positions be readily outflanked while the left flank of 21 Battalion was in **Xamoudhokhori**.

The troops were to be ready to leave the start line at 1 a.m. on 22 May. **Colonel Dittmer's** plan was to advance on a two-company front, with D supported by Headquarters Company on the right and A leading C Company on the left. Although the first part of the advance to just short of **Pirgos** village was to be regarded as an approach march, the battalion had to be prepared to engage pockets of enemy en route. To this end the forward companies were instructed to put out a screen of scouts across the front.

There was also to be a preliminary bombing of the objective by planes fitted with extra fuel tanks so that they could fly from Egypt and return after their mission; but in the event they did not arrive. Finally, the three tanks moving up the road in support of the attack were to be given protection by Lieutenant Reedy's platoon from C Company.

From this point a certain amount of what follows is conjecture and, owing to the death in action of some of the officers concerned, verification is impossible. ³¹

Major Dyer, on the right of the battalion, had the road as the unit boundary. He was reinforced by two Headquarters Company platoons (Lieutenants W. Ngata and W. McKay) to compensate for the absence of Captain Baker's fighting patrol. The three-inch mortars were left at the **Platanias** bridge, where a team of mules that Lieutenant McKay had been deputed to obtain was to pick them up, plus some ammunition, and accompany Battalion Headquarters. The mules did not arrive and the mortars had to be left behind. Supporting D Company were two Headquarters platoons (**Lieutenants D. Urlich** and F. T. Bennett) in an infantry role.

On the left of the advance A Company was almost at full strength, but Captain Bell did not have Captain Leaf with him and when the advance began was not supported by C Company.

For some days Captain Tureia had been suffering severely from dysentery but, in the absence of Captain Scott, would not leave the company. He was unable to walk to the start line and Leaf undertook to lead the company in his stead. During the day Lieutenant Keiha had been detailed with a section of his platoon to guard a party of Divisional Signals repairing the line from Brigade Headquarters forward and he returned to Battalion Headquarters just as **Colonel Dittmer** was leaving for the start line. Keiha was told to get his men a meal and to remain behind. Captain Leaf therefore had a platoon commanded by Lieutenant Tuhiwai and the rest of Lieutenant Keiha's platoon under Sergeant Te Kawa. By some mischance Captain Leaf led C Company through the forward troops without knowing it and was killed at a bridge some distance in front of the start line. Lieutenant Tuhiwai then returned with C Company, again moved through the forward troops without contacting them, and returned to Battalion Headquarters where he reported to Lieutenant Keiha. According to the timetable the attack

should by that time have been well on the way to **Maleme**, and it was decided by Keiha and Tuhiwai to await the unit's return at daylight.

Originally B Company was to have remained in the battalion area for Brigade Headquarters, located close by, required local protection, and there was also the possibility of enemy infiltration from the **Aghya** valley to be considered. This role was later altered, partly as a result of a request from Captain Anderson,³² commanding 19 Army Troops Company, for assistance in cleaning up its forward area, which was still infested with enemy who had taken possession of some of its weapon pits.

Captain Anderson explains:

Because of the position and because our engineers had no training in infantry work the **Maori Battalion** was asked to mop up our forward area—You can put it in the record that we were damned glad to have the Maoris clean up the frontage for us.

Captain Royal's revised instructions were to clean up any paratroops in front of 19 Army Troops' position and south of the **Platanias- Maleme** road, which was also the battalion forming-up area. When this was done he was to leave one platoon in B Company area as local protection for Brigade Headquarters and continue on the left of the advance as far as 23 Battalion.

B Company left on its mission at 10.30 p.m. Lieutenant Stewart was to patrol the forming-up area and then return to B Company lines, while the rest of the company re-established 19 Army Troops Company in its forward pits. This was accomplished by sending Private Timihou³³ with a section to draw fire while the others, with the enemy located, worked in behind them. The result was a dozen dead paratroops and one live glider pilot. Because he appeared to be very young and could speak a little English, he was taken along as a mascot, was lost sight of later, and probably rejoined his own people.

After some trouble with 7 Field Company, whose men were firing first and asking questions afterwards, B Company followed the route it had taken the previous night to 23 Battalion area, where it waited for the counter-attack force to come up.

During all this time **Colonel Dittmer** was waiting on the **Platanias** bridge with **Brigadier Hargest** for 20 Battalion to show up, for there was little enough time to recapture Point 107 and return before daylight robbed them of their only advantage—freedom of movement. With a screen in front, the troops at four paces' interval were lying on the ground. They passed the time speculating on the meaning of red glows and the flashes of distant searchlights at sea but did not know until later that they were watching the funeral pyres of the seaborne invasion. The Navy had given 'all possible help' as promised.

One o'clock—two o'clock—and no 20 Battalion. At 2.15 trucks clattered up with half that battalion. The 20th had had to wait until an Australian unit took over its position, but the Australians had been delayed by bombing. Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows³⁴ decided to start with his half-battalion and left instructions for the other companies to follow and move up behind him. About 3 a.m. the attack was ready to start; and although the **Maori Battalion** knew nothing about it at the time, **Brigadier Hargest**, knowing that the delay had made a night attack almost impossible, rang **Divisional Headquarters** and asked if the operation must go on. He was told that it must.

Before the operation commences we will return to Captain Baker and his patrol. Baker eventually, and with adventures that included the demise of two paratroops, made his way about midnight to 7 Field Company headquarters, where he learned that **Lieutenant Logan** and his platoon, and Sergeant Smith and his half-platoon, had been fitted into the engineers' forward positions. He was told of the proposed counter-attack on **Maleme**, but because of the indefinite position out in front the engineers were shooting on sight and he would have to wait until daylight before collecting his men and going about his affairs.

Lieutenant Logan had also seen the planes land on the beach and the survivors deplane and head inland. He led his platoon up a dry watercourse until he found a little hollow covered with grapes and olive trees and waited there until dark. When it was safe to move he led his platoon past a sleeping group of Germans and between two defended posts into the 7 Field Company area. The sergeant **Logan** met was not pleased to find that twenty Maoris had passed his listening post unseen. **Logan**, who reported to Brigade through 7 Field Company, was instructed to remain where he was, that his battalion would be advised, and further that the Brigade Major, Captain Dawson,³⁵ was on his way up to see him.

The approach march had not gone more than half a mile before both battalions met opposition. The **20th Battalion** found a large number of enemy sheltering in a house and after some sharp fighting captured it. The men of 28 Battalion, threading their way through trees and around houses, met scattered Germans firing from windows and from behind stone walls. The tanks helped by shooting at flashes from the houses, and grenade and bayonet did the rest. Further delay was caused by 7 Field Company—which had not been advised of the delay in the start of the counter-attack—fulfilling its instructions to fire on any movement and inquire afterwards. There was a sharp exchange of fire between the engineers and A Company before the misunderstanding was cleared up. There were also some casualties in A Company from anti-personnel mines scattered in front of the engineers' position, but the battalion carried on.

Daybreak was not far away when D Company reported enemy dug in ahead of it and **Major Dyer** was ordered to assault the position. He was trampling through the wire at the head of his troops when the 'enemy' yelled that they were 17 Platoon and what the hell did he think he was up to?

A Company had been rather disorganised by the death of Captain Bell during the approach march and the casualties caused by the

engineers' mines. **Colonel Dittmer** therefore instructed Captain Royal, who had now reported in, to thicken up the left flank. Dawn also disclosed that a few Cretans had joined the battalion and seemed to view the coming fight with satisfaction.

By the time the crossroads at **Dhaskaliana** were reached it was nearly full light; **Pirgos**, the first objective, was still half a mile away and the airfield another half mile; aircraft were arriving in a steady stream. The leading tank was put out of action by a captured Bofors, the second broke down, and the third also stopped. No tanks, no **RAF**, and the sky filling with enemy planes; but the attack pushed on.

It was now rising, wooded country on the Maori sector and flat, sandy country where 20 Battalion, over towards the beach, had drawn ahead somewhat.

Heavy opposition was encountered on the outskirts of **Pirgos**, and if the fullest use had not been made of the stone walls, ditches, and hedges it is doubtful if any further progress could have been made. D Company fought its way from one piece of cover to the next, but the enemy had the advantage of observation from the village church spire to bring mortar fire to bear and finally halted the advance on the line of an irrigation canal. A Company, having by this time lost Captain Bell killed and Lieutenant Porter wounded, had Lieutenant Te Puni ³⁶ as the only officer with it and was unable to move beyond the forward elements of 23 Battalion.

On the extreme left, B Company found itself on the bottom of Vineyard Ridge in a gap to the left of 23 Battalion. In front was a low ridge dominated by a stone house from which a spandau stopped any further movement. Private Tommy Duncan volunteered to silence the gun if the company would give him covering fire. This was arranged and he crept up from a flank and tossed a grenade into the house. No enemy emerged, but Duncan came out with the spandau and a lot of ammunition and there was no further trouble from that quarter.

The whole battalion was checked until **Pirgos**, which 20 Battalion had entered but had been unable to capture, was cleared. **Colonel Dittmer** appreciated that further head-on attacks by D Company would lead to heavy casualties without any advantage—Lieutenant McKay had already been mortally wounded trying to rush an enemy spandau post—and ordered **Major Dyer** to pull back slightly, veer to his left, and then try to get behind the village. While these movements were being carried out, the right flank company of 20 Battalion had reached the airfield but could not cross it in daylight against the mortar and machine-gun fire directed against it, nor could it stay where it was. Colonel Burrows ordered it to withdraw behind the Maoris and so get on to the high ground of Point 107, but a garbled version of the order suggested that the withdrawal was back to the start line. Parts of 20 Battalion's D and Headquarters Companies obeyed the mutilated order and the rest of the battalion gathered in 23 Battalion area. Vision was very restricted, and the result of the realignment was that **Major Dyer** brought D Company up on the right of B Company and Headquarters Company became mixed with A and the one platoon of C Company. **Captain Love** was reorganising when he was wounded, not seriously enough to be evacuated but too badly to move about. Fire was coming from a house and a vineyard above the position and men were falling fast. The fortunate arrival of the RSM saved a desperate situation.

'Ace' Wood writes:

All I remember was ordering a number of the boys up the track [shown on a rough sketch not reproduced] and jumping off into a bayonet charge in the direction of the stone house. I remember feeling an utter ass because, realising the seriousness of the position with our lads packed like sardines, I shot off yelling to the boys to follow and after going about thirty yards and hearing no yelling, I stopped and looked back—I was on my own. But they followed and we cleaned up what turned out to be a patrol of about Pl strength. Half the bods we speared and shot in the middle of the ridge, the other half, including the commander, in the vineyard.

Still with the intention of getting around the enemy flank at **Pirgos**, the battalion fought its way forward until it reached the top of a ridge that ran south towards 21 Battalion, where it was halted by fire from Point 107 and another ridge running up from that point across 21 Battalion's front.

By this time it was late afternoon and **Colonel Dittmer** ordered the battalion to consolidate. The position was then that the enemy was on the ridge above the road to **Xamoudhokhori** and the Maoris facing across the valley. Lieutenant MacDonald ³⁷ of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion was also there with two guns left out of his platoon, and was a great help until both guns were knocked out by mortar bombs. The front quietened down as the planes went home and the Maoris set about looking for some kai. They were supposed to have returned to **Platanias** before daylight nearly twelve hours earlier, and the Maori does not like fighting on an empty stomach. There were plenty of Germans whom 23 Battalion had killed lying around, and very soon the battalion was eating German rations and smoking German cigarettes. **Colonel Dittmer** considered that, with some help, it was still possible to drive the enemy off Point 107. He accordingly went back to find Headquarters 23 Battalion and conferred with the CO of that unit and also with the CO of 22 Battalion who was sharing the same headquarters. He learnt that what was left of the sub-units of 22 Battalion had been allotted to 21 and 23 Battalions, and the commander of the latter could not suggest any way in which he could help because of the task previously given him by Brigade. There was no direct contact with that headquarters whereby new instructions might be obtained.

Colonel Dittmer, feeling extremely disappointed that the Maoris had been unable to take their objective, returned to his command, where increasing fire and movement suggested that an attack on the right flank of the battalion was pending and arrangements were being made to meet it. The machine-gunners and Maoris pulled back but left two observers. The observers yelled 'They're coming' and the reception committee fixed bayonets. In Lieutenant MacDonald's words:

The attack began with a bursting mass of flame from the grenades the Huns threw on the top—shook us up a bit. Then they came over. There was no order but we stood up and charged forward.... The Gouns [Germans] let out a shriek or two and the rest bolted down the hill like rabbits, over stone walls, plunging through vines. Very soon the MGs opened up together with the mortars and we got back quickly.

This is how it sounded to Sergeant Sullivan ³⁸ in 20 Battalion nearby:

Sounds of German attack. Heavy fire steadily approaching. Much tracer. Then blood curdling yells from the Maoris as they went over to counter attack. Immediate decrease in German fire. Confusion, pandemonium and war cries for a few minutes then silence.

The silence is accounted for by Captain Te Punga and Sergeant Eddie Morgan ³⁹ who passed Captain Royal's headquarters out of breath and laughing heartily. Royal asked the reason for the mirth and they told him, 'The bastards are still running like Hell.'

Firing slowed down with the coming of darkness, and a line of flares indicated that the enemy had also taken up a position for the night. Losses had not been light, but a withdrawal was not contemplated at any level from the rank and file to the commanding officer. It was therefore with doubt and incredulity that **Dittmer heard just before dawn that 23 Battalion was getting ready to withdraw. He left post-haste for 23 Battalion headquarters about a thousand yards away, and from the CO of that unit learned that Captain Dawson had been up with instructions for the brigade to retire to **Platanias** and that 28 Battalion was to be the rearguard. A 23 Battalion runner had been sent to him with the message, but it was just one of those things that happen in war—the message never got to 28 Battalion—and it was a very disgusted commander who prepared to give away the ground so dearly won. The order had been to withdraw under cover of darkness, but it was then nearly daylight and **Dittmer** knew that if he did not move quickly the Maoris would have the battle all to themselves, not only from the front**

but from each flank. The withdrawing units—21, 22, and 23 Battalions—had to pass over a north-south ridge which was in view of the enemy, and it was certain that as soon as troops were seen moving over this ridge the enemy would do something about it. An operation considered impossible in the attack had to be carried out in the withdrawal—a daylight move by ground troops without air support.

Colonel Dittmer, who had arranged for company commanders to be at his headquarters when he returned, gave his orders: **Lieutenant C. M. Bennett**, the 'I' officer, would guide the battalion, less rear party, along the line **Kondomari- Modhion**; Captain Royal would lead the withdrawal with B Company and place a covering party with two automatics on the north-south ridge already mentioned, and which was about a mile behind them; **Major Dyer** would command the rearguard—an officer and ten men from each company—and would not leave the position until the main body was making good the north-south ridge.

The troops began to filter back and the German air-taxi service to **Maleme** began to operate though not with the usual number of ground-strafting machines. The battalion main body, although under fire, was also under cover and got away in reasonable order, taking with it some of the battalion walking wounded from the RAP. The CO and Adjutant, who had waited to see the troops off, followed at the rear of the battalion and **Major Dyer** was left with his small rearguard to restrain any over-eagerness on the part of the enemy to pursue.

When by good luck and the use of cover the main body of the battalion reached the ridge, two Bren-gun sections, commanded by Corporal Martin McRae ⁴⁰ and Private Pine Timihou respectively, were placed on tactical points. The **Platanias** position was visible in the distance and, because of the situation, it was decided not to continue on to **Modhion** but to take a shorter route between the engineers and **Modhion** which would bring the battalion out on to the flat ground below B and C Companies' original areas.

Parties of 21 Battalion which had come down from Vineyard Ridge

through **Modhion** were met, also Germans coming down the valley from **Aghya**. Covering fire from Lieutenant Stewart on B Company's hill kept the Germans back while the Maoris crossed the flat, waded the river, almost shoulder high, and climbed up to their old positions. The time was about 8 a.m., and from the sounds of firing there appeared to be a battle going on in D Company area. Captain Royal reported to Brigade Headquarters and was instructed to take command, with **Lieutenant C. M. Bennett** as adjutant, until **Colonel Dittmer** arrived.

The supposition that fighting was going on in D Company area was well founded. To return to the previous dawn. Captain Baker collected eight of his men who had been fitted into the Field Company defences (**Lieutenant Logan** had rejoined the battalion as already recorded) and was on the road to **Maleme** when parties of 20 Battalion men coming from that direction said that the attack was off and that they were returning to their own lines. An officer said that 28 Battalion was also withdrawing to **Platanias** by another route, whereupon Baker returned to his old company area at the **Platanias** River and awaited their arrival.

Noon came but no 28 Battalion. Troops did, however, appear in the river valley, but they were wearing the wrong uniform and the eight-man army swung into action. The appearance of some men of 19 Army Troops Company behind the enemy settled the question and sixty-odd prisoners, among whom were a number of walking wounded, were rounded up and sent back to Brigade. At dusk there was still no **Maori Battalion**—it was, of course, strung along its line at **Pirgos**.

The D Company garrison, augmented by one walking wounded, Private Kohere ⁴¹ of C Company, passed an uneasy night bickering with enemy strays. At first light troops were seen returning from **Maleme**. 'The Maori Battalion at last'—and Baker went to meet them. They turned out to be Captain Ferguson's ⁴² 7 Field Company and, after reading the withdrawal orders which indicated that the whole of the flat area between **Maleme** and **Platanias** was to be vacated by New Zealand troops by 7.30 a.m. when the Navy was to shell the area, Baker set out for Brigade Headquarters, where he was instructed by **Brigadier Hargest** to

move his men into C Company's position.

At that moment, although Brigadier Hargest apparently did not know it, Lieutenant Stewart was holding B Company lines with one platoon, Lieutenant Keiha had two platoons in C Company area, and Lieutenant Porter had brought back about a dozen walking wounded from 23 Battalion's RAP and manned some A Company weapon pits.

While moving his men, now totalling fourteen, into C Company area, Captain Baker was overtaken by a runner with new orders to take command of about sixty men from 20 Battalion who had collected in Platani's village, return to D Company area, and hold the bridge there for twenty-four hours. The 20th Battalion men were being organised into platoons when yet another message stated that about 200 Germans were already in the vicinity of the bridge.

A conference was held with the 20 Battalion officers present and it was decided to attack before the enemy got established. The opposition, using captured Bofors guns, was too strong and the attackers were pinned to the ground 500 yards east of the bridge. It would have been too costly to press the attack without the benefit of support or covering fire and Baker ordered a withdrawal to a prepared position covering the bridge—the original 18 Platoon area. The order, passed from section to section, was apparently mutilated for the detachment from 20 Battalion, instead of occupying 18 Platoon's weapon pits, carried on down the road through Platani's to Galatas. Some sections did not receive the message, and Lieutenant Markham ⁴³ with one party, by taking advantage of the bamboo clumps skirting the road, got to within 100 yards of the bridge and Lieutenant Maxwell, ⁴⁴ with another, reached the riverbed. They captured a Bofors gun and put another out of action, but casualties, shortage of ammunition, and the sight of more enemy approaching with more guns necessitated a speedy withdrawal. These officers also missed Captain Baker in the smoke of houses and bamboo burning from the battle.

Although the operation failed in its primary object of dislodging the

enemy at the bridge, it had distracted their attention to some extent from the returning battalion. It also discouraged their further movement forward for the rest of the day.

With the fight at the bridge going on at the same time as the main body of the battalion was climbing into position three-quarters of a mile away, what of the rearguard? The enemy, hard on the tail of 21 Battalion, was edging along the hills on one flank and following 23 Battalion along the main road on the other before **Major Dyer** gave the word to withdraw. His party was being fired on with everything the enemy could bring to bear and there were casualties before it began to move out. It is surprising that it was not overrun in spite of the cover and protection of the olive trees.

Skilful leadership enabled **Dyer** to get safely back to the first ridge. There the Bren-gunners were busily in action, reinforced by Lieutenant McDonald ⁴⁵ who had acquired a spandau and, with a Maori to carry ammunition, had settled in behind a tombstone in a Cretan cemetery. Besides the enemy the rearguard had an audience of two peasants who stood at their back door and, judging by their gesticulations, soundly berated the troops for running away and deserting them. **Major Dyer's** group, less Lieutenant Pene and his section who had lost contact, joined **Colonel Dittmer**, the RSM, and about ten others who were waiting for it and watching the enemy advancing in open order over the ground vacated by the battalion. The rear party continued its journey under a certain amount of fire until it was within a thousand yards of the river, when about twenty Germans were observed moving towards the party from the seaward flank. There was a patch of standing crop nearby, and the rear party crawled through it to the river and then waded upstream for about 400 yards. It again came under fire while climbing out of the river and there were more casualties before the safety of the top of the bank was reached. Private Tane ⁴⁶ was left for dead with two bullets in his body; he later got up, climbed into the lines—and recovered. The two Bren-gun crews were cut off and written off, but after hiding by day and moving by night turned up at **Suda Bay** two days later.

Lieutenant Pene's party was the last to report in. After finding that he was following a party of Germans, who in their turn were following 23 Battalion rear elements, he was forced off his route. 'By now I had collected 16 members of the Battalion (stragglers some of them) including two wounded, Nat Wiwarena ⁴⁷ (later killed at **Alamein**) and Hopa Katene, ⁴⁸ now in **Rotorua**,' he writes. 'These two were being assisted by cobblers two to each. After two or three hours travelling these wounded boys came to realise that I had purposely slowed down our pace so as not to leave them behind so they decided not to have any aid at all.... All the morning I had been keeping an eye on a white monument ⁴⁹ in the distance. I curved inland until I was under this monument in a creek. There were two lots of Jerries behind us and one straight above in the direction of the monument.... I can remember clearly there was a patch of onions growing by this creek which we cleaned up. [Here the party rested for some time and Pene worked out a plan for crossing the **Platanias** river valley.] I issued the wounded chaps with a Luger pistol each and impressed on the boys when following me to take all precautions and that if it so happened that there were Jerries ahead of us to make sure to kill at least one each before we were downed—to help our battalion along.... We dived into the main river and finally after instructing the boys to be careful made our way to our coys.'

Colonel Dittmer set about reorganising his command. Strength returns showed over one hundred killed, wounded, or missing and indicated the nature of the fighting around **Maleme**. Some of the wounded, either by themselves or with the aid of other walking wounded, had made their way back into the gully below Battalion Headquarters; Lieutenant McKay and other seriously wounded men had been left behind. The battalion RAP had been put out of action when Captain Mules was wounded and serious Maori casualties had been carried to either 21 or 23 Battalion RAPs. There was insufficient transport to evacuate them, and when capture was seen to be inevitable the doctors and orderlies of both units elected to stay behind with their wounded. They were unselfish and gallant gentlemen.

A Company had lost both its senior officers and Captain Baker was transferred to that command; D Company was fitted in between the other three rifle companies, and **Captain Love** manned a line along the western edge of **Platanias** village covering the road from **Maleme** and the now enemy-held D Company area.

Ammunition and grenades were in short supply and a mixed dump of rations and ammunition held in a gully below old Brigade Headquarters was broken into for replenishment. The gully, or rather ravine, was seething with Army and Air Force men from **Maleme**; officers were trying to sort their men out and the men were broaching the ration cases for food; the Maori carrying parties took both ammunition and rations back to their lines.

A Company passed the afternoon in snap-shooting practice against parties of Germans who kept filtering forward from the **Aghya** valley. Some who were sheltering in a cave were becoming a menace and Lieutenant Porter decided to quieten them. He obtained a length of wire from the signallers and, with a couple of his men, crawled to the ledge above the enemy hideout. Grenades were tied to the wire like hooks on a fishing line, the pins removed, and the whole apparatus lowered over the side. After the explosion there was no more firing from that quarter and Lieutenant Porter, still suffering from concussion and multiple splinter wounds caused during the **Maleme** attack by a bullet hitting his tommy gun, departed to get his injuries dressed at 7 General Hospital. For the rest of the day the Maoris were fairly consistently mortared and there were more casualties.

The brigade dispositions at nightfall were that 28 Battalion had lost its D Company area; 21 and 23 Battalions were east of **Platanias**; 22 Battalion was still further east, and beyond it were the two engineer detachments and some machine-gunners of 1 MG Company.

The 28th Battalion, originally in reserve, was in the front line now that the other units of 5 Brigade had withdrawn beyond **Platanias**. **Colonel Dittmer** had to face the enemy to the west, threats from the

south, and the worry of being cut off completely (with the rest of the brigade) by an enemy thrust to the coast between 5 and 10 Brigades. The danger of being encircled was real and immediate orders were received to pull back behind the 4 Brigade and 10 Brigade front nearer **Canea**.

As soon as it was dark enough the Maoris left their hilltops and marched seven miles along the main road into reserve, where they rested until daybreak. A Company had to take a different route and scrambled for three hours across hills and through gullies to the rendezvous. C Company was led by Lieutenant Keiha for Captain Tureia was too sick to walk and had to be carried on a stretcher. He insisted that all he needed was a little more rest and that he would be all right in the morning.

Brigade instructions were to dig in and be ready to move forward at short notice. Behind these instructions was an arrangement for 4 Brigade to call on 28 Battalion if necessary, and in pursuance of this arrangement the troops were again moved nearer the forward units into a position they were to occupy for the next two and a half days.

Fifth Brigade prepared a second line of defence, while 4 Brigade made ready for the attack which was bound to come soon. As many men as the enemy deemed necessary could now be landed at **Maleme**, and all forces west of **Canea** were free to concentrate for the attack on the key position at **Galatas** and the capture of **Canea**.

General Freyberg, with a difficult situation on his hands, found time to send a congratulatory message about the Maoris' part in the fighting:

WUNA [**5 Bde**]

From DUKE [Div HQ]

Inform KELA [28 Maori Bn] that GOC intends to cable NZ informing of their splendid conduct and dash during the operations of the last few days.

W. G. Gentry Lt-Col.

The troops appreciated the message and worked with redoubled energy. The area was like the rest of that part of Crete—olive trees, stone walls terracing slopes planted with grapevines in early fruit. Pits were dug between the roots of the trees, on either side of rock walls with communication trenches underneath, and in corners of the winding walls.

Elsewhere the state of affairs had not altered materially—the vital areas were still held though communication between them was difficult and the passage of troops from one to the other almost impossible.

At this stage Headquarters Company was commanded by Captain Love, who was slightly wounded, with Lieutenant Ulrich his only other officer; Captain Baker and Lieutenant Te Puni were the only officers in A Company; Captain Royal in B Company had Lieutenants Stewart and Pene, the latter slightly concussed by blast; C Company was no better off—Captain Tureia had been evacuated on Colonel Dittmer's instructions, Captain Scott had not rejoined, and Lieutenant Keiha commanded with Lieutenant Reedy (slightly wounded) and Lieutenant Tuhiwai. In D Company Major Dyer still had Lieutenants Logan and Ormond, the latter slightly wounded. Major Bertrand had rejoined Battalion Headquarters but was still far from well.

The fighting strength of the battalion had been reduced by approximately 140 killed, wounded, missing, and left behind in dressing stations; much of its equipment, scanty enough at the best, was gone and the only thing plentiful was fighting spirit. Small-arms ammunition was very short and was carefully rationed.

The afternoon and next morning (the 25th) passed in comparative peace in the rear of the line. Early afternoon saw the enemy attempt to break through to Canea. The 18th Battalion and the Petrol Company bore the brunt of the opening thrust. A breach was made and 20 Battalion thrown in to fill the gap. Step by step the line was forced back

in heavy fighting and 23 Battalion was ordered forward. The **21st Battalion** moved into 23 Battalion's area and the Maoris were ordered to stand by for a counter-attack at dusk. **Galatas** was lost and regained by 23 Battalion at the bayonet's point. New Zealand has few more gallant feats of arms to relate than the counter-attack at **Galatas**, but the Maoris were not involved. Although **Galatas** was again in our hands both flanks had been bent back, and about nine o'clock that night 28 Battalion was moved forward to the rear of 4 Brigade and warned to prepare for a counter-attack.

It was a tough assignment. The troops were required to move at night over unknown country towards an objective that could not be identified and with no knowledge of the enemy positions.

Major Dyer led the battalion across country towards 4 Brigade while **Colonel Dittmer** went to a brigade conference. There is a passage in *Infantry Brigadier*⁵⁰ that describes the conference and its result:

It was quite dark when we arrived at Brigade Headquarters and we stumbled round for some time among the trees. **Inglis** [Commanding 4 Brigade] was in a tarpaulin-covered hole in the ground, seated at a table with a very poor light.... **Dittmer**, the **Maori Battalion** commander, arrived a moment after me. **Inglis** was anxious to use the Maoris in a night attack and recover the ground. It was clear to all of us that if this was not feasible **Crete** was lost. It was a difficult operation, perhaps impossible: darkness, olive-trees, vineyards, no good start-line, only 400 men in the battalion. **Dittmer** said it was difficult; I said it could not be done and that it would need two fresh battalions. **Inglis** rightly pressed, remarking that we were done if it did not come off—'Can you do it, George?' **Dittmer** said, 'I'll give it a go!' We sat silently looking at a map; and then Gentry, the G.I, lowered himself into the hole. **Inglis** explained the position. Without hesitation Gentry said 'No'—the Maoris were our last fresh battalion and if used now we would not be able to hold a line to-morrow.

It is important not to attempt the impossible in war, particularly

when you have lost a fifth of your force with no replacements available.

Colonel Dittmer hurried to countermand the preparations and the troops returned to the position they had just left. Fourth Brigade was to withdraw that night and 5 Brigade would be holding the front line with 21 Battalion on the coast, 19 Battalion centre, and 28 Battalion left, with its left flank resting on the **Alikianou- Canea** road. South of the road was the depleted **19 Australian Brigade**. The morning (the 26th) followed the pattern the troops were getting used to—a thorough going over by low-flying planes. The Maoris were well dug in and escaped lightly though nerves were getting ragged under the constant punishment, the lack of sleep and the scanty meals. A German patrol tested A Company's defences but was quickly turned back; in reprisal A Company and 19 Battalion, on its right, were fiercely mortared for two hours. During the afternoon the Australians were heavily engaged, their left flank forced back, and their right penetrated at two points. Readjusting the position left a dangerous gap on the Maoris' left, which was met by 12 Platoon forming a flank along the **Alikianou** road, where it was reinforced by the Battalion 'I' section and other oddments and later by some Greeks who were distributed among the platoon.

It was nearly dark when a Greek soldier reported to B Company that the enemy was marching towards the position along the road and a suitable reception was arranged. The platoon was told not to fire until Lieutenant Stewart at the far end of the line gave the word, which would be a blast from his tommy gun. The Maoris hidden above the bank watched at about ten paces while the Germans, four abreast, swung into the ambush. As soon as the head of the German column was opposite him Stewart gave the signal, and the platoon came into action with captured spandaus and grenades and its own tommy guns and grenades. The ambushed Germans were almost annihilated. The survivors took shelter in houses on the roadside but were ferreted out and dealt with.

A warning order to prepare for another withdrawal came in while the 12 Platoon action was in progress and was confirmed a couple of hours later. The companies concentrated about half a mile to the rear, at the

spot where they had slept on the night of the 23rd. B Company was still leap-frogging down the **Alikianou- Canea** road when the head of the column moved off. Lieutenant C. Bennett left **Private Monty Wikiriwhi** to follow with B Company along the route they had reconnoitred that morning. The pair had distinguished themselves by capturing an English general, who had not appeared to relish being bailed up by a couple of tough-looking Maoris and made to identify himself. The name of General Weston meant nothing to them at the time, but his promise that they would hear more of it at a later date was not very reassuring. In actual fact, the **Royal Marines** were nearly deprived of a general for he was a little slow in putting his hands up.

The withdrawal route was across country, then back to the main road east of **Canea**, turning off to the right again at a road known as 42nd Street, a sunken road south-east of **Canea** and two miles west of **Suda Bay**, where the battalion arrived a little before dawn. The men were very tired and very hungry and dropped into whatever shelter they could find. A minimum number of sentries was posted as the battalion was thought to be behind a British brigade. That was the position as **Colonel Dittmer** understood it, but in actual fact there were no troops at all between the Maoris and the enemy.

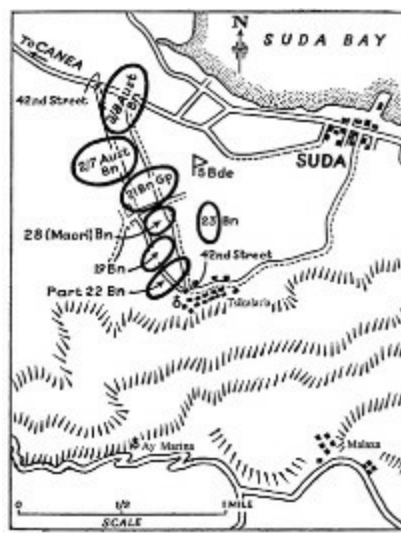
The general position at that moment was that the original four vital areas on **Crete** had been reduced to three; **Maleme** had gone and **Suda** was about to follow. The battle for **Crete** had been half lost when **Maleme** had been wrested from 5 Brigade and wholly lost after **Galatas** had been conceded to the enemy. The decision had been forced on **General Freyberg** that **Crete** must be evacuated at the earliest possible moment—if the overworked and under-strength fleet could get the troops away. The force in **Suda Bay** area was to withdraw to **Sfakia** on the south coast and General Weston had been put in command of all forward troops, which included the New Zealand Division.

General Freyberg's communications were now so disrupted that his subordinate commanders were not always in touch with him, and orders

sometimes arrived after they had been cancelled and new ones issued to deal with the changing circumstances. The consequence was that General Weston thought he had disposed his rearguard; **Brigadier Hargest** thought he had put 5 Brigade in the front line, and his battalion commanders in accordance with their latest instructions thought they were in reserve and resting with a covering force between them and the enemy. The German commander had also made his decision as to how to end the conflict—a concentric attack to pin the troops in and about **Canea**, where they were mistakenly supposed still to be.

After first light the Maoris, still very tired but even more hungry, were exploring a dump of engineer material near by. **Colonel Dittmer**, looking for Brigade Headquarters, met Colonel Allen ⁵¹ (21 Battalion) on the same mission. The pair felt that things were not as they were supposed to be and were talking the matter over when General Weston joined them. He asked what they were doing there and said they should be marching south with the rest of the New Zealanders. The General was not known by sight to **Colonel Dittmer** and was told they were there because they had been told to be there and would not move until they got orders from their own brigadier. The General did not press the point and walked away, probably thinking uncomplimentary things about New Zealand colonels.

Brigadier Hargest's headquarters could not be found, so after conferring with Major Blackburn ⁵² (CO 19 Battalion) the two commanders decided to arrange their troops tactically.



42ND STREET POSITIONS, 27 MAY 1941

42nd Street positions, 27 May 1941

Colonel Dittmer, from his headquarters in a sunken tent-hole, minus the tent, called his company commanders together, explained what he had arranged with Colonel Allen, and told them to get their men together and take up a defensive position east of 42nd Street. A Company would be on the right flank adjoining 21 Battalion, B Company centre, and C Company, left, in touch with 19 Battalion. D and Headquarters Companies were to move slightly further east into reserve.

While the company commanders were getting into position, Colonels **Dittmer** and Allen met again and after further discussion arranged that if the unexpected happened and the enemy got too close they would open fire and charge. It was a bold decision for morale was not at its highest. A sense of frustration was bearing heavily on the spirits of the troops; retreat, retreat, retreat, and seldom a chance to hit back. But the colonels knew that if the need arose the rank and file would not fail.

It was fortunate that the two commanders had prepared for the worst for low-flying planes, a sure sign that enemy troops were not far away, made an unwelcome appearance. It was about this time that Captain Scott, still weak with dysentery, reported in and took over command of C Company from Lieutenant Keiha.

That was the position when a runner from 2/7 Australian Battalion arrived with a message asking what the New Zealanders had in mind in

the case of an enemy breakthrough. The runner was told of the decision to counter-attack and departed, but quickly returned with a further message to the effect that the Australians would be pleased to be associated in any such action.

I Battalion, the leading unit of *141 Mountain Regiment*, was, as a matter of fact, very close indeed and intent on cutting the road west of **Suda Bay. It will be remembered that the terrain was covered with olive trees which, while giving some cover from the air, also obscured the view from the ground.**

Picture the scene: groups of tired and hungry men believing themselves safe for the time being and resting in the sunshine, grabbing their equipment before seeking shelter from the roaring menaces above. A rumble followed by a series of explosions and a cloud of smoke from the direction of the engineers' dump. A ragged rattle of small-arms fire, surprisingly close, and bullets mowing the leaves off the trees.... The Maori reaction was immediate—there was a glint of steel and a rattle as bayonets were fixed, then another rattle as magazines were filled and safety-catches released. ⁵³

A, B, and C Companies jostled for starting positions in the confined area of 42nd Street, now immediately in front of the battalion; B Company, led by Captain Royal brandishing a bamboo walking pole like a taiaha in one hand and a revolver in the other, and C Company following Captain Scott got into 42nd Street first and deployed across the battalion front. By this time the Germans were within 200 yards of the sunken-road start line and advancing in sections dispersed in frontage and depth.

The appearance of a line of yelling Maoris sent them to ground and they opened heavy defensive fire which caused casualties in B Company. Meanwhile, A Company had left 42nd Street and was quickly in the an of the attack, with units on each flank of the battalion in full cry. A few stray Greek soldiers added their Hellenic yells to the blood-curdling din.

Section after section of the enemy was overrun as the Maoris fanned out and swept around them and then went in for the kill. Some used rifle and bayonet, some threw grenades, and some rushed forward with spandaus at the hip while their mates ran alongside carrying the belt containers. Casualties still continued, including Lieutenant Stewart killed.

Sundry others besides the three assaulting companies thought up good reasons for being in the party: **Major Dyer**, who with Corporals Hemi ⁵⁴ and Matthews happened to be in the vicinity when the firing started, went forward to 'investigate'; the adjutant, the 'I' officer, and the RSM all decided that the position must be examined carefully and personally. **Lieutenant Urlich**, who was taking Lieutenant Porter, newly out of hospital and still bandaged, to report to Captain Banker, met the latter returning to have his newly acquired wound dressed. The pair carried on and Porter took command of A Company, which had just finished dealing with some twenty Germans dispersed along a dry creek-bed and was continuing its advance beyond.

The clearing of the creek-bed about 800 yards from 42nd Street was practically the end of the German resistance for those still alive threw away much of their equipment and disappeared westwards. They were chased for another 400–500 yards before fire from houses and a road where a second German battalion was deployed gave the harried I Battalion some relief.

At this point **Major Bertrand**, who had been sent by the CO to prevent the Maoris from going too far, caught up and said the 'Old Man was going fair dincumb crook' and to come back at once. Over eighty dead Germans were counted on the battalion sector for the loss of 10 killed and 14 wounded. The 'I' officer, Lieutenant Bennett, later reported:

The German machine gunners had taken up positions on our flanks and an attacking party of infantry were moving up between them. The enemy had put out a screen of Cretan civilians and these poor people

received the full blast of our weapons and several were killed. One of them was a policeman I knew well at **Platanias** and after the action I went over to where he was lying seriously wounded in the stomach but still conscious and he smiled a recognition. I arranged for him to be taken to the RAP but he died before this could be done—still smiling and still on our side. It should be noted that not only were these people used as a screen but as pack horses for the transport of their heavy equipment.

The enemy had learned the wisdom of prudence and, always excepting the **German Air Force**, the Maoris were not further molested that day, but neither 19 Australian nor 5 New Zealand Brigade's commander could get any firm orders about the withdrawal they knew was in progress. Finally, they gave themselves orders.

The Australians would go first after dusk and take up a position at **Neon Khorion** while 5 Brigade made for **Stilos** by way of the **Suda Bay** road as far as the turn-off south to **Beritiana**. A detachment consisting of A and B Companies under the command of Captain Royal would fall out at the turn-off and, assisted by a body of Commandos about 100 strong, would form a rearguard.

The problem of evacuating the 42nd Street casualties was partly solved by Captain Baker, himself a walking wounded case, who took charge of the other walking wounded and, as an armed party, started off ahead of the brigade. The seriously wounded had to be left behind.

A and B Companies were given final instructions at the turnoff, which was reached shortly after midnight; they, with the commando unit, were to deny the road junction until nine o'clock that night (28 May) and so gain time for the preparation of holding positions further south.

Captain Royal, with Lieutenant Porter, OC A Company, Lieutenant Te Puni (A Company), and Lieutenant Pene, OC B Company, made a quick reconnaissance in the darkness while the troops who had found

some rations had a meal. While the rest of 5 Brigade was passing through an all-round position was organised and the troops put on the ground, but the dispositions had to be altered somewhat unexpectedly. A Canadian captain in charge of the Commandos who were guarding high ground to the west and a bridge that was later to be demolished sent an urgent request for reinforcements. Sixty of his men, Spanish volunteers under a Spanish sergeant, had marched away with the last of 5 Brigade. Lieutenant Pene took 11 and 12 Platoons into the area, the bridge was blown, and the Maoris waited the dawn. We must return to the battalion in the meantime.

To make the next few days explicable it is only necessary to mention that the German commander in **Crete** mistakenly thought that his enemy in the **Suda Bay** area had retired eastwards towards **Retimo** and **Heraklion** and, in consequence, only light forces were sent after the troops retiring to the south.

The 28th Battalion, less A and B Companies, reached **Stilos**⁵⁵ after a tough 15-mile march and the men had about three hours' badly needed sleep before they were awakened by firing. The *85th Mountain Regiment*, following a route high in the foothills, bumped into 23 Battalion north of **Stilos**. The vanguard was roughly handled by 23 Battalion and soon withdrew. Beyond standing-to, the Maoris were not involved.

It was assumed that 23 Battalion had turned back the advance elements of a larger force and **Brigadier Hargest** discussed with his commanders the pros and cons of fighting where they stood, then trying to win clear at night. It was generally agreed that such a feat was not possible, so there remained the prospect of marching by day along the only road and taking the risk of planes spotting them.

Colonel Dittmer was against this course on the ground that half his battalion were still at the turn-off north of **Beritiana** and the rest of the Maoris would take a dim view of leaving them high and dry. **Brigadier Hargest** replied that they were cut off in any case but that he would do

all in his power to get a message back to them. He considered that A and B Companies would have already concluded that the **Stilos** road was cut and would be doing something about withdrawing.

A despatch rider was sent with withdrawal orders but he did not get through. Some carriers and a tank were also sent back but were stopped by guns which the enemy now had covering the road between **Beritiana** and **Stilos**. Pursuant to an arrangement to pass 5 Brigade through **19 Australian Brigade**, 23 Battalion began to thin out and **Colonel Dittmer** was preparing to follow them when a message from 23 Battalion said that another attack was pending. The sound of mingled Maori and pakeha yells behind the massing enemy caused another quick dispersion, but had they not been so precipitate they would have found in their rear only a small number of commando stragglers and walking wounded Maoris.

The battalion moved off behind 23 Battalion about 10 a.m. and made use of all available cover by marching in single file on each side of the road. Planes were overhead and the troops often had to dive for shelter but were successful in escaping attention. An hour's march brought them to Babali Hani [Babali Inn] where they rested for half an hour and listened to the sounds of a sharp engagement behind them. The enemy had finally made up his mind and was having it altered again by a mixed force of Commandos and Australians.

The troops marched on, climbing towards the pass over the towering **White Mountains**, 3000 feet higher than **Stilos** where the brigade had last fought. At three in the afternoon the battalion arrived at **Vrises**, where a three-hour halt was taken before the real ten-mile climb zigzagged, serpentine, and hairpinned over the pass. It was joined there by Captain Baker and some of the walking wounded who had gone on ahead. Those who felt unable to keep pace with the battalion kept moving independently. To spread more evenly the weight they were carrying, automatics were stripped and the parts and magazines distributed among the riflemen.

On the road was abandoned equipment and ordes of stragglers—some who had fallen out from their units, some who had left the battle over-early, some who had no unit to march with, and the balance made up of Cretans, Cypriots, and British troops. To avoid delay the battalion marched on the left of the road hard up against the bank, with instructions to stop when the Colonel held up his hand. He was the sole judge of the intention and imminence of enemy planes and a lot of time was thereby saved, for it had been found that those who leaped for over invariably jumped down off the road and took some time to climb back again.

It was near dusk and the tired, hungry, and thirsty Maoris were nearing the end of the climb over the first main ridge when an explosion was heard, and a little afterwards they saw the reason or cause. The road had been mined and instructions given to blow it at a certain time. Times had gone awry but the road was blown, in spite of the fact that an endless line of troops was still below it. The demolition spelt the end of any transport still coming and meant a difficult climb around it for the already dead-beat infantry.

There was, however, one bright spot which might be called the story of the unknown padre. Almost at the foot of the demolition was a well and a padre with a leaky biscuit tin attached to a line of web equipment. As fast as he could haul his tin up he filled the steel helmets of the waiting troops, who then tried to pour the liquid into their water-bottles or drank it forthwith. It was not very clean water to start with, and after you have worn a steel helmet day and night for a week it is in no shape for use as a water basin. Nobody knew that padre nor have the writer's inquiries been successful in identifying him. The Maori gratitude is best suggested by Kipling:

**But of all the drinks I've drunk,
I'm gratefulest to one from GUNGA DIN.**

Hour after hour the battalion marched, hampered by the stragglers who became more numerous the farther it went. Everybody was

determined that no Maori would be left behind even if the others had to carry him, and sergeants and officers dashed across the road whenever such a group was passed, taking a look at the faces of the stragglers. The Cypriots were the cause of much concern for they are of a brownish hue and, particularly from dusk onwards, easily mistaken for Maoris. To the sharp inquiry 'You 28 Battalion?' they shook an uncomprehending head or answered in their own tongue and the inquirer would rejoin the column.

Major Bertrand, whose military religion was march discipline which he preached with an insistence that sometimes left his listeners with tingling ears, had his reward that night. 'I was in charge of the rear of the battalion,' he wrote, 'and took over all stragglers in what could be called a "Stragglers Platoon". There was not a great number of them. The march discipline of the men was splendid and their reaction to previous strenuous training in marching and march discipline and care of feet in England and on the ship *Athlone Castle* on the way to ME showed the value of this part of their training. So far as I know we never lost a single man on this most arduous and nervestraining move from 42nd Street to Spakia though many of the men must have been very near breaking point at times. To my mind it was a wonderful show. To retain one's identity in the midst of so much general confusion, to emerge after several days fighting and strenuous marching and bombing from the air still a disciplined fighting unit speaks volumes for 28 Bn and makes a splendid page in their already fine history. They never lost their grip.'

Lieutenant Logan, who as a senior NCO and junior subaltern had often smarted under the Major's strictures, realised their value when the test came. He has written:

With darkness coming on, little food and after a hard day the men were moving automatically, almost insensible to time and place. It was then that I had the greatest difficulty in holding them together and keeping them moving. After the usual ten minutes halt the task would have been impossible without the assistance of men like Tainui,

Matthews and several more of the really tough soldiers. As the night wore on kicks and swear words had to be used. Some of the men had almost given in and pleaded for 'Just another five minutes and I'll be OK' and 'I'll catch you up but just let me have a little sleep.' I often found myself, after ten minutes halt and sleep, rolling over on to my stomach, struggling on to my hands and knees and walking straight off from that position. Throughout the march, my batman Jim Koti ⁵⁶ was like a giant. A heart as big as a horse and no complaints.

They staggered over the top of the [White Mountains](#), on to the upland [Askifou Plain](#), halted near [Sin Ammoudhari](#) at 3 a.m., and slept where they stood.

Back at the turn-off A and B Companies had been attacked at first light and 10 Platoon (Sergeant Eddie Morgan) was, on account of mortaring, withdrawn from the forward slope of the ridge it was holding. As an alternative a Bren gun manned by Private Makoare ⁵⁷ of A Company and two stray Australians, who had volunteered for the job, covered the ridge from a flank.

The Maoris found that they were holding a plateau among some guns that had been abandoned and their breech blocks removed. Generally their position was not an enviable one— transport could be seen coming down the coast road towards the blown bridge, infantry had got behind them in the direction of Kalami, while others were plainly in sight streaming down the ridges on to the road to [Stilos](#).

The Maoris were being fired on heavily when the commando captain reported that the remainder of his men had withdrawn, probably when their colleagues from [Suda](#) had passed through. A and B Companies were then, with the Canadian, his batman and the two Australians, the sole opposition to the German advanced guard. In effect, the usefulness of Royal's rearguard position had passed, for the demolished bridge led to [Stilos](#) and the enemy was pushing eastwards to [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#). In addition, German patrols could be clearly seen climbing down the ridges to the road between [Beritiana](#) and [Stilos](#).

Captain Royal decided to give his wounded a chance to escape if it was not already too late. There were a few walking and two stretcher cases in B Company and one seriously wounded and several walking cases in A Company. Four fit men were detailed to each stretcher, told to throw away their rifles and trust to luck if they were seen. The A Company party under command of Staff-Sergeant H. Y. T. Samuel marched straight up the road and was not molested, although Samuel afterwards stated that it had passed in full view and at close range of an enemy group.

The B Company party kept off the road and managed to worm its way past parties of Germans moving across its line of march. The stretcher cases, Privates 'Darkie' Hall ⁵⁸ and Ted Leonard, ⁵⁹ pleaded to be left behind so that the others could have a better chance to escape. The bearers' answer was to throw away the stretchers and carry the patients. It was quicker that way. Some time during the morning the walking wounded disagreed over the route and the party divided, which accounts for the Maoris among the stragglers interrupting the attack on 23 Battalion. We must leave the other four carrying their wounded mates for the moment.

Firing died down as the morning passed. Evidently the enemy was in no hurry to gather in the stubborn opposition as there was no possibility of their escaping. Captain Royal, inclined to the same opinion, was considering the problem when he saw a tuatara with its head pointing directly over a cliff at the rear of the plateau. It is common knowledge that the tuatara exists only in New Zealand and consequently could not be in [Crete](#); it is common knowledge that the British Army saw angels at Mons in 1914. Undoubtedly the old-time Maori god of war, Tu of the Red Eyes, had sent a sign to his people. It is no use suggesting that on [Crete](#) there may be a lizard that bears a superficial resemblance to a tuatara. To Captain Royal it was a tuatara and that is the end of it. The tuatara vanished and Royal decided to accept the omen and take his command down the apparently sheer cliff.

By this time two more men had been hit and it took over an hour to scramble down the cliff, swim a river at the bottom, and help the walking wounded along. Over the river was a field of barely, but tracer from somewhere set it alight and the troops had to run for it into a harvested field. There, like Ruth, 'They stood amid the alien corn' but not for the same reason—there were enemy planes overhead.

Thereafter the march was not interrupted until near **Armenoi** village on the road to **Neon Khorion**, whence it will be remembered the Australians had marched from 42nd Street. An attempt to bypass the village was turned back by enemy fire and the Maoris returned to the road. It was decided to go straight through the village and fight if necessary. Bayonets were fixed and the Maoris formed two lines—one on each side of the road, with Brens at intervals and spandaus in the rear. Royal led the column from the centre of the road with three tommy-gunners in arrowhead formation on either side of him. In this manner they passed through **Armenoi** without hindrance and turned off the road by a church where a path led uphill away from possible pursuit. The tail of the column had cleared the road before the Germans in the village opened fire, which was returned by Maori-operated spandaus. An enemy motorcycle section made an appearance from somewhere and got the same medicine. That was the last hazard. From there the party followed a track which brought it on to the main road behind the Australians, and eventually with its two wounded men, Corporal Mita Francis ⁶⁰ and Private Toi Wharewera, ⁶¹ mounted on commandeered donkeys, the column caught up with eight dog-tired Maoris of B Company still carrying their wounded mates.

Concerning the meeting Lieutenant Pene wrote: 'I was very glad to see my brother in law (Bunny Jacobs) ⁶² and the rest alive and wondered at the time how they made it with their wounded since it had been pretty sticky with us.'

It was dark by this time and the two companies marched and rested until they were challenged:

‘Halt! Who are you?’

‘A and B Companies 28 Maori Battalion.’

‘Thank God!’

Major Bertrand stepped on to the road and led them to their position in the battalion bivouac at **Sin Ammoudhari**.

Colonel Dittmer held a conference with his officers in the morning (29 May) and Captain Baker resumed command of A Company after his two-day absence. There were strays of 23 Battalion, 2/8 Australian Battalion, and 1 Battalion, The Welch Regiment, among the Maoris. After details of reorganisation had been attended to the very urgent question of rations was considered. Since the 22nd (a week before) maintenance had been well below scale, but to a limited extent supplies had been replenished from German sources—enemy killed had supplied a quota from their emergency rations and containers of supplies had dropped in and near the Maori area—but at that moment there were no Germans dead or alive in the vicinity and the unit had eaten its own reserve rations and was without food of any kind. The CO authorised the companies to send out foraging parties to see what could be found in the deserted houses at **Sin Ammoudhari**, with the proviso that if the owners were about they must be paid what they asked. There was nobody about.

The result of the forage was four small pigs, a few fowls and a collection of vegetables, not much for four hundred hungry Maoris. A poaka cum poultry stew was in the making when another crisis occurred. The battalion was to march from **Sin Ammoudhari** some seven miles across the **Askifou** plain to the Vitsilokoumos area, which in turn was about 2000 feet above and three miles north of a fishing village called **Sfakia**. The battalion was furthermore to march at once instead of at 4.30 p.m., the time originally laid down, and it appeared that somebody would inherit an unexpected meal.

Major Bertrand was equal to the occasion and detailed a carrying

party commanded by himself to stay back until the stew was cooked. Both the meal and its bearers were welcomed with fervour on their arrival.

Meanwhile the Maoris had marched along the side of the road in single columns by sections to a running commentary of threats from dispersed and leaderless troops who feared the appearance of enemy planes. The Maoris replied with derisive actions and marched on.

From a dressing station near the road came a warning from Major Fisher, the original battalion MO, that all marching troops must remove their steel helmets while passing through the **Red Cross** area. A man feels very naked without his tin that and it was a relief to see the tents and flags of the dressing station drop behind, although the German airmen fully respected this area while the Maoris were there. The troops were halted before they reached the end of the formed road above **Sfakia** and were dispersed along a ravine under sparse cover, ate their delayed meal when it arrived, and slept.

Planes were circling the area in the morning (30th) and explosions sounded much nearer. Early instructions were that the battalion would be embarking during the night and the Maoris were not to move until evening. Weapons would be carried but there would be no rations issued because there were none to issue. Revised orders came in the afternoon: owing to shipping losses 4 and 5 Brigades could not, as originally planned, both be taken off that night. The 28th Battalion allotment was 230 all ranks to embark; the remainder would be commanded, together with other troops, by Colonel Burrows and would protect Force Headquarters; officers detailed to remain were **Major Dyer**, OC, and Lieutenants Porter (A Company), Pene (B Company), Tuhiwai (C Company), **Logan** (D Company), and **Urlich** (Headquarters Company).

Colonel Dittmer objected strongly to the arrangement—he maintained that all the battalion should go or all should stay; failing that either he or **Major Bertrand** should remain with the rear party. He was overruled on both counts.

While this unpalatable information was being digested yet another and final order was received: six officers and 144 other ranks were to stay behind and carry out the role of protecting Force Headquarters. **Major Dyer** would be in command with Captain Royal as second-in-command, and the company allocation (with arms) was as follows:

		<i>Brens Tommy Guns</i>	
A Company	... 27 ORs and 1 officer	2	3
B Company	... 26 ORs and 2 officers	2	2
C Company	... 50 ORs and 1 officer	2	3
D Company	... 22 ORs and 2 officers	3	2
HQ Company	... 19 ORs and nil officers	1	1

Lieutenant Urlich, transferred for the purpose to A Company, commanded both A and Headquarters Companies' detachments.

Each company commander was to nominate its quota to stay back but the distasteful task was made easier by the number of volunteers. 'You go boy. You have a wife and kinds at home and I haven't.' There were, in fact, more than enough volunteers to stay, and some had to be sternly ordered to prepare for evacuation. The two Australians were still with the unit and the Maoris wanted to keep them, but they were not on the battalion roll and had to be sent away. They were given a certificate to the effect that they were not stragglers but good fighting men who had lost their unit and voluntarily joined 28 Battalion.

By 6 p.m. everything was ready. Arms had been passed over to the 'Stayers' by the 'Goers' as well as some tins of golden syrup, marmalade, and jam disgorged by careful foragers. Captain Royal was presented with a young rabbit his men had caught that day. After quiet farewells and handshakes the 'Suicide Company', as they had been named, watched the battalion move off into the dusk and clamber down the steep track to the embarkation beach.

At the bottom of the track the men were divided into groups of fifty, each under an officers; all were carefully checked by **Colonel Dittmer** and then waited for embarkation. At midnight MLCs drew on to the

beach and the troops were taken to the destroyers standing off shore. They were fully loaded by 3 a.m. and silently stole away from **Crete** but not from danger. Soon after dawn specks in the sky grew into enemy hawks and the destroyers, like young hares, twisted and doubled about to elude the menace overhead. **Colonel Dittmer** wrote: 'It was a real thrill during these attacks to see how destroyers could be manoeuvred at full speed to dodge the sticks of bombs and delightful to watch the enthusiastic actions of the ship's anti aircraft gunners while they strafed the enemy bombers.' One destroyer, HMS *Napier*, did in fact suffer a near miss which damaged her engines and she was able to proceed only at reduced speed.

The eventual arrival of friendly planes enabled the Navy to steer a direct course for Egypt and the CO ordered the battalion to get shaved and cleaned up for disembarkation. Shaving was something of a problem with about one razor to each company but the sailors produced sufficient spares, hot water, and soap for the operation. Some members of the battalion, because such foibles are permitted in the Army, sported moustaches of a surprising vigour.

Alexandria was reached by 7 p.m., and then the troops fell in by companies and marched ashore carrying all their possessions—arms and ammunition; nothing else. Tea, cakes, and cigarettes were awaiting them before they boarded vehicles provided by a South African unit and were driven to **Amiriya**, where a service conducted by the padre was held immediately on arrival. It ended with a special prayer for those still in peril on Crete.

After the battalion had moved off **Major Dyer's** party gathered together for mutual comfort for the men were resigned to the thought that they would probably never get off **Crete** and felt the need for companionship. Private Wipaki, ⁶³ a very practically minded man, thought a cup of tea would be helpful, so having scrounged a billy and the necessary tea leaves he built a cairn of stones round his proposed fireplace so that the flames would not be seen. (It was not safe to show a lighted cigarette for fear of being fired on by panicky troops, and there

were also night-flying reconnaissance planes about.) For added safety a blanket was put over the top of the cairn but it unfortunately caught fire before the billy boiled. Yells of 'Put that bloody fire out or we'll fire' hastened the fire-fighting. The second attempt to make the tea was successful and Wipaki produced a few mouthfuls of tea for which he was gratefully thanked.

At first light **Major Dyer** was ordered to take a position behind the Australians holding the perimeter in case infiltrating patrols got through the cordon along the ridge. He was just in time to intercept a German patrol which was liquidated with the help of covering fire from the Australians. The troops were disappointed to find that their late enemies were also without rations.

Further orders sent the Maoris to **Komitadhes** village, about two miles along the beach, in support of **Layforce** which was holding a position there. ⁶⁴ On the way they passed hundreds of leaderless and weaponless troops hiding in watercourses and ravines. One party was roasting a donkey over an open fire. The enemy had been taught caution so thoroughly that the day passed quietly. A ration party returned with some rations and five fowls it had captured on the way. It was not very long before there was chicken broth.

Late that afternoon **Major Dyer** was instructed to report with his party to Colonel Andrew at **Sfakia**, on the edge of a small shingle cove, and cover the embarkation to take place that night. On the way the column met a small party of Maoris sitting on the side of the track. They were walking wounded whose truck had broken down and who had marched most of the way across Crete. **Dyer's** orders, however, were strict and definite that not more than 150 Maoris were to embark and the column marched on. Fortunately, the plight of these wounded men came to the notice of **Brigadier Hargest** who, though busy enough in all conscience, was not too busy to take time off and personally march them up to **Major Dyer** with his instructions to attach them to the strength of the Suicide Company.

The Maoris formed an inner cordon around the beach and 22 Battalion an outer cordon. The leaderless stragglers closed in on the cordon, but the fixed bayonets and determined faces kept them at a distance until nearly dusk when a machine-gunning plane created a diversion and an unsuccessful attempt was made to break the line. It was not a sight to remember and is best forgotten.

About midnight a call came for 28 Battalion to go down to the beach and the **Royal Marines** took over. Two hours later the last Maoris were taken off on a landing craft. It was so heavily overloaded that some had to go overboard to lighten ship and get her moving. When the craft was finally waterborne and everybody on board, there were only two inches of freeboard and the men were cautioned not to move.

And so the last of the **Maori Battalion** left Crete.

¹A full belly makes a brave heart.

²Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Timaru**, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Brigade 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.

³ **Maj J. P. Snadden**, MC; **Wellington**; born **Te Kuiti**, 24 May 1913; salesman; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Mar-Oct 1944; twice wounded.

⁴ **Maj W. J. G. Roach**, MC; Inglewood; born **Levin**, 12 Oct 1909; bank officer; 2 i/c **21 Bn** Oct 1943-Mar 1944; wounded 22 Nov 1941. The Field Punishment Centre contained men from all units, including 28 Battalion, who were expiating various military crimes, mostly misunderstandings with the provosts in **Canea**. When the attack came they were all soon armed and shot their share of Germans. The surviving inmates of the 'Clinic' eventually rejoined their own units, and when the Division reassembled in Egypt the balance of their sentences was remitted.

- ⁵ **WO II G. Te Hou**; Tirau; born Tirau, 5 Apr 1912; labourer; twice wounded.
- ⁶ **Capt W. T. Ngata**; **Wellington**; born NZ 16 Oct 1908; school-teacher; wounded 31 May 1941; served in 2 (Maori) Bn in NZ, 1942–44; 28 Bn, 1944–46.
- ⁷ **Capt E. V. Hayward**; **Rotorua**; born **Rotorua**, 11 Sep 1916; labourer.
- ⁸ **L-Cpl D. Hakaraia**; born NZ 15 Aug 1905; labourer; killed in action May 1941.
- ⁹ **Lt-Col E. R. Harford**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Waitara; born **Nelson**, 8 Mar 1904; farm manager; 2 i/c Div Cav Regt Jan-Apr 1942.
- ¹⁰ **Pte J. Epiha**; born Matauri Bay, 4 Dec 1917; labourer.
- ¹¹ **Sgt H. T. De La Croix**; born **Kaikohe**, 10 Mar 1910; labourer.
- ¹² The enemy had planned to launch his attack on 15 May, but because of delays in his preparations it was postponed first to the 17th and then to the 20th.
- ¹³ **Cpl T. E. Duncan**, MM; born NZ 24 Feb 1917; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.
- ¹⁴ There is little doubt that this plane fell a victim to the battalion's self-appointed anti-aircraft sections. Brens were tied to or rested against the branches of olive trees and anti-tank rifles were also used in a role never envisaged by the inventor. The aircraft was seen to waver when directly overhead, then dive for the beach, where it received the combined attentions of the battalion mortars, D Company small arms, and the guns of C Troop, 5 Field Regiment.
- ¹⁵ **Capt P. Tureia**; born Waiapu, 5 Jan 1897; civil servant; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁶ **Revenge**.

- 17 Capt R. F. Moody, MBE, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 15 Oct 1915; medical practitioner; p.w. 26 May 1941.**
- 18 Col D. F. Leckie, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1897; school-teacher; served in Canterbury Mounted Rifles Regt, Anzac Mounted Division, 1916–19; CO 23 Bn Aug 1940-Mar 1941, May 1941-Jun 1942; comd 75 Sub-Area, Middle East, Aug 1942-Mar 1944; wounded 25 May 1941.**
- 19 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.**
- 20 Capt J. Smith; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 13 Oct 1919; dairy hand; twice wounded.**
- 21 Pte J. Whare; born Poukawa, 27 Jan 1915; farmhand; killed in action 21 May 1941.**
- 22 Pte M. Bailey; born Wanganui, 11 Sep 1911; labourer; killed in action 21 May 1941.**
- 23 Cpl R. Kopu; Tarata; born Carterton, 3 Jun 1900; labourer.**
- 24 Cpl F. K. Curran; born NZ 31 May 1916; baker; died 16 Jun 1953.**
- 25 Lt G. McDonald; born NZ 24 Nov 1917; PWD survey staff; wounded 21 May 1941; killed in action 23 Dec 1943.**
- 26 Lt E. J. Ropata; born NZ 9 Mar 1911; motor driver; died of wounds 26 Oct 1942.**
- 27 Sgt D. Haronga; born Gisborne, 26 Sep 1905; labourer; died Rotorua, 5 Sep 1953.**
- 28 Sgt P. Manawatu; Tuahiwi, Nth Canterbury; born Palmerston North, 7**

Mar 1910; moulder; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

²⁹ **Lt-Col K. A. Keiha**, MC; **Lower Hutt**; born **Gisborne**, 24 Jan 1900; law clerk and interpreter; CO 28 Bn Apr-Sep 1943.

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

³¹ See also official war history *Crete*, D. M. Davin, for account of this attack.

³² **Lt-Col J. N. Anderson**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Te Awamutu**; born **Okaihau**, 15 Apr 1894; civil engineer; OC 19 Army Tps Coy May-Jun 1941; 5 Fd Pk Coy Sep 1941-Oct 1942; 6 Fd Coy Oct 1942-Jul 1943; CRE 2 NZ Div Sep 1942, Apr-Jul 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; Engr Trg Depot, **Maadi**, Jan-Aug 1945.

³³ **Cpl P. Timihou**; **Rotorua**; born **Rotorua**, 25 Nov 1914; labourer; wounded 3 Jul 1942.

³⁴ **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-.

³⁵ **Lt-Col R. B. Dawson**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Lower Hutt**; born **Rotorua**, 21 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; 23 Bn; BM 5 Bde, May-Sep 1941, Jan-Jun 1942; BM 6 Bde 1942–43; Senior Tactics Instructor, Royal Military College, **Duntroon**, Jul 1943-Jan 1946; CO 3 Bn, 2 NZEF Japan, Jun 1947-Oct

1948; Director of Plans, Army HQ.

³⁶ Capt A. Te Puni; Palmerston North; born Petone, 7 Sep 1907; carpenter; p.w. 4 Dec 1941.

³⁷ Capt H. J. MacDonald; Whangaruru South, North Auckland; born Napier, 9 Aug 1908; sheep-farmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³⁸ Capt J. G. Sullivan, DSO, m.i.d.; Cobb Valley, Nelson; born Greymouth, 1 Aug 1913; survey assistant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³⁹ Lt E. Morgan; Rotorua; born Thames, 20 Sep 1909; clerk; wounded 5 Aug 1942.

⁴⁰ WO I M. Te T. McRae, DCM; Rotorua; born Rotorua, 22 Feb 1907; engineer's assistant; wounded 23 May 1944.

⁴¹ Pte P. W. Kohere; East Cape; born East Cape, 19 Jul 1910; farm labourer; wounded 23 May 1941.

⁴² Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Apr 1912; warehouseman; OC 7 Fd Coy May 1941; CO 18 Armd Regt Dec 1943-Jan 1944; 20 Armd Regt Jan-May 1944; 18 Armd Regt Jul 1944-Feb 1945; wounded 6 Dec 1943.

⁴³ Maj P. G. Markham; Little River; born London, 8 Sep 1908; farm manager.

⁴⁴ Capt P. V. H. Maxwell, DSO; Christchurch; born Londonderry, 14 Feb 1906; manufacturer's representative; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁴⁵ Capt H. M. McDonald; Christchurch; born NZ 30 Apr 1916; interior decorator; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁴⁶ L-Cpl N. Tane; born Otorohanga, 2 Oct 1918; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941; killed in action 14 Dec 1941.

⁴⁷ Pte N. Wiwarena; born Rotorua, 10 Dec 1913; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941; died of wounds 26 Aug 1942.

⁴⁸ **Pte H. Katene**; Ngongotaha; born **Te Puke**, 12 Jul 1917; forestry worker; wounded and p.w. May 1941.

⁴⁹ Actually a beacon for the guidance of either shipping or aircraft.

⁵⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 69, Major-General Sir H. Kippenberger (Oxford University Press).

⁵¹ **Lt-Col J. M. Allen**, m.i.d.; born **Cheadle**, England, 3 Aug 1901; farmer; MP (Hauraki) 1938–41; CO **21 Bn** 17 May–28 Nov 1941; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

⁵² **Lt-Col C. A. D'A. Blackburn**, ED, m.i.d.; **Gisborne**; born **Hamilton**, 8 May 1899; public accountant; CO **19 Bn** Apr–Jun 1941; 1 Army Tank Brigade (NZ) 1942–43; CO 1 Army Tank Bn Jan–May 1943.

⁵³ Assault troops are firm believers in the theory of 'nine rounds in the mag and one up the spout' when a bayonet affray is likely.

⁵⁴ **Lt J. H. Hemi**, m.i.d.; Picton; born NZ 9 Jul 1916; labourer; wounded 4 Sep 1942.

⁵⁵ It should be mentioned that before starting for **Stilos D Company** acquired a Besa machine gun and carried it, plus belts of ammunition, right to **Stilos**. It was put on a truck the following day and finished up over the side of a ravine when the truck was cut off by a demolition.

⁵⁶ **Pte J. Koti**; born Taumarunui, 1 Nov 1917; labourer; twice wounded.

⁵⁷ **Pte M. Makoare**; Kaihu; born NZ 5 Mar 1919; farmhand; twice wounded.

⁵⁸ **Cpl C. Hall**; born NZ 2 Jun 1919; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

⁵⁹ **Cpl E. Leonard**; born NZ 21 Jul 1913; labourer; killed in action 16 Dec 1941.

⁶⁰ **Lt M. Francis; Rotorua; born Whakatane, 22 Jan 1918; bush worker; twice wounded.**

⁶¹ **L-Sgt T. Wharewera; Whakatane; born Whakatane, 4 Jan 1917; labourer; wounded May 1941.**

⁶² **Sgt B. Jacobs; Rotorua; born Matata, 15 Sep 1915; labourer; wounded 5 Jul 1942.**

⁶³ **Pte T. R. Wipaki; Whakatane; born Ohinemutu, 16 Apr 1911; labourer; wounded Nov 1941.**

⁶⁴**A commando force under Colonel R. E. Laycock.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 6 – SOLLUM AND GAZALA

CHAPTER 6

Sollum and Gazala

MAJOR Dyer's detachment received a vociferous welcome at Amiriya. Notes were compared concerning the trip, the weather, and the attentions of the enemy aircraft. There was unanimous admiration for the Royal Navy.

Two days were spent in the issue of essential kit, in drawing pay and in writing letters home, after which the battalion entrained for Helwan, where trucks met and took it to its tented area at nearby Garawi. Already in camp there were a number of men who had found their way back to Egypt direct from Greece or who had been discharged from hospital and convalescent camps. Captain Werohia was in command of them.

The battalion was issued with summer kit and, after a muster parade on which Colonel Dittmer warned the Maoris that they must live up to the good name won in Greece and Crete, departed on seven days' 'Survivors' Leave'. The CO spoke no platitude when he said the Maoris had won a good name in Greece and Crete. Their mana had been raised very considerably indeed among all ranks of the New Zealand Division, for any lingering doubts as to their ability to stand the stress of modern war had been finally stifled. They had 'Done well in all their doings', and henceforth the Maori soldier was spoken of as a fighter who carried a thirsty bayonet and who was never so happy as when he was arrayed in a comprehensive assortment of enemy equipment—in addition, of course, to his own.

Cairo, where the New Zealand Forces Club had recently opened, was the main leave centre and there were many happy reunions with friends and relatives in the newly arrived 5th Reinforcements encamped at Maadi, the base camp for the Division. On Sunday, 15 June, and before the reorganisation of the battalion commenced in earnest, Padre Harawira conducted a special church parade in memory of the fallen and

to offer thanks for a safe deliverance. The men sang the funeral hymn 'Piko nei te Matenga' ¹, followed, in accordance with Maori custom, with a hangi lunch. Then the Army took over again. Eleven officers and 240 men were marched in, mainly from the 5th Reinforcements, but there was also a continuous movement to and from schools of instruction and a continuous shuffling of men to and from specialist platoons. The difficulty—and it persisted throughout the war—was to find enough men with even rudimentary knowledge of many of the trades necessary to the running of a modern infantry unit. Before the war the only mechanical devices with which the Maori was really at home were the hand-pieces of shearing machines and the steering wheels of motor vehicles.

The first ceremonial parade of the reorganised battalion was witnessed by the King and Queen of Greece, who were accompanied by Prince Peter, General Freyberg, several of his staff and a sprinkling of ladies. The day concluded with an entertainment for the visitors provided by two haka parties, one from C Company led by Second-Lieutenant Pine Taiapa ² and the other from B Company under Corporal Nan Amohau. After the shaking-down period, training, in view of the likelihood of desert operations, consisted of compass marches by day and night, these leading up to night-approach marches and dawn attacks against an 'enemy' provided by the unit. As the efficiency of junior officers and senior NCOs in the use of the compass increased they plotted the courses for the exercises. Of course bayonet work, the battalion's specialty, figured largely in the syllabus. The familiar straw-filled dummies never failed to produce a spring into the step of troops who, on the other hand, could think up the most amazing excuses for missing a night march.

July followed much the same pattern, with the battalion settling down as the various schools completed their courses and the men returned to the unit. It was not all work and no play—there were picnics and sports, while the highlight of the month was a divisional swimming carnival held at Helwan on the 8th. The Maoris won more than their share of the events: the 100 yards invitation freestyle was won by

Lieutenant Pene and the 50 yards open by Private Manahi,³ while the ten-men relay race for the Freyberg Cup was also won by the battalion. Minor places were filled in the 50 yards invitation, 100 yards medley, and the 50 yards backstroke. As in England, the majority of the battalion's competitors came from the **Rotorua** district.

Towards the end of the month the unit moved to **Kabrit** on the **Bitter Lake** portion of the **Suez Canal** and with the rest of 5 Brigade underwent three weeks' combined operations training—landing from assault landing craft, learning the use of special equipment such as scaling ladders and poles, nets for crossing wire defences, and wire-cutters. The course culminated in an exercise in which the battalion embarked on a naval transport, sailed for some hours, manned assault landing craft and made a dawn beach landing.

On 15 August, the day before the unit departed, boat races were held between the Navy and 5 Brigade. Two crews were entered by each unit and three by the Navy and the event was decided by the fastest time over a set course. The Maori 'A' team was first and the 'B' team second. A Maori concert at the naval barracks ended a very enjoyable day. In the morning the troops packed up and marched to **Geneifa**, where they stayed for a couple of days before moving by MT to **Tahag**, some 20 miles west of **Ismailia**. There they remained until the end of August, training steadily, while 20 per cent went on daily leave to **Cairo** or **Port Said**. On 1 September an advance party left for a new location in the **Western Desert** where a fortress area was to be constructed as part of the defences of the **Nile** valley. The battalion followed two days later by train to **El Alamein**, 60 miles west of **Alexandria**, then by MT another 20 miles south-west of that inconspicuous railway halt that was later to become a name as familiar as **Waterloo**. Fortress A, better known to New Zealanders as the **Kaponga Box**, was a ten-square-mile semi-circle of low, steep-sided ridges in an area where the navigable desert, that is where mechanical transport could move freely, was, between north and south, only 40 miles wide; the coast was one flank and the **Qattara Depression** the other. The depression began at the bottom of a 700-foot cliff and

was the partially dried-out bed of a vanished sea, impassable for heavy vehicles and unsafe even for loaded camels.

The Maoris were engaged mainly in the formation of a ten-mile stretch of road connecting the Box with a similar defensive work at **Alamein**, but they also put in some time on construction and wiring. The 5th Field Company engineers who supervised the work were asked what length of road should be constructed per day, and after consulting their Field Service Pocket Books suggested that a working party of about ninety men should do up to one hundred yards. The battalion, always unorthodox in its approach to a new situation, completed 400 yards the first day with one company on the job. This apparent miracle was performed by putting experienced men, regardless of rank, in charge of the various gangs while the others, including the officers, worked under the direction of the experts.

The monotony of the role of a road construction unit isolated in the desert was broken by occasional swimming parades at the beach near **Alamein** and a concert by the re-formed **Kiwi Concert Party**. A letter from **Sir Apirana Ngata**, the 'Father' of the **Maori Battalion**, expressing the pride of the Maori people in the manner in which the battalion had acquitted itself in **Greece** and **Crete**, and assuring it that reinforcements were rapidly coming forward, helped to keep the morale of the troops at a high level. When 5 Brigade was advised that all work on **Kaponga** would cease at the end of September, 28 Battalion's share of the road was practically completed.

Fifth Brigade, with 28 Battalion under command, had been detached to General Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt, while working on the **Kaponga Box**, but was now to return to the New Zealand Division concentrated in the **Baggush** Box on the coast some 80 miles to the west. The move, across the desert and with no sign of road or track, was done in two easy stages commencing on 5 October. The basis of the march formation used had been worked out by the 'Desert Rats' (7 Armoured Division) before the war started. 'Desert formation', as it was styled, was eventually accepted, with minor variations, as an effective

formation for moving troops across the desert.

In the case of 5 Brigade, which with the attached Maori unit consisted of four battalions, there were two battalions forward and two in rear. Each battalion moved on a two-company front and therefore occupied a rectangle with six vehicles across the front and five or six deep. During daylight each vehicle was about 200 yards from any other and at night the trucks closed to visibility distance. The Bren carriers of each unit formed a screen across the front and down the flanks, with the anti-aircraft artillery behind the carriers. All other arms—artillery, signals, engineers, and medical units—were positioned in the gap between the front and rear battalions, while the Light Aid Detachment was in the rear to effect vehicle repairs.

With the brigade making rather heavy weather of its first move in desert formation to Maaten **Baggush, this is a convenient time to bring the military situation into perspective.**

After the fall of **France the initiative in North Africa rested with **Italy**, for there was more need for Italian troops to watch the French in **Tunisia** and the British forces in Egypt were small, scattered, and ill-equipped. A week after the Maoris had moved to Doddington as part of the **English Channel** garrison—on 12 September 1940—General Graziani led the Italian army from **Libya** into Egypt. New names came into the newspapers— **Sidi Barrani, Bardia, Tobruk, Benghazi**.**

General Wavell's answer to the Italian threat was the clearance of the Libyan province of **Cyrenaica, the capture of 135,000 prisoners, and the hasty retirement of the balance of Il Duce's army into the further westward province of **Tripolitania**.**

Other factors then intervened. On 12 February 1941, the day the Maoris sailed from **Capetown, the advanced elements of a German air corps arrived in North Africa and were soon followed by German ground forces under the command of a General Rommel. British Mediterranean strategy was that fighting the enemy in North Africa was not as**

important as countering the German assimilation of the **Balkan** states with its consequent implications—an enemy advance through **Turkey**, **Syria**, and Palestine to the **Suez Canal** or via the Caucasus and **Iraq** to the same destination.

Hence the British expedition to **Greece** and the return to Egypt by way of Crete. In the meantime General Rommel had recaptured practically all of **Cyrenaica** even more spectacularly than the Italians had been chased out of it, but the fortress port of **Tobruk**, one of the few good harbours along that coast and an ex-Italian naval base some 80 miles west of the Egyptian border, was impeding his further advance towards the **Nile** valley. The Italian Supreme Command was in favour of pushing on to **Cairo** but Rommel felt that **Tobruk** must be taken first. To that end he established a line of powerful defences extending from the sea at **Sollum** to **Sidi Omar**, nearly 25 miles in the desert to the south-west. Thus covered, as he thought, from British interference, the German general was building up a sufficient striking force to assault **Tobruk**.

General Auchinleck, who had succeeded General Wavell, was also building up strength for a return to the attack. The plan was, shortly, to sweep around the enemy chain of frontier defences, seek out and destroy the enemy armour, relieve **Tobruk**, and then chase the Germans and Italians out of North Africa. While Rommel was preparing to reduce **Tobruk**, that hemmed-in garrison had an important part to play in the Auchinleck plan—at the appropriate moment it was to break through the investing enemy and join in the general offensive.

It will thus be seen that the opposing generals had entirely different objects in view—one aimed to clean up a danger to his line of communication, the other to end the war in North Africa. In the event Auchinleck just beat Rommel to the draw.

The weapon that had been forged for the destruction of the Axis forces was the Eighth Army, composed of **30 Corps**, which included most of the armour, and **13 Corps** comprising 4 Indian Division, the New

Zealand Division, and 1 Army Tank Brigade. The Indians were to contain the frontier fortress line from the south and east while the New Zealand Division, after a wide outflanking march, was to move northward when the armoured battle situation was favourable and complete the isolation of the frontier forts from the north-west and cut off the small supply port of Bardia. In the meantime nobody was to take any notice of or make any deductions from the trainloads of equipment passing daily through Baggush, but to carry on with training exercises in mobility.

The battalion occupied an area astride the railway in the eastern defences of the Baggush Box and put in six weeks' intensive training in mobile operations. Navigation and attacks from vehicles by day and by night, assaults on wired positions under cover of smoke screens, practice in crossing minefields and clearing lanes to permit the passage of armoured and other vehicles gave a foretaste of things to come.

The tactic of advancing through a minefield to provide covering fire on the enemy side of it while engineer units destroyed the mines and provided safe gaps for traffic was made so realistic that the troops thought they were really moving amongst live mines. Actually, they were practising on a dummy field with the genuine article not far away, but such was the confidence gained that the CO nearly had a heart attack when he saw a number of late arrivals for a recreation period take a short cut through the real field. Anti-personnel mines had not become fashionable at the time, but that particular field had been sown with old Egyptian and Italian products with springs so weak that one was exploded by an empty kerosene tin blown across the area by a heavy wind.

All sub-units of the battalion were determined to put up a good show when active operations began and every possible preparation and contrivance was made to meet situations that might arise. The contribution of the pioneer platoon was a wooden telescopic ladder, some ropes with iron hooks, and some home-made scaling ladders for use in climbing steep cliffs.

There had been many changes in the unit's officers since the campaign in Crete: Major Bertrand, Captain Werohia, and Captain Weir⁴ had been posted to the New Zealand roll and were at Base waiting passage; Captain Scott was with the Composite Training Depot at Maadi, and Captain Baker was with 25 Battalion. Captain Sorensen⁵ became adjutant vice Captain Te Punga, evacuated sick, and Captain Harvey,⁶ left behind sick in England, had rejoined and commanded A Company. Major Dyer was second-in-command to Colonel Dittmer.

The battalion list of officers at 11 November 1941 was as follows:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col G. Dittmer

Adj: Capt C. Sorensen

QM: Capt C. M. Bennett

IO: Lt A. Awatere

RMO: Capt M. Kronfeld

Padre: Rev K. Harawira

Headquarters Company

OC: Lt D. Urlich

2 Lt P. C. West

2 Lt D. O. Stewart

2 Lt J. C. Reedy

2 Lt P. Taiapa

2 Lt E. C. Pohio

A Company

OC: Capt H. D. Harvey

Lt W. Porter

2 Lt W. D. P. Wordley

2 Lt H. M. Mitchell

B Company

OC: Capt R. Royal

Lt F. T. Bennett

2 Lt A. Mitchell

2 Lt A. T. Rota

C Company

OC: Capt P. Tureia

2 Lt T. Wirepa

2 Lt H. P. Rangiuia

2 Lt W. Awarau

D Company

OC: Capt E. Te W. Love

Lt F. R. Logan

2 Lt J. R. Ormsby

2 Lt J. Matehaere

Attached

2 Lt H. Maloney

Lt A. Te Puni (LO HQ 5 Bde)

LOB

Maj H. G. Dyer (2 i/c)

Lt J. T. Gilroy (D Coy)

Lt H. Toka (A Coy)

2 Lt R. Pene (B Coy)

Lt H. Te K. Green (C Coy)

Lt J. Tuhiwai (C Coy)

On the morning of 8 November bayonets were collected for sharpening and in the afternoon the troops saw New Zealand beat South Africa in a representative Rugby match. A heavy shower following a lighter one earlier in the day drenched the spectators as they marched back to their lines—a reminder that the desert winter had arrived.

Battle dress was issued the next day, and on 11 November LOB details, 62 all ranks, who were to be left behind as reinforcements, watched the unit move out on a divisional exercise that was no exercise at all. The enterprise, which had the longterm object of driving the enemy out of North Africa, was to last eighteen months, for the most part in a land where no birds sang and no grass grew—‘Country with the top scraped off’—a land of bare stones and drifting sand, of escarpments and defiles, of low ridges and shallow depressions; a roadless land where trucks were driven on a compass bearing, where armoured vehicles fought whirling battles in the dust and smoke, and infantry were pawns on a thousand-square-mile chessboard; a generals' paradise of parry and thrust where formations had no front or rear or flank and where sudden reversals of fortune could lose a battle after it had been won.

It is expedient at this stage to take a short lesson in North African geography. Mention has already been made of escarpments, which might

be likened in New Zealand to papa or sandstone bluffs of varying degrees of steepness from vertical to an incline negotiable by trucks. An escarpment was almost invariably serrated with wadis like the familiar New Zealand gullies. Frequent reference will be made to depressions (*deirs* in Arabic) and ridges, so if the non-desert reader will visualise a depression as the bottom of a shallow lake and a ridge as a fold in the desert about as high as a two-storied city building the picture will not be inaccurate.

The tactical value of depressions and escarpments was immense and complementary. Situated on an escarpment, you had observation and some protection from tanks; while a depression offered cover from view and shelter from fire, a weapon pit that might accommodate a battalion or even a division.

Fifth Brigade moved west from **Baggush** towards the frontier and reached the divisional concentration area south-west of **Mersa Matruh** without incident on 11 November. It waited there for three days while the other formations of the Division assembled.

The journey was continued on the 15th when the whole Division, nearly 3000 vehicles in all, began the approach march to **Libya**. When the trucks were on the top of the slight rises that spread across the desert like undulations on a frozen sea, the Maoris could look over the square miles of vehicles that were just like the covered wagons of the Cowboy-and-Indian pictures they had grown up with. They would not have been surprised if a horde of whooping, yelling redskins had appeared on the horizon.

By nightfall the battalion was in the **Bir el Thalata** area 45 miles due west, and each unit's trucks closed in from day formation into close laager with only a yard or two between vehicles. Before first light disclosed a bomber's dream target the drivers would have their vehicles spread at 200 yards' interval again.

An easy day followed while commanders attended conferences. The

border was to be reached in two night marches, if sitting in a jolting, bucking, heaving, slithering, overcrowded 3-ton lorry could be called a march; there were to be no lights or fires during darkness, minimum movement by day, and slit trenches were to be dug on arrival and filled in before departure.

The battalion's first real desert-formation night march was not an unparalleled success for, although the axis of advance was marked by green shaded lights at 3000-yard intervals, there was no moon and some vehicles lost contact and others got bogged in soft sand. To make matters worse there was a change of direction that the unit on the right failed to notice and it carried straight on. The result was a tangle with the rear of the Maori column, but it is a tribute to the Tommy drivers of 306 General Transport Company, RASC, that all the vehicles were with the battalion at the end of the move. The frontier was now only 30 miles away and the low rumble of gunfire suggested that the Indians were already in action.

Now that we are really on the way to seek battle on something like even terms with the enemy and with the very definite intention of taking utu for Greece and Crete, a few words about the shape of an infantry battalion at this period might be interesting. The four assaulting companies, the bayonet and tommy-gun men, each contained 5 officers and 119 other ranks at full strength; Headquarters Company, 8 officers and 241 other ranks, did the administration and manned the support arms—mortars, anti-aircraft LMGs, ⁷ carriers, pioneers, signals, and transport. A battalion was by way of being a miniature army and often became more so by the attachment of a platoon of machine guns from the Machine Gun Battalion, a troop of anti-tank guns, another troop of field guns, and occasionally a section of Bofors. Tanks and engineers were also attached from time to time according to their availability and the size of the job in hand. There was sufficient transport to move the unit weapons, reserve ammunition and supplies, but the men were lifted and put down at their destinations by lorries of Reserve Mechanical Transport Companies, sometimes Tommy but

mostly Kiwi. The lorries were 'three-tonners' and contained ('contained' is the right word) up to twenty infantrymen plus gear. Sardines nicely packed in tins are lonely and dispersed by comparison.

The next night things went better and, after hours of being jolted and thrown about as the drivers did their best to dodge being stuck in soft sand or twisted suddenly to avoid a rock, the troops dug in close to the frontier wire. The wire ran far south from **Sidi Omar** into the inland sand sea—four lines of five-foot metal stakes closely intertwined with barbed wire. The barrier had been built by the Italians with the intention of keeping the subject Senussi Arabs from escaping into Egypt, but it was no insurmountable military obstacle.

The third night march took the Maoris through the gap in the wire that had been cut by the engineers and 15 miles into **Libya**. It is probable that morale was never so high as at that period. In Greece and **Crete** the Maoris had awaited the coming of the enemy in friendly country but now they trod hostile soil. The sand didn't look any different from the Egyptian variety but it was enemy sand, and the troops made unnecessary trips from truck to truck just for the opportunity of walking over it. From then (the 19th) until the afternoon of the 21st the battalion moved jerkily northwards as the Division deployed for the phase to follow the armoured clashes that had started three days earlier.

The Division's turn to enter the fight had come; 6 Brigade Group, as previously arranged, left to co-operate with **30 Corps** to the west, 4 Brigade was to cut the **Bardia- Tobruk** road, and 5 Brigade to occupy the **Sollum- Musaid- Capuzzo** area as a wedge between the enemy positions at **Halfaya Pass** and **Bardia**, and also as a base for operations to reduce the frontier forts.

Sollum was a small seaside village at the bottom of the escarpment which, in turn, was the boundary of the higher ground upon which the Division was standing. There was an Italian army barracks at the top of the winding road up the escarpment from **Sollum**. **Capuzzo** was a fort surrounded by field works; loopholed and battlemented stone walls

surrounded a watch tower and guarded a customs house close by. It looked like the battered remains of something out of a P. C. Wren novel of the **Foreign Legion**. **Musaid**, about half-way between **Sollum** barracks and **Capuzzo**, was a jumble of demolished stone buildings on a slight mound and was almost surrounded by field works. The importance of **Musaid** lay in the fact that it gave observation over a wide area, was a good defensive position, and was also the junction of a track from **Halfaya** and another from further south. B Company was to know that triangle very well before long.



In accordance with 5 Brigade's orders 21 Battalion left to investigate **Bir Ghirba** in the rear of the **Omar** forts; 22 Battalion departed for **Sidi Azeiz**, 13 miles south-west of **Bardia** and the junction of the roads from **Bardia** and **Sollum** westwards; 23 Battalion surprised the fort at **Capuzzo** and carried on to **Musaid**, which was found unoccupied. It also put out of action the water supply line and telephone exchange serving the area, leaving the garrisons dependent on local wells and with very inadequate communications. The 28th Battalion remained in reserve at **Bir Bu Tabel**, three miles south of **Sidi Azeiz**; reports from the main battle area indicated that things were going well there.

The position on the afternoon of 22 November was that 4 Brigade

had cut the **Bardia- Tobruk** road, but that **Bardia** was in communication with **Halfaya** by land along the top of the escarpment and also by sea to **Sollum**, thence by road along the foot of the same escarpment.

The occupation of Upper **Sollum**, which as already described consisted of a few scattered houses and the frontier barracks, would cut the land communications and practically isolate the **Halfaya- Sidi Omar** area which was the job allotted to 5 Brigade. To this end **Colonel Dittmer** was ordered to approach by night and attack at dawn.

The CO and his 'O Group' made a reconnaissance to **Musaid** and looked at the objective about three miles away. Two prominent features were a tower on an airstrip a mile short of the barracks and a water-tower immediately to its south. The **23rd Battalion** was of the opinion that **Sollum** was very lightly held if, indeed, it was occupied at all. Photographs taken by the Air Force did not support this view for these disclosed many clearly defined gunpits and machine-gun emplacements. They were sited along the edge of the escarpment and covered the road from Lower **Sollum**. These positions might, of course, not be occupied, for the stone buildings of the barracks and the surrounding locality had been hammered periodically from sea, air, and land since the opening of hostilities in June 1940.

The barracks were seen to be situated on a small plateau near the top of the escarpment, and it was decided to attack from the left flank and occupy the higher ground overlooking the objective. Support arms for the operation were B Squadron **8 Royal Tanks**, 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment plus a troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery, a platoon of 27 (MG) Battalion, and a detachment of engineers from 7 Field Company. A detachment of 5 Field Ambulance was also assigned to the battalion.

Colonel Dittmer held a conference of company commanders and attached units that evening and laid the plan of attack. C Company, right, and D Company, left, each supported by a platoon from A and B Companies respectively, were to occupy the barracks and exploit to the cliffs overlooking the beach. B Company, less one platoon, was to extend

the line in rear of D Company and clean up machine-gun posts and gun emplacements shown on aerial photographs, with the cliffs as the final objective. A Company, less one platoon, was held in reserve, and after the attack was to take up defensive positions southeast of the barracks. The attached artillery was to be prepared to produce covering fire at first light while the MMG and mortar platoons were to move forward at the same time. The tanks were to be at the barracks as soon after first light as possible; B Echelon was to establish itself at **Capuzzo**. The Maoris left Bir Bu Tabel an hour before midnight, debussed at **Musaid**, and marched about a mile to the start line.

It was very different from the last approach march towards the **Maleme** airfield on **Crete**: there were no landmarks, no road to follow, no grape-vines to get entangled in, no other battalion to wait for, and no powerful and determined enemy at the destination—only some low scrub and sandy patches alternating with rocky ground. Platoon commanders' eyes were glued to compasses when the battalion moved off at 3.30 a.m. on the required bearing to bring it above the barracks before dawn.

C Company was near the objective when two rifle shots wakened somebody, and within a matter of minutes coloured tracer bullets were cutting haphazard lines through the darkness. Soon afterwards the crash of mortar bombs added to the clamour and the attack developed into a series of skirmishes.

The opposition was short-lived and all objectives were taken without much trouble. B Company found that sundry gun emplacements shown on the aerial photographs were unoccupied but ran into a machine-gun post on the edge of the escarpment which caused some casualties. Sergeant Martin McRae, Corporal Tommy Duncan, and three others rushed the post and killed two of the gun crew, whereupon the others, faced with the prospect of being impaled or surrendering, chose a third course and jumped over the cliff to safety or a broken neck.

B Company was consolidating when troops were seen advancing upon its rear, but before any harm was done they were identified as the

two platoons of the reserve A Company with oddments of Headquarters Company. Captain Harvey had been wounded en route so Captain Royal disposed the men in rear of his own company.

D and C Companies extended the line along the escarpment, effectively isolating the barracks from Lower **Sollum**, and the tanks completed the operation by moving into the barrack square. Spasmodic mortar fire was coming up from **Sollum** and one tank was temporarily immobilised either by a lucky shot or a mine, but the tanks' presence was sufficient to discourage any prolonged resistance.

Colonel Dittmer was wounded about this time, and until **Captain Love** handed over D Company to **Lieutenant Logan** and went to Battalion Headquarters to take command, the **Maori Battalion** had another pakeha commanding officer. The war diary of **8 Royal Tanks** explains the situation:

0600 hrs. 'B' Sqn entered **SOLUM** with Maori Bn. Some resistance but managed to occupy barracks. Commanding Officer of Maori Bn. injured and Major **SUTTON**⁸ temporarily took command. 200 prisoners—many German. One tank knocked out in **SOLUM** Barracks.

A reinforced company of Germans held Lower **Sollum**, and though in all probability they had only the haziest notion of what was going on above them they covered the escarpment with fire. Captain Tureia, fulfilling the instructions to exploit forward, directed his company to follow when he signalled and went down the escarpment to make a reconnaissance. He was killed before he had gone far, but the fire was too severe to bring him in until some time later.

The number of prisoners mentioned in the **8 Royal Tanks** squadron's diary was increased by another fifty marched in by Captain Sorensen and Private Jack Hemi. The Adjutant was inspecting the forward positions when a Maori was sniped nearby. Corporal Governor Matthews (MM for gallantry in **Greece** and **Crete**) was trying to place the sniper when he, too, was killed, but Jack Hemi had located him. Hemi was

carrying a thermos anti-tank grenade and threw it down the escarpment; whether or not the sniper was obliterated is not certain, but about fifty enemy troops emerged from a cave and surrendered.

With the exception of a few Germans the prisoners were not a very warlike lot. They were line-of-communication troops from *4 Italian Labour Unit*, or, to give them their full title, members of *4 Battaglione raggruppamento lavoratori della Libia*, and faced the prospect of life behind the wire of a prisoner-of-war cage with admirable aplomb. Revolvers, cameras, and binoculars speedily changed hands; the Maoris, who never let the chance of extra kai pass, loaded themselves with tins of various kinds of rations; several motor cycles with side-cars were appropriated by the despatch riders and the stretcher-bearers also equipped themselves with these amenities for the quicker removal of casualties to the RAP that Captain Kronfeld ⁹ had set up near the aerodrome tower.

Casualties in the actual assault had been inconsiderable, but with the daylight OPs at **Halfaya** could see the troops digging in on the flinty desert and four long-range guns were turned on the area. At the end of the day the battalion losses were 18 killed and 33 wounded, which included two company commanders and the CO.

The position as Brigade Headquarters viewed it was serious, for with **Captain Love** acting CO, Captain Royal was the only company commander with any long experience in that capacity. Brigade Headquarters would have been even more perturbed had it known that **Captain Love** was fighting off an attack of arthritis and would not accept the MO's advice that he should be evacuated. At that stage the battalion command was:

Acting CO: **Captain Love**

Adjutant and acting QM: Captain Sorensen

OC HQ Company: **Lieutenant Urlich**

Acting OC A Company: Lieutenant Porter

OC B Company: Captain Royal

Acting OC C Company: Captain C. M. Bennett

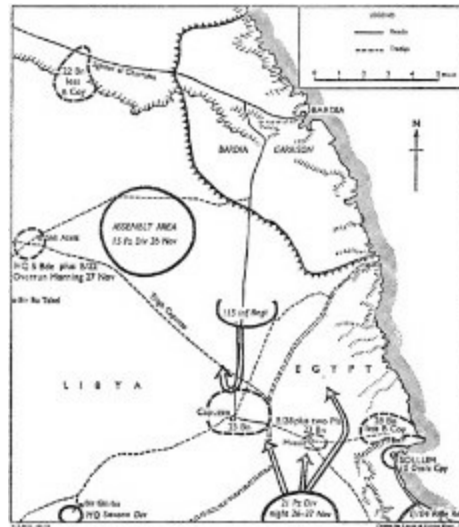
Acting OC D Company: Lieutenant Logan

Concern at the state of the command was confined to Brigade Headquarters, however, for the acting leaders were confident that they could handle any situation that might arise, and as for the rank and file the kai was adequate. Among the booty taken at **Sollum** was an army pay-truck and very soon the desert was strewn with Italian lire notes of all denominations. At first they were used for short sessions of poker, mostly in Headquarters Company, and players rose untroubled after winning or losing some hundred thousands of lire. When they tired of the novelty of being useless paper millionaires the currency was used as cigarette lighters and for toilet-paper. But the state of mind of the survivors of the campaign, who later discovered that Italian lire were exchangeable in **Cairo**, is better left to the imagination.

Brigadier Hargest placed Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie (23 Battalion) in command of the garrison of **Capuzzo- Musaid- Sollum** with orders to coordinate the defences of the area, not to allow the enemy to concentrate for an attack, and to watch the **Halfaya** flank in case the enemy attempted a breakthrough to **Bardia**. In pursuance of these instructions Colonel Leckie came over to **Sollum** and **Captain Love** showed him over the battalion dispositions. The long-range guns at **Halfaya** were still searching the area, and it was agreed to disperse the majority of 28 Battalion's transport at **Capuzzo** in 23 Battalion area where the danger of getting shot up was not so great.

Further west, the main battle, fought over many square miles of empty desert, was not only going against us but was in fair way to being lost. **General Freyberg** was instructed to leave only the minimum number of troops to contain **Bardia** and to move the rest with all speed

to the decisive area at **Sidi Rezegh**. The **21st Battalion** was accordingly withdrawn from **Bir Ghirba**, where it had been involved in a bigger operation than was intended, left 5 Brigade, and moved west into the **Sidi Rezegh** battle; 20 Battalion was relieved at **Bir Zemla** by 22 Battalion and also moved westward; 23 Battalion, based on **Capuzzo**, continued to watch the **Bardia** perimeter from the south while the Maoris continued to act as a wedge between **Bardia** and **Halfaya**; 5 Brigade (less 21 Battalion), now under command of 4 Indian Division, moved its headquarters to **Sidi Azeiz** until the Indians could take over and thus permit the New Zealand Division to operate at full strength in the battle to relieve **Tobruk**.



5 BRIGADE POSITIONS AROUND BARDIA, NOVEMBER 1941

5 Brigade positions around **Bardia**, November 1941

Brigadier Hargest's instructions to his brigade were to be vigilant and aggressive for the next few days without becoming involved in heavy fighting.

Fulfilling the directive, a patrol of two NCOs, McRae and Duncan, from B Company went down the road to **Sollum** and disturbed enemy posts with grenades. The following night a two-platoon patrol led by Lieutenant F. T. Bennett visited the same locality. The enemy was on the alert and called down fire from **Halfaya** with a red Very light. McRae, who was again in the party, remembered that the garrison had used red flares for artillery support and green to stop it, and he smartly put up a

green flare. The enemy started the artillery again with a red and McRae countered with a green. The third time the guns opened to the call of the red flare they declined to stop for McRae's green so the patrol withdrew.

A page from Lieutenant Wordley's ¹⁰ diary describes the activities in A Company area in particular and the **Sollum** position in general:

Monday 24th Nov. 1941.

Nothing eventful during night. 0600 stood down from night areas to our day areas in stone houses for cover from sight & fire. Walls can withstand the shells. Quite a few of the houses have raid-shelters built in too. Vickers gunners keeping Jerry quiet down below. Jerry made a determined attempt to wipe one post out—he had arty. mortar & m.g.s. and also a field gun firing point blank at suspected position. Found a 'Spandau' m.g. out on hill—working O.K. We have lot of Hun ammo. a.p.'s & explosive too. So will probably give him a taste of some of his own medicine. We have a 2" M. & A/T. rifle too. Jerry sends his shells in spasms but no one takes much notice. Am getting the boys to have as much rest as possible. We have a very large front to cover also a road.... Report of 40 enemy tanks in S. of **Halfaya Pass** with motorised infantry. We're waiting! Air Force is supposed to do some straffing but no sign of them—still they are doubtlessly being kept very busy.... All boys have souvenirs but I can't see how they are going to be carried....

During the day D Company noticed movement in the lower part of the barrack buildings and on investigation captured three Italians and four Germans whose firearms included one of our Bren guns. A rumour had circulated that dum dum bullets had been used the night before, and this crew was given the discredit of using them. They were all in grave danger of being shot on the spot, and one German who possibly read something unpleasant on the faces of his captors tried to run away. He was immediately shot and the mercurial Maoris sent the rest back to Battalion Headquarters.

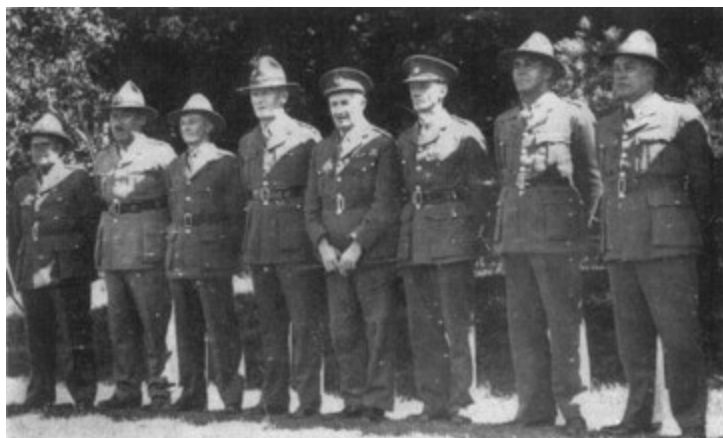
A couple of nights later the dual nature of Maori personality was demonstrated by their treatment of two more prisoners. No. 18 Platoon, sleeping in caves below the escarpment, was awakened by the rattle of a tommy gun and there was a rush to stand to. The sentry pointed out something in the dim moonlight that was swimming towards the beach and later two figures emerged from the water, stark naked and shivering. They were Germans and where they came from no one knew, but being helpless they were put to bed with their captors. In the morning they were clothed, offered cigarettes and breakfast, and made thoroughly at home before being sent back to Battalion Headquarters.

The next day (the 25th) was of much the same pattern in the Maori area, but 23 Battalion had a busy time preparing for thirty tanks reported to be moving in its direction from the south. They were, however, turned back by the Indians with the loss of seven, according to a later report.

How it came about that enemy tanks were in the rear of 5 Brigade, which itself was in the rear of the enemy frontier defences, requires explanation. General Rommel, after his near victory on the 23rd, when his adversary was defeated but not destroyed, conceived the idea of leaving some of his infantry beseiging **Tobruk** while he took *21 Panzer* and *15 Panzer Divisions* and *Ariete Armoured Division* to re-establish the situation on the frontier. When he got there he further planned to annihilate the New Zealand Division and 4 Indian Division. He certainly disrupted the supply system by cutting across the lines of communication, but neither of his intended victims was where he thought it was. He came off second best when he did locate part of 4 Indian Division and at the same time turned north to wipe out the New Zealand Division, which he thought was north-west of the frontier forts but which was actually forcing its way along the **Sidi Rezegh** ridge towards **Tobruk**.

Headquarters 5 Brigade knew as little about the enemy dispositions and intentions as Rommel knew of the location of the New Zealand

Division, but Colonel Leckie prepared for a possible attack by requesting **Captain Love** to send a company to **Musaid** to strengthen the centre of his position and ensure liaison between the two units.



At Palmerston North (l. to r.): Captains A. T. McL. Scott, E. Te W. Love, Major W. B. Fisher, Lieutenant-Colonel G. Dittmer, Major-General J. E. Duigan, Chief of the New Zealand General Staff, Major H. G. Dyer, Captains C. J. Blomfield and R. Royal

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Farewell Parade

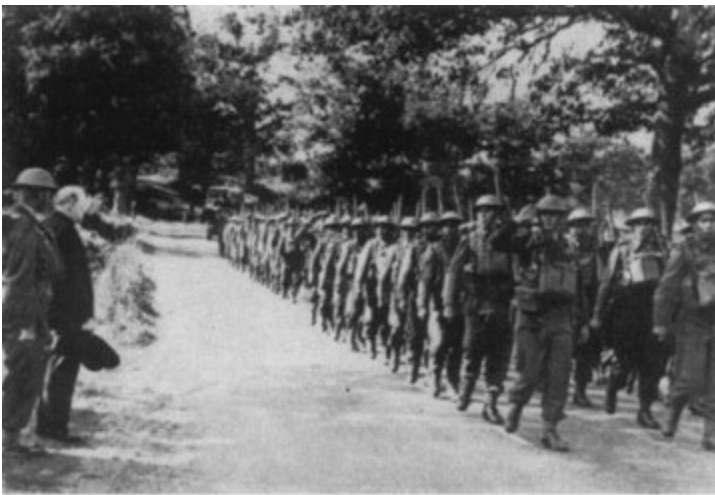


Farewell Parade



His Majesty King George VI inspects 28 Battalion at Ewshott,
6 July 1940—Major Love (back turned) is talking to the King.
Colonel Dittmer is on the right

His Majesty King George VI inspects 28 Battalion at Ewshott, 6 July 1940 - Major Love (back turned) is talking to the King. Colonel Dittmer is on the right



The Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill takes the salute from
D Company led by Major Dyer

The Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill takes the salute from D Company led by Major Dyer



Parade at Maadi
Parade at Maadi



Detraining at Katerini
Detraining at Katerini



Part of Battalion Headquarters at Katerini
 (l. to r.): *Back row:* Lt C. M. Mules (RMO), Pte K. Edward, unidentified, Pte Te M. N. Ngarimu (later VC), Pte R. Peters, Pte K. Hawira, unidentified, Lt C. M. Bennett. *Middle row:* Sgt W. Vercoe, Pte W. Hoko, Pte C. H. Wickliffe, Pte A. K. Raerena, Pte R. Paki, Pte J. Tupene, L-Sgt P. Manawatu. *Front row:* Cpl A. Anderson, unidentified, Pte W. Riteti, Pte M. Wikiriwhi, Pte E. Komene, Sgt W. P. Anaru

Part of Battalion Headquarters at **Katerini**

(l. to r.): Back row: Lt C.M. Mules (RMO), Pte K. Edward, unidentified, Pte Te M.N. Ngarimu (later VC), Pte R. Peters, Pte K. Hawira, unidentified, Lt C.M. Bennett, Middle: Sgt W. Vercoe, Pte W. Hoko, Pte C.H. Wickliffe, Pte A.K. Raerena, Pte R. Paki, Pte J. Tupene, L-Sgt P. Manawatu, Front row: Cpl A. Anderson, unidentified, Pte W. Riteti, Pte M. Wikiriwhi, Pte E. Komene, Sgt W.P. Anaru

Looking north-east to Katerini from 28 Battalion position in Olympus Pass



Looking north-east to **Katerini** from 28 Battalion position in **Olympus Pass**



Vineyard on the coastal area between Platania and Maleme

Vineyard on the coastal area between Platania and Maleme

Return from Crete to Alexandria



Return from Crete to Alexandria



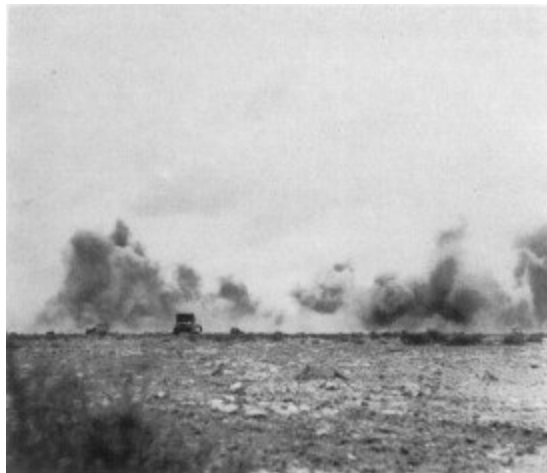
Training with a 2-inch mortar

Training with a 2-inch mortar

Lieutenant A. Awatere, Intelligence Officer, Libya



Lieutenant A. Awatere, Intelligence Officer, Libya



Stuka attack on transport south-west of Gazala

Stuka attack on transport south-west of Gazala



Anti-tank guns captured at Gazala

Anti-tank guns captured at Gazala



Wiring defensive positions in Syria

Wiring defensive positions in Syria



Arrival on the escarpment at Minqar Qaim

Arrival on the escarpment at Minqar Qaim



RAP near El Mreir

RAP near El Mreir



Various shells collected in the El Mreir area
Various shells collected in the El Mreir area



Prisoners captured after the attack at Munassib—Germans in the foreground

Prisoners captured after the attack at Munassib - Germans in the foreground



Portée blown up by a mine
Portée blown up by a mine



Before the Battle of Alamein—Lieutenants G. Marsden, J. G. P. Aperahama, Captains J. C. Henare and W. Porter

Before the Battle of Alamein - Lieutenants G. Marsden, J.G.P. Aperahama, Captains J.C. Henare and W. Porter



A Sherman tank at Alamein

A Sherman tank at Alamein



The breakthrough at Alamein
The breakthrough at Alamein



Christmas Dinner, 1942, at Nofilia. This Battalion Headquarters group includes H. D. Irwin, P. Manawatu, C. H. Wickliffe, and stretcher-bearers. Lieutenant-Colonel C. M. Bennett is on the right

Christmas Dinner 1942, at Nofilia. This Battalion Headquarters group includes H.D. Irwin, P. Manawatu, C.H. Wickliffe, and stretcher-bearers. Lieutenant-Colonel C.M. Bennett is on the right



Bren carriers outside the Benito Gate at Tripoli

Bren carriers outside the Benito Gate at Tripoli

Entering Tripoli



Entering Tripoli



2 Lieutenant Te M. N. Ngarimu, VC

2 Lieutenant Te M.N. Ngarimu, VC



Point 209

Point 209



Attending to the wounded at Takrouna, the day after the attack
of 19-20 April

Attending to the wounded at Takrouna, the day after the attack of 19-20 April



Takrouna from the South

Takrouna from the South



The ledge and pinnacle of
Takrouna

The ledge and pinnacle of **Takrouna**



How the wounded were
brought down from Takrouna

How the wounded were brought down from **Takrouna**

B Company was given the job and a section of carriers for reconnaissance purposes. A check on arms and ammunition disclosed that the company fire power had increased by approximately 200 per cent, for in addition to its normal weapons the company had raided the enemy arms depot at the barracks to some purpose. The return showed six spandaus, three anti-tank rifles, one 2-inch mortar, six tommy guns, and fifty stick grenades from this source. The Arawas, still in high spirits after the easy capture of the barracks, were prepared to tackle any number of the enemy. Captain Royal was not so optimistic until he was assured of the support of all field, anti-tank, and light anti-aircraft guns in the vicinity.

Fort **Musaid** was found to be just a heap of stones. It had been a fort once but had been completely demolished with the exception of portions of some walls. The main road from **Sollum** to **Capuzzo** ran through the area and four other rough tracks also converged and met there.

The company was disposed for all-round defence, with all roads left unobstructed, and spent the night digging narrow, two-men weapon pits. The spoil was carried some distance away and used to form parapets around non-existent trenches.

The dispositions at first light on 26 November were: 28 Battalion, less B Company, at **Sollum** barracks, three miles east of **Musaid**; 23 Battalion, less B Company, at **Capuzzo**, three miles west of **Musaid**; B Company 23 Battalion had two platoons at the Customhouse, a mile and a half west of **Musaid**, and the third platoon at **Musaid**; and B Company 28 Battalion was sitting on the junction of all roads meeting at **Musaid**. The attached artillery was disposed between **Musaid** and **Capuzzo** and the MMG platoon was north of **Capuzzo**.

The battalion put the finishing touches to its defences, both real and dummy, during the day, while the area was kept under shellfire ranging from desultory to heavy. About four o'clock in the afternoon the section of carriers which had been on a reconnaissance to the south came streaking back at high speed. Their report was: 'They're coming in bloody thousands.'

They certainly were. Ravenstein Group (Part of *21 Panzer Division*), through what *Africa Korps'* diary states were 'wrong orders or a misunderstanding', was coming up from **Halfaya** with the intention of attacking towards **Capuzzo** and breaking through to **Bardia**.

Simultaneously with its arrival an extremely heavy artillery concentration was laid on **Sollum**, later switching to **Musaid**. It was, in effect, a barrage, the first the Maoris had experienced, but the deep, narrow weapon pits were adequate cover and there were no casualties.

When the shelling stopped there was a convoy advancing on a front of 500 yards and about 1000 yards distant, with a solitary directing vehicle almost inside the position. Orders were given in Maori to keep down and allow the vehicle free passage. It came on unsuspectingly until one of the reserve sections shot it up and the secret was out. Infantry were debussed at three points in the column and advanced to clean up whatever was hiding in the ruins of **Musaid**. B Company, still under strict orders to remain hidden, held its fire until permission was given.

No progress could be made against the Maori collection of automatics though several determined efforts to close in were attempted. Towards dusk the column split in two, lapped around each side of **Musaid**, clashing in so doing with the remainder of B Company 23 Battalion, and carried on towards **Bardia**. Captain Royal wrote:

A message was passed back that what sounded like tanks were approaching—and they were. Five staff cars heading the tanks came blissfully into our position and one was heading straight for Coy Hq. Cpl McRae personally disposed of it and started the second show. The tanks were right in our position with guns ablaze. The dummy trenches were flattened out but the boys were quite safe in their narrow slit trenches and were having a lot of fun with A/T rifles and grenades and anything they could throw. A gun was brought up on a six wheeled track vehicle and made a lot of noise when fired. The boys shot off the steering wheel and immobilized the vehicle. A light tank was set alight by a sticky bomb and evacuated—the occupants were shot up. A captured South African armoured car was shot up by an A/T rifle and recaptured.

At this stage reinforcements arrived from B Coy 23 Bn—1 pl with Capt Romans ¹¹—and they joined in too. The fight stopped as quickly as it started—after about an hour though—when the enemy got organised and passed in the wake of the first convoy. The final act was to cut off one of the field pieces, a 75 mm gun, manoeuvred in by the captured light tank manned by a Maori crew and driven by Pte H. Manahi. The six wheel track vehicle with the steering wheel shot off was freely used on

salvage and patrol and was steered with a pair of pliers. The gun had been recovered by the Huns. Of course we would have fared differently if the tanks had got up in daylight for then they would have stood off and blasted our section posts one by one.

The enemy got his wounded away but the B Companies of 23 and 28 Battalions had accounted for 76 dead and had taken 9 prisoners. The cost to the Maoris was 3 killed, 4 wounded, and 2 missing. Over at Battalion Headquarters B Company had been written off as killed, wounded, or captured.

Now let us take a look at the action at **Musaid** from *21 Panzer Division's* point of view:

26 Nov 41

In the afternoon the division was ordered to push through to **Bardia**. It moved to the attack in its transport at 1700 hrs, just as dusk was falling, covered by a preliminary artillery bombardment including the artillery on the **Halfaya** front. The enemy, who had taken up positions in the little hamlet of **Musaid** halfway between **Capuzzo** and **Sollum**, was defeated after a short engagement, and the way was thus cleared. The main body of the division followed on. In the **Musaid** area, however, the division's marching columns were attacked by infantry of 4 Ind Div, with hand grenades and A Tk guns. The division suffered some casualties....

The *15th Panzer Division* had already reached **Bardia** by a more westerly route and was filling up with oil, petrol, and ammunition before getting back to the main battle area, where the New Zealand Division's operations outside **Tobruk** had assumed menacing proportions. **Capuzzo-Sollum** was the only serious intrusion into the enemy defences in that area, so while, presumably, *21 Panzer Division* refuelled, *115 Infantry Regiment* (two infantry battalions) from *15 Panzer Division* was sent to capture **Capuzzo**, still held by 23 Battalion.

This attack against A Company of 23 Battalion, made about the

same time as the one against **Musaid**, was pushed on determinedly and was as stoutly opposed—the battle report of *115 Infantry Regiment* speaks of bitter fighting with bayonets and hand grenades. The German commander, however, felt that he was on the point of success when he received a wireless message: ‘Break off contact immediately and return to your start point.’

Truly the old-time Maori god of war, Tu of the Red Eyes, was watching over his warriors and their pakeha neighbours that night, for had even a substantial portion of the strength available been sent against them they could not have escaped destruction.

During the rest of the night 28 Battalion stood-to while Ravenstein Group streamed past, B Company searched for souvenirs over its own private battlefield, 23 Battalion reorganised after its stiff fight, 22 Battalion on an escarpment near **Bardia** escaped attention, and Rommel prepared to get back to the **Tobruk** front as fast as possible.

The next day (the 27th) Rommel began the return from **Bardia** to **Tobruk**, fell upon 5 Brigade Headquarters at **Sidi Azeiz**, and, after a one-sided action, captured it. Still hankering after the destruction of 23 Battalion, he sent, inexplicably enough, a force only about half the size of the previous one to reduce **Capuzzo**.

The commander of *33 Panzer Engineer Battalion* was ordered, after he had become heavily engaged, to withdraw if **Capuzzo** could not be captured by 3 p.m. It says something for the German engineers that, although they did not succeed, they were close enough to success to disobey orders and carry on the action until nightfall. During this hard-fought engagement the Maori B Echelon, attached engineers, and some 23 Battalion men were captured.

They were not easily taken. Lieutenant Pohio ¹² had gathered his drivers and taken up a position facing south. Their armament consisted of one Bren, one Boys rifle, and about twenty rounds per man when they were attacked by three light tanks and a troop-carrier. Two anti-tank

guns nearby each accounted for a tank before they were themselves knocked out, but the other came on. With their ammunition exhausted, the drivers were taken prisoner and marched off a short distance and, with two machine guns trained on them, were left to watch the battle from the side-line.

Lieutenant Urlich, who had been at 23 Battalion headquarters, arrived in time to see the captured transport platoon being marched away, and he collected a few men from the Quartermaster's trucks further back and tried to effect a rescue. He was wounded in the charge and the others took shelter. **Urlich**, ahead of his men, was in grave danger of joining the transport platoon when Private Johnny Jenkins ¹³ jumped into an empty truck and succeeded in rescuing him.

Lieutenant Pohio, after describing the above incident, continued: 'Then two carriers from **23 Bn** came and very bravely tried to help us out. A burst of machine gun fire from behind warned us of the futility of trying to make a break.' One man, however, Private Shepherd, ¹⁴ snatched a bayonet from a guard, stabbed him with his own weapon and leapt on to the nearest carrier, but was killed instantly by an anti-tank shell which also killed the carrier crew.

When the enemy withdrew they released their prisoners in the desert about six miles north of **Capuzzo** and did everything possible to ensure that they found their own lines again, which they did. The Maori losses were five killed and two wounded; among the former was Sergeant Wilson, ¹⁵ battalion armourer since **Palmerston North** days.

B Company had stood to while the German attack on **Capuzzo** was repulsed and the next day continued its interrupted salvaging and sorting of captured equipment. Amongst the collection was a battery-operated radio with five sets of earphones, and it was on this radio that 'Lord Haw-Haw' was heard to announce that the New Zealand Division was short of provisions and had been reduced to eating salted seagulls. It was a heavy blow to the Maoris for they then knew that an expected supply of their favourite delicacy, titi, ¹⁶ had been captured.

Nothing definite about the fate of Brigade Headquarters was known until the 29th, but a message was received by **Captain Love** that administration had been upset and that for a period there would be no rations. The situation was not too bad, however, for water was plentiful and a search of the barracks produced three truck-loads of biscuits, macaroni, tinned meats, coffee, beans, soda water, and orange syrup. Other events of importance during the day were the capture of an Italian patrol south of **Bardia** by a section of carriers commanded by Lieutenant Reedy ¹⁷ and a raid by 18 Platoon on an enemy post at the bottom of the escarpment. Beacon Point was found to be unoccupied by the enemy and a section was left there to ensure it stayed that way. Further advance towards the pier was stopped by shellfire from **Halfaya** and the raiders returned.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew (22 Battalion) decided to withdraw his troops and report to 4 Indian Division for instructions. The column arrived at its destination during the night of 28–29 November, whereupon Colonel Andrew was instructed to assume command of 5 Brigade, still with the task of holding the line **Capuzzo- Musaid- Sollum** barracks to prevent enemy movement between **Bardia** and **Tobruk**.

It was while Colonel Andrew was getting a team together to operate his headquarters that the **Maori Battalion** fought its first and only naval engagement. A submarine was seen approaching **Sollum** pier and the MG section and 3-inch mortar in C Company area fired on it, whereupon the submarine turned and removed itself from the vicinity. The **Halfaya** guns retaliated with a fifteen-minute hate on C Company. The enemy was probably expecting mail and supplies and appeared very upset over their non-arrival. However, as a result of 18 Platoon's raid, the beach below C Company was clear of enemy and many of the company went down for a swim. They found three trucks and a driver hiding in a cave. There were other trucks abandoned near the pier; no doubt they had been sent for the supplies from the submarine.

D Company occupied itself in laying a minefield along its front with

Italian mines found in the barracks. Private Graham Kahui, ¹⁸ who had transferred from the Engineers, was the expert on fuses and the laying was so successful that an artillery driver who failed to understand the frantic waving of arms and took a short cut through the field had the front wheels of his truck blown off. After that the men of D Company kept a hopeful eye open for enemy tanks but were not able to test their workmanship further.

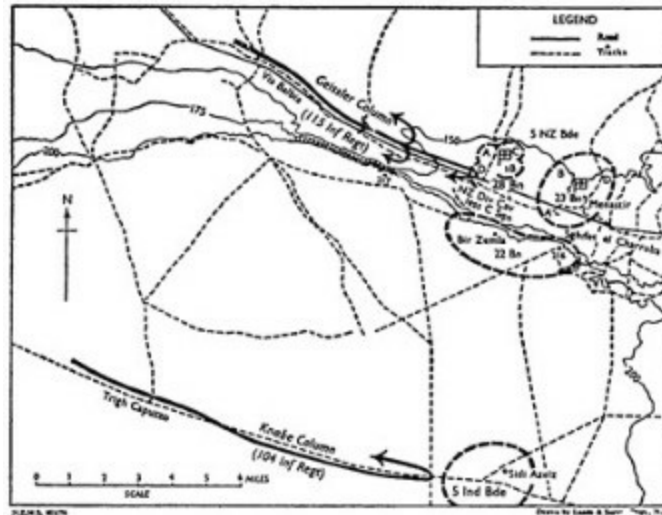
B Company was relieved by 23 Battalion on the 30th and returned in triumph with a long string of cars, motor cycles, tanks, and sundry other vehicles. The 75-millimetre gun was presented to 10 Platoon 23 Battalion as a small token of esteem and thanks for its help in the fight at **Musaid**.

On the last day of November **Lieutenant Awatere** ¹⁹ marched out to Brigade Headquarters as Intelligence Officer and the battalion received a warning order that it would soon be moving. In the meantime, the defences were further strengthened by hauling up the escarpment three captured French 'seventy-fives' and ammunition and siting them in D Company area.

A battalion of the Buffs from 4 Indian Division relieved the Maoris on 1 December. The battalion then marched a gruelling 14 miles to the **Menastir** area with the dual role of containing **Bardia** and preventing its communication with enemy forces around **Tobruk**. The rest of the Division, after crippling losses at **Sidi Rezegh** and **Belhamed**, had made and lost contact with **Tobruk** and was withdrawing while Eighth Army was preparing to renew the struggle with fresh forces.

On arrival at **Menastir**, immediately north of the **Bardia- Tobruk** road, **Captain Love** disposed the battalion for all-round defence, with B Company facing east towards **Bardia** and south towards the escarpment above the road while C Company faced north. The western side of the hollow square was defended by A Company, right, and D Company, left, with supporting arms, including a platoon of machine guns, disposed within the perimeter. The **23rd Battalion** was two miles nearer **Bardia**,

while 22 Battalion was spread over the high ground on the 180-foot-high escarpment south of the Maori position.



MENASTIR POSITIONS ON THE VIA BALBIA

Menastir positions on the Via Balbia

Bardia was 11 miles east and **Tobruk** 65 miles west of the 5 Brigade positions. The country was undulating and **Captain Love's** defence scheme so sited that, from the ground, platoon positions were completely hidden.

The battalion was dug in and open for business by the afternoon of 2 December. The first customers arrived about midnight. They were an enemy officer and two other ranks, part of a reconnaissance patrol, and were driving one of our own 15-cwt trucks with a gun mounted on the tray. Soon afterwards a German truck was stopped and two men who were looking for the patrol commander found him at Battalion Headquarters, waiting removal to a prisoner-of-war camp.

There was no further incident until morning when Lieutenant Porter took A Company, supported by A Squadron Divisional Cavalry, out on patrol. His instructions were to move not more than ten miles towards **Tobruk**, then work north before returning, but he had covered only three miles of the assignment when he sighted a column approaching. His trucks were dispersed until the newcomers were identified, which was not done until the column stopped about a mile away and men in enemy

uniforms could be seen through binoculars. Porter then decided to return and leave the attached Divisional Cavalry squadron to coax the enemy into the Maori area. Meanwhile, in 22 Battalion area, the field and machine-gunners on the escarpment were taking a keen interest in the long line of vehicles halted on the road below them.

As what followed took place largely in D Company area, a more detailed description of its dispositions will make for clarity. No. 17 Platoon (Sergeant Tainui) was the most forward and on the right or north of the road, with 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Ormsby),²⁰ right rear, and 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Matehaere),²¹ left rear, with one of his sections on the left of the road. There was a dummy minefield in front of 17 Platoon, and the company 2-inch mortars operating as a group under Corporal Te Anga²² were in the centre of the triangle formed by the three platoons. Company Headquarters, plus a **Breda** machine gun brought from **Capuzzo**, was dug in behind the rear platoons, while the company cooks' truck covered 16 Platoon with a Bren gun acquired by stealth from somewhere. Finally, Sergeant Poutu²³ had two of the battalion 3-inch mortars behind 18 Platoon and ranged on a bend in the road about 1600 yards ahead.

The enemy column, led by an officer standing on the running-board of his car and gazing earnestly at the escarpment on his right, passed 17 Platoon and was within sixty yards of 18 Platoon when he turned his glasses to his other flank, where-upon Lieutenant Matehaere shot him and started the fight. Every weapon in D Company opened fire on a target while Private Elkington,²⁴ a signaller with the company, rode around the posts on a captured motor cycle delivering ammunition. Up on the escarpment every field, anti-tank, and machine gun worked steadily down the halted line of trucks. Enemy guns at the rear of the column were quick to reply but not to the hidden Maoris, and D Company was able to prevent the German machine-gunners from getting into action. Some trucks were able to deploy in front of A Company and debus their machinegun crews, who immobilised everybody in their vicinity until they in turn were nearly all picked off by 22 Battalion on

the escarpment above them.

Late in the afternoon there were still two enemy posts firing on A Company so an operation was planned to clean them up before darkness gave them an opportunity of escaping. The battalion mortars were ordered to put a smoke screen across their front while the battalion carriers and the Divisional Cavalry troop that had remained in the background since the opening of the action made a detour and engaged the enemy from a flank. While the Germans were occupied with the light armour, a party of A Company would charge through the smoke and silence the posts. Lieutenant Porter detailed Corporal Mio Wiki ²⁵ and a section of his reserve platoon for the job.

Again reverting to Wordley's diary:

1630. My No. 2 Sect. went out on a bayonet charge under smoke screen and captured 83 Huns. They won't stand up to the bayonet. The rest of them fled. Peace reigned again. Some of the boys got merry on some drink they swiped during the day. Lloyd gave me a Luger and Maru Wharerau gave me a torch. I'm quite satisfied with my lot.

Those who were not captured by Wiki's men did not flee very far for the carriers and Divisional Cavalry rounded them up.

Meanwhile, 17 Platoon was mopping up along the line of trucks. The platoon had a number of 5th Reinforcements who were not as cautious as the old hands, and when they came upon about fifteen dead Germans in a fold in the ground they were about to carry on without further investigation. Private Harper Takarangi, ²⁶ a veteran of Greece and Crete, was suspicious and fired a burst in their general vicinity, whereupon the dead men came miraculously to life. Takarangi lectured the others very severely on the folly of taking a dead German for granted.

In this action extremely good work had been done by the RMO, Captain Kronfeld. There were few Maori casualties but, as can be gathered, the enemy casualties were heavy and the RAP had a difficult

task trying to treat them all. When the order came to move, Kronfeld volunteered to stay behind to complete his task, and did so in spite of the dangerously fluid situation. He rejoined the unit later.

Now to take a look at this action from the enemy point of view. The ring around **Tobruk** had been closed again and the New Zealand Division regarded as destroyed, a somewhat optimistic appreciation of the situation considering that 5 Brigade was still functioning so offensively. The *15th* and *21st Panzer Divisions* mustered around **Sidi Rezegh** and **Belhamed** had not come unscathed out of the battle that had resulted in the withdrawal of the New Zealand Division (less 5 Brigade) into Egypt.

Regrouped British forces operating south and south-west of **Tobruk** were causing anxiety and the supply position in the enemy's frontier posts was becoming acute. **Halfaya** was particularly insistent and claimed that it had only two more days' rations.

General Rommel ordered that two advanced guards, one each from *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions*, were to move along the **Via Balbia** and the **Trigh Capuzzo** with supplies for the **Sollum** front. Parts of the two divisions were to follow and clean up **Sollum** and **Capuzzo**.

In the event the advanced guard on the **Trigh Capuzzo** was turned back by the Indians. Geissler advanced guard, the force which moved along the **Via Balbia**, supplies its own obituary:

Report by 15 MC Bn on Action west of **Bardia** [Geissler advanced guard]—Commander; 200 Regt commander. Troops: 15 MC Bn, 1½ coys of 33 A Tk Unit, 1½ btys of 33 Arty Regt. [After detailing the sending out of a patrol that failed to return, the approach to the Maori position and the deployment of the force, the report continues:] They pushed ahead fast until Km 17, when, as they topped a rise they suddenly came under heavy shell, A Tk and MG fire. Many of our vehicles loaded with ammunition were set on fire immediately. The troops jumped off the vehicles, and many of them could not even save their weapons. The recce platoon and 3 Coy, however, pushed on under the personal

leadership of Major von Debschitz, but were very soon halted by a withering fire from HMGs, mortars and A Tk guns in well-concealed positions on the escarpment on our right, and shell fire from at least 4 batteries. One or two platoons tried again and again to get their MGs into action and silence the enemy fire but were prevented from doing this by accurate MG and A Tk fire. Our heavy weapons could not be brought into action—they were either knocked out by the hail of fire or could not be taken into position. For over 1½ hours the battalion was tied down by the enemy fire. Enemy infantry broke in among our foremost troops and captured some of them. Then the battalion commander gave the order to break off the action. Many men of the battalion were wounded as they withdrew and had to be left behind. The battalion commander, adjutant and 2 other officers were wounded and missing.... All this time 1 Coy, on the left of the **Via Balbia**, had been defending itself stubbornly, but the order to withdraw failed to reach it. After the main body of the battalion had disengaged from the enemy it was surrounded by enemy tanks. The company commander gave the order to retire, but the tanks followed up and set all the company's trucks on fire. Only the A Tk platoon of 33 A Tk Unit and one vehicle got out....

Casualties: 2 officers and 6 OR wounded.

5 officers and 226 OR missing.

In the west the battle of manoeuvre was moving against the enemy, who was in some danger of being encircled in the same manner as his **Sollum- Sidi Omar** positions were hemmed in.

During the night Headquarters 5 Brigade was informed that, due to regrouping, it was to return to the **Sollum- Capuzzo** area. It was a highly delighted 28 Battalion, loaded down with trophies of the chase—the men quite unaware that in all probability they would soon have been in the **Bardia** prisoner-of-war cages had the operation planned for 15 and 21 *Panzer Divisions* not been cancelled—which lead the column back to its old area.

Nothing had altered while the battalion had been away from the **Sollum** front, but elsewhere the climax to the relief of **Tobruk** was approaching. The two panzer divisions were recalled to help counter the threat to the German-Italian lines of communication.

Captain Love complimented the battalion on the action at **Menastir** and also reminded the troops of the good treatment accorded the **B Echelon** during the short period it had been in enemy hands. He concluded by saying that he expected the same standard of treatment to be accorded to enemy prisoners. The latter part of the message was regarded as a piece of amiable eccentricity on the part of the CO. Nobody would harm a taurekareka ²⁷ so long as he surrendered expeditiously and behaved with decorum. Clearly he would have no further use for such trophies of the chase as lugers, birettas, binoculars and such-like oddments.

The 7th December was a full day—the first letters and parcels for nearly a month arrived and were distributed; **Major Dyer**, promoted temporary lieutenant-colonel, arrived from **LOB** and took over command from **Captain Love**, who later marched out to hospital; the news was received that **Japan** had entered the war with a flourish by attacking **Pearl Harbour** without the formalities usual to such occasions; the German-Italian forces were at last withdrawing from the **Tobruk- El Adem** area towards **Gazala**, about 40 miles farther west.

The next day was also fairly busy: **Lieutenant-Colonel Dyer** was not in favour of the enemy continuing to hold the **Sollum** pier from the shelter of caves above it and was arranging a two-platoon attack on the area, but the operation was cancelled at the last moment after orders came to move with the rest of 5 Brigade in pursuit of the main enemy body.

After handing over to the South Africans, the battalion left soon after midnight and marched to **Sidi Azeiz** which it reached by dawn. **RMT** vehicles from **Tobruk** met it there and transported the troops over the remaining miles of stony desert and low scrub to the concentration

area 17 miles south-east of **Tobruk**. In the morning the battalion commanders were informed that the brigade was under command of 70 Division, newly released from **Tobruk**, and was to be ready to move at thirty minutes' notice to **Acroma**, thought to be held by the enemy rearguard.

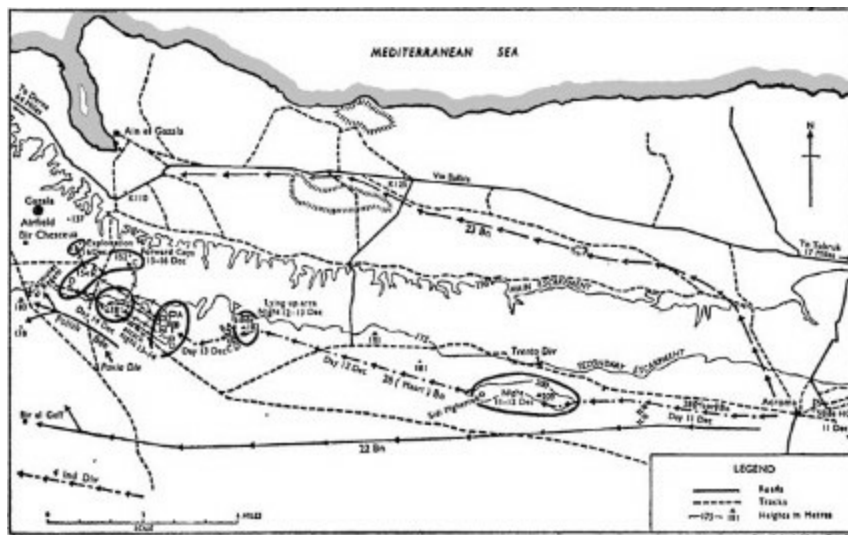
The troops sat around through a miserably cold day of wind and driving rain but were cheered in the afternoon by the arrival of a mobile canteen purchased in New Zealand by donations from Maori school children. Mr Charles E. Bennett, the **YMCA** representative who operated the canteen, presented a tin of New Zealand tobacco and a cake of chocolate to all who called on him, irrespective of unit. 'Charlie YM', as Bennett was soon christened by the troops, apparently never ran short of supplies during the four years the canteen followed the fortunes of the **Maori Battalion**. He later acquired a wireless set, reputedly a gift from the Italians in **Libya**, and on quiet evenings the men gathered around the truck listening to the news of the outside world. After the war the canteen driven by 'Charlie YM' toured the Maori schools before it ended its days of active service in the safe keeping of the Waitangi Trust Board.

Later in the afternoon information was received that the enemy had vacated **Acroma** and that 70 Division was mopping up between that area and the coast. Fifth Brigade would move first to **Acroma** and then gain contact with the enemy. If the **Gazala** Box was found to be occupied in force, the brigade would reconnoitre the area but was not to get involved in serious fighting without prior permission. Meanwhile, 4 Indian Division would bypass **Gazala** and secure objectives further west.

The brigade finally left about 3 a.m. the next morning (the 11th) and by breakfast time was at **Acroma**, a bare and rocky elevated area on the desert flatness. Here the battalions were given their tasks—22 in reserve, 23 to advance along the **Tobruk- Derna** road, 28 along a track due west from **Acroma** and four miles south of the main road. **Lieutenant-Colonel Dyer** had under command—besides the usual machine-gun platoon and section of engineers and troop of anti-tank guns—a troop from 42 Light

Anti-Aircraft Battery and one from 1 Royal Horse Artillery.

By mid-morning the battalion was ready for its semi-independent reconnaissance. The formation was A and C Companies forward, B and D in support. The carriers screened the front and both flanks, while for extra protection the anti-tank guns guarded the exposed left flank; the right was covered by the ack-ack troop and the RHA was in the rear. Final instructions were that the enemy might be met about eight miles ahead and that the companies were not to get involved in a major action. Five miles were covered without opposition but when nearing Sidi Mgherreb, a slight rise dominated by a little hill hardly more than a pimple on the desert, shells began to drop among the trucks.



THE ADVANCE TO GAZALA, 11-16 DECEMBER 1941

The advance to [Gazala](#), 11-16 December 1941

Mgherreb was actually a very strong position and had withstood an attack by tanks and infantry. The enemy left was protected by a minefield, the right by a line of twenty-six anti-tank guns interspersed with machine guns and mortars. Further back there were field guns and infantry.

Lieutenant Porter saw the shells bursting among the trucks and made a quick decision to push on as there would be less danger in moving ahead than in turning back, since the guns would have to alter range to keep up with the advance. He told his driver to 'step on it' and

veer left where a slight rise promised some shelter for the vehicles. The driver stepped on it so hard that the speed altered from seven to forty miles per hour and the whole battalion, conforming to the change in direction, missed the minefield where the greater part of a battalion of the Buffs was held up. B Company, following A, took a wide detour to the left and escaped the attention of the enemy guns, one of which put **Colonel Dyer's** car out of action. The CO was not hurt and jumped into an artillery signal truck and chased his rapidly disappearing battalion.

Nearby was a group of five Crusader tanks whose commander said they were the survivors of a regiment and could not move until the infantry went in and cleared the way. The CO pointed to the trucks racing forward and said, 'We're in!'

Meanwhile, B Company, going flat out, was nearing the anti-tank-gun line, which was still firing at the place where the Maoris should have left their trucks and deployed. Perhaps, like the Turks at Beersheeba when the Australian Light Horse charged on horseback, the gunners were too flustered to alter their range. Even Kiwi gunners find it difficult to fire in two directions at the same time, so, with B Company racing rapidly down on one flank and A Company on the other, the Italians took the course of prudence and stopped firing altogether. B Company collected about 200 prisoners. By this time A Company had debussed and formed up on the rise with the intention of capturing some field guns in the near distance. Somebody yelled to Porter that there was a whole line of anti-tank guns on their immediate left, but as they were now silent the company pushed on. However, it was soon pinned to the desert and had to watch while its intended victims limbered up and drove away.

The lack of serious opposition is accounted for by the fact that the Italian *Trento Division* was in the process of falling back on the main **Gazala** position. The Italian official history says: '... the "Trento" Division, under enemy pressure, was made to fall back with all its guns....'

The battalion consolidated with C Company on the crest of the rise, B and D in support and A out in front, with the support arms suitably positioned for a possible counter-attack. The Italians must have put up a very determined defence prior to the arrival of the Maoris for there were many dead British soldiers lying in groups with their bayonets fixed as if they had been shot down while charging the guns. There were also some survivors in the area, for a group of about sixty commanded by an NCO reported to **Colonel Dyer** and asked permission to retire as they had not eaten for twenty-four hours. Asked why they had not gone back during the night, the leader replied that they had not been instructed to do so and therefore, naturally, had stayed.

The Italian gunners were disgusted with the unconventional methods of the Maoris. They had held up tanks and infantry but had not expected to be charged down by trucks full of yelling enemy. 'This is a new way of making war,' they complained, and were told it was the Maori way.

The enemy was apparently considering a counter-attack for more guns were brought forward and the battalion endured some hours of searching fire, while groups of infantry could be seen in the distance. They were, however, broken up by the support arms before they became dangerous.

While this was going on there was an aerial clash overhead and three enemy planes came down. A carrier went out and rounded up four airmen as they landed. One of them reached for his pistol and was shot. Towards dusk the enemy was seen to be moving back. Sergeant De La Croix took his carrier forward for a parting shot but soon returned in a very bad temper saying unkind things about his jammed gun. A Company out in front decided that the battle was over and began to look for some trophies of the chase. Lieutenant Wordley wrote:

.... in time we got up and not seeing anyone about some of the boys went ahead on a 'ratting' mission and were surprised by the sudden appearance of a couple of Itis out of a dug out—the boys fired a couple of

shots above their heads and, wow! It seemed to come from out of the ground. No. 7 Pl. collected 1000 in all.

They were from *62 Regiment, Trento Division*, and brought the battalion bag up to 1123 all ranks for the loss of five killed and eleven wounded.

Brigadier Wilder, ²⁸ now commanding 5 Brigade, paid a visit to Battalion Headquarters the next morning (the 12th) and arrived in time to share the battalion's first dive-bombing attack in North Africa. Fifteen black dots in the sky became fifteen Stukas, with wings held like diving kingfishers as they streaked down with screaming sirens. The rocky ground heaved and shuddered as the bombs exploded into dusty rosettes. Private Iver Whakarau, ²⁹ a battalion despatch rider grounded with a damaged ankle, described the incident in a letter home:

It happened just before dinner when we were once more at peace with the world. I was in the middle of a shave at the time when we spotted a whole lot of planes circling around the area we'd already occupied. At first we thought they were our planes but believe me it didn't take us long to find out different. When they started to dive down on us I just flattened out on the ground and closed my eyes and prayed like Hell.... Forgot all about my crook ankle too, during my fright and I never finished my shave till three days later.

The battalion got off lightly with two killed and two wounded. New orders arrived soon after the Stukas left. The brigade would move forward on a three-battalion front with 23 Battalion right, 28, centre, and 22 left. The Maori objective was Point 182, about eight miles west, which was reported to be occupied. B and D Companies led the column, debussed, and went forward but the enemy had departed. Enemy equipment was strewn around and the troops passed the time souveniring before they dug in for the night. Fifth Brigade was now close to the main defences of [Gazala](#).

Brigade Headquarters informed units that the advance to maintain

contact would continue in the morning and **Lieutenant-Colonel Dyer** arranged his order of march. He decided on a variation of the usual desert formation by increasing the lateral distance between companies so that they occupied an extra 400 yards of frontage. In effect, the battalion was disposed in two wings, the right under Captain Royal (B Company followed by A Company) and the left under **Captain C. M. Bennett** (C Company followed by D Company). It was hoped that greater flexibility of manœuvre would be obtained and that if one wing was held up the other would be able to outflank the opposition. Brigadier Wilder had definitely forbidden any more head-on collisions without artillery and smoke protection.

In the broader picture, 23 Battalion was to continue along the **Tobruk- Derna** road while 22 Battalion was to veer northwest towards the Maoris' left flank. South of 5 Brigade was 4 Indian Division, and on its inland flank 7 Armoured Division.

The battalion had travelled a bare two miles when shells from a slight rise directly ahead (Point 181) were the signal to try the outflanking technique. B and A Companies in the line of fire charged straight ahead into the shelter of a wadi, while Captain Bennett tried to make ground to his left but was forced to debus and take cover. The support weapons immediately deployed and came into action and an artillery and machine-gun battle ensued.

The **22nd Battalion** was likewise held up by strongpoints and 23 Battalion necessarily did not move far. The Indians had met tough opposition on their front, and there was now no doubt that the enemy intended to defend the **Gazala** line and that **13 Corps** had a fight on its hands if the continuation of the enemy retreat was to be insisted upon. Thirteenth Corps was instructed to use its armour on the inland (left) flank and also to increase its frontal pressure. To effect this pressure, a Polish brigade was to reinforce 5 Brigade. The successful outcome of the operation would have been to encircle the enemy at **Gazala**, but in the event no such result was achieved.

Colonel Dyer was ordered to clear the enemy off Point 181 at first light, but after making a reconnaissance of the area and considering the reports from the artillery OPs, he decided that it was too tough a job to be done by a day show and was given permission to defer the attack until nightfall.

It was a tactical problem of some complexity; Point 181, perched on an escarpment, was the core of the strongpoint, of which the rise that had stopped the advance was a part. The escarpment was shaped like a horseshoe with the open end inviting the Maoris to enter, whereupon they would have been under fire from Point 154 at the top of the horseshoe and Point 152 on the far side. The defended localities themselves were in the form of a triangle, with each point about a mile and a half from the other.

Colonel Dyer decided to deploy the battalion so that A and B Companies would assault from the north—B on the forward rise where it would consolidate while A carried on to Point 181, which was about 500 yards farther back. C Company and D, less one platoon in reserve, would attack from the south in a similar manner. Companies were to commence moving into position 600 yards from the enemy flanks at 2 a.m. and be ready to attack at 3 a.m., when the RHA plus 5 Field Regiment, which had rejoined 5 Brigade, would open fire.

A five-minute concentration was to be fired on the near rise and then a ten-minute one on Point 181. The lift would be the signal to attack.

The CO visited each company after dark to make sure that everything was understood. At A Company Lieutenant Porter guided him to B Company area, but on the way back inadvertently took the wrong route and the pair found themselves among a lot of Italian noises. They tiptoed very quietly back, and Porter, who thought the enemy were jittery and getting ready to move out, obtained permission to feel forward with a platoon. The reception accorded them was much too warm and Lieutenant Wordley and two others were wounded in the

withdrawal. By the time the baffled Ngapuhis had returned to their lines the artillery had opened with A Company not in position. Porter led the platoon back at a gallop, with the rest of the company in close pursuit.

The rest of the troops were lying out in the camel scrub watching the darkness being cut to ribbons with coloured tracer when the artillery opened up. As soon as the guns lifted the Maori yells that the enemy were to know so well were answered by the crackle of small-arms fire, then bursting grenades disclosed deep, stone-lined trenches, each containing an anti-tank gun and some thrity Italians who were dealt with Maori fashion.

C Company began to consolidate on the first objective, but as only 17 Platoon (Sergeant Jack Tainui) had arrived from D Company and none at all from A Company, Captain Royal formed B Company up facing west and with Tainui's platoon prepared to tackle the final objective. Just as they had moved off, Lieutenant Porter, with his tin hat blown off by a grenade and his legs and back full of splinters from the same source, stormed up at the head of his company.

The second assault was a replica of the first. **Colonel Dyer** placed Captain Royal in charge with orders to consolidate while he returned to his headquarters back on the first objective. Royal, in turn, instructed A Company and 17 Platoon to consolidate while he went forward with B Company to exploit in case there were more enemy about. They found a field ambulance, medical stores, a food truck, a car and several motor cycles.

The Arawas had taken time off to sample the Italian hot coffee in the food truck when the approach of daylight disclosed still more enemy in trenches close by. They did not offer much opposition and the Maoris took over their weapon pits. B Company's adventures were not yet over for at first light another enemy group was seen about 400 yards away, apparently standing around waiting to surrender. The Maoris were proceeding to oblige them when the enemy suddenly turned and manned some guns behind them, whereupon B Company's men dived for the

cover they had just left.

By the greatest of good fortune a Vickers crew had arrived by this time and came immediately into action, cleaning up the enemy gun crews, breaking up an incipient counter-attack, and ensuring that the guns remained unmanned. The RHA battery soon had the range also and kept the area under surveillance all day, for B Company was isolated and unable to rejoin the battalion. Captain Royal and Lieutenant D. Stewart³⁰ were wounded by the same mortar shell and Lieutenant F. T. Bennett took command.

It is necessary to digress a little and account for the platoon of D Company that, it will be remembered, did not get up in time to assault Point 181. **Lieutenant Logan** had remained behind with the reserve platoon while 18 Platoon (Matehaere) and 17 (Sergeant Tainui) went forward. No. 18 Platoon came under fire from the left flank and right rear and was forced to ground. **Private Charlie Shelford**³¹ volunteered to silence the firing behind the platoon and did so in spite of being wounded three times by grenade splinters. When he was close enough to use his spandau he found that it also had been damaged by a grenade, but he still had a grenade himself which he used to bring the enemy out into the open. He captured 4 officers, including the commander of the group, and 36 other ranks. The resistance crumbled after that and the platoon was able to rejoin the battalion. Shelford was awarded the DCM for this action. Three Maoris were killed and twenty-seven were wounded and missing, but 382 members of *36 Regiment, Pavia Division*, including the colonel, were captured.

The booty, besides innumerable small arms, included numerous field and anti-tank guns, transport and two light tanks. Point 181 was found to be a very small rise on which there had been some habitations, but these had been demolished to provide the stones for the trenches of the strongpoint.

The Maori Battalion was now on the south rim of the shallow horseshoe plain that ended a mile towards the west and where more

enemy strongpoints were located. Neither of the flanking units had been required to move and 28 Battalion was holding a salient. The **23rd Battalion** was busy clearing up a landing ground and 22 Battalion was more in the Indian area than in that of 5 Brigade.

The day passed with B Company isolated by crossfire, Brigade preparing another job for the Maoris, and the **Polish Brigade** getting ready to wedge in between 28 and 22 Battalions preparatory to the reduction of a strongpoint at Carmuset er Regem.

The day was not without its diversions. Private Bill Maha ³² was down in the depression 'inspecting' enemy transport when a German staff officer, unaware that the place did not belong to his side any more, drove up to him. 'English?', he asked suspiciously. Maha replied equally curtly, 'Italian'. Maybe Maha's Italian accent was not so good for the car zigzagged away at top speed while the Maoris on the point danced with rage; had they shot at the car Maha would probably have been killed.

The next callers, two Germans with a motor cycle and sidecar, were not so lucky.

Later, as a result of a dogfight overhead, a Tomahawk plane came down in B Company area, and Lieutenant Reedy took out two carriers and under fire rescued the wounded South African pilot. Sergeant Goodwillie ³³ took three carriers out on a reconnaissance towards the main escarpment, where the enemy was still holding in some strength on the reverse side, and provided the enemy gunners with a target, the crews with some anxious moments, and the Maori spectators with some excitement. The first salvo fell close, the second right among them, and the middle carrier disappeared in a cloud of dust. A loud 'Ah-hh' from the troops changed to a delighted yell when the little carrier was seen streaking like a bat out of Hell for the crest of the escarpment. The team shot up enemy trenches and guns and then wheeled right and raced for home unscathed.

While these diversions were going on, Brigade was preparing for the

further employment of the **Maori Battalion** in conjunction with the **Polish Brigade**. Two battalions of Poles were to capture Carmuset er Regem while the Maoris took Points 152 and 154 on the main escarpment; 22 Battalion would assist the Poles with covering fire, while 23 Battalion would demonstrate south-west and divert attention from the Maoris. **Colonel Dyer's** task was not easy—Point 154 was clearly visible, a white mound of spoil above dark-green scrub, but Point 152 was hidden from view and had to be taken on trust.

The battalion plan was for D Company to advance on the right of the Poles until in a suitable position to give covering fire to A Company assaulting Point 154. While this attack was in progress C Company would assemble under the crest, then, assisted by machine-gun and artillery fire, would charge over the top on to Point 152. B Company was to remain in reserve on Point 181.

Two hours before the attack an unlucky shell killed Lieutenant Green ³⁴ and eight others in C Company and Lieutenant Taiapa was brought up from the Pioneers to command the platoon. Lieutenants Pohio and Awarau ³⁵ had already, on account of officer casualties, been transferred to B Company.

Two different actions developed, and we will deal first with the attack on Point 154 on the left flank. It has been mentioned before that the Maori approach to military problems was sometimes unorthodox, and on this occasion Lieutenant Porter was troubled by the long approach march in full view of the enemy. In the previous engagement the company had souvenired an Italian 15-cwt truck which had been used to bring up the rations, and Porter had noticed that this particular vehicle was never molested by the enemy. He used that fact and the other fact that his men, like the rest of the battalion, were wearing sundry items of enemy clothing, to obtain the element of surprise.

Sharp on time, D Company moved along the escarpment and C Company down a wadi preparatory to advancing to the shelter of the crest. A Company had a hot meal brought up in the Italian truck and the

troops were told to put their bayonets away, sling their rifles, and draw their rations. When it was time to move off the whole company straggled forward in extended order, the troops eating their hot meal as they did so.

A rattle of musketry out on the left flank indicated that D Company had found targets, and simultaneously a message from Brigade ordered the attack to be postponed for half an hour because the Poles were not ready. The order came too late to be obeyed, but it meant that until the Poles went in D Company had an open flank.

By this time the Ngapuhis were nearing their objective and upon a signal resolved themselves into three lines of yelling Maoris advancing with fixed bayonets. Point 154 fell without a shot and without a casualty. Maybe if the defenders had been Germans instead of Italians the ruse would have failed.

D Company, out on the left, was fired on from Carmuset er Regem, the Polish objective, and was forced to take cover and wait for the delayed attack to come in. A Polish reconnaissance carrier appeared and Sergeant Tainui, after a conversation with its commander, told his platoon that the Pole was willing to support them in getting forward and that he would get [Lieutenant Logan](#)'s permission to move. He was away for a few minutes, sufficient time to walk about a quarter of the distance to Company Headquarters; then, returning and saying it was all right to get cracking, he led his platoon forward. They had not gone twenty yards when he was mortally wounded by an anti-tank shell meant for the carrier. But Jack Tainui, if he could not die standing, meant to die fighting, and he signalled for a Bren gun to be brought to him. 'Give me the gun. You load the magazines', were his last words. When his men buried him they covered his grave with his spent cartridge shells.

The Poles came up with their first wave perched on carriers and took everything in their stride, including most of 17 Platoon. They could not really be blamed for this because the Maoris were dressed as much in Italian as in their own uniforms. They were eventually constrained to

release their Maori prisoners but retained their weapons just in case they were really Italians. There were plenty of enemy automatics about and there were no hard feelings.

Meanwhile, C Company had reached the bottom of the crest shielding Point 152 but fire was too fierce to risk crossing the skyline without more artillery support. **Captain C. M. Bennett** put up a red flare asking for aid, which was immediately supplied, and in addition Lieutenant Awarau was sent up with a platoon from B Company to support the attack with enfilade fire. Lieutenant Pohio begged to be allowed to take the rest of B Company and they, too, were soon moving up the valley. The anti-tank section also lent a hand by using its guns as field pieces.

In spite of the extra fire power the enemy kept the crest under continuous fire and C Company remained pinned to earth. The pioneer platoon, with a section of engineers, was the only battalion reserve not committed and it looked as if the attack was going to fail. The quietly spoken commander of the RHA battery, Major Loder-Symonds, had a solution, and he sent one of his officers, Lieutenant Hayes, forward in an open truck with a wireless set to Captain Bennett.

The result of this direct observation wirelessly back to the guns was soon apparent; the enemy fire slackened and the Maoris surged over the top, accompanied by Hayes in his truck, who brought down artillery fire neatly in front of the first wave. En route to the objective C Company overran a battery of guns.

By last light the positions had been consolidated. Casualties were 10 killed and 39 wounded, but over 200 prisoners had been taken. The troops were very thin on the ground with D Company now back at Point 185. **Lieutenant-Colonel Dyer** asked Brigade for reserves and, after checking the position, left Loder-Symonds as the senior officer in charge while he returned to Battalion Headquarters for a wash and a freshen-up.

A quotation from the Italian official history deals with this

engagement:

In the afternoon of the 15th December in the Ain el **Gazala area, the British renewed the attack on the whole front of the Italo-German units. At about 15 hours the British launched a fierce attack with infantry and armoured cars in the direction of q. 181, 186 and 208, and between 'Pavia' and ' **Brescia**' Divisions. The fighting continued with extreme violence till late in the evening, and notwithstanding the determined resistance of the troops some successes [were won] between q. 152 (right flank of the ' **Brescia**' Division) and q. 186, in the direction of Carmuset er Reghem (q. 183). They also succeeded in penetrating the right flank of the ' **Brescia**' Division, opening a gap of about 4 km, which, however, was finally held by units of the 'Trento' Division.**

Dyer had not been long at rear headquarters, about 1200 yards behind Point 185, when Captain Young ³⁶ reported with D Company 22 Battalion. The men debussed and in open order were sent up to Point 185. A short time later Major Loder-Symonds rang through to say the enemy were massing for a counter-attack. They were about 800 strong, and he had sent D Company 22 Battalion forward to support A Company and was turning his guns on to the enemy. At that moment Lieutenant Mitchell ³⁷ was the only officer with A Company. Lieutenant Porter was back at his headquarters having fragments of Italian grenade removed from his person. His batman was prising them out with his thumbnail and a sharp knife when a despatch rider reported with a message that the enemy was massing. Porter took over the runner's motor cycle, but while riding hell for leather towards the danger point, skidded on a stone and was so badly concussed that he was unable to move.

The CO raced back to Point 181 and took command. He found that the artillery had opened fire on the enemy and that the enemy artillery had also opened fire on its own troops. D Company 22 Battalion was advancing through fire towards A Company when the Ngapuhis, without any orders, left their pits and charged the enemy. A hail of bullets met them and nearly two-thirds of their number went down; the rest found what shelter they could. Captain Young occupied the pits just vacated

and covered the remnants of A Company. **Dyer** pushed B Company forward to cover the right of both A Company 28 Battalion and D Company 22 Battalion, and also moved D Company back to its old position to do likewise on the left.

Although A Company's losses were terribly high (58 killed and wounded), its readiness to meet the enemy more than half-way had broken up the counter-attack. The company, now commanded by Sergeant Dick Stephens,³⁸ vice Lieutenant Mitchell, wounded, was only 22 strong and might have been entirely eliminated had not Sergeant 'Spud' Cato,³⁹ forward with a machine gun, helped to maintain the defence and succour the wounded. A stubborn fire fight was carried on by both sides until the afternoon, when the enemy quietened down. A message from Brigade for D Company 22 Battalion to return immediately could not be acted on until dark, when the handful of A Company were also withdrawn to their original position at Point 181. At dawn, Polish patrols brought back word that the enemy had departed in the night.

Orders were received to embus and the battalion was assembled. The company commanders and the MO reported that the men, who had been in action almost continuously since 23 November, needed a spell.

The troops moved back to Point 191 during the afternoon of the 17th and stayed there until the 23rd resting, cleaning up, and servicing trucks, of which the battalion had acquired rather a varied collection. D Company scorned ordinary vehicles and owned a light Italian tank, and C Company had a heavy diesel lorry. They were all needed to carry the array of enemy longrange mortars, machine guns, and 20-millimetre cannon that had been collected during the campaign.

It was a sad battalion that received a demand from Brigade Headquarters to pass over all captured enemy arms. In spite of the order **Colonel Dyer** felt justified in retaining a selection of anti-tank guns and long-range mortars, for it was common knowledge that many men had been scooped up by enemy tanks because of the absence of anti-tank arms. Two truckloads were handed over and the rest became a secret

reserve.

Padre Harawira held a memorial service on the 19th in memory of the fallen. Describing it, Private Iver Whakarau wrote home:

Friday 19th. Our first church service was held. I think that was the saddest day I ever experienced in my life. Saw the hardiest of men shed tears during the sermon, in fact I couldn't hold back myself. Happened to be wearing a pair of goggles so I just pulled them up over my eyes so that no one would see me.

The battalion's casualties for the whole campaign were:

Killed	64
Died of wounds	14
Wounded	151
Wounded and prisoners of war	10
Prisoners of war	3
TOTAL	242

Colonel Dittmer, wounded in the attack on **Sollum**, carried on the tradition established in **Greece** by Captain Baker, and continued in **Crete** by **Major Bertrand** and Captain Scott, of going 'into the bag' and getting out again.

Some Maori casualties from the **Sollum** attack were taken to the New Zealand medical centre near **Sidi Rezegh**, for the possession of which 4 and 6 Brigades were fighting most bloodily. The medical centre was overrun by the enemy on 28 November and over a thousand patients taken prisoner.

Colonel Dittmer managed to manœuvre himself, less his badges of rank, into a tent occupied by Lieutenant Addie Mitchell ⁴⁰ and ten other ranks of various units. A compass and a map he still had were buried in the sand close by. The Colonel was considering means of escape when Captain Lomas ⁴¹ of 4 Field Ambulance, to whom the prospect of

becoming a prisoner of war for the duration was also extremely distasteful, mentioned his dislike while dressing **Dittmer's** wound. The upshot was an arrangement that Lomas was to get a truck in going order and **Dittmer** would navigate. Some thirty all ranks were mobilised and a truck selected and put in order at night. It was not possible to collect a food reserve as two scanty meals of biscuit were the daily ration, but water and petrol were quietly drawn from other vehicles as were two rifles and some ammunition.

The actual breakout was made under cover of a sing-song arranged by Captain Lomas and put on by 4 Field Ambulance to cover the noise of the truck. One by one the escapees slipped away by devious routes and boarded the truck. The concert was in full swing and the nearest sentries in serious danger of being shot when the fortuitous arrival of an enemy mechanised column incited their curiosity. They moved away and the truckload of Kiwis, driven by Sergeant Owen Gosson ⁴² of 4 Field Ambulance, moved off in the opposite direction. The course set by **Colonel Dittmer** was first due west for five miles, that is, deeper into enemy territory to avoid reserves behind the fighting troops; then due south for 35 miles in the hope of outflanking the enemy front line; then south-east for the frontier. Apart from dodging ten or so mechanised groups laagered for the night, and who may or may not have been friendly, the party safely crossed a wire and, after some hesitation, approached a halted column. It turned out to be a group of British supply vehicles.

¹In solemn grief we bow our heads.

²Capt P. Taiapa; **Gisborne**; born Tikitiki, 6 Jun 1904; carver; wounded 15 Dec 1941.

³ **Sgt H. Manahi**, DCM; **Rotorua**; born Ohinemutu, 28 Sep 1913; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941.

⁴ **Maj G. H. Weir**, ED; **Wellington**; born NZ 26 Oct 1896; public servant.

⁵ **Maj C. Sorensen**; **Whangarei**; born **Auckland**, 5 Jun 1917; school-

teacher; twice wounded.

⁶ **Maj H. D. Harvey; Auckland; born Adelaide, 31 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; Lt, AIF, 1914–18 War; wounded 23 Nov 1941; Tonga Force, Jun 1943-May 1944.**

⁷ Bren light machine guns.

⁸ Major Sutton commanded the **8 Royal Tanks** squadron. He commanded the battalion only for an hour or so.

⁹ **Lt-Col M. Kronfeld; Wellington; born Auckland, 25 Jan 1899; medical practitioner; RMO 28 Bn Jun 1941-Jan 1942; Senior Medical Administrative Officer, 2 NZEF, Oct 1943-Aug 1944; Port Health Officer, Wellington.**

¹⁰ **Capt W. D. P. Wordley; Pakotai, Northland; born Dargaville, 3 Aug 1915; farm labourer; twice wounded.**

¹¹ **Lt-Col R. E. Romans, DSO, m.i.d.; born Arrowtown, 10 Sep 1909; business manager; CO 23 Bn Jul 1942-Apr 1943, Aug-Dec 1943; twice wounded; died of wounds 19 Dec 1943.**

¹² **Capt E. C. Pohio; born Hastings, 30 Jul 1914; motor driver.**

¹³ **Pte J. Jenkins; born Waikanae, 6 Oct 1917; lorry driver; killed in action 12 Dec 1941.**

¹⁴ **Pte B. R. Shepherd; born Kenana, 24 Dec 1908; labourer; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.**

¹⁵ **Sgt L. H. Wilson; born Wellington, 19 Feb 1901; mechanical specialist; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.**

¹⁶ Mutton-birds.

¹⁷ **Maj J. C. Reedy, m.i.d.; Ruatoria; born Ruatoria, 16 Jun 1912; storeman; twice wounded.**

¹⁸ **Cpl A. G. Kahui; Lower Hutt; born NZ 31 Mar 1918; gardener; wounded Dec 1941.**

¹⁹ **Lt-Col A. Awatere, DSO, MC; Rotorua; born Tuparoa, 25 Apr 1910; civil servant; CO 28 Bn Jul-Aug 1944, Nov 1944-Jun 1945; twice wounded.**

²⁰ **Capt J. R. Ormsby; Te Kuiti; born NZ 27 Dec 1917; clerk.**

²¹ **Maj J. Matehaere, MC, m.i.d.; Tirau; born NZ 28 Feb 1916; farmhand; three times wounded.**

²² **Cpl W. T. H. Te Anga; Bluff; born Wanganui, 6 Jan 1912; carpenter.**

²³ **Sgt P. Poutu; born NZ 18 Aug 1917; labourer.**

²⁴ **L-Cpl H. Elkington; born NZ 10 Jan 1919; lighthouse keeper; killed in action 8 May 1943.**

²⁵ **Cpl M. Wiki, m.i.d.; Te Kao; born Te Kao, 13 Jun 1918; labourer; twice wounded.**

²⁶ **Lt H. H. Takarangi; Hawera; born Ranana, 3 Jan 1919; farmer.**

²⁷ **Taurekareka—prisoners or slaves taken in war.**

²⁸ **Maj-Gen A. S. Wilder, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Order of the White Eagle (Serb); Te Hau, Waipukurau; born NZ 24 May 1890; sheep-farmer; Major, Wgtn Mtd Rifles, 1914–19; CO 25 Bn May 1940-Sep 1941; comd NZ Trg Group, 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.**

²⁹ **Pte E. Te K. I. Whakarau; born Wanganui, 28 Jan 1918; fireman, NZ Railways; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.**

³⁰ **Capt D. O. Stewart; Whakatane; born Whakatane, 20 Apr 1918; grocer's assistant; wounded 14 Dec 1941.**

³¹ **Pte C. Shelford, DCM; Opotiki; born Tekaha, 22 Aug 1918; labourer;**

wounded 14 Dec 1941.

³² **Pte W. Maha**; born NZ 5 May 1912; labourer; wounded and p.w. 18 Feb 1944.

³³ **S-Sgt A. B. Goodwillie**, BEM; **Invercargill**; born **Invercargill**, 5 Jul 1918; passenger service operator.

³⁴ **Lt H. Te K. Green**; born **Tikitiki**, 9 Nov 1908; labourer; killed in action 15 Dec 1941.

³⁵ **Capt W. M. Awarau**; **Hawera**; born NZ 28 Sep 1904; barrister and solicitor; twice wounded.

³⁶ **Lt-Col R. R. T. Young**, DSO; **Richmond**, England; born **Wellington**, 25 Jun 1902; oil company executive; CO School of Instruction, Feb-Apr 1943; CO 28 Bn Dec 1943-Jul 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; wounded 26 Dec 1943.

³⁷ **Maj H. M. Mitchell**; born NZ 24 Aug 1914; Regular soldier; wounded 16 Dec 1941; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

³⁸ **Lt A. J. Stephens**; born NZ 17 May 1918; kauri-gum producer; died of wounds 21 Apr 1943.

³⁹ **WO II C. L. Cato**, m.i.d.; **Te Kuiti**; born **Stratford**, 6 May 1912; salesman.

⁴⁰ **Capt A. Mitchell**; **Rotorua**; born NZ 3 Jan 1907; civil servant; wounded and p.w. Nov 1941.

⁴¹ **Maj A. L. Lomas**, MC, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born **Wanganui**, 30 Jun 1916; medical practitioner; RMO ASC Jan 1940-Jun 1941; OC **Maadi Camp Hosp** Jun 1942-Apr 1943; DADMS 2 NZ Div Aug 1943-Apr 1944.

⁴² **Sgt O. Gosson**; born NZ 17 Nov 1917; druggist's assistant.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 7 – MINQAR QAIM

CHAPTER 7

Minqar Qaim

THE battalion, with Captain Sorensen performing the triple functions of second-in-command, quartermaster and adjutant, left the **Gazala** area on 23 December and staged leisurely back to **Baggush**. En route a dust-storm scattered vehicles, but in spite of it eighty sacks of parcels and mail were delivered to the delighted addressees.

Christmas Day celebrations had necessarily been passed over but New Year's Eve, two days after the arrival at **Baggush**, made up for everything; blackout regulations were ignored and each company had a bonfire with refreshments on the side; bullets, shells, and assorted fireworks were exploding, whizzing, and whistling for miles around. The Maoris assisted with enemy flare pistols and light mortars; but, by the greatest of good luck, nobody was hurt.

There was a further distribution of parcels on New Year's Day and a cable sent to **Colonel Dittmer** from the Hon. P. K. Paikea, MP for Northern Maori and Minister representing the Maoris, was read to the troops by **Lieutenant-Colonel Dyer**:

On behalf of the united tribes of NZ I send a message of Xmas greetings to yourself and the Battalion. Wishing you and wounded men a speedy recovery. Aroha nui.

The combined Christmas and New Year dinner of hangi pork, eels, mutton-birds, cabbage, kumara and potatoes was served at the evening meal on New Year's Day, and a few days later the battalion moved by train and road back to **Kabrit**. There two months were spent in re-equipping, absorbing reinforcements, and training under naval instructors for seaborne landings.

The background to the preoccupation of 5 Brigade with combined operations was a plan to land a force in the Gulf of **Sirte** behind General Rommel's army while another motorised force went around his southern

flank. The troops of 5 Brigade did not know that they had been selected for the landing; but the idea was dropped for several reasons, one of which was that Rommel unexpectedly returned to the attack until he was halted by the defences of the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** line, where the position again became static. Fifth Brigade returned to the **Western Desert** and built a fortress area at **El Adem**, 20 miles south of **Tobruk**, but 28 Battalion remained at **Kabrit** and passed to the command of 4 Brigade.

It was during this period that **'Ace' Wood**, now commissioned as a second-lieutenant, returned to be the battalion's adjutant, and **Colonel Dittmer**, who had formed and trained the battalion as well as leading it in its first three campaigns, paid a farewell visit before returning to duty in New Zealand. On behalf of the unit Padre Harawira expressed the feelings of respect and admiration of the officers and men for their departing commanding officer.

It was also during this period that **Colonel Dyer** received another request to hand over any enemy equipment that the battalion might still be holding. He compromised by delivering up two anti-tank guns and a number of automatics.

By this time the battalion had regained its vitality. **Cairo** was beginning to pall and cash was becoming very scarce. Little by little the word **'Syria'** crept into the conversation. Yes, definitely the Division was going to **Syria** tomorrow, next week, soon. The troops were all in favour of moving somewhere for they were heartily fed up with having their tents blown down by the winter gales and eating their meals in sandstorms. And, wherever **Syria** was, it could not be any worse than where they were.

The problems of grand strategy have small place in a unit history and it is sufficient to mention that, in the Allied view, if the German penetration of south **Russia** made sufficient progress there was grave danger of a two-pronged thrust at Egypt—one from the **Western Desert**, where the enemy strength was building up again, and the other down

through **Syria**. There were even wider possibilities, not excluding a German attack on **India** and a junction with our newest enemies, the Japanese, that made **Syria** a possible battleground.

The troops began to pack up on the last day of February and the following day the battalion vehicles, with the bulk of the unit stores, departed. For the move 4 Brigade was divided into two groups, road and rail, besides a small advance party from each unit. The road group was again divided into two convoys, A and B. The eighteen vehicles of the **Maori Battalion**, with Captain Sorensen in charge, moved in A Convoy. The route was first to **Kantara**, where the **Suez Canal** was crossed, then across the **Sinai Desert** that the New Zealand Mounted Brigade knew so well in the previous war, to Gaza, that they knew even better after fighting two major battles there. Beyond Gaza the desert gave gradual way to cultivations where Jews in modern dress worked among Arabs whose garments were still cut on a two-thousand-year-old pattern. On through Affula, near **Nazareth**, to **Tiberias** on the Sea of Galilee, thence north-east to **Damascus**, then north again through the Anti- **Lebanon** range to **Baalbek** and finally to the brigade area in the **Bekaa** valley.



Eastern Mediterranean

The turn for the rest of the battalion came three days later. The night 2–3 March was spent in the open as all tentage had been struck and loaded on the baggage train during the day. After breakfast the

troops were moved by MT to **Geneifa** and then by train by way of **Kantara** to El Kehir, eight miles south of **Haifa**, which was reached early the next morning. The desert had gone past in the night and the transit camp at At Tira, in the dusty grey shelter of olive trees an hour's march from the station, was a delight to the old hands and a pleasant new experience for the new ones.

Because of transport difficulties the men spent that and the following two days at At Tira route-marching through green and cultivated country by day and telling by night tales of other olive trees that had had no comfortable tents under their branches.

At mid-morning on the 7th the battalion piled into a fleet of civilian buses, leaned back in the unfamiliar luxury of comfortable seats, and admired the scenery with its varied biblical associations. At first there were farm settlements, then the wooded hills around **Nazareth**, glimpses of the Sea of Galilee, the rugged foothills of Mount Hermon with, wonder of wonders, a snow-capped peak in the distance, and finally about dusk the **Damascus** transit camp.

An early start in the morning dashed any hopes of exploring **Damascus**—Im el Dineh, mother of the world to the Damascenes. The last leg of the journey was in the more familiar transport of army lorries supplied by the RASC, and a after a winding route through the southern end of the Anti- **Lebanon** range, then north through the **Bekaa** valley dividing the Anti- **Lebanon** and the **Lebanon** ranges, the troops debussed at a hutment camp at **Zabboud**, near **Djedeide**, on the western side of the valley. The troops settled in and surveyed their surroundings. They were in a valley about five miles wide and sixty-five miles long, with the higher peaks of the containing ranges covered in snow. Below the snow the foothills were rocky and rough, with scanty herbage and a soil too poor to grow scrub.

In the morning **Colonel Dyer** lectured the battalion on the complicated military and political situation in **Syria**, with a potted history of the country at a rate of approximately five hundred years per

minute. He told the men that the **Lebanon**, where they were, and **Syria** east of the ranges were militarily one country divided into two republics lately subject to **France** but now nominally independent. There had been fighting between the Vichy forces and British, Australian, and Free French troops prior to the establishment of the republics, while in the mountain regions the Lebanese and Syrians, with a long history of banditry behind them, thieved arms from either side with complete impartiality. The mountain folk were no Wog rabble but tough types whose favourite pastime was 'knocking off' any disliked person be he Arab, Syrian, French, or any other nationality. Less apparent, but definitely out of sympathy with the occupying Ninth Army, were the adherents to Vichy France, also numerous enemy agents actively working to overthrow the new regime.

Militarily there was no enemy nearer than **Bulgaria** and the Grecian islands, but **Turkey** was an unknown quantity and an enemy thrust either through that country or through the Caucasus between the Black and Caspian Seas would have to occupy **Syria** or, alternatively, make a wide detour through Iran and **Iraq**, with supply problems and with an active enemy entrenched on its flank. The battalion spent a few days masticating this mass of history, strategy and geography, while preparations were completed for moving into the designated battalion area.

The move was done by route march by companies, but by the 17th the whole battalion was pitching the last tents on the rough spurs of the Anti- **Lebanon** range, where its job was to construct part of a fortress area which would bar the path of an enemy thrust through **Turkey** and **Syria** towards Palestine and the Canal.

The job was tackled on different lines from previous assignments of a like nature—in England the troops had gone through the motions without knowing what might be expected; in **Greece** and **Crete**, strictly according to the book as interpreted by company and platoon commanders; but this time the officers and sergeants knew just what they were doing and why—they had learnt by experience in three

campaigns.

However, before the work had got properly going the last blizzard of the season burst on them; heavy rain was followed by heavier gales that blew down ill-secured tents; finally, on 22 March, four inches of snow driven by a howling gale completed everybody's misery.

After the storm it was springtime in the Lebanese hills and the troops enjoyed the hard work, the plentiful rations, and the new surroundings. 'Charlie YM' put up his tent and opened for business; engineers brought compressors and explosives to deal with the adamantine rock; supporting arms moved in and Syrian guides were hired to conduct reconnaissance parties through the mountains to locate tracks and water-holes. The hardy mountaineers took a fancy to the Maoris and showed them secret tracks they had used themselves in their several revolts against the French.

The Maoris soon discovered that although their reputation as scroungers was high and not undeserved they were in reality mere beginners in that profession. Thieving was more of a religion than a pastime with the hill people and they gave early demonstrations of their prowess. After a hundredweight of gelignite and detonators was lifted from a truck in which men were sleeping, the story that you were likely to lose the nails out of your boots while you were wearing them did not seem so far-fetched. After that it became the usual practice to set a booby trap concocted from an Italian grenade and a trip-wire under anything movable, and odd fingers lying about in the morning suggested that the contest was not altogether one-sided.

The fact that the local inhabitants understood the Maori anxiety to retain their supplies and bore no ill will towards the setters of lethal booby traps was evidenced by a ceremonial dinner given by the Muktar of the nearby village. Nine officers representing the battalion sat down to a slight repast that began with coffee and three pheasants, followed by the complete hindquarters of a sheep. The next course was the side of a sheep garnished with entrails, and accompanied by two huge dishes of

rice and four dishes of boiled greens. Dozens of rounds of bread, honey, curd, and olives were followed by a garlic salad and two cups of tea. More bread and coffee concluded a memorable effort to uphold the mana of the Maori people.

No man can do more than his best, and it was a thoroughly cowed party that learnt through the interpreter that, according to Arab custom, unless a party ate a lot they were not regarded as friendly. They had, in their hosts' opinion, done very badly, but as it was understood the English were poor eaters and matter would be overlooked. The only officer exempt from the reprimand was **Lieutenant Logan** who had performed gastronomic miracles. He had, through a friendship with Ali, the Muktar's nephew and interpreter, been well groomed in the etiquette of eating according to the local rules. Ali was a school-teacher, affected modern dress and spoke French, and **Logan** was also something of a French linguist. He alone knew that the correct way to eat rice was to take a handful, massage it gently with the fingers, then force the mass until there was sufficient showing above the first finger to flick with the thumb neatly into the open mouth. He also knew the correct thing to do from time to time was to catch the Muktar's eye, bow gravely then belch heartily, bow again and continue eating.

The upshot was that the Muktar called the village together and announced that **Lieutenant Logan** was as dear to him as his own son and that henceforth nothing was to be stolen from D Company area. The Muktar went on to make it clear that it was, of course, all right to theive as usual from the rest of the battalion.

Another facet of Syrian character was seen when **Colonel Dyer** persuaded **Divisional Headquarters** that a road suitable for carriers should be constructed up a steep valley into the centre of the position. The battalion supplied the labour, 5 Field Company engineers the supervision, and 700 Lebanese the material. Whole families turned out to collect the easy money and filled in the time happily rolling stones down the hillsides into the dry water course that was to carry the road.

High above them were small stone sangars from which, no doubt, the mountaineers knocked off their enemies in the good old days of free tribal enterprise.

By the end of April the work was practically completed, temperatures of over 100 degrees were being recorded, and summer kit and timetable came into force. So did smartening-up drill.

The CO issued a directive concerning training, opening with an opinion that the work the battalion had been doing had not been conducive to discipline, which had deteriorated considerably. His prescription was a period of intense smartening-up drill. The troops grinned appreciatively, composed a song entitled 'We're going to jack things up and swing the Palmerston way', and prepared themselves for some barrack-square bashing. With **Second-Lieutenant Wood** as master of ceremonies and **Colonel Dyer**, no mean disciplinarian, both on the job, their expectations were amply fulfilled.

It was about this period that **Colonel Dyer** attended his first conference in 4 Brigade, where among other things battalion commanders were asked to submit a confidential report of any enemy equipment still in possession of their units. Lists of astonishing length and variety were turned in by the companies, with the transport drivers heading the field. Their trucks were rolling arsenals, for they remembered **Capuzzo** and had taken steps to deal with such a situation should it again become necessary. In due course a demand for the instant handing in of the equipment was received from Divisional Headquarters. **Colonel Dyer** demurred, feeling that there had been a breach of trust, and finally asked to be relieved of his command before being required to carry out the order. He was, in consequence, marched out to base duty at **Maadi** and on 13 May **Major Love**, the second-in-command, was appointed to command the battalion. Major F. Baker again became second-in-command.

It was a regrettable incident for **Colonel Dyer** (still 'The Major' to D Company) had taken part in every campaign and had proved himself a

gallant leader. His departure did, however, pave the way for the realisation of the ambition of the Maori people that 28 (Maori) Battalion should be commanded by a Maori.

Two days later the new commanding officer addressed the battalion and stressed the need for the unit's spirit to be maintained. He concluded by asking the co-operation of every officer and man in carrying out his responsible task.

It is not suggested that the troops were chained to the arid Syrian foothills. There was local leave to **Baalbek, where **Divisional Headquarters** was established, but once an afternoon had been spent exploring the ruins of ancient temples there was little else to do besides sampling the local brew. All leave parties had to be transported by truck and occasional organised trips were made to **Damascus**, where the bazaars were extensive and expensive. Evening entertainments were by way of visits by the **Kiwi Concert Party**, the **ENSA** show, 'Girls in Uniform', a South African entertainment party, the Crazy Gang, the **10 Corps** concert party, 'The Aristocrats', and the NZ YMCA mobile cinema. In addition, officers and men attended various schools of instruction and military ski-ing and commando courses. The departure of Lieutenants **Logan**, Ormsby and Lambert, and other ranks for instruction in the operation and tactical handling of anti-tank guns also indicated an addition to the battalion's defensive strength.**

With the **Djedeide fortress in a reasonably advanced state and the battalion looking less like a team of navvies, a period of exercises and manœuvres commenced and culminated in a seven-day brigade exercise in practising co-operation with infantry tanks, in rapid minelaying and lifting, and the use of direct air support. The troops were back in their unit area by the evening of 26 May and for the following week spent the time cleaning arms and equipment, listening to lectures on the lessons of the exercise, and putting the finishing touches to the wiring of company areas.**

The battalion's next move was for a week's vacation at a 'Change-of-

air' camp on the coast near **Beirut**. Practically the whole unit was taken by MT to **Rayak**, thence by train to **Beirut**, where the men found comfortable quarters, canteens, a cinema, **YMCA** reading and recreation tents, and sports facilities. It was a happy, carefree week with daily leave to **Beirut**. Leave ended officially at midnight but no questions were asked as long as the troops reported at the daily 9 a.m. parade. There were no incidents requiring disciplinary action for the men loyally obeyed the CO's injunction to uphold the mana of the Maori people. Highlights of the vacation were a social evening tendered the officers of the battalion by the matron and sisters of 3 NZ General Hospital, which had recently arrived at **Beirut**, and a motor trip for 105 all ranks to **Tripoli**.

The battalion was back in its old area by 13 June, and on the same day Major Chesterman ¹ marched in as OC Headquarters Company. He was the first senior officer to join the unit since it had left New Zealand and had already made a fine reputation in 20 Battalion. The long, lean, smiling pakeha soon had a grip on the rather unwieldy and loosely-knit Headquarters Company.

The following day was a Sunday. After church parade the troops were addressed by the Brigade Commander, who told them that the Division was to continue its role in **Syria** for at least three more months. And the next afternoon word came to move back to the desert forthwith. It's like that in the Army.

Back in North Africa the **Gazala** line which the Maoris had helped to capture six months before was being pierced and outflanked. The night the troops returned from **Beirut** the inland bastion fell and the Eighth Army began to fall back to the line **Tobruk- El Adem**. It was hoped to hold there while reserves were concentrated for a counter-attack. To that end the New Zealand Division was recalled from **Syria**.

Orders to the Division were for a secret and immediate return to **Matruh**. Shoulder flashes and hat badges were to be removed and all unit signs on transport painted out. After two days packing and checking arms, the Maoris left **Syria** on the 17th and were taken by truck to

Nesher, near Haifa. The men were given a hot meal, entrained immediately, and travelled throughout the night and following day. They reached **Kantara** by 4 p.m., marched across the canal ferry, boarded another train, then on through **Amiriya** and **El Alamein** to **Mersa Matruh**, which was reached at midnight on the 19th, just in time to share in an air raid.

By this time **El Adem** had been evacuated and **Tobruk** invested. The battalion was the first unit of the Division to arrive at **Matruh** and, apart from movement control officers, nobody in the area could have cared less. The companies dispersed and dug themselves in for what was left of the night. Further west an all-out enemy attack on the key fortress of North Africa was gaining ground. In the Division even battalion commanders knew nothing of the chaos of orders and counter-orders that **Divisional Headquarters** was contending with, but they did know that as formations arrived they were being shuttled around from area to area until they were becoming dizzy. The Maoris arrived on a Friday night and shifted camp on Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, by which time they were quartered in a portion of an Egyptian Army barracks in B sector of the **Matruh** fortress. It was during this period that the unbelievable happened and *Panzerarmee Afrika* breached the **Tobruk** perimeter and then captured the port with all its garrison and supplies. There was now no further question of a counter-attack for the Eighth Army was in full retreat—with the intention, it seemed, of putting as much distance as possible between pursued and pursuer. The next effort to stop the apparently invincible Rommel would be in the **Matruh- El Alamein- Qattara Depression** area—if formations could be reorganised and material delivered in time.

The retreat was to be arrested by mobile hard-hitting columns which could operate between the fixed defences of the fortress areas, of which **Matruh** was the pivot. In the New Zealand Division this necessitated leaving 6 Brigade back at **Amiriya**, and the proportion of infantry to artillery was further reduced by sending back to the rear one company of each remaining battalion; consequently, on the 24th D Company with

other LOB personnel returned to **Maadi**. The Division, moving in brigade groups, but still commanded as a division, prepared to move south into the desert and join **13 Corps**, while **10 Corps** defended **Matruh** and **30 Corps** organised the positions at **Alamein**.

Enough of the broader canvas. The Maori Battalion, still with 4 Brigade, handed over to men of **10 Indian Division** and on the afternoon of the 25th marched out to the concentration area, where it bedded down for the night. During the next day the Division took up a defensive position on a long, low ridge running in an east-west direction, with its highest point at **Minqar Qaim** and about 25 miles south of **Matruh**.

It must not be thought that the Division was preparing to fight the German *Panzerarmee* single-handed; there were armoured columns to the north, west and south, but communications were either faulty or non-existent and in the ensuing battle each group fought independently—and unavailingly.

The main appointments in the battalion at this time were:

CO: **Lt-Col E. Te W. Love**

2 i/c: **Maj F. Baker**

Adjutant: **Capt A. C. Wood**

MO: **Capt R. M. McDonald**

IO: **2 Lt R. C. Te Punga**

QM: **Lt I. G. Howden**

Company commanders:

HQ Company: **Maj E. R. Chesterman**

A Company: **Capt C. Sorensen** (vice **Capt W. Porter**, away on course)

B Company: **Capt M. R. Pene** (vice **Capt C. M. Bennett**, on staff)

course)

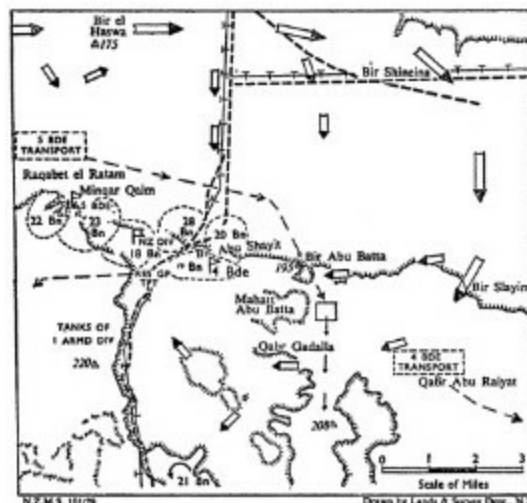
C Company: Capt K. A. Keiha

D Company : Capt A. Awatere

Left out of battle.

The battalion was directed into a shallow re-entrant just south of Bir Abu Batta, a small well four miles east of **Minqar Qaim**, and proceeded to prepare a defensive position. The troops were heartened by the sight of bomber formations flying westward, an indication that the Air Force at least was functioning to some purpose. The Maoris soon had a painful reminder that no matter how many planes you have you don't dominate all the sky all the time; low-flying enemy aircraft swooped down on them and the area was full of dust, smoke, and bursting bombs. The result, luckily, was only three men wounded.

In the early hours of the following morning the battalion was moved two miles nearer **Minqar Qaim** and the brigade was finally disposed in an all-round defensive position. The Maori Battalion faced north, with Battalion Headquarters near **Bir Abu Shayit** on top of the escarpment and the companies in the order B, right, C, centre, and A, left, about a mile forward straddling a track that came down from the north.



21 PANZER DIVISION ENCIRCLES NEW ZEALANDERS
AT MINQAR QAIM, 27 JUNE 1942

21 Panzer Division encircles New Zealanders at Minqar Qaim, 21 June 1942

The troops set about digging themselves in, but in the rocky ground compressors would have been needed to have made any real impression; sangars were built instead. Engineers came up and laid a minefield about five hundred yards in front; that is, due north of the Maori position. The newly-armed anti-tank platoon covered the engineers while they worked, and passed the time praying for a target even if it was only a little one. At first the platoon hoped for a tank but finished the job without the sight of even a half-ton truck.

A warning that the enemy was using British guns and vehicles had been issued, so that when twelve Crusader tanks came in from the north soon after breakfast they were kept well covered until they had proved their identity and passed on. Soon after 8 a.m. machine-gun fire was heard in the north and a thick smudge in the same direction indicated moving columns, identity unknown. As the morning wore on, heat haze and dust clouds made observation almost impossible at any distance. One approaching cloud resolved itself into vehicles rolling eastwards away from the battle and a second materialised into a hostile formation which was chased away by artillery fire.

Another large concentration loomed out of the haze at mid-day, passing in a north-easterly direction but staying a while to exchange fire with our artillery. By this time visibility was so poor that **Colonel Love sent Captain Tuhiwai with three carriers to investigate and patrol the battalion front. They were some four miles north of the minefield when a shell put Tuhiwai's carrier out of action and an enemy vehicle dashed forward to collect the crew. The section reserve carrier also dashed forward to collect the crew. The section reserve carrier also dashed forward to collect the crew and won the race, whereupon the patrol returned.**

In mid-afternoon another enemy formation tested the brigade perimeter, this time from the north-east or, for clarity, the right flank. The enemy bumped into 20 Battalion and a fierce artillery battle raged across 4 Brigade's front for over an hour, with A Company more than

interested in the conflict. It was Second-Lieutenant Marsden's ² first command in battle:

Guns (25 pounders) of 4th Field Arty were dispersed throughout Bn area. Really magnificent exhibition given by these gunners who were hopelessly outnumbered. My platoon and that of 2 Lt J. G. Aperahama ³ had sangered positions in horse shoe fashion forward fifty yards of one troop of three guns in our area. All gun crews except the officer of one were wiped out or wounded. Three men from my platoon were ordered to assist this remaining gun by passing up the ammunition and loading the gun while the officer sighted and fired. The forced inactivity was telling on the men who could do nothing but try and burrow deeper into the solid rock... The most welcome interlude of the afternoon to me was the arrival of 1 Gal Jerry can of hot tea from Jim Aperahama for my platoon. I learnt later that the Arty troop near him had left them a Benghasi burner and 10 gals of water in the gear they had to abandon.

Up to this point the Maoris had lacked employment, but at approximately 6.30 p.m. a company of infantry came down the track and debussed in front of the minefield. The forward troops could not see what was going on but Colonel Love had a good view and kept the company commanders informed. He suggested that if the opportunity presented itself he would like a few prisoners, especially officers, for questioning. The enemy was sent to ground by machine-gun fire from the escarpment. Second-Lieutenant Jackson, ⁴ who with 14 Platoon was nearest the enemy, was becoming more and more uneasy about explosions that he could hear but could not see. He thought that the enemy was lifting or exploding the mines and was wondering what to do about it when Private Ted Wanoa ⁵ took a hand. Wanoa had spent some time in a prisoner-of-war camp on Crete before he had broken out and been picked up by a submarine, and with a number of 'take' ⁶ to even up he left his sangar, taking snap shots at what he hoped might be German heads and yelling 'Come on Jerry.'

Jackson took a section forward for the dual purpose of seeing that

Wanoa did not get into trouble and of having a look at the minefield. As soon as the section could see the Germans lying in the folds of the ground its fire brought the rest of the platoon forward. In no time the whole company was racing up, followed by a very irate Captain Keiha. When he arrived on the scene some of B Company had joined in the action, there were twenty-odd Germans lying shot or bayoneted, and 14 Platoon had ten prisoners. There were no officers in the bag and **Colonel Love** had to be satisfied with three NCOs. The enemy party was from *I Battalion 104 Lorried Infantry Regiment*.

From then on until the swift desert darkness fell on **Minqar Qaim**, there were continual artillery duels as the enemy probed for a weak spot in 4 Brigade's perimeter but found only a very determined opposition. The New Zealand infantry had not been seriously engaged but tanks had got among 5 Brigade's transport, which had scattered beyond wireless range. Over the hundreds of square miles occupied by **13 Corps** some formations had been overrun, some had retired, and a few were still fighting or prepared to fight back. Early in the day **13 Corps** had decided that another battle had been lost and sent a code signal, 'Bedstead', to **General Freyberg** authorising withdrawal. **Divisional Headquarters** decided to 'Bedstead' in an orderly manner by night, but shells coming in from the east and south suggested difficulties that were emphasised at dusk by flares from all points of the compass. To retire at all, let alone at a particular time, was not going to be easy with a ring of tanks waiting for the New Zealand artillery to use up its ammunition.

Colonel Love returned at midnight from a brigade conference with his orders for the Maori part in the operation. The divisional ⁷ plan was that 4 Brigade would fight its way along the escarpment to open a clear passage, whereupon the MT would follow and, after embussing the infantry, would lead the Division very rapidly eastwards.

Flares indicated that the first Maori position by Bir Abu Batta, as well as lower ground of the **Mahatt Abu Batta** on the south side of **Minqar Qaim** escarpment, was occupied by the enemy. The breakout route was along the escarpment between these two positions and the

brigade forming-up line was about a mile west of this 500-yard neck of escarpment.

Zero hour had been fixed for half an hour after midnight and a running O Group was held as company commanders arrived in response to urgent signals. The troops were collected from their sangars and concentrated around Battalion Headquarters on top of the ridge while the transport moved to the brigade assembly area. The 19th and 20th Battalions were able to get to the start line almost on time but **Colonel Love**, with only half an hour to assemble his men and march much further than the rest of the brigade, was over an hour behind them. The brigade formation was an arrowhead with 19 Battalion on a two-company front as the point, 28 Battalion in column of companies on the right rear, and 20 Battalion left rear in the same formation.

The brigade moved off in bright moonlight at 1.45 a.m. (28 June) towards Bir Abu Batta. For a while there was no sound except the rhythmic crunch, crunch, crunch of boot biting into the soft sand. Training makes it second nature to march in step even when advancing into battle. The Maoris' orders were that if enemy fire opened in front they were not to break formation except to open to ten-yard intervals, but if fire came in from the right they were to go straight for it.

Suddenly one or two inquiring flares away ahead and to the left where 19 Battalion was approaching the lip of Bir Abu Batta were followed by dozens more, urgently illuminating the unexpected battleground. The Maoris were silhouetted against the light from the flares and tracer from **Mahatt Abu Batta** cut lanes through the moonbeams. The battalion deployed as instructed and, noting the strongpoints by the stream of tracer, dealt with them as laid down in the Manual of Infantry Training.

Second-Lieutenant Waaka,⁸ commanding the leading platoon, of B Company paints a vivid picture:

I called to my platoon (No. 11) to deploy and swing right and we

headed straight in at the gallop. We went straight through Jerry's groups of slit trenches (I always thought he grouped his trenches too closely—not more than six feet apart in this instance). Those who were not accounted for were left for the remainder of the Battalion who by now were following with the usual Maori roar and battle cry. By now 'A' Coy, the Ngapuhis from **Northland**, had swung up on our right... It was a tough job in the heat of the moment to get the boys to swing left again but we managed it... A lone Jerry suddenly jumped up not more than twenty yards in front of our line of advance and ran. He didn't run directly away but at about a 45 degrees angle to the left. The moment he was sighted which was plain enough in the moonlight, a cry went up, everyone let fly with tommy guns, brens and rifles. As the chap beside me was reloading he yelled out 'Go for it boy!' Well go for it he did, flat out and believe it or not he got away with at least 20 or 30 weapons firing at him. I'm sure everyone had a grin on his face. I know I did. Fairly early in the piece we ran into a truck on the back of which was posted an anti tank gun. Beside the gun a German was crouched and when he saw us coming he turned. My batman-runner Jimmy (Whiti) Ratema ⁹ went at him with such force that his bayonet went right through him, struck the gun behind him and broke off at the nose cap of the rifle. Each officer normally carried rifles with fixed bayonets into any action as it proved more effective than the .38 pistol on issue. Ratema came back to me, showed me his rifle, threw it away and calmly took mine off me. The thought passed through my mind as to whether the QM would believe my batman's story when the time came to explain its loss.

The Ngapuhis referred to by Lieutenant Waaka had much the same experience on the right of B Company. Lieutenant Marsden writes:

I can still see Lt Hupa Hamiora ¹⁰ out in front of B Coy prancing, leaping and yelling as he led that famous haka Ka mate! Ka mate! No opposition was met by A Coy. We passed clean through the enemy defences (not manned), arty and troop carrying vehicles. The drivers of these were in bed either on or under their vehicles.

When there was no more opposition the red, white, green success signal was shot into the dusty sky and the brigade sorted itself out and re-formed. There were no prisoners to worry about and the men with reddened bayonets cleaned them in the sand while waiting the arrival of transport. A watchful eye was kept on the rear and flank in case of counter-attack, but the first battalion of *Rifle Regiment 104* had been practically annihilated by 19 and 20 Battalions and the few survivors were heading due north as fast as their trucks could carry them.

Defensive fire was still coming in from the south and the troops lay on the sand listening to the rumble of transport grow to a roar as the trucks, carriers, guns, ambulances, portées and cars came up. The troops embussed as best they could, and as each truck was loaded it moved off independently. Men piled on to every variety of vehicle from water-carts to staff cars. Some rode on the barrels of the field guns. A truck full of Maoris passed a 25-pounder with two men riding the barrel, which was rearing like a buck jumper in the rough going. The gun jockeys were encouraged in their efforts to wriggle forward on to the ammunition trailer with yells of 'Ride him cowboy.'

Everything went flat out until daybreak. Whenever a truck failed mechanically or blew out its tyres it was set on fire and the occupants scrambled on to the first vehicle that had room. There was a short halt at 7 a.m. for reorganisation and breakfast, but there was no breakfast for B Company because its cook-truck had been destroyed in the breakout. The men were sitting disconsolate without food or water when an old grudge against Ngapuhi was dissipated. A Company's cook-truck drove over with the remark, 'They tell us you blokes have got no kai,' and half the contents were handed over to their old foemen, the Arawas. A 'take' that started when Hongi cut a track through the bush to haul Ngapuhi canoes on to Lake Rotorua was ended in the Egyptian desert over a century later.

A course was set for the **Alamein** defences, which were reached at last light after a move of over one hundred miles. Sixth Brigade was now

holding the **Kaponga Box** and 4 Brigade bedded down near by. It was some days before all the troops were collected and the battalion's casualties ascertained—five had been killed and seventeen wounded.

The breakout from **Minqar Qaim** was, somewhat naturally, viewed in different lights by the opposing forces: *Afrika Korps'* war diary mentions the bitter, defensive fighting and ends with the conclusion that 'the encirclement was not a success.'

Colonel Love, on the other hand, ends his report, 'altogether the show went off exceedingly well indeed.'

¹ **Maj E. R. Chesterman**, m.i.d.; born NZ 21 Aug 1914; school-teacher; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

² **Maj G. T. Marsden**; Pukehou; born NZ 28 Aug 1918; school-teacher; three times wounded.

³ **Maj J. G. P. Aperahama**; born Tolaga Bay, 9 May 1916; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁴ **Maj S. F. Jackson**, m.i.d.; **Lower Hutt**; born NZ 11 Sep 1918; labourer; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

⁵ **Pte T. Wanoa**, m.i.d.; Tikitiki; born NZ 11 Sep 1919; labourer; twice wounded.

⁶ Slights and insults.

⁷ Owing to **General Freyberg** having been wounded during the day, **Brigadier Inglis** was acting Divisional Commander and **Colonel Burrows** was commanding 4 Brigade.

⁸ **Lt K. Waaka**; Whakarewarewa; born NZ 27 Nov 1914; State Forestry worker.

⁹ **Pte J. Ratema**; Whakarewarewa; born NZ 12 May 1919; labourer.

¹⁰ **Lt H. Hamiora**; born NZ 18 Jun 1908; clerk; died of wounds 5 Jul

1942.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 8 – PARRY AND THRUST

CHAPTER 8

Parry and Thrust

WHILE components of **2 NZ Division** straggled into **Kaponga Box**, or **Fortress A** as it was called militarily, on which **5 Brigade** had laboured the previous September, the rest of **13 Corps** ‘Stopped not for break and stayed not for stone’ in the last lap of what became known in the Eighth Army as the **Gazala Gallop**; **10 Corps** around **Matruh** was encircled and lost heavily in cutting its way out; the business community of **Cairo**, which cared little what uniform its patrons wore, was, it was said, polishing up its German and Italian arithmetic. Headquarters Middle East worked on plans for another withdrawal—destination, **Syria**, or somewhere.

Fortunate, indeed, was the fact that *Afrika Korps* was almost as worn out chasing Eighth Army as Eighth Army was in keeping a jump ahead of it, because the force holding the forty-odd miles of the **Alamein** line was very thin on the ground. The 9th Australian Division was hurrying from **Syria** but was not immediately available, **1 South African Division** was in the **Alamein Box**, and the New Zealand Division was grouped around the **Kaponga Box**. Between the two fortresses **18 Indian Brigade**, newly arrived from **Iraq**, was holding the **Deir el Shein**, eight miles north of **Kaponga**. South of **Kaponga**, **Fortress B** on the edge of the **Qattara Depression** was incomplete and unable to stand a siege for lack of a permanent water supply. Instead of being in the centre of the fixed defences, **2 NZ Division**, therefore, was really on the inland flank and open to attack from north, west, and south.

The troops were deployed, with **6 Brigade** inside **Kaponga** and both **4** and **5 Brigades** in **Deir el Munassib**, about nine miles south-east. The **28th Battalion** came under command of **6 Brigade** and moved into the rear of the **Box**. **B Company** remembered the move because it lost the services of a new but much-esteemed addition to its ranks. During the breakout from **Minqar Qaim** it was found that the company had acquired a German prisoner. He was handed over to the cooks and became a

valued member of the culinary staff. They were sorry to lose him to the prisoner-of-war cage but such is the fortune of war.

No. 8 Platoon suffered a similar loss. A very dazed young German was discovered in its truck and, after he was scared almost to death with flourishing bayonets, he was given more cigarettes than he was able to smoke. He was promoted to 'platoon rouseabout' and part-time batman to Lieutenant Marsden, and in both capacities gave complete satisfaction. He was not, however, a very good linguist and mastered only three words of English—'Come', 'Go', and 'Lav'.

July opened with another disaster—the Indians at **Deir el Shein** were overrun and German armour felt its way on to **Ruweisat Ridge** which, running east and west, was in effect a ten-mile-long spear thrusting through the **Alamein** line. The water supply for **Kaponga** was also disrupted, for the partially constructed pipeline was severed on Ruweisat. The now useless line of pipes became the centre of no-man's-land and a guiding mark for night patrols.

To the Maoris, shovelling away the sand that had fallen into the earthworks since their first digging, the enemy seemed to be comfortably far away, but in reality the position of the Division was again fast becoming untenable. The night was a rumble in the north with the usual German fireworks until midnight, when, with the moon lighting the desert, the **RAF** took a hand and kept on taking it until dawn.

The expected withdrawal order came in the afternoon but was countermanded before it could be acted upon; enemy movements suggested an all-in attack against the **Alamein Box** and it was decided to counter by exerting pressure from the south. A tank skirmish in the north-east ensued, with the result that the hostile armour withdrew to the north of **Kaponga** and patrols kept a watchful eye lest Rommel altered his intention and the direction of his thrust.

The following day (3 July) was a day of movement for nearly

everybody except 28 Battalion; 4 Brigade, working with 4 and 5 Field Regiments, intercepted the Italian *Ariete Division* on *Alam Nayil* ridge and turned it back with the loss of most of its guns; 5 Brigade left to exert pressure by occupying the *El Mreir Depression*, five miles north of *Kaponga*; 6 Brigade went into reserve at *Himeimat*, but the Maoris were left behind in *Kaponga* as caretakers and passed to the command of 5 Brigade.

The only annoyance suffered by the battalion came from the methodical attentions of a single heavy mortar. It caused no casualties, but its nuisance value was considerable and *Colonel Love* wanted it removed. It was a characteristic of the CO to give an order and leave to the person concerned the manner of its fulfilment. Also, when the Colonel was emphatic his voice could be heard a mile away. *Lieutenant Hayward*, now commanding the carrier platoon, was sent for and was met at the door of headquarters' dugout with a roar: 'Get that mortar!'

The mortar was 'got' by a section of carriers and a two-pounder en portée, whereupon peace reigned in *Kaponga* for everybody except *Lieutenant Hayward*.

'In the late afternoon,' he writes, 'a column of tanks was observed approaching the box from the NE. (What appeared to be a tank battle had been going on to the N most of the day.) I was told to report to Bn HQ.

Col Love—"See those tanks?"

Self—"Yes Sir."

Col Love—"You're to find out whose they are. They could be ours or they could be theirs."

Self—"Yes Sir. How do I find out?"

Col Love—"Take this blue flag. When you are close enough to be clearly seen stand up and wave it in a circular motion above your head.

If they are ours they will reply in the same way.”

No more, no less. You will of course have guessed they were our own.'

From their position in the box the troops could see the flash of the 25-pounders supporting 5 Brigade at El Mreir and hear the dull rumble of explosions interspersed with the rat-tat-tat of machine guns, while the sky was illuminated with cascading flares and cut by coloured meteors.

Conditions continued to be peaceful in [Kaponga](#) although the reverse appeared to be the position at El Mreir. Late in the afternoon an Indian column called in for replenishment and said it was bound westward to harry the enemy flank. At last light [Colonel Love](#) was informed that he was again under command of 4 Brigade, so that within three days 28 Battalion had been attached to each brigade in the Division. That night was also noisy for 5 Brigade was still fighting at El Mreir, but at daybreak the enemy and 5 Brigade were again on opposite sides of the depression. [Colonel Love](#) returned from a conference in the morning (5th) with the news that 4 Brigade was to extend 5 Brigade's front and take up a position along a ridge on that brigade's left as part of a plan to reach around the enemy flank.

The Maoris left the shelter of the Box and joined 4 Brigade, which moved off in desert formation. Within the hour and without warning a number of enemy planes came in low from the south-west and roared down the lanes of vehicles. The attached anti-aircraft units were in action before their vehicles had stopped, but the surprise was complete and there were explosions all over the brigade area. The Maoris suffered worst of all, for out of the sixty-five casualties in the brigade, Major Chesterman, Lieutenant Hamiora, and fourteen other ranks were killed and twenty-one wounded. Another fatal Maori casualty was Lieutenant Maloney, ¹ LO at 4 Brigade Headquarters.

The dead were buried, the wounded cared for, and the brigade continued on to its destination, a ridge two miles south-west of 5 Brigade, which was reached in the late afternoon.

Colonel Love satisfied himself that there were no enemy within six miles of **Qaret el Yidma**, as the locality was named on the map, although the noise of battle could still be heard from El Mreir. The troops dug in and waited events. Nothing happened the following day, which was excessively hot, beyond regular **RAF** sweeps north and not so regular flights by the **Luftwaffe** going in the opposite direction. The situation is best described in the somewhat unorthodox phraseology of the battalion war diary: 'The **RAF** is having a day out today. It is now the heat of the day and both sides, apparently overcome by the heat have ceased activity, except the **RAF** whose planes are still going to and fro.'

That night (6–7 July) **Colonel Love** was instructed to take position on the right of the brigade for the capture of **Mungar Wahla**. **Mungar Wahla** was high ground roughly in line with 5 Brigade; and it will be remembered that in the desert high ground is only about a dozen feet or more above the general level.

It was presumed in Battalion Headquarters that the enemy had moved in since the CO's reconnaissance, but a two-mile march ended in a bloodless victory and the troops dug in at their leisure. Small groups of high-flying enemy planes were about, probably in search of transport targets, and **Colonel Love** let it be known that although ammunition was not unlimited an odd pot-shot might ease the monotony of waiting. The Colonel's gesture was highly appreciated by the men and some entirely harmless firing took place.

But let us look at the enemy's plans as we now know them. It was Rommel's intention, as he explained to General Headquarters, **Rome**, to remove the menace to his right flank by standing on his present position long enough to regroup with a view to encircling and destroying **2 NZ Division**. In pursuance of this intention an Italian division had moved towards **Mungar Wahla** in a turning movement around 5 Brigade's western flank.

Colonel Love was warned to be ready to move at thirty minutes' notice and by late afternoon was back at **Qaret el Yidma**. That was only

the start; besides the Italians, there was a threat of tanks from the west and 4 Brigade was ordered back into the **Munassib Depression**, south-east of **Kaponga**. It was a hard night, with much pushing and heaving to extricate the trucks from patches of soft sand, but the troops, somewhat bewildered at the apparently pusillanimous conduct of operations and not sure when the enemy would be on top of them, were much heartened by the quiet efficiency of the 4 RMT drivers. The battalion was safely in Munassib before first light. Fifth Brigade was also withdrawn behind **Kaponga** while 6 Brigade, which had come up and occupied the Box as reserve to a projected advance on **Daba**, was warned to leave a caretaker company behind and get back smartly to **Amiriya**.

Another dispositional shuffle that night (8–9th) placed 28 Battalion two miles north-east of Munassib. Captain Porter returned from a course of instruction and took over A Company, and Captain Sorensen went to Headquarters Company vice Major Chesterman. The arrival of ‘Ben’ Porter, as he was known to the Ngapuhi Company, was a great morale lifter. To the newer members of the company Porter was something of a legend and his appearance among his keyed-up tribesmen, arrayed in clean and highly pressed shorts and the latest in hair-do's, was worth a week's leave.

The 9th was a quiet day on the Maori front and opportunity was taken to catch up on some sleep that had lately been hard to come by. The new chaplain, Padre Rangi,² marched in to the unit, and the day closed with a ‘goodnight melody’ provided by heavy bombers and two Stukas. During that afternoon, enemy forces that had been eyeing **Kaponga** very carefully took a deep breath and turned on a full-scale bombardment. The caretaker company left unobtrusively by the back door and the enemy, with armour and infantry, bashed a way into the empty Box.

For **Kaponga** to fall without a shot fired in its defence was an ignoble end to a lot of hard work, although there were weighty reasons for its abandonment. The result was of course that, except at **Alamein**, there were now no fixed defences and **2 NZ Division** was again fully mobile.

And that was the way the Division liked it.

While these movements were taking place, 5 Brigade had been bickering with the enemy and was now withdrawing to the east of 4 Brigade. Colonel Love was instructed to occupy the southern side of Munassib Depression and take care of the rear of the brigade's area. The battalion was there before daylight and, though there was no employment offering from that direction, gunfire from the Alam Nayil ridge suggested the very dickens of a fight going on there.

The obstinacy of the New Zealand Division had bought time for the reorganisation of some armoured formations, with the result that a tank battle had turned the enemy back off Alam Nayil. A contributing factor that delayed Rommel's intention of destroying his tormentors was that the Australians and South Africans had commenced some diversions on their own account, with *Sabrata Division* as the chief sufferer.

The favourable outcome of the action on Alam Nayil had suggested the possibility of capturing the vital Ruweisat Ridge and reversing the situation by creating a threat against the enemy on the coastal sector. An Indian brigade was sharing the feature with the enemy who, however, held the greater part. The New Zealanders were given the job of evicting the intruders.

Ruweisat Ridge was only 160 feet above sea level and about 20 feet higher than the surrounding desert; in fact, it was a barely noticeable bulge in the arid flatness, but nevertheless was of the greatest tactical importance because it dominated many square miles of terrain.

The first phase of the attack on Ruweisat was an approach march on 11 July across the Alam Nayil ridge, where there was a heartening display of abandoned enemy guns and other equipment. The troops debussed about half a mile south of the ridge and formed up with B Company leading, A right rear, and C left rear; 23 Battalion was on the brigade's right and 20 Battalion on the left.

It was late afternoon when the troops crossed the top of the ridge and advanced into artillery fire that increased as they moved down the enemy side of the feature. A hull-down tank firing across the Maoris' front added a stream of armour-piercing shells and the battalion was ordered to halt. Lieutenant Marsden found the situation very trying:

The most harassing experience was lying prone in the hot sand and watching the shells come bouncing, screaming, jumping and whirring along the open front. No matter which way one rolled the jolly things seemed to jump that way too and at the last moment veer away or bounce over. Positively uncanny. My batman Pte Harry Fisher ³ got one of these AP shells in the abdomen but lived long enough to smoke a cigarette.

Just before dusk Colonel Love drove up with his adjutant to see how the men were faring. The vehicle attracted still more fire and an airburst mortally wounded the CO and severely wounded Captain Wood. Colonel Love died that night. There was another star in the Maori sky. ⁴

'E te toa! Haere Ki te Iwi i te Po.' ⁵

Captain Keiha took temporary command and Captain Sorensen became adjutant. The casualties, besides the CO and adjutant, were three killed, twenty wounded, and one missing.

The Maoris were very upset at the loss of their first Maori commanding officer and were unhappy about the outcome of the projected operation. In the days of tribal conflict such an occurrence would have been construed as the worst possible portent and the fight abandoned forthwith. That aspect of Maori psychology was probably not considered by Brigade Headquarters, and it was no doubt because of the loss of two key officers and the absence of the second-in-command that the battalion was moved during the night to cover the brigade's rear. The attack on Ruweisat was postponed and for two days the Maoris dug weapon pits under intermittent and occasionally heavy fire, listened to the running fights between opposing mobile columns in the south,

absorbed some thirty-odd reinforcements and uncomplainingly endured heat, haze, and dust-storms because they reduced visibility and provided relief from shelling.

‘Charlie YM’ was also wounded at this time. He had acquired a carrier, Te Rau Aroha, and visited the area daily bringing cigarettes, soft drinks, chocolate and tinned fruits. In some ways Te Rau Aroha was a great nuisance on account of the dust it raised, but the good cheer it brought was considered ample recompense for the shelling that invariably followed. Another change in dispositions on 14 July required the Maoris to hand over to 18 Battalion, which in turn was relieved by 26 Battalion. The last unit took over all the Maori desert-worthy vehicles and left in their places 2-ton rear-wheel-drive trucks which, in Army terms, were ‘unreliable in soft going’.

Rear-wheel-drive trucks were being gradually replaced in the forward areas because, once the back wheels lost grip in soft sand, within a matter of seconds they had scoured a hole and the vehicles were sitting on their differentials. And then the twenty or so occupants heaved, hauled, pushed and swore for maybe ten, a hundred yards, perhaps even further, until hard going was found again.

After the swop-over of trucks was completed the battalion reported to Rear Headquarters **2 NZ Division** and was told to move back to **Alam el Halfa** ridge. The unreliability of the two-tonners was not overstated, for by dusk the whole unit was bogged down and by dawn was widely spread over the desert. Lieutenant-Colonel Baker, ordered forward to take command, was waiting on **Alam Halfa** when, on 15 July, one by one the trucks made the rendezvous and the unit reorganised.

Meanwhile, the attack on Ruweisat had been mounted. The assault was initially successful but **15 Panzer Division** counterattacked, overwhelmed 4 Brigade, and forced 5 Brigade to relinquish its hard-won objective. There were some in the ranks of 28 Battalion who were not surprised at the result but were amazed at the temerity of generals in disregarding the omen of **Colonel Love's** death.

The battalion's job on **Alam el Halfa** was, with other troops, to lay out a brigade box as part of a divisional defensive area should the Ruweisat- **Alam Nayil** line become untenable, but three days later (the 18th) it moved forward and took over 22 Battalion's transport. Most of that unit's assault troops had been captured at Ruweisat and the rest were going back to **Maadi** to reorganise. It was small concern to the rank and file of the **Maori Battalion** as to which brigade they were in, but at **Alam Halfa** they had been in 6 Brigade and were now posted, for the last time, to 5 Brigade, where they stayed for the duration.

Meanwhile, Major Hart ⁶ had marched in as second-in-command to Colonel Baker. He was an original member of 22 Battalion.

Fifth Brigade was now deployed with the Maoris facing north-west towards the enemy-held part of **Ruweisat Ridge**, 21 Battalion on their right rear, and 23 Battalion on their left flank. The Indians were preparing for another attempt to push the enemy off the ridge while the rested 6 Brigade attacked El Mreir.

For three days the Maoris were kept busy with a variety of jobs—improving defences, burying dead Italians, laying minefields, dodging fifteen-plane dive-bombing raids; hoping our own planes were finding suitable targets; cursing the flies, the enemy gunners, and the terrific heat of high summer.

Guns for the support of the infantry attacking El Mreir were scattered over the Maori sector, and during the height of the preliminary concentration (21–22 July) a draft of 100 reinforcements reported. Most of them were new to battle and the red flashes of the muzzle blasts, the appalling noise of the departing shells, and the enemy flares rising in a constant cascade were an overwhelming introduction to the front line.

The attack on El Mreir, like that on Ruweisat, was unsuccessful through circumstances beyond the scope of the history of a unit not involved. It is sufficient to say that the close integration of infantry, artillery, and armour was a concept yet to be applied in the Eighth

Army. Some time before daylight urgent steps became necessary to reform the divisional line, and within three hours of the warning order 28 Battalion had left its area and occupied the vacant pits of 26 Battalion on the southern flank.

It was a hard day. Odd parties of 26 Battalion filtered back from the disastrous attack on El Mreir, while enemy dive-bombers and artillery concentrations sought the guns and tanks still in the vicinity. Two Maoris were killed and fifteen wounded before nightfall. Further realignment followed that night. The southern sector of the Maori line was taken over by 23 Battalion, and 21 Battalion plus the remnants of 26 Battalion moved up on the right flank. The following night the battalion was shifted back to the vicinity of its previous position south of Ruweisat. The remaining week of July was static. The New Zealand Division was in no shape to attack and the enemy was in all probability thankful for the respite. In addition, the Australians and South Africans were hitting back with some success on the northern sector.

August 1942 was a month few will forget. The pakeha troops found the heat almost insufferable and even to the Maoris, whose darker pigmentation was some protection, it was distressing. Both sides were consolidating and there was little activity, and that mainly when the troops concentrated for meals. Mealtimes were accordingly altered so that the enemy would have no encouragement for desultory shelling, which was not only of a nuisance value but also extremely unpleasant to endure. Breakfast came up before first light and tea after dark, while the midday meal of dry rations was eaten in the shelter of the men's slit trenches, which were covered with groundsheets to afford some protection from the burning sun and cloudless sky. There was no protection from the myriads of flies breeding and battenning on the corpses and filth of the Italian battlefield. The battalion diary, with the Maori flair for the picturesque, is vivid:

Even more trying than the heat were the flies which infested the area in countless thousands. They were everywhere, shared our meals, committed suicide in our tea, and used our bodies as playgrounds for the

remainder of the day. As is usual in the desert the nights were a compensation for the trials of the day. Brilliant moonlight nights and cooler temperatures and absence of flies were much appreciated.

The night was one long thud of picks and whirr of compressors biting into the rock beneath the shallow sand. Minefields were laid and wire obstacles erected between the opposing armies while patrols kept a vigilant eye on the enemy preparations. Doubtless enemy patrols also ended their reports with such remarks as that, on account of the moonlight and the vigilance of the enemy listening posts, little detailed information could be obtained.

Once more, during the night 2-3 August, the Maoris moved and changed places with 21 Battalion opposite the eastern end of **El Mreir Depression**. The Italians opposite did not appear to like Maori patrols poking about their wire and the battalion mortars did their best to increase the tension. At odd times during the nights the mortar teams, accompanied by bursts from the machine-gunners in the vicinity, slammed a dozen or so bombs into the **El Mreir Depression**. Even if they were fired on the blind, the sound was heartening to the Maoris, who liked to hear trouble being exported; of late, they had been overmuch on the receiving end.

A section of amateur gunners in A Company did its best to maintain morale. Sergeant Ritchie Davis,⁷ platoon sergeant of No. 7 Platoon, found a derelict Italian 'seventy-five' and organised a team to work it. As an artillery piece it had some drawbacks for one wheel was missing, there were no sights, and the moving parts were reluctant to move. The volunteer gunners found enough rocks to lever their weapon more or less upright and enough ammunition to put them in a strong offensive position.

The new battalion arm was ready for business just when the pukka gunners were engaging targets some few hundred yards behind the enemy FDLs and proceeded to lend its active support. The artillery O Pip officer nearly collapsed when he saw a shell burst a thousand yards short

of the set target. The crew sighted their gun by peering down the barrel and for some hours brought heavy fire down on Heaven only knows how many square miles of Italian-held North Africa. The enemy got fed up with the annoyance and retaliated so violently that Colonel Baker had to prohibit the use of the weapon.

Meanwhile, Field-Marshal Rommel, who had no intention of sitting indefinitely almost within sight of **Alexandria**, had reinforced and re-equipped his army. Signs were not wanting that he proposed to continue his conquest of Egypt at no distant date.

Generals Alexander and Montgomery, newly arrived, were also rebuilding their forces and taking steps to frustrate the German and Italian intentions prior to taking the offensive. In the New Zealand sector, as with others, the plan was to construct a fortified area capable of all-round defence from which there would be no retreat. The intention to hold under any circumstances was emphasised by the removal of all but the most necessary transport to Burg el Arab, some 40 miles to the rear—a modern equivalent of burning your bridges. Headquarters 5 Brigade issued an operation order on 18 August which made the position quite plain to everybody concerned. The operative sections laid down that:

5 NZ Inf Bde Gp will hold present posn against attack from any direction.

Minefields will be extended by the CRE until the whole area is enclosed, except for 1000 yds gap in the NE corner. Units are responsible for closing gaps in minefields on their front in the event of E [enemy] attack.

Units will be prepared to counter-attack either with or without Army Tk support, and will prepare plans accordingly.

The Maori Battalion 'prepared accordingly'. Reserve rations, water, and ammunition were buried in company areas, cook-houses were

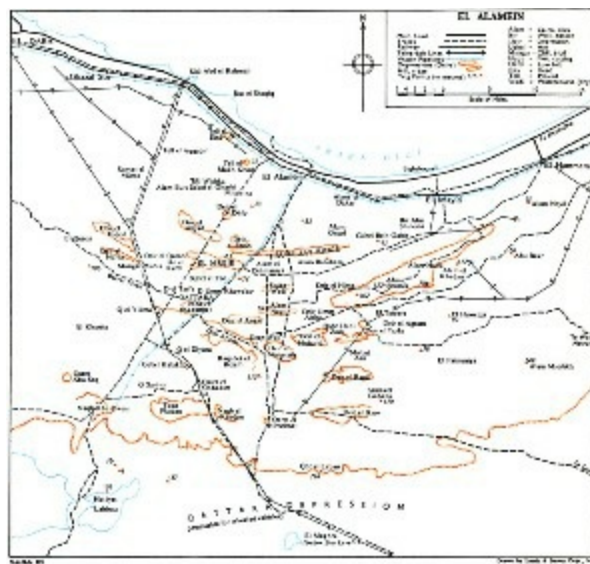
brought forward and dug in, more minefields were laid both within and beyond the battalion boundaries to break up the thrust of any attack, and more wire was erected.

By the last week in August the Maoris were ready for any emergency and distinguished callers were dropping in: **General Freyberg**, recovered from his wound at **Minqar Qaim**, made an inspection of the forward areas by moonlight on the 20th; the next day all battalion commanders met the new **13 Corps** commander, General Horrocks; and on the following day the new Eighth Army commander, General Montgomery, visited Battalion Headquarters and met all the senior officers.

By this time the Intelligence forecasts were that Rommel would open the campaign for the reduction of the **Alamein** line and the final conquest of Egypt by an outflanking move through or around the New Zealand area. The most likely attempt would be the breaching of the minefields south of the **New Zealand Box**, as the area had been christened, the folding up of the line, and the encirclement and destruction of the Eighth Army.

It was thought that the German attack would start with the full moon on 25–26 August, and **Brigadier Kippenberger** indicated to Colonel Baker that a really purposeful raid on El Mreir would have the two-fold result of identifying the occupants and possibly diverting some strength from, or even delaying, the main project.

The Maoris, tired of inactivity, were keen to oblige. It would be the first Maori attack under the command of **Brigadier Kippenberger**, the first offensive action of Eighth Army under General Montgomery, the first time Colonel Baker had directed the battalion in action—and the CO decided to make it a personal matter. He led a reconnaissance party, selected the point where the battalion wire would be cut, and fixed the location of the start line. Finally, the party worked up to the enemy wire and, with the help of a bright moon, got a fairly clear picture of the terrain.



El Alamein

The configuration of El Mreir with its narrow salient had suggested that instead of an orthodox frontal attack, in this case from east to west, the raiders should approach from the south and by attacking north take the enemy in the flank. The element of surprise might then be added to the overwhelming artillery support arranged by the Brigadier.

The day (the 25th) was spent by A and B, the two raiding companies, in making preparations—oiling weapons, testing magazine springs, loosening grenade pins and putting really sharp points to bayonets. It is the point that counts in a bayonet, the rest is muscle and wrist action.

Battalion Headquarters also was very busy; orders conforming with the artillery programme were prepared and given; an engineer detachment to blow holes in the wire was briefed; C Company was to place a platoon in each of A and B Companies' areas while the tenants were away; two platoons from 23 Battalion were to act as covering party while the start line tapes were put out and were to remain out until the Maoris withdrew. The setting up of a forward RAP and a dozen other details were attended to.

The scene where the companies assembled was, in the eyes of **Brigadier Kippenberger, an impressive one:**

Half an hour before zero I went up to see them off. Both companies,

Ngapuhi under Porter and Arawa under Pene, were ready, waiting together at the near end of the tape. I walked about among them and was amazed and amused by the number of weapons they were carrying. Every other man had an automatic, mostly captured Spandaus or Bredas, they were loaded with grenades, many had pistols, very few had rifle and bayonet only. Otherwise they were lightly equipped. The Maori padre spoke to them, most eloquently and impressively. Then he said a prayer, very moving in the utter silence. Baker asked me to speak. I did so briefly. I said how many guns would be in support—there were grunts of satisfaction—that I was confident they would do well, wished them all good fortune and concluded by saying: 'The fame of your people and the honour of your battalion are in your hands to-night.' There was a pause and a moment's silence, broken by a long burst from a Spandau in the salient. A man said: 'Let her go, boy, that's your last.' Baker said: 'On your feet, men,' said 'Goodbye' to me, and they moved silently off and disappeared into the gloom. ⁸

The 'I' section had made a good job of the start line, with each platoon area clearly defined and lacking only individual place cards. Captain Porter (A Company) on the right was to sweep around the lip of the depression behind the enemy wire then wheel right and return direct to his own lines, while Captain Pene (B Company) was to keep abreast of Porter, go down into the depression and up the far side, return over his own route, then back home via the gaps he had entered by.

At precisely 4 a.m. the concentrated fire of two divisional artilleries fell with an overpowering whine-roar-crash on the eastern tip of El Mreir and the raiders closed up towards the barrage. The guns lifted their range, the engineers streaked forward into the dust and smoke with bangalore torpedoes, and the Maoris leant forward like runners waiting the starting pistol. The flash of the exploding bangalores was the signal for a race for the resulting holes in the wire. The enemy defensive fire came down across his own eastern front, which was quite the wrong place. It also fell in the battalion defences, which it will be remembered were occupied by C Company, who also considered the fire to be in quite

the wrong place.

The reserve platoon with Battalion Headquarters was just through the wire when the first prisoners appeared. Lieutenant Waaka writes:

One was a huge fellow, well over six feet and who appeared larger still in the dust and smoke haze. The smallest chap in my platoon, 'Hoot' Hapimana, ⁹ who stands at five feet nothing, immediately ran forward and circling around the bloke rummaged at his clothes. The Italian looked down amazedly at this little chap apparently unconcerned at the sight of a gigantic enemy and only interested in his waist line. I was also wondering what Hoot was up to until he burst out disgustedly, 'No bloody luger' and kicked the Itie in the seat of his pants, or as close to the seat as his short legs could get. The old tale, loot at all costs.

The attack itself was a gory business. A Company overran sixteen machine-gun posts, half of which fell to 9 Platoon led by **Sergeant Jack August**, ¹⁰ who was awarded an MM for his aggressive leadership. Lieutenant Waaka's most vivid memory is overtaking Lieutenant Hamilton, NZE, ¹¹ standing with his hands on his hips and swearing disgustedly because he had a spare bangalore and nothing in sight to blow up. The two sappers carrying the torpedo eventually ditched it. Thirty-five minutes had been allowed for the raid and A Company, with time on its hands, found its immediate vicinity on the far side so peaceful that cigarettes were produced and lighted one from the butt of the other, after which Captain Porter gathered up his sixteen prisoners and, hands firmly and deeply in his pockets, led his men home. A bar to the MC awarded for his leadership in the Libyan campaign was later announced.

B Company on the left, and deeper inside the enemy positions, found dugouts and slit trenches from which twelve prisoners were taken. After the platoons reached the far side of the depression they were joined by Colonel Baker, and then retraced their steps, attending to any posts that had been overlooked on the sweep across.

Captain Pene included in his report his men's admiration for the fine work done by the engineer detachment. Maori losses were two killed, two died of wounds and sixteen wounded, while, besides a final count of 41 prisoners of war, at least one hundred, probably more, Italians were killed or wounded.

The prisoners, all Italians, were identified as belonging to *III Battalion, 39 Regiment, Bologna Division*. They were physically of a poor type, badly shaken and, as Colonel Baker's report had it, 'were in no condition to offer proper resistance.'

Brigade and [Divisional Headquarters](#) were well pleased with the bag and it was thought that it would be a good thing to occupy the area permanently. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) asked Baker if it would be possible to collect the battalion and return immediately, but it was pointed out that the troops had dispersed and that if transport was handy it would be quicker to bring up some of the reserve battalion, which course was decided upon.

An officer from the [Maori Battalion](#) who had been in the raid was to guide a platoon of 21 Battalion into the depression, and as Lieutenant Waaka writes:

I was the goat who was given this doubtful honour.... My batman runner Jimmy (Whiti) Ratema, on hearing what was cooking immediately donned his kit and said he was coming with me. No argument would stop him so I took him along, thankful that I had some one dependable in case of emergencies. A 21 Battalion platoon duly arrived under Lt Eady ¹² whom I at once made fully aware of the position by forming contour replicas of the depression on the ground.

If anything could be flatter than a billiard table it was that 1000 yards or so between our wire and the depression. We were about half way there when machine gun fire opened up on us but we pushed on forward until we were less than 100 yards from the enemy wire when mortar fire also came down on us. We all went to ground, making use of whatever

dent there was in the ground.

After being subjected to heavy fire for some time Lt Eady and myself managed to get together. I pointed out that I was there to guide him into the depression and would do so if he was prepared to commit his platoon to the rather sticky situation in front of us. He decided to wait a little longer and after being plastered some more gave the signal to his platoon to withdraw. I think it was a wise decision.

The 26th August was still expected to be zero hour for Rommel's final thrust that was to win the Nile valley; all leave had been stopped for some days and the need for extra vigilance was stressed by Brigadier Kippenberger in a talk to the officers and men near Battalion Headquarters. His theme was, 'the position was good and there was to be absolutely no retreat.' Other information was that the signal 'Twelvebore' and the firing of red and white over green Very lights would indicate the start of the enemy offensive.

The troops waited expectantly, but all that happened that day was a stream of congratulatory messages pouring in to Battalion Headquarters from Corps, Army, and neighbouring units concerning the previous night's raid.

For a time it did look as if the forecast for the start of the offensive was only a day out because the next afternoon was ushered in with the heaviest bombardment the unit had stood under for some time; within an hour approximately two thousand shells landed in the battalion area, all telephone wires were cut, and everything indicated an infantry follow-up. Nothing happened, however, and a nil casualty return was sent in to Battalion Headquarters, a tribute to the deep, narrow digging of slit trenches and the dispersal of sections. There was some argument as to which company had the greatest number of shell holes in its area.

Two more days went by with air activity increasing in tempo. Spitfires made their first appearance in numbers and there were dogfights, bomber sweeps, fighters on patrol, planes plummeting out of

the sky, some with black crosses on their wings and some with roundels. D Company came back to the battalion from Base while B Company in its turn went out for a rest.

A rumour swept the unit that all hands were going out of the line for a rest but it was based on the very insecure foundation of a change in dispositions. Fifth Brigade was to change places with a brigade of 44 Division which was holding the south face of the New Zealand divisional area. The **44th Division** was new both to battle and the desert—so new that a subaltern taking over from Lieutenant Tikao-Barrett ¹³ brought his camp stretcher with him and was amazed to learn that if he wished for a reasonably long life the safest place to sleep was in a nice deep slit trench.

The relief of the Maoris by **4 Royal West Kents** on the evening 30–31 August was a harassing experience for the troops. Enemy shelling of considerable intensity began half-way through the operation and was followed by an attack on the neighbouring West Yorks. It was only a diversionary attack and was thrown back at daylight, but the noise, the fireworks, and other concomitants of a night attack completely upset the battle-raw troops moving into the Maoris' area. The changeover was still going on at 2 a.m. when the signal 'Twelvebore' came through with the Maoris partly in the new area, partly in the old, and partly somewhere between the two. The attack on the West Yorks did not spread south and the Maoris had settled in before daylight. The troops spent the day preparing for the German assault slowly bashing its way through the elaborate system of minefields to the south. The spearhead was ten miles away, but the air was full of dogfighting planes and the bark of the Bofors was incessant. That night was one long throb in the air and thunder on the horizon where the British light forces were back-stepping from the German armour. A special message was received from General Montgomery:

TO OFFICERS AND MEN OF EIGHTH ARMY

SPECIAL MESSAGE

- 1. The enemy is now attempting to break through our positions in order to reach CAIRO, SUEZ, and ALEXANDRIA, and to drive us from EGYPT.**
- 2. The Eighth Army bars the way. It carries a great responsibility, and the whole future of the war will depend on how we carry out our task.**
- 3. 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. If each one of us does his duty, we cannot fail; the opportunity will then occur to take the offensive ourselves and to destroy once and for all the enemy forces now in EGYPT.**
- 4. Into battle then, with stout hearts and with the determination to do our duty. And may God give us the victory.**

B. L. MONTGOMERY

Lieutenant-General

September the 1st followed the same pattern, with the enemy still advancing and the defence stepping back. Before dawn sentries reported that there were men lifting mines near 18 Platoon area, and as platoon commanders had been told to fire three coloured Very lights if they required supporting artillery, Lieutenant Tikao-Barrett decided that this was an appropriate occasion.

I instructed the boys not to open fire until these signals were fired and then to let the whole works go and spray the area. Meanwhile the work of lifting the mines was still being carried out by Jerry.... I then fired the signals and ... five brens went into action and the din was terrific. Being night the sound of fire seemed louder. I waited for the stonk but nothing eventuated. 'Say, Tomoana,' I asked, 'What the Hell's happened to the Artillery?' 'You've fired the wrong signal,' he replied. 'OK, we'll try again.'

The second time the colours were fired in the correct order and brought down a divisional 'stonk' which ended that particular mine-lifting job. An inspection at daybreak disclosed that a 25-yard-wide path had been opened through the minefield, but all that remained of the lifters were three burnt-out' trucks, an anti-tank gun, and two bodies identified as belonging to *90 Light Division*.

September the 2nd. The enemy was now through the protecting minefields and some miles east of the New Zealand defences, but was finally held up in front of the **Alam el Halfa** ridge where, it will be remembered, 28 Battalion had in July commenced constructing a brigade defensive area. Since then **Alam Halfa** had been strengthened and expanded and was now manned with fresh troops and the main armoured formations of Eighth Army. Here the leading enemy forces came under constant punishment; Rommel decided to withdraw and the crisis of the battle passed.

Back in the Maori sector it was the mixture as before—our planes flying low and theirs flying high; anti-aircraft guns blazing and machine guns and rifles joining in whenever a divebombing raid came in; field and medium guns pounding Munassib and **Muhafid** depressions, which were full of hostile vehicles and infantry; enemy shells meant for the tormenting guns falling in the Maori area. 'Charlie YM' was doing his usual round of the rifle companies when a near miss riddled his vehicle with splinters and two tyres were damaged beyond repair, but he was moving again within an hour. The battalion war diary in mentioning the fact takes time off to record the battalion's appreciation of the Maori school children's gift and of the staff who operated it:

The tps have a very soft spot for our **YMCA** staff for they have driven their van right into the foremost defended posns, oblivious to danger—carrying on with the task which the little children at home we feel sure have silently asked them to do—for what tps anywhere in the world can say that these little comforts supplied by the **YMCA** are not a welcome addition to the army fare. Happy memories come to us when we see our children's most useful gift. We owe them a million thanks.

Colonel Baker attended a brigade conference where a plan was discussed to assist Rommel in deciding to withdraw by attacking his flank. This was confirmed the next morning (the 3rd) when Intelligence reports suggested that the enemy was already beginning to pull out. To German officers the mirage of a river flowing past pyramids and the

dream of sitting at ease in **Cairo** on the balcony of Shepheard's had faded into the reality of getting back into the open desert as fast as the Eighth Army would permit.

A silent attack with the bayonet was to be put on that night: **26 Battalion** of **6 Brigade**, on the right, to move south and west; **132 Brigade** of **44 Division** (under command of **2 NZ Division**) centre, to move south; and **5 Brigade**, left, to move south and east.

The plan was for **21 Battalion** to secure the open left flank while the Maoris, between **21 Battalion** and **132 Brigade**, would consolidate on a line stretching from a track junction in the middle of the north side of **Munassib** to the right flank of **21 Battalion** resting on the neighbouring **Muhafid Depression**. The country between the two depressions would be mined by engineers while the battalion carrier platoon, plus two sections from **21 Battalion** carriers, would exploit into the hollows where the enemy transport was sheltering. The supporting tanks would be under brigade command until sent forward.

Colonel Baker, having learnt from patrols that only minor opposition was likely during the approach march, ordered Captain Keiha (C Company) to cover the battalion front, about 1500 yards, until he met the main resistance, when the men would lie down and he would send a runner back to Battalion Headquarters, which would be moving immediately in rear of C Company. The assault companies, D (**Captain Awatere**) on the right and A (Captain Porter) left, would pass through the screen, which would then reorganise and dig in as battalion reserve.

Before describing the action it should be mentioned that in previous battalion attacks the ruse of using the Maori language for communications was often employed, but this time Maori signallers were lent to Brigade Headquarters and the other units in **5 Brigade** so that signals during the fighting could be sent in clear but in Maori instead of English. The Germans were not good Maori linguists. Captain Bennett, the **Maori Battalion** liaison officer at Brigade Headquarters, was to be on duty at the control set.

There was some delay at the assembly area occasioned by part of D Company moving directly forward to the start line, but the advance began at the appointed time, 10.30 p.m. C Company kept in touch with 21 Battalion until it turned left towards its objective, but no contact was ever made with a battalion of the Buffs of 132 Brigade which should have been on the right flank.

Nearly two miles were covered before enemy patrols or reconnaissance parties were met by the screen and were dealt with in summary fashion. C Company had been instructed that, as the forward screen, it was not to bother about prisoners and the men construed the instructions somewhat differently to what was intended.

Suddenly the darkness was split by machine-gun tracer across the battalion front. The RAF, which had been bombing further south, dropped flares that lit the battlefield and the enemy replied with mortars, artillery, and anti-tank guns.

It was now about midnight and C Company had closed with the main enemy defences; Colonel Baker sent runners to the assault companies and at the same time whistled for the attack, but neither whistle nor runners were necessary for both companies charged the nearest posts. The Colonel reports:

Unfortunately the RAF picked that time to drop right over us a whole string of flares which lit up the battle field and put our troops, who were attacking above ground, at a big disadvantage. On the other hand it enabled me as CO to get a very good close up view of the attack which the two companies now delivered with a will. The enemy's defensive fire was very intense and was assisted by two enemy armoured cars which came forward amongst our attacking infantry. These were in A Coy's sector and perhaps fifty yards from where I stood on a small rise shouting 'Sticky bombs!' The men of this Coy ignored me and scrambled on over these cars with their brens and other automatics firing persistently at anything that looked like a hole or crevice. Sparks were flying everywhere as the bullets ricocheted off the outside but this

procedure paid dividends in the end as they were finally able to shoot up the occupants of both cars and put them out of the fight. At the same time the others rushed into the enemy infantry positions, throwing first the HE grenade and as they got nearer the grenades of the bakelite type. They then got in with their bayonets with much shouting and generally terrific noise and confusion. Above this I could hear shouts of 'Kamarad!' from one side and 'Kamarad be b ...' on the other.

This was too much for the men of C Company to watch without taking a hand and a number of them forgot their instructions about staying where they were. Some joined the assaulting companies, causing Captain Keiha to lose touch with a large part of his company until next morning.

The first serious opposition met by D Company on the right flank was two machine guns firing on a fixed line between 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Tikao-Barrett) and 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Ropata),¹⁴ thus separating the two forward platoons. No. 18 Platoon charged the guns and bayoneted the crews but not without loss. Tikao-Barrett wrote:

Several of my men in 18 Platoon were hit rather early in the piece. I well remember two men being hit from Jerry's first burst of machine gun fire. In battle these boys were easy to control. For instance, when these two men were hit Dave McDonald¹⁵ of **Blenheim** started flat out with bayonet at the ready for this machine gun post. I did not notice him until he was well past. I called him immediately to rejoin the line. Automatically McDonald stopped and waited until the first line came abreast of him. Later I was standing about a yard from McDonald when a heavy machine gun burst blew his left arm off at the elbow. I shall always remember McDonald when he fell. He was so worked up that when he hit the ground he picked up his arm and in his fury threw it at the machine gun post—of course this post was silenced by grenade and bren gun fire.

Other enemy posts opening fire from the right were dealt with by 17 Platoon (**Lieutenant Tutaki**).¹⁶ No. 16 Platoon had veered away to the

left and eventually joined up with A Company.

A flare disclosed a low ridge in front of 17 Platoon, which went straight at it with bayonet and grenades, closely followed by 18 Platoon. The ridge was cleared from left to right, with the result that D Company had changed direction and was moving at right angles to its original axis. Tikao-Barrett wheeled his men left and thus back on the proper axis. Another strongpost opened on them, pinning both platoons down until Sergeant Pitama ¹⁷ took a section from 17 Platoon and dealt with it. He quietened one machine gun himself by killing the crew, while the section accounted for the other two guns. Pitama was awarded an MM for his leadership in this action. Mounting casualties and the absence of one platoon decided **Captain Awatere** to try to find Battalion Headquarters. This was done after some searching, whereupon he was ordered to reinforce Captain Porter, presumably on the edge of the depression but actually down in it.

A Company, after the affair with the armoured cars, kept on until it was fired on by a nest of spandaus. Sergeant Davis, who it will be remembered had a weakness for enemy artillery, spotted an 88-millimetre gun and rushed it singlehanded. He had to kill the crew before he could take possession. This he accomplished with expedition and was later awarded an immediate DCM. No. 8 Platoon (Lieutenant Marsden) was sent to quieten the spandaus, and succeeded only after some trouble as the machine guns were supported by a dug-in 'eighty-eight'. The platoon then found itself in the midst of parked vehicles, many of which were fired and the drivers killed. Sergeant Wanoa, ¹⁸ with a party of C Company at his heels, joined Marsden, who, unable to find A Company, again eventually contacted Captain Keiha.

Captain Porter was now leading his men diagonally across Munassib to take advantage of high ground on his right and was in consequence moving west towards **132 Brigade's** objective. That formation had been disorganised by the defence and never approached the depression. Porter wrote:

[We] then arrived at a small island if one may call it such, as this particular knoll was on its own in a vast depression. The enemy had their vehicles parked by it and the men were kept quite busy with the usual earnestness for looting. Spent two or three hours on this knoll listening for movements of trucks etc. Had men sitting and lying on the top keyed to fire at the command and this was done with my Very pistol. The flare gave us enough light to fire at various moving targets.

It was here that Lieutenant Ropata with 16 Platoon, separated from his own company, joined A Company, and it was about this time that Porter thought it advisable to get out of the depression and consolidate on the proper objective before daylight. It was about 3 a.m. when **Captain Awatere met A Company returning.**

The arrival of the signals jeep, which had started the advance with Battalion Headquarters but had been delayed by suspected minefields, permitted Colonel Baker to order the carriers forward. **Lieutenant Hayward advanced with his carrier force for nearly four miles and accounted for seven strongpoints en route. He eventually found himself among transport, which was shot up, but as he could neither locate friendly troops nor raise anybody on the air he decided to return and join the tanks of B Squadron 50 Royal Tank Regiment which were under brigade command. On the way back he met Captain Keiha and Lieutenant Marsden with a number of wounded but with no clear picture of the battalion situation. Two carriers were loaded with wounded, one was damaged on a mine, and the rest joined the tanks. Keiha accompanied the wounded as far as Brigade Headquarters, near the start line, and reported for instructions. He was told to return, gather what men he could, and dig in. During his absence Lieutenant Marsden had tried unsuccessfully to find 21 Battalion.**

Brigade had ordered the tanks, anti-tank guns, and other support arms forward, but unfortunately the tanks were nearly all either put out of action by anti-tank guns or blown up by mines. The battalion carriers and anti-tank guns at the rear of the stricken armour eventually ended

up in 21 Battalion area.

Colonel Baker, anxiously waiting their arrival, sent out patrol after patrol searching for them. When A and D Companies returned to the lip of the depression, Battalion Headquarters was moved about half a mile farther back.

At first light Baker left in his jeep to try to locate the column, for the infantry could not stay much longer without anti-tank support. He had gone some distance when he saw two Valentine tanks on his right and directed his driver, Te Wake, ¹⁹ to turn towards them. As the gap closed he noticed some men on the nearer tank waving to him. There was a terrific roar and the jeep stopped dead in a cloud of dust. The front wheel had hit a mine but both the CO and his driver emerged unhurt, the former complaining bitterly about the careless way Jerry left his mines lying about and the latter lamenting a large hole in his teapot which had been hanging on the bonnet. They made their way to the tank, to be told that the waving was to warn them off as the tanks were there only because they had run over mines and were immobilised.

Back at Brigade Headquarters there was anxiety tinged with apprehension, and Captain Bennett had been sent forward in his jeep to guide the tank squadron to the **Maori Battalion**. In addition, 22 Battalion was ordered to bring its companies forward ready at hand to form a line from 21 Battalion's exposed flank across to **132 Brigade's** area. What little news had come in was mostly bad; the engineers had not been able, on account of opposition, to mine the gap between Munassib and **Muhafid** depressions; 21 Battalion, although securely in position, was not in touch with the Maoris, who, according to vague reports by walking wounded and prisoner escorts, had gone past their objective into enemy territory. This, coupled with the failure to get the armour through, suggested the possibility that the **Maori Battalion** might be surrounded and annihilated. The 132nd Brigade had definitely been shot to pieces and the right flank of the **Maori Battalion** was completely unprotected. Captain Bennett in the forward area had found Colonel Baker on foot and they drove rapidly to Brigade Headquarters, where the

situation was discussed. The Brigadier promptly decided to send 22 Battalion forward to form a firm base line and to put down an artillery smoke screen through which the **Maori Battalion** could withdraw to its original position to reorganise.

While the CO hurried back with his instructions, the forward troops were having an uncomfortable time—they had dug pits in soft sand, and when shelling began and anything landed close the sides of the pits caved in on top of the occupants. A most unusual incident occurred during this period. Captain Porter, who was involved in it, writes:

Sometime during the morning we had quite an interlude. I thought Rommel had decided to call the war off and declare an armistice. We noticed the firing had ceased, and walking towards us was someone with an oversized white cloth stretched out in front of him. About a couple of hundred yards away I instructed one of my men to walk out and meet him. He was searched for arms and allowed to advance to my Hdqtrs. It was very disappointing. He was a young fellow from the Buffs captured that night—ordered by the Germans to ask us to surrender or else? Asked whether he was keen to get back to take a message from me? Shook his head.

In a way it was a pity for it deprived history of a modern version of Rewi's reply: 'Ka whawhai tonu matou, ake ake ake!' to a similar suggestion at Orakau. Porter's reply would probably have been shorter—and perhaps rude.

The smoke screen was building up when Colonel Baker got back to his headquarters and called for volunteers to take a message recalling A and D Companies. There were several volunteers, and he picked out two who he knew were reliable and gave them careful instructions. Both went off at the double into the area where the smoke was already drifting, but one seemed to be having trouble with his pants which were torn, split down one side, and flapping around his legs. He stopped for a moment and, with a vigorous tug, ripped them right off, threw them aside in the sand, and made off at high speed into the fast-thickening

smoke with his shirt tails flapping. A minute later he reappeared at an even faster speed. The Colonel yelled out, asking if he'd got cold feet or lost his way. 'No sir,' he yelled back, 'Just forgot my paybook.' He scooped up his discarded pants, yanked the paybook out of the hip-pocket and poked it into his shirt breast-pocket—all without stopping—and disappeared again into the smoke.

The smoke was just in time, for enemy tanks were approaching. The troops withdrew through 22 Battalion, which waited for the counter-attack which came in soon after midday. It was smashed by artillery concentrations, but the **Maori Battalion** was not unrepresented. **Captain Logan**, commanding the anti-tank platoon, reported after the action:

On the morning of 4th September the 28th Bn A/T Pl. had taken up a defensive posn, facing south in support of 22 NZ Bn on the right flank of 21 Bn.

At 13.30 hours approx. the E attacked with some tanks and infantry. The Pl A/T guns were sighted on the reverse slope of a hill feature and so not open to E observation and tank fire.

The first tank to appear was an M.13 and was immediately engaged at 150 yards approx by one gun. After the third shot the crew jumped out. Immediately two more M.13 tanks appeared on the right of the tank knocked out and they were engaged by two other guns. They were immediately stopped and the crews jumped out. A fourth M.13 which appeared at the same time on the right of these two tanks was similarly knocked out by a fourth gun. Thereafter no further tank attacks were made.

All tanks were engaged head on, the closest being 150 yards and the furthest 250 yards approx. Three were eventually set on fire by subsequent shots. All Amn used was HV. Given HV amn the Pl is confident of carrying out their role against any of the E tanks at present used in the desert.

The next few days were spent in reorganising, cleaning arms, and resting. Rommel made it plain that his thrust around the New Zealand flank was really only a reconnaissance in force and not to be taken seriously. A special message to the Eighth Army from the King was read to all ranks:

I pray that God may bless the Desert Army in the important battle that has now begun, from which great results may flow to the cause of the United Nations in every part of the world. I have the utmost confidence in the troops from all parts of my Empire and in their Commanders.

All my thoughts are with you.

GEORGE R. I.

The following message from the Army Commander was sent to all units:

The battle of **Alamein** has now lasted for six days, and the enemy has slowly but surely been driven from 8 Army area. Tonight, 5 September, his rearguards are being driven west, through the minefield area north of **Himeimat**. All formations and units, both armoured and unarmoured, have contributed towards this striking victory, and have been magnificently supported by the **RAF**. I congratulate all ranks of Eighth Army on the devotion to duty and good fighting qualities which have resulted in such a heavy defeat of the enemy and which will have far-reaching results. I have sent a message to AOC, WD [**Western Desert**], expressing our thanks to the **RAF** for their splendid support.

And finally a message to all ranks from the CO:

The following message from GOC to Comd. 5 Inf. Bde: 'I send 5 Bde my congratulations on the successful attack of night 3/4 especially to Lt-Col. Baker and Maori Bn. for their exploits in the Munassib depression.' Message ends.

In addition the Corps Commander has asked me to convey to the Bn. his warmest congratulations on what he describes as the magnificent operation carried out by this Unit. He stated that the Eighth Army Commander is of the opinion that the operation of 5 Bde. on the night 3/4 Sept. and particularly the part played by 28 Bn. forced Rommel to make a quick decision to withdraw to approximately his old position and to give up, at least for the moment, his intention to advance into Egypt.

Our Bn. casualties in the action were 5 killed, 54 wounded, 3 wounded and missing and 15 missing. In addition we lost a certain amount in LMGs etc. and one carrier. Enemy losses on our Bn. front were over 500 killed or very badly wounded plus 108 prisoners. Coys. destroyed 36 enemy MGs, 4 A/Tk. guns and one heavy mortar as well as a large number of MT. It is known that the 120 Grenadier Regt. (German) was so badly mauled in the attack on the whole front that they have had to be absorbed into other units. (One German Regt. equals one of our Bdes.)

I congratulate every Platoon individually on its splendid effort and am proud of the command which I hold. When our losses are compared with those of the Enemy and when we consider the effect it had on the Enemy plans, the operation cannot be regarded as anything but an outstanding success.

The above message is to be conveyed to every member of the Battalion.

Fredk Baker, Lt-Col.

Commanding Officer.

During the night 8-9 September 5 Brigade was relieved by a Greek brigade and went back to a rest area at Burg el Arab.

¹ Lt H. T. Maloney; born NZ 26 Feb 1914; school-teacher; died of wounds 5 Jul 1942.

- ² **Rev W. Rangi**; Taneatua; born Tolaga Bay, 30 Jul 1891; Anglican minister.
- ³ **Pte H. Fisher**; born Awanui, 5 Oct 1909; labourer; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.
- ⁴ It was a belief of the Maori in olden times that when a chief died he became a star.
- ⁵ Brave one! Go to the People of the Night.
- ⁶ **Maj I. A. Hart**, m.i.d.; born NZ 24 Oct 1904; barrister and solicitor; died of wounds 2 Nov 1942.
- ⁷ **Lt R. Davis**, DCM; born **Opotiki**, 12 Mar 1912; surfaceman, NZR; died 28 Oct 1947.
- ⁸ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 202, **Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger**.
- ⁹ **Pte H. Hapimana**; Rotorua; born NZ 10 Apr 1910; labourer; wounded 18 Dec 1943.
- ¹⁰ **WO II J. August**, MM; born NZ 2 Apr 1909; slaughterman; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.
- ¹¹ **Maj P. H. G. Hamilton**, m.i.d.; **Malaya**; born **Auckland**, 25 Apr 1918; mining student.
- ¹² **Capt A. T. Eady**; **Auckland**; born NZ 26 Jan 1906; musician.
- ¹³ **Lt J. P. Tikao-Barrett**; **Wellington**; born **Lyttelton**, 10 Nov 1914; storeman; wounded 3 Sep 1942.
- ¹⁴ **Lt E. J. Ropata**; born NZ 9 Mar 1911; motor driver; died of wounds 26 Oct 1942.
- ¹⁵ **Pte R. M. MacDonald**; **Blenheim**; born NZ 1 Feb 1918; labourer; twice wounded.

- ¹⁶ Capt R. Tutaki; Wanstead; born Porangahau, 19 Feb 1920; student; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. 27 Jul 1944.**
- ¹⁷ Sgt E. T. M. Pitama, MM; born Tuahiwi, 12 May 1918; farmhand; killed in action 27 Oct 1942.**
- ¹⁸ WO II A. H. Wanoa; Tolaga Bay; born Tikitiki, 27 Aug 1918; labourer; twice wounded.**
- ¹⁹ Pte G. Te Wake; Panguru; born Panguru, 12 Jul 1910; labourer.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 9 – ALAMEIN TO TRIPOLI

CHAPTER 9

Alamein to Tripoli

FOR ten happy carefree days the troops stayed along a white sandy ridge only a quarter of a mile from the sea. Offshore breezes tempered the heat and the nights were cool and tranquil. There was six-day leave to **Cairo** and day leave to **Alexandria** for those who wanted it. The Kiwi Concert Party put on two shows daily and the canteens provided two bottles of beer per man per night. 'Charlie YM' produced endless supplies of fruit, cakes, cigarettes and chocolate.

'To laze around doing nothing; to walk around without fear of getting blown sky high by shells; to sleep above ground in a comfortable bed; to sit at a table and eat every kind of delicious food; to drink beer by the any amount you like; to know there's not a German within fifty miles of one; all these things seem to make life almost a dream,' wrote Second-Lieutenant Waaka in his diary.

The surf was found to be rather treacherous on account of a strong undertow so a volunteer party of strong swimmers and men skilled in life saving was excused all other duties in order to patrol the beach. Sergeant C. Wickliffe ¹ was in charge of it.

Perhaps the best flavour of the period can be got from the battalion war diary for 10 September:

Reveille 0700 hrs. Breakfast 0800 hrs. Inspection of all arms 0900 hrs. 0930 hrs. A 2-hour route march for all personnel. Lunch 1230 hrs. The afternoon period easy. 1830 hrs. Dinner and all ranks were to dress properly. This was the daily routine for the unit in this rest area.

Cool sea breezes, clean sands, and good food and bathing brings the day to a too speedy ending.

At night the only sounds to remind us of the war are the drone of heavy bombers and night fighters of the **RAF** riding the skies to their

allotted tasks, and by day our fighter patrols on the alert.... Beer was made available this evening.

On 19 September the battalion embussed and headed southward into the Swordfish training area some 40 miles away. It was the usual expanse of rock and sand and scattered desert scrub, inhabited by lizards and scorpions. There were low hills to the north-west and south and it was noticed that these features were often included in training exercises.

The first few days were devoted to range-firing and toughening-up; any softness that had been acquired at Burg el Arab was soon shed by way of physical jerks, bayonet fighting, and route marches. After that, ‘*L'attaque, l'attaque, toujours l'attaque*’ was the theme and the troops trained in attacks by day and by night, at dawn and at dusk; and always the reorganisation took place on a ridge. Variations on the attack theme were the platoon in attack, the company in attack, the company in attack with supporting arms, the company in attack without supporting arms, the battalion in attack with all arms. Other training subjects were the battalion in desert formation at rest and on the move, advancing to attack in MT, debussing and reorganising—never a dull moment.

September the 24th saw the return of B Company and the start of a three-day divisional manoeuvre. There was no ‘beg pardon’ about this show—live ammunition was fired by the artillery supplying a creeping barrage instead of the stationary concentrations to which the troops were used; sappers made tracks through real minefields and bangalore torpedoes blew holes in real wire. It was after this exercise that the CO explained the proposed technique of an attack and reorganisation on a two-brigade front to his officers, who thereupon passed the information on to the men.

The outline of a possible assault on a certain probable area had been explained to battalion commanders in strict secrecy by **General Freyberg**, and Colonel Baker memorised some of the map references. He then got the ‘I’ section to prepare a sandtable which, to the officers and

NCOs studying it, was just a sand-table. Actions were fought each evening on the Colonel's new toy—but when the troops went into the battle line the officers found that they were not on wholly unfamiliar ground.

Training, punctuated by tabloid sports and an occasional ceremonial parade, continued until the middle of October, when the brigade returned to Burg el Arab and put in a few days' marching in the mornings and swimming in the afternoons.

By this time it was no secret that General Montgomery was going to attempt with Eighth Army what General Rommel with his *Afrika Korps* and attached Italians had failed to accomplish—smash a forty-mile-long system of minefields of unknown density and defended by infantry, anti-tank guns, armour, artillery, and an air force. The only things the troops did not know were how, when, and where, but the officers had been informed that the attempt was scheduled for 23 October.

Working south from the sea, the opposing armies looked at each other from tactical features—we held Tell el Eisa Ridge, and roughly four miles away the enemy line ran in front of *Miteiriya Ridge*, then across *Ruweisat Ridge*, through El Mreir, then west of the old New Zealand area southwards to the *Qattara Depression*.

The plan was to attack between *Ruweisat Ridge* and the sea on an eight-mile front with four divisions—9 Australian, 51 Highland, 2 New Zealand and 1 South African, in that order from right (north) to left (south). The assault troops were to capture the opposing outpost and main line while engineers cleared tracks through the minefields for the armour to get up in support. The main armoured strength, under cover of diversionary attacks along *Ruweisat Ridge* and further south, would then pass through and destroy the German tanks.

We had undoubted superiority in the air and a new tank, the Sherman, said to be more than a match for its hard-hitting opposite number. General Montgomery met commanding officers and stressed the

role of each formation and each type of arm; **Brigadier Kippenberger** addressed his officers on similar lines; Major Hart made a reconnaissance of the brigade area with the company commanders, and on the 21st the troops were assembled and the forthcoming operation was carefully explained to them by the CO. At the conclusion of the talk the battalion had its tea, shouldered its equipment, embussed and left for the divisional assembly area at Alam el Onsol, about 15 miles behind the front line, and dug itself in. By daylight every vehicle was gone, the battalion had got all its equipment under cover and there was apparently nobody in the vicinity, with the **RAF** continuously overhead as a discouragement to too-inquisitive enemy planes. The troops remained hidden all day and after dark edged forward, again by MT, into the brigade assembly area in the rear of 23 Battalion, which had taken over a sector of the front a couple of days earlier. That night the troops saw flickering in the distance the familiar Aurora Borealis effect of flares and star shells. Clearly the fight was not far away. It was, in fact, very close indeed for during the next afternoon a message from General Montgomery was read to all ranks. The message ran:

EIGHTH ARMY

Personal message from the ARMY COMMANDER

- 1. When I assumed command of the Eighth Army I said that the mandate was to destroy **Rommel** and his Army, and that it would be done as soon as we were ready.**
- 2. We are ready NOW. The battle which is now about to begin will be one of the decisive battles of history. It will be the turning point of the war. The eyes of the whole world will be on us, watching anxiously which way the battle will swing. We can give them their answer at once, 'It will swing our way.'**
- 3. We have first-class equipment; good tanks; good anti-tank guns; plenty of artillery and plenty of ammunition; and we are backed up by the finest air striking force in the world. All that is necessary is that each one of us, every officer and man, should enter this battle with the determination to see it through—to fight and to kill—and finally, to win. If we all do this there can be only one result—together we will hit the enemy for 'six', right out of North Africa.**

4. The sooner we win this battle, which will be the turning point of this war, the sooner we shall all get back home to our families.
5. Therefore, let every officer and man enter the battle with a stout heart, and with the determination to do his duty so long as he has breath in his body. AND LET NO MAN SURRENDER SO LONG AS HE IS UNWOUNDED AND CAN FIGHT. Let us all pray that 'the Lord mighty in battle' will give us the victory.

B. L. MONTGOMERY,

Lieutenant-General, G.O.C.in-C., Eighth Army

Middle East Forces

23-10-42

Since the battalion had left the front after the Munassib attack a number of changes had occurred in the command of companies; **Captain Awatere** had been evacuated sick and Captains Keiha and Porter had been sent to Base for a rest. They had, however, smelt the battle from afar and had wangled themselves into jobs as liaison officers at Divisional Headquarters.

The field return of officers before the battle began was as follows: ²

CO: Lt-Col F. Baker

2 i/c: Maj I. A. Hart

Adjutant: Lt K. P. Mariu

Lt W. Vercoe (absent on course)

IO: Lt R. C. Te Punga

QM: Lt I. G. Howden

MO: Capt C. N. D'Arcy

2 Lt M. Wikiriwhi (LO 5 Bde)

HQ Company

OC: Capt C. Sorensen

Signals: 2 Lt H. Mohi

Mortars: Lt P. Te H. Ornberg

Carriers: Lt T. Wirepa

Lt E. V. Hayward

Pioneers: Lt P. Taiapa

Anti-Tank: Lt H. M. Mitchell

2 Lt E. J. Ropata

2 Lt W. D. P. Wordley

Transport: 2 Lt A. E. McRae

A Company

OC: Capt J. C. Henare

2 i/c: Lt G. T. Marsden

2 Lt K. Rika

2 Lt A. J. Stephens

Lt J. G. P. Aperahama

B Company

OC: Maj C. M. Bennett

2 i/c: Capt M. R. Pene

2 Lt K. Waaka

2 Lt A. P. Warbrick

2 Lt M. Francis

C Company

OC: Capt W. M. Awarau

2 i/c: Lt S. F. Jackson

2 Lt W. Te A. Haig

2 Lt H. P. Rangiuia

D Company

OC: Capt F. R. Logan

2 i/c: Capt J. Matehaere

Lt P. C. West

Lt R. Tutaki

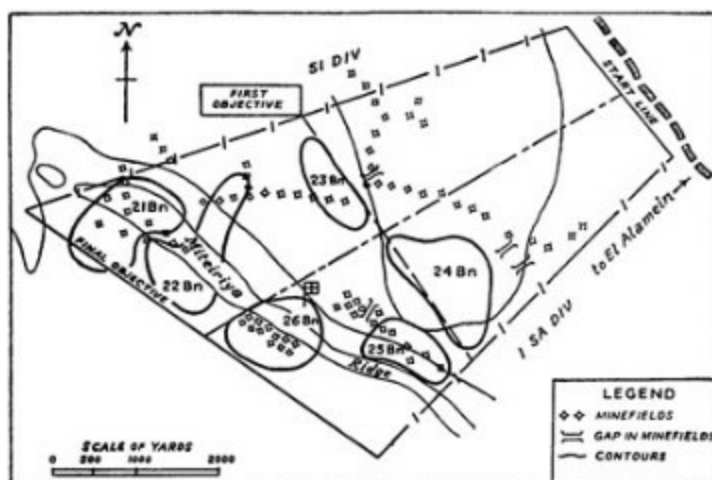
2 Lt J. Smith

Detailed orders had already been issued to units for the capture of **Miteiriya Ridge**, about four miles from the start line. The operation was to be carried out in two phases, the first objective being the outpost line behind the first enemy minefield, which would be captured by one battalion in each brigade, while the second phase, the taking of the ridge itself, was in each brigade a two-battalion job.

The original divisional start line was one and a half miles in length, widening like the ribs of a fan to two and a half miles, which meant that each company would move forward on a slightly different bearing.

The New Zealand Division had 104 guns firing on its front, a concentration before unheard of in North Africa although much denser fire power was provided later in the war. In actual fact, after batteries detailed to smother known enemy positions were deducted, the actual

barrage, the moving wall of fire, the steam-roller of destruction was more of a direction and pace indicator than a barrage. At Messines in 1917 the guns supplying the barrage stood wheel to wheel and in serried ranks according to the weight of their shells.



5 AND 6 BRIGADE POSITIONS, DAWN 24 OCTOBER 1942
The Maori Battalion had a mopping-up role

5 and 6 Brigade positions, dawn 24 October 1942
The Maori Battalion had a mopping-up role

It was, then, almost a certainty that pockets of enemy would be bypassed and 28 Battalion was given the important task of mopping up behind, firstly, the one battalion of each brigade front, and then, after the other two units had passed through, of carrying on to **Miteiriya Ridge**. The Maoris were to ensure that the sappers clearing the vital tracks through the minefields for the passage of guns and armour were not molested by over-looked strongpoints; the engineers' job was dangerous enough as it was.

C and D Companies, assigned to the mopping up in 6 Brigade's sector, moved off at dusk and took position in rear of 24 Battalion; behind them again were 25 and 26 Battalions edging up to deploy. Similarly, A and B Companies responsible for 5 Brigade's area aligned themselves in rear of 23 Battalion, with 21 and 22 Battalions behind them. Further back, front-line vehicles began to move along their allotted axes, which were defined by shaded lights. Still further back, the armour was warming up to lock horns with the German panzers.

A watchful enemy sentry, peering into the bright moonlight at twenty minutes to ten that night, would have seen hundreds of points of light glowing like matches from Ruweisat to the sea. Before he would have realised their significance hundreds of shells would have been screaming westwards.

The Maoris, lying on the cold sand, felt the thud of the recoiling guns and smelt again the characteristic perfume of the battlefield—smoke and burning cordite. The assaulting infantry moved towards the opening line of the barrage, which was due to start rolling at twenty-three minutes past ten; fifteen minutes later the mopping-up parties followed into the mixture of moonlight, dust and smoke. A and B Companies, following 23 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel R. E. Romans), had gone about a quarter of a mile when they were caught in a counter-barrage and there were some casualties, including Captain Henare³ (A Company), before they were clear. **Major Bennett** took charge of both companies and worked them as one unit for the rest of the operation.

There was little employment for the moppers-up as far as the first objective for 23 Battalion missed only two small groups who offered no resistance. Near the first pause line **Major Bennett's** force was augmented by a platoon of 23 Battalion (Second-Lieutenant Cooper)⁴ which had become detached from its unit during a scuffle with a strongpost and the combined force moved on to the first objective. There were only a few 23 Battalion men there, a perturbing situation for a mopping-up party, but 24 Battalion (the leading battalion of 6 Brigade on the left) was contacted and a defensive line established. The **23rd Battalion** had overshot its objective and carried on to the foot of **Miteiriya Ridge**.

Word was passed along that 24 Battalion was retiring and **Major Bennett** went to investigate. He found that C Company 24 Battalion had merely gone a couple of hundred yards forward to settle a strongpoint and was returning to its correct place. No elements of 51 Division were in the locality on his right, so Bennett pulled his own people and the

oddments of 23 Battalion back to conform to 24 Battalion's line, dug in, and waited on events. The time was about midnight.

On 6 Brigade's front C and D Companies got away to a good start, but C Company was not long in touch with B Company on the left of 5 Brigade's area. Spasmodic shelling was encountered but there were no losses in C Company as far as the first objective. Only four prisoners were taken in an uneventful follow-up behind 24 Battalion.

D Company was not so lucky; the first few hundred yards were unopposed, but then an enemy battery that had escaped the counter-bombardment concentrated on the area being passed over by the troops. Casualties were also caused by S-mines, a type of anti-personnel mine that had not previously been encountered. They were held down by a spring which, when actuated, threw the mine into the air, where it exploded. An understandable desire to push as rapidly as possible out of this dangerous area was frustrated by the fact that 24 Battalion could move only as fast as the barrage in front of it.

The failure of the South Africans to keep pace with 6 Brigade meant that the left flanking company of 24 Battalion and D Company 28 Battalion behind it were exposed to enfilade fire from the open flank. The result was that 24 Battalion veered to its right and the Maoris became, in effect, assault troops.

They were nearing the first objective when they were sent to ground by a strongpoint. The company 2-inch mortars were turned on it, and after three salvos men were seen running and the Maoris closed in. Seven machine guns and three prisoners were captured. One, wearing a stretcher-bearer's armband and a Luger pistol, was shot. The others who had left earlier were lucky, for though they were seen by 24 Battalion men they were mistaken for Maoris and permitted to depart into the smoke.

When the first objective was reached D Company was still in the front wave, but contact was established with C Company 24 Battalion

and that battalion's headquarters located. The company reorganised on the first lines pending the arrival of 25 Battalion, which was to continue the assault on the left.

Back in 5 Brigade's sector **Major Bennett** did not have long to wait, and the troops of 21 and 22 Battalions moved to the capture of Miteiriya according to the timetable. The mystery of the whereabouts of 23 Battalion was solved when the moppers-up, after an unimpeded progress, reached the ridge and met it there. Judging by the appearance of the battlefield 23 Battalion had done a very thorough job where the opportunity had presented itself. **Major Bennett** halted on the near slope of Miteiriya and went forward to locate 22 Battalion. This battalion was enduring very heavy shelling but needed no assistance in cleaning up behind it; 21 Battalion, whose objective lay somewhat further forward, took longer to find but it, too, was solidly in position. The Maori assignment was over and the troops were returning when they met armour trying to negotiate a minefield at the bottom of the ridge. **Bennett** well knew the imperative necessity of getting tanks and anti-tank guns forward before daylight and put a part of his force to helping the engineers clear lanes for the wheeled traffic. They worked until just before daylight and then reported back to Battalion Headquarters.

In 6 Brigade's sector C Company's luck continued. The **26th Battalion** arrived on the start line a little late but in good shape and C Company followed through to its objective, which had been laid down as the foot of Miteiriya. The company had only two casualties and took four prisoners.

At 1 a.m. there was no sign of 25 Battalion on the left flank and a runner sent to 24 Battalion brought back word that HQ 24 Battalion had not seen it either. **Captain Logan** waited for an hour, during which time engineers passed through clearing tracks, and then decided to go forward and cover them. D Company had gone forward for nearly a mile when fire came in from the South African sector and the company faced in that direction to meet a possible attack. The firing ceased and the troops pushed on, still thinking that they were the front line. They were

supported in this impression when they overran a strongpoint and collected four more prisoners and were very surprised to find 25 Battalion at the foot of the objective ridge. Headquarters 25 Battalion could not be located but an officer of that unit assured **Captain Logan** that the battalion was where it should be, so when the first armour came up through the engineers' track the company returned home.

The Maori Battalion's losses in this attack were 6 killed (1 officer and 5 other ranks), 53 wounded (3 officers and 50 other ranks), and 3 other ranks missing. The general situation at dawn on 24 October was that 9 Australian Division had its right brigade on the objective but was otherwise half a mile short; 51 Highland Division was up only on the extreme left (in contact with 21 Battalion) and the extreme right, but was otherwise well back; the New Zealand Division had 5 Brigade wholly on the objective, while 6 Brigade had 26 Battalion up and 25 Battalion half a mile short; **1 South African Division** had its left brigade solidly on the objective but its right was also half a mile short. The tanks under the New Zealand Division's command were in defensive positions but the main strength of the armoured corps had not been able to break out.

The battle raged while the battalion reorganised and endured odd air raids, though nearly all the planes in the air were Boston and Mitchell bombers, with fighter escort, flying westwards.

Captain Pene went to A Company, vice Captain Henare, wounded, and Padre Wanoa ⁵ marched in. Colonel Baker was warned that the Maoris would relieve 21 Battalion the next evening (the 26th).

A surprise air raid caught the unit forming up at dusk and caused three casualties, one fatal; otherwise the take-over from 21 Battalion was uninterrupted. The rest of the night, however, was very much interrupted by fierce artillery duels and enemy small-arms fire directed against covering parties supplied by the battalion for sappers laying minefields. There was nothing inspiring about the view at first light: silent field pieces and derelict tanks immediately in front and, further away, more tanks and guns that were anything but silent. Behind the

troops was the fold of **Miteiriya Ridge**, and away in front El Wishka Ridge. The Maoris called it 'Hell's Whiskers' and wished it wasn't there or that somebody would capture it and stop the shells coming from that direction. Something more dynamic than wishing could be done about the machine guns searching over the area and the supporting machine-gunners replied with longer and better bursts. More armour had got through the minefields and a tank battle was in progress to the north-east of the Maori area. The day passed under an assorted rain of shells, mortar bombs and bullets with consequent casualties, among whom was Sergeant Pitama, who had been awarded an MM for gallantry in the recent attack at Munassib. The move into the line was only a dispositional shuffle and the unit was relieved after dark on 27 October by a South African Royal Natal Carbineer battalion. The whole division was, in fact, pulling out in conformity with a resolution to regroup for another thrust, which explains why, after travelling the greater part of the night, most of the time at a snail's pace, the Maoris found themselves back in the Alam el Onsol area. Three days were spent swimming and relaxing while other divisions carried on the fight.

Brigadier Kippenberger inspected the unit on the last day of October and in an address to the troops said that he thought the brigade would stay where it was until a gap had been punched in the enemy line, whereupon the New Zealanders would board their trucks and help to chase Rommel out of Egypt. It was an alluring prospect. Battalion Headquarters extended itself and turned on afternoon tea for the Brigadier, and the troops made plans for the morrow; even the toughest fighters can bear to miss a battle occasionally.

At midnight the CO was wakened. He was to report urgently to Brigade Headquarters. The orders group was warned to stand by and a fast trip was made to **Brigadier Kippenberger's** headquarters; would Colonel Baker please wait until the Brigadier returned from a conference at Division?

The Brigadier, together with the other senior officers, including the

commanders of British formations which had been placed under **2 NZ Division's** command, was getting information and instructions from **General Freyberg**. Briefly, the position was that **9 Australian Division** in the northern sector had, after a hard fight, swung towards the coast and was a serious threat to the enemy jammed for room against the seashore. It was proposed to attack westwards from the Australian area with fresh troops and so provide the gap for which the main armour was still waiting.

The key to the breakout was the high ground in the **Tell el Aqqaqir** locality, about two miles behind the enemy line—unfamiliar country, strongly defended and covered by uncharted minefields. To increase the hazards, time was short and the two assaulting brigades which were coming under the Division's command for the operation had never trained together.

The brigadiers were told that nothing the enemy could do was to stop the advance—if tanks were encountered before the armour got up they were to be bypassed; if the infantry lost the barrage the tanks were to push on without them. The breach must be made this time, come what may.

Methods to obtain tactical surprise included ostentatious digging-in by **51 Division**, whereby it was hoped to indicate a static intention at the exact place from which the assault was to go in, and also a diversionary Australian attack with the object of holding enemy reserve armour in their area.

The rest was up to the English and Scottish infantry of **151 and 152 Brigades**, supported by as many guns as could be brought to bear. The plan was for an attack on a two-brigade front, **151 Brigade** (**50 Division**) right and **152 Brigade** (**51 Highland Division**) left, both supported by the tanks of **23 Armoured Brigade**, with **9 Armoured Brigade** to carry on past the infantry's final objective to **Tell el Aqqaqir**; the whole operation was to be under command of **2 NZ Division**, but the New Zealand infantry was being held in reserve as a break-through force.

But a last-minute adjustment to the plan was necessary. The direction of the thrust was towards a desert track running inland from Sidi Abd el Rahman, and there was a locality which, if it continued to be defended, could enfilade the advance of **151 Brigade**. The Maoris had therefore been detailed as an additional battalion to supply protection on this flank and had been placed under command of **151 Brigade** for the operation. Such was the gist of the information passed on to Colonel Baker, and with all dreams of a further spell dissipated he drove rapidly back to his waiting O Group.

After a very early breakfast all senior officers drove to HQ **151 Brigade**, located near the original start line of the Highlanders on the night 23–24 October, and here Colonel Baker, attending a brigade conference, rapidly realised that **151 Brigade** had never trained with the New Zealand Division.

‘This conference was the most unsatisfactory Bde or other conference I have ever attended,’ he wrote later. ‘There was no orderly presentation (as we had been used to) of either information or of the job that had to be done ... or who was to do what. My recollection of the conference was that it commenced with a discussion of whether hot tea should be supplied to the men at the start line, recognition signals, success signals and a password (finally resolved by adopting the word “Joss” which we were given to understand was the Bde Comd's name).

‘On matters of more concern to Unit Comds the orders were very indefinite and the only definite information given, viz., the means of getting to the Bde start line proved later to be inaccurate. At the end of the conference, by question and answer the following information as it affected the 28 NZ Bn was elicited:

- (a) The 28 NZ Bn was to be on the northern flank of the attack. The attack was to be due west which meant that the right flank of the Bn was to be open.
- (b) The artillery barrage was to be continuous over the front of the 151 Bde proper but was to cover half of our front only.

(c) In view of the varying distances between the Bde start line and the enemy F.D.L.'s the 28 Bn start time was, I think, 10 mins ahead of the other units.

(d) The Bn front was one Km wide and the distance to the objective approximately 3.5 kms.

(e) On reaching the objective the Bn was to re-organise and prepare a defensive position and would have the support of two A/T troops and one Sq of tanks.'

After an unsuccessful attempt by the CO to obtain more satisfactory artillery cover the company commanders were given their orders and went back to their men, who by this time were en route to the designated rendezvous near Tell el Eisa railway station, where the whole battalion had assembled by the afternoon. Colonel Baker reported to **Brigadier W. J. Windeyer, commanding the Australian infantry brigade in whose area the start line was situated, only to find that the Brigadier had received no information regarding the attack nor was he aware that his front-line trenches were to be evacuated before the barrage was to commence.**

Much more disquieting was the fact that, according to the location of the several features given at the **151 Brigade conference as landmarks, the whole brigade would have lined up at least two kilometres south of where it should have been. At dusk on 1 November the 'I' section put down the start-line tapes on the correct place and Colonel Baker located and, after considerable discussion, induced the other battalion commanders, who had followed the brigade orders without question, to move north into their correct areas so that at least the Maoris would not be fighting a separate action.**

The Australians pulled back from their forward positions at midnight (1-2 November) and within the hour the troops were in position and disposed with C Company (Captain Awarau) right and D Company (**Captain Logan) left; B Company (Major Bennett) was to mop up 600 yards in rear, Battalion Headquarters was behind B Company, and A Company (Captain Matehaere) was in reserve behind Battalion Headquarters.**

The barrage opened at five minutes after 1 a.m. and the assault troops moved off into the gloom. Colonel Baker ⁶ was seriously wounded about half a mile forward of the start line.

C Company advanced about a quarter of a mile before it was fired on, then machine guns and mortars opened at close range and the Ngatiporou went at them with levelled bayonets. The enemy were Germans and, in the words of General Montgomery, it was a real killing match as the company stabbed, grenaded, and tommy-gunned its way through an area thick with machine and anti-tank guns.

Cohesion in the company was lost in the fight and its members fought singly and in sections; Lieutenant Haig ⁷ reached the objective with ten men and then had to go another 200 yards to silence more machine guns; Lieutenant Jackson, after dealing with strongposts that had been missed by the first wave, got to his objective with five men; Captain Awarau and Lieutenant Rangiuia ⁸ were both wounded.

D Company, with both its flanks covered by C Company, right, and 6 Battalion Durham Light Infantry on the left, had little trouble until passing a derelict tank. It had been booby-trapped and it exploded, causing several casualties. **Captain Logan**, concluding after an hour's steady advance that he was near his objective, sent patrols to locate his flanking troops and consolidated.

B Company (**Major Bennett**) started fifteen minutes after the first wave. 'Although to all intents and purposes we were the mopping up Coy, in effect we were front line troops throughout,' he wrote. 'I don't know what happened to C and D ahead of me but we lost contact with them almost from the start line and hardly saw them again. We had to fight almost every inch of the way. We were never far behind the barrage which gave us good protection and did some damage too.... At one spot we were opposed by a wall of enemy firing at us with all they had. We all broke into the haka "Ka mate! ka mate!" and charged straight in with the bayonet.... It was the most spirited attack that I myself had taken part in.'

When the estimated distance had been covered Bennett halted his men and scouted around for the front wave. He found D Company just in front of him but could not locate either A or C Companies or Battalion Headquarters. His wireless was working but the only one to come in on the air was the A Company operator; but he was lost and did not know where his people were. Bennett decided to dig in and wait on events.

Captain Logan was already digging in facing west so B Company was swung to face north, from which direction a lot of fire was coming in and which was the most likely place for a counter-attack to originate. While the Arawas were getting below ground both Haig and Jackson located them and were fitted in with their men, also facing north.

A Company kept Battalion Headquarters in sight for almost a mile before it lost contact. Later the company overtook the Adjutant (Lieutenant Mariu) ⁹ and **RSM Wikiriwhi** ¹⁰ looking for Battalion Headquarters. They had stayed back when Colonel Baker had been wounded and had waited until his jeep had come up across the minefields and evacuated him to the RAP, near where Major Hart was waiting with the fighting transport. The CO was unable to speak but by written notes advised the Major of the situation as he knew it and handed over command of the battalion. In the meantime Captain Matehaere had been wounded. Major Hart arrived in time to attend to his wound while Lieutenant Aperahama led the company against fierce opposition. They passed Lieutenant Rangiuia and several of his platoon who had been wounded trying to take the position, and cleaned up four strongposts. Aperahama was really facing his right flank although he was under the impression that he was attacking frontally, and, fearing to penetrate too deeply and thereby run the risk of being cut off, he ordered the platoons to consolidate.

The writer is unable to give a clear account, through the death in action of the officers concerned, of the support-arms position, but the battalion 3-inch mortars and a platoon of machine-gunners were dug in near Battalion Headquarters before dawn while L Troop 244 Anti-Tank

Battery, RA, making a belated appearance, had only two guns dug in before daylight. The remaining guns were shot up and the troop commander killed. It is quite clear, however, that there was no communication between the different sections of the battalion. This is how **Major Bennett** saw the situation at dawn:

I was very fearful for the forward troops' welfare. As far as I could see nothing was on our right and nothing on our left and where we were dug in the enemy was immediately in front of me and also covered me from the left. It was quite unsafe to poke your head out above ground level and the same of course applied to the enemy in front of us. We were like a little finger poked out into the enemy positions and likely to be nipped off with ease. I was not apprehensive of enemy troops but I was of his tanks. Without anti-tank defences I knew I was absolutely at the mercy of tanks should they have attacked.

No news came to us from behind. I got no orders and so decided to stay put. Even if it was possible to get back (and this was virtually impossible in the hours of daylight) it wasn't the kind of situation that one would have liked to have left his men in on their own.

The expected counter-attack did not eventuate for Field-Marshal Rommel had his hands much too full in other directions, particularly with the penetration in the vital **Tell el Aqqaqir** sector. The troops lay under fire all that day; the large gap between the Maoris and the Australians was still full of enemy although the carriers did manage to quieten it some-what.

As soon as it was dark enough **Major Bennett** left Lieutenant Waaka in command of B Company and made his way back to Battalion Headquarters, only to find that the CO had been wounded and that Major Hart, also, had been mortally wounded. Bennett thereupon assumed command of the battalion. ¹¹

Major Bennett reported his situation to Headquarters 6 Brigade, under whose command the battalion had passed after the attack, and

was given two more platoons of machine guns and another troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns to strengthen his rather precarious position. It was on his return from this journey that he found that the location of A Company had been established and he got his command together. Casualties had been heavy, nearly one hundred in an already depleted battalion; 22 killed, 72 wounded, including 8 officers (one of whom, Major Hart, died of wounds), and 4 missing.

Companies were reorganised with Lieutenant Aperahama as OC A Company, ¹² vice Captain Matchaere, wounded; Captain Pene, B Company, replacing **Major Bennett**; and Lieutenant Taiapa, C Company, vice Captain Awarau, wounded. **Captain Logan** still commanded D Company and Captain Sorensen Headquarters Company.

Major Bennett resited the battalion to present a stronger front towards the north. Contact was established with the Australians on the right and with 24 Battalion, which had come up during the night. By first light all arms were dug in and the battalion prepared for any eventuality except the one that happened. As **Major Bennett** wrote in his report on the action: 'Unfortunately the morning arrived only to find that the enemy had evacuated during the night.'

The battle was in fact over, with the enemy moving westwards.

A battalion is not a very big cog in the military machine and it was not until that night that **Major Bennett** received information which enabled him to tell his officers that the enemy was on the run and that 28 Battalion, as part of 5 Brigade, was going to chase him. No. 1 Platoon 4 RMT reported at ten o'clock the next morning; the troops were given a hot meal and were on the way to the rendezvous within the hour; by 3 p.m. on 4 November 5 Brigade was shouldering its way through the gap which had been made, south-west into the desert, its destination the **Fuka** escarpment. It was hoped to deny the road to the departing Germans (the majority of the Italian force, stripped of transport by its ally, was already as good as in the bag) in the same manner as they had incommoded the **Matruh** garrison when the New Zealand Division was

galloping back from **Minqar Qaim**.

The plan did not come off. The route, marked by the **Divisional Provost Company** with the familiar diamond signs on iron pickets with shaded lights, was south-west of **Tell el Aqqaqir** then north-west, but by the time the Division had wriggled through the minefields and got itself into formation it was within two hours of dawn.

While 5 Brigade was waiting for the rest of the Division to concentrate, an escaping fragment of the enemy bumped the rear of the column and there was some confused firing and fighting before it was driven off. The **23rd Battalion** got the worst of it with 26 casualties, but A Company 28 Battalion lost its latest commander. Lieutenant Marsden's pick-up was riddled and he was seriously wounded. Lieutenant Aperahama again took command, with Lieutenant Stephens his only other officer.

During this time the enemy was not standing on the order of his going along the good tarsealed coast road, even though the unceasing attentions of the Desert Air Force did not assist his retreat.

The Division was on the move after breakfast (5 November) and, with the armour ranging ahead, struck across a stricken field for **Fuka**, where a steep escarpment crossed by only one road and a railway track offered a chance of cutting off at least a part of the enemy rearguard. Italian formations whose transport had been appropriated by the Germans did not seem unduly cast down. Lieutenant Waaka wrote:

Very noticeable that only prisoners after the break through are Italians. They march back in orderly parties 6 deep singing and laughing and calling out as we pass, 'Multo bone Campo Cairo.' The Wops! Marked contrast to the average Jerry prisoner who hardly says a word and is obviously terribly hurt at having been captured and if, which is seldom, he speaks at all, it is with the arrogant assurance that they will win and that the term of imprisonment is but temporary.

However, with minefields (real and dummy) to cross and armoured

engagements to wait upon, the road was still ten miles away at nightfall. **Baggush** landing ground, urgently needed by the Air Force, was the following day's objective, but here fate or what lawyers call 'an act of God' intervened. The sky opened and rain, at first intermittent, fell in torrents; the dusty desert changed into a morass and the trucks sank to the running boards. The pursuit was over for the time being.

A change in duties took place within the battalion. **Second-Lieutenant M. Wikiriwhi** relieved Lieutenant Te Punga as IO and Te Punga became Adjutant in place of Lieutenant Mariu, who went to liaison officer duties at HQ 5 Brigade. Two days of crouching under groundsheets and tarpaulins had passed before the unit was mobile again and the chase resumed. **Matruh, Minqar Qaim**—all the old names came back into the vocabulary. Major Keiha and **Captain Awatere** rejoined the battalion as second-in-command and OC C Company respectively. By midnight 10–11 November 28 Battalion was 12 miles from **Sollum** at the rear of the brigade column.



Central and Eastern Mediterranean

The position was curiously similar to that at the opening of the 1941 campaign—the enemy was holding the escarpment with British armour coming up behind from the direction of the Omars. But the similarity ceased there for the top of **Halfaya** Pass was no nest of panzers but the

temporary abode of an Italian rearguard. The forward armour was worrying at them and it was thought they would not stay long. In the event they proved more stubborn than was expected and 21 Battalion was sent to expedite their departure. This was effected before daylight and the **Maori Battalion** was directed to ascend the escarpment via the **Sollum** road it knew so well. It was, however, so thoroughly demolished that the battalion was redirected to the **Halfaya** Pass, and after some delay on account of congestion finally halted in the vicinity of **Sidi Azeiz**. Bardia had been evacuated without a fight and the last enemy soldier who was free to move was out of Egypt. General Montgomery issued another message to be read to all men in the Eighth Army:

1. When we began the battle of Egypt on 23 October I said that together we would hit the Germans and Italians for six right out of North Africa. We have made a very good start and to-day, 12 Nov., there are no German and Italian soldiers on Egyptian territory except prisoners. In three weeks we have completely smashed the German and Italian Army, and pushed the fleeing remnants out of Egypt, having advanced ourselves nearly 300 miles up to and beyond the frontier.

2. The following enemy formations have ceased to exist as effective fighting formations:

Panzer Army— 15 Panzer Div.
21 Panzer Div.
90 Light Div.
164 Light Div.

10 Italian Corps— Brescia Div.
Pavia Div.
Folgore Div.

20 Italian Corps— Ariete Armd. Div.
Littorio Armd. Div.
Trieste Div.

21 Italian Corps— Trento Div.
Bologna Div.

The prisoners captured number 30,000 including nine Generals. The amount of tanks, artillery, anti-tank guns, transport, aircraft, etc., destroyed or captured is so great that the enemy is completely

crippled.

3. This is a very fine performance and I want, first, to thank you all for the way you responded to my call and rallied to the task. I feel that our great victory was brought about by the good fighting qualities of the soldiers of the Empire rather than by anything I may have been able to do myself.
4. Secondly, I know you will all realise how greatly we were helped in our task by the R.A.F. We could not have done it without their splendid help and co-operation. I have thanked the R.A.F. warmly on your behalf.
5. Our task is not finished yet; the Germans are out of Egypt but there are still some left in North Africa. There is some good hunting to be had further to the west, in **Libya**; and our leading troops are now in **Libya** ready to begin. And this time, having reached Benghazi and beyond, we shall not come back.
6. On with the task, and good hunting to you all. As in all pursuits some have to remain behind to start with; but we shall all be in it before the finish.

The New Zealand Division's part in assisting the enemy's departure was over for the time being; other formations attended him along the North African coastline past **Tobruk**, **Derna**, **Benghazi**, **Agedabia**, to his lair at **El Agheila** in the Gulf of **Sirte**. To the troops left hundreds of miles behind the battle line the situation was supremely satisfactory, but there were others who remembered that *Panzerarmee* had been driven back to the same place twice before and had returned, refitted and refreshed, almost to the gates of **Cairo**. But this time the landing in North Africa of a new British-American Army on 8 November was a new factor.

The Maoris left the conduct of the war to General Montgomery and set about making themselves comfortable. Summer was well past. Battle dress was issued and worn, particularly at night, with appreciation. Training in the use of the troops' tools of trade, that bugbear of the rank and file but his salvation in battle, commenced forthwith; the front-line soldier is slow to realise that while in action he is mostly standing around, lying around, or being carried around, and that physical fitness must be regained and nerves restrung before he is ready for further battles.

A trip to the beach near **Bardia** for a swim resulted in the discovery of a dump of American canned potatoes, some of which were smartly loaded on to the troop trucks. **Colonel Bennett** was very pleased with the potatoes and sent more trucks to lift the remainder of the dump. He was not so pleased with the assorted barrels of wine, cognac, and zibbib which had also been found and loaded with the potatoes. He had, in fact, a definite antipathy to mixing Maori training with Italian alcohol and took prompt measures to separate the two. The battalion was sent out on a route march and by the time it returned, expectant and thirsty, the stock of *vino* had been located and poured over the even thirstier desert.

About a month was spent in the locality, during which time the main activities were roadmending, route-marching, barrack-square bashing, sports meetings and football. The last was a really serious business for the divisional champion team was being sought, and **General Freyberg** had made it known that if the competition was not decided before the advance continued he had arranged, without consulting the enemy, to stage the finals in **Tripoli**.

The battalion officers also played the brigade officers, headed by the Brigadier, at softball and beat them soundly, an action which the other ranks did not consider to be very diplomatic; a 14-mile route march the next day lent point to their belief.

December opened auspiciously with a brigade sports meeting. The prize for the unit with the most points was a free day and the Maoris won handsomely. Corporal Kirk ¹³ of the carrier platoon stripped and reassembled a Bren gun in 1 minute 32 seconds—at least 30 seconds better than average time and an astounding performance. It was also on 1 December that 28 (Maori) Battalion officially became an integral part of 5 Brigade. Since its formation the Maori unit, like the Machine Gun Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry, had been a divisional unit and had on sundry occasions been under command of every brigade in the Division. Great satisfaction was felt by all ranks at the change in status, even if it did mean the substitution of red oblong for the familiar red

half-moon patches that had been worn since **Palmerston North** days.

The free day was used to play 4 Field Regiment and 23 Battalion at Rugby and to win both matches. The holiday was nearly over. The position was that, although **Tobruk** harbour was working again, every pint of water, every gallon of petrol, every bullet, shell and item of replenishment had to be carried by truck across four-hundred-odd miles of desert to the troops in front of **El Agheila**. That fact had been mainly the reason for Rommel's double return to the attack in 1941 and mid-1942, but General Montgomery had taken steps to see that there was no third return. Supplies had been accumulated and troops were moving forward with the object of capturing the seaport city of **Tripoli**, a place which would do very well as a base port for the final liquidation of the Axis forces in North Africa and, of course, for the final of the Rugby competition.

The next step to the capture of **Tripoli**, Mussolini's 'Jewel of **Africa**', was the removal of the enemy occupying the barrier at **El Agheila**, and the plan to effect this was a frontal attack by 51 Division and 7 Armoured Division, with the envelopment of the inland flank by **2 NZ Division**. The troops packed up on 4 December and next day set out across **Cyrenaica**. The desert here was no different from its Egyptian namesake and the Division travelled directly across the bulge in North Africa that is **Cyrenaica** and rendezvoused in the **Agedabia** area, with 5 Brigade at **El Haseiat**, 30 miles farther south.

The first leg of the approach march proper was about 30 miles due south in daylight on 11 December; then, after a day for the Division to get into formation, the real trek started. Speed, or as much speed as the difficult going permitted, was essential and 50 arduous miles, including the crossing of a six-mile-wide path through Crystal's Rift, were followed by a full day and night march north-west towards **Marble Arch**. Word had been received that the enemy was already moving out and the Division's route was moved further west towards Bir el Merduma to try to cut off at least the rear elements.

The men had three hours' sleep, a quick breakfast, and the trucks were away bumping, jolting, and swaying through the day. Sixth Brigade was leading the Division and was some miles in front of 5 Brigade. Over 60 miles were covered by the end of the day (the 15th) and the Division was behind the whole of the German *Afrika Korps* which, like **2 NZ Division** at **Minqar Qaim**, was, in theory, in the bag.

What actually happened was that *90 Light Division* held 6 Brigade up long enough during the night for *21 Panzer Division* to scuttle past along the main road and then depart itself. Sixth Brigade had to deploy in the darkness over unknown ground, with the result that there was a six-mile gap between it and 5 Brigade. The *15th Panzer Division*, the last of the rearguard, passed through the gap in the early morning and *Afrika Korps*, again like **2 NZ Division**, lived to fight another day.



LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

Left hook at **El Agheila**

There was nothing the **Maori Battalion** could do about the escaping enemy so the men had breakfast and hoped there would be no more day-night-day dashes over a wadi-strewn desert—the RMT drivers must have had sharper eyes and several more lives than a cat. The battalion stayed where it was all that day while the next enemy position at **Nofilia** was felt out. Fires were permitted that night for cooking, the first since the advance began, and the whole countryside glowed for a while then darkened as the troops went to bed.

In the morning (the 17th) 5 Brigade left on another turning movement around the **Nofilia** position where 4 Light Armoured Brigade was engaged. The route was first south then west, and finally, when about seven miles beyond the village, a right turn faced the brigade north with 23 Battalion leading in the centre, 28 Battalion, right, and 21 Battalion, left rear. The brigade advanced in this order for about three miles across the flat top of an escarpment until the sea came into view, and between the sea and the edge of the escarpment ran a road along which enemy vehicles were streaming westwards towards **Sirte**.

Immediately 23 Battalion came into view of the enemy shells dropped between the trucks and an immediate attack was ordered. However, 5 Brigade had bumped into a strong flank guard placed for just the situation that had developed. The 28th Battalion, keeping its position in right rear of 23 Battalion, lurched down the edge of the escarpment into treacherous soft sand covered by light scrub, and the trucks screamed along in low gear until they were in danger of bogging down, so the troops debussed and advanced on foot. The **23rd Battalion** became heavily engaged and darkness fell with the enemy still in command of the road. **Colonel Bennett** was ordered to dig in facing east. The battalion had lost only one man, but most of the fire was directed on 23 Battalion and the Maoris had had the easier part.

After dark 21 Battalion was ordered to make a night attack; 28 Battalion was to stay where it was but was to send a company and mine the road near **Nofilia**. D Company was selected, and **Major Logan** with a party of engineers and trucks full of mines made a wide detour and cautious approach. Cars and tanks were heard and avoided by moving down a watercourse which led to a large, three-span concrete bridge. The company took up positions at each end of the bridge; the engineers' trucks were brought forward and the minelaying began. It is probable that the enemy had already mined the area for two engineers were killed by an explosion while they were working. The company returned safely and was able to report that the bridge over Wadi Schedgan was

dangerous for heavy traffic. The Maoris knew the name of the bridge for it had a large signboard at each end.

The flank guard was gone in the morning and for the second time Rommel had made a skilfully timed withdrawal. **Colonel Bennett** was told that 5 Brigade would be remaining in the vicinity for a few days, and the battalion dug itself in on top of the escarpment.

The chase receded into the west and training took the place of building defences. Christmas Day was a happy occasion for the Maoris. Nothing much was expected for the supply line was now even longer than before the turning of the **Agheila** line and **Cairo** was over 1200 miles away. Further, rumour had it that a boat allegedly bringing a bottle of beer for every man for Christmas Day had been torpedoed.

The day opened with a church parade at which **Colonel Bennett** wished the troops the compliments of the season and mentioned that money had been received from the Maori people which would be distributed equally as soon as it was possible to spend it. 'Hangi' pork and puha gathered from the wadis in the area was the highlight of Christmas dinner and was followed by tinned fruit, cigarettes, a gift parcel from the Patriotic Fund, and letters from home. And the boat bringing the beer had not been sunk after all.

The North African variety of puha was not a total success; Captain Pene, who was responsible for its discovery and collection, reminisces:

All dixies were commandeered to boil the stuff in (allowing for numerous returns) but, on boiling, the dam stuff smelt like hell—it simply stank. But considering that the only eatables we've had for weeks resembling 'greens' were dehydrated potatoes and carrot we tucked into the so called puha smell or no smell. I fully expected the troops (and myself) to have stomach complaints but we had none. Mind you, I put this down to the fact that said stomachs, having endured hard rations since **Alamein** were probably cast iron by **Nofilia**.

Life was taken very easily for a little while and the footballs were

much in evidence. The 21st Battalion was soundly trounced and the unbeaten Divisional Petrol Company team met its Waterloo, 6-5. The third New Year's Eve away from home passed quietly.

The Maori camp was astir early on 1 January—bivvies were struck, slit trenches filled in, and the unit ready to move before 9 a.m. Life is like that on active service—periods of leisure punctuated by periods of intense activity, sometimes through enemy action, sometimes in preparation for a fight, and sometimes for no apparent reason at all. On this occasion the Air Force needed forward landing grounds.

The distance to Tripoli was now within fighter range and our bombers needed their protection. Three days later the battalion, after battling through a hellish dust-storm, was picking up stones on an embryonic landing ground in the Hamraiet area, about 30 miles southwest of enemy-held Sirte. The whole of 5 Brigade was on the job and a very nasty one it was, in spite of the protection afforded by Bofors and a squadron of Spitfires.

Enemy fighter-bombers were only a few minutes' flying time away and did their best to delay the work. You can't dig slit trenches for protection in an airstrip and the troops worked with one eye on the stones and one on a large radar outfit in a corner of the field. As soon as the radar frame began to move the men bolted for trenches on the side of the strip, but even with that warning the battalion lost seven killed and seven wounded the first day.

There was added protection the next day for the carriers were brought up and gave extra ack-ack cover, as a result of which three planes were brought down (one by fighters and two by anti-aircraft fire) for no casualties. The job was finished on the 9th when thirty-six Kittyhawks landed on the new field and the battalion, with twenty-two casualties, left thankfully to rejoin the Division. The only ones sorry to move back were 12 Platoon (Lieutenant Vercoe). They had been several miles away guarding an ammunition dump and were busily eating their way through some gazelle they had shot.

Affairs had been marching while the brigade had been detached. Sufficient supplies had been accumulated for a spring at the city seaport of **Tripoli**, *Brillante di Africa*. Most assuredly the tables had been turned since the Maoris had taken part in the attack on Rommel's flank in the **Munassib Depression** only four months previously.

There was a three-hundred-mile barrier of the toughest going to be negotiated—sandy desert, rocky desert, hilly desert, terrific wadis and almost perpendicular escarpments, then the **Gebel Nefusa**, the bastion range of the coastal highlands. Beyond the Gebel was water, grass, trees, houses, and a very frightened Italian population.

The force was still the 51st Highlanders, 7 Armoured Division, the New Zealanders, with the Scotties on the coast and the others wide out into the desert. Opposition could be expected but every precaution to obtain surprise was to be taken—night marches, camouflaged trucks, no fires after dark, avoidance of tracks where possible, and all vehicles to be parked facing north so that the sun would not heliograph their presence off the windscreens.

The Division balanced itself, loaded up with a fortnight's rations, and began the turning movement on 15 January. Seventh Armoured Division on the right and the tanks of the **Royal Scots Greys** and the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry on the left led the way and conducted a running battle with opposing armour which fell back steadily; 5 Brigade in the rear had nothing to do except marvel at the nightmare country it was traversing, sometimes in open country in desert formation, sometimes through canyons in single column. By the 20th the brigade was back in the open desert again and at the head of the Division, with 28 Battalion the advance battalion. It was expected that **Tarhuna** at the edge of the Gebel would be defended and the Division was deploying for the attack when the place was reported empty. The road from **Tarhuna** over the **Gebel Nefusa** was traversed on the 21st, and late that night the battalion slithered down a bypass road the engineers had constructed. The Maoris were to act as local protection to the Scots Greys' tank

harbour. **Tripoli** was only 40 miles away.

While the modern Israelites were wandering, albeit with more purpose than the tribes of Moses, through desert that would have made that leader's hair stand on end, the Highland Division was making steady progress along the coast and was also within striking distance of **Tripoli**. The enemy departed westwards but left a rearguard from **15 Panzer Division** to see that the evacuation of the city was not interrupted.

Most of the next day (22nd) was spent in battling through soft sandy country on to the highway that led through **Azizia** to **Tripoli**, but by the amount of shelling the light armoured screen (Divisional Cavalry and 28 Battalion carriers) attracted it appeared likely that field guns and tanks would be needed to clear the way. An intercepted message indicated that the enemy did not propose to move until 7 p.m., and as nothing would be gained by trying to hurry him 5 Brigade stood by. At 8 p.m., a good hour after the suggested hour of departure, 5 Brigade, with 28 Battalion leading, began to move on **Tripoli**. B Company (Captain Pene) less 11 Platoon (Sergeant Kingi) ¹⁴, with the carrier platoon (**Captain Hayward**) under command, was the advanced guard and very soon found that something had gone wrong with either the decoding of the enemy message or his movement schedule. **Captain Hayward** wrote:

A few yards past the 1 kilo peg the front of my carrier was struck by MMG fire which appeared to be coming from an armoured car which was moving away. We held our course down the centre of the road for a while—I can recall my first reaction to the splatter of fire striking the carrier—poor show I know—but I thought, well, if I do have to stop one to see the lights of **Cairo** again and rest without jumping every time a motor bike backfired I'd prefer to have it in the right shoulder instead of tummy which was in line with the MG aperture approx 12 in. × 6 in. I made the necessary adjustment—however the lights faded as we smartly 'took to the bush' on the right of the road. Capt Pene and I then agreed that B company would advance on the left of the road and the carriers on the right.

About a mile had been covered in good time when the noise of enemy armour moving about on the left of the advanced guard suggested caution and Pene halted the company. In the blackness ahead there were sounds of birds calling, but in New Zealand birds, with the exception of moreporks, do not make a feature of night concerts and the Maoris grinned sardonically. Captain Pene, with at least two tanks scuffling around on his flank, told CSM (Bully) Harawira ¹⁵ to put up a red tracer flare, the signal that there were tanks about.

It was also the signal for a very large number of enemy automatics and machine guns to disclose an elaborate interlocking defence system and the Maoris flattened into the sand. Captain Pene considered the position: 'After some prolonged firing by the enemy I went into a huddle with my platoon commanders and decided to go back with runner George Lawson ¹⁶ and report to CO, especially re tanks on left gradually working to rear of us. Brig Kippenberger was there and informed me that they'd sent somebody to find me to come back as the enemy in front of us was larger than at first thought.' Fifth Brigade turned itself around and went back to its bivouac area. The enemy was gone by daylight and the road to Tripoli was open.

What was to have been a stage-managed entry of the New Zealand Division into Tripoli did not go according to plan. It will be remembered that 51 Highland Division was on the right of the New Zealanders at Alamein, three months earlier and fourteen hundred miles to the east; the Highlanders were still on the right and had taken advantage of the delay at Azizia to steal a march on their rivals. Hours before the carrier platoon leading the Maoris who were leading the brigade had reached the city gates, the Scotties were in full control of Tripoli, having themselves been preceded into the city by armoured cars of 11 Hussars. The column that was to have made a triumphant entry into Tripoli halted while new arrangements were made, and then, while A Company occupied the Fiat assembly works in the city, the rest of the battalion established itself in a bivouac area on the outskirts.

For the first time in months the troops were in an area where water, cool fresh water, was plentiful and everybody drank gallons of it. There were wells, dozens of windmill-operated wells, in the vicinity and the troops were able to get rid of the alkaline desert dust from their clothes and bodies. The hair on their heads took longer to clean than their bodies for it was one clotted mass through long use of water so brackish that it curdled the tinned milk that they used in their tea.

A couple of days later the battalion moved to an area about 15 miles south of the city. It was a nice spot after the arid desert—trees, mostly eucalyptus, lined the roads and the orchards of plums, apples, and almonds were in full bloom. Smartening-up drill took the place of patrols and there was a divisional parade and march past the Prime Minister of the **United Kingdom**, Mr Winston Churchill. But from the Maori point of view the resumption of the Rugby competition, interrupted by the departure from **Bardia**, was the most important event of the period. The finals were played in **Tripoli** as **General Freyberg** had promised.

At one stage it looked as if the finals would be fought out by the **Maori Battalion** versus the **Maori Battalion** for it had two teams entered, but the 'B' team finally went down to the Machine Gun Battalion and the championship lay between the Divisional Signals and the Maoris. The deciding game was played on the divisional football ground at **Castel Benito** on Sunday, 14 February, and in spite of heavy rain and a strong wind was witnessed by practically the whole Division. The rain cleared before the match and the betting was slightly in favour of the Maoris. Divisional Signals won the toss and elected to play with the wind at their backs. The Maoris' team was:

Fullback

Sgt H. H. Takarangi (HQ Coy)

Threequarters

2 Lt. J. Smith Cpl Taite **Cpl D. Hapi**
(D Coy) (HQ Coy) (HQ Coy)

Five-eighths

Pte O. Tumataroa Pte D. Hakaraia

(D Coy)

(HQ Coy)

Half-back

Sgt T. Matenga (D Coy)

Forwards

Cpl H. Hohepa L-Cpl R. Rautahi Pte F. Henderson

(HQ Coy)

(HQ Coy)

(C Coy)

Pte Tepurei Lt W. D. P. Wordley

(HQ Coy)

(HQ Coy)

Lt S. F. Jackson Pte D. R. Aratema Sgt A. Kenny

(C Coy)

(B Coy)

(HQ Coy)

Referee: Rev Father J. L. Kingan

Divisional Signals had the Maoris hard-pressed nearly all the first spell and at half-time the score was 3–0 in their favour. Father Kingan was consigned by the Maori spectators to a country much warmer than **Tripoli** for penalising Maori offside play, and one of the consequent free kicks had gone over the bar. At the interval the Maori team changed jerseys and wore 6 Field Regiment's colours of yellow and blue—their original black and white jerseys were difficult to distinguish from the Divisional Signals' blue and white. In the second half the Divisional Signals were just as capable in defence as they had been in attack, but eventually Wordley made a break through and sent Aratema over for a try which Jackson converted—5–3. Divisional Signals came again and brought the score to 5–6 by a good goal from another infringement. The Maoris could not break the Divisional Signals' defence until, within a few minutes of time, Taite streaked away to score near the corner—8–6. The kick was not successful and, with no further score, 28 (Maori) Battalion ended an unbeaten season by becoming the champions of the Division.

Tripoli to the Maoris, unsteeped in ancient history, was just another

African city since neither food nor drink could be purchased by a man with money to spend, a sand-blasted stomach and a Saharan thirst. Even if the hotels and restaurants had been in bounds the sight of a camel's head in a butcher's shop, with a donkey tethered at the door waiting his turn to go on the block, would have deterred all but the most meathungry. The esplanade along the waterfront was a pleasant place to rest while you ate the lunch you had brought with you and looked over the harbour filled with dead ships or at the modern buildings surrounded by gardens.

Another part of the city that the Maoris were to know very well was the dock area. As soon as the engineers had got the harbour working, the battalions took turn about in supplying wharf fatigues. The officers were the gang foremen and the work went on by day and by night. There were interruptions, sometimes by enemy planes but more often by unauthorised celebrations after a case containing rum had been accidentally dropped. Among the stores were hundreds of sacks of peanuts for the Indians and the troops were permitted to take home as many of them as they liked. Many bags of peanuts transformed themselves into tins of fruit by the time the working parties returned to camp. But, all the same, the ships were turned round in record time, enemy raids or no enemy raids.

¹ Sgt C. H. Wickliffe; Wellington; born Rotorua, 2 May 1911; labourer.

²No chaplain had yet been appointed to replace Padre Rangi, evacuated sick at the beginning of September.

³ Lt-Col J. C. Henare, DSO, m.i.d.; Motatau; born Motatau, 18 Nov 1911; farmer; CO 28 Bn Jun 1945-Jan 1946; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁴ Capt A. F. Cooper, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 20 Oct 1919; civil servant; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

⁵ Rev N. T. Wanoa; Opotiki; born Rangitukia, 9 Aug 1906; Anglican minister; wounded 23 May 1941.

⁶ Colonel Baker was awarded an immediate DSO in recognition of his aggressive leadership of the battalion and was later invalided home on account of his wounds.

⁷ **Capt W. Te A. Haig**, m.i.d.; Ruatoria; born Waipiro Bay, Ruatoria, 14 Nov 1904; clerk.

⁸ **Lt H. P. Rangiua**; Ruatoria; born Ruatoria, 4 Jul 1914; clerk; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

⁹ **Capt K. P. Mariu**; born NZ 27 Feb 1916; civil servant; killed in action 9 Jan 1944.

¹⁰ **WO I R. Wikiriwhi**; Maketu; born Maketu, 15 Sep 1905; civil servant; wounded 23 May 1941.

¹¹ He was not long afterwards confirmed in the appointment with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, the youngest commanding officer in the Division and the first with no previous experience of peacetime soldiering. Promotion came quickly in the **Maori Battalion** to both officers and other ranks. It all depended on how long you kept out of the casualty lists.

¹² Lt G. T. Marsden, second-in-command A Company, came up from LOB and took command of A Company that night.

¹³ **Sgt A. M. Kirk**; Taumarunui; born **Auckland**, 18 Aug 1920; fruit packer.

¹⁴ **Sgt A. E. Kingi**; Okere Falls, **Rotorua**; born Whakarewarewa, 10 Apr 1918; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

¹⁵ **WO II Te K. Harawira**, MM; **Whakatane**; born **Tauranga**, 27 Oct 1909; labourer; twice wounded.

¹⁶ **Pte G. Lawson**; **Rotorua**; born Poroporo, 25 Feb 1919; labourer; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 10

Medenine and Point 209

LET us bring the war into focus again. in June 1942 the Allies had agreed to clear enemy troops out of North Africa as a preliminary to the invasion of Europe. To this end the Eighth Army was to advance from Alamein and join at Tripoli an Anglo-American force which was to land in French North-West Africa. Tripoli had been secured by the Eighth Army according to plan but the Anglo-American Army had not been able to keep to the timetable. Rommel, after refitting his harried panzer divisions, had left the Italians holding the immensely strong Mareth line and had joined General von Arnim in an effort to delay further the advance from the west before the Allied armies could join up.

These German operations were causing some worry and to relieve the pressure Eighth Army was asked to demonstrate against the Mareth line. The New Zealand Division took no part in this reconnaissance in force, which coincided with Rommel's return to Mareth after indifferent success in the north. Soon there were indications that, before General Montgomery's preparations were complete, his adversary proposed to put in a major attack himself.

General Freyberg was asked to get his division up to the danger spot with all speed and the transition from a working to a fighting role was very sudden indeed.

The Maori Battalion's officers at the beginning of March were as follows:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col C. M. Bennett

2 i/c: Maj K. A. Keiha

Adj: Capt R. C. Te Punga

QM: Lieut M. P. Swainson

IO: Lt M. Wikiriwhi

MO: Capt C. N. D'Arcy

Padre: Rev N. T. Wanoa

Headquarters Company

OC: Maj F. R. Logan

Signal Platoon: 2 Lt G. McDonald

Anti-Tank Platoon: Capt H. M. Mitchell

Lt H. C. A. Lambert

Lt W. D. P. Wordley

Carriers: Capt E. V. Hayward

Mortars: 2 Lt G. Katene

Transport: Lt A. E. McRae

A Company

OC: Maj W. Porter

2 i/c: Capt J. C. Henare

Lt J. G. P. Aperahama

2 Lt K. Rika

2 Lt A. J. Stephens

B Company

OC: Capt C. Sorensen

2 i/c: Capt M. R. Pene

Lt E. Morgan

2 Lt W. P. Anaru

Lt W. Vercoe

C Company

OC: Capt A. Awatere

2 i/c: Capt T. Wirepa

2 Lt M. N. Ngarimu

Lt S. F. Jackson

Lt W. Te A. Haig

D Company

OC: Capt J. Matehaere

Capt E. C. Pohio

2 Lt J. Smith

Lt P. F. Te H. Ornberg

Lt H. Marsden

At 10 a.m. on 1 March the troops were returning from a lecture by Captain Sandy Thomas ¹ (23 Battalion) on a subject about which he was something of an authority, 'Prisoners of War and Escaping'; at 11.30 a.m. everybody was packing up and checking over ammunition supplies; at 7 p.m. the battalion attended a cinema show put on by the **YMCA—its features were two scenic tours of New Zealand; at 11.30 p.m. 5 Brigade was embussed and it moved within the hour, its destination **Medenine**.**

A short halt for breakfast and then the long column pushed on through **Ben Gardane** where dumps were being built up for the coming offensive. The coast turns sharply to the north at this point but the route was still westward to **Medenine**, a white-washed village of semi-nomads, the location of our most forward fighter strip, the junction of several tracks through the **Matmata** hills and the point at which the road itself turned north through the **Mareth** line to **Gabes** and **Tunis**.



Allied positions at **Medenine**

It was too dark to deploy when the battalion reached **Medenine** so the troops slept around the trucks until first light, when they were put down in their allotted areas. Fifth Brigade fitted into a line previously held by a single English battalion; 28 Battalion was on the right, 21 Battalion in the centre, and 23 Battalion on the left. Later, **131 Brigade** of 7 Armoured Division moved in between 201 Guards Brigade and the Maoris, and 6 Brigade deployed in reserve as it arrived.

Fifth Brigade's front was about eight miles in length, three miles of which was in the Maori sector—all gently undulating country and ideal for defensive fighting. The line faced west and south towards the **Matmata** hills, ten miles across a plain carpeted with tussock. **Medenine** lay about three miles east of the Maoris with the only prominent feature, Elephant Hill, on the right of their sector. It made a lovely O Pip and was regarded by the gunners as a special dispensation of Providence.

The final dispositions were A Company (Major Porter) right, D Company (Captain Matehaere) centre, and C Company (**Captain Awatere**) left. B Company (Captain Sorensen), together with some elements of 21 Battalion which had a shorter front, was in reserve. The anti-tank and anti-aircraft platoons, plus two platoons of machine guns, supplied depth to the line, which was further strengthened by twenty-four guns from 73 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA. If enemy tanks were still functioning after passing that obstacle there were four new 17-pounders and then the field guns detailed for extreme emergencies. The 17-pounders were still on the secret list; for security purposes they were called 'Pheasants' and were able to knock out tanks with an efficiency equalling that of the deadly German 88-millimetre. Still further back was 8 Armoured Brigade charged with the task of sealing off any penetration which enemy armour might make.

Two days and two nights passed in siting and re-siting the defences so that not a square yard of Maori ground was uncovered. The troops slept in their weapon pits, strong patrols roamed about, listening posts kept watch and carriers went out to the foot of the hills. The troops were instructed that, should an attack come in headed by tanks, they were to lie low until the anti-tank guns opened fire, for these guns had been placed well forward and were expected to deal with enemy armour before it got among them.

No mines were laid by 5 Brigade on this occasion as it was not desired to restrict the freedom of movement of the supporting tanks should they have to counter-attack. Instead, a single strand of wire stretched across the front, which included in A Company's area an eighty-yards-wide wadi sufficiently deep to give reasonable cover to tanks.

The only way to tell if a minefield is real or a dummy one is to test it, and it was hoped that if enemy armour came that way they would take the mines for granted and skirt the wire denoting the alleged field. This would lead them to rising ground covered at point-blank range by

two Royal Artillery six-pounders hidden from view by a fold in the ground.

For two more days the troops watched the sun disperse the morning mists and disclose the panorama of plain and hill devoid of any moving thing; then, on the fifth day (6 March), any doubts that Rommel intended to try to roll up our line and perhaps, for the third time, send us hurrying back to Egypt were swept quite away. Thick fog had hidden the initial approach but when it lifted there they were—tanks, guns and transport had debouched from the hills and fanned out over the plain. Soon the Desert Air Force and the **Luftwaffe were at each other's throats and the blue Tunisian sky was dotted with the white puffs of exploding shells.**

The Maoris left the sky to the pilots and watched the approach of some forty tanks preceding dozens of loaded half-tracked troop-carriers. The tanks halted about two miles from the FDLs, the turrets opened, and the commanders swept the country with their field-glasses. Nobody interrupted the operation. After a good look the turrets were closed and the tanks filed into the wadi that led towards the Ngapuhis; the enemy infantry in their trucks waited on events. Now it remained to be seen if notice was going to be taken of the dummy minefield.

Yes! The warning wire was taken at its face value and the leaders changed direction towards the bank that was presumably the boundary of the obstruction. Anti-tank gun crews are only human, and when four tanks were presenting their silhouettes the two six-pounders came ferociously to life. Four direct hits and four knocked-out tanks. The others scampered back out of trouble, but not before the Maoris' mortar platoon had blown the tracks off another tank and worried at it until it was burning.

Once the action was opened the field guns clamped down on the enemy infantry who had debussed and were moving cautiously forward. A patrol from A Company stalked the crews of the brewed-up tanks and returned with a company commander and fourteen other ranks of 7

Regiment, 10 Panzer Division. Such was the introduction of *10 Panzer Division* to the Eighth Army. It had been withdrawn from the Russian front to refit and, when the Anglo-American army invaded North Africa, had been sent to the new theatre. Maybe the war was conducted on different lines in **Russia** for this was the first time the Maoris had been attacked by tanks without artillery support.

The **Medenine** flank had no further attention beyond searching shells until late afternoon, but, by the sounds of battle coming down from the north, the Guards and 51st Highlanders were having their dispositions well tested.

The next effort to pierce 5 Brigade's line was made by approximately a thousand infantry, formed up in three waves accompanied by tanks and supported by artillery. The FOOs on Elephant Hill had been waiting all day for some such move and warned their batteries that something special was coming up. As soon as the enemy was in the desired position the guns smashed the attack before it was properly started and the forward troops never got a target for their rifles. Just before dusk the tanks came again with machine guns blazing furiously at nothing in particular, like a small boy approaching a cemetery in the dark and whistling to keep up his courage. They were soon turned back; and that, in effect, was the Maori and 5 Brigade share of the battle of medenine. The result was the same in the north: fifty-two dead tanks in all and scarcely a dent in the line.

As darkness came down on the battlefield the German infantry could be seen earnestly digging weapon pits as if they had come to stay. **Colonel Bennett** ordered listening posts to be established 300 yards in front of the FDLs with telephone wires laid direct to Battalion Headquarters and, as most of the enemy preparations were being made in front of A and B Companies, a platoon from each of the other companies moved into the area to thicken up the line. A night attack was considered a possibility and it is axiomatic that, in such circumstances, you use guns by day and men by night.

Sentries were doubled and before dawn every man stood to, peering into the darkness; listening posts listened all through a night that was filled with the rumble of moving transport and reported variously that the enemy was manoeuvring into position to launch an attack and that he was pulling back into the hills. Patrols went out but found only a very alert covering force.

The noise of moving vehicles stopped before first light and fingers tightened around triggers; machine-gunners settled themselves for the business ahead and grenade pins were tested for a smooth withdrawal. The curtain of mist rose from the plain and, except for two ex-American half-tracked vehicles and an ex-British Bren carrier, the stage was empty. The cost to the battalion for the whole operation was two concussion cases and one wounded.

While carrier patrols scoured the plains to make quite sure that nothing hostile was hidden in the wadis, the anti-tank platoon got one of the American troop-carriers running and used it for carrying spare ammunition.

The Maoris did not think much of the fight for there were no trophies of the chase—not a luger or a spandau or even a pair of binoculars. General Montgomery, on the other hand, considered **Medenine** the perfect example of a defensive battle in its setting, its conduct, and its outcome. He issued a congratulatory message to the troops concerned, and at an address to senior officers he dealt at length with the tactics of a battalion defensive layout and concluded: ‘I would strongly advise those of you who can to make a point of visiting the **Maori Battalion** area.’

A suggestion from the Eighth Army Commander was equivalent to a command and for a while the place was thick with colonels and brigadiers. At the instigation of **General Freyberg** the New Zealand fernleaf and the serial number of the **Maori Battalion**, as well as that of 73 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, were superimposed on the German markings on the knocked-out tanks.

Still another morale-raiser was a demonstration of what, under favourable conditions, the anti-tank platoon could do to enemy armour. At 400 yards both the two- and six-pounders with which the battalion was now equipped ripped holes clean through the derelicts, and the Maoris applauded as tracer shells tore through the target and soared across the plains.

At the same time as he was seeing the enemy off at **Medenine** General Montgomery was putting the finishing touches to his plans for the turning of the **Mareth** line. Like the **Alamein** defences, the **Mareth** line began at the sea coast, but there the similarity ended for, unlike its Egyptian counterpart, the French engineers who designed the **Mareth** fortifications had natural obstacles to strengthen. This they had done according to the best military engineering practice with concreted pillboxes and gun emplacements. The result was a thirty-mile-long system of mutually supporting strongpoints sited behind wadis, above escarpments, and among the **Matmata** hills. The French might justifiably have felt that they had set up an impassable barrier between French and Italian North Africa while the Italians, now in possession of the works designed to keep them out, no doubt entertained the same fallacy. For extra strength the **Mareth** defences had been continued west and north for another 50 miles among the ranges, thus refusing the flank as far as the **Tebaga Gap** where a pass through the broken country carried a road to **Gabes**.

Shortly put, the Eighth Army plan was to break through on the coast while the newly constituted **New Zealand Corps**, consisting of **2 NZ Division**, General Leclerc's Free French force, 8 Armoured Brigade and attached artillery, turned the inland flank and advanced to **Gabes** on the coast.

In accordance with pre-battle practice LOB personnel comprising seconds-in-command of companies, with the exception of Captain Pene who went to Headquarters Company vice **Major Logan**, evacuated sick, and fifty other ranks went back with Major Keiha to Advanced base at

Tripoli.

The departure from **Medenine** was to be carried out with all deceptive measures—fernleaf and other typical New Zealand signs on vehicles obliterated; titles and badges removed from uniforms; at every halt vehicles were to be turned facing the way from which they had come so that the setting sun would not reflect from their windscreens. All units carried six days' rations and water, petrol for six hundred miles, and a full scale of ammunition. Another four days' supplies were carried in second-line transport.

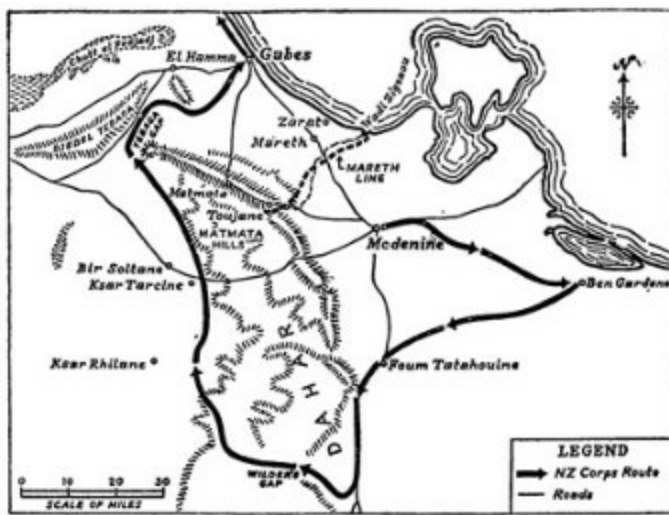
Fifth Brigade travelled back on 12 March to **Ben Gardane**, where it changed direction south-west for the staging area about ten miles distant and on arrival halted for tea. It was only a three-hour halt, a leg-stretcher for the all-night drive which followed. The Maoris did not know where they were going but they did know, by the time they had reached the native village of **Foum Tatahouine**, that it was a dusty, bumpy ride. However, they were really lucky for bulldozers had trimmed up the worst sections of the route and 6 Brigade had already passed over it. By daylight the battalion was dispersed about 55 miles south-west of **Medenine** on the western side of the **Matmata** hills, and it stayed there for nearly a week while the other units of the **New Zealand Corps** got into position. When the assembly was completed there were fourteen and a half thousand Kiwis, five and a half thousand other troops, and goodness knows how many thousand trucks scattered across country that was not supposed to be negotiable for a significant military force.

History that had been forgotten before the Grand Migration carried the forerunners of the **Maori Battalion** from Hawaiki to Aotearoa is not included in the modern infantry training manuals, so the troops were not aware that their camp was near what was once the bottom of a lake. The salt pans in the area are supposed to be the deepest parts of the legendary Lake Tritonis which stretched almost to **Gabes** on the coast. One version of the legend of the Golden Fleece states that the Argo was cast into Lake Tritonis and that later the Argonauts managed to reach the sea by a river that came out near **Gabes**.

Every precaution was taken to avoid discovery by reconnoitring aircraft; movement by day was forbidden unless absolutely imperative; no vehicle could move without special authority and then, so that no dust would be raised, its speed was not to be greater than ten miles an hour; no fires or lights after dark; all digging to be covered with brushwood; no bedding or clothing to be displayed; camouflage nets to be used to the maximum.

It was not possible to do much training under these restrictions but route marches in the early night and weapon cleaning during the day helped to pass the time. Clearly something was afoot for the force would not be parked in the middle of nowhere just for the fun of it. The first sign that the possibility of an outflanking movement had not been entirely overlooked by the enemy even if it was considered rather unlikely was the appearance of a reconnaissance plane on the 16th. It was flying fairly high and may not have seen anything; in any case, identification was unlikely and the wireless was making special mention of the fact that the New Zealanders, specialists in moving across nasty country, were still in front of the **Mareth** line.

There was a muster parade on the 18th at which **Brigadier Kippenberger** told the troops with a big map (the officers had already been informed) what was brewing— **NZ Corps** intended driving a wedge into the **Mareth** line through the **Tebaga Gap**, a six-mile-wide passage through the hills on the western end of the **Mareth** line extension. On the same day another reconnaissance plane came over and this time made a thorough inspection. It was assumed that the enemy was awake to what was going on and all badges, titles, and fernleaf signs on vehicles were replaced.



LEFT HOOK AT MARETH
Left hook at **Mareth**

More information was given at a brigade conference the following day—defensive works were being thrown up by the enemy in and around the Gap, but whether as a precautionary measure or in anticipation of an attack was not clear. It would probably mean an infantry show to get the armour through and the move forward would begin that night. Everybody was thoroughly in accord with the proposals; the Maoris were sick of lying around the trucks; there had been sandstorms and rainstorms, and the motto ‘ **Tunis** or the bush’ was on every tongue.

The next move, with 6 Brigade leading, was a tough one; it took seven hours in bright moonlight to do the 30 miles to the Wadi el Midjend. Another 40 miles the next day (20th) brought the leading elements of the Corps within sight of the country around the Gap.

The Luftwaffe was now taking a very keen interest but the Desert Air Force was more than able to cope. The troops had by this time almost forgotten that there was a **Luftwaffe** (shades of **Greece** and **Crete!**) so efficient was the protection of the air arm—the sight of one Spitfire in the sky induced such confidence that the Maoris, instead of keeping watch, generally went to sleep.

The brigade shuffled around but did not move far until the 25th. Meanwhile the armoured cars chased the enemy behind an extensive minefield, **30 Corps** launched a frontal attack on the **Mareth** line but

failed to hold the initial penetration, and 6 Brigade, after passing through the minefield, captured an important hill, Point 201, guarding the Gap. German reinforcements had been rushed up to stiffen the Italian defence but had arrived too late to save Point 201. The Free French had widened the threat by pushing through the hills as far as the last range and were looking down on the coastal plains.

Prospects of forcing the **Mareth** line proper were poor and General Montgomery decided to shift the weight of the attack to the **New Zealand Corps'** area. To that end 1 Armoured Division was started on a three days' forced march so that it would be ready to break through when a path had been cleared through the rapidly strengthening defences denying the **Tebaga Gap**.

Fifth Brigade received its orders on the 25th. **Brigadier Kippenberger** summed the position up thus: Rommel, anticipating that the thrust at **Mareth** would not be renewed, had brought *21 Panzer* and *164 Light Divisions* into the Tebaga area and there were signs that *15 Panzer Division* was also coming in. **New Zealand Corps** would clear the Gap and 1 Armoured Division, coming up at the double, would exploit through and seize **El Hamma** behind the **Mareth** line.

The plan was based on the assumption that the enemy would be unaware of sundry dispositions to be made that night. The first step, entrusted to 21 Battalion, was the taking of Hill 184 on the right of the projected start line, thereby securing the right flank of the advance and denying the enemy a view of the deployment. The complete success of 21 Battalion's mission was an essential preliminary to the main effort.

The brigade was rolling by half past five that afternoon. The 28th and 23rd Battalions were to relieve 6 Brigade units, then hide up as at **Alamein** while 21 Battalion was making its preparations. At 10 p.m. the Maoris were at 26 Battalion headquarters, where guides led B and C Companies to the relief of their opposite numbers and the rest of the unit dug in where they stood.

At one in the morning the artillery concentration prior to the 21 Battalion assault opened and it was no light one. The Maoris listened to the bang-bang-bang of field guns, the swoosh-swoosh-swoosh of shells overhead, the crrump-crrump-crrump of bursting high explosive, the rhythmic rat-tat-tat, tat-tat, tat-tat-tat of machine guns, muffled yells in the distance, then silence. The **21st Battalion** was digging in on Point 184.

Before dawn the tapes had been laid on the start line and the troops had made the most of the last hot meal that could, with any degree of certainty, be expected for some time. Further back unit fighting vehicles and support weapons had vanished into wadis or under camouflage nets while 8 Armoured Brigade, which was to lead the infantry in the attack, had hidden itself behind Point 201.

The second phase was to open with an attack on a three-battalion front, 28 Battalion right, 23 Battalion centre, and 24 Battalion left, so that 1 Armoured Division, timed to arrive as the assault went in, would be able to pass through and capture **El Hamma**. The units not taking part in the main attack were to clear the enemy off the hills on either side of the Gap, and when that was completed **NZ Corps** would rejoin 1 Armoured Division.

The starting time was unusual—late afternoon. There might be an element of surprise involved for the Kiwis were notorious night hawks, besides which the enemy would, for once, be under the disadvantage of fighting with the sun in his eyes. Finally, and most important, the fullest use could be made of our superiority in the air.

About two hundred guns would fire a creeping barrage as well as timed concentrations on known enemy positions and batteries; regiments of tanks from 8 Armoured Brigade—in the case of 28 Battalion, the Notts Yeomanry—would precede the infantry; the Desert Air Force would supply for two hours continuous cover as well as a squadron of ‘tank-busters’. ²

The right of the Maori start line was a mile west of 21 Battalion of Hill 184. C Company was already in position as moppers-up some 300 yards behind the forward troops and did not have to move. A and D Companies had a mile to march and were under cover before daylight, but B Company, farther away, had to dig temporary pits half a mile short of its correct lying-up area.



Maori Battalion attack on point 209

The battalion formation was two companies up, A (Major Porter) right and B (Captain Sorensen) left, with C (**Captain Awatere**) spread across the front and 300 yards in rear. D Company (Captain Matehaere) was in reserve on the right open flank, with battalion Headquarters immediately behind accompanied by a truck equipped with a No. 11 set linking with Brigade Headquarters.

The penetration was to be approximately three miles in depth and was to be done in two bounds. The first pause line, half-way to the final objective, was the edge of undulating country where a hill, Point 209, somewhat higher than the one 21 Battalion occupied, dominated the area. **Colonel Bennett** was instructed that the capture of Point 209 was essential and detailed the job to C Company, which was to swing right at the first objective and occupy the feature. D Company would assume the support role later and secure the open flank by exploiting forward and to the right of the battalion objective.

As a final precaution two sections of carriers, commanded respectively by Sergeants Walkers ³ and Walters, ⁴ were given a roving commission to patrol the open flank and shoot up anything they could find.

At precisely half past three in the afternoon of Friday, 26 March, the orange-coloured flares denoting the most forward line of infantry were set alight and the first wave of fighter-bombers—British, American, and South African—was overhead with bombs for infantry positions and gun emplacements. Wave after wave of these low-flying, light aircraft came up from the south and set the earth rocking with explosions; behind them came the squadron of tank-busters with attendant fighters weaving and zooming in search of targets; above this intricate mass of flying destruction was an umbrella of Spitfires. And behind the hidden infantry more tanks were emerging from their hiding places.

For thirty minutes the gunners fidgeted around their pieces; battery officers checked zero lines and inter-gun phones; gun numbers checked sights and recuperators and the moving parts of their weapons or the air pressures of tyres. It had all been seen to, checked and double-checked; but the infantry up front depended on the artillery—and at the dot of four o'clock over two hundred guns of all calibres opened fire.

General Freyberg wrote:

At three o'clock ... as I drove up the valley in my tank all was quiet except for occasional shellfire. There was no unusual movement or sign of coming attack. Exactly half an hour later, the first squadrons of the **RAF roared overhead and relays of Spitfires, Kitty-bombers, and tank-busters swept over the enemy positions giving the greatest measure of air support ever seen by our army. At four o'clock 200 field and medium guns opened their bombardment on a front of 5000 yards. In an instant the attack developed and 150 tanks and three battalions of infantry appeared as from nowhere, advancing in the natural smokescreen provided by the duststrom. It was a most awe-inspiring spectacle of**

modern warfare. The roar of bombers and fighters ahead of our advance merged with our barrage of bursting shells. Following close behind this intense barrage as it advanced came waves of Sherman tanks, carriers, and infantry and sappers on foot, preceded by three squadrons of Crusader tanks. Behind the **New Zealand Corps**, coming down the forward slopes just in rear of our front line, were 150 tanks of the 1st Armoured Division, followed by their Motor Brigade in lorries, advancing in nine columns.

The infantry was to cross the start line at 4.15 p.m. with the Maoris following the tanks, but B Company, short of its correct position, moved forward twenty minutes earlier to get into alignment. The battalion waited for the armour to go through: first the heavy Shermans, then the lighter Crusaders, and finally the unit carriers under **Captain Hayward**, augmented by two sections from 21 Battalion. The assaulting companies went in behind the last wave of vehicles and the enemy brought every undamaged gun into action. It was the first time in North Africa that he had been confronted by tanks leading a largescale attack and he made every effort to see that the innovation did not succeed.

The tanks mistook the enemy artillery fire for our own barrage and paused for it to lift, thus halting the whole battalion. Then over-zealous planes mistook the side the Maoris were on, and it was with difficulty that the victims were restrained from answering in kind for there were casualties before the men again got moving.

Once away and through the defensive fire there was no pause and no opposition except the 'overs' meant for the armour. The shells continued to scream outwards, and high in the air there were dogfights from which the losers hurtled smoking to earth. Past the first mile and signs were not wanting that the enemy had left in extreme haste—strewn about were papers, typewriters, office equipment, trucks in going order, and a regimental aid post, but no sign of a body, dead or alive. There must have been some very fast movement.

The tanks were now approaching the rising ground at the base of

Point 209 and, because they could not climb the high ground to the east of it, they swung to the left and everything followed them. The result was a bunching of armour and men. Concealed anti-tank guns came into action, the pace slowed down, then stopped, and the barrage moved away. Some tanks, trying to close on the guns, had their turrets blown off by the weight of fire directed against them.

Colonel Bennett was told by the tank commander that it was impossible for the armour to move until the enemy gunners had been dislodged. There were more than gunners to be dislodged for the Colonel could see a row of steel-helmeted heads on Point 209 belonging to men of *II Battalion, 433 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 164 Light Division*, who had been rushed up just too late to reinforce Point 201 which 6 Brigade had wrested from the Italians during the initial attack.

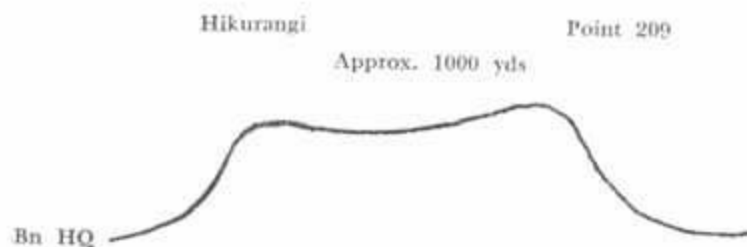
From where the CO was standing Point 209 was not the same shape as it appeared to be from the start line. In actual fact it was not Point 209 at all but an under-feature connected by a half-mile-long saddle, and from that position hiding 209 from view. The under-feature was later called Hikurangi by the battalion as a compliment to the Ngatiporou Company who performed valorous deeds on its rocky sides. It will be called Hikurangi in this history to distinguish it from Point 209 proper.

Elsewhere the line of battle had rolled on, leaving the enemy in possession of the feature 28 Battalion had been told must be taken and held for the security of the divisional flank. **Colonel Bennett** set about taking it. **Captain Awatere** was told to organise C Company for an assault on Hikurangi while the rest of the battalion assisted with fire. **Awatere** summed the job up and instructed 13 Platoon (Lieutenant Jackson) to work around to the rear of the hill from the right, 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Haig) to attack towards the crest in the centre, and 14 Platoon (**Lieutenant Ngarimu**) to take the left flank.

The company was in position about five o'clock and **Captain Awatere**, well forward and with his back to the enemy most of the time, directed the manoeuvre by whistle blasts and arm signals.

Moving by section rushes **Lieutenant Ngarimu** got 14 Platoon to the base of Hikurangi without serious loss. The hill was steep, the ground rocky, and the enemy was dug in above them, but **Ngarimu** went straight up. He annihilated two strongposts single-handed and near the top found himself with one section led by Corporal Wiwi Teneti. ⁵ The Germans evacuated that part of the crest and Teneti, finding that the other two sections were held up by two machine-gun posts above them, took a Bren gun and, firing from the shoulder in full view of the enemy, kept their heads down long enough for his men to rush the posts. The rest of the platoon were then able to join their commander and establish themselves near the crest of Hikurangi. No. 15 Platoon in the centre was pinned near the base of Hikurangi by machine-gun fire from Point 209 and had to remain there until dark.

Hikurangi was nearly as high as Point 209—like this:



Hikurangi and Point 209

No. 13 Platoon, possibly aided by the diversion caused by **Ngarimu's** men, managed to work around and join them. By this time it was nearly 6 p.m. The two subalterns made their arrangements to push on to the top of Point 209 but soon discovered that it was not going to be easy to stay where they were. The enemy was only a few yards away on the far side of the crest, which was swept continuously by machine guns on Point 209, and the Germans were as determined to push the Maoris off the crest as the Maoris were determined to stay there. The enemy made several dashes over the top with bayonets but the Maori bayonets were waiting; their automatics were also waiting and the German losses were

heavy. The casualties were not all on the one side, however, for by last light **Captain Awatere** had been wounded once, **Lieutenant Ngarimu** twice, and Corporal Teneti was the only survivor in his section. He had then joined the remainder of the platoon and fought on until he himself was seriously wounded. He was awarded the DCM.

But to resume. When the enemy found that the Maoris were not to be moved by direct action they called on their mortars to help. The Maoris, lying unprotected on the rocky hillside, suffered severely, but when the Germans launched another bayonet attack the survivors arose out of the dust and smoke, and, with more enemy lying on top of those already killed, C Company remained in possession.

There were no more efforts to dislodge the East Coasters before nightfall permitted a redistribution of the garrison, and 15 Platoon less the Bren-gunners was brought forward on to the southern slope of Hikurangi; the Bren-gun section was placed where it could support the garrison with crossfire.

Colonel Bennett visited the men on Hikurangi and advised both **Awatere** and **Ngarimu** to go down to the RAP to get their wounds dressed. **Awatere** refused point-blank to do anything of the sort and **Ngarimu** begged to be allowed to stay with his tribesmen. 'I'm all right, Sir, Let me stay a little longer with my men,' was his plea, and the CO relented.

Bennett was not aware that the rest of the brigade had taken its objective and reiterated that Hikurangi must be held at any cost. 'Have no fear, Sir. This hill will never be lost,' was the assurance of **Captain Awatere**, who supervised the defence until the leg that had taken the wound was so swollen that he could get around only by crawling. He then consented to be evacuated and Lieutenant Jackson took command of C Company.

Meanwhile **Bennett** organised the battalion against the possibility of a counter-attack. Battalion Headquarters was moved to the foot of Hikurangi, the wounded evacuated, and a hot meal brought up by

Captain Pene was distributed even to those on top of Hikurangi. It was about 9 p.m. by the time the support arms were deployed in the area and the mortar platoon, which had been with 21 Battalion during the day, had reported back. Finally, after the ammunition had been replenished and the unit signal network completed, the question of making contact with 21 and 23 Battalions was considered.

Brigade Headquarters, out of communication with Colonel Bennett, instructed 21 Battalion to send out a patrol to find the battalion and to deliver a message that 28 Battalion was to locate 23 Battalion and, as soon as a line was laid to Brigade, the CO was to report to the Brigadier. Before the patrol from 21 Battalion arrived, however, Captain Sorensen had already sent out several parties to try to tie in with 23 Battalion and wireless contact had been made with Brigade Headquarters. The situation of the battalion was discussed but it was not made clear that the main objective, Point 209, was still in enemy hands, and it was not until next morning that artillery was directed to harass the reverse slope of the feature. Colonel Bennett was very worried about the gap between the Maoris and 21 Battalion, which was still holding its hill, and A Company 21 Battalion (Captain Bullock-Douglas) ⁶ was sent forward with a platoon of machine-gunners to link up with the Maori right flank and so partially close the gap.

Until this had been arranged the safety of the open right of the Maoris had been in the hands of the two carrier sections previously mentioned. They had ranged far and wide shooting at any sign of movement. Both leaders were awarded MMs for their dash and determined leadership.

It was about three in the morning before A Company 21 Battalion was firmly in position and all this while the fight for Hikurangi, which had started again, continued almost without pause. The two lines were only twenty yards apart on opposite sides of the crest and the Maoris could plainly hear the German voices and commands. The scraping of hobnailed boots on the rocky surface was the warning that the Germans were massing, and when Ngarimu thought the time was opportune he

ordered his men to throw their grenades.

The screams of the wounded and the sounds of men scattering were answered by the Maoris with the taunting call of 'E koe'. ⁷On one occasion the Germans penetrated the Maori line, but **Lieutenant Ngarimu** threw them out single-handed by shooting some with his tommy gun and scaring the others by throwing stones as if they were grenades. Again the Germans broke in and again **Ngarimu** rushed to the danger spot, rallied his men, and led them back again. So the night wore on, the Germans determined to win back the crest but not succeeding. Grenades gave out and **Ngarimu** told his men to use stones instead—they looked like grenades and served the purpose.

Casualties mounted, but the lodgment under the lip of the hill was still held at daybreak. Lieutenant Jackson reported to Battalion Headquarters with a request for reinforcements as there were only about a dozen men left in 13 and 14 Platoons. It was then that another counter-attack was mounted by the enemy and the whole episode was watched from Battalion Headquarters. Ngarimu was seen to wave his men on forward, then advance himself, firing as he went. He was killed on the crest of the hill and the Germans came on. It was an anxious moment and could have meant the loss of Hikurangi. **Captain Hayward** was ordered to cover the spot with converging fire from his carriers, but the Germans were apparently in no shape to exploit success for soon afterwards they withdrew from Hikurangi right back to Point 209. Captain Matehaere was ordered to relieve C Company and take over the defence of Hikurangi.

Brigadier Kippenberger had arrived at Hikurangi by this time and he saw that the Maoris were not, as they thought, attacking Point 209. He arranged for a series of divisional artillery concentrations on the hidden objective, impressed on **Colonel Bennett** not to miss any chance of aggressive action, and then carried on to 23 Battalion where Colonel Romans was instructed to push some of his men forward into a position where fire could be brought down on the rear of the enemy-held area.

In order to enable D and C Companies to change places the battalion mortars put down a smoke screen and by 9 a.m. the relief was completed. Moderate enemy harassing fire went on for another hour and was being replied to by far from moderate artillery 'stonks' when a dramatic change came over the battle scene—two German soldiers appeared on the top of Hikurangi with their hands high in the air. A carrier opened fire before the significance of the enemy action was realised and both men fell. One was killed and the other shammed dead. Everybody waited expectantly. Those two were out of luck but perhaps there were others prepared to take a chance. It was not very long before four Germans and a big **Red Cross** flag appeared. The 'cease fire' was ordered and the party, an officer and three other ranks, all wearing **Red Cross** armbands, was led down to Battalion Headquarters where the CO was waiting to receive them. The German officer in fluent English explained that he was a doctor and the men his stretcher-bearers. He had ninety badly wounded men on the other side of the hill but had run out of bandages and medical supplies. Could we help them? **Colonel Bennett** rang through to Brigade and **Brigadier Kippenberger** gave permission for all possible assistance to be rendered. Yes, we would be only too pleased to help.

Captain D'Arcy⁸ came over from his RAP and the two doctors discussed the position. It was arranged that rather than send medical supplies to the German RAP, which was in poor shape, the wounded were to be brought over to our lines, where they would receive proper attention before being evacuated to hospital. The doctor mentioned that they had also run out of food. A meal was produced immediately as well as a plentiful supply of cigarettes, both of which were gratefully acknowledged. Did the Maoris have any spare stretchers? Why, certainly, as many as were available. The German doctor was sorry but he did not have enough stretcher-bearers to manage all the wounded. **Colonel Bennett** was also very sorry but he could not see his way clear to risk the possibility of their being retained by the opposing commander. The doctor would understand? The doctor understood perfectly and thanked the Colonel for his courtesy. As the Germans were about to

withdraw Bennett dropped the suggestion that if any of the German soldiers felt like calling it a day they would be guaranteed safe conduct. The doctor promised to pass the message to those concerned.

About midday a long procession with the German doctor at the head wound its way around the base of Hikurangi; some were walking, some were being helped, and others were being carried on stretchers. The Maori rifles were ready but silent, and the procession's only trouble was from odd shells from both sides casually searching the area.

The column reached Battalion Headquarters safely, and the first thing the doctor did was to point to a group of about twenty in the rear. 'They are not wounded,' he said, 'they are surrendering.'

They were soon under guard; then, with the two doctors working side by side and the Maori stretcher-bearers showing their German opposite numbers the way to the ambulances that had by this time arrived, the wounded were cared for. The combatant Germans had clearly had all the fight knocked out of them. Quite voluntarily they said that others were ready to surrender but were afraid of being shot if they came over. They added that the garrison of Point 209 was short of ammunition and supplies and was generally in a bad way. **Colonel Bennett** decided to attack immediately. Colonel Romans was asked if 23 Battalion could assist and was told that a mortar concentration on the reverse slope would be helpful. Captain Matehaere was ordered to prepare D Company for the assault at 3 p.m. under cover of a concentration that Bennett arranged privately with a British field regiment.

The concentration came down on the dot of three o'clock but not on Point 209. Somebody had got the ranges and directions mixed and B Company shared with 23 Battalion what was meant for the Germans on Point 209. The artillery assistance was called off and D Company went unsupported for its objective. The company was held up at the foot of the hill and Matehaere wirelessed for carrier support to deal with the fire coming down on it from the top of Point 209. Sergeants Walters and Harding ⁹ brought their carriers, each mounting a heavy machine gun,

up a wadi between Hikurangi and Point 209, where they drew down on themselves the concentrated fire of the enemy. One wheeled round and advanced on the north while the other carried on towards the south of the objective hill; Matehaere, thus with carrier support on each flank, sent his men climbing Point 209.

By this time D Company had an enthusiastic audience, for most of the battalion had scrambled on to the top of Hikurangi for a ringside view of the proceedings. The enemy, if not too preoccupied with dodging the carriers' hose of machine-gun bullets, must have been at least mildly astonished to see a crowd of cheering, tin-hat-waving troops urging their side on to victory.

The determined advance of D Company was bad enough, but when the opposite hill broke into the rhythm of the stirring haka 'Ka mate, ka mate' it was too much and too unorthodox for the Teutonic temperament. One white flag after another began to wave on Point 209, each surrender being followed from Hikurangi by the cheers that would have greeted the winning try in a Ranfurly Shield match.

The Germans had fought bravely and had taken terrible punishment from the artillery, from 23 Battalion, and from the Maoris. There were only 231 prisoners ¹⁰ from the battalion that had occupied Point 209 with the intention of preventing the forcing of the **Tebaga Gap**; only one gun was serviceable out of the thirteen mortars and anti-tank guns emplaced there, and there was practically no ammunition left for the survivor; the machine guns were down to their last belt and the automatics to the last clip. It was discovered later that the sight of the two carriers, which were mistaken for tanks, had caused the final collapse.

Maori casualties were not light, 98 in all, 22 of them killed, the rest wounded and nearly all from C Company; but, apart from the damage done by the long-range weapons, the enemy dead were lying one on top of another, with the nearest but a few yards from the Maori line.

Besides the decorations awarded to the rank and file **Colonel Bennett** received the DSO, **Captain Awatere** an MC, and **Lieutenant Ngarimu** a posthumous VC, the first Maori to be so honoured. The citation upon which the Victoria Cross was awarded to **Second-Lieutenant Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa Ngarimu** read:

During the action at the **TEBAGA GAP** on 26 March 1943, **2/Lieut Ngarimu** commanded a platoon in an attack upon the vital hill feature, **Point 209**. He was given the task of attacking and capturing an underfeature forward of **Point 209** itself and held in considerable strength by the enemy. He led his men with great dash and determination straight up the face of the hill undeterred by the intense mortar and MG fire which was causing considerable casualties. Displaying courage and leadership of the highest order he was himself first on the hill crest, personally annihilating in the process at least two enemy MG posts. In the face of such a determined attack the remainder of the enemy fled, but further advance was impossible as the reverse slope was swept by MG fire from **Point 209** itself.

Under cover of a most intense mortar barrage the enemy counter-attacked in an attempt to regain their dug-in positions. **2/Lieut Ngarimu** ordered his men to stand up and engage the enemy man for man. This they did with such good effect that the attackers were literally mown down, **2/Lieut Ngarimu** personally killing several. During this encounter he was twice wounded, once by rifle fire in the shoulder and later by shrapnel in the leg and though urged by both his Coy Comd and Bn Comd to go out he refused to do so saying he should stay a little while with his men. He stayed till he met his death the following morning.

Darkness found this officer and his depleted platoon lying on the rocky face of the forward slope of the hill feature with the enemy in a similar position on the reverse slope about twenty yards distant. Time and again throughout the night the enemy launched fierce attacks in an attempt to dislodge **2/Lieut Ngarimu** and his men, but each counter-attack was beaten off entirely by **2/Lieut Ngarimu's** inspired leadership.

During one of these counter-attacks the enemy, by using hand grenades, succeeded in piercing a certain part of the line. Without hesitation 2/Lieut Ngarimu rushed to the threatened area and those of the enemy he did not kill he drove back with stones and with his tommy gun. During another determined counter-attack by the enemy, part of his line broke. Yelling out orders and encouragement, he went to his dislodged men, rallied them and led them in a fierce onslaught back into their old positions.

All through the night, between attacks, he and his men were heavily harassed by MG and mortar fire, but 2/Lieut Ngarimu watched his line very carefully, cheering his men on and inspiring them by his gallant personal conduct. Morning found him still in possession of the hill feature but only he and two unwounded other ranks remained. Reinforcements were sent up to him.

In the morning the enemy again counter-attacked and it was during this attack that 2/Lieut Ngarimu was killed. He was killed on his feet, defiantly facing the enemy with his tommy gun at his hip; and as he fell he came to rest almost on top of those of the enemy who had fallen to his gun just before he fell to theirs.

The hill feature that 2/Lieut Ngarimu had so gallantly defended was strewn with enemy dead and was a bold witness of the great courage and fortitude with which 2/Lieut Ngarimu had fought and died.

There is ample confirmation in captured enemy documents that the citation is, if anything, an understatement. A report by *II/433 Regiment* of the fighting at Point 209 on 26–27 March reads:

By the night 26/27 Mar. the regrouping of the battalion on Pt. 209 was at the following stage; Bn HQ and 8 Coy on Pt 209, 6 and 7 Coys on the high features in front of 209, 5 Coy in reserve behind 209. [The report goes on to describe the preliminary bombardment, the infantry attack, and the destroying of four tanks, three by anti-tank-gun fire and one by a sticky bomb.]

In the meantime the situation on 7 Coy's front had become serious—enemy infantry had succeeded in occupying a spur running out from 7 Coy's feature. 6 Coy's reserve platoon, under S/Sergt Schmidt was sent up to 7 Coy, both as a counter-attack force and to make up for the heavy casualties the company had suffered in the barrage. In a fluctuating hand to hand struggle (which even developed into a fight with stones after most of the weapons had been knocked out) 3 Pl 6 Coy and Schlinder Pl of 7 Coy took and lost the ridge several times. S/Sgt Schmidt and Sgt Schlinder distinguished themselves by particular initiative.

Early on the morning of 27 Mar 7 Coy received a further reinforcement—a platoon of 5 Coy under Lieut Noack, which was sent up with orders to clear the enemy finally off the ridge forward of 7 Coy. The platoon suffered heavy casualties but did not achieve its object. Only half the troops engaged in the counter-attacks came back. Lieut Behrens, Lieut Noack, S/Sgt Schmidt and Sgt Schlinder—that is to say, all the platoon commanders—were either killed or wounded.

(signed) DRECHSLER, Lieut.

The battle for the **Tebaga Gap** ended for the Maoris with the surrender of Point 209, but even before the capitulation the rest of 5 Brigade was manœuvring to form a gunline and widen the gap. The Maori Battalion was already in the required area, but the effect of the operation was that the unit was the pivot of a brigade gunline facing north-east.

Sixth Brigade was under thirty minutes' notice and 1 Armoured Division had broken through to the vicinity of **El Hamma**, where another delay threatened; it was essential for the enemy to hold **El Hamma** until the **Mareth** garrison escaped; so, rather than mount another frontal assault, **NZ Corps** made for **Gabes** to outflank **El Hamma**.

As far as 28 Battalion was concerned the night was quiet and the troops caught up on sleep lost during the marching and fighting of the

previous three days and two nights. Early in the morning (28 March) **Brigadier Kippenberger** was taken by **Colonel Bennett** on a tour of the Hikurangi battlefield, and he later entertained Major Meisner and his adjutant to breakfast before their departure for the peaceful environs of a prisoner-of-war camp.

Major Fairbrother ¹¹ describes *II/433 Regiment's* last parade:

Breakfast over, these two were marched off to join the Bn and go off to the PW cage, Capt Abbott (IO) ¹² going with them. They paused about half way across and Abbott carried a request 'Could the CO address his Bn before it went away?' **Brig Kippenberger** gave permission. The Adjt went ahead. In a few moments the RSM (or some NCO) shouting orders, formed the Bn up in line 3 deep and called it to attention. It was first class drill and after their ordeal it showed remarkable discipline. The Adjt took over. The CO then took over from the Adjt exactly as we do, and when he did so the whole Bn, some 200 odd, gave a lusty and perfectly timed 'Heil' salute. The CO addressed his unit (a FS Sec. NCO knew enough German to understand) thus—'We are going off now to a cage and are together for the last time. We had an honourable end and were fairly beaten in a real fight. Let us face up to imprisonment as we faced up to our active service'—words to this effect.

He received another 'Heil' on finishing. The guards promptly took over just as the Bn was breaking up into groups and reformed it, and marched it off southwards down the road in the usual dust. The CO and Adjt were bundled into a 15 cwt. and at the rear of the unit they too disappeared in the dust—not without the sympathy of those who watched for they showed good qualities to the very end.

¹ **Lt-Col W. B. Thomas**, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., Silver Star (US); **London**; born **Nelson**, 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO **23 Bn** Jun-Aug 1944, Oct 1944-May 1945; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; returned to unit May 1942; Hampshire Regt, 1947-.

²Hurricanes equipped with 40-mm cannon.

³ **Lt J. I. Walker, MM; Te Kaha; born Te Kaha, 22 Nov 1917; dairy-factory hand.**

⁴ **Sgt W. P. Walters, MM; Te Kopuru; born Aratapu, 25 Nov 1918; wounded Oct 1942.**

⁵ **Cpl W. Teneti, DCM; Waipiro Bay; born Waipiro Bay, 18 May 1918; labourer; wounded 27 Mar 1943; died 16 Aug 1956.**

⁶ **Capt G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas; Hawera; born Wanganui, 4 Jun 1911; bank officer; twice wounded.**

⁷ **Words of satire used when a wrong has been requited.**

⁸ **Maj C. N. D'Arcy, MC, m.i.d.; Morrinsville; born Carterton, 6 Jun 1912; house surgeon, Waikato Hospital; RMO 28 Bn Aug 1942-Apr 1944.**

⁹ **Sgt H. Harding; Auckland; born Russell, 14 Dec 1912; welder.**

¹⁰ **Approximately 60 all ranks evaded capture.**

¹¹ **Brig M. C. Fairbrother, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942-Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr-Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun-Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944-Sep 1945; comd Adv Base 2 NZEF, Sep 1945-Feb 1946; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.**

¹² **Maj R. B. Abbott, MC; Ngaruawahia; born Auckland, 16 Feb 1919; insurance clerk; wounded 6 Jul 1942.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 11 – TAKROUNA

CHAPTER 11

Takrouna

OF all the magnificent achievements of 2 NZ Div. I have always felt that the capture of **Takrouna must surely have been one of the finest. I went up there myself during the battle just after the 51st Highland Division had taken over, and I cannot, to this day, imagine how it was captured in the face of tenacious enemy resistance.'**

Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks, KCB, MC

For the Maoris the move towards **Gabes was a tedious two-day journey while minefields were cleared and rearguards chased away, for the outflanking manoeuvre had succeeded and the enemy was in full retreat from **Mareth**. **El Hamma** was given up without more ado and **Gabes** was the Corps' next objective. Fifth Brigade was ordered to go straight for it, but as the Maoris were at the rear of the column the move on 29 March was for them another day spent in stopping and starting.**

Boredom was, however, replaced by excitement when 5 Brigade's advanced guard reported that it had entered **Gabes on the tail of the retreating enemy, that it was being embarrassed by a civic reception from the French population, and that it was finding it difficult to get on with the job. That was running a war on the right lines and everybody took a new interest; odd scraps of French were resurrected from school days and **Cairo** nights, and '*comment ça va's*' and '*très bien's*' were flung around the trucks with abandon.**

The congestion was terrific and the battalion, seven miles south of **Gabes at 2 p.m., made only four miles in the next five hours. Darkness found it moving almost imperceptibly and a heavy fall of rain did nothing to help. Finally, in the town, demolitions, darkness, and torrential rain so thoroughly disorganised the column that it was daylight before the last trucks reported at the brigade area two miles beyond **Gabes**.**

The Israelites could not have been more pleased with their first glimpse of the Promised Land after their years in the desert than were the Maoris taking their first look at the country around **Gabes**. For almost a month they had marched, fought or hung around, either in the desert proper or along the scorched bottom of Lake Tritonis, and now the Mediterranean Sea sparkled in the sun on one side and, on the other, a palmfringed oasis with fresh water and, wonder of wonders, a warm mineral spring. B Company felt very homesick—others (a very few others!) who could remember back to **Thermopylae** compared the spring with the Greek pools.

The battalion was lying half-way between **Gabes** and the village of **Rhennouch** on the narrow plains between the sea and the hills. The country was cultivated and inhabited by French, Jews and Maltese, all very friendly and all very delighted at the ejection of the German-Italian army and the arrival of British troops. It was, of course, too good to last and soon after breakfast the battalion was on the way again, but only to a position south of **Oudref** village, where the troops did stay a while.

New Zealand Corps' left hook had succeeded in forcing the evacuation of the strong **Mareth** line though no significant number of enemy was trapped there. The next likely position for a delaying action was along the line of the **Wadi Akarit**, about 17 miles north of **Gabes**. The coastal plain was only from 20 to 40 miles wide and the **Wadi Akarit** stretched across it into a maze of hills and salt pans.

The 28th Battalion was told to make itself comfortable while the rest of the Division ¹ concentrated and a plan of battle was drawn up in case the enemy elected to make the **Wadi Akarit** the scene of something more than a rearguard action. The troops were dispersed, tactically sited and dug in, and then proceeded to obey the orders to make themselves comfortable. To the Maoris this could mean only one thing, and the tender young lamb that accompanied the equally tender young poultry to the mess tins indicated a somewhat over-enthusiastic interpretation of the instructions.

The following day was spent in taking it easy until dark, when a muster parade attended a memorial church service in honour of those who fell at Hikurangi.

April the 2nd was notable for two events: General Montgomery addressed all officers and non-commissioned officers of 5 Brigade, dealing first with the **Mareth** operations and then with the future role of **2 NZ Division**. He stated that on Sunday, 4 April, **30 Corps** would smash through the **Wadi Akarit** line, then being held by four Italian divisions, or rather, what was left of them. They were the *Trieste*, *Young Fascists*, *Pistoia* and *Spezia Divisions*. In addition, the German *90 Light Division* and infantry from *21 Panzer Division* were mixed among the Italians to brace the line. Against them we would pit **30 Corps**, with 400 guns and thirty squadrons of aircraft. The role of the Division was to break out through the gap which was to be made and exploit north. The General warned them that the enemy air force was still liable to be a factor. His prediction in this respect was dead right.

The second, and to the troops the more important, event was their first pay since **Tripoli**, and many perplexing hours were spent working out the relative values of francs, piastres, and lire.

The attack on **Wadi Akarit** was postponed for two days during which period Captain Awarau, Second-Lieutenant Keelan, ² and fifty other ranks, mostly 8th Reinforcements, marched in. The men were welcomed by **Colonel Bennett** and sent to their respective tribal companies, while Captain Awarau took command of C Company from Lieutenant Jackson.

April the 5th was spent packing up ready to follow at the rear of 5 Brigade when the hole through the enemy line had been made. **Colonel Bennett** had attended a brigade conference the previous evening and later passed on to his company commanders the story to the effect that the enemy commander was uncertain whether he would be straight-lefted or left-hooked and was continually moving his troops from one position to another. Eighth Army was definitely attacking on the night 5-6 April in the manner already announced; the role of the New Zealand

Division was unaltered and the troops were to be ready to move off soon after breakfast.

The battalion arrangements were for reveille at 6.30 a.m., breakfast 7 a.m., stand by to move off at 9.30 a.m. The move through the bridgehead was to be made initially in nine columns, each following a lettered track through the minefields.

The 496-gun barrage began at a quarter past four in the morning, but even the flash and thunder of the steel curtain was not sufficient to get more than the new men out of their warm blankets before reveille. The battalion was embussed on time and by eleven o'clock was in position behind 23 Battalion ready for the breakthrough. Up forward the battle ebbed and flowed; the enemy left flank broke early; then the right began to show signs of crumbling, but the centre held until the afternoon when 5 Brigade was warned to edge up a few miles. The Maoris in the rear of the column began rolling at 5 p.m., but the going was difficult and hazardous and only four miles had been covered when orders came through to halt for the night. A few minutes later six Ju88 bombers attempted a hit-and-run raid by flying in from the coast at speed. The planes were quick but the anti-aircraft gunners were quicker and shot down three of them, while the remaining three streaked away with Spitfires on their tails. There was another raid during the night but 28 Battalion was not molested.

An attack planned for 6 Brigade to force the issue in the centre was later made unnecessary by the withdrawal of the enemy, and next day once again the battalion dawdled along behind the column. By midday six miles had been covered through minefields and across the **Wadi Akarit, but by 5 p.m. the Maoris were completely through the obstructions and shortly afterwards they laagered for the night.**

Lieutenant Mariu, Brigade LO, arrived with new instructions: there were several enemy Tiger tanks in the neighbourhood and a gunline was to be formed by 5 Brigade Group, with 28 Battalion facing south—this order was carried out but the night was uneventful.

The order of march was altered the next day (8 April) and 28 Battalion led the brigade column in an advance that was mostly halts while the armoured screen dealt with rearguard opposition. **Captain D'Arcy** (Battalion MO) surprised **Colonel Bennett** by handing over what he hoped, from the ornaments on his person, might be an Italian general or even a fieldmarshal, plus two other less ornate enemy officers. They had been given to him by someone who was too busy to be bothered with them, and although the MO had not acquired a fieldmarshal his trophy proved to be General Mannerini, who commanded the Italian Saharan Group, and a brace of his staff.

Early in the afternoon the CO was instructed to report to 8 Armoured Brigade. Brigadier Harvey said he was pushing north for 16 miles during the night and the **Maori Battalion** was to accompany him and be prepared for any infantry tasks that might crop up. They reached the objective area without opposition, and while the tanks laagered for what was left of the night the Maoris mounted guard.

Soon after first light the tanks fanned out and occupied high ground just ahead of the laager and the troops were called forward in support. Quite an interesting sight awaited them— down on the flat about a mile ahead was a road along which was passing a stream of enemy transport and tanks. In addition to this moving spectacle was a nice view of a tank duel. **Colonel Bennett** was then told that owing to the speed of the general advance his further attendance was unnecessary and he was to report back to 5 Brigade.

He was to take position behind brigade tactical headquarters as it passed Point 264, where the unit was concentrated. This was easier said than done for a constant stream of vehicles was passing, but the battalion managed to slip in only to find that it was well in advance of the brigade and was, in fact, mixed up with the forward armour engaged in a running fight with the enemy. The Colonel pulled the battalion out of the traffic and awaited instructions which, when they came, were to bed down until the morning.

Fifth Brigade settled down nearby and the following day's tasks were set out. The intention was that **2 NZ Division** was to cut the main coast road about 17 miles north of **Sfax**. Eighth Armoured Brigade would lead, followed by a gun group, then 5 Brigade followed by the rest of the Division. This would swing the axis of advance to the right with the object of trying to cut off *90 Light* and *15 Panzer Divisions*, still in the vicinity of **Sfax**, by occupying **La Hencha**, about 30 miles north-east of **Triaga**, the present location of the brigade. In effect it was another left hook, which the enemy was quick to avoid by retiring smartly towards **Enfidaville**.

Good progress was made, mostly along first-class roads; by midday both **Sfax** and **La Hencha** were reported clear, but the orders remained unchanged and when the column halted for the night 28 Battalion was six miles south of **La Hencha**.

Colonel Bennett wrote of the countryside:

We had now entered that belt of fertile plains which extends in varying degrees from the **Djebiniana** to as far north as **Enfidaville**. Olive groves acutely reminiscent of **Greece** and **Crete** extended in orderly pattern for miles, interspersed at various points along the countryside with picturesque white-washed homesteads typical of this part of the African coastline. With a background of changing landscape, travelling for once became a scenic adventure; the roads were good and water was readily available from the many wells dotted along the roadside. We had indeed bidden farewell to the sands and the barren wastes of the African desert.

In the morning the troops were told that they were not likely to move for twenty-four hours; in the afternoon they were moving towards the seaport town of **Sousse**. The enemy rearguard had waited only long enough to make an excellent job of mining, demolishing, and otherwise spoiling the road, but the main thing that impressed the Maoris was that a promised easy day had vanished. By nightfall they had ploughed across country through 25 miles of the scenery described by the Colonel.

Sousse was evacuated that night and the chase was resumed after breakfast on the 12th. It was slow going because the terrain now altered to sharp wadis and watercourses until finally the only reasonably direct route was the mine-infested El Djem- **Sousse** road. The sappers were going flat out detecting mines and filling road craters, but it took seven hours to cover 20 miles, at which point the battalion was directed along a secondary and unmined road with the mission of occupying **Sidi Bou Ali** village about four miles beyond **Sousse**. **General Freyberg** had a keen desire to get to **Enfidaville** as soon as possible.

Colonel Bennett was instructed that although **Sidi Bou Ali** was reported clear he was to treat it as hostile, to consolidate on the far side, and to push out patrols for another four miles. No. 3 Platoon, 7 Field Company, would repair any demolitions but all transport was to be off the road by first light. The rest of the brigade would concentrate just clear of **Sousse**, with 21 Battalion ready to support the armoured screen.

The CO's orders to his company commanders were that A Company was to occupy the village, then patrol forward the required distance and return by first light; B Company was to help the sappers repair the road and cover the return of A Company; C and D Companies were to follow B in transport and dig in on either side of the road a mile beyond **Sidi Bou Ali**.

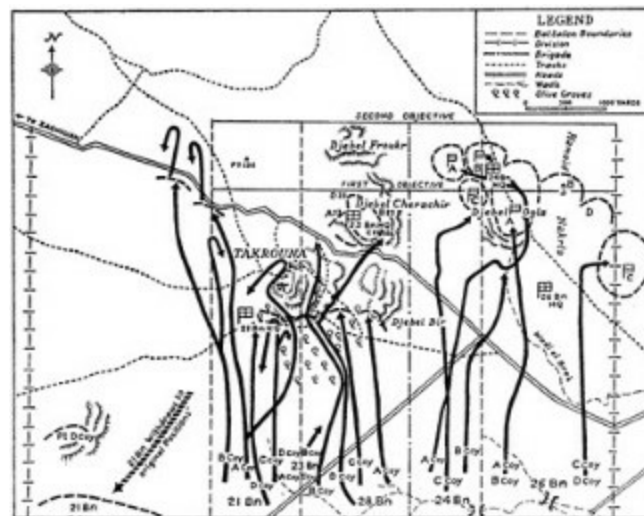
The battalion halted one mile east of the village at 11 p.m. while **Lieutenant Monty Wikiriwhi**, who had volunteered for the job, made a reconnaissance in a carrier. The place was empty and A Company advanced on foot, followed by B Company and the engineers in trucks. A Company had almost completed its patrol when it was fired on, and in the ensuing skirmish it captured a gun mounted on a truck after killing two of the crew and capturing two others at a cost of three casualties, one fatal.

The rest of the operation went according to plan—the support companies dug in and the engineers reported no mines and only one demolition which could be easily bypassed. Cavalry patrols went through

at daylight and the battalion was warned of an early move. This was to be in the nature of a left hook aimed at **Djebel Garci**, west of **Takrouna** hill, in support of a thrust by 8 Armoured Brigade on to the high ground around **Enfidaville**, an important road junction where all roads over the plain met to cross the mountains into northern **Tunisia**.

The brigade column, led by 23 Battalion, travelled partly by road and partly overland towards **Djebel Garci**; but, on a closer view, that high country was considered to be at least a divisional objective so **Brigadier Kippenberger** decided to swing his attack towards the **Takrouna** feature.

It was hoped that the enemy might be caught off balance by the rapidity of the advance and so easily hustled off **Takrouna**, but by the time 23 Battalion had reached Wadi el Boul, about three miles from **Takrouna**, there were enough enemy guns firing to suggest caution and 23 Battalion was ordered to halt on the line of the wadi.



THE CAPTURE OF TAKROUNA
The capture of **Takrouna**

Colonel Bennett was instructed to extend 23 Battalion's line by placing two companies on each flank and to send strong fighting patrols as far as the Pont du Fahs- **Enfidaville** road. While the Maoris are wading through the knee-deep water in the wadi, it is a convenient time to outline the position of **2 NZ Division** in particular and the North African scene in general.

Fifth Brigade was deployed in front of **Takrouna- Enfidaville**, while 6 Brigade was advancing up the coast road. The end of the long desert trek was near. In front of the New Zealanders was a country of high hills with roads winding through defiles, the enemy holding the passes and the high ground and the Eighth Army on the plains below— **Greece** in reverse. The German-Italian armies were contained behind a 110-mile line extending from **Enfidaville** to Cape Serrat, with the sea behind them and British, French, and American bayonets forcing them back step by step. And the Navy and Royal Air Force were there to see that there was no **Dunkirk**.

Now that the Anglo-American army had joined hands with the Eighth Army, the Allied dispositions along the front were as follows: from the coast at **Enfidaville** to a point 25 miles inland, Eighth Army; westwards for 25 miles, the French **10 Corps**; west and north for 30 miles, the British First Army; the remaining sector of 30 miles was held by **2 United States Corps**, with French formations on the coast. *Africa Army Group*, commanded by General von Arnim, held the two important ports of **Tunis** and **Bizerta** and was making a determined effort to deny the Allies the **Mediterranean** passage.

For the Maoris the next few days were quiet while attempts were made to ease the enemy out of his position without mounting a full-scale attack. Sixth Brigade was moved up to face **Enfidaville** and 8 Armoured Brigade made an effort to outflank the town. Fifth Brigade shaped up to **Takrouna** by putting 21 Battalion across Wadi el Boul and generally straightening the line. Reconnaissances by night strengthened the impression that the enemy intended to stay where he was—Maori and other patrols reported parties laying mines in olive groves and numerous enemy parties dug in or digging defensive positions around **Takrouna**.

Planning for the capture of **Tunis**, tentatively set for 22 April, gave Eighth Army the mission of drawing enemy forces away from the real thrust line on the **First Army** front by exerting maximum pressure in the

south. Tenth Corps began to deploy for the battle.

The **201st Guards Brigade** took over part of 6 Brigade area and 28 Battalion moved back six miles to make room. The Maoris were fully in accord with this move because, for the first time in weeks, they were able to erect their bivvies. Fourth Indian Division moved into position on the left of the New Zealand Division, with 7 Armoured Division on its left. The Maoris slept in until seven o'clock and passed a nice quiet day on the 17th. At last light a flight of wild ducks passed over the battalion area; the troops leapt to life and put up a most impressive anti-duck barrage but there were no casualties. A cartoon in a subsequent *NZEF Times* depicted an inferno of bursting shells, machine-gun bullets, rifle fire and tracer bursting around the ducks and one saying, 'I told you not to fly over the **Maori Battalion** area.'

Colonel Bennett had been informed that his unit would be attacking in the forthcoming battle and, with his company commanders, spent most of the day on a vantage point in 23 Battalion's area studying **Takrouna**. This is what he wrote about it later:

The key point of the enemy's **Enfidaville** defence line was the Rock of **Takrouna**, a pinnacle not unlike the Athenian Acropolis, rising to a height of over 600 feet and standing like a grim forbidding sentinel, nearly four miles to the west of the village of **Enfidaville**. On the very summit of the pinnacle, and commanding an uninterrupted view to the south were the remains of an old fort, a formidable stone structure of Berberan origin, used in former days to oppose French rule and administration. Resting as it did on a massive foundation of solid rock twenty feet deep, this fortress surveyed the plains below with an air of almost impregnable seclusion.

Nestling half way down the northern slopes of the feature was the picturesque native village of **Takrouna**, uninhabited at the time of its investment but normally supporting a population of some 500 people. The southern slopes of the rock were precipitous and formidable but at its northern end it sloped away more gently and the narrow track that

led from the village down to the **Enfidaville- Zaghouan** road below made that end the least resistant line of approach.

The intervening country between our position and the rock, though fairly flat and undulating, was a natural death trap.

Around the base of **Takrouna**, especially between it and the prominent saddle situated about 1,200 yards to the east—the **Djebel Bir**—were numerous olive patches interspersed with impenetrable walls of cactus so thick as to deny passage to a man's hands.

As an indication of the seriousness of these obstacles it may be stated here that on the night of the attack not only was each assaulting battalion allotted three Crusader tanks for the purpose of smashing a way through these cactus hedges but all available machetes were also issued to the men as part of their battle equipment for the assault. It later transpired too that nearly all these cactus hedges had been heavily mined. The wheat fields dotted here and there across our front were an added impediment and were chiefly responsible for retarding the infantry's rate of advance during the actual attack. The planned close cooperation between our troops and the artillery was thus largely neutralised.

The hilly country to each flank of **Takrouna** and to the rear provided great vantage points in the enemy's plan for the defence of the Rock for there was not a single line of approach to the fort that was not covered by converged fire.

During these days of ease for the Maori troops the plan of attack was being discussed, revised, and amended at corps, division, and brigade level. In broad outline, **2 NZ Division** was to break into the **Enfidaville** line while **4 Indian Division** was to capture the **Djebel Garci** and then clear along the tops of ridges in a north-easterly direction towards the coast. While the Indians were advancing the New Zealand Division was to deepen its penetration. **Seventh Armoured Division** would cover the Indians' left flank while **50 (Northumberland) Division** was to occupy

Enfidaville and put strong patrols north along the coast.

The New Zealand Division's intention was to attack and capture the Djebel el Froukr and Djebel el Ogla features and exploit to the north-west and north. In non-technical language, the New Zealanders were to secure the end of a ridge and exploit into the hills. Fifth Brigade on the left of the New Zealand sector had for its first objective the capture of Djebel Cherachir, which lay beyond **Takrouna** and **Djebel Bir**. The final objective, Djebel Froukr, lay a mile further north.

The **Enfidaville- Zaghouan** road ran between Cherachir and **Takrouna** and was the final objective for the first phase of the attack—the responsibility of 28 Battalion, right, and 21 Battalion, left. The **21st Battalion** was to reach the road by moving around the left or western side of **Takrouna**. **Takrouna** hill itself and **Djebel Bir** were to be taken by the Maoris, although 21 Battalion was to be prepared to help capture **Takrouna** if required. Both units were to join up again on the **Enfidaville-Zaghouan** road, which was to be the forming-up line for 23 Battalion making the assault to the Djebel Froukr.

Colonel Bennett was given the orders mentioned above on the 19th. Zero hour would be 11 p.m. that night and the code word would be ORATION. A heavy barrage would be fired and would move forward at the rate of 100 yards in two minutes, while the recognition signal was to be red tracer fired vertically. Support arms (Captain Pene) were to be brigaded under the Brigade Transport Officer and each unit would call through Brigade Headquarters for them when required.

After lunch the CO and his officers left for an observation point to study the terrain, after which the plan for the attack was discussed.

The salient features of the Maori dispositions were: A Company (Major Porter) was on the right of the Maori front with the job of taking **Djebel Bir**, a round hill about 500 feet high and not precipitous except on the western side but known to be well defended. C Company (Captain Awarau) in the centre would advance through the 700-yard gap between

Djebel Bir and the bottom of **Takrouna** to the road behind those two features, then exploit forwards for 200 yards to facilitate the deployment of 23 Battalion. It would have to cross country cut with small wadis and pass through two olive groves surrounded with cactus hedges. B Company (Captain Sorensen) would also pass through an olive grove before skirting **Takrouna** and, together with C Company, push through to the road. Two sections (Sergeant Rogers ³ and Sergeant H. Manahi) would detach themselves and create a diversion in front of the steepest part of **Takrouna**. D Company (Captain Ornberg) ⁴ would follow the assaulting companies until in a position to attack **Takrouna** from the more accessible rear.

The barrage opening line was 1400 yards in front of the start line and the **Enfidaville- Zaghouan** road approximately 1200 yards beyond the barrage opening line.

The difficulty of keeping touch between companies moving by night over rough country was met by the detailing of reliable NCOs whose one task was to maintain contact. The provision of meals was also of major importance, for Maori morale during hard and protracted fighting was helped very materially by hot food and steaming tea. At Point 209 the men on Hikurangi had been provided with a hot meal with the enemy less than fifty yards away and it was to be the same at **Takrouna**.

Upon their return the officers gathered their men together and told them the whole story, thus ensuring that everybody knew his part in the coming battle. Then the Maoris prepared for the fight: rifles were given a final clean and oiled, automatics tested, ammunition cleaned and water-bottles filled. After last light the battalion was driven up to the Wadi el Boul; then, before going into action, the troops gathered behind a cactus hedge and were led in prayer by Padre Wanoa, after which the CO spoke briefly. He told them that the honour and good name of the battalion and of their people at home were once again in their hands. That night they had a definite duty to perform and, whatever the cost, they were to give of their best, not so much for themselves but for the battalion and the Maori race they had left behind. If every man pulled his weight they

would come out of the action covered in further glory. Every man was expected to do his duty.

It was then time to move up to the start line two hundred yards or so in front of the Wadi el Moussa, but **Lieutenant Wikiriwhi** who was to guide the battalion had not returned from assisting the Brigade IO to put down the tapes. After waiting some time **Colonel Bennett** decided to lead the troops forward himself. The battalion was halted in a barley field forward of the wadi while the CO and Major Porter scouted ahead to try to find Wikiriwhi. They were not successful and A Company, leading the column, moved off again but soon discovered that C Company, immediately behind, was not following. A Company was again halted and runners sent back to locate the rest of the battalion, still lying in the barley and unaware that A Company had moved. **Lieutenant Wikiriwhi** arrived at this moment. The tape-laying had taken longer than was expected, but as a result of these delays the battalion was hardly deployed when the barrage opened.

A Company's plan was to advance with one platoon forward and two in support for a converging assault on **Djebel Bir**, but the platoons were not properly deployed before the barrage opened. The company got away slightly ahead of C Company and before contact had been made with 24 Battalion on the right. Major Porter sent two men to try to locate it, but they were not successful for the reason that 6 Brigade's start line was behind Wadi el Moussa. Porter was not aware of this and, concluding that 24 Battalion was ahead of him, he ordered A Company to advance at the double, but after covering half a mile and still not finding 24 Battalion he called a halt.

C Company came up after a while but the barrage was again far ahead, and when A Company moved forward it ran into the enemy's defensive fire and began to suffer casualties. The terrain became difficult, with wadis and trenches, but in spite of continuing casualties the company carried on until an east-west track in front of **Djebel Bir** was reached. Major Porter wrote:

It was right on this track and among the cactus that my Coy eventually came to grief—practically all my leading men including the remaining Platoon Commander were wounded simultaneously through land mines connected up with trip wires.... At this point with less than half a company I decided to get in touch with Bn Headquarters but it appeared that my wireless was the only one in operation. It was then that I decided to look around to see how many men were left in the Coy but as I walked only five yards or so from the track a mortar shell with New Zealand marked on it for me fell too close to miss.

The loss of Major Porter completed the disorganisation of A Company. Some of the survivors attempted to carry on the attack but were finally halted at the foot of **Djebel Bir. Corporal Cook ⁵ organised a small party and removed all the wounded he could locate into shelter. He saved the lives of many men that night and earned the MM he later received.**

C Company got away a few minutes late but made good progress as far as the first olive grove, where 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Haig) was delayed by one section having to hack a track through a cactus hedge. By the time it was reorganised enemy fire had driven the men to the shelter of a wadi. Lieutenant Haig wrote:

We struck a barbed wire barrier across the wadi on our left or the upper side. Presuming that this barrier would be placed thus in order to divert any attacking force—to bear right or move to the lower side of the wadi and thus bring it under more concentrated fire—I retraced my steps hastily and advanced to the left of barrier. Heading into wadi once again, I struck the rest of C Coy milling around without any officers. On being told that the other two officers, Capt W. M. Te Awarau and 2 Lt Tom Keelan had been hit and both were presumed dead, I then assumed command. The time would then be about half an hour after midnight.

While Lieutenant Haig is reorganising C Company we will follow the fortunes of B Company under Captain Sorensen. This company could see 21 Battalion at the start line but soon lost sight of it in the broken

country. Enemy defensive fire was encountered about 500 yards on, but once the company got into the first olive grove the cactus hedge gave it some cover. It was while forcing a way through the hedge at the top of the grove that the company ran into trouble for the area was sown with trip-wired mines of the same nature as those in A Company's area. The explosions were the signal for the enemy machinegunners located among the large rocks strewn along the eastern base of **Takrouna** to cover the front between **Takrouna** and **Djebel Bir** with crossfire and B Company was brought to a standstill.

Meanwhile **Colonel Bennett**, following with his headquarters behind C Company, was nearing a white house situated between the two olive groves when he realised that B Company was held up. He sent **Lieutenant Wikiriwhi** to investigate, and when he returned with the information that it was pinned down he was sent back with orders for Captain Sorensen to bypass the opposition and join C Company. The CO hurried forward to hold C Company until the junction was effected and found it in the wadi and on the point of following Lieutenant Haig, who had already moved off. Bennett ordered Sergeant Kaua,⁶ whom Haig had put in charge of the rest of the company, to stay where he was, and Haig accordingly soon found himself with only three men. He left them in a slit trench near the track where A Company had been stopped and returned to find out why the others were not following.

He was met by some men of 23 Battalion making a vociferous advance towards their uncaptured start line and waited for the arrival of B Company.

In the meantime the CO, determined to straighten his line, had returned to B Company to accelerate its advance—all contact with A Company had long been lost—and found it still under very heavy fire from the slopes of **Takrouna**. He sent back instructions to the three tanks attached to the battalion to turn their guns on **Takrouna** and ordered Captain Sorensen to leave a party of men with automatics to engage the enemy while the others pushed on and linked up with C Company. **Colonel Bennett** then left again for C Company to co-ordinate

the movements of the two companies but, accepting the risk of stepping over a trip-wire, he exploded a wooden box mine and was severely wounded.

Captain Sorensen got his men another 300 yards around the south-eastern toe of **Takrouna** before he was wounded and Lieutenant E. Morgan took command, with 10 Platoon commanded by Sergeant J. Rogers, 11 Platoon by Second-Lieutenant Anaru,⁷ and 12 Platoon by Sergeant Trainor.⁸ Originally 10 Platoon was to have detailed two sections to make the feint attack on the south face of **Takrouna** and Rogers left with all the men he could muster to carry out the task.

It was now about 2 a.m., the objective over half a mile away, and the barrage for Phase I was completed. B Company made another start and when, soon afterwards, Lieutenant Morgan was wounded, the two sergeants carried on independently. No. 11 Platoon, farthest from **Takrouna**, missed C Company and reached the road under fire from high ground ahead. Sergeant Trainor could muster only nine men and in front of him were machine guns covering two 75-millimetre guns. He led his party straight at the pocket, silencing the guns and taking twenty-seven Germans prisoner. He was awarded an MM for the exploit. Half an hour later 12 Platoon was also up to the road.

We must leave B Company with a handful of men on the road, and Sergeant Rogers with his party sheltering in a wadi below **Takrouna**, and follow the fortunes of D Company. This company's starting time was zero hour plus ten minutes, and its tasks were to mop up behind the assault troops and then attack **Takrouna** from the rear. It soon caught up with B Company and halted. Mortar fire was particularly heavy, and included the noisy detonations of the new enemy weapon, the six-barrelled nebelwerfer. Battalion Headquarters, which was moving with the company, was completely disorganised and the Adjutant (Captain Te Punga) was wounded. Captain Ornberg was unable to get any accurate information as to the whereabouts of A and C Companies but gathered from stretcher-bearers that things had gone badly with them. He knew

that Captain Sorensen had been evacuated and B Company halted and that Te Punga was wounded; and, suspecting that the CO was also a casualty, he conferred with his platoon commanders and decided that it was time to throw the reserve into the fight.

This is how Lieutenant Lambert ⁹ (18 Platoon) describes what followed:

We advanced across knee high barley crops among which were innumerable 'box' mines which we had not encountered before and which one man thought was a suit case. The mines were lying on top of the ground or only partly covered by earth. We hacked our way through three cactus hedges which we did not realise we could by-pass. By this time the moon was up and by dint of careful searching we were able to locate barbed wire which warned us of 'minen'. The enemy was still firing from **Takrouna** and the feature on our right. We encountered no troops however. As the enemy was using tracer we were able to avoid the criss cross fire of his machine guns—mortar and shell fire was intermittent. We did not return the enemy's fire but we felt sure he was aware of our presence because his bullets always seemed to be aimed at us.

After we had sheltered for a while in a small cemetery which appeared particularly eerie by moonlight and circumstance, we proceeded in a general northerly direction. It was while we were making our way along another cactus hedge that Capt Ornberg received a wound in the leg from a piece of 20 mm flack shrapnel, which gun was firing from the slopes of **Takrouna**. It was a flesh wound low in the calf and Capt Ornberg was much handicapped in his walking but, being the soldier he was, would not dream of retiring.

Eventually, not long before first light we crossed the road and made our way into the deep wadi which ran more or less parallel to it. Once here we were able to take stock of our position. Ahead of us was our objective; from it was coming small arms fire and a medley of English and German voices. These mixed sounds had us guessing. We heard

someone calling to 'Monty' and for a time supposed that some of our own Bn were there with **2 Lt Monty Wikiriwhi** who was Bn IO. Later we found out that it was Lt Montgomery ¹⁰ of **23 Bn**. (16 Pl, Lt Smith, cleaned up such enemy as were in the immediate vicinity and 18 Pl was sent to make contact with whoever was in front of the Company.) Sergt Weepu ¹¹ who was my platoon Sgt and I located some of **23 Bn** including Lt 'Sandy' Slee ¹² and his platoon digging in on the ridge of the objective. From these men we learned that Major 'Sandy' Thomas who was temporarily in command of **23 Bn** was down below. As Capt Ornberg was in no condition to move quickly and as it was just on first light I made my way over to Major Thomas. Major Thomas was pleased to know we were there and I remember that he called out to Lt Slee that he was sending forty Maoris up to give him a hand and we were greatly surprised to hear a German voice say in English 'Let the bloody black bastards come.'

Before I left Major Thomas the enemy was firing vigorously from the direction of the final objective and as we feared a counter attack I doubled back post haste to D Coy in order to get them settled before daylight really came.

The 23rd, like 28 Battalion, had been disorganised by the broken ground, the cactus, and the heavy fire. Only about one company in strength had got up and the men were consolidating in front of the **Enfidaville- Zaghouan** road. The Maoris were incorporated in an all-round defensive position sited on the south-east of Cherachir facing **Takrouna** and **Djebel Bir**. The majority of 23 Battalion arrived before dawn and were fitted in to the perimeter.

The brigade position, then, was that 21 Battalion, on the left of **Takrouna**, had been withdrawn after fierce fighting and heavy losses, for; with **Takrouna** still held by the enemy, its position would have been untenable in daylight; the greater part of 23 Battalion's rifle companies, plus D Company and what remained of 11 and 12 Platoons of B Company 28 Battalion, were virtually surrounded and waiting a counter-attack; and there was no contact with Brigade Headquarters which had

no clear picture of the confused battle.

The only firm report from 28 Battalion had been a wireless message that the CO and all the company commanders, the Adjutant, and the RSM were wounded; this was added to by a message from the Advanced Dressing Station that eleven Maori officers were there wounded. Unless **Takrouna was captured, the battle, as far as 5 Brigade was concerned, was lost, for with enemy observation from that feature our guns could not stay on the open plain in daylight.**

Something had to be done to retrieve the position.

Normally I should have gone forward at daylight; but the situation was so confused and uncertain that I thought I might be more useful at headquarters for a while. The guns were still out on the plain under direct observation from **Takrouna and I started to work out a plan to storm the hill with the reorganized Twenty-first from the area occupied by the Maoris. But there was no need. At 8 a.m. we saw, to our relief and delight, a stream of prisoners coming down from the pinnacle, about 150 of them. ¹³**

To explain this most unexpected spectacle we must return to 10 Platoon which we left at 2 a.m.

Sergeant Rogers gathered his men in a little hollow preparatory to creating the diversion that would assist D Company to attack **Takrouna from the rear. He found that he had ten men including himself and divided them into two parties: one he commanded and the other was under Sergeant Manahi, ¹⁴ but before the operation began he received reinforcements—Sergeant W. J. Smith ¹⁵ of 23 Battalion and Private Takurua ¹⁶ from D Company, both of whom had lost their companies and had attached themselves to his party.**

Sergeant Rogers had with him (as far as can be traced) Lance-Corporal H. Ruha, ¹⁷ Privates E. Douglas, ¹⁸ J. Douglas, ¹⁹ W. Ratahi ²⁰ and Takurua, and the pakeha Sergeant Smith, ²¹ while Manahi's 'force'

consisted of Privates H. Grant,²² J. Ingram,²³ K. Aranui²⁴ and J. Takiwa.²⁵

It was agreed to separate and attack from two directions, Rogers from the right and Manahi from the left; or, more precisely, from the east and south-west. Almost as soon as they showed themselves a green flare from the enemy position brought a shower of mortar bombs, but the Maoris dashed from rock to rock strewn on the base of the hill and grenaded, bayoneted, and shot their way through the system of defensive pits in front of **Takrouna** until they were above and behind the enemy.

By this time dawn was breaking and the shooting was good; three tiers of rifle pits stretched from the 21 Battalion area to a bulge on the eastern side of the feature and the occupants were sitting shots for the Maoris behind them. White flags began to flutter and Manahi sent Hinga Grant down to expedite the surrender. He rounded up sixty Italians and escorted them away from the war.

This is Private Takurua's version of the action in a letter to his mother:

just day Break I could see straight up the Pinicell [Pinnacle] about 600 feet from the foot of the hill to the top Well the time is now getting on to about 0700 hrs in the morning when a voice call out is their any volunteer I call out Yes Ill be one this sargeant was from B Coy Sargeant Roger and one Pakeha sargeant of the 23rd and three other men I was the fourth one. I jump up from where I was waiting and went up with Sargeant Roger and Sargeant Smith and the four of us men. mortar shell Where Dropping about 50 yards at the Back of us while we where climbing up the Hill I look back down the Hill their was some of our Comrade where coming up to Join us we are now between nine and twelve as we where going up the Hill same time calling out from behind cover surrender New Zealander you Burstards surrender they have heard this famous name New Zealander well it was quite enough for them they came down from where their machine guns where looking down at us With their hands up calling comarade commarade capture 30 to 40 of

them they were Hitites and German some of our boys were mopping up around the side of the Hill **Takrouna** they took charge of the Prisoners that surrendered to our party.

Aranui and Smith had by now joined forces and kept on climbing until they reached a steep rock face that was too perpendicular to climb, but a bunch of telephone wires running to the now surrendered pits below suggested a method of scaling the face. They went hand over hand up the wires to the base of a stone wall, but the wire still led upward and upward went the pair to the top of the wall. They looked down into a small courtyard where a single German soldier was busily operating a wireless set. Aranui dropped in on him and Smith collected an officer dictating from a room opening off the courtyard, where he had been observing from a window that commanded the front. Manahi and Rogers also reached the rock face with their men and followed around seeking some way up. They eventually came to a section that was climbable and found themselves on a narrow ledge covered in stone Berber buildings. They also found Smith and his prisoner having a quiet smoke. It had all depended upon who reinforced first as to who was prisoner of whom.

While the new garrison of the top of **Takrouna** was taking stock, Sergeant Smith caught sight of an Italian departing with some speed and gave chase. The Italian had the benefit of local knowledge and eluded him, but Smith carried on up a flight of stone steps to a higher and wider part of the summit. There was no enemy about, so he went on to the north side and saw that there was a sheer drop down to the village of **Takrouna** that should have been captured by then—and wasn't.

It will make the next few hours clearer if the geography of the limestone outcrop known as **Takrouna** is described in some detail. The top, about half a mile in length, was on three different levels and shaped roughly like a crescent; the ledge on top of the rock face facing south, which the Maoris first gained, will be called the ledge; the part where Smith chased the Italian and lost him is the central and highest part and will be called the pinnacle; stone buildings covered both ledge and pinnacle, and there was also a small mosque built on the south-eastern

corner of the pinnacle which was in the nature of a rock keep with four steep sides.

A flight of rough-hewn steps connected the two levels near the mosque and, in addition, a track started at the same place and worked along the bottom of the drop below the mosque on its western side to the third portion of the crescent. Other methods of arriving and departing from this robbers' nest were rope ladders from the mosque to the steps below and a tunnel from the floor of the mosque to the same steps.

We have accounted for three of the four steep sides of **Takrouna** keep—the fourth, connected by the steps referred to, we will call the village because it was a stew of hovels on the western end of the crescent, separated from the pinnacle by a sheer rock wall and sprawled down the shoulder to another and larger group of buildings near the road—the actual village of **Takrouna**. So now we have four areas—the narrow ledge connected to the pinnacle by a set of steps and to the village by a longer set of steps on a lower level; the pinnacle, virtually inaccessible on all four sides; the village with no apparent access to the pinnacle; and **Takrouna** village.

Rogers and Manahi decided that the best way to defend the pinnacle was to block all access from the village, which was full of Italians quite unaware that the top of **Takrouna** no longer belonged to their side—at least they were unaware and moving about freely until Rogers took time off for a little snap-shooting.

A rock was put over the mouth of the tunnel and Manahi covered the steps from the south-eastern side of the pinnacle; the others were placed overlooking the village. A handful of B and D Company men filtered up the hill and were incorporated into the defence scheme, as was a section of B Company 23 Battalion which had strayed from its unit. With **Takrouna**'s tiny garrison thus organised, we will leave them for the moment and take up the story of the rest of the battalion and, more generally, of the whole operation.

Lieutenant Wikiriwhi, after failing to locate **Colonel Bennett** upon his return from B Company, went back to Battalion Headquarters. He found it completely disorganised and the RSM and Adjutant wounded. At first light the tanks that were to have gone forward with the infantry, but which had lost touch and withdrawn, began on brigade orders to go to the assistance of 23 Battalion, and **Lieutenant Wikiriwhi**, carrying out the threefold duties of Intelligence Officer, Adjutant and Commanding Officer, went up to locate the Maoris. He had seen enemy dug in on northern slopes of **Djebel Bir** (A Company was dug in on the southern side) and he suggested to Private Heka ²⁶ of A Company who appeared from somewhere that under protection from the tanks attached to the battalion he should take a closer look at the rear of **Djebel Bir**. Heka was willing and **Wikiriwhi** went back to the tanks with his suggestion, which was acted upon immediately. When the tanks began to fire Heka moved up **Djebel Bir** single-handed and saw an anti-tankgun post which surrendered to him after he had killed the commander. Then three machine-gun posts attracted his attention, all of which he put out of action. He returned with fourteen prisoners and was awarded a DCM for the operation. D Company 28 Battalion and sections of 23 Battalion firing back from their positions on Djebel Cherachir completed the clearance of A Company's objective.

Wikiriwhi then met Haig, who said that he had been searching for C Company men and that those he had found were securely dug in. Captain Awarau had also been found and before being evacuated had instructed Haig to carry on and get to the objective if at all possible. Stretcher-bearers had given Haig the impression that most of the officers were out of action and, with the intention of organising a daylight advance, he had sent runners to find the other companies. **Wikiriwhi** suggested that Haig stay where he was while he (**Wikiriwhi**) reported back to 5 Brigade Headquarters for instructions. He arrived shortly before 8 a.m. and gave the first firm information about the battalion. Little was known at headquarters about 23 Battalion at the time, and **Wikiriwhi** ²⁷ was instructed to reorganise his battalion on a line running from the south of **Takrouna** to A Company on **Djebel Bir**.

It will be remembered that **Brigadier Kippenberger** was at the time contemplating an attack by 21 Battalion on **Takrouna**, still, as far as was known, held by the enemy, and **Wikiriwhi**'s mission was to prepare a second line of defence in case 23 Battalion was bypassed or overrun.

The Maoris were in point of fact already roughly on the line ordered by the Brigadier, and as the whole area was being continually shelled by the enemy little more could be done than to discover the company positions and instruct the men to stay where they were until nightfall, when they were to return to Battalion Headquarters at the south-eastern corner of the olive grove. Instructions were sent by Brigade to B Echelon for Captain Pene, senior surviving officer, to take temporary command of the battalion and for Lieutenant Wordley and **Captain Hayward** to come up and command A and B Companies—Lieutenant Jackson had already arrived and was in command of C Company.

While the battalion passes an uneasy day under fire and 23 Battalion improves its position against counter-attack and support arms finally succeed in getting forward, **Takrouna** must claim our attention again.

When the enemy realised that his observation post on **Takrouna** was lost, both the pinnacle and the ledge were subjected to fire of all types. It was kept up almost continuously during the day, and the events which follow must be pictured as occurring under a constant deluge of mortar and other shells. All the garrison found targets in **Takrouna** village and vicinity; Private Takurua found an enemy 2-inch mortar and six bombs which he delivered to the village, and Corporal Ruha, ensconced on the cupola of the mosque, picked out two of our captured 25-pounders and with his rifle prevented them not only from firing but also from being withdrawn to a safer position.

Casualties, however, were mounting. Privates Ingram, Ratahi, and Moore ²⁸ were all killed by one shell, and soon afterwards another killed Sergeant Rogers and Private E. Douglas and wounded his brother, J. Douglas. The last was also killed later in the fighting.

There was still no communication with 5 Brigade Headquarters so, with a vital section of the defence now almost unmanned, Sergeant Manahi decided to go down and collect some reinforcements and chance the enemy attacking in the meantime. Had they done so Takrouna would have probably been retaken.

Manahi managed to contact Lieutenant Haig and, having obtained a section of riflemen, stretcher-bearers, food and ammunition, he led them back to the smoke and dust-cloud that enveloped Takrouna. On the way he met an officer from a medium artillery regiment who had been up Takrouna and who told Manahi that it was not possible to hold the position. The place was going to be 'stonked' with everything that could be brought to bear prior to another attack, the artillery officer said, and Manahi should go back to his unit.

Manahi was not convinced and carried on. It was a fortunate decision for at the foot of the hill he met Captain Catchpole ²⁹ (5 Field Regiment) with later information that the intended artillery concentration had been cancelled. Reinforcements were on the way and the hill was to be held at all costs. Manahi climbed Takrouna, placed the new men, and delivered the kai to the others. About 3.30 in the afternoon Lieutenant Shaw ³⁰ scrambled on to the ledge at the head of 15 Platoon 21 Battalion. They were the promised reinforcements and Shaw was to take command. He was being shown around the position by Manahi and part of 15 Platoon was still clambering on to the ledge when a counter-attack came in.

There was a pause in the preliminary mortaring and Manahi raced for his position at the head of the track. His intuition was correct for twelve truckloads of Italians had divided into two parties and were attacking from the north-west corner of the ledge.

The Italians made a really determined effort to climb the track but Manahi and Corporal Bell ³¹ mowed them down with their automatics. The second party forced its way on to the ledge and there was some close-quarter fighting in the alleys between the huts. The Italians lobbed

a grenade into a building where the wounded were gathered; it is not suggested that they knew the men were wounded, but the grenade killed most of them. The Maori reaction was ferocious and Italians, whether they wanted to surrender or not, were shot, bayoneted, or thrown over the cliff.

No. 15 Platoon of 21 Battalion had been caught at a disadvantage but enough of the men got into the fight to make a material contribution before a few more Maoris led by Captain Muirhead,³² a 5 Field Regiment officer who had been on the pinnacle when the attack started, turned the scales by a counterattack from above. The last of the enemy fled, taking three Maori prisoners with them, and by 7 p.m. everything was quiet on **Takrouna**; Lieutenant Shaw had taken over and Manahi was leading his men down to a well-earned rest.

The divisional position at this stage was that 6 Brigade, which had taken all its objectives in the initial attack, was reorganised and firmly settled; on 5 Brigade's front there had been no material alteration during the day except that communications had been established. The enemy held the western approaches to **Takrouna** and the hill itself—with the exception of the ledge and pinnacle. On the Division's right 201 Guards Brigade was settled in around **Enfidaville** and in touch with 6 Brigade; on the left 4 Indian Division held on to the ground it had won. Tenth Corps' orders were: 'Hold and prepare for the future.'

By first light on the 21st 28 Battalion had been withdrawn to the vicinity of the south-east corner of the olive grove, 25 Battalion (transferred from 6 Brigade) had relieved 23 Battalion—and the Italians were in possession of the pinnacle.

Another platoon from 21 Battalion (14 Platoon of C Company under Lieutenant Hirst³³) had reinforced 15 Platoon and had very much the same experience as Shaw's men—they had scarcely got settled in when they were taken by surprise. The attack on the ledge was repulsed after some sharp fighting, but to the consternation of the garrison a shower of grenades from the pinnacle was bursting between the buildings. Every

possible approach to the pinnacle was covered and it was quite impossible for the enemy to be there, but the bursting grenades were no figments of the imagination. The fight for the top of **Takrouna** developed into a stalemate—neither side could shift the other. There was telephone communication to Headquarters 5 Brigade by this time—the line was frequently cut by traffic or shellfire but the Divisional Signals linesmen just as often repaired the break—and when Headquarters 5 Brigade was apprised of the situation a message was sent to Captain Pene for reinforcements. It was particularly requested that Sergeant Manahi be one of the party on account of his local knowledge. Captain Pene wakened him and told him the position on **Takrouna**.

Rather than risk the lives of those who had already been on **Takrouna** Manahi selected new volunteers, eight from B Company and four headed by Sergeant Ihaia Weepu from D Company, loaded up with ammunition, and went back to the ledge.

Lieutenant Hirst (Lieutenant Shaw had been wounded during the fighting) discussed with Manahi the problem of ousting the enemy from the pinnacle, and as a first step Manahi decided to use the battalion 3-inch mortars to blast the mosque and other buildings sheltering the intruders. The mortar platoon (Lieutenant G. Katene) was keen to help but the range was too great and the bombs fell short. A 2-inch mortar on **Takrouna** itself was tried next and two cases of bombs were fired by Manahi and Weepu with the mortar barrel held vertically like a howitzer, but the range this time was too short. A third method of softening the position was suggested by Captain Harding,³⁴ Forward Observation Officer, 5 Field Regiment, who had arrived by this time, and after some hesitation owing to the small margin of error—about 50 yards—he was asked to go ahead.

The FOO got a 25-pounder from E Troop 28 Battery, at about 8000 yards, to range its shells up the side of the hill a few yards at a time. It took fifty rounds to bring the gun on to the target but the last three were dead on.

Meanwhile three assaulting parties had been detailed: one of seven Maoris led by Manahi, one of seven pakehas led by Lance-Corporal Worthington ³⁵ of 21 Battalion, and one of twelve Maoris and some 21 Battalion men led by Sergeant Weepu. The first two rushed the mosque and the third covered the pinnacle, but the enemy had left as mysteriously as he had arrived.

Enemy mortar reaction was immediate and there were more casualties, but by this time the artillery FOOs had both observation and communication with their guns; one by one the mortars were silenced and the Italians made to realise that this time **Takrouna** was definitely lost.

Takrouna village itself was so situated that the field guns could not get at it so one of the new 17-pounder anti-tank guns, hitherto kept in the background, was brought up into action by **Major Fairbrother** while the Brigadier was with the forward troops. Sergeant Manahi had decided that he had been a target long enough, so when the solid shots were ripping through the stone buildings and creating confusion and despondency among the enemy hidden there, he collected a couple of other Maoris and went out on a private reconnaissance. He patrolled north-west towards the two captured 25-pounders that Corporal Ruha had dealt with the previous day and which had not been removed during the night. There several posts were stalked and captured and Manahi felt better.

Corporal Horne, ³⁶ probably actuated by the same feelings as Manahi, collected seven other Maoris, slipped quietly away from the ledge, and made unobtrusively towards **Takrouna** village. At the same time Lieutenant Hirst, who had just returned from a reconnaissance which Brigade had ordered him to make preparatory to a night attack on the village, took Worthington and four of his men down the western slopes to the rear of the village. With Maoris in front and pakehas behind them, the enemy capitulated smartly and eighteen Italian officers, five German other ranks, and 300 Italians were marched away.

The enemy were from *I Battalion 66 Infantry Regiment, Trieste Division*, and from the *Folgore Division*, two companies of which had reinforced the garrison, and were by general consent the best fighting Italians the Maoris had met.

The whole of the **Takrouna** feature was at last in our hands and 21 Battalion was sent to hold it. While he awaited the arrival of the rest of the composite company made up from A and B Companies of 21 Battalion, Lieutenant Hirst occupied enemy pits sited to oppose an attack from the north, and incidentally the direction from which D Company would have attacked had the original operation gone according to plan.

With **Takrouna** safely held there remained one more task for Sergeant Manahi to supervise. As soon as darkness fell the dead lying on the pinnacle and ledge were wrapped in blankets and lowered by ropes down the rocky cliff face and laid to rest in a specially dedicated plot. Of the 17 officers and 302 other ranks who had taken part in the action, 12 officers and 104 other ranks were killed, wounded, or missing; 21 Battalion suffered 171 casualties and 23 Battalion 116.

The GOC sent the following message to **Brigadier Kippenberger**: 'Please accept and convey to your brigade my congratulations for their magnificent efforts in the initial attack on **Takrouna** and in the action today which resulted in the capture of **Takrouna** village.'

The following broadcast account of the battle for the **Takrouna** pinnacle was given over the Italian radio on 30 April 1943:

A previous report has revealed the heroic conduct of our garrison of the Rock of **Takrouna** which was organised by the Command of the **First Army** as a defensive stronghold. One battalion of the 66th Infantry Regiment (Trieste Division), a section of the 202nd Gruppe and one German antitank platoon of twenty men were sent to garrison the Rock of **Takrouna**. These heroes were presented with an Italian and a German flag so that the symbols of the fatherland should be present.

In the early hours of the night, British artillery laid down its barrage. After a concentrated barrage the New Zealand and Maori troops advanced flanked by tanks which acted as mobile artillery in order violently to pave the way for the assault formations. The New Zealanders, despite the gaps caused in their ranks by our accurate fire, went into the attack on the slopes of the hill. But our infantry sprang upon them and stopped them with hand grenades. They were seen to be rushing amidst the smoke with drawn knives. The defence of the hill of **Takrouna gave rise to countless incidents of heroism.**

The struggle continued without respite, without breathing space for the whole night. By the morning the enemy had succeeded in penetrating the streets of the village. This enemy thrust threatened our garrison and a company of Grenadiers was sent in support. The enemy attackers were clinging to the hillside but the Grenadiers succeeded in joining the garrison.

In the early hours of the afternoon two companies of a battalion of the Folgore Division also succeeded in reaching the position and in lending their help in a new counter attack which completely restored the situation. But the British Command did not spare its forces in order to break through the Rock of **Takrouna where the battle was raging most furiously. Detachments of the 50th English Division were sent to reinforce the New Zealand Division but these attacks were in vain. Our artillery laid down a concentrated fire, and broke up every offensive attempt, dispersing the enemy masses which were attacking in waves. One of the most terrible artillery duels ever registered in North Africa then flared up. The enemy intended literally to submerge under an avalanche of steel and fire the garrison of **Takrouna**. The struggle reached the pitch of unprecedented violence. The next day the **BBC** said that the hill had been defended foot by foot.**

The enemy impressed by the reaction of our artillery, hesitated, but the British artillery did not cease for a minute. At 1700 hrs. the communications to the garrison were broken when the radio operator

collapsed over his machine, struck by splinters. Right until the second night the battle was continued by our men who, barricaded among the smoking remains of the village and entrenched behind natural cover, continued strenuously to defend the flags as they had promised.

When the day of the 23rd broke and the enemy was able to set foot in the position, he found nothing but dead and wounded. The victor, exhausted by the bitterness of the battle and by the terrible losses inflicted by vastly inferior forces, was obliged to call a halt, to take refuge in trenches and to cover himself with camouflage netting for fear of further attacks from troops who were fighting until the last breath of life.

The truly lion-hearted courage of our infantry made a deep impression on others besides the New Zealanders, the Maoris and the British of the 50th Division. Even the BBC commentators noted for their blindness to Italian heroism had to recognise the indomitable valour of our soldiers. The Germans of the anti-tank detachment fought in this battle for life and death, firing until the last cartridge and performing deeds of great valour.

From the heroic defenders of [Takrouna](#) a chaplain, Don Giuseppe Maccariella, a sergeant and a few soldiers managed to return to our lines. The behaviour of all these valorous men was sublime. This is evident from the story of the priest who ran from spot to spot administering the last rites to the dying and from the statements of the soldiers. [Takrouna](#) will constitute an indelible page of the exceptional valour of our soldiers in the immense battle of [Africa](#) and the heroes of this epic resistance will forever remain engraved in the hearts of the Italians, from Capt. Politi, the commander of the battalion who with his senior assistant, Capt. Lirer, personally led the remaining soldiers in the counter-attack, to Capt. Giacomini, to Diletti, 2 Lieut of the grenadiers, that soldier who found the strength to joke about his wound by saying, 'If I lose this leg I shall save in shoe leather', to Cpl. Sessa who alone faced four New Zealand soldiers with his rifle killing one and putting the others to flight, to Sgt. Bressaniniche who, although wounded wrote

with his own blood upon a scrap of paper, 'Long live the King! Long live **Italy!** God save **Italy!**' and then died clutching his rifle. This is the temper of which the defenders of **Takrouna** were made. It is the temper shown by the soldiers of **Italy** every day in the violence of the battle of **Tunisia**.

The Maoris were relieved the next night, 23–24 April, by a battalion of Seaforth Highlanders from 51 (Highland) Division, and Major Keiha, who had arrived and taken over from Captain Pene, led his depleted command to the 5 Brigade bivouac area.

The rest of April was spent in rest and reorganisation while **10 Corps**, following the policy of 'peaceful penetration', felt and probed around the enemy positions. Not that the offensive had slackened; further west and north British and American armies were driving towards **Tunis** while the Eighth Army, which had come so far and fought so hard, was relegated to the role of exerting pressure and pinning down as many troops as possible away from the vital area.

The men were made as comfortable as possible; hot showers were available, and organised swimming parties went daily to the beach at **Hergla** where 5 Brigade's band played morning and afternoon; the 'left out of battle' group returned to the unit with fifty-six reinforcements from Base under command of Captain Henare, thereby largely replacing the casualties of **Takrouna**.

May was ushered in with a two-hour route march, which to the knowing indicated that the rest period was coming to an end. Two days later the brigade moved back about 15 miles into an olive grove for at least another fortnight's rest—and within two hours was just as busy packing up again as it had been unpacking. It was going back into the line on the right of the French **19 Corps**, where the New Zealand Division was to prevent the enemy from withdrawing troops from that front and be ready to go forward should the French attack be successful.

The Maoris left early the next morning and by dusk were deployed in

brigade reserve south of the **Saouaf-Pont du Fahs** road in the **Djebibina** area, about 15 miles west of **Takrouna**. It was a nice locality, with plenty of shelter and comfortably beyond the range of the enemy gunners, who did not appear to be unduly dispirited by the continuous advance of the Allied forces in the north. They stayed there until the 6th while the forward battalions carried on an energetic policy of peaceful penetration. Very little was known about the enemy dispositions except that he was in the hills north of the **Saouaf-Pont du Fahs** road and had mined every road, track, and other suitable area in the locality.

The line had been pushed forward some miles by patrolling, by pinching out isolated points that gave the enemy observation, and by other similar tactics without bumping into anything solid, and a very little more of the same would make the whole of the **Djebel Garci** feature untenable.

Bizerta and **Tunis** fell on the 7th and the only enemy problem left was how to stage a second **Dunkirk** without being involved in Allied naval operations. That was a problem for the enemy generals—there was still plenty of fight left in the rank and file.

Lieutenant-Colonel Keiha had been instructed that 28 Battalion would be taking part in the operations set down for the night 7–8 May. Two small hills in front of 23 Battalion were to be taken, while 21 Battalion on the left had similar objectives.

D Company (Captain Matchaere) was detailed to capture Point 212 and A Company (Captain Henare) was to take Point 237, about three-quarters of a mile to the right of 21 Battalion's objective. The **23rd Battalion** would support with two companies and artillery concentrations would soften up the objectives. After the assault A Company would tie in with B Company 21 Battalion under Captain Roach.

The troops prepared during a day that threatened rain, and besides loading up with 100 rounds of ammunition each man filled his pockets with grenades, fastened a pick or shovel to his person, and carried a

greatcoat and a day's rations. The greatcoat was a sound precaution for the threat of bad weather developed into a drizzle, then to heavy rain with thunder, lightning, and wind at gale force—one of the dirtiest nights experienced in the African campaigns.

D Company had great difficulty because of the night and the terrain in keeping direction, but once into a wadi the objective could be seen against the skyline and disclosed itself as two distinct peaks. Captain Matehaere set a platoon against each peak, held one in reserve and, supported by automatics and the company 2-inch mortars, rushed the positions. Many of the crews of four machine guns and a mortar were killed and the rest captured.

Captain Henare had intended to attack Point 237 from a flank but at the start line decided that the danger of missing the objective altogether in the rain was too great. He consequently altered his tactics and advanced frontally with two platoons up and one in reserve. En route several snipers and enemy pockets were overrun, but when the top was gained the enemy had departed. So far there had been no losses, but a patrol sent towards 21 Battalion ran into another enemy position and suffered three casualties, one fatal, before returning to Point 237. A half-hearted counter-attack was turned back with grenades and the company consolidated.

When daylight came A Company's position was not good; from the north it was overlooked by another and higher ridge, the eastern flank was open, and there were enemy hidden in the scrub between it and 21 Battalion. The troops were pinned down all day by extremely heavy shelling and suffered ten more casualties, five fatal, before darkness. D Company was not so solidly punished and could move. The supporting artillery fired continual 'stonks' and concentrations. Perhaps the Germans did not know their days of active service were numbered; perhaps they wanted to use up as much ammunition as possible before the end was inevitable; perhaps they were good soldiers fighting until they were told to stop?

The night, when it came, brought no relief. If anything the contrary, for the enemy continued to throw everything he possessed into the 23 and 28 Battalion areas. Nebelwerfers, firing four at a time, each sent their six bombs screaming inwards; 88- and 210-millimetre guns fired haphazardly all night, happily without finding targets.

A Company had been out of communication all day owing to the telephone cable being cut and the No. 18 set operator not being able to raise Battalion Headquarters. The wire was mended at last light and Captain Henare reported that the enemy was infiltrating between him and 21 Battalion. Repeated artillery 'stonks' failed to stop the movement and he asked for another platoon and some mortars to reinforce his position. Before this could be done further reports suggested that the enemy was working around the company from the other flank so, with most of his Bren-gunners casualties, Henare decided to pull his company back on 23 Battalion. This was effected without further loss and the company fitted in between D Company and A Company 23 Battalion. The next day (9 May) was quieter although far from placid. A Company was in poor shape after its ordeal by rain, cold, and enemy action, but D Company in the Maoris' last fight in North Africa was very much on top. Two patrols surprised and took fifty prisoners, some machine guns, and a mortar while they were probing in the wadis on the northern slopes of Point 212.

During the night the battalion was relieved by a French formation, and back at B Echelon A and D Companies found dry blankets and the first rest for forty-eight hours. Fifth Brigade moved back to the coast the next day, 10 May. The Maoris had fired their last shots in North Africa and the enemy was surrounded but still fighting, although an invitation had been sent to him to surrender and save useless bloodshed.

The troops were settled in by midday and in the evening each man in the battalion received a gift of £1 donated by the folks at home. That night fires and demolitions were reported behind the enemy front.

The 11th was a day of swimming at [Hergla](#) beach for some and of

showers at the **Mobile Shower Unit** for the others; Colonel Keiha returned from the brigade conference with the news that **2 NZ Division** would be returning to the Delta in a few days; 10,000 troops from **21 Panzer Division** arranged to surrender the next morning, and that evening pictures were shown in the Maoris' area—the main feature was entitled 'Something to Sing About.' By the end of the next day only the Italian **First Army** was under arms, and at a quarter to twelve on Thursday, 13 May, Field-Marshal Messe surrendered unconditionally. Three hours later General Alexander sent the following signal to Mr Churchill:

Sir, it is my duty to report that the Tunisian Campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores.

Returning through the Marble Arch between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica



Returning through the **Marble Arch** between **Tripolitania** and **Cyrenaica**

Marching in Cairo on
the United Nations'
Day parade, 1943



Marching in Cairo on the United Nations' Day parade, 1943



Awaiting embarkation at Alexandria for Italy—
Chaplain W. Te T. Huata on right

**Awaiting embarkation at Alexandria for Italy —
Chaplain W. Te T. Huata on right**

Arrival at Taranto



Arrival at Taranto



28 Battalion moving across the Sangro

28 Battalion moving across the Sangro

Mutton for dinner



Mutton for dinner



The approach to Orsogna
The approach to Orsogna



Major J. C. Reedy, Captain R. Tutaki, Lieutenant-Colonel
R. R. T. Young, 2 Lieutenant M. Raureti, Captain G. Marsden,
February 1944

**Major J.C. Reedy, Captain R. Tutaki, Lieutenant-Colonel R.R.T. Young, 2 Lieutenant M. Raureti,
Captain G. Marsden, February 1944**



The bombing of the Monastery at Cassino, as seen from the bank of the Rapido River, 15 February

The bombing of the Monastery at Cassino, as seen from the bank of the Rapido River, 15 February



The attack on the Railway Station, Cassino, from outside the RAP. Smoke has been put down to give cover

The attack on the Railway Station, Cassino, from outside the RAP. Smoke has been put down to give cover



The narrow road between the RAP and the Railway Station

The narrow road between the RAP and the Railway Station

Ready to advance into Cassino—2 Lieutenant W. S. L. McRae
in the foreground



Ready to advance into Cassino — 2 Lieutenant W.S.L. McRae in the foreground



Route 6, about a mile from Cassino—a portée, two jeeps, and an
anti-tank gun burnt out

Route 6, about a mile from Cassino — a portée, two jeeps, and an anti-tank gun burnt out

From the RAP in the entrance to the crypt at Cassino



From the RAP in the entrance to the crypt at **Cassino**



Preparing for a *hangi* at Isernia

Preparing for a **hangi** at **Isernia**



The hilltop village of Bocca, taken by elements of 28 Battalion

The hilltop village of Bocca, taken by elements of 28 Battalion



Battalion Headquarters before the entrance into Florence

Battalion Headquarters before the entrance into Florence



The final objective on the way to Florence

The final objective on the way to Florence



Covering fire, Fiumicino River. The Maori soldier is wearing a German helmet

Covering fire, Fiumicino River. The Maori soldier is wearing a German helmet



Bren carriers beyond Rimini

Bren carriers beyond Rimini



Ready to move in the Faenza sector

Ready to move in the Faenza sector



Moving into the line on the Senio

Moving into the line on the Senio



Fusing hand grenades, Faenza

Fusing hand grenades, Faenza

Checking weapons



Checking weapons



The start line for the Senio assault

The start line for the Senio assault

The Senio stopbank



The Senio stopbank



Signaller and stretcher-bearer at the Senio

Signaller and stretcher-bearer at the Senio



Route march, Trieste, July 1945

Route march, Trieste, July 1945



Lt-Col F. Baker
Lt.Col F. Baker



Major I. A. Hart
Major I.A. Hart



Lt-Col C. M. Bennett
Lt.Col C.M. Bennett



Lt-Col K. A. Keiha
Lt.Col K.A. Keiha



Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother
Lt.Col M.C. Fairbrother



Lt-Col A. Awatere
Lt.Col A. Awatere



Lt-Cols R. R. T. Young
and J. C. Henare

Lt.Cols R.R.T. Young and J.C. Henare



Italy Map No.1

- ¹ NZ Corps was disbanded on 31 March.**
- ² Lt W. T. Keelan; Gisborne; born NZ 4 Dec 1914; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.**
- ³ Sgt J. Rogers; born NZ 29 Dec 1916; school-teacher; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.**
- ⁴ Capt P. F. Te H. Ornberg, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 2 Apr 1919; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943; died of wounds 30 May 1944.**
- ⁵ L-Sgt N. B. Cook, MM; Kerikeri; born Kerikeri, 23 Feb 1919; labourer;**

wounded 4 Sep 1942.

⁶ **WO II T. T. Kaua**; Tikitiki; born Tehoro, **Gisborne**; 21 Jun 1917; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁷ **Maj W. P. Anaru**; **Rotorua**; born NZ 27 Feb 1905; civil servant; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁸ **Sgt T. Trainor**, MM; born Ruatoki, 15 Feb 1919; carpenter; died of wounds 24 May 1944.

⁹ **Maj H. C. A. Lambert**, MC; **Auckland**; born NZ 14 Jun 1914; clerk; wounded 28 May 1944.

¹⁰ **Maj H. Montgomery**; **Ashburton**; born Carmunnock, **Scotland**, 25 May 1907; school-teacher.

¹¹ **WO II I. Weepu**, MM; **Wellington**; born NZ 19 Dec 1910; labourer; twice wounded.

¹² **Maj C. A. Slee**, m.i.d.; born Westport; clerk; died of wounds 5 Apr 1944.

¹³ **Major-General Sir H. Kippenberger**, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 308.

¹⁴ Manahi was awarded the DCM for his part in this action.

¹⁵ **Lt W. J. Smith**, DCM; **Lower Hutt**; born **Timaru**, 24 Sep 1917; labourer; wounded 26 May 1941.

¹⁶ **Pte W. Takurua**; **Wellington**; born Picton, 24 Feb 1908; labourer.

¹⁷ **L-Sgt H. Ruha**, MM; born NZ 12 Jul 1919; bushman; wounded 21 Apr 1943; died of wounds 27 Mar 1944.

¹⁸ **Pte E. Douglas**; born Ngongotaha, 9 Sep 1917; labourer; wounded 11 Dec 1941; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

¹⁹ **Pte J. Douglas**; born Ngongotaha, 24 Aug 1919; labourer; killed in

action 20 Apr 1943.

²⁰ **Pte W. A. Ratahi**; born **Whakatane**, 1 Jul 1918; labourer; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

²¹ **Smith** was awarded the DCM and Lance-Corporal **Ruha** and Private **Grant** the MM for the action which follows.

²² **Lt H. Grant**, MM; **Rotorua**; born **Mourea, Rotorua**, 9 Jul 1921; chainman; twice wounded.

²³ **Pte J. H. Ingram**; born NZ 5 Aug 1918; farmer; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

²⁴ **Pte K. Aranui**; **Rotorua**; born **Rotorua**, 6 Oct 1914; labourer.

²⁵ **Pte J. Takiwa**; **Taumarunui**; born **Kakahi**, 16 Apr 1917; millhand; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²⁶ **Pte T. Heka**, DCM; **Awanui, North Auckland**; born NZ 15 Nov 1915; labourer.

²⁷ **Wikiriwhi** was awarded the DSO for his services at **Takrouna**.

²⁸ **Pte S. Moore**; born **Opotiki**, 25 Jul 1919; labourer; killed in action 20 Apr 1943. Moore was one of the later arrivals.

²⁹ **Maj S. F. Catchpole**, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Huntly**, 12 Apr 1916; salesman.

³⁰ **Capt R. A. Shaw**; **Taumarunui**; born **New Plymouth**, 8 Jun 1912; commercial traveller; twice wounded.

³¹ **L-Cpl J. P. Bell**; **Te Awamutu**; born **Taumarunui**, 16 Feb 1918; labourer.

³² **Maj J. C. Muirhead**, MC; **Palmerston North**; born **Palmerston North**, 5 Oct 1911; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

³³ **Lt I. H. Hirst, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 5 Feb 1915; farmer; wounded 3 Sep 1942.**

³⁴ **Maj A. F. Harding, MC; Wellington; born Wanganui, 27 Nov 1916; accountant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.**

³⁵ **L-Sgt B. A. W. Worthington, MM; born NZ 29 Jun 1919; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943; killed in action 19 Dec 1943.**

³⁶ **Sgt E. Horne; born Otaki, 30 Sep 1910; labourer; died Rotorua, 19 Jan 1953.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 12 – ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

CHAPTER 12

Across the Mediterranean

FIFTH Brigade began the long trek back to **Cairo** on 15 May, two days after the 'Cease Fire' in **Tunisia**. Among the stream of orders regulating the departure was one to hand in all enemy vehicles that the units had acquired during the campaign. Now that their faces were turned towards safety nobody wanted spare trucks and all were handed in with the exception of one car that burst into flames and had to be abandoned. That was the story told at the car park, but it was not quite the whole story.

It will be remembered that A Company was detailed to guard a motor works in **Tripoli**. Among the collection of cars in the building was one eminently suitable as a company commander's runabout. An RMT sergeant looked it over and confirmed the opinion that it had been built for only one purpose—the conveyance of OC A Company about his multitudinous duties. The question of camouflage to hide its origin was being considered when an **RAF** guard marched up and took over the main gates of the plant. The company was to rejoin the battalion the next morning—quick action and heady staff work was indicated. A rendezvous was arranged with the RMT sergeant who was to produce a pot of paint and brushes; after dark the cooks' three-tonner was emptied and willing hands lifted the little car inside, the back cover was tied securely and the truck driven out, allegedly to bring the rations. In the morning the car, painted with fernleaf insignia and battalion serial number complete, stood in the company car park.

Before leaving **Tripoli** for **Medenine** all enemy vehicles had to be left in a special park, and OC A Company regretfully sent his runabout there in the charge of two drivers. They failed to return but reported at **Medenine** the next day with the little car. They had handed it in, and then had waited until dark and had stolen it back again, for they knew how attached the 'boss' was to his runabout. With Major Porter severely wounded at **Takrouna**, the car remained with B Echelon until the new

order came to hand in all foreign vehicles. Clearly Ngapuhi mana would be lowered if the car fell into less worthy hands, for Major Porter had ancestry among the chiefs who led the tribe in the Ngapuhi-pakeha war in the north. Four gallons of petrol and a match ensured that nobody ever drove the Major's car again.

It is not necessary to describe the return to Egypt. It was a tedious journey. Sufficient to say that the brigade passed through **Mena** on 31 May and settled into what had been Base Reception Depot at **Maadi**. An issue of three bottles of beer per man helped the home-coming, which was also celebrated with a little Bren-gun and mortar fire.

A full muster parade was held in the morning when Colonel Keiha announced the names of 182 officers and men, practically all that was left of the original battalion, who had been selected to return to New Zealand on three months' furlough. The party, commanded by Captain Pene, was allotted separate quarters and referred to as the Ruapehu draft. The men marched out on 15 June and took with them the good wishes of the battalion. They had been away from their homes for over three years.

For the rest it was a time of complete relaxation; half the unit went on a fortnight's leave and the other half followed in due course. There was daily leave to **Cairo** for those who wanted it and the very minimum of camp duties for those who didn't. After six weeks of taking things very easy indeed the new training syllabus came into force; for the most part the troops were not sorry to have their comings and goings arranged for them again.

Cricket, picnics, tennis, and swimming helped relieve the boredom of the old hands going through the 'One-stop-two' of elementary drill and the 'holding, aiming and firing' exercises. With the loss of the Ruapehu draft the **Maori Battalion**, like all other units, had to be rebuilt from the ground up. And the foundation of all training is discipline—unquestioning obedience to orders.

The landing in **Sicily** of the Seventh United States Army and the Eighth British Army early in July supplied a new topic of conversation and gave more than a suggestion of the shape of things to come, for was not **2 NZ Division** a foundation member of Eighth Army?

Of more immediate concern to the rank and file was the selection and training of competitors for the 5 Brigade swimming sports to be held in the **Maadi Camp** baths on 27 July. Seating was limited but the two hundred Maori supporters watched their champions collect 33 points, 21 Battalion 15, 23 Battalion 9, and Brigade Headquarters 3 points. More advanced training began in August; likewise the selection of NCOs and exercises by the specialist platoons. The unit failed as thoroughly at the divisional sports on 11 August, winning only the tug-of-war, as it excelled in the divisional swimming championships on the 31st, when it finished first in eight events and came second in the ninth.

September was a month of exercises conditioned to a country that included roads, hills, houses, and wooded areas in its topography; the curious coincidence did not pass unobserved that **13 Corps** crossed the Strait of Messina to the mainland of **Italy** in the first week of September and that the Fifth United States Army had forced a landing at **Salerno** a week later. The Italians not only capitulated but changed sides. However, **Hitler** was determined to save the Italians from themselves and there was hard fighting on the new battlefields in the land of his late allies and new enemies. Such was the background to the New Zealand Division's training in operations as conducted in close country.

It was also during this period that the battalion acquired another pakeha commanding officer, for with the evacuation to hospital of Lieutenant-Colonel Keiha the Maoris had run out of officers sufficiently senior and sufficiently experienced. **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother**, the new CO, was an original of 20 Battalion and had commanded other units of 5 Brigade. Previous to that he had been Brigade Major 5 Brigade for most of the 1942–43 North African campaign and consequently knew a great deal about the battalion. Major Young, another pakeha, had

already marched in as second-in-command, replacing Captain Pene. Major Young had been taken prisoner with the rest of 22 Battalion at **Ruweisat Ridge** in July 1942 but had escaped, the only one to do so, by first mixing in with the rank and file, then by hiding behind a pile of stores until dark, whereupon he departed south into the desert. He did a 65-mile trek in four nights, hiding up by day and eventually, a walking scarecrow, passed through the Italian lines by mumbling, when challenged, what he hoped might be taken for German.

The troops said goodbye to **Maadi** on 19 September and marched to Burg el Arab; marched, not moved by RMT, a hundred miles from the lights, cafés, smells and noise of **Cairo**. More brigade training exercises were carried out. These manoeuvres were made as real as possible by way of battle inoculation for the reinforcements and were not without loss. In a night exercise a short-ranged gun firing a barrage wounded seven men and killed four. It must be remembered, poor consolation, that a large number of gunners were also learning their trade.

Early October was a time of inoculation parades, swimming, outfitting with battle dress, the enjoyment of scratch games of football and the curse of seasonal dust-storms. On the 10th the CO announced what everybody was expecting—the battalion would shortly move to a transit camp preparatory to taking ship to an officially unknown destination.

The move was to be made in three groups or flights and each group was to contain one platoon from each company—a precaution against a whole company being lost in one ship by enemy action. Nominal rolls were compiled, tents were struck, and the battalion moved to **Ikingi Maryut**. On the 17th the three groups were taken by MT to the **Alexandria** docks and went aboard the transports *Llangibby Castle*, *Nieuw Holland*, and *Letitia*.

The following officers, including a number of attachments, landed in **Italy** with the battalion:

CO: Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother

2 i/c: Maj R. R. T. Young

Capt A. Awatere (HQ Coy)

Capt J. C. Henare (A Coy)

Maj C. Sorensen (B Coy)

Capt T. Wirepa (C Coy)

Capt P. F. Te H. Ornberg (D Coy)

Capt J. C. Reedy

Capt S. F. Jackson

Capt M. P. Swainson

Capt H. C. A. Lambert

Capt M. Wikiriwhi

Capt R. Tutaki (Adjutant)

Capt K. P. Mariu

Capt C. N. D'Arcy (RMO)

Rev W. T. Huata (Padre)

Lt G. Katene

Lt G. McDonald

Lt W. D. P. Wordley

Lt W. H. Prescott (QM)

2 Lt H. N. Tawhai

2 Lt H. W. Northcroft

2 Lt C. J. Balzer

2 Lt T. A. Pile

2 Lt P. S. Munro

2 Lt M. Raureti

2 Lt L. Paul

2 Lt K. T. Hetet

2 Lt W. P. Anaru

2 Lt R. Smith

2 Lt G. Tamahori

2 Lt Te M. R. Tomoana

2 Lt S. R. Urlich

2 Lt B. G. Christy

2 Lt J. S. Baker

2 Lt W. E. Jones

2 Lt N. Mahuika

2 Lt M. Searancke

While the troops spend four crowded and uneventful days crossing the **Mediterranean** let us consider how well the Division was equipped to fight on the conventional battlefields of **Europe**. On paper it was terrifically strong in fire power and probably, given room and roads, the most mobile division in the British Army. The infantry had been strengthened by the issue as platoon weapons of Piats (projector,

infantry, anti-tank). They were very useful weapons which could, at close quarters, knock out any but the heaviest tank and would have been a Godsend in the desert. Platoons had also been provided for the first time with a wireless set, No. 38, which permitted the infantry to talk direct to supporting tanks and to get quick assistance from the artillery.

Fourth Brigade, now back with the Division as an armoured brigade, was equipped with over 150 Sherman tanks so that the Division had a striking force of one armoured and two infantry brigades. But, and a big but, the more mechanised a formation the more road-bound it is, and the old, old lesson had to be relearned—the man with the rifle and bayonet is the only answer to hills, valleys, and mud; and there was not enough of him.

Finally, in the **Maori Battalion** as in most other battalions, many of the earlier reinforcements still serving had migrated to the comparative safety of Headquarters Company, so that the assault companies were composed of men who had fought in **Tunisia** only or who had not yet been in action.

Italy came up on the horizon early on the 22nd and gradually the blurred outline solidified into the white stone houses of **Taranto**. The convoy formed line to enter the harbour, lately an important Italian naval base and not so long ago the proud point of departure for the overrunning of **Albania** and the invasion of **Greece**. The water was full of wrecks, and the appearance of the buildings on the waterfront indicated that the **RAF** had been around.

By way of digression, **2 NZ Division** was not the first armour-supported force to land at **Taranto**. Two thousand-odd years ago Tarentum was a Greek colony, and during a war with the Romans the Greeks brought over Pyrrhus with an army to assist its defence. He landed with 20,000 infantry with support arms—archers, slingers and cavalry, plus twenty heavily armoured Indian elephants. These four-legged tanks won four costly victories, but then chariots were brought

up fitted with stoves in which stones and darts were heated and used as 'anti-tank' missiles. Landing on the elephants' unprotected trunks, they sent them galloping back through their own lines.

The troops arriving for the new campaign in **Italy** were ferried to the wharf where their packs, a stupendous load normally carried in vehicles, were stacked for later transport. A six-mile march to the concentration area near Statte village did not seem far. The Maoris were almost cross-eyed from trying to look at both sides of the streets at once and return the stares of civilians and shore-bound sailors, who doubtless were comparing them with the recently departed Germans.

At Statte the Maoris found everything except a prepared camp—there were no buildings, but lots of timber stacked on the site; no sanitary facilities, but piles of latrine seats and ablution benches. The cooks' gear had still to arrive, but 25 Battalion came to the rescue with tea and a hot meal. When the packs were delivered the men pitched their bivvies and prepared against an autumn night that promised to be cold. Civilians were soon in the lines selling grapes and the product thereof, almonds and fruit, haircuts and fancy goods. In the early evening sounds of revelry indicated that the local brew was not unpalatable.

By the end of the month the camp and amenities had been organised and the troops were adjusted to the new life in **Italy**. It was quickly found that the CO had definite views about men overstaying their leave and the troops settled down to rigorous training in close-country tactics.

Fifth Brigade stayed near **Taranto** until 18 November when the move began to join Eighth Army, 250 miles north. The route to the first staging area at **Altamura** was across partly flat and partly undulating country, where white stone houses clustered around every crossroad and signs were not wanting that the Eighth Army had recently passed that way. The next leg was through **Foggia**, little more than a flattened heap of stones, to the **Lucera** area, where the battalion stayed for two days in the rain and where some useful, if unofficial, patrol work was done. Several captured pigs added variety to the evening meals.

Demolished bridges and cratered crossroads were no novelty now, but the third move took the battalion over roads reminiscent of the Grecian highlands to **Furci**, nearly a hundred miles nearer the fighting. It rained all day and the roads were fast becoming a greasy mess. Most of the trucks could not get off the road and the troops spent another night in the rain and a day in the sun, drying out.

From **Furci** to the Sinello River was only seven miles, done at an average speed of two miles an hour; the congestion of traffic was almost unbelievable, heavy rain was falling again, traffic jams developed, and it was a stiff and weary battalion that made the best of a dirty night on the banks and in the riverbed of the Sinello. At that particular moment the Sinello was hardly worthy of being called a creek, but obviously it was a raging, mountain-fed river when the winter rain and snows came.

Fifth Brigade was grouped around **Atessa** and 28 Battalion, in brigade reserve, moved the next day on to the low hills which formed the **Sangro River** valley. The troops could look down on to the river itself and to enemy-held high ground on the far side about six miles away. To the west were the foothills, row on row and rising all the time to the Apennine Mountains—the backbone of **Italy**; to the right they could see almost to the mouth of the **Sangro**, where **5 Corps** was endeavouring to establish a bridgehead and from where, by day and by night, came sounds of battle; overhead the **RAF**, based on the **Foggia** airfields, passed to bomb and strafe the enemy positions opposite with pleasing frequency and intensity.

Had the war been further north or the **Sangro River** further south, and if the Maoris had brought rods instead of rifles, good use could have been made of them. The Sangro was fairly leaping with trout.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 13 – ORSOGNA

CHAPTER 13

Orsogna

is divided by the Apennine Mountains which sweep from the north-western boundary with **France** across to the east coast near **Rimini**. From there they run south close to the seaboard so that, topographically, a good comparison with the south-east coast of **Italy** is the west coast of the **South Island**.

The Eighth Army had linked up with the Americans who had landed at **Salerno**, and while the latter struck for and captured **Naples**, General Montgomery moved north with the intention of advancing along the east coast as far as **Pescara**; from there the Eighth Army was to follow the road through the mountains towards **Rome**, also the objective of the Americans. The German counter was an exceedingly stubborn defensive as his troops fell back towards the historic **Winter Line** running north of the **Sangro River**, through the **Apennines** to **Cassino**, thence to the roadless **Aurunci Mountains** on the west coast.

At the beginning of November General Montgomery was approaching the **Sangro**, but the combined difficulties of fighting across the grain of the country, the increasing German strength, and the onfall of winter compelled a modification of the original plan.

The New Zealand Division was brought up to relieve **8 Indian Division** around **Atessa** and enable **5 Corps** to regroup. While the Kiwis fitted themselves in the Indians were to thicken up **5 Corps'** right flank, where the thrust was to be delivered. If all went well **2 NZ Division** was to make a dash first for **Chieti** then to **Avezzano**, while **5 Corps** carried on to **Pescara**. Sixth Brigade was to make the breakthrough with New Zealand tank support and was all set to go, but the **Sangro** ran in high flood and the operation was cancelled. Finally, the plan of a stealthy night attack was abandoned; then the whole conception of a deep exploitation was given up in favour of a deliberate frontal infantry assault against the **Winter Line** by an augmented force supported by

infantry. Fifth Brigade was brought into the line on the right of 6 Brigade, but 28 Battalion stayed around **Atessa** while the forward units of 5 and 6 Brigades patrolled across the temperamental **Sangro** whenever it dropped sufficiently. The riverbed was a kind of no-man's-land and ran in several channels; night patrols tested its depth, sought crossing places, and endeavoured to fix enemy positions.

The Maoris kept fit with route marches and practised with their Piats. Stone is the universal building material in **Italy** and there were several demolished *casas* in the vicinity. The Piat was an untried weapon as far as the troops were concerned, and whether they were any good as 'projectile infantry antitank' remained to be seen but they certainly fulfilled all requirements as projectile infantry anti-stone building.

During the last week of the month plans for the attack across the **Sangro** were completed; 28 Battalion was to stay in its present area in brigade reserve, but the state of the river now became a matter of immediate concern to troops liable to be rushed forward at any moment. For several more days, because of freshets, the river was too deep for men to wade through, but finally, on the morning of the 27th, the assault was declared possible and 'on' that night. **Colonel Fairbrother** took advantage of the view afforded the battalion by its elevated position and gave the men a talk on the coming attack. He was able to point out the actual objectives on the brigade sector to an interested audience. Even more interesting to the rank and file was the arrival of the mobile canteen, **Te Rau Aroha**, with eagerly awaited delicacies.

It was an interesting if broken night; following the opening of the canteen the mobile cinema unit set up in a gully out of enemy sight and screened the comedy 'There Ain't No Justice', after which the troops went happily off to bed. They were awakened by 3 a.m. by the crashing noises a barrage makes. The old soldiers turned over and went to sleep again, but the new hands left their blankets to watch the red rosettes preceding the assault up the muddy bluffs across the **Sangro**.

The 28th Battalion stood by at short notice while the engineers worked feverishly on bridges, the mortar teams manhandled their pieces up the bluffs, and bulldozers winched tanks across the river. But everything went well and the reserve battalion was not called forward. An indication of the type of country that lay ahead was the arrival that afternoon of a train of twenty-four mules. The livestock was put on the strength of Headquarters Company and **Lieutenant Urlich** appointed OC mule train.

The following day the troops sharpened their bayonets and waited, impatiently by the new hands and with complete resignation by the veterans, for the word to get into the fighting.

They waited until 1 December, by which time the attacking battalions had exploited forward, sometimes fighting for enemy strongposts, sometimes without fighting, towards the backbone of the **Winter Line**.

It will clarify the operations that occupied December if the reader will visualise the terrain beyond the **Sangro** as rolling country broken by deep gullies which, in a distance of about five miles, rises to the top of a 700-foot-high main ridge running from the **Majella Mountains** down to the coast. Starting at **Lanciano** near the sea a good road wound along the top of this feature through **Castelfrentano** and **Guardiagrele** into the mountains. From **Guardiagrele** another road curved backwards along yet another ridge through **Orsogna** and **Ortona** back to the coast. These two ridges were the core of the **Winter Line** in that area.



SANGRO RIVER-ORSOGNA AREA, NOVEMBER 1943-JANUARY 1944

Sangro River — Orsogna area, November 1943-January 1944

The battalion moved forward in 4 RMT transport on 1 December; perhaps it would be more accurate to say 'was to have moved forward by transport' because there was great congestion at the bridge over the **Sangro** and, after waiting some hours, the troops abandoned the trucks, waded the ice-cold river and marched to their destination, which was the 23 Battalion objective of the first attack—Point 208. From there they were to have carried out an assault towards **Elici**, but 23 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry had already done the job; so after the trucks arrived with the heavy gear the unit dispersed and passed a moist night in the open. While it slept the enemy vacated **Castelfrentano**, a sizeable town of some 6000 inhabitants; 5 Brigade advanced its line as far as the **Castelfrentano- Lanciano** road, with **8 Indian Division** coming up on its right; and 6 Brigade entered **Castelfrentano** with the dawn.

The Maoris were again ordered to occupy 23 Battalion's area, this time overlooking the road to, and a mile east of, **Castelfrentano**; 23 Battalion squeezed 21 Battalion out of the line by moving to the left in front of that unit's FDLs, thereby forming a firm base for 6 Brigade, which was about to attack **Orsogna** alongside 4 Armoured Brigade, directed on the ridge-junction village of **Guardiagrele**.

By early afternoon the Maoris had taken over the reserve positions of 23 Battalion and that unit had departed for **Castelfrentano**. The Maoris

dug night positions on the forward slope of the ridge overlooking the deep gully which was the bed of the **Moro River**. The Moro was really only a creek but it was a nasty obstacle to transport. Beyond the **Moro** was more broken country and then the ridge where, guarded by **Guardiagrele**, the village of **Orsogna** clung to a peak on its ridge. And after that ridge was taken the next scheduled stop was **Chieti**, en route for **Rome**.

The Maoris' anti-tank platoon, making leisurely preparations to cover the open right flank, put on a very decided spurt when a warning came through that six enemy tanks were approaching from **Lanciano**. Eighth Indian Division was nearing but had not yet taken **Lanciano**, so a troop of 19 Armoured Regiment was sent along to assist, but nothing happened and it departed in the morning.

The first phase of breaking the **Winter Line** had not entailed heavy fighting, mainly because the **Castelfrentano** ridge was not the key of the defence nor was the German **65 Division** holding it a very tough formation. Many of its units had a proportion of men conscripted from occupied territory. But the high ridge running north-east from **Guardiagrele** through **Orsogna**, **Arielli**, to **Ortona** had difficult approaches, perfect observation, good communications and very warlike tank support. The **26th Panzer** was one of the best German divisions. It was against this ridge that the New Zealand Division suffered its first major defeat in **Italy**.

While the Maoris were peacefully acquiring vegetables and stray poultry that 23 Battalion had not had time to collect, 6 Brigade was assaulting **Orsogna**. **Orsogna** was taken and lost when the German tanks counter-attacked, and our armoured thrust against **Guardiagrele** was turned back by demolitions on the only possible road approach.

The Division faced another setback the next day (the 4th). The forward troops were not aware of it but heavy rain in the hills flooded the **Sangro** and washed away both divisional bridges, thereby effectively putting a stop to further operations. Had the German generals been in

an offensive mood things could have been very sticky indeed; however, their gunners celebrated our artillery's restricted programme with a full day of harassing fire.

While the engineers waited for the flood to pass so that they could repair the vital bridges, preparations were going forward for another attack on the ridge from **Orsogna to the Sfasciata spur, with 28 Battalion cast in the leading role as far as 5 Brigade was concerned.**

Colonel Fairbrother was warned to move his men to a lying-up area after dark on the 5th, but before doing so to send two patrols, each to be accompanied by a tank officer, on a daylight reconnaissance for possible tank routes across the **Moro** towards Sfasciata spur. One of the tank officers was wounded while the patrols were looking over the country from an artillery O Pip, consequently only one party of ten men under Lieutenant Northcroft, ¹ accompanied by Lieutenant Passmore, ² made the reconnaissance. The report was that a fair track existed over the **Moro** but that Sfasciata was apparently too steep for vehicles.

The battalion was carried by transport along a road over the hills to a point half a mile short of the junction with the **Lanciano- Orsogna road, where it debussed.**

The crossroads had already, for good cause, been christened Hellfire Corner, with Shell Alley, another stretch nearby, vying with it in unpopularity. Both these undesirable localities were bypassed by marching across country to the lying-up area in a tributary valley to the **Moro in the rear of 24 and 25 Battalions holding San Felice ridge. There were a few haystacks about and the troops made themselves fairly comfortable. After first light the CO, not entirely satisfied with the previous report, made a personal reconnaissance with a few of his own officers and some from 18 Armoured Regiment only to confirm the opinion that Sfaciata was too steep for tanks without earlier engineer assistance.**

The attack was tentatively fixed for the afternoon of the 7th so as to

give sufficient time to capture the objectives before dark but too late for the enemy to counter-attack in daylight. Both brigades would advance on a one-battalion front, 6 Brigade (24 Battalion) along the **Lanciano-Orsogna** road straight at **Orsogna** and 5 Brigade (28 Battalion) up the Pascuccio spur to cut the **Orsogna-Ortona** road east of 6 Brigade's objective. **Colonel Fairbrother's** plan was to attack with two companies forward and one mopping up behind them; B, the reserve company, was detailed to relieve a 24 Battalion standing patrol on Pascuccio spur, and would then be in a handy position to reinforce if needed. Meanwhile other patrols were hunting around to see if it was possible to get tracked vehicles across the **Moro** and up on to Pascuccio. The reports were unanimous that it was quite out of the question.

This posed a problem in supply and support for it meant that **Fairbrother** could expect no armour or anti-tank guns until **Orsogna** was captured. It also meant that both brigades would have to use the same road; it meant further that should 6 Brigade fail the Maoris' position would be untenable in daylight. They would be overlooked by the higher Sfasciata ridge on their right, the higher **Orsogna** area on their left and, unless they attained their own full objective, the higher road across their axis of advance. And that, less the last supposition, is precisely what happened.

Final orders were received about midday. The 28th Battalion would, by advancing up each side of Pascuccio spur, cut the **Orsogna-Ortona** road for a distance of half a mile on each side of the cemetery—a grisly rendezvous—and hold as deep as the railway line, which in that vicinity ran parallel to and 300 yards back from the road. The **23rd Battalion** would protect the open right flank by occupying the lower end of Sfasciata ridge; 24 Battalion would take **Orsogna** by way of the road over the Brecciarola ridge; there would be a barrage of adequate intensity while, in addition, thirteen squadrons of fighter-bombers would bombard **Orsogna** for half an hour.

The CO's plan was to attack with C Company (Captain Wirepa)³ right, and D Company (Captain Ornberg) left. A Company (Captain

Henare) would follow, mopping up, then extend along the road towards **Orsogna** and put the battalion on a three-company front. B Company (Major Sorensen) would remain in reserve where it was. Battalion tactical headquarters would be established in a *casa* between the reserves and the front line.

The troops were to carry as much ammunition as they could drape around their persons while the carrier platoon, which on account of the terrain had no part to play, was divided into carrying parties; three men, each with sixteen Hawkins antitank grenades, accompanied each company, four manhandled the battalion wireless set, and twelve were told off as muleteers, standing by to carry up further supplies of ammunition if needed.

The day of the assault opened to the advantage of the enemy inasmuch as although misty showers obscured the deployment to a certain extent they very largely neutralised the Air Force bombing programme and blinded the artillery observation posts.

The troops made their own individual preparations—some went to sleep under the olive trees, some formed small groups and spoke of anything but the business in hand. Others, more practical minded, lightened their packs for the better stowage of hard rations. Officers and NCOs were continually moving about checking various matters as they cropped up, the Air Force was continually passing and repassing overhead, and the German gunners were continually trying to skim the top of the gully and land their shells where they would do most harm. It was ideal country for howitzers, but happily that type of gun had gone out of fashion.

The artillery programme opened at 1 p.m., and half an hour later the **Maori Battalion** began its first battle in **Italy** by climbing up the steep San Felice ridge, where 25 Battalion was to remain as a firm base for the assault. En route, the Maoris could see 23 Battalion taking another route to its forming-up place and 'Good luck' waves were exchanged. Felice ridge lay roughly parallel to the **Orsogna- Ortona** road, from which

both Pascuccio spur and Sfasciata ridge ran at right angles with a deep gully separating the two.

No time was wasted in getting over the crest of Felice for, although the sight of planes swooping down on Orsogna and the resulting explosions were heartening, enemy shelling of the ridge invited haste. In actual fact the Air Force effort, on account of the low cloud and later misty rain, was considerably reduced and finally petered out altogether.

The forward slope of San Felice, like the rest of the area, was strewn with olive trees and peasants' dwellings, and at the bottom was the Moro stream where the platoons reformed preparatory to climbing the steep, bare toe of Pascuccio to the start line at the end of the spur. The troops, loaded almost to capacity, slipped, fell, rolled down and climbed up again until they were in position.

Anyone who has been in a party of pig hunters or deer shooters and has climbed a stiff spur to reach the leading ridge will understand that the troops welcomed the wait for the barrage to open before continuing the climb along the sides of the razor-backed approach route. At the top, on D Company's front, was an almost sheer escarpment, but in front of C Company the approach to the road was not so steep. A Company had the benefit of a track along the spine of the ridge where tank marks indicated recent enemy movement.

The barrage, which started as a 'stander', began to roll uphill at 2.30 p.m. and the Maoris followed into a smudge of rain and smoke. Here it should be mentioned that the barrage rate of advance, 100 yards in six minutes, proved much too fast and the fire was of little use to the men edging along the steep hillsides.

C Company advanced with 13 Platoon (Lieutenant Baker) ⁴ along the top of the spur, 14 Platoon (Sergeant Ngata) ⁵ spread over the east face, and 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Mahuika) ⁶ in support. No. 14 Platoon had not gone far before it came upon a small minefield and time was lost while Corporal Richardson ⁷ cleared a track. A couple of hundred yards

beyond the mines it ran into a post of about platoon strength firing from buildings. The first section was rushed and wiped out; another was dealt with by Piat and mortar until the eight occupants surrendered—one tried to run away and was shot. The other posts then surrendered and the platoon carried on.

No. 13 Platoon advanced astride a track until it was held up near the top by an anti-tank gun covering the route. The crew was engaged with fire while a section crawled round to a flank. It got to within 25 yards without being seen and then a rush with the bayonet decided the issue. C Company met no more opposition and by 5 p.m. was on its objective.

D Company was deployed on a one-platoon front with 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Tomoana) ⁸ leading, 16 Platoon (Lieutenant R. Smith) ⁹ centre, and 17 Platoon (Lieutenant Searancke) ¹⁰ rear. Theirs was the steeper side of the ridge, and crossing the many re-entrants where slips had laid bare the clinging yellow clay was a difficult business. Odd mortar bombs landed on the hilside, but the platoon commanders threaded their way through the pattern without loss. The Maoris, mostly new hands, heartened by the apparent harmlessness of the mortars and excited by the noise of the barrage, took pot-shots at stray fowls. Opportunity was taken by Lieutenant Tomoana to try out the platoon Piat on a house that might have had a machine gun ready to fire through the window. There was no machine gun but there is no point in taking chances.

One soldier introduced the novel, possibly unique, method of calming his nerves by reading a book during waits for the barrage to lift; Lieutenant Tomoana was startled to find any of his men with such pronounced literary leanings. In a letter to the author he says:

During our advance a young fellow, Goodwillie, R. T. M., ¹¹ took a book with him and as we went to ground he promptly lay on his back with his head to the enemy and commenced to read his book. An act of bravado really to take his mind off the battle. At one stage a mortar bomb landed close to him and his mind was soon brought back to the job

in hand. Quite a sound idea in theory. I witnessed all this but said nothing. You know yourself all sorts of methods are used to conquer the feeling of fear.

The leading platoon reached the foot of the bluff at the top of the spur and edged along until it was judged that it was opposite the cemetery, whereupon Tomoana sent two sections forward. There were sapling poplars growing on the bluff, and the Maoris hauled themselves up by their aid towards enemy troops dug in about twenty feet from the edge who were apparently more interested in the road behind than the cliff in front of them.

Corporal Henry Barrett ¹² was first up and had accounted for a post single-handed by the time the others arrived, whereupon the locality was cleared at a cost of two casualties, one fatal. Barrett's aggressive action and use of the bayonet (he is credited with killing nine Germans) undoubtedly enabled the platoon to gain the top so cheaply.

Tomoana found that he was to the left of the cemetery and set a course to bring him on to his area. He also found that he had acquired about a dozen men from the other platoons which were still at the bottom of the bluff and took them along with him. Sergeant Mason ¹³ was left with the reserve section covering the road while the others moved in the failing light to the railway, then down into a small valley where they were fired on from houses. By this time it was almost dark, and with no friendly troops in sight the platoon returned to the cemetery and selected a defensive area.

No. 16 Platoon had more trouble in climbing the bluff and lost some men before it was securely in position. The reserve platoon (17) clambered up and assisted with fire, but even so the opposition was too severe for it to move forward.

Although one platoon was actually exploiting past the objective, it appeared to Captain Henare commanding A Company that the whole of D Company was in trouble and he took appropriate action:

As we had a two Coy frontage to cover, my plan was:— 7 Pl under 2 Lt Jones ¹⁴ behind C Coy, 9 Pl under 2 Lt Christie ¹⁵ behind D Coy, 8 Pln under Lt Paul ¹⁶ in reserve. During the advance 7 Pln had nothing to do while 9 Pln mopped up one sniper and a MG post which was causing D Coy a lot of trouble. At approx 1730 hrs I could see that D Coy was not making much headway due to intense small arms fire, so I ordered the whole Coy to move to the right flank and attack the enemy from the rear. This eliminated most of the posts that were pinning down D Coy. It was evident that the enemy was not prepared for an attack from the rear as he threw in the sponge without much ado. Isolated posts were dealt with as only Maoris know how. ¹⁷

The company was in position straddling the road at 7.30 p.m. and almost immediately called for an artillery 'stonk' to break up an impending counter-attack.

Lieutenant Katene met Tomoana about this time and asked if there were any targets for the mortars. He then moved on towards A Company and was killed en route. Katene was a foundation member of the **Maori Battalion** and one of the very few still serving.

The position at that moment was that C Company was dug in across the road facing north, D Company partly in position at the cemetery and partly on the edge of the bluff with enemy still in between, and A Company firmly across the road facing towards **Orsogna**. On the 6 Brigade front 24 Battalion was fighting in the outskirts of **Orsogna**.

Colonel Fairbrother, at Tactical Headquarters about half-way up Pascuccio spur in a farmhouse with a cellar full of civilians, noted the heavy fighting in **Orsogna** and in the dusk saw flamethrowers operating. He could only hope that 24 Battalion would succeed and open a route to what was now a promising situation in 28 Battalion's sector. There had been good wireless communication throughout the action and he knew that C Company was early on the objective, that D Company was reasonably secure, and that A Company could commence to enlarge the sector towards **Orsogna**. He wirelessed for the mule train to bring up

reserves of ammunition and waited anxiously for word of success from 6 Brigade.

It was while **Lieutenant Urlich** was leading his mules, each with two boxes of ammunition, up Pascuccio that disaster overtook C Company. The men were in high spirits and very pleased with themselves—they had killed ten Germans, taken nineteen prisoners, and destroyed an anti-tank gun. No. 13 Platoon was deployed between the road and railway, with 14 Platoon south of the road and 15 Platoon also south of the road in close support.

There was some firing from an embankment further east, as well as from some houses in the vicinity, but nothing of any strength. Lieutenant Baker quietened the house with his platoon mortar, but a converging movement from east and north decided him to pull his platoon back near the road and closer to 14 Platoon. A haystack set alight by the enemy had added its flames to the faint moonlight trickling through the clouds when the noise of tanks was heard approaching from the east. It was known that 23 Battalion had occupied part of Sfasciata ridge and the Maoris, believing that tanks had managed to get up from that quarter, cheered the clanking steel reinforcements. The cheers changed to curses when the tanks opened fire on them. At least five enemy tanks, one a flame-thrower, were preceding infantry.

A Piat was used and at the twelfth and last round stopped the leader, but Captain Wirepa considered the odds too great and ordered an immediate withdrawal. It was no exaggeration to say that the order was obeyed with alacrity by 14 and 15 Platoons. Lieutenant Baker held his men while he crept up to the stationary tank and placed several Hawkins grenades under the tracks. When the tank did move again it lost a track. Some of the platoon had been wounded and a section captured before Baker withdrew the remainder towards Tactical Headquarters.

Colonel Fairbrother, hearing the fighting and the sound of tanks, had left to investigate and met C Company coming down the ridge. The troops were quickly reorganised and shortly afterwards Captain Wirepa,

who was the last to leave the area, appeared. He was able to assure the CO that all the Maoris were clear and to give roughly the enemy position. The CO promptly called for a 'murder stonk', which the gunners as promptly supplied. One tank was set on fire and the rest departed. B Company was ordered forward to man C Company's area and C Company, without heavy weapons which had been left behind in the hurried evacuation, was held at Tactical Headquarters as reserve.

To return to D Company, or rather to Lieutenant Tomoana at the cemetery. 'At approx 8.0 pm the sound of tanks was heard at the identical time ours were supposed to be on the move,' he wrote. 'Our elation was natural but it soon turned to alarm when we found the bullets splattering the walls of the cemetery. Sergt Wilson was hit in the head. Huns were counter attacking from [Poggiofiorito](#). I withdrew D Coy (my group) back from the cemetery across the road to the edge of the cliff. Here we attacked more Huns (killed the lot) 8 in all.'

D Company was now together again.

A Company had also pulled back to the edge of the bluff when tank bullets came its way and was again digging fast and deep in anticipation of a counter-attack that could be seen massing in the dim moonlight. Small-arms fire is not effective under such conditions for the tendency is to aim high and the results of the unaimed bullet cannot be seen. An artillery concentration, however, is a different matter, for the fragmentation of the shells covers a wide area. Captain Henare called for a 'stonk', and when it subsided said laconically over the air, 'Kanui te pai!' ¹⁸

By this time it was nine o'clock, the mule train had delivered the ammunition, and [Captain Awatere](#), who had guided it up, was instructed to return forthwith and try to manhandle two of the battalion anti-tank guns forward. Still no success signal from 6 Brigade, but instead a request from [Brigadier Kippenberger](#)—could 28 Battalion go to the assistance of 24 Battalion? The 28th Battalion was having a tough enough time staying where it was with one flank driven in, tanks in the

area, and nothing to answer them with.

Within half an hour A Company called for another 'stonk' on a massing counter-attack but a third effort was handled differently. The Germans could be seen flitting from tree to tree, and then a voice was distinctly heard to order in near English, 'Feex Bayawnets!' The Maoris accepted the challenge and leapt from their pits; their 'bayawnets' were already 'feexed' and the two lines of steel grew closer. 'Charge you bastards!' Sergeant Fred Te Namu ¹⁹ invited the Germans as he rushed forward. The enemy line faltered, then turned back, followed by the exultantly yelling Ngapuhis. Some enemy did not escape, but Captain Henare recalled his men for fear that they went too far. The Maoris strolled back in high good humour. They had had no casualties.

It was about this time that RSM Martin McRae, according to the battalion war diary, went out on a one-man patrol to test the strength of the enemy in front of 23 Battalion on Sfasciata ridge. It is unusual to send out one-man patrols and even more unusual to send the Regimental Sergeant-Major. McRae had a personal affront connected with the death of a near relative to avenge—an affront that could not be satisfied by proxy. Besides his own armoury of war he carried two enemy revolvers and a nasty-looking sheath knife, and was so accoutred when he suggested that he might take a look at the forward companies' ammunition supply. But instead of going up the ridge he cut across the gully towards a house silhouetted on the far ridge, and when he returned some hours later he informed Battalion Headquarters that there *had* been some Jerries in that house.

Midnight. B Company had reached the road and was in the vacated C Company pits but was being pestered by fire from positions forward of 23 Battalion on Sfasciata; D and A Companies were being pounded with mortars and artillery; **Captain Awatere** had got as far as he could with two anti-tank guns *en portée* and the augmented crews were manhandling them across the **Moro** stream at the bottom of Pascuccio preparatory to hauling them up the steep slopes—a Herculean task; the Germans were still holding in **Orsogna**. **Colonel Fairbrother** weighed up

the situation thus: the battalion at daylight would be overlooked from **Orsogna** on the left and from the higher **Sfasciata** ridge on the right. It had been attacked by tanks even by night and in daylight would be extremely vulnerable, for no supporting armour had been able to get through the **Orsogna** defences. He submitted to Brigade Headquarters that unless 24 Battalion succeeded the Maoris be withdrawn, and that the withdrawal would need to begin at 3 a.m. if they were to be clear by daylight.

After a short delay permission to withdraw was granted and A and D Companies were each ordered to send an officer back for instructions. This was necessary to avoid both the possibility of enemy interception of the timetable and the interruption of operational messages constantly being passed over the sets. (B and C Companies were handy enough to be told verbally.)

Lieutenant Searancke (D Company) and Lieutenant Paul (A Company) started back with an escort and fourteen prisoners, but they were delayed by enemy pressure and then walked into an S-mine field where Paul and two others were killed and some of the Germans wounded. The CO, becoming concerned at the delay, finally told the Adjutant (**Captain Tutaki**) to put the withdrawal orders over the air in Maori—even this had to be stopped while calls for ‘stonks’ were made by A and D Companies, which had to deal with two more threatened counter-attacks.

The anti-tank platoon had meanwhile got two guns as near as possible to the **Moro** by portée and then, one at a time, eased them down into the bed of the stream. One gun was dragged to the far side and, with about forty men heaving and pushing, was manhandled foot by foot up the side of the near-precipice that was the foot of Pascuccio spur. **Captain Awatere** was picking the track and Lieutenants Hetet ²⁰ and Balzer ²¹ urging the Maori haulers when they were recalled and faced the heartbreaking job of getting their pieces back to the portées again.

Up on the ridge the troops began to thin out at 3 a.m. C Company was told off to carry out the Maori and German wounded. So steep and

heavy was the going that six men were required for each stretcher, and even then eleven wounded Germans had to be left behind under the care of an Italian who promised to give them food and water.

Tactical Headquarters, moving back after C Company had started off with its load of wounded, also had a tough time manhandling the heavy No. 11 set and batteries mounted on a platform. Several times during the climb up San Felice calls had to be put through for 'stonks' to assist the withdrawal.

The last of the Maoris, except Lieutenant Northcroft and eight other ranks left to guard the old B Company outpost, tired after eighteen hours in action, slogged over the top of Felice in the grey dawn and down into the safety of concealment at their bivvy area, where dixies of hot food were waiting. The casualties were fifty-seven killed, wounded, or missing. The battalion had done all that was asked of it, but the only positive gain in Fifth Brigade's operation was a piece of Sfasciata ridge where 23 Battalion was solidly in position. So were the Germans in **Orsogna**.

The fate of the enemy stretcher cases was still in the mind of the CO. A small patrol from Northcroft's post was sent to visit them and found there were only ten. One had obviously tried to get back to his own lines, and if he succeeded he would be able to state that the **Maori Battalion** had left wounded men without attention. From humanitarian reasons, as well as from reasons of policy, it was important to remove them if at all possible. After dark that night a carrying party of forty men from A and B Companies, protected by two platoons from C Company, climbed back to the RAP and brought them out. Northcroft's post was also withdrawn.

The troops remained in their gully until the evening of the 10th, when they marched back to B Echelon area near **Castelfrentano**. Deserted houses and dugouts supplied shelter and for five days the battalion rested and absorbed reinforcements. During this time **5 Corps** had much hard fighting to force and hold bridgeheads across the **Moro**

while the engineers built bridges for a third attempt on **Orsogna** by way of the Sfasciata ridge, along which it was found possible, after tracks had been formed, to get our armour up in support.

The next attack was to be made by 5 Brigade, assisted by 18 and 20 Armoured Regiments, with 28 Battalion in reserve. It opened at 1 a.m. on the 15th and by daylight 5 Brigade was back on the **Orsogna- Ortona** road again, but 23 Battalion had lost heavily and its left flank was very thinly held. The **25th Battalion** was to advance up the Pascuccio spur, but its leading company was held up and 23 Battalion was asked for assistance, which it was unable to give; 28 Battalion was ordered to stand by for a quick move.

The tanks, with engineers clearing mines and making detours and the tank commanders walking ahead to direct their drivers, struggled in single file up Sfasciata. The first eight tanks of C Squadron 18 Regiment were halted by burnt-out clutches or through running off the track or being bogged, but the ninth reached the top and moved right to 21 Battalion, which was having tank trouble of a different nature—from enemy tanks. A Squadron was up by daylight and one troop went along to help 21 Battalion while the rest went left to the cemetery, where they expected to find 23 Battalion. The **23rd Battalion** was not there—because of the heavy losses it had not been able to extend that far. The 20th Regiment was told to reinforce 18 Regiment and the **Maori Battalion** was ordered to relieve 23 Battalion that night.

The 20th Regiment, meanwhile, had exploited past the cemetery towards **Orsogna**. Its tanks were road-bound on account of the sodden paddocks, but they had shot up numerous enemy posts and had found in the Germans a certain readiness to surrender. Darkness forced the regiment to return to the cemetery minus its prisoners, where it laagered for the night. Its reports gave a promise of success, and the **Maori Battalion** was now ordered to protect the laager overnight while the two COs produced a plan to clear the road to a point where **Orsogna** could be overlooked and thus outflanked.

Preparation for moving back into the line included the provision of an extra-large hot meal, for the Maori likes to march into battle on a full belly. The 4th RMT carried the Maoris to the ford over the **Moro**, whence they climbed to Headquarters 23 Battalion where **Colonel Fairbrother**, who had gone on ahead, was waiting. It was an arduous climb up Sfasciata ridge, heavily laden as they were, but the hot meal stood them in good stead.

The situation at dusk was that 5 Brigade held a mile-wide salient on the **Orsogna- Ortona** road; there were still 36 tanks mobile, 23 of them at or near the cemetery, under orders to advance against **Orsogna** in the morning.

B and C Companies, the first to arrive, were detailed to protect the harbouring tanks. Battalion Headquarters was set up in a *casa* in C Company's old area of the 7th and the other two companies, to be quartered nearby, were told to get as much rest as they could preparatory to taking part in an armoured/infantry thrust at first light next morning.

Colonel Fairbrother and **Colonel McKergow** ²² (CO 20 Regiment) worked out the details of the forthcoming attack in the eerie, moonlit graveyard. Their planning was conditioned by the supposition that they would be opposed by units who that afternoon had shown a readiness to surrender, whereas the operation was in fact to be launched against tough and rested troops of the highest calibre.

The commanders' chief problem was the fact that the 'going' off the road was too soft for tanks. They would therefore have to move smartly down the road in line ahead—and waste no time doing it—until they reached the bend in the road where they had been that afternoon (15th). It followed that no barrage was possible as it would slow them down too much, but observed artillery fire was arranged. Each squadron of tanks would have a company of 28 Battalion in close support, D Company in open formation on the left of the road to support the leading C Squadron, and A Company similarly disposed on the right of the road

behind A Squadron. The infantry was to keep within 300-400 yards of the armour to provide assistance when called up over the radio to do so.

To this end the companies were to net their No. 38 sets with the tanks and Battalion Headquarters' 38 set was netted with the Regimental Commander's tank so that the COs could keep in touch. After the following 'O Group' had been held and the orders issued, **Colonel Fairbrother** called up the tanks' commander to discuss a point but could get no response. Lieutenant Raureti ²³ went across to Regimental Headquarters, less than a quarter of a mile away, to check the netting but could get no response until quite close, when the operator acknowledged his call. So did the tank crews on watch who mistook him for a German and opened fire, luckily without doing any damage.

The attack was to begin with the tanks crossing the start line at 7 a.m. but at 3.30 a.m. a tank-supported counter-attack, coming from the **Arielli** direction against 21 and 23 Battalions, reached its peak, with flame-throwing tanks burning up buildings and close infantry clashes. The Maori companies were still settling into their new positions, and the CO, separated from this counter-attack by a hill surmounted by a large pink house, was quite unaware of the nature or severity of it. He therefore directed D Company, just arriving, on to the hill to thicken up the depleted 23 Battalion and warned A Company to be prepared to move in any direction. But these precautions proved to be unnecessary. The **21st Battalion**, assisted by artillery concentrations and supported by tanks of 18 Armoured Regiment, was well able to deal with the situation, and **Brigadier Kippenberger** was able to tell the CO, who rang for information, that the Maori and tank thrust would go on in spite of the aggressive enemy in the rear. By 6.30 a.m. the enemy counter-attack had subsided and the Maori companies, due to start in half an hour, moved into position.

The thrust was to be made by A Squadron (Major Phillips), ²⁴ with six tanks, and C Squadron (Major Barton), ²⁵ with seven tanks. The commanders were confident for it was only the lack of infantry support

that had compelled them to withdraw the previous evening. But during the hours of darkness a new factor had been introduced for the not-so-tough *65 Division* had been substantially thickened with troops from *26 Panzer Division* and *I Parachute Division*. Neither of those formations could be regarded as pacifically inclined.

C Squadron met heavy fire and two tanks were knocked out within 200 yards of the start line. D Company moved off but was forced to ground by the fire from front and right. Two more tanks were hit and one of them set on fire. The German anti-tank guns could not be located and the tanks called for infantry support—urgently. D Company's wireless picked up no such message nor could the company have moved if it had.

A Squadron advanced along the railway line to help C Squadron but lost four of its six tanks in quick succession, and the others called for infantry but called in vain. A Company's wireless failed to pick up the messages.

And so the first operation by New Zealand tanks and Maori infantry ended in complete failure and both tanks and troops were recalled. It was a most difficult procedure to break contact and withdraw. The Maoris suffered twenty-nine casualties, and 20 Regiment in its two attempts on *Orsogna* had lost fifteen tanks.

Subsequent inquiries regarding the failure of communications between tanks and infantry disclosed that, when the Armoured Brigade had made its trials with new radio sets in Egypt, the aerials had been fitted along the sides of the tanks so as to advertise their presence as little as possible. This worked satisfactorily enough in Egypt but in *Italy* it worked only at very short distances—a fact that was not discovered until the attack was launched. These aerials were later altered to stand vertically, and thereafter the 38 set provided satisfactory communication between infantry and armour.

The enemy attempted to follow up his successful repulse of the latest

attempt on **Orsogna** by attacks of his own that night but was turned back by artillery concentrations. Fifth Brigade was ordered to hold the ground it had won, 23 Battalion was withdrawn, and the Maoris extended to the right and tied in with 21 Battalion.

The position was then that the salient on the **Orsogna- Ortona** road was firmly held with two battalions of infantry supported by tanks of 18 and 20 Armoured Regiments. The **25th Battalion** remained on Pascuccio spur and the rest of 6 Brigade remained deployed facing **Orsogna**. The enemy was still in possession of parallel ridges running east and west from **Orsogna**, with communication by a secondary road along the further one to **Arielli**. Patrols confirmed that the nearest spur, Fontegrande, was his forward defensive line which, from the spirited reception accorded investigating patrols, he had every intention of holding. For the following ten days Bren answered spandau across the first dividing valley; **Orsogna** was attacked daily, sometimes several times a day, by our planes; and the enemy shelled and mortared constantly and accurately. Deeper and stronger defences minimised but did not wholly prevent casualties.

Food was something of a problem but the Q staff managed one hot meal a day. It arrived before daylight by mule train. The other meals were supposedly of hard rations, but the civilians had not removed all their livestock when their ridge became a battlefield and it was seldom indeed that the biscuits and bully were not accompanied by a little fresh pork or a bite or two of poultry.

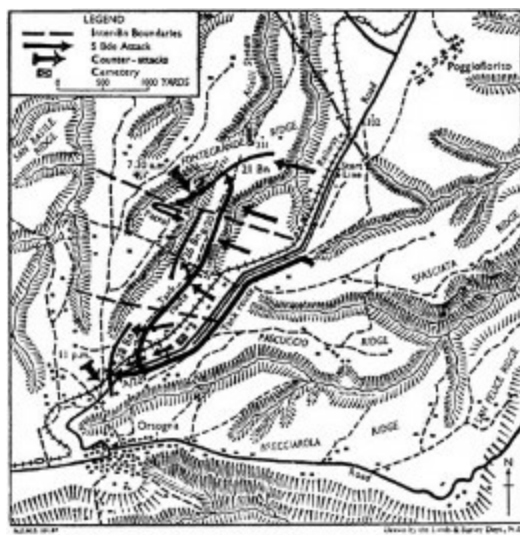
Even those delicacies were disregarded when Major Young brought up a load of **YMCA** chocolate, parcels from home, and mail. Oysters, whitebait fritters, and tinned fruit took their places as kinaki to the army biscuits. This is not intended to give the impression that the men were in good fettle for, though not of a temperament inclined to reflection, they were feeling the effects of prolonged exposure to cold, damp weather and constant shelling in a relatively confined area. One mitigating circumstance, however, was that the country was well covered with olive, cypress, and other trees as well as by numerous

casas in varying degrees of habitability.

Undeterred by the reception accorded patrols feeling forward, **13 Corps** was of the opinion that the far ridge was lightly held, and the upshot was that fighting patrols from 28 and 21 Battalions and the neighbouring 2 Northhamptons were instructed to get on to the ridge and establish strongpoints, upon which the line would be advanced the following day.

Each patrol was turned back, those of 21 Battalion with severe losses, but it was still the intention to keep up the offensive and on the evening of 22 December Corps issued an operation order for another attack. Fifth British Division on the right was to take **Arielli village**, while the New Zealanders were to secure Fontegrande ridge, then cross the **Arielli** stream at the bottom and capture the far **Magliano** ridge. They would then reorganise to meet counter-attacks, join up with 5 Division, and exploit across another two ridges; **Orsogna** would then be outflanked and would probably be evacuated. It looks quite easy on a map—if the contours are not clearly defined.

The New Zealand Division issued its instructions late the same night—5 Brigade was to do the attack with, under command, 20 Regiment and 26 Battalion; 23 Battalion was too low in strength to participate. Fifth Brigade orders, issued the next day (23rd), stated that the attack would be made on a three-battalion front, 21 Battalion right, 26 Battalion centre, and 28 Battalion left. Zero hour was 4 a.m. when the artillery, nine field regiments, three medium regiments and two heavy anti-aircraft troops, would stand on the opening line for ten minutes until the moon rose, after which a barrage would advance at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes.



5 BRIGADE ATTACK, 24 DECEMBER 1943

5 Brigade attack, 24 December 1943

The Maoris' task was curiously like that of 24 Battalion during the first attack inasmuch as, unless they succeeded, there would be no tank support for the rest of the brigade consolidating on **Magliano** ridge.

While the axis of advance for 21 and 26 Battalions was north-west and straight across the Fontegrande and on to **Magliano** ridge, the Maoris' objectives were, firstly, the point where a secondary road from **Orsogna** cut across the head of a gully and joined the main **Orsogna-Ortona** road about 1000 yards from their start line east of the cemetery; secondly, the area directly north of the crossroads, for in that area the two ridges Fontegrande and **Magliano** divided from the main ridge; thirdly, to extend the line to the right along the **Magliano** ridge and tie in with 26 Battalion.

It was after the details of the battalion's operation had been worked out that **Brigadier Kippenberger** told the CO that he was due for furlough and that if he was to catch the ship leaving Egypt in a few days he must hand over immediately to Major Young. No commander likes to leave his unit on the eve of a battle, but ships will not wait while battles are being fought and even colonels have to do as they are told, very firmly in this case.

The plan which **Colonel Fairbrother** handed over to Major Young was to attack with two companies, B right and A left. D Company would

follow behind B Company, extend the line to the right, and tie in with 26 Battalion.

Major Young established his Tactical Headquarters in a *casa* between the cemetery and the escarpment where D Company had made its lodgment on the night of the 7th. The sector was fan-shaped, narrow at the base and wider on the objective. The road to Orsogna was the axis of advance and the boundary between B and A Companies, while D Company opened the fan as the operation progressed.

To B Company, which started as the right flank and ended as the centre of the Maori line with D Company between it and 26 Battalion, it looked at first as if the enemy had pulled back. The company was making for a secondary road that wound from Orsogna around the watershed of the Arielli stream, thence on to the Magliano ridge, and was pushing determinedly through a tangle of shell-shattered olive trees when defensive small-arms fire began to smack into the tree trunks.

The barrage did not appear to worry the enemy and casualties were frequent, but the company pushed on and by daylight had crossed a road. The two forward platoon commanders, Lieutenant Northcroft (10 Platoon) and CSM Tini Crapp ²⁶ (12 Platoon), were quite convinced that they had reached their objective.

In actual fact the company had passed a track that was a bypass from the cemetery to the secondary road it was making for. Voices could be heard giving fire orders and Private Ransfield ²⁷ volunteered to investigate; he never returned. When the casualty lists were purged after the war he remained 'wounded and missing' but has since been reclassified as 'died of wounds'.

Major Sorensen went forward to investigate and explains the position:

From aerial photographs, the crossroad was the objective, but when the attack was launched, B Coy which was under my command came up

to the first crossroad and at the time forward platoons thought this was the objective. It was not until attack had been made with A Coy on the left flank that it was realised that B Coy was short by approximately 100 yards of the main objective. As soon as I realised that B Coy was short of the objective I called up a troop of tanks to give my forward platoons supporting fire as the barrage had gone forward... During the attack there was one of the guns in the artillery barrage falling short, in fact, shots were dropped between the forward platoons and the reserve platoon. Perhaps this gave the chaps the incentive to keep up with the attack rather than taking to the ground as the opposition machine gun fire was very intense.

Sorensen found that he had only two platoons in close touch and that No. 11 (Lieutenant Munro) ²⁸ had strayed to the left and was in a *casa* near the railway. It was told to tie in with A Company and the rest of the company consolidated on the line it then held.

Before A Company moved off Captain Henare instructed his platoon commanders that the main objective was a little church on a side-road, and that possession of this area would permit the tanks to reach the forward troops without difficulty. (In passing, this road was the same one that B Company stopped on, thinking it was its final objective.) The company encountered no opposition until near the church, when enemy hidden in the ruins and among the trees took some time to subdue. In the meantime the tanks, preceded by engineers and protected by 14 Platoon C Company (Lieutenant Hetet), got sufficiently close to assist and cover a rush which cleared the church. The tanks then turned right towards the railway embankment, where two were shot up in front of the house occupied by 11 Platoon and the others went on to assist B Company as already detailed. We must leave them for the time being.

After a short halt to reorganise A Company continued its advance towards the second side-road, but daylight was at hand and with Orsogna but 400 air yards away across the deep gully it was not possible for the company to go further or to remain where it was. Henare called for a smoke screen and withdrew his forward troops back to the church,

where they were extended to the right and linked up with B Company in the house previously mentioned.

Unlike the others D Company's early night was full of incident, for it was first delayed by strongpoints that had been off B Company's line of advance and was then sent to ground by extremely heavy fire. Captain Matehaere brought up his reserve platoon (18 Platoon under **Sergeant Hira Parata**)²⁹ to deal with the hold-up, but before any harm was done some phrases typical of the Kiwi in battle but quite unprintable were heard and replied to suitably. The Maori opposition turned out to be a stray platoon from 26 Battalion. It had been involved in heavy fighting, had lost its way, and was very pleased to accept an invitation to join D Company for the time being.

Daylight was very near and the augmented company carried on until the objective, a ridge running east and west and spitting fire from two houses, from posts in front and from a line of trees behind, showed up on the skyline. The time was now nearly 6 a.m. and at that hour a troop of tanks was due to assist the company. Right on time the tanks were seen winding their way through the olive trees, and with their close support it was not long before the houses changed owners.

The Maori Battalion, although not fully on its objective, was far enough forward to permit the tanks to move to the support of 26 and 21 Battalions, who had not been able to get beyond Fontegrande ridge except for one company of each unit clinging precariously to an insecure foothold which was ultimately relinquished.

Regarding the pakeha platoon from 26 Battalion which stayed with D Company through thick and thin, Captain Matehaere writes:

I'd like to say something about the 6 Brigade Pl that stayed with us as long as they could. Following the morning of the attack a general survey of our position was taken and it was found that the 6 Brigade Company that should have been on my right had suffered very heavy losses and were some distance behind us. As a result our right flank was

rather exposed so 26 Bn Commander ordered his platoon that had attached themselves to me for orders to withdraw to their own lines leaving us out in front on our own. The Platoon commander came to me asking if I had been ordered to withdraw. I answered no. Said very sorry they had to go but we were definitely staying and had no intention of withdrawing whatsoever. He left me to prepare his platoon to move out, however he was back again in a few minutes. He said to me with a rather worried look on his face, 'I told the men to get ready to move out and they wanted to know what the Maori boys were doing. I told them you were staying and they said if its good enough for them to stay we're staying too.'

I couldn't help but admire them, they were a great lot to have in a tough spot. I would appreciate it if you could make some reference to the incident.'

During the day the enemy expended most of his energy on the other two battalions but unlucky shells wounded, first, Major Sorensen, and then Major Phillips of 20 Regiment and Lieutenants Northcroft and Munro and four other ranks, leaving B Company under the temporary command of CSM Crapp. [Captain Wikiriwhi](#) came up later and the company was relieved by C Company after dark.

The cold, damp day was followed by a Christmas Eve equally cold and wet and the Maoris thought wistfully of the dinner they would not have—the hangi with its steaming pork, potatoes and pumpkin, the mutton-birds and accompanying cabbage, the odd bottle of beer to bring forth song. So passed Christmas Eve, the first in [Italy](#) and the fourth away from home. The day itself was uneventful: 21 Battalion went out of the line and 28 Battalion stayed under command of 6 Brigade which had taken over the sector. Two days later 24 Battalion took over and the Maoris followed 21 Battalion back to their old quarters near [Castelfrentano](#).³⁰

The usual cleaning of weapons, returns of equipment and deficiency parades followed, and the next day (29 December) the dinner that the

troops had dreamed of on the Fontegrande ridge was eaten on the **Castelfrentano** ridge. The New Year was ushered in with a blizzard. In the morning two feet of snow covered the countryside and men whose bivvies had not collapsed in the storm had to be dug out. Many of the Maoris had not seen snow before and the skylarking usual to such occasions lasted until the more serious business of shovelling the roads clear for the passage of vehicles commenced and lasted all day. This was really a major operation for some drifts were several feet deep.

Winter had beyond all doubt arrived, and with it came the end of the attempt to reach **Rome** from the east coast. The Germans had won the round and a breathing space.

The battalion returned to its old area on the night 3–4 January and found that the names of the **Orsogna- Ortona** ridge and the Fontegrande ridge had by common consent been altered to Cemetery ridge and Jittery ridge respectively. It will be remembered that the Maori area was at the junction of the two ridges. The names were well chosen for movement by day was well-nigh impossible; **Orsogna**, although more battered, was still full of very pugnacious enemy troops well provided with ammunition.

With a snow-covered battlefield and a static fighting policy both sides settled into houses, with the troops hoping that the enemy would not pick on their particular residence. Trenches around the houses were manned by night, but a two-hour watch across the whiteness and quietness was calculated to ruffle even the strongest nerves.

The enemy, who had already been provided with snow suits, upset everybody by wriggling through the lines to toss grenades through doors and windows; a patrol, twelve strong, sneaked into a house in D Company's area and started a free-for-all in which nobody was very sure what it was all about, but one dead German and one dead Maori proved that the visit was no figment of the imagination. Jittery ridge was a good name all right. The same thing happened in 23 Battalion's area and a Maori patrol, now also in snow suits, visited a *casa* with the intention of bringing back a live enemy for identification. The patrol was on the

point of rushing the post when it was fired on by its own side and the enterprise had to be abandoned. Two civilians visited Battalion Headquarters with a request for permission to pass through the lines to see relatives, one a mother-in-law. The touching request was refused.

Snow fell at intervals until it was twelve feet deep in drifts. A patrol was about to leave when Battalion Headquarters got a request—would there be a spare drop of rum left over from the rations to warm the semi-frozen patrol. There was no rum available but the CO sent his compliments and half a bottle of whisky. Corporal Balzer, ³¹ watching in the moonlight, spotted a row of trees behaving oddly. Trees often behave oddly at night, but when five trees fanned out into arrowhead formation and two others moved to a flank the post was warned that visitors were approaching. When it was within 150 yards the patrol dropped into the snow and began to crawl towards the house. One hundred yards, fifty yards, forty yards from the house. At thirty yards one man leapt to his feet and the Maoris opened fire. After a fusillade there was no movement at all except from the covering party, which poured burst after burst through the windows. In the morning five dead bodies lay in the snow.

Such was the pattern of life on Jittery ridge. Fifth Brigade was relieved by Indians during the night of 15-16 January, cleaned up on the 17th, and was told to divest itself and its vehicles of all identification marks on the 18th because it was going down to **San Severo** for a spell. **Lanciano** was combed for absentees, the carriers were loaded on to transports, the RMT called for its cargo of troops and by dawn on the 20th the **Sangro** was far behind the convoy.

The battalion's casualties in the **Orsogna** campaign were:

	<i>Offrs ORs</i>	
Killed and died of wounds ...	5	45
Wounded	6	168
Missing	—	1
Prisoners of war	—	8
TOTAL	11	222

- ¹ Maj H. W. Northcroft, MC; born NZ 15 Sep 1914; Anglican minister; twice wounded.**
- ² Maj C. S. Passmore, MC; born [Auckland](#), 21 Jul 1917; bank clerk; twice wounded.**
- ³ Maj T. Wirepa; Ruatoria; born Te Araroa, 25 Feb 1916; clerk; wounded 18 Nov 1941.**
- ⁴ Maj J. S. Baker, MC and bar; [Auckland](#); born Tikiti, 16 Jul 1918; clerk; now Regular Force.**
- ⁵ Lt G. Ngata; Otahuhu; born Waiomatatini, East Coast, 8 Aug 1918; labourer.**
- ⁶ Capt N. Mahuika; Tikitiki; born NZ 30 Jul 1913; labourer; twice wounded.**
- ⁷ Sgt L. Richardson; [Opotiki](#); born NZ 5 Apr 1919; labourer; twice wounded.**
- ⁸ Capt Te M. R. Tomoana, MC; Hastings; born Hastings, 16 Nov 1919; railway porter; twice wounded.**
- ⁹ Capt R. Smith; Nuhaka, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 17 Jan 1913; labourer.**
- ¹⁰ Maj M. Searancke, m.i.d.; [Gisborne](#); born [Te Awamutu](#), 6 Sep 1921; carrier; Adjt 28 Bn Jun 1945-Jan 1946; comd Maori Sqn, Div Cav, J Force, Apr 1946-Jan 1948.**
- ¹¹ L-Sgt R. T. McM. Goodwillie; Burnham MC; born Otakau, 27 Dec 1919; farmhand; now Regular Force.**
- ¹² Cpl H. K. Barrett, DCM; [Temuka](#); born NZ 2 Oct 1911; labourer; twice wounded.**
- ¹³ Sgt A. Mason; born NZ 20 Jun 1919; labourer; died of wounds 13 Dec 1943.**

- ¹⁴2 Lt W. E. Jones; born Ongarue, 4 Mar 1910; bush foreman; wounded 18 Feb 1944; died Taumarunui, 12 Oct 1951.
- ¹⁵ Maj B. G. Christy, MC, m.i.d.; Nuhaka, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 11 Jun 1920; labourer; four times wounded.
- ¹⁶2 Lt L. Paul; born NZ 26 Aug 1911; radio announcer; killed in action 8 Dec 1943.
- ¹⁷Report of A Company attack by Captain Henare.
- ¹⁸Very good.
- ¹⁹ L-Sgt F. Te Namu, MM; born NZ 20 Sep 1914; labourer; wounded Oct 1942; died of wounds 17 Dec 1943.
- ²⁰2 Lt K. T. Hetet; Te Kuiti; student; born Te Kuiti, 8 Aug 1921; twice wounded.
- ²¹ Lt C. J. Balzer; Rotorua; born NZ 24 Jun 1919; labourer; wounded 30 May 1944.
- ²² Lt-Col J. W. McKergow; Rangiora; born England, 26 May 1902; farmer; CO 20 Bn Sep-Oct 1942; CO 20 Armd Regt Jun-Dec 1943; wounded 22 Dec 1943.
- ²³ Maj M. Raureti, m.i.d.; Wairoa; born Wairoa, 12 Sep 1917; farmer.
- ²⁴ Maj J. F. Phillips, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born Perth, W.A., 25 May 1913; company manager; three times wounded.
- ²⁵ Maj P. A. Barton; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 29 Nov 1912; bank clerk; CO 20 Regt 19 Dec 1944–9 Jan 1945.
- ²⁶2 Lt L. T. Crapp; Whakatane; born Whakatane, 16 Jul 1920; hotel hand; wounded 17 Feb 1944.
- ²⁷ Pte T. K. Ransfield; born NZ 15 Jun 1917; labourer; died of wounds 25 Dec 1943.

²⁸ **Capt P. S. Munro**; born NZ 23 Jun 1915; school-teacher; wounded 24 Dec 1943; killed in action 10 Dec 1944.

²⁹ **Lt H. Parata**; Waikanae; born Waikanae, 8 Nov 1915; labourer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

³⁰ Casualties in this action were 10 killed, 44 wounded, 7 missing.

³¹ **Lt A. Balzer**; Rotorua; born Rotorua, 30 Dec 1920; mechanic.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 14 – CASSINO

CHAPTER 14

Cassino

SAN Severo, a viticultural centre of some forty thousand inhabitants, held great promise as a rest area but it was a promise that did not materialise into fact. The brigade column stopped before daylight at **Casalbordino** for breakfast then skirted **Vasto** and **Termoli**, passed through **San Severo**, and halted at the staging area near **Lucera**. The troops ate their tea on the side of the road and digested with relish the information that the Division was on its way to the west coast.

The New Zealand Division was, in point of fact, the third of five divisions leaving the snow and mud-bound **Sangro**, which was actually farther north than **Rome** but on the other side of the **Apennines**, to join the Fifth Army for an offensive in easier country towards the same political prize—**Rome**. The Division was to go into 15 Army Group reserve with the ultimate role of exploiting a breakthrough by the American Fifth Army—the role that had been intended but not realised on the **Sangro**.

One hundred-odd miles through the passes that carried the road and railway from **Foggia** to **Naples**, then across the fertile plains of Campania where three crops a year are gathered, brought the Maoris to the staging area at **Cancello**, about 14 miles north of **Naples**. The war had passed that way not long since.

Before daylight they were bearing north through **Caserta** where previously, during the summer, the King of **Italy** relaxed in a royal place and gardens which imitated **Versailles**. Many men of the Maori and other battalions were also to relax there soon for 2 NZ General Hospital established itself in **Caserta**. The move ended on the banks of the **Volturno River** near **Piedimonte d' Alife**, a village secreted in a valley of the Monte Matese plateau.

The battalion, scattered over a wide area between the villages of **Alife** and Sant' Angelo d' **Alife**, about four miles apart, made itself at

home under olive and oak trees, cleaned off the **Sangro** mud, and freshened up under showers operated by an American unit in **Piedimonte d' Alife**. The difference from the Adriatic conditions was very striking and very welcome—the intense cold, the biting winds, the monotonous overcast skies were replaced by a warmer climate and bright sunshine.

The unit stayed there a fortnight training hard, absorbing reinforcements, and regaining its fighting edge. A hint of the shape of things to come was provided by practices in crossing rivers in assault boats. In between times conducted parties went sightseeing at **Pompeii** where the Maoris, with proper pride, considered the quiescent **Vesuvius** came a bad second to Ngauruhoe. A talk on the general situation, illustrated with maps, was given by **Brigadier Kippenberger**, and for the benefit of the 9th and 10th Reinforcements he also outlined the history of 28 (Maori) Battalion. It was a not undistinguished record as unfolded by the speaker under whose command it had been for most of the time.

When the Eighth Army drive to **Rome** via **Chieti** and **Avezzano** (a name we will hear of again) slowed and eventually bogged down in mud and snow around **Orsogna**, the Fifth Army had also been halted by a different barrier about 30 miles north of the New Zealand reserve area, where the **Apennines** bulge and, by various names, reach the coast. The Liri valley, an Italian **Tebaga Gap**, was the only practicable route to **Rome**, the seat of Government and the centre of an empire that had, for the second time, passed into history.

The Liri valley ran roughly north and south, was from four to seven miles wide and was covered by two rivers, each with several tributaries; the Rapido rushing down the valley of the same name was joined on the flat by several side streams and then flowed into the Gari. Somewhat confusingly, the Gari then joined the **Liri** and became the Garigliano. But as far as this history is concerned all that is necessary to remember is that the Rapido had several branches and that the Gari was similarly endowed.

Behind the 30-foot-wide Rapido whose name indicates its style was a

series of defended localities, the key to which was the town of **Cassino**¹ under the extreme eastern end of **Montecassino**, 1600 feet high and almost precipitous. On the top was a monastery, a superb lookout and perhaps a stronghold, and between the town and monastery a road wound up the cliff. Five miles north of **Montecassino** stood **Monte Cairo** (5400 feet) with the lesser features Castellone and Corno at its feet. Both **Monte Cairo** and **Montecassino** commanded every yard of the Rapido and **Liri** valleys.

The night the Maoris staged at **Cancello** (20-21st January) the Fifth Army, with the French Expeditionary Force on the right, **2 US Corps**, centre, and 10 (British) Corps, left, made a full-scale attack on the **Cassino** position. The Americans were to break through on a six-mile front between **Cassino** and the Liri River and **2 NZ Division** was to exploit the breakthrough as at **Alamein**. The plan did not come off. Both flanking corps made some progress in country that would have puzzled a mountain goat before they were stopped, but the centre corps, unable to get supporting arms across the Rapido, was counter-attacked and thrown back.

A seaborne landing at **Anzio** behind the German line was quickly sealed off and the position of the Fifth Army was not one to be regarded with equanimity. The Americans continued to hammer away at the Gustav line—enemy appellation—via **Monte Castellone** and fought their way to within 300 yards of the monastery, where they were finally stopped by a steep valley pitted with machine-gun nests. They again crossed the Rapido and broke into the outskirts of **Cassino**, but strongpoints built into houses likewise stopped them there.

The picture of **2 NZ Division** chasing a broken German army towards **Rome** faded and preparations were begun for another slugging match; the Division became the **New Zealand Corps** by the addition of 4 Indian Division, 78 (British) Division, sundry RA and American artillery formations, four American tank battalions and two tank-destroyer battalions.² **General Freyberg** commanded the Corps, and on 9 February

Brigadier Kippenberger, promoted Major-General, took command of **2 NZ Division** and Brigadier Hartnell ³ took over 5 Brigade.

New Zealand Corps was welcomed into the Fifth Army by a letter from its commander which **General Freyberg** promulgated to the troops by Special Order:

Dear **General Freyberg**,

It is with a great deal of pleasure and pride that I welcome you and the officers and other ranks of the **New Zealand Corps** into the Fifth Army. I assure you without reservation that I have the utmost confidence in your leadership and in the battle-trained troops of the 2nd New Zealand and 4th Indian Divisions, both of which have established such enviable records in the hard fighting in the desert, in North Africa, and here in **Italy**.

I look forward with great anticipation to your forthcoming operations with the firm belief that they will affect in a large manner the outcome of our present campaign for the capture of Rome.

With every good wish for splendid success, I am,

Sincerely yours,

(Sgd) **MARK W. CLARK**,

Lieutenant-General, **USA**.

The characteristics of the New Zealand soldier and how he acquired the name of Kiwi were explained to the Americans in a service journal by one of themselves:

The name that is most generally applied to the NZ Division, both individually and collectively, is 'Kiwi'. The Kiwi is a species of bird found only in NZ and now almost extinct.... In the **RNZAF** certain personnel are often referred to as Kiwis, for obvious reasons; but the most usual application of the term is to NZ'ers, soldier variety, serving overseas, and

it originated with the first of our countrymen to arrive in the **Middle East**. One version of the derivation of the name I have heard goes like this—‘Like the bird, we can't fly, we can't see, and we are rapidly becoming extinct.’

A characteristic almost universal among the Kiwis is that they experience a practically uncontrollable urge to ‘Brew-up’ at any old hour of the day or night.... When living in base camp, or in a bivouac area—in fact at any time when they are not moving or actually engaged in action—they will be found boiling up at more or less regular hours between meals—around 1000 hours, 1500 hours and again before turning in at night.

At the beginning of February and before 4 Indian Division had arrived from the Adriatic coast to join **NZ Corps**, it was planned to attack again with **2 US Corps** to turn the position from the north. Fifth Brigade was to relieve 36 US Division for employment in this operation and tension began to mount as the orders trickled downwards. Colonel Young was in the middle of an inspection at a battalion ceremonial parade on 4 February when he was called away and the troops did an hour of squad drill and marching to the music of 5 Brigade Band in lieu of the parade. When he returned it was to confirm what had already been sensed by the troops and guessed by the company commanders; the unit packed up ready to move into the line late the following afternoon.

The **36th US Division** had not got its orders regarding the changeover and there was some delay before the matter was cleared up. The Maoris were to take over from the Americans holding the line of the Rapido River from Route 6 (the main road into **Cassino**) south for two and a half miles to where the 21 Battalion sector began. The Americans were widely spread and it was not easy to find a suitable assembly area, but eventually Colonel Young selected a position immediately south of the 1000-foot-high **Monte Trocchio**, an isolated hill flanking Route 6.

The trucks edged into the traffic and followed Route 6 as far as the **Mignano** railway station, which touched the road about ten miles from

Cassino. From there onward Route 6 was a oneway road, and traffic was passed along the railway line which had been converted into a road, then, by several connecting tracks, rejoined Route 6 for the return journey.

The railway line-cum-road skirted the south end of Trocchio, where the unit dispersed into the area selected by Colonel Young only to find that rain, which had been falling steadily, had rendered the place uninhabitable—clearly the reason why the Americans had left it alone. A and B Companies found trenches and dugouts recently vacated by the enemy further up the hillside, D Company was fitted in around Battalion Headquarters near Route 6, and C Company went forward to take over from 91 Reconnaissance Unit on the right of the New Zealand sector.

The FDLs were between 200-400 yards from the Rapido River. Willow trees, olive orchards, and houses blocked the view, whereas the enemy on the higher ground across the river overlooked the area. It could have been a very uncomfortable place, but it was part of the locality where the Americans had been thrown back and was probably not then regarded by the enemy as dangerous.

D Company relieved part of 141 US Regiment the next night (6th), linked up with 21 Battalion, and 5 Brigade was again in the line with two battalions up and 23 Battalion in support.

New Zealand Corps had taken over from **2 US Corps** and, with the immediate aim of creating a small bridgehead, 5 Brigade was ordered to make a thorough reconnaissance of the Rapido and the approaches thereto. Lieutenants Tomoana and Asher, ⁴ each with seven men, traversed different lateral roads from which other tracks went down to the river. Four possible crossing places were inspected without enemy interference and the patrols reported their findings to the CO, who consolidated them into a written report to Brigade Headquarters. The congratulations of the Brigadier on the completeness of the information were passed on to the men concerned; the reports stated that the routes followed were waterlogged in places, the approaches soft and exposed,

but that assault boats could be launched. In short, the engineers would have to do a lot of work and even then, on account of the swampy ground, the routes would be extremely difficult in wet weather.

The **21st Battalion** patrols did not have such a quiet time; first a German patrol invaded the area and tried to capture a company headquarters; then two patrols clashed near the river. Taken by and large, it was a very lively night.

Colonel Young thought it wise to thicken his line because of the distance between posts, and 9 Platoon (Lieutenant Christy) took over half a mile between Route 6 and C Company, which closed in to make room. It was a wise move for about 10.30 that same night Lieutenant Reedy reported that one of his outposts had fired on an enemy patrol, which left behind one man wounded. The CO was not in favour of having enemy patrols wandering around, so after dark the next night (the 9th) the outpost line was pushed right up to the river and posts established at 100-yard intervals along the whole front. A and B Companies sent men up to help man the posts, which were held during the hours of darkness only. Thereafter comparative peace reigned along the Maori sector.

Meanwhile, on 8 February, **2 US Corps** tried again to clear the hills north of **Cassino** and occupy positions commanding the eastern end of the **Liri** valley. Some progress was made but the Americans, like the Kiwis on more than one occasion, were almost fought out for the time being and they failed to dislodge the stubborn Germans. It was decided to have one more try and then, if unsuccessful, to hand the job over to **NZ Corps**.

Maybe **General Freyberg** anticipated the result, for his plan envisaged the embanked railway from **Mignano** to Trocchio being continued as a road across the swampy country to the **Cassino** railway station, and 28 Battalion was ordered to make a reconnaissance of the embankment as far forward as possible.

The distance from the Rapido to the **Cassino** station was about half

a mile and the station was about the same distance south of the town. After dark that night (10th) Lieutenant Christy, accompanied by Lieutenant Faram ⁵ (5 Field Park Company) and preceded by four men from the anti-aircraft platoon sweeping for mines, took a nine-man patrol across the Rapido by the ruined railway bridge. From there they advanced in single file on each side of the track and Faram examined the demolitions along the embankment. There was no interference until the patrol was in the marshalling yards, when grenades were thrown from a building and immediately answered by tommy-gun fire. The enemy was not inclined to disclose his position and that was the end of the matter; Lieutenant Christy was grazed by a splinter but was able to carry on. The sapper reported that there were ten demolitions between the river and the station (actually there were two more in the railway yards), almost all of would need bulldozing, culverting, or bridging for the passage of tanks.

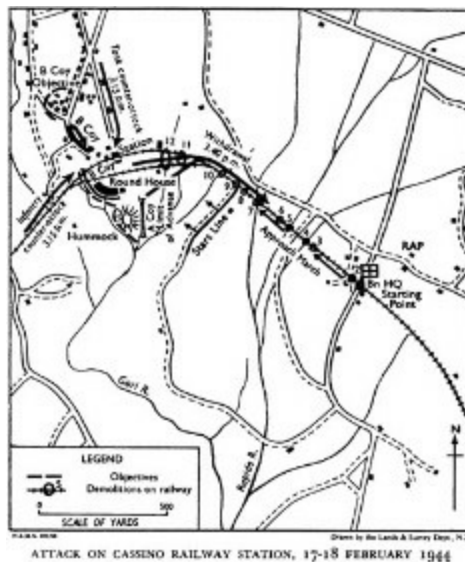
The final American attack on the 11th failed and the assault was over to **NZ Corps**, the only fresh force available with adequate reserves. For the second time in **Italy** the exploitation division, through force of circumstances, became an assault division. Fourth Indian Division began to deploy for its part in the **NZ Corps'** plan: to carry on the attacks in the hills north of **Cassino** that the outfought and decimated American battalions had begun.

When the Indians were ready **2 NZ Division** would seize a bridgehead over the Rapido along the axis of the railway embankment and hold it while the engineers got in bridges, culverts, and fillings for the passage of tanks and supporting arms. The next night an American combat team of 180 tanks, with 21 Battalion under command, and **4 NZ Armoured Brigade** with nearly as many tanks, and with 23 Battalion under command, would break out into the **Liri** valley. The Maori Battalion would make the initial bridgehead.

This is how **General Kippenberger** appreciated the situation:

If we could hold the railway station, the operation would go on with

a fair prospect of success, whether the Indians succeeded, had partial success, or failed. If we failed to take the station or lost our toe-hold there, then the operation ended and we would not have lost heavily. I felt a little unlucky having to deal with so awkward a problem in my first battle as a divisional commander. ⁶



Attack on **Cassino** Railway Station, 17-18 February 1944

The assault was fixed, tentatively, for the night 13-14 February. The Maoris' start line was just across the Rapido, with the railway embankment as the right boundary on a two-company front of 200 yards. B Company (**Captain Wikiriwhi**) right and A Company (Captain Henare) left were detailed for the capture of the station.

The company officers concerned spent a lot of time on the top of Trocchio viewing the proposed route and on the night before the attack took a closer look at the terrain forward of the start line. They were very unfavourably impressed. The ground was marshy, covered in places with an inch of water, and quite impossible for digging in support weapons. **Divisional Headquarters** decided, as a result of this reconnaissance, to postpone the operation until conditions improved; in any case, 4 Indian Division was not yet ready to attack.

The night of the proposed attack did not pass without incident; standing patrols providing a screen for the sappers and as an assurance

against enemy curiosity regarding the nature of operations on the railway line stood by from dark to dawn. That night two bulldozers lost tracks when mines exploded under them. The area had been swept but the mines were evidently hidden under the steel rails and had not been detected; the noise of the explosions was the signal for the enemy guns to give the area a thorough going over. The bulldozers were camouflaged with nets and everybody departed with some celerity.

The succeeding night was also fairly lively; the anti-aircraft platoon went forward to dig a position in the embankment near the start line for Battalion Tactical Headquarters. D Company supplied the screen, and in addition two patrols went towards the station. One patrol of ten men led by Lieutenant Takuraa ⁷ was to test the enemy defences and, if possible, bring back a prisoner for identification, while the second, Sergeant Rivers ⁸ and four others, was to survey the approaches to a hummock on the left of A Company's objective. Takuraa's patrol was challenged from a demolition in the station yard, whereupon two challengers were shot, but six spandaus then opened fire from various directions on the Maoris, who withdrew without loss. Sergeant Rivers was close to the hummock when the firing began and likewise withdrew his party. Once more the sappers had to stop work because of the enemy activity, although our machine guns and artillery had been making a fuss to hide the noise of their work.

The strain of waiting was relieved on the morning of the 15th by the sight of 250 bombers reducing the [Montecassino](#) abbey to a heap of ruins preparatory to the Indian attack. The abbey itself did not affect the Maori operations, so the question whether it was occupied by the enemy or not or the rights and wrongs of destroying a sacred edifice that in one form or another had stood there for a thousand years are outside the scope of this history.

C and D Companies, after ten days of desultory attention from the German guns, were very pleased to be relieved next night by 24 Battalion and to move to the shelter of the railway embankment.

The Indian prong of the **NZ Corps'** pincer, after hard fighting for a start line, was ready to attack on the night 17-18 February and Colonel Young issued his final orders for the Maori prong to operate the same night. B Company's objectives were, first, the station buildings and the engine shed and, second, three hundred yards of sunken road leading to **Cassino** and bordered by a scattered group of houses. A Company was to clear the railway yards and capture a small mound south of the engine shed known variously as the Pimple, the Hummock, or the Hummocks. The engineers, who had already repaired four of the demolitions on the railway, were to have the necessary bridges and fillings completed before daylight. Immediately the road was open 19 Armoured Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin) ⁹ would send tanks through to support the Maoris and secure the bridgehead.

There was no barrage but two batteries of American heavies and two regiments of medium guns were to put down a ten-minute concentration on the objectives, whereupon every available field regiment would concentrate on likely areas for two hours; four machine-gun platoons would engage targets that had been located south of the station, plus any other targets that might appear; 5 Brigade's 4.2-inch mortars would also assist, while the battalion mortars were to stand by and bombard targets as requested by the infantry.

The troops were to cross the start line at 9.30 p.m. A final check up, a short Ringatu service led by Lieutenant Takurua (12 Platoon), a few words by the CO, and A Company, followed closely by B, moved off in single file along the embankment. There was some delay in getting past the engineers and their piles of bridging equipment and B Company was not properly on the start line at zero hour. The enemy was quick to reply to the preliminary artillery fire and there were casualties before the advance commenced. **Captain Wikiriwhi** was slightly wounded but was able to carry on. He had decided to carry the Company Headquarters wireless set himself and had instructed his platoon commanders to do likewise so as to ensure communication, because it was so easy for signallers to get lost in a night attack. A blast from a near miss

shattered his set, which luckily saved him from anything worse than scratches, but this meant that he was out of communication right from the start. Fire from the south edge of **Cassino** town and the lower slopes of **Montecassino**, the hazards of an unsuspected minefield, and creeks, drains, and a near swamp hampered the Maoris, but they pushed on. On the right, cascades of flares showed up new wire laid across the entrance to the railway yards with two strongpoints dug in behind it. **Captain Wikiriwhi** writes:

As we closed my 12 Pl on right wavered momentarily in the face of a particularly violent burst of MG fire from 2 Jerry posts. I immediately ordered a charge—the men leapt forward and, as in training, two men leapt on to the wire (concertina)—the others jumped over (there was sufficient light from flares and gun flashes) and, with bayonet and grenades cleaned the posts out. Others were busy with wire cutters on the ordinary dannert wire and the platoons were soon through on to the 1st objective.

A Company worked up the station yard in much the same way and by midnight both companies were digging in with a third of their strength casualties. **Captain Wikiriwhi** received a nasty leg wound while he was attending to CSM Ron Koinaki ¹⁰ and left Lieutenant Takurua in temporary command while he went back to get 'patched up' at the RAP. He was back within half an hour after a short report to Colonel Young and found that Lieutenant Asher (10 Platoon) had been killed and Lieutenant Crapp (11 Platoon) wounded. By this time the engineers had dealt with five demolitions, the field guns were 'stonking' the western approaches and the mediums hammering **Cassino**. The brigade mortars were told to continue firing until they had only thirty rounds left.

Around the station, in the words of OC A Company, '... sections and groups of men were having individual scraps all over the place—a few prisoners here and there a few dead Jerries....'

Colonel Young went up himself to examine the position and found both company commanders confident that all objectives could be taken

before daylight. A Company had been stopped by a twenty-foot-wide swollen creek covered by wire and mines that had not shown up on air photographs, but patrols were looking for a crossing.

On his return to his headquarters Colonel Young sent the following signal to Brigade:

Have been on recce fwd and have ordered a pl of A Coy [which had been called to assist B Coy] to attack houses at 857204 [B Coy's second objective]. Attack now in progress. Confident of success. A Coy still held up and are looking for another way through although the enemy is still firing MGs from the Hummocks. CO still confident that he can capture objective by first light. General impression that enemy is thin on ground but has plenty of MGs. Engrs may be finished by daylight but CO expected it would take longer than that. Engrs are prepared to work on in daylight under cover of smoke. Minor delays have been caused by mortar and shell fire. CO's appreciation—Once the bridge is finished pass the armour through; at one stage B Coy adv was held up by 4 MGs in a house and when the house was rushed enemy escaped in a truck which had been standing with the motor running behind the house. The truck went along the road into **Cassino**.

At 2 a.m. the engineers were working on three demolitions at the same time with one more untouched, but at 3 a.m. the moon came up and gave the enemy sufficient light to lay directed mortar and machine-gun fire on to them. A sapper officer, Lieutenant Martin,¹¹ wrote:

The enemy, who had apparently not seen the work or been aware of what was going on then began to cover the area with MG fire from the Hummocks on the left and well directed concentrations from mortars further back. On two occasions the mine sweeping and clearing parties had to stop work. However word came through that the work had to proceed as it was fast becoming light and support weapons had to be got through to the Maoris.

Between moonrise and dawn, however, the engineers were ordered to

withdraw and Colonel Young asked Brigade if the Maoris, with the Hummock still untaken, should stay forward. The answer, after the query had been submitted to **Divisional Headquarters**, was that they were to hang on and that they would be screened with smoke.

A and B Companies were in much the same situation that the battalion had been in at **Orsogna**, where support arms could not get through and permission had been given to pull back; this time permission was refused and daylight found the companies overlooked by the towering **Montecassino** and under fire from three sides—from **Cassino** town, from the Hummock, and from the western approaches to the railway station.

Smoke was building up as fast as the gunners could get the shells away, but glimpses could be had of enemy forming up for a counter-attack and tracer was coming in from a tank that could not be located. Artillery concentrations were called for, and the second, falling right in the middle of the German infantry, lessened the tension for the time being.

Here is a report of the position as seen through German eyes:

... The enemy is still in the station, and we are round him in a semicircle. He has the station, only nothing else. About midday he tried to push north along the road. Baade assumes from this that that is his next direction. We are trying to cut off the men by thrusting from the north and south.... ¹²

All through a torrid morning and afternoon the Maoris withstood the infiltration tactics of a determined enemy. An attempt to reinforce with a platoon (Lieutenant Reedy) from C Company was frustrated when twelve of the men were shot down before they had gone a hundred yards. Up in the railway station A and B Companies had already lost seventy-six men killed and wounded. Orders were relayed through from **Divisional Headquarters** that the Hummock was not to be taken and that the forward artillery would fire one round every two seconds into that

target from a time to be notified later.

The problem for the Divisional Commander to decide was whether to continue the smoke or revert to shelling. It was decided that smoke was more likely to keep down casualties and every available weapon that had smoke shells was ordered to use them. Smoke was, in fact, a two-edged weapon, as the murk enabled the enemy to get in so close that the guns could not fire on them for fear of dropping their shells among the Maoris.

Infantry the Maoris could deal with while their ammunition lasted, but when two tanks overran sections of 10 and 12 Platoons **Captain Wikiriwhi** ordered a withdrawal.

When tank attack came in I was with remnants of my Coy HQ right in the station, i.e. 1st objective. The forward sections must have been overrun by then. They were not more than 50x [yards] from us and opened up with 75 mm and MG. That was when I gave the order to withdraw.

More men were hit returning to the start line. **Wikiriwhi** stopped to rally some who had taken cover from the firing and was seriously wounded. Lieutenant Takurua and two others dragged him to the shelter of the railway embankment and used his pistol lanyard as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. He ordered them to leave him there and get back while they might. Takurua was killed a few minutes later. Those who did get safely back were a pitiful remnant of the two hundred who had gone into the attack—26 Arawas and 40 Ngapuhi. A few more straggled in during the night. ¹³

In high places another method of reducing **Cassino** was being worked out, for the Indian effort had also failed and the beach-head at **Anzio** was not secure. Back with the rest of the battalion, the Maori survivors of the attack on the railway station were sleeping the sleep of soldiers after a hard battle. Private Maihi, ¹⁴ with two holes drilled through him, reported back at midday, and some hours later **Captain Wikiriwhi**

crawled in to 24 Battalion's FDLs.

By a fortunate coincidence he had been left in such a position that a piece of board and a discarded gas cape were within his reach. He split the board with an Italian stiletto he had carried since the days in the desert and fashioned a pair of splints to hold a leg shattered with machine-gun bullets so that it was possible to move. When it was dark he crawled up on to the railway line and, using the sleepers as levers, hauled himself back to safety. An MC was added to his **Takrouna DSO.**

The Maoris moved back a couple of miles into brigade reserve and the officers entertained the COs, adjutants, and company seconds-in-command of 21 and 23 Battalions to an evening. The men went to a picture show put on by the **YMCA.**

One gathers, from the following conversation between Colonel-General Vietinghoff, commander of *Tenth Army*, and Field-Marshal Kesselring, that the Kiwis, although regarded as tough fighters, were not liked very much.

V. We have succeeded after hard fighting in retaking **Cassino station.**

K. Heartiest congratulations.

V. I didn't think we would do it.

K. Neither did I.

V. North of **Cassino also very heavy attacks have been beaten off. 400 dead have been counted on 1 Para Regt's front.... Our losses are pretty heavy too.**

K. Convey my heartiest congratulations to 211 Regt, and 1 Para Regt not quite so strongly.... I am very pleased that the New Zealanders have had a smack in the nose. You must recommend the local commander for the Knight's Cross. ¹⁵

Fifth Brigade was not going to be involved in the new attempt to

clear the way into the **Liri** valley. Briefly, the plan was for 6 Brigade to take **Cassino** and the railway station from the north, where a foothold had been obtained, and clear **Castle Hill** (Point 193), a commanding outcrop that guarded the only practicable route to **Montecassino** monastery. Fourth Indian Division would then, via **Castle Hill**, capture the monastery while the engineers completed the road on the railway embankment into the **Cassino** station, whereupon Task Force B (approximately one battalion of American tanks), some New Zealand engineers and 21 Battalion for local protection would exploit through. Other formations would follow as the situation developed.

The only part the battalion had in the operation, timed to commence on 24 February, was to occupy the railway station after its capture.

The actual time of the attack depended on the weather remaining fine sufficiently long to dry out the airfields further south. The Maoris had had no air support for their attack as every effort was being made to support the **Anzio** landing, but this time a massive bombing programme had been arranged. But, instead of drying out, the airfields became boggy as the winter rains fell steadily for a fortnight, and it was not until 14 March that the ground was dry enough at **Cassino** for the passage of tanks and at **Foggia** for the heavily loaded bombers to take off. Zero hour was finally fixed for the following afternoon.

It was during this waiting period that Private Rangiuia ¹⁶ (12 Platoon B Company) reported back after a week behind the German lines as a prisoner of war. He had been taken to the headquarters of another enemy division opposite 56 (British) Division and sent across the front with a truce note suggesting an armistice to bury the dead and care for the wounded between the lines.

The troops learned with deep regret that **General Kippenberger** had been seriously wounded on **Monte Trocchio** on 2 March. A written address of condolence and wishes for a rapid recovery from his wounds (one foot was blown off and the other amputated) was sent to the

General as a mark of the high regard in which he was held by all members of the **Maori Battalion**. The address was signed by the officers and NCOs of every platoon in the battalion. The General, in spite of his condition, insisted on replying and later had the battalion letter framed. His reply read:

Ward 4,
1 NZ MOB. CCS,
10 March 1944.

Lt-Col R. R. T. Young, Officers, NCOs and Men of the
28 (Maori) Battalion,

I have received with pride your message. It will always be one of my most treasured possessions. Further battles lie ahead of you, but mine are finished, and no more will I share in planning your battles and it will fall to others to help you in your tasks. I will still, from a distance, glory in your deeds, and grieve over your losses. I know that you will always remember that in the hands of each one of you rests the fame of your great battalion and the honour of your people. It has been one of my proudest privileges to have had the **Maori Battalion** under my command in so many battles. Now the time has come to part. I thank you and those who have served before you and wish you well. I thank you with all my heart.

H. K. KIPPENBERGER,

Major-General

Many descriptions have been written about the destruction of **Cassino** town on 15 March 1944 but few so matter-of-fact as these extracts from the battalion war diary:

0745 Bn HQ with C and D Coys all packed up ready to move fwd at a moment's call. All awaiting the big show.

0810 Own Arty still shelling the slopes of **Cassino** and an occasional

shot in the town.

0830 First wave of 30 Med bombers passed overhead and dropped their bombs in **Cassino** town. No A/A went up at all. Very good results observed. Smoke from the bombs added to the Arty shells made a very good screen and troops were able to move about.

0845 Second wave of bombers 24 in all also dropped their bombs in **Cassino**. The second 12 of the 24 bombers however mistook the **6 Bde** HQ for **Cassino** and dropped their bombs killing 15 of the **6 Bde** HQ personnel. ¹⁷ This however discouraged the men and after that all eyes were watching the bombers in case they dropped some more short of the mark.

0900 Third wave of 24 Liberators again plaster **Cassino**....

0925 20 Fighter bombers heading out over Enemy lines probably supplying an umbrella. A/A went up for the first time and from well behind **Cassino** Monastery. Fourth wave of 23 Fortresses dropped their loads both in the Enemy and own lines. Luckily no casualties suffered by us.

0945 Fifth wave of 34 Fortresses this time dropped their load right in **Cassino** town and started several small fires.

0950 Sixth wave of 31 Liberators drops their load both in the **Cassino** Town and on M. **Cassino**. Up to now the town is but a mass of rubble with no sign of life what-so-ever.

1000 Seventh and Eighth waves of 35 Fortresses and 39 Liberators again plaster the town and the Monastery. The smoke of the bombs growing intense every minute and **Cassino** could hardly be seen.

1015 Ninth wave of 12 Bostons and 12 Marauders carried their loads further up the Valley and there dropped them on some gun line or Adolph Hitler line.

1017 Tenth wave of 37 Liberators again plaster **Cassino and this time heavy A/A met them as they swung round to come back. Fighter cover still being maintained by light fighter bombers (P40s).**

1037 Eleventh wave of 40 Liberators again plaster **Cassino after having dropped some of their bombs on the Arty lines.**

1100 Twelfth wave of 43 Fortresses with fighter cover again plaster **Cassino.**

1115 Thirteenth wave of 40 Liberators drops their loads right in **Cassino and area rly Stn.**

1200 Arty opens up with full force on **Cassino Town and slopes of the hill. Again another 2 waves of 36 Bostons bomb rly Stn and **Cassino**. Even well behind **Cassino** got its share of the bombing.**

1215 Fighter bombers then took over the job of strafing and Divebombing....

1345 Still no word of moving up received yet. **6 Bde probably meeting stiff opposition. Everybody watching the shelling and Dive bombing.**

C and D Companies had already gone back to approximately the old battalion posts between Route 6 and the railway. From these positions D Company (Captain Matchaere), preceded by mine-lifters, would occupy the station after it had been captured and C Company (Captain Reedy) would provide parties to protect the engineers on several road and bridge-construction jobs.

The **25th Battalion had followed the bombers into **Cassino** while **24 Battalion** stood by in close support. Sixth Brigade, supported by a squadron of 19 Armoured Regiment, was to clear the town and **Castle Hill**, which 5 Indian Brigade would take over as the base for its job of climbing **Montecassino** and taking the monastery on top.**

Castle Hill fell early in the afternoon but resistance was stiff in the

town in spite of the cataclysmic destruction by shell and bomb. The tanks had been unable to keep up with the infantry on account of cratered roads and fallen masonry and by evening both 24 and 26 Battalions had been thrown into the fight.

In the end it was the weather as much as the enemy that prevented the complete clearing of **Cassino**. Torrential rain began in the late afternoon, filling the bomb craters and adding to the difficulties of 19 Armoured Regiment struggling to the support of the infantry. What should have been a night of moonlight was one of impenetrable blackness with the defenders knowing the locality and the attackers groping their way forward. By the afternoon of the following day (16th) most of the town was being shared with a tenacious enemy, but the vital south-west corner was still in his hands. The Indians, who had taken over **Castle Hill** from 25 Battalion, had not been able to fight their way to the summit of **Monastery Hill** and were preparing to renew their attack.



Cassino

Colonel Young, ordered to test the defences in the railway area, detailed Lieutenant Smith and twelve Maoris to work forward behind a smoke screen. They were accompanied by Lieutenant Whelan, NZE, ¹⁸ and two minesweepers to clear the way but were forced to return by fire from at least four spandau nests. On their way back a change in the

wind left them in the open and the sapper officer and two others were wounded.

In contrast to the rain on the previous day, dawn on Friday, 17 March, broke fine and clear. The second Indian effort failed and 25 Battalion, after clearing the Botanical Gardens in the centre of **Cassino**, was also stopped by fire from the Continental Hotel, the Hotel des Roses, and the houses grouped along the base of the steeply rising **Montecassino**.

No word came for the Maoris to occupy the station after its capture by 26 Battalion, as had been arranged, and they waited through the night and most of the following day. Orders came, but not the orders expected: 28 Battalion was to pass to the command of 6 Brigade and clean out the south-western corner of **Cassino**. In effect, the Maoris were to close a gap between 25 Battalion north of Route 6 and 26 Battalion south of it; then, after clearing the Continental Hotel, they were to carry on to the Hotel des Roses, where they would be met by C Company 24 Battalion holding Point 146, while a force from 4 Indian Division would clear the high ground west of the battalion objective. The way would then be clear for the sappers to repair Route 6 for the armour to go through and establish a bridgehead in the direction of Sant' Angelo.

The Maoris' start line was the western edge of the Botanical Gardens and the area to be cleared was the jumble of masonry bounded by Route 6 and what may be called for clarity the North Fork, as far as the Continental Hotel. The method to be adopted, as laid down by Colonel Young's operation order, was:

Two Coys, C and D will be involved in the operation. D Coy will search for and clear out all enemy in the objective area and take up and consolidate on western side of the objective, with front particularly directed west.

C Coy will follow D Coy at 15 mins interval and will rely on the bayonet and grenade and not fire to clear out any isolated pockets left

behind, *searching every nook and cranny.*

C Coy will take up to and consolidate on eastern side of objective (i.e. Route 6 running south) with front particularly directed east. Time of crossing start line—

D Coy 0300 hrs 19th

C Coy 0315 “ “

The troops saw to their weapons, ate the hot meal that had been delivered, and snatched a few hours' sleep while Colonel Young, his company commanders and subalterns, pored over aerial photos and selected landmarks. Nobody realised that the photographs, taken before the town was heavily bombed, were quite useless because the landmarks had been obliterated.

The CO left early to find a battalion headquarters site handy to the start line and eventually settled on a corner in the crypt of the church where 26 Battalion headquarters was already operating.

Shortly before midnight D Company led the way in single file along Route 6 into **Cassino. The road was not being heavily shelled at the time and the approach was made safely to the start line on the edge of the gardens. Behind them were the Municipal Buildings, in front an open space pitted with waterfilled bomb craters, then four hundred yards of shattered houses hidden against the deeper darkness of the side of **Montecassino**. Secreted in the rubble, in cellars, behind walls, and in houses not completely flattened were enemy strongpoints manned by paratroopers determined to hold **Cassino**. A few enemy tanks were also concealed in buildings; at that very moment there were two tanks close to the Maoris' start line. When 21 Battalion was thrown into the battle two nights later it found one in the row of buildings next to its headquarters. The fate of the other will be related in due course.**

Captain Matehaere disposed D Company with two platoons up, 18 (Sergeant Ruku Haddon) ¹⁹ right, 17 (Sergeant Mataira) ²⁰ left, and 16

(Lieutenant R. Smith) in reserve. They had not moved thirty yards when they were fired on by a machine-gun post. No. 17 Platoon silenced it and took two prisoners. This job, disposed of in a few words, took half an hour to accomplish, but the jungle of masonry and the difficulty of control posed a problem. 'It was evident that to try and move my whole Company forward would be asking for trouble,' wrote Captain Matehaere, 'therefore decided to probe with 17 and 18 Platoons, leaving 16 Platoon in reserve with part of my Coy HQ and the two PW.'

Matehaere was wounded within the next few minutes by fire from another enemy post directly in front. He told the two sergeants to try to outflank it, and when they moved off that was practically the end of coordinated movement. It was not so much an attack as a game of hide-and-seek—a grim game with a sudden penalty for the loser. As soon as one post was silenced another opened fire from a different direction and eventually 18 Platoon had to take shelter in cellars and what remained of houses. Sergeant Haddon was killed later while trying to rescue one of his men lying wounded in the open.

Sergeant Mataira led 17 Platoon up a narrow street and, noticing a door swinging open, went through to make a quick investigation. As soon as he went in the door slammed and he was in the bag. At the same time a machine gun firing on a fixed line down the lane forced the platoon to take shelter. Apparently Mataira yelled to his men to pitch a grenade over the wall—there wasn't any roof—and in the commotion that followed he emerged wounded but still able to shoot a couple of his late captors. He was awarded the DCM for his exploit.

By this time 17 Platoon was even more scattered than 18 Platoon, and before dawn a few of the men filtered back to Company Headquarters convinced that they were the sole survivors of the company.

C Company met exactly the same fate—its men lost contact and direction and took shelter wherever they could. Second-Lieutenant Waititi's ²¹ experience is typical of what went on that night in **Cassino**:

Immediately we [13 Platoon] moved into the attack I lost contact with my platoon with the exception of the section I was with. Our objective for the attack was the Continental Hotel. As far as I could make out our line of attack was fairly true. I had two sections forward and one in reserve. Occasionally I sent a man to our right to contact our other forward section but returned each time without contact. However we kept going until we came to a high bank of rubble etc which I think must have brought us up onto the sky line because we got pinned down by machine gun fire every time we attempted to go over.

We had no idea whether we had reached our objective or how far we were from it as the area we were in was bomb holes and rubble and only parts of buildings standing.... Day was breaking and we were out in the open so I pulled my men back a little and found a better position to lie up in. Contacted one other section in this position. I settled my men under **Sergt Tutaki** and then I went out to try and find Coy HQ.

Lieutenant Waititi was wounded before he found his Company Headquarters. Thirty wounded passed through the RAP before daylight prevented further movement; the others had to wait until the following night to receive attention.

The net result of the operation was a partial clearance of the triangle bounded by Route 6 and the North Fork, but the important objective, the Continental Hotel, was still held by the enemy. Our own tanks could not get further forward than the Gardens but were able to silence the enemy tanks near the Continental Hotel while our own artillery with smoke and high explosive smothered the hillside. The enemy in return smothered **Cassino** with mortar bombs. Little more except to ferret out enemy occupying the same or adjacent houses could be attempted until dark. WO I McRae, returning to Battalion Headquarters after checking on ammunition and the evacuation of the wounded, discovered the second enemy tank referred to earlier. Lieutenant Morrin, ²² 19 Armoured Regiment, who with his tank was involved in the subsequent proceedings, describes what followed and

what earned McRae the award of the DCM:

As we were pulling out once to replenish with ammunition, we had a small dump in behind the Convent, a Maori (WO I McRae) who was in one room at the end of a long building, made out he wanted us to shoot up the end room. We obliged with HE from the 75 and Browning and carried on, on his instructions, at various openings, doorways and windows, in the building. This went on for some time. We fired quite a number of rounds of HE and a few belts of Browning at a range from about eight feet to 60-70 yards. We noticed one of the Maoris, there were only two of them, had a Hun prisoner by then and the following was most natural and realistic. McRae made the Hun to understand if he told the rest of the Huns to surrender all would be well, if not he would be shot.... The movement of McRae's tommy gun was dinkum enough. The Maori won out OK and in next to no time Huns were everywhere, dozens of them. I think there were round 70-80 that came out alright and with the dead and wounded the score for the building would be near the 100 mark. My tank I think did most, if not all the shooting on this building, but 2 Lt Carmichael ²³ in his tank was on the scene before the end of the action. I omitted to mention that the prisoner was pulled out of the tank in the room. He was the wireless operator and McRae's observation was done by looking through a doorway which led into a long corridor.

McRae's haul of prisoners, probably larger than the total number taken to date, did not exhaust the supply, for the Maoris had a very troublesome day with odd snipers who had infiltrated or re-emerged in their rear. The reason for the large number of enemy being concentrated in one building has never been satisfactorily explained, but it is probable that the building was a rendezvous for infiltrating parties who had lacked the time or inclination to spread out during the hours of darkness.

There was a reorganisation after dark that night (19-20) with 5 Brigade deploying north of Route 6 and 6 Brigade south of that highway, inclusive of the railway station. The 28th Battalion was not involved as it was to return to the command of 5 Brigade, but 23 Battalion came in

and took over 25 Battalion's positions on the Maoris' right flank. One 23 Battalion company reinforced 24 Battalion in the sunken road leading to the railway station just in time to help beat back a counter-attack. The **23rd Battalion** was then disposed roughly in a semi-circle round the **Maori Battalion** from right and rear.

This battalion had come in to clear up the remaining enemy pockets. Two companies went forward at first light on the 20th but, after fairly heavy casualties, were unable to advance beyond the Maori-held area.

Enemy mortar batteries celebrated the so-far successful defence of **Cassino** by another deluge of bombs. The building above the crypt, now also used by 23 Battalion as a headquarters, received fifty direct hits. A few more tons of masonry were dislodged, all the candles supplying the illumination in the crypt extinguished, and all the signallers' lines severed; otherwise there was no harm done. And probably that was also the position in the Hotel Continental which received special attention from us.

The **21st Battalion** was the last to be thrown into the battle. It attacked on the night 20-21 March along Route 6, the boundary between the two brigades, but like everybody else was stopped by the Continental Hotel and other strongposts in **Cassino**.

Daylight found 23, 28, and 21 Battalions practically in line, with the final objectives as far away as ever. That night all battalion commanders went out by tank to a conference at Brigade Headquarters ²⁴ where each detailed the difficulties and the situation in his area.

Further frontal attacks were ruled out, but a possible avenue lay alongside the side of the hill from **Castle Hill**, trying for the Continental Hotel from its rear. One company from 21 Battalion and another from the 23rd made the attempt but they failed, and that was the last New Zealand effort to clear **Cassino**. Despite the best efforts of American, New Zealand, and Indian divisions, **Montecassino** still blocked the road

to **Rome**. The *1st Parachute Division* was entitled to congratulate itself.

It was decided to hold the line **Castle Hill- Cassino** railway station for the time being, and as the Maoris' CO, IO, and RSM had been in the FDLs for a long time without a rest the Brigade Commander insisted that they go back to B Echelon for a short spell. **Captain Logan** then took temporary command of the battalion, with **Second-Lieutenant Baker** as his Intelligence Officer.

Although there was no attack, neither was there any truce, and the Maoris endured mortaring, shelling, and machine-gunning from the hill above them until the night of 26-27 March, when they were relieved by 24 Battalion and went back to **Mignano**.²⁵ A week later the unit was back in its old area, but in the meantime **NZ Corps** had been disbanded. Fifth Army, probably very thankfully, had handed over the **Cassino** and **Liri** sectors to the Eighth Army; **2 Polish Corps** was coming out of the hills for another attempt at **Cassino** and the Kiwis were back in Eighth Army again.

The Division was to go back into reserve and reorganise and on the night of 5-6 April a battalion of **Coldstream Guards** took over the Maori sector. As was usually the case, all battalion messages from Brigade were sent in Maori through Captain Marsden. This practice avoided the necessity of using code and Maori signallers were frequently lent to other units so that their signals could be sent in clear. Sometimes, when the wavelengths were too close to those of neighbouring units, there were repercussions. Maori messages always ended with the word 'Kahuri' ('Over') and once, after a battle for the mastery of the air, an American voice was heard to say, 'Come on Sam, let's get this over while those ruddy Kahuri guys are off the air.'

It was not as easy as it sounds to take over the forward posts in **Cassino**; liberal quantities of smoke were necessary to cloak troop movements, and the enemy, rightly interpreting the laying of smoke at night, took appropriate measures. The battalion war diary strikes an authentic note:

2230 hrs—D Coy calls once more for smoke to be laid. Change over commenced but had to wait a while to allow the smoke to thicken as the enemy is only 40 to 50 yds away. More smoke was called for at various times and directed onto 35, 34, 33. At last the guns put down a decent smoke and the change over was carried out in safety. At this time a fair scrap was going on in the 21 Bn area and this demanded alertness both in our own troops and the relieving party.

2415 21 Bn mortars under orders from Bde also put down smoke fwd of Bn area.

0010 Change over completed without incident and D Coy with Bn HQ moved out. The whole of the Bn proceeded down Highway 6 moving to the cemetery area where they all embussed on RMT and moved straight back to area **Mignano**. On the way out D Coy suffered two casualties from MG fire which came over from the rly stn area.

‘Proceeding’ down Highway 6 meant marching in single file down the Mad Mile out of the town with eyes strained forward for obstacles such as stranded vehicles, dead men, and holes in the road. It also meant marching with ears strained backwards for incoming shells and with muscles flexed for a quick jump for cover. There was no cover, but you jumped just the same and chanced the unswept mine.

¹Population 5000.

²The Corps was formed on 3 February but the Indian and British divisions and the **United States** units did not join it until later.

³ **Brig S. F. Hartnell**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Palmerston North**; born NZ 18 Jul 1910; carpenter; CO **19 Bn** Oct 1941-Apr 1943; comd **4 Armd Bde** Jun-Jul 1943, **5 Bde** 9–29 Feb 1944.

⁴ Lt G. A. Asher; born NZ 31 Jul 1914; student; killed in action 18 Feb 1944.

⁵ **Maj L. F. Faram**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born tikokino, 19 Nov 1900; civil

engineer.

⁶ **Kippenberger**, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 355.

⁷ Lt G. Takurua; born Ruatoki, 23 Jun 1913; lorry driver; killed in action 18 Feb 1944.

⁸ Lt P. Rivers, m.i.d.; Awanui, **Northland**; born NZ 4 Dec 1912; contractor; wounded 23 Jan 1945.

⁹ Col R. L. McGaffin, DSO, ED; **Wellington**; born Hastings, 30 Aug 1902; company manager; **27 (MG) Bn** 1939–41; comd 3 Army Tank Bn (in NZ) Mar-Oct 1942; CO **27 (MG) Bn** Feb-Apr 1943; CO 19 Armd Regt Apr 1943-Aug 1944; CO Advanced Base, **Italy**, Aug-Oct 1944.

¹⁰ Sgt R. Koinaki; Tahuna; born Hoe-o-Tainui, 22 Aug 1918; labourer; twice wounded.

¹¹ Capt S. M. F. Martin, MC; Newcastle; born **Thames**, 20 Jun 1918; mining student.

¹² From **10 Army** reports and conversations, February and March 1944; German Military Documents Section files held in **Washington**, D.C.

¹³ The battalion's casualties were 22 killed, 78 wounded, and 24 missing or prisoners.

¹⁴ Pte M. Maihi; **Kaikohe**; born **Kaikohe**, 18 Mar 1918; farm labourer; wounded 18 Feb 1944.

¹⁵ From **10 Army** reports and conversations.

¹⁶ Pte S. Rangiuia; Tuatahuna; born Tuatahuna, 15 Jun 1919; labourer; missing 18 Feb 1944; safe with unit 27 Feb 1944.

¹⁷ The diarist has made an error here. HQ **6 Bde** was not bombed, although some other units were.

¹⁸ Lt E. L. R. Whelan, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Napier**, 19 May 1905;

builder; twice wounded.

¹⁹ **Sgt R. Haddon**; born Manunui, 21 Mar 1911; sawmill hand; three times wounded; killed in action 19 Mar 1944.

²⁰ **Capt J. W. Mataira**, DCM; **Porangahau**; born Nuhaka, 20 Dec 1914; truck driver; twice wounded.

²¹ **Maj J. H. Waititi**; **Opotiki**; born **Opotiki**, 20 Jul 1918; labourer; three times wounded.

²² **Capt T. G. S. Morrin**, MC; **Dannevirke**; born **Wanganui**, 26 Aug 1917; stock agent; twice wounded.

²³ **Lt A. H. Carmichael**; **Palmerston North**; born **Riverton**, 10 May 1917; farm employee; wounded 14 May 1944.

²⁴ Fifth Brigade was now commanded by Brigadier J. T. Burrows.

²⁵ The battalion's casualties from 18 to 27 March were 12 killed, 95 wounded, and 1 prisoner of war. Its casualties while in Fifth Army were: Killed and died of wounds 45, wounded 213, prisoners of war 22 (includes 4 wounded and p.w.).



Italy Map No.2

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 15 – ADVANCE ON FLORENCE

CHAPTER 15

Advance on Florence

THE Isernia locality in the upper **Volturno** valley some 20 miles inland from **Cassino** was an ideal rest area; spring was in the air, the ground was dry, the hills were green and sheltering trees were plentiful. The YMCA put on a picture show nightly and each company had a leave day with three three-tonners for transport to **Naples**, **Pompeii**, and **Caserta**. Platoon commanders and all NCOs down to lance-corporals did four one-hour periods of squad and arms drill daily while jobs were found or invented for any other ranks not away sight-seeing, swimming, or on local leave. And just in case the troops should find the spectacle of their military superiors engaged in elementary drill too great a magnet, there was authority in Routine Orders whereby 'Provost to have power to co-opt all interested spectators into drill squads.'

It was a happy, carefree fortnight in which everybody enjoyed himself in his own way—company seconds-in-command deplored the untidiness in the lines; **Captain Logan**, acting second-in-command to Colonel Young while Major Henare was having a spell at Base, bewailed the standard of drill; troops not on leave attended afternoon concerts by the 5 Brigade Band which included in its repertoire a number of Maori items; a brigade sports meeting was held, and 23 Battalion sent invitations to a day of donkey racing. The only occasion for regret was the marching out of **Captain D'Arcy** for duty in No. 2 General Hospital. 'Doc' D'Arcy had been with the unit since August 1942 and had endeared himself to the Maoris, many of whom had known him since that first day in the desert. Captain Miller ¹ marched in as RMO in his place.

Large-scale troop movements had been going on during this time of relaxation. Tenth Corps of Eighth Army was taking over the Apennine mountain sector from **2 Polish Corps**, which was being deployed for yet another attempt to break through the German defences around **Cassino**. The New Zealand Division was to man the left of **10 Corps'** line and protect the right flank of **2 Polish Corps**. Sixth Brigade had already

moved in and 5 Brigade was scheduled to relieve 28 (British) Brigade in the **Terelle** sector; 28 Battalion, in brigade reserve, was to take over from 2/4 Hampshires on the Belvedere ridge and begin the movement on the night of 19-20 April.

Belvedere was difficult of access and the move entailed a considerable amount of planning, but the Maoris were content to leave that to those responsible while they concentrated on a 'shipboard' race meeting which was to be held on Sunday afternoon (16 April). Six 'horses' were to be entered for each race, one from each rifle company, Battalion Headquarters, and Headquarters Company. None of the pedigrees supplied with the nominations will be found in New Zealand stud books. Some of the more pointed ones were—Half Caste by Maori out of Pakeha; Chaos by Detail out of Orderly Room; Hangover by Plonk out of Jerry Can; Disgraceful Lines by 2 I/C out of Inspection; Wishful Thinking by Soldier out of **Italy**; Brown Off by One-stop-two out of **Isernia**. There was a tote, tickets cost 20 lire, and to be quite sure everything was above board the dice officers were Padre Huata ² and Mr N. Perry of the **YMCA** staff. Racehorses, even artificial ones, are very popular with the Maori at peace or at war and an enjoyable time was had by all.

The battalion left for the new sector in the late afternoon of 19 April, stopped for tea at Ceppagua, made good time along Route 6, negotiated the Mad Mile safely and turned off to **Cervaro**, whence a narrow track wound up a ridge to **Portella**.

Guides from 2/4 Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment, were waiting to lead the men down a five-mile track to the Rapido river crossing at Sant 'Elia and thence to the lying-up area at the foot of a steep and rocky hill, the **Colle Belvedere**. While the men were marching there the cooks and QM staff were unloading their gear at **Hove Dump**, situated in a deep ravine near **Portella**. This was the end of the truck supply line, and from there jeeps filled up nightly for their trip along the ' **Terelle** Terror Track' which writhed down to the Rapido and then by ten twists up the **Colle Belvedere** to the jeep-head. All supplies forward of the jeep-

head were carried by Indian mule trains.

Up in the FDLs the Hampshire Battalion crouched behind sangars of rocks on the forward slopes of its ridge while the enemy on a higher ridge sniped at anything that moved. If he did not snipe he mortared and if he did not mortar he shelled, but on this occasion the Maoris had a reasonably comfortable area in brigade reserve—when they got there.

The troops rested in the lying-up area until the following night. B Company (Captain Anaru) had all the luck because it stayed where it was. A Company (Captain Wordley) clawed its way over loose rocks up the main gully and into *casas* strewn about and wondered why the Italians lived in such precipitous places; C Company (Captain Jackson) climbed higher to a locality near the jeep-head and hoped that Jerry's persistent attempts to blow the jeep-head off the hillside would be strictly confined to that area; D Company (Major Matehaere) went still higher to the top of **Colle Belvedere**.

The enemy indicated that he was not unaware of what was going on by slamming two shells, luckily without causing any casualties, into a *casa* housing Battalion Headquarters. The *casa*, as a house, was thereafter valueless and another one was selected.

At first light the troops were rewarded for their climb with a nice view of **Cassino** and the monastery; elsewhere there was nothing to see except hilltops dominated by the steep and snowy **Monte Cairo** behind the German lines, but towering above **Colle Belvedere** in the same manner as **Montecassino** towered above the town at its base. The relief was completed the next night and the Maoris, after minor shufflings, passed a comparatively uneventful few days in brigade reserve.

It was the unit transport drivers who had the worst of it, for each night food and ammunition had to be carried down the **Terelle** Terror Track and up the zigzag to the mule-head. Almost every chain of the road was under enemy observation at a distance of not more than two air miles; and even though it was not practicable to shell all the road all

the time it was possible to shell some of the road most of the time, and with traffic going on throughout the night the question was who was going to be unlucky. The Maori drivers' luck was in, for jeeps were blown off the road nightly without harm coming to them.

At the end of April the Maoris were relieved. The relief, by 25 Battalion, was also spread over two nights and by 2 May the unit was reassembled in the **Montaquila** area at the head of the **Volturmo** valley. The 28th Battalion was now a counter-attack reserve to 2 (British) Paratroop Brigade, which was holding a mountain sector facing Monte San Croce about three miles to the north-west.

Summer comes quickly in **Italy**. The blackened stumps of grape-vines sprouted greenery and full and tiresome anti-malaria precautions were put into force. Down in the valley the frogs were in good voice and nightingales sang. An identification parade of Headquarters Company and A Company was held because a local civilian had apparently lost a pig. All villages were put out of bounds. Te Rau Aroha came into the lines and biscuits and tea were served before the nightly screening of pictures. Concerning the programme presented on 5 May, Lance-Corporal Nepia ³ wrote:

The evening's programme by the Mobile Cinema Unit was, perhaps, the most memorable ever attended by the **Maori Battalion** throughout its long service overseas. Films depicting the Ngarimu VC investiture were shown, and the eyes of these battle scarred warriors lit as they heard and saw, once more, their native land before their very eyes. Brief and perhaps too momentary in character some of these scenes might have been, yet there was sufficient to carry them away from the sordidness of the battle fields to the realms where dwelt those whom they prized most.

For a few moments Maori girls, their own flesh and blood, danced and swayed, twisted and twirled the ceremonial poi. Brothers saw their sisters, fathers saw their daughters so close and yet so far away. With one voice they called for a repetition and the operator obliged—in slow motion. It was the main topic of conversation for days afterwards.

A looming ceremonial parade at which the GOC would present ribbons to recipients of honours and awards brought the Maoris back to the business in hand, for an inspection by **General Freyberg was not to be taken lightly. There were practice marches past, a very great deal of cleaning and oiling of weapons, and positively microscopic inspections of clothing and equipment. The General spoke to each company commander and to each of the other officers whom he remembered and was pleased to express his approval of the appearance and bearing of the battalion. Nineteen officers and men, headed by Colonel Young, were decorated. Routine Orders the next day (9 May) began:**

CEREMONIAL PARADE:

I congratulate all ranks on the concentration shown on the Ceremonial Parade. I believe that every man tried.

I wish it to be known that I regard my own award as a Bn award. It is not practicable to divide the ribbon into 700 parts, so I will instead turn on '700 pints of Vino'.

C.O.

LIGHTS OUT:

- 1. Most men need some sleep. Not all wish to be kept awake by all night parties.**
- 2. Commencing Tuesday, 9 May, 'lights out' will be at 2300 hours each night, followed by silence. Coys will enforce in their own areas. Application for late nights for parties may be submitted by Coys to Bn HQ and will receive favourable consideration.**

As for sharing his award, the CO was even better than his word, and seldom has a DSO been more loudly acclaimed.

To resume. The need for less defensive armament in a battalion fighting under Italian conditions was met by a divisional instruction, to take effect forthwith, which abolished the anti-aircraft platoon and reduced the strength and weapons of the carrier and anti-tank platoons by one half, thereby adding to the strength of the rifle companies.

A brigade sports meeting on the 11th, at which most of the events were won by 23 Battalion, was followed by an intricate 'operation', the salient features of which were that the Brigadier (now Brigadier Stewart),⁴ his staff, and the senior officers of 21 and 23 Battalions were entertained by the senior officers of 28 Battalion, while the junior officers of 28 and 21 Battalions were entertained by the junior officers of 23 Battalion. An extremely complicated table of guests and hosts ensured that NCOs and other ranks of the three units entertained or were entertained, while the 'movement orders' instructed the Maoris to move with their mugs clasped firmly in their right hands. There was a considerable number of pakehas in the Maori breakfast queues the following morning.

The entertainment was at its height when Eighth and Fifth Armies opened fire, with two thousand guns, against the enemy denying the road to **Rome**. The result of the attack was limited gains held against fierce counter-attacks on the **Polish Corps'** front, the seizing of a bridgehead over the Rapido by **13 Corps**, and a deep penetration by the French Algerian troops in the unroaded and precipitous **Aurunci Mountains** near the coast, where the Germans had made the mistake of underrating the capacity of the Algerian Highlanders to climb 'impossible' country.

Fifth Brigade, due to move into the FDLs in the near future, carried on with its training programme by day, and by night listened to the **Kiwi Concert Party**, newly returned from furlough. The Maoris relieved 24 Battalion on the night of 15-16 May and when the troops regained their wind after an arduous climb, for the line lay along the top of **Colle Belvedere** with O Pips on the crest and the FDLs on the reverse slope, it was evident that any uneasiness regarding the position around **Cassino** was not shared by the enemy opposite **Colle Belvedere**.

The German right flank was still being forced back although his left was as yet securely anchored on **Monte Cairo**. Sixth Polish Brigade attacked again during the night 17-18 May and by daylight the Polish

Sztandar was flying above **Cassino** Abbey. The only difference in the Maori sector was a bigger and better rain of mortar bombs to which the battalion replied in kind.

Colonel Young wrote later:

Our posns on the Belvedere sector were on the reverse slope of a very steep hill (Mt Belvedere), entailing a stiff climb and precipitous, from BHQ to the FDL's near the top. An ideal site for mortars, both for the en and for our own and one of the greatest problems was to get adequate supplies of bombs up to the guns. These came up by mule train after dark each night with the rations and, though we fired many hundreds of bombs we had to leave a large dump when we vacated the area at short notice as we had neither the time nor the mules to remove them.

The air became more electric daily as the 'sitreps' disclosed the enemy right reeling backwards, the centre collapsing with the Eighth Army pushing up the **Liri** valley and the hold on **Monte Cairo** weakening. By the 24th the whole German line across **Italy** was thinning out preparatory to a fighting with-drawal northwards; that night patrols from 23 Battalion met no opposition and then 21 Battalion, with the road to **Terelle** as its axis, entered the hilltop village, from which their positions had been overlooked for so long, without a shot being fired.

It was the job of **2 NZ Division** to secure the right flank while the attack gained momentum after being stalled for so long, and in pursuance of this directive 5 Brigade was to move down mountain valleys to an important road junction at **Atina**. Beyond **Atina** the narrow valley widened into the upper **Liri** valley, to where **Sora** guarded the entrance to the valley leading to **Balsorano** and **Avezzano**. **Avezzano**, east-north-east of **Rome** and about half-way between that city and the **Sangro** battlefields, had been the objective of the **Sangro- Orsogna** fighting.

The Maori Battalion stayed perched on **Colle Belvedere** while the Poles cleared up pockets of enemy on the base of **Monte Cairo** and 21

and 23 Battalions slid down the ridges to the **Belmonte- Atina** valley. Two days later (27th) the Maoris marched down the track from which the 'Terror' had been eliminated, parked for the night in *casas* at the Sant 'Elia crossing, and were picked up the next afternoon by a platoon of 4 RMT trucks.

The route from Sant 'Elia was up the Rapido valley then over a ridge and down to **Belmonte**. From Belmonte the narrow, dusty, and winding road led to **Atina**, beyond which by a few miles the enemy rearguard was being worried by 21 and 23 Battalions and a squadron of Divisional Cavalry.

It was not possible to debus south of **Atina** and the convoy continued on until the valley widened north of the town. The sun shining on the lorries' windscreens heliographed the arrival of the column to the observant enemy. A sighting smoke shell was followed by high explosive and there were a dozen casualties, including Captain Lambert and Lieutenant Mataira, before the troops scattered. The companies were disposed among the cover of olive trees and in spite of searching shells many of the battalion took a quick swim in the nearby **Melfa**. The Italians call the **Melfa** a river, but actually it is only a creek by New Zealand standards. Enemy shells claimed one more victim before darkness ended the firing. Captain Ornberg had just left the CO when his jeep was hit and he was fatally wounded.

Later the same night the troops were moved forward in close support to 21 Battalion, which was about to attack the hilltop villages, **Alvito** and **Vicalvi**, and occupy **Monte Morrone**. The latter feature was too heavily defended and remained in enemy possession, a thorn in the side of everyone within artillery range, but the other objectives were taken before the day ended.

The position then was that 23 Battalion was sealing off all roads leading to **Atina**, 21 Battalion had formed a line along a side road from **Vicalvi** to **Alvito** with a detachment of Divisional Cavalry prolonging the line to the right, and the enemy was holding the Morrone hill

immediately in front. Sixth Brigade, not yet required, was making leisurely progress along a well-cratered road.

The next morning the battalion marched a couple of miles under cover of the trees lining the road to the crossroads where the branch turns to **Alvito**, and there it waited for the **Melfa** bridge and other demolitions to be put in order for wheeled traffic. The enemy was still holding **Monte Morrone** but, according to prisoners of war, had orders to break contact before pressure became too great. And that would be any time now.

The cavalry threw a screen between Morrone and the Maoris on the **Atina- Sora** road and Colonel Young was directed to secure the crossing of the Fibreno by seizing the Monacesco feature across the river. The Fibreno was twenty yards wide at this point, and of course the bridge had been ruined. Jerry was very thorough about such matters.

The valley which the Maoris had been following widened considerably beyond the Fibreno, with fairly level country on the left and hills on the right. The strategically important town of **Sora** on Highway 82 lay four miles further on.

Colonel Young had under his command for the operation B Squadron of 20 Armoured Regiment, a detachment of 8 Field Company, and on call one platoon of machine-gunners. The tanks were to be in position by first light.

The four-mile advance to the river, which began about 9 p.m. as soon as it was sufficiently dark, was an anxious affair owing to the darkness of the night and the lack of information on the strength of the enemy. C Company, right, and D Company, left, with the road as the axis of advance, felt their way carefully forward, but difficulties of terrain and poor wireless reception made it hard to keep direction. Company commanders were thankful that there were no enemy to add to the uncertainties of the night.

The enemy rearguard was not very far away, however, and as soon as

daylight disclosed the presence of engineers working along the river heavy mortar concentrations forced a serious delay in the provision of bridges. The enemy effort was ably assisted by two Spitfires which strafed Battalion Headquarters and set nearby *casas* on fire. Aircraft recognition signals only seemed to annoy them for they came back and fired some more houses before they left for home. The supporting tanks were parked along the road close to Colonel Young's headquarters and their presence seemed to infuriate the enemy mortar teams. Taken by and large, Battalion Headquarters was a very tumultuous locality until the tanks moved back out of sight.

The second phase of securing the crossing was carried out by the same two companies. C Company, working under good cover, found a ford and the men waded the waist-high river with their rifles held above their heads. They met no opposition and were soon in possession of **Colle Monacesco**. A rather one-sided engagement occurred later in the day when an enemy party about forty strong made a leisurely approach; the enemy clearly expected to find nobody in the vicinity and nothing was done to disabuse them until they were very close. A volley from rifles and automatics mowed them down; very few escaped.

D Company's objective was **Brocco** village, situated on a hill-side to the west of **Colle Monacesco**. It had a commanding view of the approach to **Sora** and of the Fibreno bridge site. Like 21 Battalion's **Monte Morrone**, it was clearly a rearguard post and there would be no peace for the sappers until it changed hands.

The river at the bridge site was too deep to wade but a crossing was effected by borrowing a flat-bottomed boat from a very reluctant Italian. It did not take the Maoris long to convince him that their need was greater than his. Maoris have a way with them in such a situation.

Eight men could cross at a time, and with the good cover the company was soon safely across and deployed. About ten in the morning the advance towards **Brocco** began over stone terraces, through half-grown grape-vines, and around scattered houses. Fire was heavy but wild

and there were some neat tactical problems for the section in attack. There were diversions also, such as when an Italian rushed down the hillside and warned Major Matehaere that there were eight or nine Germans in a house straight ahead and that they had taken all his poultry earlier in the morning. The troops closed in on the *casa* only to find that the occupants had left hurriedly without having their breakfast, which was laid out on the table. The Maori platoon stayed long enough to repair the omission.

Major Matehaere writes:

The attack from this stage became very sticky and the going was tough. I lost three very good soldiers who had seen a great amount of fighting through the desert and **Italy**. We were held up for a while in a small group of buildings at the foot hill of Brocca, pushed on that evening and the village was in our hands before morning.

There was no further movement elsewhere during the afternoon but after last light two companies of 23 Battalion relieved A and B Companies south of the river, whereupon they took up positions along a creek at the bottom of **Brocco** hill preparatory to the advance on **Sora**.

The brigade plan was to widen the front by bringing 23 Battalion forward, and from a base on **Colle Monacesco** to exploit into the hills east and north of **Sora** while cavalry Staghounds took care of the left flank.

The bridge was not ready until mid-morning when the battalion, with the armour in close support, moved towards **Sora**. There was no opposition at first and little later owing to the vigilance of the tanks, which shot up any likely strongpoint, and to the fact that D Company was moving along the hills parallel to the road. According to D Company's commander it was an interesting day:

At this stage we were really enjoying this war business. Not since the desert battles had we seen anything like this. It was like a day out

shooting rabbits. Germans were going in all directions and my company was enjoying every minute of this part of our advance. There were casualties among the other companies.

C and A Companies passed through **Sora** without much trouble and took up positions covering the western and northern approaches; B Company, to whom fate had again allotted a railway station as part of its objective, was held up for some time by a strong post. The road into **Sora** at that point is very open and the tanks using that axis drew fire from the hills north of the town. There was also a large hole in the road which the engineers did some good work in repairing under fire so that the armour could get at the opposition holding up the Maori advance. The GOC was up with the troops at this time and witnessed a smart action best told in the terse 20 Regiment manner:

Leading tank of No. 5 Tp fired at by SP gun from rd junc G. 668 ⁴⁷⁴. Tank retaliated with AP and HE. A patrol of Maoris was contacted and sent forward. Patrol reported SP gun KO'd and A.tk gun by house one hundred yds from SP gun. Tk fired HE and inf patrol went in and collected 3 PW. Tank was KO'd by A.tk gun, posn unknown. No casualties in tank.

This patrol was commanded by Lieutenant Rogers. ⁵ It silenced the anti-tank guns and collected in all ten prisoners. Lieutenant Rogers was wounded, apparently lightly, in the leg and expected to be back with his unit quite soon. News of his death, however, was received a few days later.

Battalion Headquarters settled into a three-storied house on the outskirts of **Sora** where it was visited by the GOC and the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser. The **23rd Battalion** was having a tougher time in the hills around **Campoli** and it was not until the morning (1 June) that its men were securely in possession.

The intentions for Thursday, 1 June, were for 28 Battalion to exploit for two miles along the road to **Balsorano** while 23 Battalion pushed on

across the hills to **Pescosolido** and secured the flank. Sixth Brigade would occupy **Sora** and push forces along the western side of the **Liri** valley.

A Company, right, and C Company, left of the road, each with a section of carriers under command, and D Company in close support with the battalion anti-tank platoon in a mobile role were not molested, and the troops dug in for the night and reconnoitred the area. Late that night 23 Battalion was reported to have pushed on to Forcella.

B and D Companies took the lead the next day and covered a very long four miles towards **Balsorano**. The way was across foothills criss-crossed by secondary roads and tracks which had to be investigated, and separated by small streams running down to the **Liri**. The enemy, on high hills to the north-east, had an excellent view of the exploitation and from time to time signified his disapproval with field guns.

The first mile was done at a fairly fast pace because the tanks had good going and the troops had to sacrifice some caution to keep up, but a 'blow' in the road at an awkward spot gave everybody a couple of hours' rest.

The unit objective for the day was the Colle Prospero and there the troops settled into *casas* on each side of a creek that would be an obstacle to wheeled traffic until the bridge was repaired. The **23rd Battalion** had been halted in the Forcella area, leaving a considerable gap between the two units, but of course it was tougher going in the hills.

The plan was to push on again the next day, but upon representations from the CO that the troops were footsore after three days' hard marching and climbing the order was countermanded and 21 Battalion took over the probe towards **Balsorano**. The position was strongly held and 21 Battalion, under orders not to get involved in heavy fighting, did not make much progress. This was one of the few times that a hot breakfast failed to arrive, but the Maoris were not unduly put

out, for with time on their hands and a plentiful supply of vegetables and live-stock around the abandoned houses, no great demands were made upon the unconsumed portion of the day's rations carried on the man.

The **21st Battalion** was to make another attempt to enter **Balsorano** that night (3–4 June) and **28 Battalion** was warned to be ready at short notice to support it, but the order was later cancelled. **Sixth Brigade** had by this time advanced along the western side of the valley and the job was handed over to it as having the easier approach. The COs of the leading units had made their reconnaissances and were on the point of opening their thrust when their operation was also cancelled.

This apparently pusillanimous decision was the result of information not available to the lower formations—the Americans were on the point of entering **Rome**, so that the enemy rearguard would have to move northward with some rapidity and without any prodding by **2 NZ Division**.

During the day (the 4th) word was flashed to **London**, to **Washington**, to **Wellington** that the Americans had occupied **Rome**, and the next day **5 Brigade** was relieved by the **Divisional Cavalry** and the **Maoris** went back to **B Echelon** area in the positions they had occupied before they crossed the **Fibreno**. It was thought that they would be there for three days before joining in the pursuit of the retreating enemy, but it was not until the 13th that word came to move and then only to the divisional concentration area near **Arce**, ten miles or so north-west of **Cassino**. The whole situation had been altered by the opening of the **Second Front** and the landing of the **British** and **American** forces on the coast of **France** on 6 June. In the mean-time, **6 Brigade** had passed through a deserted **Balsorano** and entered **Avezzano**—seven months behind the original schedule and from the opposite direction.

The **Maoris'** casualties in the advance from **Terelle** were 9 killed, 10 died of wounds, and 54 wounded.

The Eighth Army reserve area was in the **Liri** valley around the junction of the Route 6 which the Maoris had thankfully departed from in front of **Cassino** and the Route 82 which they had cut at **Sora** and followed towards **Avezzano**. They were located on a flat facing Route 6 and, with the exception of one or two platoons, were in bivvies, no hardship in the height of an Italian summer. After the capture of **Cassino**, and with the spread of the fighting northward, the area had been fought over and many of its houses had suffered damage.

Opportunities occurred from time to time to renew acquaintance with the former battleground, and the number of destroyed German tanks and vehicles strewn along the road, more plentiful nearer **Cassino**, was heartening evidence that Jerry had found Route 6 as uninviting as the Maoris had themselves found it.

After action comes reaction; discipline under fire is natural to well-trained troops—and so is mischief in a reserve area where amenities are not plentiful. Colonel Young clamped down hard on the practice which was creeping in of treating tattoo reports as something of no consequence, and saw to it that, at least by day, his command had plenty to occupy its time. During the next four weeks the Maoris ‘square-bashed’, route-marched, weapon-trained, mine-detected, and manoeuvred unceasingly; a daily leave quota of three men per company supervised by an officer left for **Rome**, a battalion swimming team practised in the **Fontana Liri** baths and the troops turned on concerts for themselves at night. A brigade swimming carnival, witnessed by **General Freyberg**, no mean swimmer himself in his day, was won by the battalion with 51 points, but it must be admitted that Corporal Whareaitu, ⁶ an outstanding swimmer, was responsible for a large number of points secured by the unit. The **23rd Battalion** was runner up with 20 points.

Meanwhile the German line was receding northwards as slowly as an energetic advance would permit towards the Gothic line stretching from

Rimini on the east coast, along the Apennine Mountains, and thence to **Pisa** on the west. General Alexander was aiming at a quick break through the partially prepared Gothic line into the Po valley, and the New Zealand Division was for the third time in **Italy** cast in an exploitation role—and for the third time the exploitation did not happen.

The city of **Florence** on the River Arno was the immediate objective, but stubborn resistance north of **Rome**, including a stand south of **Arezzo**, 40 miles south-east of **Florence**, upset the timetable. Thirteenth Corps had used up its reserves and 6 Armoured Division was in urgent need of supporting infantry in its coming full-scale attack on that mountain-encircled rail and road centre. The New Zealand Division was the brick most immediately available and it was thrown at very short notice.

Sixth Brigade left for the fight on the night of 9–10 July and 5 Brigade, under orders to concentrate in reserve near **Lake Trasimene**, followed the next night. The travelling under cover of darkness and the obliteration of vehicle signs and the removal of all titles, badges, and other identification marks was done in order to keep the Kiwis' move a secret. How successful was the ruse is a matter of opinion—the Italians were certainly not deceived and they were not all on our side.

The first staging area was 30 miles north of **Rome**, the second 100 miles further north, and the last leg of the journey a daylight drive around the western side of **Lake Trasimene**, a little smaller than Taupo, to the foot of a high hill on which perched the town of **Cortona**.

The situation in front of **Arezzo** was that the commander of *10 German Army* had forbidden further withdrawal and *305 Division* had been ordered to hold firm on **Monte Lignano**. To hold **Monte Lignano**, **Monte Camurcina** and subsidiary peaks had also to be held. Sixth Brigade proceeded to chase the enemy off these hills, thereby clearing the flank of 6 British Armoured Division and enabling it to drive through to **Arezzo**.

The 28th Battalion found its situation among the hills of **Tuscany**, one of the most fertile districts of **Italy** where wine was of the most palatable and as plentiful as water, extremely easy to endure. The CO prescribed another session of intense training, lengthy route marches, confinement to battalion areas and the stoppage of all leave for both officers and men.

This corrective programme was relaxed when the Taupo leave scheme was announced—all married men of the 4th Reinforcements, plus a proportion of the single men (already drawn by ballot), were to march out to Advanced Base forthwith en route for New Zealand. **Major Logan**, Captains Wordley and Anaru, and twenty-seven other ranks were farewelled and there were sounds of revelry by night. The battalion war diary for 18 July ends:

2000 hrs. A party was held in HQ Coy lines as a farewell to Capts Anaru and Wordley and also to **Major Logan**. CO and all offrs attended ... the party lasting to 2330 hrs. As the Bn had a late night tattoo was at 2359 Hrs. Weather: Fine and hot. Visibility good. No sign of rain yet.

There was, of course, soldierly work ahead and the farewell with its appropriate concomitants was just an episode in the life of 28 (Maori) Battalion. Captain Wordley's successor in command of A Company was Captain Mitchell, and Major H. P. Te Punga succeeded Captain Anaru in command of B Company.

Sixth Brigade had cleared the way for the British armour at **Arezzo** and **2 NZ Division** was in the course of being switched to another sector further west where, under command of **13 Corps** and flanked by 6 South African Armoured Division, right, and **8 Indian Division**, left, it was to take a narrow front of three to four miles and drive through to the River Arno. The main thrust line was the road from **Castellina** to **San Casciano**, thence across broken country direct to the **Signa** crossing about six miles west of **Florence**. The country was eminently suitable for the German purposes—hilly, wooded, thickly populated, and with innumerable buildings to serve as strongpoints. The weather was fine

and hot and the roads inches deep in dust, so that movement by day was signalled to the enemy on the high country north of the **Arno**.

During the night 21–22 July the battalion was carried 60 winding, dusty miles through **Siena** to the area held by **2 Morocco Division**, and then, after a two-mile march over hill and dale, took over the FDLs before dawn. The troops found themselves in a country of low hills, small valleys and many streams. Roads and tracks wound along the tops of ridges, mostly tree-covered, to villages only a mile or so apart. The brigade dispositions were 23 Battalion on the right, 28 Battalion, left, and 21 Battalion in support at **Castellina**. The enemy was conducting a fighting withdrawal, the result of the fall of **Arezzo**, and the New Zealanders' instructions were to seek out his rearguards and ensure that the withdrawal continued. Brigade would detail times and distances but each unit would deal with its own local situation.



Maori Battalion's advance to Florence

The **23rd Battalion** was sent off soon after the Maoris had settled in; its first objective was **San Martino** a Cossi and it had a hard fight to take and hold the village. Colonel Young was directed towards **Tavarnelle**, about three miles away along a highway running north-east. Patrols reported that the country in front was almost deserted and it was thought that 23 Battalion had scared the enemy away. One enemy party was located and dealt with. Lieutenant Hubbard ⁷ (B Company) was

returning from a fruitless quest when he saw suspicious movement in a two-storied house near by. Private Bluett ⁸ volunteered to go and look the place over and disappeared into the undergrowth. He wormed his way into the house and on the ground floor surprised a German who was sent out with his hands in the air. An officer appeared on the stairs, fired at Bluett and missed; Bluett fired his tommy gun and did not miss. He then ran up the stairs, burst through a hastily closed door, wounded two more Germans and killed a third.

C Company (Captain Jackson) led the attack along the road with A Company (Captain Mitchell) and a troop of 18 Armoured Regiment tanks following. B Company (Major Te Punga) spread down the hillside, covering the right flank, and D Company (Captain Tomoana) conformed on the left and open flank.

Tignano was unoccupied but there were enemy in a nasty frame of mind not far away. The road had been so thoroughly cratered that the tanks could not get into the village until an alternative route had been found, so the troops were halted for the night with C Company forward of **Tignano**, A in the village, B near Spicciano and D in la Fornace. The tanks were through by daylight and the battalion, still in the same order, moved on **Tavarnelle**. The enemy had left during the night after blowing the road. The march was unopposed but was held up until the craters were filled in. The inhabitants of **Tavarnelle** did not seem very enthusiastic over their deliverance, but the men of C Company were not put out by the lack of reception committees for they found something there more to their liking. There was a shop in the village with a nice display of piano-accordions, and the next phase of the operation saw Maoris with slung rifles emitting noises from their new toys that would have put a team of novice bagpipe players to shame. The flanking companies were by this time well ahead. A Company remained in **Tavarnelle** and C Company, with accordion accompaniment, moved on until it arrived at some fallen trees, where it was halted.

B Company met slight opposition past Spicciano and after reporting

the incident, which had resulted in eight prisoners, one of them wounded, went off the air. Battalion Headquarters heard nothing more from it for some time but Lieutenant Maika ⁹ fills the gap:

The advance went smoothly. Bedded down that night with rumours going around—Tigers ahead. Met opposition following morning [already referred to] Tiger tank at point approx. ½ mile NW of Tavernelle. Could hear it firing as we approached villa on a knoll. Trigger happy soldier fired at villa. Tiger heard it and saw us. Plastered the area—shells bursting all round. Went to ground except Major Te Punga coolly striving to locate it. Yelled out to bolt for the villa. Orders from Te Punga to press on and take advantage of copse on left of villa to a house on the other side of the knoll. Tiger was now plastering the copse. Casualties here. Wounded some of C Coy which was on B Coy's left. Shells cutting tree tops. Arrived at house: open country ahead: ordered to stay put. Tiger still firing but not in our direction. Could now see it silhouetted against white wall of a cemetery on ridge immediately in front—800 yds. Major Te Punga endeavouring to raise BHQ for Arty. Tiger firing a few rounds to the right and then swinging barrel hard left and firing a few rounds there. Believe it was responsible for knocking out a few Shermans. Suddenly swings barrel in our direction and drops smoke shell in front of our house. 'Scram,' says the Major, 'We'll go back to the villa up the top; safer there.' We all agreed. Unexplainably Tiger stops firing. From villa we see it moving forward away from the wall; disappears behind olive trees, the tops of which could be seen against the white wall.

We are now observing at leisure. With the naked eye could see Jerries getting out of slit trenches—some of the Jerries had divested themselves of their jackets and we could plainly see the whites of their singlets against the dark patches of soil from their trenches, sunbathing. Sigs still can't raise BHQ and Major Te Punga has gone off there.... Pongo Major arrives in a Sherman and believe it or not he's opipping for the Long Toms. We tell him there's a Tiger ahead but he is very sceptical. After all, we can't see it, so neither can he. But when we

pointed out the sun bathers to him he immediately contacted his guns and asked for 50 rounds, paused—'Fire'! Jerries, olive trees and cemetery disappear in a cloud of smoke and dust, and above all a red flame shoots up followed by dense black smoke. The Tiger had had it I presumed.

The company passed the cemetery in the morning and the Tiger had 'had it' right enough.

Meanwhile D Company had pushed on past Palagione but was halted until the tanks got around some demolitions and silenced a few spandaus firing from a group of *casas* ahead. The next delay occurred soon afterwards at a place where trees had been felled across the road, and while a track was being sought through some hastily laid mines a shower of shells fell into the area. The troops left the tanks to find a way around the obstacle, for once past the fallen trees they could see where the opposition had been coming from. Sergeant Patrick ¹⁰ sketches the scene:

From here we could see a huge casa or villa ¹¹ across the gully from us and close to the road. There was a plantation of trees to the right of this building and from the bottom of the gully which was very steep the land sloped fairly gently. A spandau was firing from one of the windows and there was a fair amount of activity in the trees around the casa too. We fixed bayonets and went down the gully and up the other side pretty well worked up too. But 18 Platoon beat us to it. The en. must have seen them coming for they left their defences and scampered back to the building. The trees seemed alive with running men, and the yelling of the Maoris added to the din created by the shouting of the Jerries. We killed a few but the rest disappeared and we presumed they had entered the casa. We searched but found no one in it. It was a tremendous building and I remember a beautiful piano in it. I think it was one of the most beautiful that I have ever seen or heard. Tom West ¹² tried his hand at it and managed to belt a fairly good tune out of it. Aussie Huata, our Pl Comd, told us to get out and continue the advance. Outside some of our men had located two a. tk guns, one a stepped up 75 mm which must have been responsible for the damage to our tanks earlier. These

guns were well concealed in the trees.

It was dusk by this time and C Company was sent forward to fill the rather wide gap between B and D Companies. Some of the Maoris occupying the [Villa Bonazza](#), more thirsty or more persistent than D Company, found their way to the cellars and returned with about two dozen Germans who, with the benefit of local knowledge, had hidden there when they left the shrubbery.

Fifth Brigade had now forged ahead of the flanking units and, though 23 Battalion had felt most of the opposition to date, 28 Battalion did not have a very easy night with enemy troops and two Tiger tanks reported in the vicinity. Both troops and tanks, however, had departed when the advance was resumed in the morning (24th). The CO had been instructed to make for Podeste del Sodo, about a mile away, and the dispositions were C Company, right, D left, and B in support; A Company was to remain in [Tavarnelle](#) in the meantime, and the Divisional Cavalry was looking after the open left flank.

Platoon commanders and section leaders had need of their fieldcraft this day for the country was very rough with enemy on every forward slope, but the troop of 18 Armoured Regiment excelled itself in traversing the hillsides and earned the approval of the Maoris by its marksmanship. D Company, on the open flank, worked along the road towards a large house, the Villa Cantuccio, the centre of the usual small crossroads village. The enemy had left during the night and all the civilians were crowded in the church. Goodness knows what stories they had been told and what treatment they expected. C Company made contact with 23 Battalion, which was having trouble in chasing a reluctant enemy off a high hill. When he had been constrained to depart, C Company carried on to Podeste del Sodo.

Meanwhile D Company was directed towards il Pino, just outside the divisional boundary. There it met a platoon of A Company, the carrier platoon, and elements of the Divisional Cavalry who had come up by the road through Noce. D Company then struck for Cellole, the last objective

for the day, about a thousand yards north along a narrow track. The day's operations ended with D Company in Cellole, C at Podeste del Molino, B at Podeste del Sodo, and A Company with Battalion Headquarters on the unit's axis. Colonel Young picked a large and palatial villa with a tower as his headquarters, but in the morning he wished he hadn't because an enemy shell scored a direct hit on it, bringing the whole structure down, killing one British artillery officer and wounding another who had made it their OP.

The third day of the thrust towards **Florence** opened with C Company clearing a party of enemy from a crossroad on the route and then, with B Company in close support, going on to take temporary possession of the Villa del Corno. D Company bypassed del Corno and established itself in Villa Arrighi, near the road junction at **San Pancrazio**. The country was still heavily wooded, its hills rolling to steep; small mobile—very mobile—parties of enemy held strategic locations and again the Maoris were full of admiration for the tank crews, who worked their vehicles across gullies and over hills, shooting up everything that looked like an enemy hideout.

At midday A Company and Battalion Headquarters were established in a *casa* near del Corno. C Company was told to remain in del Corno and B was passed through to the left rear of D Company. That flank was wide open, with the Indians somewhere in the rear, and needed strengthening.

Opposition was mounting, and D Company on resuming the advance had a very sharp fight and took twenty-three prisoners at the road junction Belvedere, near **Lucignano**. That was the limit of the day's programme and nightfall found the battalion with D Company at Belvedere, B in support in Villa Guicciarno, C in Villa Arrighi, A Company and Battalion Headquarters still in del Corno.

During the day Colonel Young, who like **Colonel Love** at **Sollum** had been fighting an attack of jaundice, was evacuated to hospital and when **Major Awatere** arrived to take over from Captain Jackson, temporarily in

command, he brought the news that 21 Battalion was relieving the Maoris that night. More accurately, 21 Battalion was coming in to the area with the intention of attacking **Poppiano**, but the Maoris were to stay in their present positions until daylight.

For D Company, which had had a very arduous day, there was more to come. **Major Awatere** was showing Major Dymock ¹³ of 21 Battalion the D Company dispositions when quite a sharp counter-attack came in and the two senior officers found steady employment filling magazines for the automatics. Captain Tomoana went from post to post encouraging his men, and when the position seemed serious took up a Bren and showed how they were used in the **Western Desert** when he was a private soldier. The company was fired on periodically during the night and it was comforting to know that D Company 21 Battalion was in the vicinity. At first light a pakeha platoon went out to test the enemy dispositions but found more enemy than it could deal with and returned with half a dozen casualties.

B Company was relieved by A and returned to the Villa del Corno, followed by C Company. The villa, typical of the homesteads in **Tuscany**, where the landowning class maintained itself in feudal style, was large enough to hold the whole battalion, tanks included. Flower gardens, vegetable gardens, orchards and vineyards acres in extent surrounded the villa, while green paddocks and cultivated fields divided by lines and thickets of poplar trees must have needed an army of peasantry to keep them in order. D Company, among similar surroundings, still stayed with 21 Battalion under orders to follow up and occupy **Poppiano** when it fell to that battalion.

Meanwhile San Casciano was blasted from the air and then captured by a mixed force of tanks, armoured cars, and 22 Battalion. **San Casciano** was on one end of a ridge and **Poppiano** on the other, so when 21 Battalion cleaned out **Poppiano** and subsidiary points on the night 26–27 July and D Company of the Maoris moved in to occupy the village, the way was cleared for 6 Brigade and 4 Armoured Brigade to move in on the right of 5 Brigade.

The Maoris were given the task of protecting the divisional left flank until the Indians drew level. This they did the following morning, and the unit was then concentrated around Poppiano and the men did some much-needed washing and mending.

Sixth Brigade was striking at Cerbaia through a tangle of wooded ridges and in the face of a desperate defence, for any deep penetration would open a short and indefensible route to Florence. Fiercely pressed counter-attacks slowed and finally stopped 6 Brigade and 5 Brigade was switched from the left to the right of the divisional front.

The 28th Battalion, with C Company Commanded by Captain J. S. Baker in place of Captain Jackson, seconded for duty at Advanced Base, left by truck after dark for the San Casciano area to take over a part of 23 Battalion's line. The 23rd Battalion had already taken over a part of 22 Battalion's front and when 21 Battalion followed in a reserve role, covering the right flank until the South Africans got up, 5 Brigade was again ready for work.

While the Maoris were settling in, 23 Battalion tried for Sant' Andrea about a mile away but found it too strongly held. The 23rd returned to the attack in the morning and this time occupied the village but had a tough time holding it. It was now the usual story of waiting for the support arms to get past the demolitions while the field guns tried to keep enemy tanks at a safe distance.

Colonel Awatere was warned that 5 Brigade was attacking again that night with 28 Battalion on the left of 23 Battalion. He was told that he might have to fight for his start line. For the main attack he had the assistance of a half-squadron of 20 Regiment tanks, a machine-gun platoon, a troop of 39 Mortar Battery, a detachment of 7 Field Company and a bulldozer. A seventy-minute artillery programme would precede the attack, which would commence at 10 p.m.

The CO issued his orders: the battalion axis was the road San

Casciano- Cigliano- Faltignano and the advance of about 1000 yards was to be made by C Company, right of the road, and A Company on the left; Sergeant Matchitt ¹⁴ would take 13 Platoon to clear the start line half an hour before the zero hour. This was done in workmanlike style with six enemy killed for no loss to the platoon.

The start was delayed by the barrage opening too close to the start line and by the enemy's defensive fire, but after half an hour's delay the troops got away without casualties but also without the benefit of the barrage. The country was rough and heavily wooded and the two companies were soon out of wireless contact.

C Company made fair progress against light opposition—only ten enemy were killed and one wounded prisoner, who died later, was taken—and two, perhaps three, tanks were encountered. Support arms were waiting for demolitions to be filled so the company was withdrawn to a more favourable position about 300 yards back.

A Company, meeting similar light opposition, was roughly in line although the tanks firing on C Company were a worry to it. The **23rd Battalion** was largely on its objective with support arms in position.

The axis road was very badly cratered and all vehicles were re-routed through 23 Battalion's area and the attackers told to wait until they arrived. Meanwhile the engineers with the bulldozer were working on the Maoris' road. The engineers were under fire and were having an awkward time.

One 17-pounder was through before daylight and B Company, ordered to fill a gap between the forward troops, was in close support. Patrol reports indicated that the enemy was pulling back again and the advance was resumed. The objective, a ridge top (Point 250), was but 100 yards away when a tank duel ended with the loss of one Sherman and C Company was again withdrawn to the protection of some houses. A Company reported that it was sheltering in a wadi a quarter of a mile further back.

An artillery stonk induced the Tigers to depart but not to any distance. Captain Baker, quite fed up with the prospect of further delay, decided on a bold and hazardous move. No. 13 Platoon had lost its commander (Sergeant Matchitt) and five others who had been wounded by a shell or a mine while crawling through a line of grape-vines and was drawn into reserve with 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Mahuika). No. 14 Platoon (Lieutenant Paniora), ¹⁵ with the help of two tanks still with the company, was directed to work around the enemy and cut the road behind them.

The Tigers recognised the danger and departed, this time for good. No. 14 Platoon, accompanied by the tanks and supported by machine-gunners, ended the movement by a 500-yard attack with the bayonet towards the road. Germans behind rows of vines were trapped and killed, some twenty of them, and the road was reached without a casualty.

No. 14 Platoon was in high good humour for the exhilaration of the charge with the tanks and the business at its conclusion was recompense for the days of marching over the **Tuscan** hills and through the **Tuscan** timber. Lieutenant Paniora was wounded before Captain Baker arrived and although the objective was passed the Ngatiporou leader had the bit in his teeth. A huge villa set on a small knoll took his attention. He sent 13 and 15 Platoons at it and acquired an enemy RAP complete with staff, lacking only a doctor. C Company was now a mile ahead of where it should have been and prudence suggested consolidation. No. 14 Platoon was ordered forward to another *casa* near by and after a sharp fight took possession. The company casualties for the day were twelve for about 30 Germans killed, 6 wounded, and 6 prisoners. For this action Captain Baker was awarded a bar to his MC.

The general position was that **2 NZ Division** was still the spearhead of **13 Corps** and was about to make a last thrust with all three brigades in an endeavour to push the enemy right back across the **Arno**. The **23rd Battalion** had been relieved by a unit from 6 South African Armoured Division, the **Free City of Cape Town Highlanders** (FC/CTH for short)

under command for the time being of 5 Brigade, who would watch the open right flank while 23 Battalion reorganised in reserve; 21 Battalion was moving up and the Maoris would open the 5 Brigade fight by advancing B and D Companies through A and C as far as the line from Poggio delle Monache crossroads to la Poggiona hill, thereby linking up with 6 Brigade.

The troops were to skirmish forward at 8 a.m. (1 August) but before that hour a minor disaster had occurred; the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Stewart, was missing. He had set out at daybreak to visit 28 Battalion, had missed the Battalion Headquarters sign, and was on the point of turning back when he found himself looking down the barrel of a German gun. The Brigadier was unarmed. Colonel Pleasants ¹⁶ was sent forward to take command and pick up the threads as best he could.

Both companies, D on the right of the road and B on the left, were under mortar fire from the start, but with the help of the support tanks advanced to the next crossroads about half a mile forward. A group of houses held by the enemy was shot up by the tanks and C Company established itself in the *casa* le Montanine. B Company, under fire from la Poggiona, was forced to take cover in the Villa Tavernaccia, where three tanks broke up a counter-attack from the direction of la Querciola.

Major Te Punga was then directed not to attempt la Poggiona without further orders but Captain Tomoana was to capture his objective if at all possible. Sergeant Patrick describes the outcome:

Enemy tanks were located near the road junction close to **Poggio Issi**. We did not realise this till afterwards. We lined up near the *casas* and attacked across the flat ground, through trees and vines towards Villa Treggaia. Just before we reached it we saw the tanks. We pulled up smartly and doubled back to the La Montanine group of *casas*.

We mounted brens in as many strategic points as possible. We watched enemy infantry prepare a set attack on our position. They came through the trees keeping as much as possible to cover. We shot as

many as we could see. They reached our casas and we knew we were surrounded. During the fighting our Coy Comd. Capt Tomoana was wounded. It was then that Pte G. Mate ¹⁷ drove his Jeep RAP up the main road, then swung in along the connecting track to our group of houses. The enemy were all around. He picked up the wounded and drove off with the enemy staring at him.

The enemy kept firing at our windows and doorway. A stonk, ordered by the Coy Comd, came down among the vines and trees. Some of the Jerries raced back out of range. During a lull in the fighting we evacuated the posns and not a man was lost in the operation. The Jerries found out a little too late and kept up a running fight with us. We reached Vla Nidiaci (the start line) without incurring any losses.

The 28th Battalion was ordered to consolidate on its present position and 21 Battalion was warned to take over after dark. It had more than a taste of what the Maoris had been experiencing, plus a slice of really hard luck with a barrage, for its attack was to be a set-piece operation. An error had been made about the locality of the forward positions, either through an inaccurate 'sitrep' or through not realising that D Company (Second-Lieutenant McRae) ¹⁸ had pulled back from its furthest crossroads, or perhaps through one of those things that sometimes happen to signal messages. The barrage opened behind the enemy lines and 21 Battalion was turned back. The following night (2-3 August) there was no mistake and 21 Battalion was digging in on la Poggiona before dawn. Elsewhere the battle was going according to plan and Colonel Awatere was ordered to pass 28 Battalion through and carry on. The 23rd Battalion was coming up again and Florence was just over the hill.

A and D Companies led the unit in the morning along the road to Giogoli, a small village about two miles ahead. They were on the top of the last hill now with a tree-lined road and heavily timbered valleys dropping down to the flat country along the Arno. Enemy gunners still had the road in their range, but the rapidity of the onfall had upset the German engineers' demolition timetable and the Maori support arms

were not hampered from carrying out their protective duties. Two hours' scrambling through the thickets saw the troops down on the flat and in **Giogoli**, where they found no enemy but cellars full of civilians.

The **23rd Battalion** had its own axis of advance, and between the two units a strongpoint had been bypassed and was giving **Giogoli** its undivided attention. B Company was disposed to cover the unit flank and the companies dispersed into *casas* around **Giogoli**. **Scandicci**, an outer suburb of **Florence**, lay barely three miles away on the western bank of the Greve.

Orders for the next day's operation were that C Company was to push on to the River Greve, with B in close support, and establish a crossing; D Company was also to move forward and seize a crossing. Early in the morning Lieutenant McRae rang through to **Colonel Awatere**—Jerry was pulling out from **Scandicci** and what about following him?

Permission was granted and Sergeant Patrick describes the result:

Early next morning we saw some Jerries moving through the trees in the direction of **Florence**. We followed after them. We passed **Scandicci** and reached the River Greve. The bridge as usual was a mess. We crossed over and saw the tram lines. We were thrilled for we knew that these must surely lead in to the town proper. We were tempted to carry on without the tanks. We decided to wait for them and when they came up we mounted and went as far as the American Countess's villa. Here we dismounted and advanced on foot to the River Arno reaching it at the site of the Ponte della Vittoria. The enemy was still sniping from across the river from among the trees in the park. Our tanks however fired a few HE into the trees silencing the opposition.

B Company was also quick off the mark. Lieutenant Maika tells a vivid story:

We were just sitting down to a breakfast of Galinas when we were

told to move, and fast. Two or three times during the push we were caught like this, but this time I was determined. I told my batman to bring the pot with him.... And so we swept down to the plain that was **Florence**. There was evidence all around that Jerry had completely broken off and even now was sitting on the high hills just north of **Florence**. The road was now getting lined by civilians and the nearer we approached the city the larger the crowd got and the louder the cheering. We were being showered with flowers, offered fruit, bigger and more luscious than any we had acquired along the long march from **Siena**. In all it was a great welcome, spontaneous, warm and genuine. By this time we had reached the outskirts of the city. The crowd had completely disappeared. A loud crash of a Jerry shell down one of the streets promptly brought our minds back to the job on hand.

C Company also encountered no opposition. It crossed the Greve and, when Battalion Headquarters could not be contacted by radio, Captain Baker decided to carry on to **Florence**. The men were in complete accord and an occasional shell did nothing to slow up their private entry into **Florence** via Route 2. The Germans had evacuated all civilians from a two-kilometre strip south of the river, or rather they thought they had, for the 'Vivas' and waves from windows indicated that the order had not been completely obeyed.

Where the unauthorised occupation of **Florence** might have stopped is a matter for conjecture for at this juncture **Colonel Awatere** received urgent orders to halt the battalion in its tracks. It was then concentrated in the **Monticelli** suburb and made itself at home in houses while it did some plain and fancy souveniring and waited for the next move, which, it decided, would undoubtedly be across the river into the city proper.

It was mistaken. The New Zealand Division had finished its job in that locality and was to move west and shield a reorganisation of forces; the Americans were moving in and the Indians moving out preparatory to the next thrust against the Gothic line.

The battalion, on one hour's notice, put up with a little desultory fire from across the **Arno** while a Canadian brigade selected quarters for itself, and the next day (6 August) 5 Brigade moved back to the **Poppiano** area where B Echelon had bivvies erected and showers working. That night, with the pressure off once more, the troops gave themselves a party; the officers also held a party in honour of Major Matehaere, who was marching out to a tour of duty in England.

Coincidental with the fall of **Florence** were large-scale troop movements designed to expedite the enemy withdrawal. Except for patrols, the Germans had retired behind the **Arno** and **2 NZ Division** was to winkle out any remaining posts, reconnoitre the river for crossing places, and cover the changeover between the Indians and the Americans. The Maori Battalion, being in brigade reserve, was not greatly interested beyond marching a few miles nearer the scene of operations. This was done in the evening of 7 August and the unit found itself facing Empoli, 15 miles west of **Florence**. **Empoli**, a communication centre about the same size as **Cassino**, was the ultimate objective of night-time 5 Brigade probes towards the river.

B Company was put under command of 21 Battalion for the final clean-up and moved into battalion reserve during the night of 9–10 August. The following night the whole Division surged up to the riverbank but did not risk any heavy fighting in **Empoli**—if the Germans stayed there they would be blasted out by the Air Force. No. 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Maika) was asked to work along the western outskirts of **Empoli** and see if there were any tanks there. The platoon kept off the streets and progressed via the backyards. No tanks were found and no civilians encountered, but the troops had a lesson in the art of booby-trapping a building. At a school they came upon, one of the Maoris, on peeping through a shell hole through the wall, saw a wire tied to the back-door knob and disappearing behind the oven door of a large coal-range on the far side of the kitchen. A second look disclosed a Teller mine fixed to the wire; all you had to do was to open the door. The platoon felt that it had seen enough of **Empoli**.

B Company was ordered to enter Empoli the next afternoon (11th) while C Company 21 Battalion stood by to reinforce if necessary. Major Te Punga's plan was to attack up the centre of the town by three parallel streets and to keep going until held up. No. 12 Platoon (Lieutenant Francis) right, 11 Platoon, centre, and 10 Platoon (Lieutenant Ransfield)¹⁹ on the left moved cautiously forward, with half a platoon on each side of the street very carefully watching the windows on the other side.

The three side-streets joined a main street near the river, and it was not until the platoons were nearly there that they were straddled by a salvo of shells and took shelter in convenient buildings, carefully avoiding those which were not partly demolished, as the best way to dodge booby-traps. Notwith-standing these precautions there were some casualties.

Lieutenant Maika, at the head of his platoon, had an exciting few moments:

We could not go on any further as there was a demolition right on the cross road and it was impossible to climb it. The corner building was partly demolished so I took the Sigs bloke with me (Pte Apanui)²⁰ and wormed ourselves under and through the rubble into a room the door of which opened out on to the street crossing ours. I came out. By now it was getting gloomy. Looked up the street to my left and saw a group of blokes at the far corner; naturally I thought it was Johnny's [Ransfield's] platoon. I yelled out in Maori, 'Johnny, it's us.' Just as well the light wasn't the best because the reply came back in the form of spandau bursts. I couldn't get back through the door quick enough. However I had a Yankee automatic rifle so I emptied the magazine in their general direction, taking pot shots.

While this one-man war was being conducted, C Company 21 Battalion was moving through the Maoris to take over for the time being. The 28th Battalion was to occupy the town the following night. Back in the unit area a muster parade heard some very pithy remarks from the Colonel concerning its bizarre taste in civilian headgear; bell-

toppers vied with Homburgs while women's bonnets were not unpatronised. The light-hearted Maoris regretfully discarded their grotesqueries and prepared to move into **Empoli**.

The **21st Battalion** moved back into reserve as its companies were relieved by 28 Battalion, and the dispositions then were that D Company held the right half and A the left half of **Empoli**, C was in support at Cortenuova, and B in reserve at la Moriana.

A Company, with two troops of tanks assisting, was to mop up remaining enemy pockets during the afternoon (13th) and proceeded to do so in the face of considerable mortar fire from across the river. Twenty-five Germans were killed for the loss of two wounded and the company established itself in the street overlooking the river. A warning order from Brigade that 338 Regiment of 85 US Division would take over 5 Brigade's front on the night 15–16 August, whereupon the brigade was to move to a non-operational area, was received with acclaim.

The changeover took place in due course and the Maoris staggered to the trucks, not from exhaustion but because of the weight of the souvenirs they were carrying. B Company, being under command of 21 Battalion at the time, had escaped the CO's strictures regarding unauthorised dress, but Major Te Punga had to take action when one of his toas appeared wearing a top hat and an overcoat with a fur collar. He had on a pair of shiny topboots and carried an umbrella in one hand, a mandolin in the other, and his rifle slung over his shoulder. The Americans thought he was a partisan who had joined the Maoris, for one was heard to remark, 'That guy's a civilian I guess, but he sure is black.'

Some reorganisation in the battalion command occurred before this move: Major Te Punga transferred to D Company, Second-Lieutenant Harris ²¹ relieved **Lieutenant Hayward** as liaison officer at 5 Brigade and the latter took command of B Company. **Lieutenant Hayward** had commanded the battalion carriers from **Alamein** to **Tunisia** and had recently rejoined the battalion after furlough.

The battalion's casualties in the Florence campaign were:

Killed	24
Died of wounds	8
Wounded	111
Prisoners of war	4
	—
TOTAL	147

¹ **Capt T. F. Miller; London; born NZ 24 Sep 1917; medical practitioner.**

² **Rev W. Te T. Huata, MC; Hastings; born NZ 23 Aug 1917; Anglican minister.**

³ **WO I E. H. Nepia; Lower Hutt; born Nuhaka, 17 Nov 1910; school-teacher.**

⁴ **Maj-Gen K. L. Stewart, CB, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); Kerikeri; born Timaru, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 NZEF 1917–19; GSO 1 2 NZ Div 1940–41; Deputy Chief of General Staff Dec 1941-Jul 1943; 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; Adjutant-General, NZ Military Forces, Aug 1946-Mar 1949; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949-Mar 1952.**

⁵ **Lt Te W. Rogers; born Rotorua, 24 Jun 1914; civil servant; wounded 8 Dec 1943; died of wounds 8 Jun 1944.**

⁶ **Lt W. Whareaitu; Ohinemutu; born Okauia, 15 Aug 1908; labourer; twice wounded.**

⁷ **Capt J. Hubbard; Rotorua; born Patetonga, 6 Oct 1921; carpenter; wounded 13 Dec 1944.**

⁸ **S-Sgt R. Bluett, MM; Taneatua; born Whakatane, 25 Apr 1920; labourer; twice wounded.**

⁹ **Lt R. Maika; Rotorua; born Taumarunui, 10 Jan 1910; forestry worker.**

- ¹⁰ **Lt P. W. Patrick; Auckland; born Waerenga, 15 Nov 1921; clerk.**
- ¹¹ **Villa Bonazza.**
- ¹² **WO II T. B. West; Bluff; born Bluff, 4 Mar 1909; oysterman; twice wounded.**
- ¹³ **Maj J. H. W. Dymock, m.i.d.; Te Karaka, Gisborne; born Gisborne, 3 Nov 1915; shepherd; twice wounded.**
- ¹⁴ **Sgt R. H. Matchitt; Tokaha; born Opotiki, 3 Nov 1912; farmhand; wounded 31 Jul 1944.**
- ¹⁵ **Lt S. Paniora; born NZ 18 Feb 1919; labourer; three times wounded; killed in action 15 Dec 1944.**
- ¹⁶ **Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn Jul-Oct 1942; 18 Armd Regt Oct 1942-Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep-Nov 1944; 5 Bde 1-22 Aug 1944, Nov 1944-Feb 1945, May 1945-Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander, Fiji Military Forces, 1949-53; Commandant, Northern Military District, Oct 1953.**
- ¹⁷ **Cpl G. J. Mate; Auckland; born NZ 8 May 1905; motor driver.**
- ¹⁸ **Maj W. S. L. McRae, MC; Little River, Canterbury; born Blenheim, 1 Dec 1913; station manager; twice wounded.**
- ¹⁹ **Capt J. Ransfield, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Rotorua, 24 Dec 1905; truck driver; twice wounded.**
- ²⁰ **L-Cpl M. Apanui; Opotiki; born Opotiki, 9 Feb 1916; labourer; wounded 2 Nov 1942.**
- ²¹ **Capt I. G. Harris, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 10 Oct 1914; farmer; twice wounded.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 16 – THE RIMINI CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 16

The Rimini Campaign

ALONG and dusty night drive ended in the wooded Chianti hills four miles north-west of **Castellina**. **Colonel Awatere's** first order after the troops had settled in was that every man must write at least one letter home.

The battalion stayed there for ten easy days; each company spent twenty-four hours swimming and sunbathing at a beach three hours' drive away near **Follonica**; leave to **Rome** reopened and there was daily leave to **Siena**. **Siena** had been liberated by French troops without any damage to its treasures of art and architecture, but it must be admitted that its greatest attraction to the troops was a restaurant opened by 6 South African Armoured Division and courteously made available to New Zealanders on leave. On the 24th the battalion lined a road and cheered a column of dust that enveloped a car containing **Britain's** Prime Minister, Winston Churchill; the next day Second-Lieutenant Ngapo ¹ and an advance party left for parts unknown—everything was very 'hush-hush' for a surprise concentration was being aimed at.

Around **Florence** the Fifth Army was now facing the Apennine mountain chain while on the Adriatic coast the right flank of the Eighth Army had edged, sometimes bloodily and sometimes without opposition, up the narrow corridor from the **Sangro** to within 30 miles of the seaport city of **Rimini**. Beyond **Rimini** the mountains swung west past **Florence**, and from **Rimini** along those mountains was the German Gothic line guarding the Po valley and the industrial north of **Italy**.

The plan to break the Gothic line was to give an impression of great activity on the west coast north of **Florence** while a breakthrough force was concentrated for an all-out offensive on the Adriatic coast. When the enemy reserves had been drawn away from the American Fifth Army, it in turn would breach the mountain barrier, join the Eighth Army in forcing the **Po River**, and the war in **Italy** would be over.

The brigade column left in the evening of the 27th and the route,

about 120 miles the first night, was through **Siena**, San Quirico, Torrita, **Castiglione del Lago**, around the north of **Lake Trasimene**, **Perugia** to **Foligno**. Colonel Young, fit and well again, looked in for a few moments before preceding the unit to **Iesi**, its destination for the time being.

A later start that night took the column another hundred miles right through the mountains to the Adriatic coast. No headlights were permitted but the Maoris, with implicit faith in the drivers, got what sleep was possible in swaying lorries screaming in low gear as they climbed the road's hairpin bends.

The Iesi area was something over one hundred miles north of **Orsogna** of unpleasant memory, 15 miles from the coast and quite near the **Esino River**. Colonel Young resumed command of the battalion, with **Major Awatere** as second-in-command and Captain Lambert adjutant. The company commanders were:

HQ Company: Major J. C. Henare

A Company: Major H. M. Mitchell

B Company: **Captain E. V. Hayward**

C Company: Captain J. S. Baker

D Company: Major H. P. Te Punga

The weather was still hot, dry and dusty, and sleeping out was no hardship. Battalion Headquarters lived on the top floor of a farmhouse; the family, the pigs, fowls and cows shared the ground floor.

The attempt to gatecrash the Gothic line by rushing the last 30 miles to **Rimini** had started a few days previously. It also served the purpose of masking the concentration of the remainder of the ten divisions, 1200 tanks, and 1000-odd guns that were to drive through to the Po.

Colonel Young told his company commanders that as far as he could

gather there would be no more operations for the battalion until after 8 September, when 6 Brigade would force a bridgehead across the Po and 5 Brigade would take part in an aquatic right hook. The **3rd Greek Mountain Brigade** was joining the Division for an operation which must not be permitted to falter for lack of manpower. An exchange of officers would probably be made and engineer detachments would give instruction in mine detection to all ranks.

The Polish Corps, which had been on the Adriatic coast for the previous three months, had already completed its programme by clearing the enemy off the south side of the River Metauro. Behind the Poles and unknown to the enemy, 1 Canadian and 5 British Corps were balancing themselves for the breakthrough but **2 NZ Division** was in Army reserve for the time being—the traditional exploitation role had been assigned to it once again as on the **Sangro** and **Cassino** fronts. As far as the Maoris were concerned it was a continuation of the rest period and the fruit was just as ripe, the tomatoes just as red, and the corncobs just as toothsome as in **Tuscany**.

Swimming parties were taken almost daily to the beaches and the local river was quite handy for the others; there was talk of selecting a Rugby team to tour England after the war—say in about a couple of months' time—and games started at platoon level. Everything was just fine, with the exception of one fly in the ointment or rather one mosquito, for the area was malarial and got worse further north. The troops did not all appreciate the importance of anti-malaria precautions—daily use of mepacrine tablets, frequent applications of repellent cream, the nightly use of sleeping-nets—and the Colonel had some hard words for his company commanders; nor did NCOs escape his ire for he promised a court martial to each one brought before him on a charge of neglect of duty. Thereafter anti-malaria precautions became a very important part of the daily routine. Supervision was reinforced by mention in Routine Orders, such as the footnote dated 3 September:

PS: 28 (NZ) **Maori Battalion** have so far had only four (4) cases of Malaria this season. Will there be a FIFTH? Will it be you?

The Division stayed a week around **Iesi** while the Eighth Army ground its way, albeit a little slowly, up the corridor between the mountains and the sea. There were still rivers every few miles and fighting of the bloodiest nature at each crossing. The Polish Corps went into reserve with its job well done and **2 NZ Division** was told to edge up a little nearer the battle in case the breakthrough happened. Sixth Brigade, as previously mentioned, was earmarked for the pursuit role just as it had been ten months earlier on the **Sangro**.

The Maoris considered that the **Mondolfo- Fano** locality, 30-odd miles north, was even better than around **Iesi** because the blue and sparkling Adriatic was only a quarter of a mile away and the beach was perfect for sunbathing. To the left were the low foothills of the mountains, still enemy-held but disregarded. The enemy could stay there or leave as he pleased; **Rimini** and the plains beyond were the objectives and the time for worrying about flanks had passed. To the right and not so far over the horizon lay **Greece**, where the Maoris had met their first enemy; and not so far to the north the Canadian Corps, with the help of the New Zealand artillery, was pounding the stubborn Germans who had, temporarily, stabilised their line along the **Coriano** ridge.

But the Eighth Army was beginning to tire. It had had eight thousand casualties since the start of the offensive on 25 August and no replacements; first priority was being given to the Second Front. The only fresh formations left were **4 British Division**, **2 NZ Division**, and 25 Tank Brigade. The newly-arrived **Greek Brigade** had been put temporarily under command of the Canadians to get battle experience, but if it got an overdose of experience it would be of no use to the New Zealand Division for it also had no reserves.

The Maoris' syllabus of training included street fighting and route-marching in the mornings, but the A and B football teams were excused all duties and reported to Sergeant Kingi for tactical exercises—Rugby tactics of course. Padre Huata commanded another excused-duties party for the purpose of constructing a stage for a concert to be put on by 18

Armoured Regiment. It proved to be a very enjoyable affair and was attended by Brigadier Burrows and most of 5 Brigade Headquarters staff. A route march by A Company also proved very enjoyable, for one platoon returned with a fowl dangling from the belt of each man. The platoon was quite unperturbed by the horrified looks of Authority and swore that the Italian peasantry had rushed up and presented each man with a fowl and that absolutely no persuasion had been used. The lack of complaints about missing poultry proved that this was not a case of Maori mendacity. Such was the pattern of life behind the lines—everything was fine; Paris had been liberated, the Fifth Army was going well in its thrust through the mountains, and Eighth Army was closing in on Rimini and the gate to the Po valley. The 21st Battalion delivered a blow to Maori morale by defeating the A team by 14 points to 8, but a tabloid sports meeting held on the beach on 13 September, followed by a celebration in honour of the 7th Reinforcements' third anniversary overseas, helped to restore their spirits.

Up in the battle line sterner things were afoot. A plan had been worked out whereby 5 Canadian Armoured Division would capture the Coriano ridge and then, in seven successive phases, 1 Canadian and 4 British Divisions would carry the offensive forward and establish a bridgehead over the Marecchia River. And then 2 NZ Division, with 6 Brigade leading, would exploit through the bridgehead along the axis of Route 16. The operation would commence on the 13th and 6 Brigade had already moved up to Gradara in readiness for a dash towards Ravenna. The Division had come under command of the Canadian Corps three days previously.

Brigadier Burrows had passed this information to his unit commanders. Colonel Young wrote:

Discussions had previously taken place at Bde Hq at which conference all Unit comds. and comds. of the sp [support] arms were present, on the most effective order of march for the Bn when entry was gained to the plains of Lombardy. It was anticipated by the higher

command that we would soon be at the gates of the Po hard on the heels of the en. In the event however of increased resistance by the enemy and the resulting slowing up of the advance this should only put plans back for a month or two.

That was for the commanders to worry about and the Maoris continued to enjoy themselves in their own way. As Colonel Young records:

At night the Maoris would hold song singing gatherings, and limited quantities of vino would help liven matters up a little. It was a treat for a pakeha to listen to their melodious voices. Often I was invited to one or other of these impromptu concerts, a pleasure indeed to me. I was tempted time and again to accede to requests for a solo but I managed to resist all offers.

In passing, it is interesting to note that the enemy High Command had not been aware of the transfer of the New Zealand Division to the Adriatic coast but was now beginning to suspect its presence through two circumstances that had, in fact, nothing to do with the Division—the enemy had been attacked by night, notoriously a New Zealand custom, and the presence of dark-skinned troops in the line had been established. The dark-skinned troops happened to be the Gurkhas of 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade, but it was a nice compliment to the Maoris for there is no tougher fighter than the little man with the razor-sharp kukri. The yarn used to go that so keen was the edge of a kukri that a German never knew when his head was severed from his shoulders until he sneezed!

Fifth Brigade edged up a little nearer on the 16th. The Maoris were located in a group of houses about eight miles north-west of Pesaro. It was close enough to the fight to be able to hear the growling of the guns, New Zealand, Canadian and English, firing in support of the offensive now getting set for the crossing of the Fortunato ridge and the forcing of the many-pronged Marecchia River. The Greek Brigade had fought several sharp actions and 22 Battalion was now with it.

An important alteration to the original plan of securing the **Marecchia** bridgehead had been made at a conference of the divisional commanders and passed on to the brigadiers and unit commanders. It might be that the Canadians could not break the German defence on the Fortunato ridge and establish the bridgehead. Fifth Brigade would then be used to cross the river, whereupon 6 Brigade Group would pass through and exploit in accordance with the original plan. It was hoped that this alternative would not be necessary.

Brigadier Burrows and his unit commanders went off to high country at **Coriano** to look over the terrain and possible objectives; 28 Battalion went over to 21 Battalion area to help organise a football ground. The attack on the Fortunato ridge was timed for the morning of the 18th. Meanwhile, the Maoris beat Brigade Headquarters 13-9.

The operations of other formations, particularly large formations, are not much dwelt upon in a unit history, but the attack on the Fortunato ridge is noteworthy for the use of a technical weapon that had been tried out in **Italy** in the First World War and then forgotten. 'Artificial moonlight', as it was called, was the result of beaming searchlights on adjoining hills or low clouds overhead, from which the reflected glow gave sufficient light to assist night movement. In the **Western Desert** darkness, owing to reflection from the sand, was never absolute, but in **Italy** a really black night inhibited the free movement of large bodies of troops.

The success of the experiment resulted in artificial moonlight being provided whenever necessary and often several areas were lighted up to provide an element of uncertainty as to the exact locality of a new attack. The surprise and dismay of the enemy is evidenced by the following extracts from captured German documents:

Conversation between Maj-Gen Wentzell [Chief of Staff, **Tenth Army**] and Lt-Gen Roettiger [Chief of Staff, **Army Group C**], 1045 hrs 19 Sep.

W: Last night he did the weirdest thing I ever saw. He lit up the

battlefield with searchlights.

R: From the sea?

W: No, on the land. He turned on a display like a party day in Nuernberg....

R: They will do that again tonight.

W: I don't know what we are going to do about it. We may detail a few 88-mm guns to deal with them.... Could we send a few aircraft over?

R: I'll see what I can do.

W: It is a great worry to the boys to be lighted up and blinded and not be able to do anything about it. ²

The initial moves in the Fortunato attack appeared to be going well and 6 Brigade, deployed for the coming breakthrough, camouflaged itself among the guns around [Monticelli](#), which area had been cleared by 22 Battalion and 3 Greek Brigade with the assistance of some New Zealand tanks. Towards midday a different picture emerged from the mass of situation reports coming in from the forward units and it appeared that the enemy might be able to hold on the Ausa River at the foot of the objective ridge. Fifth Brigade was ordered to stand by ready to reinforce the Canadians. At that moment there were three different plans being considered by General Weir ³ to cover the possibilities of the changing situation, but in the end 5 Brigade did not move that day or night. In the morning (19th) the Maoris just scraped home against 21 Battalion B team 10-9; at 2 p.m. they were lined up ready to move into the fight, and at 5 p.m. the move was cancelled until next morning.

They really did move the next morning (20th) about nine miles forward to a location between the [Rimini](#) airfield and [San Lorenzo in Strada](#). The Canadians were now fighting for the Fortunato ridge and the bridgehead over the [Marecchia](#) was to be established by (a) 5 Brigade, or (b) [1 Canadian Corps](#). Sixth Brigade would still lead the breakthrough

with 5 Brigade in reserve, though 5 Brigade was to be prepared to take over the advance at a moment's notice.

The brigade was now the most forward New Zealand formation, and as shelling at extreme range was possible trenches were dug. During the day Colonel Young was instructed that 5 Brigade would not move again until the Canadians, still mopping up on the hard-won Fortunato ridge, had established the bridgehead over the Marecchia. A few hours later the signal came:

Move forward to the lying up area south of the Ausa tonight. Details later.

The 'Details later' consisted mostly in altering the time to start, but eventually firm instructions to leave in trucks at 7 p.m. were received. It looked as if it would be a dirty night with lowering rain clouds, and that is what it was. The route, northwest, only five miles to the lying-up area between the Ausa River and the **San Marino** railway, was over secondary roads winding and narrow, cratered and obstructed with the debris of war. The rain began to pour down in torrents and the clay roads became first skating rinks then quagmires. The men were still in light summer clothing and bivvies had been left behind. The area was under shellfire and the troops dug themselves in, with the alternatives of standing up in the open in the rain or of standing in the slit trenches and watching the water creep up their legs. One man was killed by a direct hit on a carrier.

Orders for the brigade were now firm but the timing was still subject to alteration. The **21st Battalion** group, right, and 28 Battalion Group, left, were to enlarge the **Marecchia** bridge-head, whereupon, as previously arranged, 6 Brigade would pass through. As for the enemy, he had appreciated that with the loss of Fortunato ridge the only thing to do was to surrender **Rimini** and fall back behind the same river the Canadians were to cross. So, during that dark night of 20-21 September and after twenty-six days of continuous fighting as bitter as any in the war, the Germans were getting their guns and supplies north of the river

which was the boundary between the corridor and the open plains of northern **Italy**; 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, representing the country that Mussolini had set out to conquer, was getting ready to make a triumphant entry into the Italian seaport city of **Rimini**; 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade was on the march towards the river it was to force; 5 NZ Brigade was waiting the word to enlarge the Canadian bridgehead; 6 NZ Brigade Group was waiting to exploit through into a country supposed to be a tank playground; and rain was falling in torrents.

The objectives given 5 Brigade were two canalised rivers or, according to the season, creeks which run across the Promised Land of the **Romagna**. The first, the **Scolo Brancona**, was about three and a half miles north of the **Marecchia**, and the second, not to be attempted if the opposition was too severe, was the Rio Fontanaccia another mile further north. But, in any case, the brigade was not to impede the passage of 6 Brigade Group. The **23rd Battalion** would remain in reserve.

The jumping-off place was behind a railway line and the route to it was along a track then being put in order by the Canadians over the eastern end of the Fortunato ridge.

The approach march was finally fixed to begin at 3.30 p.m. on the 21st and the method was for the forward companies, A (Major Mitchell) and D (Major Te Punga), to ride on the tanks of A Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment while B Company (**Captain Hayward**) and C (Captain Baker) marched behind them. Support arms were to use their own transport.

The Maoris were very taken with the novel transport arrangements and made light of the buck-jumping propensities of their chargers—until a sudden break in the rain that the Germans were praying would continue and everybody else was cursing most heartily disclosed their presence to enemy gunners. (The Germans still held high country to the north-west.)

The enemy gunners' aim was much too accurate and the troops 'detanked' while their conveyances sought shelter. Colonel Young

signalled for smoke to hide his forward companies while they marched down the ridge to the flat country along the riverside. The smoke was supplied, but between the haze and the failing light the companies took different tracks and wireless contact failed between them and Battalion Headquarters. There was some marching and counter-marching before the bridge they were looking for was located, and it was well after dark before the platoons were established in *casas* between the river and a railway embankment that ran across their front. The **21st Battalion** was not far away on their right and the tanks (Captain Passmore) were nosing around for hide-ups.

Colonel Young established his headquarters in Casa Guida near the bridge that had been used by the forward companies, and the reserve companies, who had not lost touch, were in *casas* along the Sant' Andrea road near by. Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey ⁴ (21 Battalion) also moved into Casa Guida and for some time both commanders were in the same position of not knowing where their forward companies were. The **21st Battalion** re-established wireless contact and Colonel Young went on a reconnaissance to find his missing men. He had no trouble in locating them because they were where they should have been, and final arrangements were made for the move forward which was to begin at first light or as soon afterwards as practicable.

The company commanders were warned that their left flank might be exposed as no word had been received from **4 British Division** operating on the left of the Canadian Corps, or from 5 Canadian Armoured Division which was to move out from the British bridgehead. To keep the picture in focus, **4 British Division** had cancelled its attack because of the shocking weather and consequently was twelve hours behind the New Zealand timetable.

In addition to the uncertainty on the brigade left flank, neither Colonel Young nor Colonel Thodey had been informed that the portion of 4 Armoured Brigade not in support of the assaulting troops had sought and obtained permission to take over a part of 21 Battalion's front so as to be in at the kill. The 'tankies' had an idea that **Venice** would be a nice

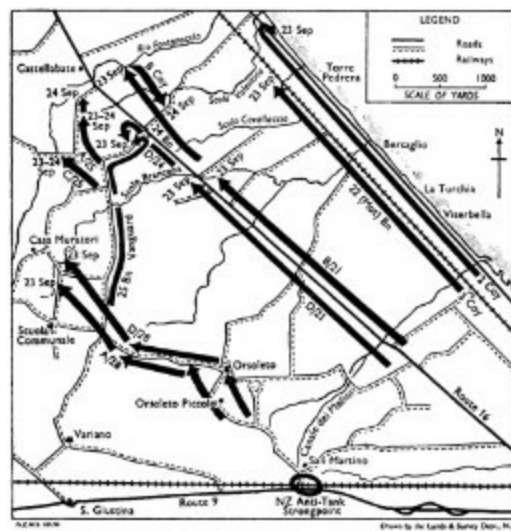
place for a rest area.

The **21st Battalion** was attacking along the axis of Route 16 and 28 Battalion's axis was, initially, a secondary road from **San Martino**, across the railway, to **Orsoleto** about a mile away. The 2nd Battalion of the Somerset Light Infantry should be handy on the left flank, but to take care of any trouble that might ensue through their non-appearance, Colonel Young moved C Company, the 3-inch mortars, and the attached platoon of machine-gunners into a position protecting the possibly open brigade flank.

Before the troops go into what was hoped and what the enemy feared was the breakout into the Po valley, let us take a quick glance at the country which would be fought over in the morning. The foothills sloping sharply north-west left behind an ever-widening plain, pancake flat. It had been and could easily again become a swamp; only stopbanked rivers and innumerable smaller watercourses, 'Fosso' and 'Scolo', plus a pumping system prevented it. Besides supporting a human beehive, particularly along the coast, the clay soil was a dustbowl in summer and a morass in the rainy autumn—and autumn was very near. It was more than near; it was overdue.

Horticulturally, the area was given over to grape-growing. Those familiar trellises were strung from tree to tree at thirty yards' interval. The vines, still in full leaf and fifteen feet high, were like a series of drop scenes on a stage. Irrigation ditches, never more than a mile apart in any direction, and *casas* hidden in the greenery made wonderful strongposts for a determined enemy intent on a slow withdrawal behind the Rio Fontanaccia. There were only two main highways which ran along embankments. All other secondary roads were unmetalled, narrow lanes.

And what of the enemy? The German forces on the Fifth Army front had been denuded to a dangerous extent; the Eighth Army front was held by thoroughly worn divisions salvaged from the earlier fighting but reserves were still available.



ADVANCE TO RIO FONTANACCIA, 23-24 SEPTEMBER 1944

Advance to Rio Fontanaccia, 23-24 September 1944

On our side the Fifth Army, fighting through the **Apennines**, had also been denuded of formations switched to **France**; in the Eighth Army the New Zealand Division was the only fresh fighting formation left and there were no reinforcements available. **Italy** was now only a secondary theatre with the task of keeping as much enemy strength as possible away from the vital French theatre.

On 5 Brigade's front the two unit commanders, Colonels Young and Thodey, were attacking with two companies forward, in the case of the **Maori Battalion** with D on the right and A left the axis road. The time fixed upon was 6 a.m.

Most of the enemy strength had been disposed along 21 Battalion's road axis. Consequently, the Maoris were not heavily engaged. The enemy's policy seemed to be to hold the top stories of houses, with other posts cunningly sited in drains; 18 Regiment's 2 and 4 Troop tanks shot up the houses while the infantry searched the drains, but the German tactic was, apparently, to hold until the Maoris were ready to close, then fall back behind the sheltering vines to the next ditch. The result was that while 21 Battalion made slow progress against a determined defence, 28 Battalion was not halted until it reached the report line which, on its sector, was the **Orsoleto** village. The German infantry had withdrawn as the Maoris closed up and occupied houses around a road

junction on the eastern side of the village while awaiting the signal to carry on. The six support tanks also arranged themselves defensively for the time being and watched alternatively a gap that had opened between the Maoris and 21 Battalion on the right and the enemy-held area on the left where 28 Infantry Brigade had still not crossed the Marecchia. A good deal of mortar fire was coming in from that direction and casualties began to mount. Colonel Young had ordered a halt until 21 Battalion drew level and this instruction was later confirmed by the Brigadier, who also sent some Staghound armoured cars to support a reconnaissance troop of 18 Regiment tanks protecting the Maoris' open left flank.

No stretchers had been taken into the attack, but the problem of evacuating the wounded was solved by Sergeant Holgerson ⁵ of 18 Regiment, who converted his Honey reconnaissance tank into an ambulance in addition to acting as a wireless link between Battalion Headquarters and the forward platoons. He personally loaded his patients into his vehicle and, in spite of being 'stonked' every time he showed himself, made several trips back to the RAP. He later received an immediate award of the Military Medal.

More trouble was ahead of the Maoris. Two Tiger tanks were reported to be moving along Route 9 towards them. The supporting armour did not like this news for its tanks were no match for the heavier armed and armoured Tigers; another troop was ordered up and took a position in Orsoleto Piccolo ('Little Orsoleto', although **Orsoleto** proper was only a village) about 500 yards to the south.

About two o'clock in the afternoon Tiger-weight shells announced that the warning was a reality, and when his house was selected as a target Major Mitchell withdrew his men towards Orsoleto Piccolo where the cover was better. The forward tank commander (Captain Passmore) called for divebombers to come over and deal with the Tigers, but his request was refused on the ground that they were too close to the infantry. Medium guns were also refused, probably for the same reason; consequently, the 25-pounders and Shermans had to do the best they

could. They did it until dusk.

Captain Passmore describes the end of the engagement of which the Maoris were most unwilling witnesses:

Towards dusk the Tigers fired machine gun tracer and fired the haystacks. I then informed the Maori Coy Commanders that as my tanks were illuminated by the flames I would ask them to withdraw. They agreed to this, so I asked the Arty for smoke cover to be fired. This was done and the infantry withdrew under cover of smoke and tank fire. After the infantry had taken up new positions the tanks pulled back also. The Tigers withdrew when the smoke was firing as I believe they feared an attack.

The Maoris and the tanks established an all-round defensive position between the Casa Venturini and Orsoleto Piccolo and waited on events. Casualties for the day were 5 killed and 25 wounded.

In the meantime, 21 Battalion overcame its opposition and was on the line of the Canale dei **Molini** and 22 Battalion was likewise in **Viserba**, at the mouth of the canal. The 28th British Brigade widened the bridgehead under heavy artillery fire but was a long way back.

The German Army Commanders were not too happy over the day's events but were extracting what consolation they could, as the following conversation between Major-General Wentzell and Lieutenant-General Roettiger at 7.10 p.m. on 22 September shows:

R: I don't understand what is going on on your left. The enemy penetrated 1½ km SE of **Viserba**, and then they say it was at La Turchia.

W: That's right, La Turchia. 303 Turkoman Regt was there.

R: But isn't the line at **Viserba**?

W: It was. A strong enemy patrol with tanks broke through at **Viserba**.

Fighting is now going on 1½ km south of La Turchia.... Herr does not take a very serious view of the situation, as the parachutists had something behind.

R: Then what about the penetration in the Orsoleto area?

W: That isn't much....

R: But they will be coming again tomorrow.

W: Beyond doubt—strong patrolling at least. But that is not 100 per cent certain because his shelling is not yet strong enough to point to a major attack.

R: He won't have finished bringing his artillery up yet....

That is what the enemy thought; and this is what happened. A full-scale artillery barrage was to precede 4 Armoured Brigade and 5 Brigade as far as the [Scolo Brancona](#), where the troops would consolidate and leave the roads clear for 6 Brigade, still waiting for the word to 'get cracking' along Route 16. On the New Zealand left 28 British Brigade, now firm on Route 9, was to patrol forward and establish crossings over the Uso River, whereupon the Canadians would take over.

Unit commanders were called to a conference at Brigade Headquarters and did not return until the barrage was almost due to open. Colonel Young has vivid memories of that night:

This conference at Bde HQ lasted till 2300 hrs and Bde HQ at this stage was in [Rimini](#). The conference was called at a late moment (about 1900 hrs) and at this time I was discussing the night's op with my O Gp at Bhq. I expected to be back at 2100 hrs, and I advised my O Gp to await my arrival at Bhq at that hour. On my hurried return my jeep finished up in a large shell hole right in the middle of the road and I am certain it was not there four hours earlier. I borrowed a carrier from an adjoining unit. This also finished up in a large crater and I had difficulty in locating my HQ in the dark.

There was some hurried moving to get the troops well back from the barrage opening line at **Orsoleto** but all went well. The companies carried on in the same order as previously against negligible opposition, with improved communications and the new amenity of artificial moonlight.

At 3 a.m. the forward companies reported that they thought, but were not sure, that they were on the right **Scolo**. Both Major Mitchell and Major Te Punga went towards a house to study their maps by torchlight. There was a burst of fire which lighted the windows and when a party went to investigate they found both the officers killed. Major Te Punga was an original member of the battalion. He had been its adjutant in **Greece** and **Crete** and had recently returned from New Zealand after being invalided home from the desert. Major Mitchell was also an original member and had returned from furlough with the 11th Reinforcements. Their loss was a sad blow to the battalion.

The companies were thrown into confusion by the loss of both commanders and the uncertainty of their own whereabouts, but Colonel Young hurried forward and restored the position. Lieutenant Harris was placed in temporary command of A Company and Lieutenant R. Smith took command of D Company. It was fortunate that the barrage had ensured an uninterrupted period for reorganisation, for the **Scolo Brancona** was still a quarter of a mile away and daybreak was near. To have been caught above ground with nothing much on the open flank would have meant losses, for although the Colonel had brought his reserve companies forward facing the dangerous quarter, the proposed patrolling by **28 Brigade** had not occurred because of opposition on its vulnerable left flank.

However, about the same time as 28 Battalion completed its advance to the **Scolo Brancona**, 5 Canadian Armoured Division was deploying with the dual purpose of eliminating the opposition to its advance in the **Casale** area and crossing the **Uso**. That river flowed almost due north. The New Zealand advance was directed north-west conforming with the

coast, and there was a considerable and growing distance between the Brancona and the **Uso** the nearer the latter river got to the coast.

At daybreak, therefore, the position was that from left to right **2 NZ Division** had taken all its objectives, and in 21 and 22 Battalions' areas had pushed patrols forward of the **Scolo Brancona**; the Canadians were in the process of conforming and 6 Brigade, ready to do its part, was coming up in two columns, each, with forty vehicles to the mile, twelve miles long.

The column headed by 25 Battalion passed through the Maori area early in the morning (23rd) and by midday the Maoris were resting in the **Celle** area. Company commands were reorganised with Lieutenant Christy taking command of A Company, and Captain Marsden, whom we left severely wounded in the **Western Desert**, relinquishing his job as Brigade LO to command D Company.

The troops rested there until the 27th, during which time they got the last of the caked mud off their legs, managed a swim in the Adriatic and washed their clothes; 6 Brigade pushed a determined enemy off his Fontanaccia defence line and then chased him across the **Uso**. But no further. The Germans were cracking but had not broken. So 5 Brigade was sent in again.

Ravenna was still the objective but on this occasion 28 Battalion was in brigade reserve. The Maoris left in the afternoon and by dusk were spread around **Bordonchio**, near the mouth of the **Uso**. The **23rd Battalion**, also in the same area, had pounced on all the habitable *casas* but the Maoris were to take them over later in the night when the attack started. The **23rd Battalion** vacated its quarters around four in the morning and the Maoris moved in, but as the rain began to fall again and the houses lacked roofs nothing much in the way of comfort had been gained.

Even if the troops had to use their groundsheets as umbrellas, they were very well placed by comparison with the assaulting battalions, who

were working over autumn-ploughed ricefields towards the **Fiumicino**, a shallow trickle of water between wide stopbanks. When they forced a crossing 6 Brigade would resume its interrupted advance to **Ravenna**. The Canadians were also closing on the river with the same idea.

Fifth Brigade reached the near bank of the **Fiumicino** but the continual rain had flooded the gunners out of their pits, washed away the bridges over the **Uso** behind them, and turned the inches-deep **Fiumicino** into a forty-foot-wide raging avalanche of water. The German prayer for the coming of the autumn rains had been answered.

The **23rd Battalion** was relieved by 22 Battalion and 21 Battalion by the Maoris on the last night of September; it was a clear night and the moon was new; the rain had, for the time being, ceased; the river would be crossed as soon as the water was low enough; then the drive to **Ravenna**.

The troops passed two days and nights under exultant enemy fire and hoped he would not think about breaching the stopbanks. Engineering difficulties with secondary roads were recognised as insurmountable and the project, in that area, was abandoned; the **Greek Brigade** took over; the Maoris, very thankfully indeed, left for **Rimini** where hot showers and a hot meal awaited their arrival. The battalion's casualties for the month had been 13 killed and 51 wounded.

The rank and file rested while the commanders thought things over. The tank playground of earlier planning had turned out to be a tank nightmare and it was conceded that, under the climatic conditions prevailing and with the enemy able to decide when he would retire to another river line, the breakthrough was just not possible on the Adriatic coast.

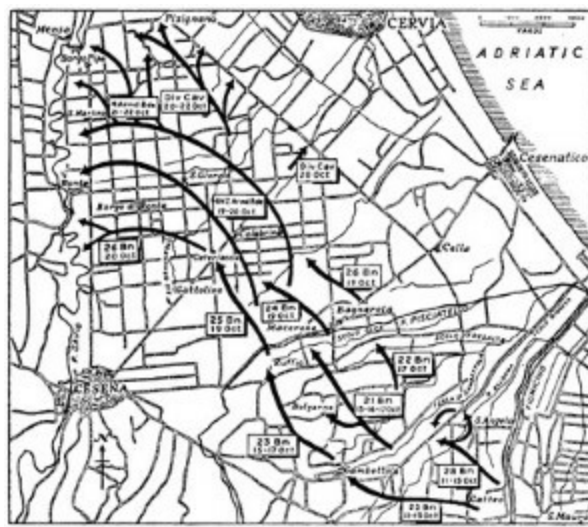
Maybe a thrust further west where the ground was a little higher might be the answer. It was decided to try it, to forget **Ravenna** for the time being and attack north-west towards **Bologna**. German strategists figured that the likely thing for the British to do was to attack north-

west towards **Bologna** and reserves were deployed accordingly. From the German point of view the Allied plan was an excellent arrangement because, even if it meant two armies feeling towards **Bologna**, it allowed the Germans to concentrate their forces; from our angle the Eighth Army change of direction might ease the way for the Fifth Army, which was still moving down the mountains but was running very short of assaulting troops.

Eighth Army was in much the same condition—it had sufficient strength for only one more major effort; in the New Zealand Division units of specialists, the Divisional Cavalry, anti-tank gunners and machine-gunners were now being used in an infantry role.

The locality selected for the attempt was in front of **Gatteo**, with the New Zealand left flank joining 1 Canadian Infantry Division and the **Rimini- Cesena** railway as the boundary; the New Zealand right would be protected by **Cumberland Force**, a mixed force of Greek, Canadian, and New Zealand units organised for the purpose.

A favourable feature in that locality was that 5 British Corps operating in the foothills had not been so inconvenienced by the weather; it had already crossed the Fiumicino River and had observation over the new breakthrough sector. There were, in fact, indications that the enemy proposed to pull back on that wing and there was a possibility that a decisive success might pin large forces against the coast.



THE ADVANCE TO THE SAVIO, OCTOBER 1944

The advance to the **Savio**, October 1944

Fifth Brigade would move into the new territory on 10 October and the **Maori Battalion would take over from the **Cape Breton Highlanders** of 11 Canadian Brigade on the right of the line; 23 Battalion would be on the Maoris' left and 21 Battalion in reserve at the Fabbrona crossroads.**

The troops debussed at Fabbrona, where 21 Battalion was settling in, and marched up to their billets around the Villagrappa area. Mindful of the information that the enemy might be pulling back, Colonel Young sent two patrols to test the depth of the river and, if possible, to test the enemy strength as far as the villas Rocci and Poggi, about a quarter of a mile on the enemy side. The patrols reported that the river had fallen to a depth of from three to four feet and that both houses were unoccupied.

It was decided to snatch a bridgehead. C Company was directed to cross forthwith and take up a position in a cemetery—tombstones make splendid bullet-proof shields—and then to enlarge the bridgehead. The enterprise went smoothly and without opposition, but the rear areas received a pasting from heavy guns and the signals platoon had a most hectic time finding and repairing breaks in its lines. Recourse had to be made to wireless, but the unit control set was faulty and the Colonel had finally to take himself to A Company to keep in touch.

This started another war of a different kind for Canadian frequencies were jamming the A Company set and tempers began to rise. The battle

for the mastery of the air went on with the Maori language competing with Canadian until the latter gave up with a despairing wail: 'Can you hear those God dam kahuri guys on your frequency?'

The **23rd Battalion** filtered over the **Fiumicino** in its sector and the engineers worked feverishly getting two bridges across, for 5 Brigade was to protect the Canadian right flank and be prepared to fight if need be. The objective was the **Pisciattello River** about four miles away, and the advance was to be done in four bounds—the first to **Rio Baldona**, the second to the **Scolo Rigossa**, the third to the **Scolo Fossalta**, and the fourth to the **Pisciattello**. The brigade front was a mile and a half wide and the start line was the **Sant' Angelo-Gatteo** road. Colonel Young's plan was to attack with C Company, right, and D left, with a troop of B Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment supporting them along the axis north of **Gatteo**, north-east of **Gambettola**, then westerly to **Bulgarno**, north-west to **Ruffio**, and finally north to the **Pisciattello** near **Casone**. It sounds very complicated, but in effect the troops were to go straight ahead while the tanks followed the roads through the villages named.

The morning passed fairly quietly on the Maori front; on their left 23 Battalion was nosing into **Gatteo** which was apparently unoccupied, but with the river still unbridged extreme caution was being exercised; the bridges in the rear were coming along, though very slowly on the Maori sector. On the Maoris' right Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards had established themselves on each side of the river; overhead the sun was drying out the muddy roads to a certain extent.

The **23rd Battalion** bridge was ready in the early afternoon and bulldozers started repairing the inevitable demolitions at **Gatteo**, but the Maori bridge, as it was called, took longer as the builders had to take shelter from shelling at frequent intervals. It was still uncompleted the following morning, but the Maori support arms came forward by 23 Battalion's crossing.

About the same time as the first bridge was ready, 28 Battalion had poised itself on the start line, which ran from the north end of **Gatteo** to

a point 500 yards south of Sant' Angelo. A Company was in close support to C Company and B Company was with Battalion Headquarters.

The Canadians had commenced their advance, but 5 Brigade was held back until the following morning and told to get all its support arms across the one available bridge. In the meantime the roads were cleared of mines as far forward as practicable. The enemy took advantage of the delay and gave the assaulting troops a very bad night with gun and mortar fire.

The troops crossed the start line at a quarter to six in the morning (12 October) and reached the first halt line, the Rio Baldona, an hour later without much trouble, with no casualties and with eleven prisoners. One newcomer to the battalion, with more enthusiasm than discretion, shot up the cemetery in passing but was gently reproved by his platoon sergeant: 'You shoot at live Jerries, Arthur, not dead ones.'

The **23rd Battalion**, which owing to the winding of the Baldona had much further to go, was not far behind.

While this movement was in progress the enemy blew sky high the Sant' Angelo bridge over the Rio Baldona but showed no intention of vacating the village itself. There were more strong-points near C Company prepared to defend the Baldona stream and the troops had a bad time from them and from guns and mortars further back. Lance-Corporal G. D. King ⁶ took his section forward to quieten the fire, which had cost nine casualties since the company had halted on the Baldona. He stalked a spandau post and killed most of the occupants, only to find that the position was dominated by another post. King was wounded but able to carry on, and he led his section to a flank and rushed the second post. He stayed with his section for some hours but had finally to give in and be evacuated. In due course the award of an immediate MM was announced.

The **23rd Battalion** tried to move to the next objective, the Scolo Rigossa, but was halted by heavy fire, and for some hours both our and

the enemy's artillery were in full action, the Germans 'stonking' **Gatteo** and our guns Sant' Angelo and each dealing according to his lights with the Rio Baldona area.

Fifth Brigade started again about 3 p.m. for the Scolo Rigossa, this time with more success, although C Company on the open flank had initial difficulty with a strongpoint. Here another MM was won by Private T. H. Tuhi, ⁷ company medical orderly, who attended the wounded under fire and was himself wounded.

There was no further opposition and the battalion had settled into *casas* near the Scolo Rigossa by 4 p.m., with the enemy FDLs about 200 yards beyond it. Sant' Angelo was now becoming very much of a preoccupation both with Colonel Young and Brigadier Burrows. The support tanks were roadbound and could not pass that enemy strongpoint to assist the Maoris, while the Canadian unit was similarly embarrassed. No further move was made by 5 Brigade that day; A Company sent a patrol towards Sant' Angelo to test its strength but the reception it was accorded was quite convincing; an engineer who went with the patrol reported that the road was thick with mines.

On receipt of this information Brigade ordered Colonel Young to take the obstruction by assault. A Company, still on the track 500 yards south of and parallel to the Sant' Angelo- **Fiumicino** road, was ordered to take Sant' Angelo. No. 10 Platoon of B Company under Lieutenant Ransfield would be under command in reserve, three tanks from B Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment would support the attack, and there would be a half-hour artillery concentration preceding it.

The company was deployed and ready to advance when the artillery stopped firing at 3 a.m., but Captain Christy was severely wounded almost immediately. All the platoon commanders had been wounded in the previous engagement and the sergeants commanding platoons waited for Lieutenant Ransfield to assume command of the operation. Because of this unavoidable delay Battalion Headquarters suggested that the attack be stopped until the artillery put down another

concentration. Ransfield took the opportunity to study Captain Christy's map and to learn the company dispositions from Sergeant-Major Allen. ⁸

The postponed attack started at 5 a.m. on a front of 150 yards with 10 Platoon, now commanded by Sergeant H. Grant, in reserve. There was fairly heavy but unaimed fire until within 200 yards of the road leading into Sant' Angelo, when small-arms fire was added to the mortar bombs and shells. A farmhouse was rushed and five prisoners captured. A Company took up a defensive position around the house while a patrol from 10 Platoon made a forward reconnaissance. It reported much enemy movement and light tanks in Sant' Angelo. The company wireless could not raise either the tanks or Battalion Headquarters so a runner was sent to call the armour forward. He returned with the message that the tanks were held up by a demolition and could not come forward. It was an unsatisfactory position for a young subalter to find himself in, and when two bazooka shells ripped through the house he ordered a withdrawal. A runner was sent back with a message asking the tanks to give covering fire.

As soon as the support fire began A Company withdrew carrying its four wounded, then 10 Platoon with the five prisoners followed along a drain by the side of the road. A Company returned to its old position while 10 Platoon stayed as infantry protection to the tanks. The identity of the prisoners disclosed the fact that Sant' Angelo contained elements of *I Parachute Division*, last encountered at **Cassino**.

There was little movement during the day beyond tidying up the line; a gap between 23 Battalion and the Maoris was filled with a company of 21 Battalion; 23 Battalion, which owing to the direction of the Rigossa had a longer and tougher job than its right-hand neighbour, made some local moves; **1 Canadian Division** was over the Rigossa in places and looking hard at its next objective, the **Bulgaria** locality.

The Canadians captured **Bulgaria** that afternoon (14 October) and 28 Battalion was ordered to make another attack on Sant' Angelo and thus gain a wider bridgehead. This time two companies, B and C, with more

supporting fire, would make the assault. A tremendous programme of harassing and diversionary fire was also to be provided by 39 Heavy Mortar Battery, the MMGs, and 21 and 23 Battalions.

The order of attack was B Company, right, and C Company, left, and the boundary between them another of the myriad canals that spider-webbed the locality. The attack was to go in at half past nine, but B Company was to wait for five more minutes to allow C Company, some distance away, to get level. On account of the pitch-black night and the considerable enemy shelling, the two companies did not make contact and moved independently but the enemy had already decided that 'Now is the hour for me to say goodbye'.

The two companies met at the village crossroads without encountering any enemy and then pushed on to their final objectives along the Baldona about half a mile away. At this point the platoons lost contact again and there was some marching and counter-marching along the wrong ditches before they reached their posts. Lieutenant Maika eventually found his company headquarters but had no clear idea about the direction of his own post.

However our very capable 'I' man Spider Wikiriwhi came to light with his protractor and compass plus some very heavy nutting and said to me. 'There's your objective in that direction chief, 325 steps away.' We arrived on the objective just as a couple of shells from Jerryland burst near the house, a sure sign that Jerry had scrambled. Our bit of fun was still to come. No sooner had Bart Davis got his all round defence established than there was a burst of machine gun fire from the rear, the bullets splattering on the walls outside and some of them coming through the wooden shutters of the windows. Our bren guns promptly replied but the din died down as suddenly as it started up. The corporal came in. 'Its those C Coy jokers' he said. 'I heard them yell in their Ngati-Porou lingo, 'rush the B's' so I yelled back 'Get the hell out of it, B Coy here.' I said to the corporal, 'I think C Coy has also had their share of frolicking round the paddocks.'

Cumberland Force took over the Sant' Angelo area and 28 Battalion shifted into **Gatteo**, tentatively in brigade reserve; 21 Battalion moved into the line alongside 23 Battalion.

The enemy had resolved on a fighting withdrawal behind the **Pisciarello** and the **Maori Battalion** was not called on to accelerate his departure. The breakthrough plan was still being followed. Fifth Brigade was to go as far as the **Pisciarello** by the 17th, when 4 Armoured Brigade was to be prepared to exploit through with 6 Brigade following in support. If it was found necessary to alter the plan, 6 Brigade was to relieve 5 Brigade and then carry on. In the event further heavy rain undid the good accomplished by the last few days of fine weather; the advance was slowed down by the conditions and by the enemy's skilful tactics. Sixth Brigade took over, crossed the **Pisciarello** with a set-piece attack, and the enemy began to back-step to the **Savio**, four more miles away.

The New Zealand tanks launched their armoured drive but met determined resistance from the enemy rearguards. The terrain—flat farmland criss-crossed with narrow lanes and deep ditches—the state of the going—waterlogged ground that was not tankable—and a profusion of anti-tank weapons slowed down their advance. The enemy was able to keep his line intact along the **Savio** and to detach sufficient strength to block the Fifth Army almost within sight of **Bologna**. In Eighth Army 4 Indian Division and the **Greek Brigade** had been ordered to **Greece** after the German withdrawal from that country. Two more divisions were out of action from lack of infantry, for men and material were being poured into **France**.

It was decided to accept the situation and **2 NZ Division** was drawn back into Army reserve; 5 Brigade boarded its trucks and temporarily turned its back on the war. The date was 22 October, the first anniversary of the brigade's arrival in **Italy**.

The Maori Battalion's casualties for October were:

Killed --- 5
Wounded --- 32

¹2 Lt T. J. Ngapo; Kennedy Bay, Coromandel; born NZ 19 Oct 1917; labourer; twice wounded.

²From *10 Army* reports and conversations.

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 **Col J. I. Thodey**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Perth**; born **Gisborne**, 8 Dec 1910; life assurance officer; CO **21 Bn** Jul-Oct 1944, May-Dec 1945.

⁵ **Sgt A. C. Holgerson**, MM, Bronze Medal (Gk); **Auckland**; born **Waihi**, 3 Mar 1911; bushman; wounded 24 Jul 1942.

⁶ **L-Cpl G. D. King**, MM; Taumarunui; born Taringamotu, 19 Mar 1922; millhand; twice wounded.

⁷ **Pte T. H. Tuhi**, MM; Puha, Te Karaka; born NZ 6 Dec 1912; labourer; twice wounded.

⁸2 Lt K. Allen; **Kaitaia**; born NZ 23 Sep 1914; labourer.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 17 – THE WINTER CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 17

The Winter Campaign

THE New Zealand Division had not fought alongside the Canadians before and its departure did not go unnoticed. 'All ranks 1 CDN CORPS are very sorry 2 NZ DIV. is leaving us,' a message from General Burns, GOC 1 Canadian Corps, read. 'Together we have driven the enemy from the MARECCHIA to the SAVIO and inflicted heavy losses on him. Canadians greatly admire the skill and gallantry with which New Zealanders fight and hope that we shall soon be together again.'

The Maori Battalion staged at Iesi in the same area it had occupied prior to the operations with 1 Canadian Corps, and then after a night drive found itself tucked away in a remote valley of the Apennines. The war that had ruined so much of Italy had left this backwater untouched and the hills were dotted with farmhouses where life went on as if the foreign invasion had never happened.

The venerable university town of Camerino looked down from its hilltop on the New Zealand flood that left the main road and spread into the villages. Battalion Headquarters was established in Polverina, A Company four miles away outside San Luca on the road to Camerino, B Company on the slopes above San Luca, C Company in Rocca, D near Vergoni, and HQ Company scattered around Pont le Trave.

The day after settling in (25 October) was clean-up day and the Italian clothes-lines displayed an unusual wealth of male garments. The women, horrified at their guests' treatment of woollen socks and underpants, speedily took over the job and thenceforth the Maoris wore really laundered shirts and really pressed battle dress. The people were friendly after their initial fears were dispelled, and the Maori, when not a bloodthirsty fighting man, is also of a friendly and happy-go-lucky nature.

Leave to Rome and Florence was generous and the men were encouraged to take advantage of the facilities offering for rest and

recreation. In the unit route marches were frequent, lengthy, and interesting. Scarcely anyone then serving had marched through the leafy lanes of the south-eastern English counties but it was the same interest that shortened the kilometres.

As it was put in the *News Flash*, the unit bulletin sent to the men in hospital:

Route-marching in this country has been found to be a pleasure in contrast to the sandy wastes of Egypt. Marching on the road one encounters strange things, such as an old broken-down Italian vehicle loaded up with all sorts of odds and ends, and then again it may be a pretty Italian signorina leading or following behind two or more bullocks. This ... makes route-marching very interesting and one is always looking forward to the next corner to see what is happening or has happened.

Another event on 29 October that created much interest was the recording of messages to be broadcast to the folks at home at Christmas. A percentage of men from each company had their voices recorded, some in Maori and some in English, but Colonel Young, after speaking in English, sent a message in Maori on behalf of the battalion as a whole. His accent might not have been that of a Maori orator but his gesture was much appreciated by the troops.

The real rest period ended on 30 October with a 15-mile relay race, with eighty men from each company participating and with the company seconds-in-command driving jeeps behind their representatives and stirring them on with advice and exhortation. D Company romped home an easy winner, followed by B Company, then came Battalion Headquarters in whose ranks were Colonel Young, **Major Awatere**, **Major D'Arcy**, the last again with the unit for a short time. Thereafter it was 'One-stop-two' in the mornings, football in the afternoons, and concerts in the evenings.

Three weeks passed thus, with diversions. Rugby was taken very

seriously and the unit had an unfailing run of wins at battalion level until a narrow win against 23 Battalion was followed by a thorough hiding at the hands and feet of 21 Battalion. The final score was 17 to 6—two penalty goals put over by Captain Smith.

For some time it had not been possible to hold a battalion church parade, but a small flat across the river from Battalion Headquarters offered a suitable site and the first Sunday in November a suitable time. Padre Huata gave an address on conduct in and out of the line, with special reference to courtesy towards the Italian womenfolk. One hundred and twenty-eight members of the unit attended Holy Communion.

November the 10th was quite a day. The troops woke to find the countryside covered in snow and platoon strength battles raged fiercely. And then a kit inspection followed with woeful results and red-ink entries in 'Army Book 64'. The Maori is a generous soul and the civilians were very short of blankets, boots, and woollen clothing!

November the 14th was a high-light day when a competition for a very high stake—four days' leave in **Florence**—was decided. It was a contest by platoons in arms and foot drill. No. 8 Platoon of A Company and 12 Platoon of B Company were the finalists, with 8 Platoon the winner. They left for **Florence** in the morning. In the evening about half the battalion was taken in to **Camerino** to attend a show by the **Kiwi Concert Party**.

Not to be outdone by the professionals, 5 Brigade put on a concert two nights later in the same hall. The items were well received, especially a rendering of 'Ave Maria' by a local girl. The second half of the programme was contributed by the battalion and the greatest applause followed an item by C Company's haka team. Sixty men stripped to the waist, wearing piupius and with faces tattooed, provided a spectacular performance. Many of the signorinas who were guests of the different units were *molto paura* (very frightened) by the ferocious aspect, the loud noise and pukana ¹ made by the performers.

November the 18th was an important day for the battalion. Colonel Young announced that he was marching out on furlough and that the battalion would again be commanded by a Maori. Padre Huata reviewed the Colonel's career with the Maoris, a career that ranked second only to **Colonel Dittmer's** in length but was the longest in actual fighting command. It was with the deepest regret that he, on behalf of the troops and as their kaumatua, had to say 'Haere e te Rangitira.'

The Colonel was visibly moved as he made his reply. At 11.59 p.m. that night command passed to **Lieutenant-Colonel A. Awatere**, MC, with Major Henare as his second-in-command.

It should be mentioned here that an amenity not particularly appreciated by those it was meant for was the 'Mobile Orderly Room', made necessary because of the distance between Battalion Headquarters and the companies. Whenever requested the Mobile Orderly Room arrived at the delinquent's home address and dispensed military justice on the spot.

A warning order on 22 November to be ready to move at twelve hours' notice began a session of cleaning of arms and ammunition, checking of equipment and preliminary packing up. Preparations were accelerated the following day when an advance party under Lieutenant W. Reedy departed for **Cesena**. **Cesena** was on the **Savio**, but a four-divisional attack towards **Bologna** along Route 9 was in the process of driving the enemy back to his next river, the **Lamone**, about 20 miles farther north-west. The defeat of the Germans in **Europe** was expected before the spring, and with the two-fold object of withholding as much enemy strength as possible from the vital theatre and of pushing the line as far north as possible at the same time, sufficient men and material had been scraped together to mount another offensive. It was in full swing at that moment.

The twelve hours' stand-by warning was superseded that same night by a movement order which had the troops entrucked by 7.30 a.m. It could have been an Italian mobilisation, judging by the groups of red-

eyed women and children standing around. As the trucks moved out sounds of unrestrained weeping and calls of 'Buona Fortuna', 'Buon Voyage', 'Tornare Ancora', induced an unusual silence in the column.

Meldola village near **Cesena** was reached that night. The unit stayed there for four days, then moved up to **Forli**, a sizeable town on the main road to **Bologna** and seven miles from the **Lamone**, where the attack had halted. Billets were in the centre of the town adjacent to the square, over which towered a lofty monument to the Italian soldiers who fell in the 1914–18 war.

A strict blackout was enforced in **Forli** as enemy planes, although not numerous, had still to be reckoned with. The town was also shelled by long-range guns. It had not been knocked about much and amenities were rapidly being arranged for the troops—Naafis and picture theatres were operating and the inhabitants, very few at that moment as they had not emerged or returned from their hideouts, were forgetting German and learning English. It was noticeable that though the 'Pakeha Kiwis' were welcomed the 'Hori Kiwis' were given a wide berth. Later, when amicable relations were established, it was found that the Maoris were thought to be Greeks or Indians and neither race was much esteemed in **Forli**.

The Division had taken over from **4 British Division**, which had closed up to the Lamone River and was now in need of a rest. Immediately beyond the river stood **Faenza**, a town to which the enemy attached the greatest importance. The river itself was a serious obstacle with control banks a hundred yards apart containing a two-chain-wide flow of water that could rise twenty-four feet in as many hours. The far stopbank was held in strength, and it was the job of the forward troops to look for suitable crossing places. The **22nd Battalion**, again in an infantry role, was under command of 5 Brigade, and with 21 Battalion was forward while 28 and 23 Battalions remained in reserve in **Forli**.

The troops stayed in **Forli** until 10 December. Their situation was very similar to that of the Maori Pioneer Battalion in Armentières in

1916: they were in a town close to the line where shells could be expected at any time and a hit-and-run air raid often enough to prevent outdoor training. A couple of hours' route marching when visibility was poor, which was fairly frequently, was more by way of exercise than part of a training scheme. The danger of minefields outside the town was the only limiting factor unknown to the earlier Maori Pioneer Battalion.

The unit finally lost the services of [Major D'Arcy](#) during this period. With one short break, he had been with the Maoris as their medical officer since August 1942, when he had taken over from Captain [Cumming](#)² in the hectic days before [Alamein](#). At a farewell dinner tendered to him by the officers of the unit [Colonel Awatere](#) mentioned that '[Doc](#)' [D'Arcy](#) had been with the battalion longer than most of the present members and that it would be in order to refer to him as a Maori. The Pakeha-Maori doctor, who had been posted to 6 Field Ambulance, ended his reply with a dash of mordant humour. 'Of course I'm bound to meet up with quite a few of you chaps yet, as I am only a stone's throw away from the battlefield.' Lieutenant [Moore](#),³ [NZMC](#), was welcomed into the unit at the same function.

The only other event of note was an air raid that caused some damage to buildings. It was noteworthy only because of its rarity; one raider was shot down to the cheers of the [Forli](#) garrison.

The battalion's senior officers at that date were:

CO: [Lt-Col A. Awatere](#)

Second-in-command: Major J. C. Henare

Adjutant: Capt J. S. Baker

QM: [Lt W. H. Prescott](#)

OC HQ Company: Capt J. G. P. Aperahama

OC A Company: Capt G. T. Marsden

OC B Company: Capt P. S. Munro

OC C Company: Capt H. Mackey

OC D Company: Capt R. Smith

On the Eighth Army front the indefatigable Canadians on the coast were wading through the mud towards **Ravenna**, which place, it will be remembered, had been the destination of 6 Brigade earlier in the campaign. ⁴ On the inland flank 46 British Division had forced a crossing of the Lamone River and was being fiercely counter-attacked west of **Faenza**. The New Zealand Division was to sidestep into the bridgehead and relieve the British who were seriously under strength, so seriously under strength that some battalions could muster only 150 bayonets.

The New Zealand Division, with **10 Indian Division** on its left, constituted the striking force of **5 Corps**; on the Corps' right was **1 Canadian Corps** and on its left **2 Polish Corps**. In 5 Brigade's area **28 Battalion** was to be on the right with **23rd Battalion** on the left.

It was a cold winter morning when the men, muffled to the ears, climbed into the trucks. They were put down near the Marzeno, another of the multitudinous rivers that drain into the larger ones, this time the **Lamone** near **Faenza**. A two-mile route march due west across more muddy creeks, then across the **Lamone**, brought the Maoris to the Casa Cartiera, a huge building with a high tower and the headquarters of **2/5 Queens**, where they stayed until last light. Captain Munro was killed while making a reconnaissance of his company area and Lieutenant Maika was put in temporary command until the arrival next day of Captain Northcroft.

The changeover was completed with some care and in extreme silence for, according to the guides, 'Jerry was very trigger happy and at the slightest sound they would know all about it.' It was a matter of crawling to the most forward *casas* and, as the ground was very muddy,

some of the Maoris soon got careless and began to walk. A stream of tracer about waist-high decided for them that perhaps crawling was the better method. In the morning the Maoris found themselves disposed around a road junction a little more than a mile from the outskirts of **Faenza**. Two roads and the railway line from **Faenza** met there and a third road went north-west to **Celle** village. Houses were scattered around the junction which, for tactical purposes, was christened 'Ruatoria'.

C, A and B Companies in that order straddled the roads and railway into **Faenza**, with D Company in reserve. Enemy-occupied houses were only 150 yards away. The nearest, the Casa Celetta, was hedged in with tall olives and poplars so that only the roof could be seen.

It was decided to take a closer look at Casa Celetta that evening and Sergeant Cullen ⁵ (8 Platoon) took out a fighting patrol of eleven other ranks with him.

They found that the place was a real hornets' nest. Three well-hidden tanks were behind the building. The patrol was detected and a battle royal ensued in the darkness while the patrol withdrew with four wounded. The medium and heavy mortars were turned on to the locality and the tanks were heard moving back towards **Faenza**, whereupon Cullen returned with his patrol and killed six Germans who were still in the house. The men were preparing to settle in the *casa* when tell-tale rumblings indicated that the tanks had returned. Shells belting into the house confirmed the indications and again the patrol withdrew, this time with four more wounded.

Meanwhile, shortly before dusk, 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Balzer) was pestered by a man in civilian clothes who, in Italian no better than that of the Maoris, said he was a deserter and asked to be taken prisoner. He went from post to post pleading to be put in the bag but the troops were too busy to bother with him. At last in desperation he emptied a sack he was carrying on to the ground and there were his uniform coat, trousers, and all the 'trimmings'. His desires were then gratified and he was later identified as belonging to *7 Company, 278 Regiment, 305 Division*.

The **22nd Battalion** came into the line on the left of **23 Battalion** and **5 Brigade** then had three battalions up and **21 Battalion** in reserve. Defences were strengthened by sandbagging the walls of the *casa* strongposts, a very necessary precaution in view of the fact that a shell penetrated the wall of **C Company** headquarters on the morning of **12 December** and wounded **Captain Mackey**⁶ and two others. **Lieutenant Mahuika** then took command. Enemy gunners were trying to locate the battalion mortars whose attentions were evidently disliked, and as **Battalion Headquarters** was just behind the mortars there was a lot of work for the signallers in repairing lines.

The new task of **2 NZ Division** was part of an operation designed to seize crossings over the **Senio River** about three miles north-west of 'Ruatoria'. Both **5 Corps** and **2 Polish Corps** were attacking; **5 Brigade** on the right of the Corps sector was, initially, to threaten **Route 9**, the enemy escape route from **Faenza**. If he did not take the hint, **43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade**, as the **Faenza** task force, was to attack and clear the town.

The Germans were known to have a reserve of tanks in **Faenza** and no intention of departing until the last possible moment. They were getting their heavy gear across the **Senio**, and **Faenza** and **Celle** were key points in the holding position. The Maoris had studied the taller buildings in **Faenza** very closely and were of the opinion that the town should contain good winter quarters; if the war was to hold out much longer it was desirable that they and not Jerry should have the use of them.

Fifth Brigade's operation order directed **23** and **22 Battalions** north-west towards the **Senio River** while the **Maori Battalion**, with the railway line as its right boundary, attacked north and seized sundry points about half a mile short of **Route 9**, thereby guarding the open flank and making the passage of **Route 9** a very precarious business.

Colonel Awatere, with half of **A Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment** at his disposal, made the following plan:

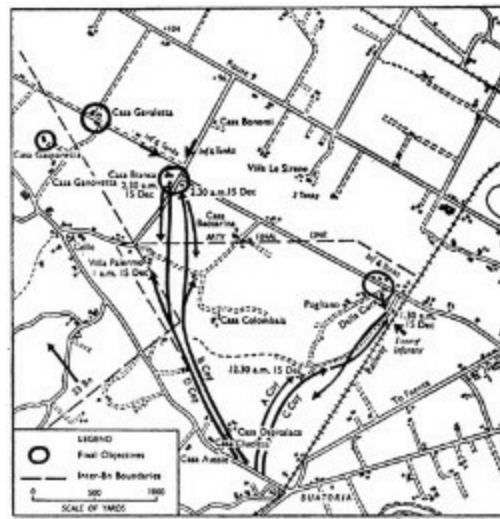
C Company (Lieutenant Mahuika) on the right would capture Pogliano and the Casa Baccarina localities.

D Company (Captain R. Smith) on the left would capture Villa Palermo, Casa Bianca, Casa Gavaletta and Casa Gasparetta. No. 12 Platoon B Company (Lieutenant J. Hubbard) would be under command for the operation.

A Company (in support of C Company) would seize buildings from La Morte to Casa Colombaia.

B Company (in support of D Company) would occupy Casa 'Clueless' and Casa Ospitalaca.

In addition to an adequate barrage, the area east of the railway line would be under constant fire from machine guns, mortars and carriers, while at first light the tanks and anti-aircraft guns would move up. Artificial moonlight would be provided. The start line was from 'Ruatoria' to Casa 'Clueless' and the time 11 p.m. 14 December.



MAORI BATTALION ATTACK, NIGHT 14-15 DECEMBER 1944

Maori Battalion attack, night 14-15 December 1944

The great and unavoidable weakness of the Maori position, as will be seen by a glance at the map, was the lack of an axis road; on the right was the embanked railway line, but on the left the only road was in 23 Battalion's area and that was useless until Celle was cleared.

The Colonel was well aware of the possibility of having to contend with enemy armour without the benefit of his own supporting arms, and he ended his pre-battle conference by warning his officers that the presence of enemy armour might influence the fortunes of the attack. Provided the tanks and anti-tank screen could get forward at the earliest possible moment, he considered the Maoris need have no fear of the outcome.

After making final arrangements with 25 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Norman) ⁷ regarding the relief of A and B Companies and assuring General Freyberg, who had made a surprise call, that the Maoris were all well and looking forward to another 'crack at Jerry', Colonel Awatere climbed the steeple of the church at 'Ruatoria' for a final look over the country.

Like the rest of the area it was quite flat, with a slight rise towards Celle and Pogliano. Small paddocks now fallow were separated by single rows of mulberry and poplar trees. In the season these trees would support the trellised grape-vines. The rows of trees ran in the same direction as the advance and would be no obstacle to the passage of tanks if the ground was firm enough. But the ground was not firm enough. Two shells tearing away a part of the tower warned Awatere that it was time to leave. He took the hint, which was just as well for a third shell brought the whole tower down.

The troops were on the start line half an hour before the barrage was due to open and moved off in good shape.

C Company attacked with two platoons, No. 14 (Lieutenant S. Paniora) right and 13 (Lieutenant Hogan) ⁸ left. No. 15 Platoon was temporarily split into three stretcher-bearer parties, one to each platoon, and the third with Company Headquarters. There was no serious molestation from the enemy so Hogan swung left and shot up La Morte. It was apparently empty, and he rejoined Paniora who was waiting in a small *casa* near the railway and 50 yards from Della Cura; Pogliano lay

another 50 yards further west. The two platoons waited the arrival of Lieutenant Mahuika, when the final assault would be planned. So far they had had only five wounded.

D Company's plan was for 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Huata)⁹ and 12 Platoon to make for **Casa Bianca** while 17 Platoon (Lieutenant H. Parata) and 18 Platoon (Sergeant Duff)¹⁰ dealt with Villa Palermo. They had an unimpeded passage and, after a short fire fight, **Casa Bianca** was taken without casualties. Eighteen Germans who surrendered were locked in the livingroom. Private Scia Scia¹¹ had an exciting few moments. He was searching haystacks near the *casa* when he fell into a weapon pit that was already occupied by a very large German who seized him from behind. Scia Scia leaned back against his adversary, and, hitting him over his head with his steel helmet, forced the German to release his hold. When Scia Scia had finished with him he was dead. No. 12 Platoon, in an undefended house close to **Casa Bianca**, heard cries for help and found several wounded enemy in a drain. They had probably been caught by the barrage, but before anything could be done for them a tank came from the direction of **Pogliano** and stopped at the crossroads a few yards from the *casa*

Were the support tanks up already? They were not. Private Paraki¹² moved quietly and climbed on to the tank, rapped on the steel hatch and, when it opened enough, dropped a grenade inside. An explosion followed, but the driver apparently escaped fatal injury for the tank backed off like a wounded bull. The Maori leaped off before it veered into a ditch, heaved itself out and departed at speed. Almost immediately another tank arrived, this time from the road connecting with Route 9. Lieutenant Huata turned a bazooka on to it, but the bombs failed to find a vital spot and the tank made off in the direction from which it had come. So far the only casualties were Paraki, with a hand grazed by the tank hatch, and another Maori, assisting with the bazooka, whose pants were burnt by the blast.

Nos. 17 and 18 Platoons had little difficulty with Palermo. Several prisoners were taken and locked in an outhouse. No casualties.

A Company found that **La Morte**, which had not responded to 13 Platoon's fire, was far from empty. The two forward platoons commanded by Lieutenant Kake ¹³ and Sergeant Cullen had to dodge a minefield that Hogan's men had walked through safely and then attack from front and flank before the enemy capitulated. **La Morte** was apparently intended to be held, for several spandaus were found inside.

Ospitalaca was empty and B Company settled in. Thus at 2.30 a.m. the left flank was on the objective road but the right was in serious trouble. While waiting for Lieutenant Mahuika and C Company headquarters to arrive, Paniora and Hogan decided to send a patrol to investigate **Della Cura**. Two sections, one from each platoon, crawled along a ditch to the edge of a tiled courtyard. There was no need to go further for a few yards away were two Tiger tanks and enemy in numbers moving about. An officer was giving orders and a German was sitting by the open hatch of one of the tanks.

This was serious news for the troops had no weapon capable of knocking out a Tiger. Lieutenant Mahuika, who had arrived while the patrol was out, called over the air for 'stonks' on **Della Cura** but none fell on the target. To make matters worse, the enemy tanks came out and began a tentative shelling of the building where the Maoris were sheltering. Mahuika decided to pull out and told Hogan to go first with his men and that the others would follow later.

No. 13 Platoon crawled down a ditch flanking the railway line, but when the men thought it was safe to leave that shelter they walked into a minefield. Explosions followed rapidly; there were also Germans on the railway embankment firing at them. Two haystacks caught fire and the enemy had perfect targets. Very soon there were not enough men to carry away the wounded. The survivors made for **La Morte**, though not sure if it was occupied or not. Hogan went forward alone and when within hailing distance yelled, 'Hey, Ngapuhi!' No answer. He tried again. 'Ngapuhi! Ko Ngatiporou tenei.' ['This is Ngatiporou.'] This time the answer came. 'Ae. Ko Ngapuhi tenei.' ['Yes. This is Ngapuhi.']

Hogan thereupon led his men into the backyard. Here two Germans leapt from hiding in a haystack with hands up and yelling 'Kamerad'. **La Morte** was now overcrowded, so after waiting some time for the others Hogan led his men back to Casa 'Clueless'. Corporal Peters ¹⁴ volunteered to lead a section back to bring in the wounded men left behind, and on the last of several trips was himself wounded and evacuated.

The road to the rear was heavily shelled, but the battalion carriers never stopped until they had taken the last wounded man to the dressing station. One driver was killed.

Before 14 Platoon was due to leave, Lieutenant Mahuika was wounded and evacuated and command devolved on Lieutenant Paniora. Hoping that the tanks might get up or that the enemy might leave before daybreak, he decided to stay on where he was. All posts were withdrawn into the building and observation kept on **Della Cura**, a difficult business as the house had but one window opening in that direction and the Germans in **Della Cura** had it well covered. As soon as it was light enough four incautious enemy were shot in the open. This must have incensed the others for, besides the two tanks at **Della Cura** that had been peculiarly silent, two more arrived and the four turned their guns on to the house. One corner was torn off and falling bricks, timber, and debris wounded four of the garrison. An infantry attack, the preparation of which might account for the inactivity of the first two tanks, then came in but the range was suicidal and the survivors retired. Lieutenant Paniora was killed and Sergeant-Major Wanoa took command. He considered that there was no sense in staying there to be killed when nothing could be gained by so doing and called for a smoke screen and defensive 'stonks'. The dead were laid together in one of the rooms and as the defensive fire came down the survivors, carrying their wounded, slipped away without being seen and reached Casa 'Clueless' safely.

There was at least one good marksman among the Germans. B

Company back in Ospitalaca was peering through windows at no-man's-land and in a big room occupied by 11 Platoon a new reinforcement was riding a bicycle around the room. One of the windows had been blown in, and every time he passed the open space there was a thud on the wall opposite. The recruit mentioned to Lieutenant Balzer that every time he passed the window something smacked into the wall. 'Yes,' replied Balzer, 'and if you don't stop riding that bike you'll be the one that'll be smacked, not the wall. You're being sniped at.'

To return to D Company. The two platoons at **Casa Bianca** found themselves in the same situation as C Company at **Della Cura**—tanks could be heard and later seen in the artificial moonlight. **Celle** junction, a 23 Battalion objective, was still in enemy hands so that, in effect, the two Maori platoons were well ahead of the fighting on their left flank. Supporting armour had no chance of reaching them and they had no weapons capable of dealing with the heavy Tigers, whose characteristic whine could be clearly heard. The tanks fired into and lit haystacks, evidently to supply illumination for their better aim; the two platoon commanders pulled their men back to Villa Palermo. So far so bad. Once again the Maoris had been forced to relinquish their gains through circumstances beyond their control. There was consolation, however, in the sight of enemy tanks and infantry speeding along Route 9 from **Faenza** to the safety of the **Senio** stopbanks.

The **23rd Battalion** had also not managed to complete its programme owing to the tenacious defence of **Celle**—it captured it, was thrown back by a fierce counter-attack, and recaptured it before dawn.

The next phase of the operation, in view of the limited success during the night, was for 5 Brigade to feel towards the **Senio**. The job allotted the Maoris was to push out and cut Route 9 and secure the highway bridge over the river.

At his O Group conference the Colonel reported that he had seen from a vantage point enemy stretcher-bearers still carrying wounded from **Pogliano**. It was known that the enemy had a number of tanks still

concentrated in that area and it was unfortunate that the anti-tank guns had not been able to reach the men who had taken their objectives that night. The supporting tanks had not been able to move either, but the clearing of **Celle** had allowed them to use the road to the Villa Palermo, where two of them bogged down in the front lawn.

The proposed thrust by the battalion set down for the following day would be along the road to **Casa Bianca** and Casa Gavaletta, thus giving **Pogliano** a wide berth. As soon as it was dark the companies were to move to new locations. Before this, however, 12 Platoon, still with D Company and situated in a building near Palermo, had a hectic few minutes. Just as the light was failing a party of Germans was spotted creeping up a drain towards the platoon post. It was thought desirable to let them come as close as possible and they were not molested. Suddenly there was an explosion and part of the front wall of the building fell in; three more explosions and the place was in ruins. Brens sprayed the area and the bazooka crew made off, leaving behind six dead; the Maori casualties were one killed and five wounded.

After dark B Company marched by a devious route to **Celle** and dug in near the church; C Company moved in to Ospitalaca when B vacated it; A Company handed **La Morte** over to 25 Battalion and occupied Casa 'Clueless'. D Company remained at Villa Palermo. When the attack began first C Company and then D would move up to **Celle** in close support.

The moves were done in a peaceful atmosphere; the enemy was too busy defending the last toeholds in **Faenza** and dodging our artillery along Route 9 out of **Faenza** to spare any men or material on a lost battlefield.

The plan of attack was for B Company to attack, first, **Casa Bianca** and then Casa Gavaletta after an adequate artillery softening up. When these posts were taken, C Company would pass through and establish posts on Route 9.

Captain Northcroft entrusted the taking of the **Casa Bianca** crossroads to 10 Platoon (Lieutenant Maika) and the Casa Gavaletta crossroads to 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Balzer). No. 12 Platoon, which had rejoined B Company, was in reserve.

No. 10 Platoon moved off at 10.30 p.m. while the shells were still falling on the target only 600 yards away. A mist shrouded the objective as the troops in open order on each side of the road closed cautiously on **Casa Bianca**. Not a shot was fired and one section, covered by the others, was sent to investigate. The place was empty. The success signal was sent up and supporting tanks came up the road from Palermo accompanied by 11 Platoon. Lieutenant Balzer also made a cautious approach and found an empty house and a burnt-out Panther in a garage.

Route 9 was now only half a mile away. As soon as he saw the success signal Lieutenant Hogan, in temporary command of C Company, sent two platoons (Sergeants 'Jeep' Paringatai ¹⁵ and Ben Te Ngahue ¹⁶) up to **Casa Bianca**. Paringatai then led his men along a hedge and made a brief halt in Casa Bonomi, half-way to Route 9, where they had a view of German troops streaking across the fields for the shelter of trees and houses beyond the highway. There was no opposition and the platoon settled into *casas* covering the road junction. A search in the ditches around about produced three Germans.

Te Ngahue also found his objective unoccupied although the platoon was fired on from a house across the road. The tanks had arrived by this time and they shot up the house. Corporal Taylor ¹⁷ took a section to investigate and had the satisfaction of seeing enemy disappearing with celerity through the orchard. **Colonel Awatere** wanted to carry on to the **Senio** but the tanks were reluctant to risk Route 9 without careful examination. They did not think the Germans would depart without mining the road first. **Awatere**, as impetuous as he was fearless, had taken the bit in his teeth and was prepared to chase the enemy as far as **Berlin** if needs be. He sent a signal to Brigade: 'Give us Engineers to

clear the mines to get the tanks up and we will go after the enemy.'

Brigade Headquarters, not so impetuous, told him to patrol the wide gap that had opened between the Maoris and 23 Battalion and that no attempt was to be made to cross the **Senio**.

The general position was that 22 and 23 Battalions had closed up to the **Senio** defences and 25 Battalion, after a sticky start, had pushed up to Route 9 on the Maoris' right; fighting was still going on in **Faenza**; farther right the enemy held the Lamone River line though reports suggested that he was thinning out.

That night (16-17th) it was the enemy's turn to keep Route 9 under intermittent fire and in the morning he had departed from **Faenza**. It was a quiet day on the Maori front, which was fitting because it was a Sunday. The only incident of interest was the capture by 15 Platoon of one German with a bazooka. He said he was one of three who had volunteered to destroy tanks, and also added that there were at least fifty enemy in the Casas Trentola, Quarantini and Prosciuta between the unit and the **Senio**.

The **21st Battalion** took over the Maori *casas* during the night 20-21 December and the troops returned to the old billets in **Forli**. The battalion's casualties were 22 killed, 65 wounded, and 2 missing.

The date being what it was, the most immediate operation was the building of hangis for a proper Maori Christmas dinner, so while the troops cleaned their weapons, their persons and their clothes, B Echelon bargained with the owners of livestock. Major Henare called the company seconds-in-command together and explained what had so far been accomplished. There would be an extra issue of rations and a consignment of mutton-birds from the folk at home was already in store. But, as he put it ever so delicately, no army rations this side of Valhalla could completely satisfy the meat-hungry Maoris. He understood that the district could meet the requirements for the hangis, but he warned them that tact and patience were necessary in dealing with the Italian

farmers. Maori is a wonderful language in which to say nothing at great length, but the officers left the meeting clearly understanding that it would be up to them to produce adequate supplies of pork and poultry—somehow.

Snow fell that night (23rd) and the temperatures dropped below zero. Some genius thought up a way of combating the cold by the use of two oil drums. One with tap attached permitted a drop of dieselene oil to fall some distance into the bottom drum, thereby breaking the oil drops into fragments small enough to burn readily. There were fumes, smoke, and smuts as well as heat, but the result was entirely satisfactory to the Maoris, whose god next to kai is mahana. ¹⁸

Snow fell again on Christmas Eve but the Maoris were warm and it was a 'Late Night'. Soon after dusk there were sounds of revelry; then hakas in all their old-time ferocity were performed to the accompaniment of Bren and tommy-gun fire. By the grace of Providence nobody was hurt.

Snow had to be removed from the already-prepared hangis in the morning. It was a scene to be remembered. Around each of the company hangis men were preparing poultry or cutting pork into manageable sizes. Columns of smoke rose high in the air from the ovens where the fires crackled (only God and the Maoris knew where the wood came from; nobody else could find any) and heating stones burst with a noise like rifle shots. Sacks of Italian puha stood ready to be cooked with the mutton-birds for it is the oil of mutton-birds that gives the puha a flavor that to the Maori is a gastronomic delight. The ovens were opened at midday and the battalion's second white Christmas in **Italy** was a complete success.

The Maoris relieved 22 Battalion north-west of **Celle** on the night 26-27 December. They were all in *casas* out of the wet and cold and, being on slightly higher ground, could look across the **Senio** stopbanks where the enemy reserves were also ensconced in houses though their FDLs lay in front of the river.

The position on the Italian front was that the Germans, by their delaying tactics, had won another winter's respite. Eighth Army, denuded of divisions for more important theatres, had fought itself to a standstill and had neither the men nor the ammunition to mount another offensive. The Americans were finally bogged down near **Bologna**. In Greece the liberated Greeks, Communists and anti-Communists, were cutting each other's throats while a British force tried to keep the contestants apart without appearing to take sides. In Europe in the vital battle area unheard-of names were being mentioned over the air daily. Nobody knew where they were or cared much, but out of the welter of news it was learned that the Russians were advancing through **Poland**, the Anglo-American Army had reached **Germany**, the French were fighting in Alsace and the British were nearing **Mandalay**.

New Year's Eve did not go unheralded but it was Jerry who put on the show. Right on the stroke of midnight he opened up with all his fireworks aimed harmlessly at the sky—ack-ack shells, star shells, Very lights and tracer formed a multi-coloured pattern against the darkness of the night. Then, when the show was over, he aimed his weapons in the(to him) right direction.

January passed in much the same way as January 1944 had passed at **Orsogna**—patrols patrolled and mortars mortared. A German patrol got behind a Maori *casa* and caused some casualties. Brigade wanted some prisoners and WO II Bill Whareaitu (11 Platoon) spotted movement at a demolished house near the stopbank. A carefully planned raid secured six prisoners, and by a happy coincidence a German-speaking officer from a Jewish battalion was with the Maori company for experience. He ascertained from the Germans that they were waiting for a runner to bring word of their relief that night, so a party went out and collected the runner also. Further questioning brought the information that the capture of the patrol would probably not be known at their company headquarters. The typically Maori scheme was thought up of sending seven men to the stopbank; they would then return as the new patrol and collect the real patrol when it made its appearance. This

dangerous idea appealed to Whareaitu's men and Corporal Johnny Hughes ¹⁹ set out to give an imitation of a German patrol returning to its lines. There must have been something wrong with their act because they were fired on and lost three wounded. Hughes stopped long enough to inform the Germans at the top of his voice that they were a pack of square-headed b—s. Even so, the platoon felt that on balance it had had the best of the deal. The battalion went back to **Faenza** on the 9th and returned to the line on the 23rd.

February was a replica of January. River-crossing exercises kept the men busy when out of the line, and sandbagging the holes knocked in their *casas* kept them equally busy when in the FDLs. The CO noticed a tendency for the Maoris to take things a little too easy in the stand-to period and issued a special order to all companies which ended:

Aggressiveness. [Company Commanders] will check pl comds to see that they, the pl comds, without being bloody minded or bloodthirsty, are prepared to pull the trigger on the enemy 24 hrs a day without being told to do so. If a Spandau fires towards us from nowhere a pl comd must retaliate immediately with 2 brens at least, Fire SOMEWHERE ANYWHERE in the direction of the enemy. Inertia breeds laziness and lulls men into a sense of timidity which always causes demoralisation. Get cracking!
SHOOT!

Fifty-five officers and men who for good cause had been left behind when the battalion last went into the line were fare-welled at **Forli** by the CO. They were the Maori portion of the Tongariro furlough draft, practically all the men in the unit up to and including the 5th Reinforcements. The Colonel ended his address: 'Pikautia atu nga mate me te aroha o te Hoko-Whitu-a-Tu ki te hunga e tangi mai ra i nga marae maha o te wa kainga.' ²⁰

Two innovations were tried out during this period, one with definite and the other with doubtful success. The first was to stage a 'Chinese' attack whereby everything in the area that could fire fired, and the infantry, with improvised compasses, telephoned back the bearings of

enemy gun flashes. It became a popular pastime and battalions issued invitations to their neighbours to participate in the next 'Chinese' shoot. If the flash reports were of use to the gunners, the enemy tracer display was well worth the trouble the infantry went to.

The second method of brightening up the war was to issue loudspeakers, turntables, and propaganda records to battalions. One or two musical items were put over first to soothe the suspicious Teuton and were followed by war items, and finally the state of the Reich was described in vivid terms. No shells or mortars sought out the equipment so it is to be presumed that the enemy found the enterprise not uninteresting.

Signs were not wanting that spring was near. A fortnight of sunny days dried up the mud pools and permitted the Air Force greater freedom; the untilled fields began to sprout from last year's crops and yellow crocuses bloomed in the most unlikely places.

It was about this period that the Division changed its shape again by the formation of a third brigade of infantry. The 27th (Machine Gun) Battalion passed its weapons in and became an infantry unit, while each infantry battalion formed its own MMG Platoon and trained its own gunners; the Divisional Cavalry was also reorganised and became an infantry unit; and 22 Battalion, attached to 5 Brigade for some time, ceased to be motorised and marched out to the newly formed 9 Infantry Brigade.

On 5 March the Maoris handed over to 14 Battalion, 5 Wilno Brigade, 5 Kresowa (Polish) Division and returned to **Camerino** to train for the last showdown. The convoy travelled all night and early dawn disclosed the familiar valleys, streams, and hamlets of **Camerino**. The troops debussed and marched to the same area they had occupied on the previous occasion. It was like a welcome home.

There was a week's complete stand-easy accompanied by the assurance that a period of strenuous training was to follow. The

afternoons were given over to organised sport and recreational training, with inter-battalion matches to stimulate interest. Maori Rugby was passing through a stagnant period for after a couple of wins the representative team took four good beatings in a row. Hockey was little better—definitely an off period.

Training began in earnest on Tuesday, 13 March, with PT and a road gallop and never let up while the unit was in **Camerino**. **Colonel Awatere** made a tour of the hospitals and arrived back with fifty men from Advanced Base who he thought would be doing better work in the battalion.

Major-General Kippenberger paid the battalion a visit on 22 March and there was a battalion parade in his honour. The General was entertained to afternoon tea by the CO and his officers and was presented as a mark of esteem by the Maoris with a carved walking stick—a peculiarly appropriate gift as the General had lost both his feet at **Cassino**.

The carving was the work of Second-Lieutenant Rua Kaika ²¹ who had used as a base a pick handle from **Cassino**; the eyes of the figures were pieces of glass from the chapel on **Monastery Hill**; the stick was shod with the casing of a point five Browning cartridge and the rubber at the end was taken from a jeep destroyed at **Cassino**.

The following day there was a practice ceremonial parade for the GOC Eighth Army, Lieutenant-General McCreery, at which **General Kippenberger** took the salute—he was seen to lean heavily on his carved stick.

The 26th was a day few will forget for an event certain to be unique in Maori military affairs. It had never before been possible for the battalion to welcome its representatives in the **New Zealand Army Nursing Service**, and the arrival of Sister Pare Saxby ²² and Nurse Kia Rewai ²³ of 2 NZ General Hospital, accompanied by Nurse Betty Clements ²⁴ and an escort of Maori officers, was celebrated at a

battalion parade in the time-honoured manner of their forefathers. After the CO had congratulated the men on their fine showing in front of General McCreery, the visitors were welcomed to the battalion by word and song.

Ceremonial parades for General Officers Commanding are, to the knowing, advance notice that the training period is drawing to a close. The parade for General McCreery was no exception and the troops packed up and left for the **Senio on the last day of the month. A special order of the day from Field-Marshal Alexander urged them on to the last battle:**

Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre

Final victory is near. The German Forces are now very groggy and only need one mighty punch to knock them out for good. The moment has now come for us to take the field for the last battle which will end the war in **Europe. You know what our comrades in the West and in the East are doing on the battlefields. It is now our turn to play our decisive part. It will not be a walkover; a mortally wounded beast can still be very dangerous. You must be prepared for a hard and bitter fight; but the end is quite certain—there is not the slightest shadow of doubt about that. You, who have won every battle you have fought, are going to win this last one.**

Forward then into battle with confidence, faith and determination to see it through to the end. Godspeed and good luck to you all.

¹Grimaces.

² Capt D. G. Cumming; Auckland; born Masterton, 3 Feb 1915; medical practitioner.

³ Capt P. W. E. Moore; Auckland; born England, 17 Mar 1918; medical student; wounded 14 Dec 1944.

⁴See p. 410

⁵ **Sgt R. Cullen**, MM; **Paeroa**; born NZ 5 Jan 1920; carpenter; four times wounded.

⁶ **Maj H. Mackey**, MM; **Ruatoria**; born **Waiomatatani**, 1 Dec 1914; shepherd; wounded 12 Dec 1944.

⁷ **Lt-Col E. K. Norman**, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Levin**; born **Napier**, 14 Sep 1916; theological student; CO **25 Bn** Dec 1943-Feb 1944, Jun 1944-Apr 1945; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

⁸ **Lt W. Hogan**; born NZ 6 May 1911; stock agent; died **Ruatoria**, 18 Mar 1947.

⁹ **Maj A. Huata**, MC; **Frasertown**, **Hawke's Bay**; born **Wairoa**, 19 Jun 1920; labourer; wounded 23 Mar 1944.

¹⁰ **2 Lt W. Duff**; **Dunedin**; born **Puketeraki**, 14 Jul 1917; labourer.

¹¹ **L-Cpl C. Te A. Scia Scia**; **Porangahau**; born **Porangahau**, 1 Nov 1916; labourer; wounded 27 Apr 1945.

¹² **Sgt T. Paraki**; **Taneatua**; born **Ruatoki**, 5 May 1920; labourer; wounded 1 Aug 1944.

¹³ **Capt R. Kake**; **Whangarei**; born **Whangarei**, 25 Nov 1923; student; wounded 25 May 1944.

¹⁴ **Cpl S. Peters**; **Auckland**; born **Omaio**, 21 Apr 1920; farm labourer; three times wounded.

¹⁵ **Sgt J. Paringatai**; **Te Araroa**; born NZ 31 Mar 1919; labourer; twice wounded.

¹⁶ **Sgt B. Te Ngahue**; **Te Araroa**; born **Te Araroa**, 18 Mar 1914; labourer; wounded 21 Feb 1945.

¹⁷ **Cpl D. G. Taylor**, m.i.d.; **Manutuke**, **Gisborne**; born NZ 14 Feb 1918;

labourer; wounded 21 Apr 1945.

¹⁸Warmth.

¹⁹ Cpl H. Hughes; Reporoa; born NZ 5 Mar 1918; farmer; wounded 7 Jan 1945.

²⁰Take with you the memory of the dead and the love of the living of the **Maori Battalion to those who are lamenting and grieving in the courtyards of the people.**

²¹ Lt R. J. Kaika; Te Araroa; born NZ 19 Jun 1917; carver; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

²² Sister R. P. Saxby (now Mrs. Marsden); Pukehou; born **Opotiki, 16 Nov 1916; nurse.**

²³ Nurse Te K. Rewai, BEM; **Christchurch; born Chatham Is., 21 Nov 1916; machinist.**

²⁴ Nurse B. M. Clements (now Mrs. Wood); **Auckland; born **Wanganui**, 27 Jun 1921; clerk.**

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 18 – THE LAST BATTLE

CHAPTER 18

The Last Battle

THE dust-covered brigade column broke up into sections and by midday on 1 April 28 (Maori) Battalion had debussed about five miles north-west of **Faenza** in the area held by a battalion of 11 Brigade of 78 British Division. Fifth Brigade's sector was forward of **Granarolo** with 21 Battalion on the right, the **Maori Battalion** left, and 23 Battalion in reserve; 6 Brigade was on the left and 9 Brigade in divisional reserve. Fifth Corps intended to start the last offensive with two divisions up— **8 Indian Division** on the right and **2 NZ Division** on the left. Second Polish Corps, with one division up, on the New Zealand Division's left, completed Eighth Army's deployment. The object of the Eighth and Fifth Armies was the destruction of all enemy forces south of the River Po; then, after a crossing had been forced, Eighth Army would push north-east and join up with Marshal Tito's forces near **Trieste**. Fifth Army, after taking **Bologna**, would strike north-west and west at Milan and Genoa.

The first phase was the capture of **Bologna**, which was to be effected by first a feint in the north at Lake Comacchio, followed by a two-corps thrust towards **Bologna** by Eighth Army. It was hoped that enemy reserves would be drawn towards those threats so that the American Fifth Army could strike direct at **Bologna**.

The main breakthrough was expected to occur in the north through the **Argenta Gap** and the New Zealand Division's role was to create as much havoc as possible in its immediate vicinity. The New Zealand operations were purely subsidiary to the main efforts, with no thought of a breakthrough. Foiled on the **Sangro**, at **Cassino** and at **Rimini**, the breakthrough came when and where it was not contemplated, for, starting with the object of drawing off enemy reserves, the New Zealand Division fought five major battles for the **Senio**, **Santerno**, **Sillaro**, **Gaiana**, and **Idice** rivers and smashed three German divisions, **98th**, **278th**, and **4th Parachute** in the process. Then it broke through to

Trieste—but let us start at the beginning.

All the usual precautions for a secret move had been taken to avoid advertising the return of **2 NZ Division** to the line, but the policy was to be extended by trying to hide the fact that **78 British Division** was handing over part of its frontage. To this end the 'Battleaxe' patches of that division were issued to the Kiwis in place of their own insignia; furthermore, the **Maori Battalion** was always to be referred to as H. 75. German Intelligence usually deduced an early attack when **2 NZ Division** was located in a new sector, and it was essential that the enemy should stay on the **Senio** where he was to be overwhelmed and not move back to the next river and thus cause much of the preparatory planning and dumping to be done over again.

The battalion area was quite flat and with all the trees and vines in leaf there was good cover for movement. Even the dust from moving vehicles was now a good thing from an infantry viewpoint because it gave the gunners on each side sufficient targets to keep them busy without bothering overmuch about about small bodies of men moving about.

Battalion Headquarters was established in a flour mill on another of the innumerable canals that help to keep this near-swamp area dry enough for cultivation. The battalion front, about 800 yards in width, was occupied by C Company, right, and D Company, left. Each had defensive posts dug well into the stopbank and could, with periscopes and peepholes, view the reverse slope of its bank and the forward slope of the enemy-held bank with reasonable safety. The **Senio** itself was not deep at the time—about five feet and twenty-five feet across—but the twenty-foot-high stopbanks would have to be bridged before the armour could cross. That would be the engineers' business, but at present the high banks were useful because they screened the forward platoon *casas* and permitted quick and safe journeys to and from the posts on the bank itself.

The first day and most of the following night were spent in

reinforcing and strengthening the defences; the weapon pits on the stopbank were deepened and sandbagged while timber from ruined houses was used to revet the walls.

Brigadier Bonifant, ¹ now commanding 5 Brigade, laid down the pattern of work for the near future. A policy of offensive defence was to be adopted and the fullest use made of snipers. Strict wireless silence was to be observed and only very guarded speech used on the telephone—the enemy was known to have, like ourselves, a device for listening to line telephone conversations; every precaution was to be taken against the possibility of losing a prisoner to a smash-and-grab raiding party.

Other arrangements were the use of bangalore torpedoes to explode mines and destroy wire entanglements between the stopbanks, the construction of ramps for the use of flame-throwing Wasps and Crocodiles, the digging in of boats and kapok bridges behind the stopbank, and the construction of positions for the forward companies to draw back to when the bombardment preceding the attack opened.

For the next few days it appeared that the enemy was deliberately refraining from firing on the Maori sector although there seemed, by the characteristic noises, to be something doing most of the time on 21 Battalion's front. The enemy held the near stopbank in part of that battalion's area and an intermittent battle appeared to be raging to force him off it, a battle that eventually ended in the Germans vacating the premises in favour of 21 Battalion. One upsetting feature of the German-21 Battalion war was the loss of three prisoners to a snap raiding party and the consequent breaking of all the security precautions. As a matter of fact nobody need have worried for the arrival of **2 NZ Division** was not news to the **German High Command**.

The night 6–7 April showed the enemy in a new role and for some hours his gunners plastered the divisional area. Most of the fire fell on the gun lines, and apart from setting alight to haystacks and buildings did little damage to the Maori area and wounded only three men.

Divisional Headquarters was 'scared stiff', not at the Brock's Benefit exploding around the place but because an enemy withdrawal might be afoot. That precisely was the enemy's idea, though the withdrawal had been cancelled at the last moment and the enemy gunners solaced by being permitted to expend a few thousand shells.

The morning after the reverse 'Chinese attack' all officers down to company commanders attended a conference at **Divisional Headquarters**, where they heard a review of the situation. The enemy divisions had never been so widely spread and so heavily committed in the history of the Italian campaign; there were thought to be thirty Tigers or Panthers on the **5 Corps** front, of which twenty should be available to trouble the Division. There were also about fifteen self-propelled guns. Following this review **General Freyberg** took over and opened by saying that now was the time for which the Division had been waiting five years. The enemy was clearly breaking up. He sketched the outline of the thunderbolt soon to fall on the enemy and said that there would be a barrage greater than at **Alamein**, almost total superiority in the air, a favourable ratio of ten to one in armour and six to one in guns. In manpower, however, the odds in our favour were not so great, about one and a half to one.

Brigadier Bonifant went into more detail at his unit commanders' conference later in the day. The *2nd Battalion, 289 Regiment, 98 Infantry Division* was opposing 5 Brigade; the attack would be on a two-corps front; **5 Corps** was to break through the **Senio** defences, establish a bridgehead on the **Santerno River** and make for the **Argenta Gap**. Second Polish Corps on the left would establish a bridgehead and make for **Bologna**.

Fifth Corps' plan was to attack with two divisions, the Indians on the right moving north-west across the front of 78 British Division, thus squeezing the latter into corps reserve.

Fifth Brigade's operation order is full of map references and code-names which for clarity have been translated into roads, towns, and

canals. Briefly, 21 Battalion, right, and 28 (Maori) Battalion, left, would assault the **Senio** stopbanks and then form up on a parallel road about a quarter of a mile beyond the far bank. From there they would follow a barrage for a mile to another lateral road half a mile short of and to the south of **Lugo**, a small but important road centre and the place where **8 Indian Division** would tie in with **2 NZ Division**. The final phase was exploitation for another mile to the Canale di **Lugo**.

The only matters of interest that occurred the next day (8 April), beyond the preparations that had been going on since the brigade took over the sector, were, firstly, a slight tactical adjustment whereby 21 Battalion occupied a small piece of C Company's front and 25 Battalion vacated its right-hand platoon area to the Maoris; and, secondly, the marching in of twenty-three reinforcements. All were men with long service in action. In order to expose them to as few risks as possible, **Colonel Awatere** detailed them as stretcher-bearers.

The CO was awakened at ten past four the next morning, 9 April. Lieutenant R. Maika (Brigade LO) had a message for him which had to be delivered personally. It was a very short message, only four words, 'THIS IS D DAY.'

Every officer and NCO in the battalion and units attached was assembled at Battalion Headquarters after breakfast. Nobody needed telling what it was all about; a large map hung on the wall was eloquent in its silence. The Colonel gave a short résumé of the divisional and brigade conferences, warned his listeners that this was the last round, that there was to be no looking back and that the only thought was to smash the Nazi machine. He ended:

They are a tough mob and cannot be taken too lightly. We only hope that after the arty and Air Force have finished their tasks the enemy will be so demoralised as to offer the minimum of resistance.

The battalion line of battle was A Company (Captain Harris) on the right and B Company (Major Northcroft) left, and in support C Company

(Major Reedy) right and D Company (Major McRae) left. B Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment would be in support, while liaison officers from 74 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, 34 NZ Heavy Mortars and 5 NZ Field Regiment would move with Battalion Headquarters.

It was a beautifully sunny, cloudless day with a light haze shimmering over the river. There was not the slightest hint of the coming cataclysm. The forward troops had to withdraw at least 400 yards from the FDLs before midday and they moved back in small and casual groups to the sheltered trenches already prepared for them. Some sunbathed, some slept, some played cards, some took a risk and played hop-step-and-jump close to their trenches. Throughout the day the two chaplains who were with the unit, Padres Huata and Bennett, ² visited each platoon and held a short service in which they exhorted their tribesmen to be of good cheer and acquit themselves like men and gave them the blessing of the Church. Seldom has that favourite Maori hymn 'Au e Ihu, Tirohia' been sung so feelingly and seldom were men more spiritually ready to go into battle.

Lance-Corporal Nepia describes the four-hour bombardment:

We saw the first of the bombers, flying high in perfect formation, approach at 1340 hrs from the SW, huge Fortresses, like giant silver fish, silver in the bright afternoon sun. Then the roar of the engines, ever increasing as the planes came closer, filled the air. Then they were over and away beyond into enemy territory. Wave after wave passed till the air was filled with a constant, incessant deep roar.

Then, as the first of the waves reached the target areas, a loud hissing accompanied the falling bombs, followed immediately by a deep prolonged rumble, then deep-toned explosions could be heard above the roar of the planes overhead, and, in the wake of these, the reverberations as the earth shook beneath the weight of the bomb loads.

The first bombs fell at exactly 1350 hrs. Liberators came, with their tell-tale twin tail sets; medium bombers, flying lower than the heavies,

swept past at a greater speed.... The second wave of bombers was met by white puffs of smoke, indicating that the 88mm AA had at last gone into action. Then black smoke belched from one of the machines, a Fortress. The others flew on. The disabled plane lost speed, then spiralled earthwards, out of control.



FROM THE SENIO TO THE ADIGE, APRIL 1945

From the **Senio** to the **Adige**, April 1945

Meanwhile a thick pall of smoke hung over enemy territory, where fires had begun their work of destruction, while huge clouds of dust rose as each stick of bombs found their mark.

The last of the bombers had barely disappeared out of sight on the journey home when the thunderous barrage of hundreds of guns of all calibres rained shells on targets beyond and on the **Senio**.

.... For four hours the guns, 25 prs, 4.5s, 5.5s and 7.2s poured shell after shell over the river, while the mortars played a tattoo on the banks, setting off mines and booby traps besides reducing wire defs [defences] to a state easily negotiable by the inf.... In the dim light, rendered so by the concealment of the sun in the smoke and dust, the Maoris left their positions and section commanders led them to the start line. There were still twenty minutes to go, and by the time all the men were in line a few minutes remained.

.... At this moment the Crocodiles and Wasps roared fwd from their posns of concealment among the trees to the stopbank, mounted the ramps provided, and played long tongues of flame on B bank and beyond.... As soon as the Wasps and Crocodiles moved fwd the infantry left the start line. In a long line, and spaced at intervals of at least ten feet between men, the Maoris crossed the intervening space in a trice, through the low trees, and burst upon the bank just as the Crocodiles and Wasps had ended their phase of operations. Seconds only were required for reaching the top of the bank, and then the men were over, out of sight.

Near the stopbank the platoons changed from extended order into single file. The wire entanglements presented no difficulty—they had been chopped to fragments—and the leading sections threw their kapok bridges across the water; many did not wait their turn but plunged into the waist-high **Senio**.

They were met by the enemy before they had climbed the flame-blackened further bank, but not a fighting enemy—a dazed enemy with hands high in the air; after the pounding their defences had taken it was miraculous that there were any survivors at all. The Maoris pointed to the rear and the prisoners waited for no bridges. Within five minutes the leading platoons were strung out in a line across a bomb-pitted field waiting for their supports who had been covering them from the top of the stopbank; when they showed up through the murk of smoke and dust both companies went forward across the paddocks to the forming-up road. So far they had had no opposition and no casualties. There was no contact with 6 Brigade, but A Company could hear 21 Battalion moving through the trees and vines. An occasional voice would call, ‘Are you there Hori?’ and the Maoris would reply to the pakeha inquiry in terms that left no doubt whatever as to their identity.

A group of *casas* showed up near the road and 10 Platoon (Sergeant Mason) made a cautious approach, but a search produced only two bomb-happy Germans who were added to a small batch of about twenty picked

up en route. The first three casualties occurred about this time and the prisoners were told to escort themselves back and take the wounded with them.

When the standing barrage began to roll at five past eight all four assaulting battalions were ready to follow; both flanking divisions were still fighting for their crossings but were making progress.

There was only scattered fire while the troops followed the barrage to the pause line about half-way to the final objective, but the failing light and the smoke that was being laid to hide them from possible strongposts made ordered progress very difficult. Colonel Awatere was asked to call the smoke off but the pause line was reached before the CO's message was acted upon.

The troops were to wait and the barrage was to stand for thirty-five minutes, so both companies occupied a schoolhouse near a crossroad with sections dug in around the building. Prisoners were being taken in numbers at this stage and were causing some embarrassment. They would have needed a sizeable escort which would have reduced the fighting strength of the platoons; eventually it was decided to disarm them and lock them in the school; they probably did not stay there very long.

When the barrage started to move again some civilians who had taken refuge in the open fields were mistaken for enemy and shot. Major Northcroft was wounded close to the objective road but refused evacuation and was made comfortable on a bed in a *casa*, from which he directed Lieutenant Hubbard (12 Platoon) about consolidating and searching the houses in the vicinity; only civilians were found in occupation, and with the arrival of the armour soon after daylight the position was considered secure. Major Northcroft then permitted the stretcher-bearers to evacuate him.

Now let us follow the fortunes of the reserve companies.

C Company, following A Company, had to put up with consistent

small-arms fire from the right, where 21 Battalion had evidently missed some hardy occupants of a strongpost. Actually, its first casualty occurred on the stopbank when Lieutenant Kaa ³ (13 Platoon) stepped on a mine, and by the time they were near Casa Svegli Lieutenant Park ⁴ and some NCOs had been wounded in 15 Platoon. Corporal Pou Rakena ⁵ found himself in command of the platoon and quickly demonstrated his fitness for the position. The Germans holding the *casa* were in belligerent mood but Rakena charged two spandaus and killed both crews single-handed. After a sharp fight the house was occupied but the enemy rallied and began to bazooka the platoon, whereupon Rakena went out with his Bren, found the bazooka in a drain and killed the crew. That was the end of the fight; a large dugout near the *casa* yielded about sixty prisoners. Rakena was awarded a DCM.

Meanwhile, D Company had an easier time. The only enemy met were those sent back by B Company, and after searching every building on its axis the platoons dug in around the school vacated by B Company. Shortly after the fight at Casa Svegli C Company joined D Company and both commanders made their headquarters in the school. That was, for the time being, as far as they were to go.

Sixth Brigade probably had the tougher fight but was up by daylight; the Poles on its left had had to fight for every yard and had not made much headway; the Indians, after a shaky start, were preparing to attack **Lugo**.

The second day of the attack (10 April) dawned sunny and warm and at 8 a.m. the exploitation to the Canale di **Lugo** began in the same formation. There was no artillery support and the troops were not to go beyond the canal but were to dig in there. The Lugo had been treated as a possible enemy defence line and the heavy bombers had wrought tremendous damage. Almost every *casa* had been razed to the ground. There was no opposition, only small groups of civilians looking at the ruins of their homes. Some were very outspoken, but the Italian linguists among the Maoris were equally terse and reminded them that **Italy** had

started the war and that they had only themselves to blame for the devastation.

The Maoris halted on the canal and wondered what was coming up; they soon found out. At his O Group **Colonel Awatere** said that a good start had been made but he did not want the men to build up false hopes of a quick and easy victory. The enemy line on the **Senio** had been broken and a considerable part of **98 Division** with it. Fifth Brigade was now about to force the **Santerno River** about two miles away—with 23 Battalion replacing 21 Battalion—and the first job was to seize the **Scolo Tratturo**. The dispositions would be C Company, right, and D left, with A Company (now under command of Captain Ransfield) in support of C Company and B Company in support of D Company. A Wasp and a six-pounder would be under command of each forward company and the starting time would be 2 p.m.

The men of A and B Companies, after their comparative walkover, were basking in the sun, although they kept one eye on the shadows among the tree-lined fields between them and the **Scolo Tratturo**.

C Company was late on the start line, but D Company, dispersed in open order among the trees, did not wait for it. The **25th Battalion** could be seen also moving in open order and the supporting tanks were ready to come on when the infantry was far enough ahead. So were the 3-inch mortars and machine-gunners. There were no enemy in the immediate vicinity and for at least half a mile the troops passed unmanned strongposts and dummy field guns. The trees stopped on the edge of a wheat field and beyond the foot-high crop lay the Tratturo, skirted with clumps of olive trees. The Maoris had no sooner left the shelter of the trees than four machine guns opened fire. They should have had the range to a yard, but their fire was high and at first there were no casualties.

No. 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Potaka) ⁶ began to lose men and went to ground in the wheat; without waiting to see if 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Preece) ⁷ was doing likewise Private George Nia-Nia ⁸ led his section

straight at the enemy, all his men firing from the hip as they charged. These shock tactics were successful and, at a cost of one wounded Maori, eleven Germans were killed, five of whom fell to Nia-Nia. The post obstructing 16 Platoon thus obliterated, Preece led his men to the Tratturo and into a group of houses; the late occupants disappeared into the trees beyond the ditch. No. 17 Platoon (Lieutenant W. Duff) was brought up alongside while 18 Platoon, which had lost some men, including Lieutenant Potaka wounded, went into reserve. Nia-Nia was awarded the MM for his action.

C Company had an even more arduous day against stronger defences and a more determined enemy. Lieutenant Kaika had handed his signallers over to Sergeant Cook ⁹ and now commanded 13 Platoon, Sergeant Ruru ¹⁰ commanded 15 Platoon, and Lieutenant Hogan commanded 14 Platoon. Good progress was made until they came to a narrow road flanked by thick trees; beyond the trees was the same cornfield that D Company had crossed and when the C Company men burst through the trees the reception of the leading platoons was the same as that accorded D Company. Lieutenant Kaika was wounded and the platoon pinned to the ground. It was clearly a job for the tanks, but in plain view at Casa Capucci beyond the Scolo was a large anti-tank gun for which the tanks would be sitting shots. Word was sent back for the attached six-pounder. Lieutenant Tibble ¹¹ brought it up en portée as far as possible and then the crew hauled it along under the shelter of a banked-up road to a suitable position, where it was manhandled up the bank until the muzzle cleared the top. The first shot was sufficiently close for the enemy gunners to bolt for cover; the second was a direct hit and knocked out the anti-tank gun. Now for the tanks. The wireless sets were out of action so the company runner, Private Pita Maangi, ¹² was sent to bring them up. Between the tanks and the troops was an open, bullet-swept space which was the shortest distance and the most dangerous. Maangi crossed safely and later was seen walking ahead of the armour, guiding them to the waiting company. The enemy redoubled his efforts and mortar shells fell so thickly that nothing could be seen except dust and smoke.

Maangi emerged unscathed and the tanks opened fire on their targets. The Germans were hardy and stood their ground, but under the cover of the supporting armour the whole company surged forward with their bayonets at the ready. The enemy asked for no quarter and received none. Three Maoris were killed and six wounded, but there were ten nests of rifle pits filled with dead men when the company pushed on. Pita Maangi was awarded a DCM in the next list of honours and awards.

The only other opposition to D Company came from the direction of Casa Capucci where one spandau, with more bravery than discretion, opened up, but converging fire killed all four of the crew without further loss.

From Casa Capucci a **Red Cross flag could be seen above a large building on the **Scolo Tratturo**. The place was thoroughly searched but nobody was there. The occupants had made a very hurried exit, for on the tables were steaming hot poultry, black bread and wine, which were quickly swept up by the new incumbents while they waited for C Company to come up.**

After a short halt for reorganisation the battalion pushed on with only an hour of daylight in hand. Every house had a white flag waving from its roof; civilians peered through windows and to the question 'Dove Tedeschi?' a storm of Italian, accompanied by appropriate gestures, indicated that the Germans had bolted. The state of the enemy communications may be inferred from the incident of a German despatch rider riding into the Maori lines with a message from his headquarters to the troops supposedly on the Tratturo. C Company overran a quartermaster's store complete with quartermaster; away out in front figures were dashing for the shelter of a high bank.

This was the old stopbank of the **Santerno which in that locality wound through the flat country in a series of loops. The river had been straightened and confined between floodbanks similar to those at the **Senio**, but the area between the old and the new beds was reported to be a tank obstacle. It was expected that the **Santerno** would be heavily held**

and its crossing an even more hazardous operation than the crossing of the **Senio**, but guns and aircraft had so disorganised the defence that the well-prepared trenches were unmanned. Each company put a post on the near bank while the rest of the unit was sited for defence. A hot meal came up and by midnight the position was secure. The Maoris' casualties for the day were 5 killed and 20 wounded.

On the Maori right 23 Battalion had had a difficult time with Tigers and self-propelled guns and had eventually left them for the artillery to deal with while the troops were swung left on to the Maori axis and thence back to their own area. Further right, the Indians were not quite up; on the left 6 Brigade was still moving forward and had occupied the far bank by first light. The Poles were still well back and fighting hard for every yard.

Patrols across the **Santerno** disclosed no enemy handy though our forward posts were consistently but not heavily mortared throughout the night; after daylight the fire was switched to crossroads and bridge sites.

So far only **98 Division** had been encountered, but Intelligence predicted that **4 Parachute Division** would be thrown in to try to stop the advance. Tiger tanks and assault guns would probably hold a sagging line while the infantry withdrew behind the **Sillaro River**, west and north-west of **Massa Lombarda**. **Massa Lombarda** was about five miles north-west of **Lugo**, and the railway line connecting the two small towns was the right boundary of 28 Battalion and the left of 23 Battalion.

Colonel Awatere told his O Group at midday on 11 April that the battalion was to cross the **Santerno** and enlarge a small bridgehead already established by 6 Brigade. It would be a one-battalion show with a barrage opening on the stopbank and moving forward for 600 yards. Fighter-bombers would be on the lookout for tanks, mortars and guns. Engineers would whip a bridge across as soon as a suitable site had been reconnoitred and sufficient frontage secured to make it feasible. Zero hour was 2 p.m., and when the position was secured 9 Brigade would pass through and carry on the attack.

The Colonel did not put all his trust in the ability of fighter-bombers to protect his troops from marauding Tigers until bridges were up and protecting armour across. Lieutenant Tibble was told to think up a way of getting two of the battalion anti-tank guns through the river and as close to the infantry as possible.

The crossing itself was entrusted to A and B Companies; 23 Battalion would assist with fire from its front while C Company was to take particular care of the embanked railway line, the most likely place for sniper posts.

General Freyberg paid an unexpected visit to Battalion Headquarters and expressed his pleasure at the progress being made. He amused his hearers by saying that we had given the enemy his running shoes and that he was making good use of them. He was certain that the enemy had had all the fight he wanted, though there would still be a few major skirmishes before he threw in the towel. The troops were drawn back to a safe distance behind the barrage opening line, but a few minutes before the barrage started a low-flying fighter-bomber mistakenly dropped a 500-pound bomb in D Company's area. The men had hardly time to dive for cover before it exploded, causing three casualties, one fatal. Others were badly shaken by the blast but revived sufficiently to carry on with the company.

The barrage was to stand for twenty minutes on the opening line, but the forward platoons were within fifty yards of the storm of steel when the first lift came and they lined the old bank. It was very like going over the top in the trench warfare days of 1914–18; on the word of the platoon commanders the troops leaped as one man on to the top and down the far side. At the real stopbank the same procedure was adopted; the water was twelve feet wide, was muddy and looked deep; the leaders plunged in and waded forward—some had to swim, for wet or dry it was imperative to keep up with the barrage.

Private Jimmy Kira ¹³ was first across and caught a spandau crew unawares; then he caught sight of another one and wiped that out also.

By this time the rest of his section had arrived dripping and mud-covered. Again the troops lined the bank and, on the word of command, swept over the top. No. 7 Platoon (Lieutenant Rivers) found two bazooka crews and shot them in their trenches before they could do any harm. Kira was awarded an MM.

B Company was able to cross dry-shod as it found a foot-bridge intact. It was only eighteen inches wide but sufficient for the purpose, and one by one the Maoris edged across, lined up again, and once more went over the top. Olive trees and orchards in full bloom gave excellent cover to both companies, but searching fire from the railway embankment, at that point some thirty feet high, was showering the men with leaves and twigs. Captain Harris called for concentrations along the line and the answering shells came thick and fast, enabling the advance to be resumed to the area of scattered *casas* that was the final objective about 1500 yards west of the river.

It was now in the vicinity of three o'clock. Captain Ransfield reported the discovery of three tanks in the gap that had opened between 5 and 6 Brigades. The mediums were called on to engage the target, now recognised as Tigers, and in quick time shells were dropping dead on the area indicated. The flash of the huge shells bursting on a tank was clearly seen, then the other two were sighted making off in a swirl of dust. Fighter-bombers prowling around were smartly on their tails and they disappeared from view in a storm of exploding steel.

From then until dark two dozen Spitfires swept across the front chasing anything that took their eye. [Massa Lombarda](#) appeared to be in eruption by the amount of smoke and dust rising from it.

The reserve companies picked up about a dozen Germans who had been overlooked and then settled in behind the forward troops. The CO told all companies to pay particular attention to their defences because he expected the enemy armour to make a determined bid to break their hold on the river during the night.

On 5 Brigade front the village of Sant' Agata east of [Massa Lombarda](#) was both holding up 23 Battalion and preventing the engineers from working on a bridge in the Maori area. Under the circumstances the oncoming night was nothing to look forward to. But help, if only in a small way, was at hand.

It will be remembered that Lieutenant Tibble had been given the job of thinking up ways and means of getting at least two anti-tank guns over the river to strengthen the bridgehead during that fateful period before armoured support was available. The anti-tank platoon had estimated the width of the river and the problem of producing stringers from somewhere was solved by dragging four rafters out of a demolished house. These were loaded on to a portée and, as soon as the troops left the start line, the vehicle, dragging two guns as well, followed on their heels to the foot of the first stopbank. No. 15 Platoon, previously detailed to assist, helped to carry the stringers to the river and get them across the water. The guns were then hauled over the two banks to the water's edge and manœuvred across to the far side. The ammunition was carried across and the guns practically lifted over the far bank and into the shelter of the trees. For almost a mile the two crews hauled and pushed the weapons up to the FDLs. One gun was ready for action in each company before dusk. It was a feat that excited the admiration of the Division when it became known. For this and previous exploits Lieutenant Tibble was awarded the MC.

The Maori attack had cost thirty casualties and the same number of prisoners was taken. The [23rd Battalion](#) put two companies over the river in the 28 Battalion area with the intention of moving across the railway towards Sant' Agata, which was preventing the further movement of 5 Brigade in that locality. Further right the Indians had two battalions across the river, and on the Division's left the Poles were fast overcoming their opposition and at one point were on the [Santerno](#). Meanwhile the night was full of alarms and excursions, mostly on A Company's front.

Tanks were reported at various points and 'stonks' and 'murders' called for. Just to prove that these reports were no figments of imagination induced by nerves, artificial moonlight, or heaps of masonry that looked like a tank, Captain Harris, from the top window of his headquarters house, watched a Tiger nestle in alongside the wall and switch off its engine. The Maoris kept studiously out of sight; the turret top opened and one of the crew sat on the edge for a while and conversed with others in the bowels of the Tiger. Harris told one of his men to slip Hawkins grenades under the tracks as soon as the turret closed. This was done, but when shortly afterwards the unwanted visitor moved away the grenades failed to explode. Probably in the excitement of the moment they had not been primed.

B Company, apart from one tank scare that was stilled by an artillery 'stonk', had a quieter time. The anti-tank gun had been sited well forward and about midnight the crew heard a strange noise approaching. It sounded like a horse and cart coming down the road, which, of course, was quite absurd. The crew stood by and waited; then in the artificial moonlight the Maoris saw that it actually was a horse and cart, and sitting in the cart were three Germans singing the Italian version of 'Lilli Marlene'. Italian linguists among the several other Maoris who had been drawn by the unusual noise asked the very shaken Germans what was the idea of driving through the Maori lines. They replied that they were taking rations to the troops on the river. The captured vehicle was driven to company headquarters and the contents of the dixies examined by the ever-hungry Maoris. They contained an extremely unpalatable soup but the black bread was given full marks.

The **23rd Battalion** quietened the enemy fire from Sant' Agata and the engineers had the bridge ready by 2 a.m. The supporting tanks crossed immediately and a much-relieved **Colonel Awatere** called his O Group together and said, *inter alia*, that reports suggested that the enemy, covered by his Tigers, was regrouping behind the **Sillaro River**. Fifth Brigade would keep up the pressure and advance for another two miles to the **Scolo Zaniolo**, commencing at 6 a.m.; 3-inch mortars,

Wasps, anti-tank guns, and MMGs would be in support in addition to a troop of tanks with each forward company. The order of deployment would be A Company, right, B Company, left, C and D Companies in support.

The troops were waiting for the barrage by 5.30 in the morning (12 April) and were greatly heartened by the sound of Spitfires already overhead. There was a ground fog which, however, began to clear soon after the advance began and revealed A Company crossing drains and peering into the deep dugouts that gridironed the country. They were all empty and it looked like an easy day; then without warning one shell, two shells, crashed into a C Company support tank. The tank was a total loss. Mortars and spandaus opened from the railway across the front and the company made for the shelter of buildings ahead until counter-measures could be initiated.

B Company met the same reception, and though the 18 Regiment tanks were able to subdue some of the fire the platoons were also forced into buildings for shelter.

Both support companies received a severe pounding; C Company lost a tank on the way to the start line and had to shelter in the same houses as A Company. Both companies were shelled out of their shelters and pulled back to another group, where they were still under heavy fire. Captain Harris was informed that Air OP had located the source of the shelling, four Tigers, and that the 'heavies' would soon be engaging them.

D Company had a tougher time than any of the others, most of the fire coming from 6 Brigade's front, and took shelter in Casa Bartolini. Major McRae was wounded and Second-Lieutenant Duff took command until the arrival of Captain J. W. Mataira.

The 23rd Battalion was also facing stiff opposition on the outskirts of Sant' Agata; on the left, 6 Brigade was moving 26 Battalion into a gap that had opened between the two brigades.

Notwithstanding the local reverse, **General Freyberg**, with a wider view of the position, decided on a two-brigade attack, with all stops out, to cross the line of railway running south from **Massa Lombarda**. It was, in fact, becoming likely that the breakthrough would not be in the north but on the New Zealand front where it had not been expected.

While high-level conferences were planning the new move, 'stonks' and 'murders' were chasing Tigers and breaking up infantry concentrations on the Maori front. Towards midday **Colonel Awatere** held his O Group and told it that the indications were quite plain that the enemy was pulling back towards the Sillaro, although there would probably be delaying rearguards along the canals and ditches lying across the line of advance. The enemy withdrawal, although forced on him by the thrust from the **Santerno** bridgeheads, appeared to be part of a general regrouping which would bring fresh troops in along the Sillaro. It was possible that the troop movements would be made under cover of darkness that night, but in the meantime the enemy would have to rely on already well-hammered forces on the line **Massa Lombarda- Medicina**. The stiffening of the defence was due to *26 Reconnaissance Unit* fighting to plug the holes caused by the virtual wiping out of *289 Regiment*. It was this unit's tanks that had been and were still a nuisance. Prisoners taken from this force appeared to be of a better type and still confident of ultimate victory. **Hitler**, they said, would shortly astound the world with a new and devastating secret weapon.

The general position at that time (9 a.m., 12 April) was that 23 Battalion was being counter-attacked; further right the Indians were over the river; on the divisional left the Poles had captured Castel Bolognese; 6 Brigade was expected to conform with the Maori line; then at 3 p.m. both brigades would make a set-piece attack behind a timed barrage. The conference was still in session when A Company located a Tiger and called down a 'stonk'. As soon as the first shells fell the Tiger made for **Massa Lombarda** at speed, but, greatly to the delight of A Company, a shell landed right on the target and set it on fire.

Both A and B Companies had difficulty in moving back behind the barrage line. A Company had to call for smoke and had hardly settled into houses when a tank behind the railway embankment pounded the buildings and destroyed its anti-tank gun; another 'stonk' was called down and the Tiger backed out and retired. B Company had to crawl along drains.

When the standing barrage began to roll the companies took different routes but had arranged to meet on the first pause line, which ran through a cemetery. A Company had the shortest distance to go and rushed the cemetery when the barrage lifted. About thirty Germans were still alive and a short sharp fight followed. They fought until they were all killed. The Germans were apparently on the point of pulling out for all their gear was neatly stacked and ready for removal.

That was the only infantry clash. The plantations now ran in the same direction as the axis of advance and the platoons filed along the cover of the trees flanking the fields to the halt line. The supporting armour lost two tanks and destroyed one Panther, and B Company's anti-tank crew got seven shots at an enemy tank that moved out of sight into the town of [Massa Lombarda](#).

It was now nearly six o'clock. The Colonel had been informed of a brigade conference in a couple of hours' time, and the battalion was ordered to stand on the pause line until he returned. The CO took his company commanders with him to the conference, the upshot of which was the relief of the Maoris by 21 Battalion after dark that night, whereupon they withdrew to Sant' Agata, now cleared and well behind 23 Battalion's line.

It was while waiting for the return of the CO and his commanders that B Company had an anxious interlude; a hot meal due to arrive did not turn up at the expected hour. The citation for Staff-Sergeant Rangitauri's ¹⁴ MM explains the situation that arose and his method of overcoming the slight difficulty in which he found himself:

S/Sgt Rangitauira went forward on evening 12 April 1945 to take food to his coy which was holding the left flank of the Battalion near **Massa Lombarda**. As it became darker visibility decreased whereupon he missed our FDLs and found himself on the very outskirts of the village. On making a recce he saw some eighteen armed German soldiers coming towards his jeep. Immediately he moved behind cover and when these enemy soldiers were near him he dashed up behind them, ordering them to surrender. He called and made signs as if calling up more infantry to help him. When the enemy saw this they surrendered. He immediately disarmed them and shepherded them back to his lines. By his daring and cunning this soldier contributed to the Battalion's effort to reduce enemy resistance on the front as much as possible.

The **21st Battalion** entered **Massa Lombarda** at midnight without any trouble at all for the back of the opposition had been broken; by daylight both 21 and 23 Battalions were on the **Scolo Zaniolo** waiting for their breakfasts to arrive. Sixth Brigade was not far behind them. The Maoris spent a quiet day watching the brigade right flank where the Indians were still fighting doggedly forward.

The signs that the enemy was withdrawing behind the Sillaro were confirmed by the identification of a new division, the *278th*, on the New Zealand front. It was digging in on the Sillaro while the battered *98th* passed through. That hardly-used formation had had all the fight knocked out of it, for according to reports the survivors stumbled past their reliefs, muttering variations of the theme '*Rette sich wer retten kann*' ('Now it's every man for himself').

The 28th Battalion, short by 116 casualties—most of them wounded—remained in reserve until the afternoon of the 16th, during which period the Sillaro had proved no greater obstacle than had the **Santerno**.

The need for more infantry to keep up the pressure was met by taking under command 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade. Everywhere the German line was cracking—far away the Russians were in Vienna and the American Fifth Army was reaching **Bologna** on its eastern and

Genoa on its western flank.

The Division regrouped with 9 Brigade on the right, the Gurkha brigade on the left, and with 5 and 6 Brigades in support; the Gaiana, the Scolo Acquarolo, and the **Quaderna were overrun and the unlucky **278 Division** with them. The 28th Battalion stood at one hour's notice until the night 19-20 April, when 5 Brigade passed through 9 Brigade.**

The *4th Parachute Division*, whose units had given us such a rough time on **Crete, was repaid with interest full and overflowing. The division was holding the Gaiana and pledged to stay the avalanche, be the cost what it may. Its men fought with the courage of despair and died where they stood as the tide rolled over them. The Air Force had also had a field day for the roads were littered with vehicles, tanks, and horse- and oxen-drawn guns.**

The Maoris, still in reserve, relieved 27 Battalion between the Gaiana and the **Quaderna while 5 Brigade advanced, against negligible opposition, to **Budrio** and finally towards the **Idice**. The river line was held by elements of *4 Parachute Division* and *I Parachute Division* to whom was owing the setback at **Cassino**. They were blasted by planes, pounded by guns, and roasted by flame-throwers while 5 Brigade deployed, 21 Battalion on the left and 28 Battalion on the right of 23 Battalion, which was to make the initial crossing while the flanking units occupied the near bank.**

The **23rd Battalion did not have much difficulty. Sixth Brigade was over an hour or so later.**

The Maoris were to cross at midnight (20–21 April) with A and B Companies leading and C and D Companies to follow and widen the foothold. They were to move as soon as flame-throwers had scorched the forward face, but owing to a misinterpretation of orders the flame-throwers did not operate the barrage was some distance ahead before the Colonel ordered the crossing to be made without their aid. There was no immediate opposition, but the forward troops had a very trying time

from nebelwerfers and mortars and nine men were hit before the set-piece attack commenced.

The chief obstacles to quick movement were the smoke shells mixed with the high explosive of the barrage. The smoke blotted out artificial moonlight and often the men had to hold hands to keep contact. C Company was lucky as its right flank was on the brigade boundary road but D Company had to rely on compass bearings until some identifiable *casas* were reached. The few enemy encountered had no fight left in them; 16 Platoon, searching a house, found nobody there, but Sergeant Carroll, ¹⁵ lighting a match to take a closer look at some bullocks in the stable stalls, was started to see nine fully-armed Germans arise from the straw-covered floor and give themselves up. No. 13 Platoon also found an empty house but the investigation of suspicious sounds at the rear disclosed eight Germans busily boring into a haystack.

By daylight the battalion was settled into houses a mile and a half from the river and in country untouched by the blight of war—no defences, no wrecked buildings, no cratered roads. Civilians came forth with smiles and hospitality. That day, Saturday 21 April, was in reality the beginning of the end. **Bologna** had fallen and the whole German line had crumbled. All over the country the enemy was streaming along the roads in headlong flight towards the **Po River** defences—and the Air Force was making it extremely difficult for him to get there.

Bridges were across the **Idice** by nine in the morning while 23 and 28 Battalions waited for their support to show up before exploiting forward again and the planes searched for any tanks or guns still in the vicinity. The Maoris were watching a plane flying around looking for targets when it came straight at the *casa* housing C Company headquarters and one of the platoons. A bomb landed close to the building and, to the Maoris' horror, the plane circled around for another run in. Sheets, blankets, and anything white was waved madly from windows and rifle pits but the undeterred fighter-bomber swooped down again with his guns spraying bullets. When it was safe to lift a head the plane was gone from sight—no casualties but plenty of frights.

The **23rd Battalion** got away about 9 a.m. but a hornets' nest in **Cazzano** delayed the **Maori Battalion**. A deluge of mortar shells forced the forward troops to seek shelter. Four tanks, two supporting each company, were put out of action. **Colonel Awatere** went forward to see what was the matter and called for the heavy mortars to retaliate; he then left for Brigade Headquarters, where he reported that the battalion could not move until the enemy was disposed of.

The Brigadier explained that **10 Indian Division** was responsible for that area and was still over two miles behind the New Zealand line. The enemy still had a considerable force in and around **Cazzano** with mortars and probably self-propelled guns, but an air blitz would be laid on that afternoon. The **23rd Battalion** and the 6 Brigade units were ordered to halt until 28 Battalion caught up with them, which would not be until after the air attack.

Fighter-bombers and artillery pounded the **Cazzano** area for the rest of the afternoon, but though the enemy showed little sign of weakening he could not be permitted to interrupt the timetable any longer. Division's orders were imperative that 5 Brigade must push on. Arrangements were therefore made with 23 Battalion for the Maoris to move over behind that unit until **Cazzano** had been bypassed and then get back on to their own front. The companies moved very quietly and unostentatiously over on to 23 Battalion's axis and at 8 p.m. continued the advance that had been interrupted in the morning. The **23rd Battalion** could be seen moving ahead and the fields were alive with quietly moving men. At 10.30 the Maoris were back on their own axis on the right of 23 Battalion lining the Scolo la Zena. Further orders came through for all forward units to be ready to carry on again at 6 a.m.

The Colonel held his O Group at 5 a.m., an hour before the next leap. He reported that all along the line the enemy was in full retreat, orderly and well-planned and not yet a rout. It was expected that he would make for the Po, where elaborate defences had been noted by the air reconnaissance, but it was problematic whether, in view of the severe

losses sustained since the **Senio**, he would be able to man the line. The Colonel added that he was definite in his own mind that the enemy had 'had' it and that the final objective for the day was the River Reno. A and B Companies would lead the battalion.

A Company got away to a flying start and had to be halted until the battalion was properly balanced. B Company put on a spurt and caught up, whereupon the battalion crossed field after field until it came to the Savena, a deep canalised stream across its path. The bridge was blown, and while the tanks hunted for a crossing the troops went on without them. There was no resistance and every house had a white sheet hanging from its windows. Odd parties of Germans were picked up here and there but there was no organisation behind them. Civilians offered hospitality which was regretfully declined, though many a haversack was filled with cold chicken and hard-boiled eggs.

The Canale Navile was reached at half past eight. There was no bridge in the vicinity, but there was probably one in the village of **Bentivoglio** close by. **Awatere** ordered the forward companies to move into the village, where they found the bridge totally demolished. However, a plank footbridge was quickly organised by the partisans who were now coming out into the open. Although it was important to cross the canal without delay, many of the troops managed to take a quick look into a hospital where there were some New Zealand as well as a number of enemy wounded. The magnet was the sight of German nurses tending the patients.

The battalion took position beyond the canal, scooping up an enemy RAP and directing batches of prisoners, some under escort and some under their own power, back to the rear. The RAP included a doctor who had lived in England and who spoke fluent English. He was still quite confident that even at that late hour **Hitler** would perform a miracle and turn the flood backwards again.

The troops waited while the engineers worked on the bridge. Rafters from demolished buildings were carried by the enthusiastic populace and

by midday the armour and a number of other vehicles were across. News from the whole front indicated that the enemy was withdrawing on a scale unprecedented in the Italian campaign. Both Fifth and Eighth Armies were racing towards the last enemy bulwark, the River Po, but it was expected that rearguards which had to some extent slowed up the advance by skilful use of self-propelled guns, nebel-werfers, mortars, and cleverly sited spandaus and mines would continue to harass the forward troops.

The Orders Group, meeting at 3 p.m., was told that 23 and 28 Battalions were still to continue as the spearhead of 5 Brigade and that the intention was to get across the Reno River that night. A and B Companies would continue to lead the battalion, while C and D Companies maintained strong flank protection. Tactical Battalion Headquarters would continue to be mounted on the CO's Honey tank about half a mile in the rear. Partisans, the CO said, had reported enemy snipers in the path of the unit though none of the many trenches along the route were manned, but that was not to imply that vigilance was not necessary. There was still a large number of waterways to be crossed and the men would be wet for most of the time.

The Maoris spread across the fields and were moving by 4.30. Over to the left 23 Battalion could be seen embussing and following behind its tanks. The OP 'Shufti' plane swooped low and dropped a message which read, 'Mount your trucks. There isn't a sign of an enemy for the next four miles.' The CO was taking no chances, however, and insisted that the men continue on foot and that every building en route be searched.

A group of partisans warned them that there was a nest of enemy near Rubizzano. Corporal Nepia describes the party:

The Partisans appeared to be a motley crowd, some of whom were women. One, in particular, stood out from among the others by her bearing and her beauty. This bepistolled (she carried two, one a Beretta and the other a Luger) trousered daughter of Italy bore a bandolier, well filled with ammunition, cowboy-like, encircling her waist, with another,

equally cumbersome, wound around her deep bosom, from shoulder to waist, almost completely hiding the heaving chest behind it. One of the women showed a wound, fortunately only superficial, to the SBs, who changed the filthy cloth covering it for clean bandages.

B Company was nearing Rubizzano when another partisan group appeared and pointed out a house where there were enemy in strength. Captain Ransfield deployed one platoon to watch the northern exit and waited for the tanks, which were having trouble in this particularly deeply-ditched area and were consequently some distance behind. Suddenly the back door opened and about twenty Germans ran out. Only two were brought down owing to the distance and the Maoris raced after them like dogs after a hare, but the fugitives threw away their arms and escaped.

It was an exciting afternoon. D Company complained bitterly that B Company was bypassing too many buildings and thus delaying it, and at one stage fairly accurate sniping from 23 Battalion's area was quietened by **Colonel Awatere's** Honey tank, whose Browning dealt effectively with the situation. Yells for more ammunition were answered by RSM McRae, who drove the ammunition truck up to the men with empty bandoliers. At Gavassetto a pitched battle was being fought between partisans and Germans and a Wasp was sent to assist with its flamethrower.

By midnight the troops had marched nine miles from their afternoon halt, were wet to the skin through wading so many canals, and because of the mud in their socks were wearing their boots slung over their shoulders. The danger of meeting any opposition now appeared remote and the men were told to climb aboard tanks, portées, and the other unit vehicles. This strange mixture of vehicles, with the tanks leading, swept down to the **Reno**, where the forward companies dug in on the side of the river. **Colonel Awatere** was anxious to throw a company over so he waded across and examined the empty trenches. Then he yelled in Maori, 'There's no one here. Come over B Company.'

B Company came over. Shortly afterwards brigade orders arrived: 28

Battalion to stand fast until further orders. The battalion crossed in the early morning and settled in around the village of [Poggio Renatico](#).

The Maoris were away again after an early breakfast. The [21st Battalion](#) had passed through during the night and was making for the Po as fast as the trucks could take it, and the Maoris, now in reserve, were to follow. A three-hour drive along popular-lined, dusty roads brought them to the [Bondeno](#) area, about three miles south of the river, where 21 and 23 Battalions were impatiently waiting the word to gatecrash across and were being restrained by an equally keen but prudent GOC until darkness covered the 250 yards of water between the near and far banks.

Headquarters Company found its billets already occupied by two Germans who had remained behind when their unit retired; otherwise there was no sign of a war in its dying stages. Bivvies were pitched and in next to no time a sea of canvas filled orchards and lapped under hedges and trees. The CO brought the latest news; two American divisions were across the Po; 6 British Armoured Division and [2 NZ Division](#) were following that night. The battalion would not be needed for at least another twenty-four hours but after last light must be ready to move within the hour. The battalion would now probably adopt a more mobile role as the enemy was disorganised and unwilling to maintain close contact. All surplus gear and all loot must be discarded for every square inch of truck space would be needed. Company commanders would make rigid inspections to ensure that no man retained enemy weapons. In giving this order the CO was also giving a creditable imitation of Pilate's gesture, for to part the Maoris from their trophies of the chase was just not possible. They would, of course, be hidden for the time being, an inspection would be made, and honour would be satisfied.

During the night the forward troops ferried themselves over the Po and went all out for the [Adige River](#), in case opposition was being organised behind that difficult barrier.

The 28th Battalion was moved up to the villages of Paolecchio and

Salvatonica and watched the engineers throwing a pontoon bridge over the river. The water was full of rafts, 'fantails', floating tanks, and 'ducks' ferrying troops, supplies and equipment, while all around them were evidences of what an unopposed air force could do to an army at a river crossing—guns, tanks, trucks, vehicles of every description were piled in heaps and dead horses, men, and oxen were mixed in the heaps.

When the bridge was finished the Maoris watched **General Freyberg** cross it, bend down and touch the ground, then return and drive away.

It was Anzac Day—the last one of the war and very different from the day when the Maoris were seeking a refuge in Crete. Not all the German horses had been killed on the banks of the Po, and with time on their hands the men were soon organising rodeos and races. When the battalion left the area it contained a small cavalry unit that had organised itself with the best of the enemy horses.

For the Maoris it was a time of being moved about; they crossed the Po with the brigade group that night and pitched their bivvies in more orchards while the forward units 16 miles ahead put the **Adige River** behind them, whereupon the Maoris proceeded to **Badia-Polesine** and were quartered in the centre of the town. Some of the inhabitants did not seem over-pleased to have such exuberant guests forced upon them. Fifth Brigade had now dropped into reserve together with the 6th and the **Gurkhas** and 9 Brigade took over the chase, for that was all it could be called now.

The battalion stayed there for another day while insurrection across north-east **Italy** added another foe to the bedevilled German Army. Only a pen wielded by the Prince of Darkness could do justice to a situation where, besides the Fifth and Eighth Armies moving forward like Juggernauts, two bitterly hostile forces from **Yugoslavia**—Communists under Tito and Monarchists under Mikhailovitch—slaughtered one another when they were not shooting Germans, and Italian partisans murdered upholders of the Mussolini regime and burned their own cities to smoke out the German garrisons. Mussolini, the author of it all, was

hanging by the feet in front of a wayside petrol station like a pig waiting to be dismembered.

And **2 NZ Division** at last had the pursuit role it had been denied at **Orsogna** and **Cassino**—to strike hard and fast for **Trieste**. The long Maori column crossed the **Adige** on the morning of the 29th and headed north-east for Route 10. It was Sunday morning and the Italians were strolling to church. Some waved; mostly they stood and stared. Past **Piacenza**, then through **Ponso** and on to **Este**, where the column stopped for an hour while somebody cleared away some enemy, or so it was rumoured. On again past crossroad villages, country mansions embedded in trees, factories, through **Monselice**, then a sudden halt for hours while a 20-mile-long traffic jam was untangled. It was evening when the Maoris passed through **Padua**. The city was burning in a dozen places, the garrison had been slaughtered by the partisans ('cleared' is the euphemism), who were then dragging collaborationists to the firing parties. Now it was moonlight and the column skirted the **Canale Naviglio** full of small barges, then passed through **Mira**, **Oriago**, **Mestre**, where the road turned off to **Venice**. Continuing north, then east, the column kept on to **Noghera**, where the Maoris got the fright of their lives. Enemy horsedrawn guns and a long line of infantry bore down on them and the battalion was halted. A lone Kiwi materialised from somewhere and said that the enemy were all prisoners and he was the escort—all of it. It was well after midnight when the Maoris tumbled out of the trucks on the **Piave**. Ninth Brigade was already on the far side of the river, and 5 Brigade would stand fast for twenty-four hours.

In the morning half the battalion scoured the lower channels of the **Sile** for enemy pockets, but all they saw of interest were the high spires of **Venice** in the distance. So ended a momentous month.

A more ambitious operation was set down for the next day. Coast-defence forces were to be rounded up peacefully if possible, but if they showed fight the infantry was to stand back and leave the matter to the tanks and artillery. In the event 21 Battalion got in first and collected some batteries who had declined to have their throats cut by partisans

but were prepared to surrender to their regular enemies.

In view of these developments the Maoris were to catch up with 23 Battalion at **San Giorgio** and then mop up as far as **Palmanova**, thence to **Udine** to meet 6 British Armoured Division which was coming by another route. There was fighting in the streets of **Trieste** and 9 Brigade had contacted Marshal Tito's forces at **Monfalcone**.

The unit was therefore concentrated again, entrucked, and after an afternoon and night of road tangles and of looking for an alternative bridge across the Tagliamento, it deployed beyond **San Giorgio** at 10 a.m. on 2 May.

C and D Companies set out to mop up along the road to **Palmanova** but could not find any enemy to mop up. The route through each village was lined with cheering crowds, but at **Palmanova** the streets were packed and the troops moved to the Piazza through lanes of wildly cheering people. In the town square the carriers guarded all the approaches until the rest of the unit arrived. They were only a quarter of an hour behind but their appearance was the signal for another outburst of cheering and 'Viva Inglese!'

As soon as the armour arrived, causing a third demonstration, the column set out for **Udine**. If the war was not yet over, most certainly enemy were very hard to find. Sixth Armoured Division was met on the outskirts of **Udine**, but 28 Battalion was to go to **Udine** and to **Udine** it went to an even more tremendous welcome. **Colonel Awatere** led the troops in his jeep along a street strewn with flowers. Some of the drivers were bedecked with garlands of flowers while handkerchiefs, silken scarves, and other gifts were tossed to the troops. It was a fitting end to a long war.

The battalion's casualties in the last battles were 25 killed or died of wounds and 117 wounded.

¹ **Brig I. L. Bonifant**, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; **Gisborne**; born **Ashburton**,

3 Mar 1912; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942-Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943-Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3-27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan-May 1945; 6 Bde Jun-Oct 1945.

² Rev M. A. Bennett; Feilding; born Rotorua, 10 Feb 1916; Anglican minister.

³ Lt H. Te K. Kaa; born NZ 2 Dec 1914; labourer; four times wounded.

⁴ Lt S. R. Park; Wanganui; born Motueka, 13 Nov 1914; farmhand; wounded 9 Apr 1945.

⁵ Sgt P. Rakena, DCM; Mangamuka; born NZ 6 Sep 1918; labourer.

⁶ Lt W. Potaka; Parikino; born Turakina, 22 Aug 1916; labourer; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

⁷ Lt A. Preece, m.i.d.; Owenga, Chatham Islands; born Chatham Islands, 19 Feb 1922; labourer; wounded 15 Mar 1944.

⁸ Cpl G. Nia-Nia, MM; Wairoa; born NZ 7 May 1924; labourer.

⁹ Lt H. K. Cook; Wellington; born Otaki, 25 Nov 1919; labourer.

¹⁰ Sgt H. Ruru; Wanganui; born Te Karaka, 12 Dec 1905; judge's associate; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

¹¹ Lt Te R. W. Tibble, MC, m.i.d.; Te Araroa; born NZ 24 Oct 1913; drover; twice wounded.

¹² Pte P. Maangi, DCM; Cape Runaway; born Cape Runaway, 27 Dec 1923; labourer.

¹³ Cpl J. Kira, MM; Matauri Bay, Kaeo; born NZ 10 Mar 1920; labourer.

¹⁴ S-Sgt K. Rangitauira, MM, m.i.d.; Murupara; born Rotorua, 13 Mar 1919; labourer; wounded 3 Jun 1944.

¹⁵ L-Sgt J. Carroll; Little River; born Wairoa, 31 Jan 1923; farm labourer.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

CHAPTER 19 – AOTEA QUAY

CHAPTER 19

Aotea Quay

THE troops returned to **Palmanova** late in the afternoon. The cheering crowds had dispersed; there was no enemy to be found; maybe somebody would tell the Maoris all about it soon. They went to bed.

In the morning they were on the move again, this time to **Iamiano Nuovo**, a small village near **Monfalcone** on the road to **Gorizia**. While they are crossing the **Isonzo River**, let us try to understand the position which had arisen.

The unconditional surrender of all German forces west of the **Isonzo** had in reality ended the war in **Italy** on 2 May. But the bulk of the Division was east of that river and in the border province of **Istria**. It had been ceded to **Italy** together with its seaport city of **Trieste** after the 1914–18 war and contained an explosive mixture of races—Italians, Austrians, and Slavs. Marshal Tito had convinced himself that both city and province rightly belonged to **Yugoslavia**, and the job was to convince him that he was wrong and that the disposal of **Istria** was a matter for the Peace Conference. He had some good arguments in his favour—four divisions and an armoured brigade, of which force two divisions were spread over **Istria** and the rest concentrated in and around **Trieste**. Our arguments consisted of the Eighth Army, a sky full of planes, and a number of warships standing off the harbour.

Tito made the first move by ordering **General Freyberg** to remove all New Zealand troops from **Istria** by the night of 5–6 May. The GOC countered by putting the Division on three hours' notice to move—forward; the **Maori Battalion**, on receipt of the signal ' **AUCKLAND**', would move with all speed to defensive positions already reconnoitred. The Maoris pitched their bivvies, tried to make friends with a sullen Slovene countryside and waited on events. That was the position until the night of the 7th when, as the war diary says in capital letters: **NEWS RECEIVED TODAY THAT THE GERMANS HAD SURRENDERED**

UNCONDITIONALLY TO THE ALLIES, AT 0241 HRS 7 MAY 1945.

Well before the first day of peace dawned the battalion was marching to the parade ground; it formed up in a hollow square and in complete silence waited the arrival of Padre Huata. The eastern sky lightened and all heads were bowed as the padre commenced—‘Kia inoi tatou’. Then, as at the end of so many campaigns, the troops sang the hymn ‘Au E Ihu’ and the first parade of remembrance was over.

While each side awaited the other's next move, two companies at a time spent three days at the beach near **Monfalcone. Mussels and flat fish were abundant and were eaten in great quantities; there were even a few eels to be caught in the local streams. Kapai te kai nei. Back in the battalion lines the Maoris set about breaking down the hostility of the Slav population. The children fell first, for Te Rau Aroha, of which little has been mentioned lately but which had been close by all the time, produced unending quantities of sweets and biscuits; it was not long before the children were romping with the troops. The New Zealand Mobile Cinema Unit consolidated the gains by making local history in screening the first moving pictures shown in the district. A concert and dance on the village green, to which all and sundry were invited, breached the defences completely and thenceforth the Maoris were welcome visitors.**

The climax of the argument on the occupation of **Trieste drew nearer and the battalion moved up on 19 May to the steep and boulder-strewn area around **Prosecco** and prepared to deploy at short notice. Tito's men were digging in close by and the artillery made its preparations to blast them out if the need arose. The populace was even more sullen than at **Iamiano**, and in view of the tense atmosphere Brigade Headquarters ordered no more fraternisation.**

Perhaps the Maori infiltration had been more successful than was realised in higher spheres, for a few days after the prohibition of entertainments a party of Yugoslavs put up a proposal that they would invite the Maoris to their functions if they, the Maoris, would

reciprocate. Brigade withdrew its opposition and the battalion put on a dance every night of the week; civilians, Tito's men, and the troops were soon on the best of terms. Marshal Tito himself gradually came to the conclusion that the Peace Conference would be the right place to advance his claims, and on 9 June an agreement was signed in Belgrade to withdraw all Yugoslav troops from the disputed area east of the Isonzo River.

With the crisis past the brigade relaxed and two companies, to be followed in due course by the others, left for a fortnight's stay at the **Lignano** beach. **Lignano** was a holiday resort and the Maoris had a hotel to themselves. It was spacious and well appointed and a bare hundred yards from the sea.

Where do we go now was the question everybody was asking. **Japan** still had to be attended to, but many in the battalion had seen long service and were due to return home.

The policy of sending long-service men back to New Zealand and of replacing them with others drawn from industry had resulted in the return home of the First, Second, and Third Echelons and the 4th and 5th Reinforcements. Now that the war in **Europe** was over the 6th and 7th Reinforcements were to be withdrawn as soon as shipping became available. The 8th Reinforcements, the last of the North African veterans, were not to be involved in further fighting but the date of their return was indefinite.

In pursuance of these provisions the 6th Reinforcements, 51 all ranks, were, with suitable ceremony, farewelled on 23 May. The Sevenths, 60 all ranks, followed on 16 June, four days after the battalion had moved to the Villa Opicina area overlooking **Trieste** on relieving 9 Brigade. **Colonel Awatere** also returned with this draft and Major Henare took command of the battalion. These two officers had vowed, at the end of the African campaign, to stay with each other and

the **Maori Battalion** while they had life in them, and it was not without a pang of disappointment that **Awatere** relinquished his command. In his farewell address to the troops he said that he would not rest in New Zealand until he had rejoined the unit in the **Pacific**.

The battalion command for service in the **Pacific** was:

CO: Lt-Col J. C. Henare

2 i/c: Maj H. W. Northcroft

HQ Company: Capt M. Raureti

A Company: Capt B. G. Christy

B Company: Capt J. Ransfield

C Company: Capt J. H. Waititi

D Company: Maj W. S. L. McRae

LO at Brigade HQ: 2 Lt F. Tibble

2 i/c: Capt P. A. Francis

2 i/c: 2 Lt R. Rollo

2 i/c: 2 Lt J. Hubbard

2 i/c: Lt N. Mahuika

2 i/c: Capt J. W. Mataira

Platoon commanders: Lt R. Maika, 2 Lts H. N. Job, A. Balzer and C. R. Smith. Other platoon commanders would be drawn from the training depots.

July was taken up with wharf and guard duties in Trieste, in controlling road check points, and in sporting and social activities. It was not enough to keep the Maoris busy and the adage about Satan

finding mischief for idle hands to do was countered to some extent by putting all vino bars out of bounds, restricting leave for all junior officers, and by the institution of a tough training programme. Those not on duties routemarched over much of **Istria**.

The Division was withdrawn from the **Trieste** area at the end of the month and made a leisurely move to **Lake Trasimene**, where the Maoris were allotted an area on the western edge of the lake in sparsely settled but heavily wooded country. Here the 8th Reinforcements—19 out of an original 52—left for home.

The announcement on 15 August of the unconditional surrender of **Japan** solved the problem of the future of the Division and brought to an end the rumours and speculation that had been a main topic of conversation during the last few weeks. Then in early September it was announced that memorial services would be held at war cemeteries near the principal battlefields and that **Crete** would be visited first. **Greece** was not included on account of the political situation there. About one hundred all ranks who had fought on **Crete**, accompanied by 5 Brigade Band, a guard of honour and a choir for the consecration ceremony, would represent the Division.

There were only three Maoris who had fought on **Crete**—Captain W. T. Ngata, Second-Lieutenant Wahapango,¹ and Private Rule²—still with the unit, but Colonel Henare was asked to detail the guard of honour, who would also act as the choir. Second-Lieutenant Wright³ and 24 other ranks from the different tribes and of the main religious denominations were selected and went into rigorous training in ceremonial rifle drill, haka, action songs and hymn singing; they embarked on HMS **Ajax** at **Naples** on 27 September and arrived at **Suda Bay** two days later. During the dedication ceremony, held on Sunday 30 September, Captain Ngata laid at the foot of the flagstaff a wreath from the maori Battalion with the inscription:⁴

‘Kahore he aroha o tetahi i rahi ake i tenei ara kia tuku te tangata i a ia ano kia mate mo ona hoa.’ Hoani, xv. 13.

‘Hinga atu he tetekura, ara mai he tetekura.’

Whakatauki Maori

Ne te Ope Hoia Maori o Niu Tireni.

25 o Hepetema 1945

Padre Huata then farewelled the Maori dead on behalf of the Maori people.

Similar ceremonies were later held at the [Cassino](#) and [Sangro](#) military cemeteries but the men lying in smaller plots were not forgotten. Padre Huata and a small party paid the battalion's last respects to the dead at [Coriano Ridge](#), [Faenza](#), [Forli](#), [Padua](#), [Monfalcone](#), and [Udine](#) before the Maoris left [Italy](#).

The battalion was to return to New Zealand as a unit, but the time of its return was uncertain and with the approach of winter a move was made to barracks in [Florence](#), lately a British rest camp.

The question of Maori representation in the occupation force for [Japan](#) was, after some correspondence with New Zealand, settled by the inclusion of 270 all ranks as D Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry Battalion commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel MacIntyre. ⁵ There was no lack of volunteers but the squadron was restricted to single men of the latest reinforcements. The squadron's officers were:

OC: [Maj J. S. Baker](#)

2 i/c: Capt A. Huata

A Company Platoon: 2 Lt R. Wright

B Company Platoon: [2 Lt H. Grant](#)

C Company Platoon: Lt B. Poananga

D Company Platoon: 2 Lt F. Preece.

The Maori Battalion commenced its return to New Zealand on 6 December when it entrained at Florence en route to Bari, at which place it remained until it embarked on the *Dominion Monarch* at Taranto on 26 December, sailing for Egypt the same night. Eighty-six all ranks from the Maori Training Depot were picked up at Port Tewfik on the last day of the year, and when the *Dominion Monarch* departed into the Red Sea she carried, according to the ship's paper, the *Monarch Mail*, 3287 passengers, 20 permanent ship's staff, 312 crew and two cats.

Fremantle was reached on 14 January 1946, and after a three-mile route march leave trains left for Perth, where a concert arranged between the Mayor and Colonel Henare by wireless was put on by sixty Maori performers. The Perth Esplanade was packed and an appreciative audience clamoured for encores; the hakas were an electrifying novelty to the West Australians.

The *Dominion Monarch* sailed in the morning and the troops prepared for their homecoming. There was to be a march through Wellington, a Government welcome in the grounds of Parliament Buildings followed by Maori ceremonies at Aotea Quay, but a heavy sea made the scheduled berthing at 7.30 on the morning of 23 January too hazardous for such a huge unballasted ship. She cruised backwards and forwards until the wind abated near midday and it was possible to enter the Heads with safety. The troops lining the rails watched an endless stream of cars following them from Seatoun to Karaka Bay, past Point Halswell, and around Evans Bay to Oriental Bay.

Meanwhile the march through the city had been cancelled; the *Dominion Monarch* anchored in the stream and an official party headed by the acting Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. W. Nash, came aboard. There were welcoming speeches over the loudspeakers while the ship came alongside Pipitea Wharf, in almost the same berth as the Maori Battalion

had departed from in the *Aquitania* nearly six years previously.

The troops assembled on the wharf and were met at the Aotea Quay gates with all the ceremony pertaining to the return of a war party in pre-pakeha days. Anania Amohau, a returned original member of the battalion, pranced and leapt towards Colonel Henare as between them the ancient ceremony of the wero was enacted. As this was a peaceful mission the challenge was not accepted and Amohau gave way, though he still eyed the newcomers very carefully. Then followed the women raising the mourning chant, the tangi, for the men of the race who would never return; they were garlanded with greenery and beat their breasts with green twigs. Before the men could mingle with their people they had to be cleansed from the blood of their enemies and the tapu of the warrior removed by appropriate ceremony.

Hakas and action songs by the Ngati Poneke Maori Club preceded welcoming speeches by local chiefs and former commanding officers and a fitting reply in Maori and English by Colonel Henare. Then the troops moved into the quay shed and sat down to a real Maori meal.

Trains throughout the afternoon carried the Maori soldiers to a hundred welcoming maraes. The 28th (Maori) Battalion had ceased to exist.

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

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Already Published

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

ROLL OF HONOUR

Roll of Honour

KILLED IN ACTION

Maj E. R. Chesterman, m.i.d.	5 July 1942
Maj H. M. Mitchell	23 September 1944
Maj H. P. Te Punga	23 September 1944
Capt L. J. Bell	22 May 1941
Capt H. W. Leaf	22 May 1941
Capt K. P. Mariu	9 January 1944
Capt P. S. Munro	10 December 1944
Capt J. Tuhiwai, m.i.d.	28 June 1942
Capt P. Tureia	23 November 1941
Lt H. Te K. Green	15 December 1941
Lt G. Katene, MM	7 December 1943
Lt G. McDonald	23 December 1943
Lt P. C. West	24 October 1942
2 Lt G. A. Asher	18 February 1944
2 Lt Te M. N. Ngarimu, VC	27 March 1943
2 Lt S. Paniora	15 December 1944
2 Lt L. Paul	8 December 1943
2 Lt A. Te R. A. Rota	23 November 1941
2 Lt H. O. Stewart	27 May 1941
2 Lt G. Takurua	18 February 1944
2 Lt G. A. Te Kuru	21 May 1941
2 Lt H. Te R. Vercoe	22 May 1941
WO II J. August, MM	2 November 1942
WO II H. W. Rogers	1 June 1941
S-Sgt L. King	22 April 1945
Sgt H. Gage	23 November 1941
Sgt J. Te W. Graham	30 May 1944
Sgt R. Haddon	19 March 1944
Sgt H. Harawene	20 April 1943
Sgt W. T. Hau	2 November 1942

Sgt R. Ihaka	2 November 1942
Sgt R. Kaiawe	13 April 1945
Sgt P. K. Kaire	5 July 1942
Sgt R. Peta	11 April 1945
Sgt T. Pitama, MM	27 October 1942
Sgt T. Rickit	30 May 1944
Sgt J. Rogers	20 April 1943
Sgt W. Skipper	24 May 1941
Sgt J. Tainui, MM	15 December 1941
Sgt P. R. Te Rito, MM	30 May 1944
L-Sgt R. W. Eparaima	24 October 1942
L-Sgt S. George	30 May 1944
L-Sgt S. P. Hau, m.i.d.	1 January 1945
L-Sgt P. Hunia, m.i.d.	15 December 1944
L-Sgt G. Pou	8 May 1943
L-Sgt N. Tukaki, DCM	31 May 1944
Cpl R. Allen	23 May 1941
Cpl S. Bluett	11 December 1941
Cpl B. Brown	8 May 1943
Cpl T. Bryers	20 April 1943
Cpl M. B. Delamere	2 November 1942
Cpl T. E. Duncan, MM	24 October 1942
Cpl H. Edmonds	24 December 1943
Cpl J. A. Elkington	2 November 1942
Cpl W. H. T. Grace	16 February 1945
Cpl C. Hall	20 April 1943
Cpl R. Hemi, MM	22 September 1944
Cpl M. H. Kaire	16 December 1941
Cpl J. B. Kirk	15 December 1944
Cpl E. Leonard	16 December 1941
Cpl G. Matthews, MM	23 November 1941
Cpl R. D. B. Milner	2 November 1942
Cpl A. P. Mulligan	2 November 1942
Cpl H. Newton	5 July 1942
Cpl T. Noble	7 December 1943
Cpl J. Parkes	26 March 1943
Cpl A. T. Paul	20 April 1943

Cpl R. H. Piki	5 January 1943
Cpl J. Pirihi, MM	5 January 1943
Cpl G. Porter, m.i.d.	20 April 1943
Cpl T. H. Rakau	19 March 1944
Cpl H. Roera	27 November 1941
Cpl M. Tahata	24 April 1941
Cpl J. Tahau	2 November 1942
Cpl M. Tawhara	24 December 1943
Cpl P. Te Kani	20 April 1943
Cpl M. Te Keena	19 March 1944
Cpl J. R. C. H. Thwaites	18 February 1944
Cpl A. Tohara	27 June 1942
Cpl C. Uatuka	4 August 1944
L-Cpl G. A. Barney	24 October 1942
L-Cpl G. G. Bird	27 May 1941
L-Cpl M. Daniels	27 July 1942
L-Cpl H. Elkington	8 May 1943
L-Cpl D. Goffe	5 January 1943
L-Cpl D. Hakaraia	1 June 1941
L-Cpl H. Heke	22 July 1942
L-Cpl R. Henderson	26 March 1943
L-Cpl L. Hindrup	10 April 1945
L-Cpl R. Leef	18 February 1944
L-Cpl C. J. McCalman	1 August 1944
L-Cpl L. Merriman	27 May 1941
L-Cpl P. Metekingi	20 January 1945
L-Cpl H. Mitai	1 August 1944
L-Cpl T. Nutira	3 March 1945
L-Cpl T. Puhirere	23 April 1945
L-Cpl Te U. N. Rangī	24 December 1943
L-Cpl A. Rore	2 November 1942
L-Cpl H. Taiuru	27 March 1943
L-Cpl K. Tanara	27 November 1941
L-Cpl N. Tane	14 December 1941
L-Cpl R. Tangoiro	15 December 1944
L-Cpl B. Tapuke	23 November 1941
L-Cpl H. K. Taupe	26 March 1943

L-Cpl R. Thompson	16 December 1943
L-Cpl J. Waha	25 April 1941
Pte J. Anderson	11 December 1941
Pte H. T. Anderson	26 March 1943
Pte J. Aorangi	25 July 1944
Pte N. N. Apatu	23 May 1941
Pte H. T. Aramakutu	2 November 1942
Pte W. Arona	21 December 1943
Pte L. Aspinall	20 March 1944
Pte J. Atkins	15 December 1941
Pte J. Atkins	24 July 1944
Pte T. Awatere	23 November 1941
Pte M. Bailey	21 May 1941
Pte O. K. Balzer	7 December 1943
Pte T. Barlow	12 April 1945
Pte R. N. Bell	24 October 1942
Pte S. J. Bird	2 November 1942
Pte B. Brass	18 February 1944
Pte F. R. Brooking	27 March 1943
Pte J. M. Brough	8 December 1943
Pte H. Brown	4 September 1942
Pte I. Brown	7 December 1943
Pte J. R. Brown	24 April 1941
Pte K. Brown	21 April 1943
Pte L. Busby	10 April 1945
Pte S. A. Campbell	11 April 1945
Pte W. D. Cassidy	20 April 1943
Pte R. S. Castleton	24 December 1943
Pte L. W. Chalcraft	24 July 1944
Pte S. Coleman	8 May 1943
Pte W. M. Courtney	23 May 1941
Pte W. Cowell	5 July 1942
Pte J. Davis	21 March 1943
Pte T. Delamere	2 November 1942
Pte H. Dickey	4 November 1942
Pte J. Dinsdale	18 February 1944
Pte E. Douglas	20 April 1943

Pte J. Douglas	20 April 1943
Pte H. Duff	3 December 1941
Pte J. N. Edmonds	24 October 1942
Pte C. Ehau	2 November 1942
Pte R. Ellis	15 October 1944
Pte P. Eparaima	1 June 1941
Pte W. Erueti	27 May 1941
Pte R. J. Farrell	26 October 1942
Pte C. Fisher	23 May 1941
Pte J. Foster	7 December 1943
Pte C. Fox	15 December 1941
Pte P. Goldsmith	27 April 1941
Pte D. T. Gotty	5 January 1943
Pte G. Graham	23 May 1941
Pte G. Haapu	28 June 1942
Pte M. Haenga	24 December 1943
Pte E. Haere	1 August 1944
Pte G. Te A. Hall	27 November 1941
Pte C. Hapeta	18 February 1944
Pte J. Hapeta	16 December 1943
Pte H. Harawira	5 July 1942
Pte S. Harding	11 April 1945
Pte P. Haronga	8 January 1945
Pte C. Harris	10 July 1942
Pte P. Harris	7 December 1943
Pte G. Hei	20 April 1943
Pte R. P. Heka	23 May 1941
Pte A. Heke	18 February 1944
Pte A. Heke	18 February 1944
Pte J. Heke	4 September 1942
Pte J. Heketa	23 September 1944
Pte H. Hema	27 March 1943
Pte H. K. W. Henare	30 July 1944
Pte T. Henare	27 November 1941
Pte W. Heretaunga	27 November 1941
Pte E. Herewini	18 February 1944
Pte H. Herewini	16 December 1943

Pte R. Herewini	18 December 1943
Pte W. Herewini	4 January 1944
Pte D. Heta	31 July 1944
Pte N. Hinaki	22 September 1944
Pte R. Hinaki	24 July 1944
Pte S. Hirawani	15 December 1941
Pte M. W. Hodge	22 May 1941
Pte C. K. Hona	20 April 1943
Pte K. Hongara	23 November 1941
Pte G. Hooper	11 December 1941
Pte S. C. Hooper	2 November 1942
Pte C. C. Horne	April 1941
Pte T. Horomona-Anaha	22 April 1945
Pte J. Hotere	21 December 1943
Pte J. Hoterene	23 May 1941
Pte J. Hough	24 October 1942
Pte J. H. Ingram	20 April 1943
Pte Te W. Iraia	16 December 1941
Pte T. W. Isaacs	19 December 1943
Pte B. Iwihora	23 November 1941
Pte J. Jenkins	12 December 1941
Pte N. Jones	11 July 1942
Pte H. Judah	23 November 1941
Pte M. Kahuroa	22 September 1944
Pte C. Kaimoana	17 April 1941
Pte K. Kaire	22 March 1944
Pte M. Kaka	15 December 1944
Pte K. Kamira	25 May 1941
Pte M. Karaka	15 December 1944
Pte M. Karanga	26 March 1943
Pte J. Kareko	13 April 1943
Pte E. Karena	1 August 1944
Pte T. Karetu	23 May 1941
Pte W. Karipa	4 September 1942
Pte T. Karora	25 May 1941
Pte T. Katene	21 May 1941
Pte T. K. Katene	23 May 1941

Pte Te W. K. K. Kauai	3 August 1944
Pte J. Keelan	2 November 1942
Pte N. R. Keelan	23 December 1943
Pte R. Keelan	26 March 1943
Pte T. Keepa	3 August 1944
Pte P. Te K. Kemp	26 August 1942
Pte E. Keppa	5 July 1942
Pte N. Kerei	20 April 1943
Pte H. Kereopa	25 May 1941
Pte P. Kereti	18 February 1944
Pte L. Koha	18 February 1944
Pte P. Komene	23 November 1941
Pte N. H. Kutia	24 July 1944
Pte V. Kutia	23 November 1941
Pte D. Leach	23 May 1941
Pte W. H. Leaf	24 December 1943
Pte A. Leef	26 May 1944
Pte J. A. Lloyd	26 March 1943
Pte P. McCauley	18 February 1944
Pte P. McLean	23 November 1941
Pte M. McPherson	16 December 1941
Pte E. Maaka	18 February 1944
Pte T. H. Maaka	9 April 1945
Pte J. Mahanga	7 December 1943
Pte L. Mahanga	23 May 1941
Pte J. Manuel	15 December 1941
Pte M. Manuwaa	16 December 1941
Pte G. Martin	23 May 1941
Pte H. Mason	20 January 1945
Pte R. T. K. Mason	23 May 1941
Pte H. W. Matene	25 May 1941
Pte R. Mathews	2 November 1942
Pte G. Matthews	19 March 1944
Pte K. Mauhana	26 March 1943
Pte S. Maunsell	16 December 1941
Pte W. M. Maurirere	26 October 1942

Pte T. Mea	20 September 1944
Pte S. Mendes	18 February 1944
Pte J. Mikaere	23 November 1941
Pte G. Miller	24 October 1942
Pte J. H. Milner	5 January 1945
Pte W. Mio	1 August 1944
Pte W. Miru	15 December 1944
Pte K. Moa	8 May 1943
Pte S. Moeke	16 December 1941
Pte J. Mohi	22 March 1944
Pte H. R. Mohi	26 August 1942
Pte S. Moore	20 April 1943
Pte W. Moore	2 November 1942
Pte L. D. Munn	4 September 1942
Pte K. Naera	24 July 1944
Pte S. Neilson	24 December 1943
Pte P. Nelson	4 September 1942
Pte J. Nepata	4 September 1942
Pte E. Ngapuhi	23 November 1941
Pte H. Niao	20 April 1943
Pte R. M. Nikora	12 December 1941
Pte C. O'Brien, m.i.d.	11 October 1944
Pte T. J. Paiki	1 June 1941
Pte T. Paipa	4 September 1942
Pte R. T. Paki	28 May 1944
Pte M. Panapa	16 December 1941
Pte W. Paora	14 December 1941
Pte S. M. Papuni	17 December 1943
Pte J. Paraki	20 April 1943
Pte H. Parata	25 July 1944
Pte P. Parata	23 May 1941
Pte W. Parata	2 November 1942
Pte W. Parete	27 May 1941
Pte T. Paurini	19 March 1944
Pte M. Pawa	24 December 1943
Pte W. P. Peachey	5 January 1944
Pte P. Pehi	15 December 1944

Pte J. Bene	17 December 1943
Pte K. Penetito	22 May 1941
Pte G. Perawiti	10 April 1945
Pte W. Perenara	18 February 1944
Pte H. Peretini	7 December 1943
Pte J. D. Perrett	15 December 1941
Pte R. Peta	8 December 1943
Pte S. Peti	8 May 1943
Pte R. T. Pihema	5 January 1943
Pte L. Pirihi	22 May 1941
Pte W. Pirini	27 August 1942
Pte H. Piripi	5 July 1942
Pte R. Piripi	8 January 1945
Pte J. Pittman	16 December 1941
Pte T. R. Poa	23 May 1941
Pte D. Pohatu	15 December 1944
Pte P. H. Pokai	23 May 1941
Pte T. Pokai	22 September 1944
Pte T. H. Pokai	20 April 1943
Pte H. P. Pokaihau	16 December 1941
Pte W. P. Poki	23 November 1941
Pte T. Pomare	5 July 1942
Pte T. Porter	18 February 1944
Pte W. Porter	26 March 1943
Pte H. Potae	11 October 1944
Pte M. R. Potae, MM	28 December 1944
Pte J. Poutu	17 April 1941
Pte I. Puketapu	15 December 1941
Pte R. Raharuhu	25 May 1941
Pte D. W. Rai	16 December 1941
Pte M. Rakatairi	27 October 1942
Pte H. Rakena	7 December 1943
Pte W. Rakuraku	16 December 1944
Pte M. Rameka	25 May 1941
Pte T. Rangī	21 May 1941
Pte T. Rangī	25 July 1944

Pte W. Rangiaho	4 January 1945
Pte T. P. Rangiahono	20 April 1943
Pte Te R. Te W. Rangihuna	10 April 1945
Pte P. Rangipuawhe	23 May 1941
Pte H. Ropana	4 September 1942
Pte W. A. Ratahi	20 April 1943
Pte K. Raukura	5 July 1942
Pte T. W. T. K. Reihana	10 April 1945
Pte P. Reuben	22 September 1944
Pte H. Reweti	27 May 1941
Pte T. Rewharewha	3 August 1944
Pte S. Rewi	27 May 1941
Pte W. Rewi	5 January 1943
Pte M. Ria	7 December 1943
Pte J. Richmond	5 July 1942
Pte P. Rikihana	7 December 1943
Pte R. Rikiriki	18 February 1944
Pte A. Rinii	16 December 1941
Pte J. R. Roach	23 May 1941
Pte W. Robb	24 December 1943
Pte F. Roberts	5 January 1943
Pte H. H. Robinson	7 January 1943
Pte E. Rogers	27 November 1941
Pte P. Rogers	26 August 1942
Pte R. Rogers	22 March 1944
Pte M. Ropata	17 April 1941
Pte P. T. Ropiha	12 April 1945
Pte R. Ropiha	23 November 1941
Pte P. Rua	23 May 1941
Pte T. Ruki	14 December 1941
Pte W. Ruru	23 May 1941
Pte T. Ruwhiu	26 May 1941
Pte R. Samuels	26 May 1944
Pte M. Scott	15 December 1941
Pte B. R. Shepherd	27 November 1941
Pte J. Silberry	8 April 1945
Pte G. Simon	18 February 1944

Pte P. Simon	18 March 1944
Pte E. R. Stevens	23 May 1941
Pte R. O. Stewart	16 December 1941
Pte J. Sullivan	5 July 1942
Pte T. Sullivan	23 May 1941
Pte D. Swann	15 December 1944
Pte J. Tai	1 August 1944
Pte P. Tai	20 January 1945
Pte R. Tai	26 March 1943
Pte T. Taingahue	22 May 1941
Pte Te H. Tainui	4 September 1942
Pte W. P. K. Takarangi	20 April 1943
Pte F. Tamati	16 December 1941
Pte R. Tamitahi	5 July 1942
Pte T. T. D. Tangira	24 July 1944
Pte P. Tani-Rau	26 March 1943
Pte T. Tapsell	2 November 1942
Pte C. Tarau	20 April 1943
Pte P. Tarawhiti	5 July 1942
Pte J. Tau	22 September 1944
Pte T. Taumata	23 May 1941
Pte T. Taumaunu	15 December 1944
Pte H. Taurere	18 February 1944
Pte G. Tautari	20 April 1943
Pte H. T. Tautuhi	7 December 1943
Pte J. D. Tawhai	8 May 1943
Pte W. Tawhai	26 March 1943
Pte P. M. Tawiri	23 November 1941
Pte W. T. Teao	22 April 1943
Pte P. Te Haate	16 December 1943
Pte H. Te Kura	18 February 1944
Pte H. T. Te Maro	15 December 1944
Pte K. Te Roia	24 December 1943
Pte P. Te Ruatoto	24 October 1942
Pte J. A. Te Whare	18 December 1943
Pte J. Te Whata	18 February 1944
Pte D. Tewhau	7 December 1943

Pte P. H. Thompson	25 May 1941
Pte T. Timoti	16 December 1941
Pte R. Tohu	24 December 1943
Pte M. Toopi	21 July 1942
Pte C. M. Topi	19 March 1944
Pte R. Tuhaka	23 September 1944
Pte M. Tuhoro	22 May 1944
Pte P. Tuiri	18 February 1944
Pte W. R. Tumaru	22 March 1944
Pte T. Tupe	23 May 1941
Pte Te N. Tupe	20 April 1943
Pte H. N. Tutahi	5 July 1942
Pte T. Tutu	15 December 1941
Pte D. Vercamer	11 December 1941
Pte K. R. Waata	15 December 1941
Pte H. Waimio	22 May 1941
Pte D. Walsh	2 November 1942
Pte T. Wanoa	2 November 1942
Pte P. Ward	2 November 1942
Pte G. Warren	18 February 1944
Pte M. P. Wehi	23 May 1941
Pte L. T. Wereta	April 1941
Pte W. Wereta	26 October 1942
Pte G. Wetini	20 April 1943
Pte E. Te K. I. Whakarau	24 October 1942
Pte J. Whare	21 May 1941
Pte H. K. Whareaitu	1 August 1944
Pte R. Whareaitu	2 November 1942
Pte M. Wharerau	15 December 1941
Pte H. Whatarau	15 December 1944
Pte M. White	23 November 1941
Pte T. Wihengi	25 May 1941
Pte H. Wihongi	11 December 1941
Pte A. Wi Keepa	20 April 1943
Pte P. A. Williams	23 May 1941
Pte W. Williams	15 December 1944
Pte D. Winiata	1 August 1944

Pte W. Wiremu 18 February 1944
Pte S. Wolfram 22 July 1942

Pte H. J. Wyllie 14 April 1943

DIED OF WOUNDS

Lt-Col E. Te W. Love, m.i.d. 12 July 1942
Maj I. A. Hart, m.i.d. 2 November 1942
Capt P. F. Te H. Ornberg, MC, m.i.d. 30 May 1944
Lt H. Hamiora 5 July 1942
Lt H. T. Maloney 5 July 1942
Lt D. Mitchell 27 August 1942
2 Lt J. H. Pile 8 December 1943
2 Lt Te W. Rogers 8 June 1944
2 Lt E. J. Ropata 26 October 1942
2 Lt A. J. Stephens 21 April 1943
WO II G. L. Burke 23 May 1941
WO II H. Kereopa 24 July 1942
WO II I. Riini 27 October 1942
S-Sgt S. Hodge 29 October 1942
Sgt W. R. Hare 26 April 1941
Sgt J. Heke, MM 17 March 1944
Sgt W. Kingi 28 March 1943
Sgt K. Kiwha 23 October 1944
Sgt A. Mason 13 December 1943
Sgt J. Potatu 28 March 1944
Sgt R. K. Strongman 18 February 1944
Sgt I. Tangaere 11 April 1945
Sgt T. Trainor, MM 24 May 1944
L-Sgt W. Silva 26 March 1943
L-Sgt F. Te Namu, MM 17 December 1943
L-Sgt H. Ruha, MM 27 March 1944
Cpl W. N. Edwards 26 July 1944
Cpl B. Fox 13 June 1944
Cpl S. Hook 1 August 1944
Cpl K. Maika 12 July 1942
Cpl G. W. Pokau 1 June 1944
Cpl R. K. Te Hana 11 April 1945
Cpl J. H. Turner 31 January 1945
Cpl T. Wetini 2 June 1944

L-Cpl P. Epiha	7 January 1944
L-Cpl J. S. Johnson	4 November 1942
L-Cpl T. Hii	11 April 1945
L-Cpl N. Kingi	5 July 1942
L-Cpl J. K. Reid	24 February 1944
L-Cpl F. Skinner	20 July 1943
L-Cpl G. Smythe	11 March 1944
L-Cpl J. Tumataroa	14 April 1943
Pte H. Aupori	3 August 1942
Pte M. Beattie	14 December 1941
Pte W. Beattie	26 August 1942
Pte J. W. Bird	15 December 1944
Pte H. Brown	26 March 1943
Pte W. C. Brunton	27 October 1942
Pte H. Busby	27 November 1941
Pte D. Coleman	15 January 1945
Pte J. Curry	23 May 1941
Pte P. Davis	15 December 1944
Pte E. K. Delamere	13 December 1941
Pte W. T. Duff	15 December 1944
Pte J. Ehau	2 November 1942
Pte H. Fisher	12 July 1942
Pte R. Fisher	24 May 1944
Pte R. Fisher	22 September 1944
Pte R. T. Fowler	4 September 1942
Pte W. Fox	27 March 1943
Pte H. Haami	28 November 1941
Pte T. W. Haira	11 April 1945
Pte R. Hakaraia	7 April 1943
Pte P. Ham	25 July 1944
Pte E. D. Hamon	30 November 1941
Pte E. Hansard	24 July 1942
Pte W. P. Harding	22 May 1941
Pte J. Hauraki	27 August 1942
Pte A. Heke	27 June 1942
Pte J. Hemopo	24 October 1942
Pte H. H. Henare	30 June 1942

Pte J. H. Henderson	3 November 1942
Pte J. Hepi	16 December 1943
Pte B. Hingston	4 September 1942
Pte M. Hunia	5 September 1942
Pte K. Hurihanganui	31 July 1942
Pte K. Isaacs	22 September 1944
Pte R. T. Jones	28 May 1941
Pte A. O. Kani	22 July 1942
Pte H. Karaka	20 January 1945
Pte P. Karu	13 October 1944
Pte J. Keepa	16 December 1944
Pte T. Kelly	31 May 1941
Pte K. Kingi	16 December 1944
Pte Te R. Kingi	24 November 1941
Pte B. P. Kuiti	19 May 1941
Pte B. McClutchie	2 April 1944
Pte N. Mackey	28 November 1941
Pte W. Mapi	22 April 1945
Pte P. Messent	24 July 1942
Pte W. Milner	29 July 1942
Pte T. Minarapa	24 November 1941
Pte C. Moeke	5 July 1942
Pte R. Moke	2 November 1942
Pte B. T. Morgan	27 November 1941
Pte A. R. Morris	31 July 1944
Pte T. Naera	11 August 1944
Pte H. Nehemia	3 March 1945
Pte M. Nepia	5 July 1942
Pte J. Ngawhika	8 July 1942
Pte P. Nuku	21 January 1945
Pte H. Paputene	14 July 1942
Pte D. H. K. M. Parata	24 May 1941
Pte J. Parata	20 April 1943
Pte M. Paringatai	16 December 1941
Pte M. Peepe	4 September 1942
Pte M. Petricevich	6 July 1942
Pte H. R. Poa	23 May 1941

Pte T. Pokai	16 December 1941
Pte R. Pomare	10 April 1945
Pte D. Puke	7 March 1944
Pte A. Rangiuia	28 November 1942
Pte P. Raniera	15 December 1944
Pte B. Rameka	20 April 1944
Pte H. T. Ransfield	23 May 1941
Pte T. K. Ransfield	25 December 1943
Pte G. Rihia	28 June 1942
Pte N. Rogers	1 June 1941
Pte T. Rua	7 November 1942
Pte Te N. W. K. Ryland	14 April 1945
Pte Te A. Sutherland	17 December 1942
Pte J. Taingahue	14 May 1943
Pte H. K. Takarangi	21 May 1941
Pte J. T. Tamaki	14 June 1944
Pte H. Tangira	25 July 1944
Pte F. Taniwha	11 April 1945
Pte R. Tapsell	27 November 1941
Pte D. Tawhiao	2 August 1944
Pte M. Tawhiao	22 January 1945
Pte U. R. Te Kani	1 August 1944
Pte M. K. Te Rore	23 November 1941
Pte R. Te Weehi	1 June 1941
Pte K. Tumataroa	24 May 1941
Pte J. Walker	10 April 1945
Pte A. Walters	20 December 1941
Pte I. Wawatai	6 January 1944
Pte W. West	26 March 1943
Pte B. Wharepapa	13 December 1943
Pte N. Wharerau	16 December 1944
Pte N. Wharerau	14 April 1943
Pte M. White	29 May 1944
Pte J. Wi Hare	12 July 1942
Pte K. Wirihama	22 April 1943
Pte N. Wiwarena	26 August 1942

KILLED WHILE PRISONER

OF WAR

Pte Te Waaka 31 March 1945

DIED WHILE PRISONER OF WAR

2 Lt W. H. McKay	30 August 1941
L-Cpl M. Robson	26 August 1941
L-Cpl R. M. G. Wanoa	23 April 1944
Pte J. Corcoran	12 May 1945
Pte R. D. Gerrard	25 March 1942
Pte M. Kelly	12 June 1941
Pte C. Marsh	17 August 1942
Pte P. Nihoniho	15 April 1945
Pte B. Paipa	28 June 1942
Pte P. Raponi	27 October 1942
Pte J. robin	8 May 1945
Pte K. Winiata	19 June 1943

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Cadet R. Tahuriorangi	3 June 1941
S-Sgt M. H. Kingi	9 January 1945
Sgt M. Baker	3 April 1945
Sgt E. N. Howell	20 July 1941
Sgt W. Te Purei	4 June 1944
Sgt R. T. P. Turei	15 April 1944
L-Sgt T. Tupara	4 June 1944
Cpl H. Ropiha	7 February 1942
L-Cpl J. R. Karepa	13 January 1945
L-Cpl T. Paora	17 January 1945
Pte W. Adamson	20 July 1945
Pte S. Arena	11 May 1945
Pte J. Ashby	9 February 1945
Pte J. M. Emia	10 January 1945
Pte P. Ferris	19 September 1943
Pte K. Grey	29 September 1943
Pte T. Hami	19 October 1941
Pte B. Hape	28 August 1944
Pte H. Hohua	28 June 1944
Pte R. Hotereni	16 July 1942

Pte T. Hui Hui	8 January 1945
Pte I. Kingi	16 March 1941
Pte T. Kirk	8 January 1945
Pte R. Koopu	15 November 1943
Pte M. Mahuika	18 August 1942
Pte R. Ngatoro	9 December 1941
Pte W. Pahau	8 January 1945
Pte Te P. Parata	13 March 1941
Pte R. Paul	30 December 1941
Pte K. Penewiripo	12 November 1942
Pte P. Phillips	3 January 1942
Pte N. Pohatu	8 January 1945
Pte T. Pokai	5 September 1940
Pte R. Rapana	25 October 1944
Pte R. Taare	29 September 1943
Pte G. K. Taiapa	30 September 1943
Pte T. T. Te Whao	20 May 1945
Pte H. Tipiwai	18 July 1941
Pte B. Tumataroa	15 May 1943
Pte R. Tunua	27 December 1944
Pte T. Wainui	23 June 1945
Pte D. Wanoa	30 September 1943
Pte Te W. Wharepapa	6 September 1945

NZ Maori Training Depot

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Pte D. Hoani	16 May 1942
Pte P. Thompson	8 May 1943

NZ Ordnance Corps (attached)

KILLED IN ACTION

Sgt L. H. Wilson 27 November 1941

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Summary of Casualties

	Killed in Action and Died of Wounds		Died on Active Service		Killed or Died while PW		Wounded		Wounded and PW		Pris of	
	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>O O</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>O O</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>O O</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>O O</i>	<i>O Rs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>O O</i>	<i>Offr</i>
	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>		<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>	<i>Rs</i>
Greece	—	10	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	—	—	11 6
Crete	5	69	—	—	—	—	8	—	94	—	—	46 2
Libya, 1941	3	74	—	—	—	—	10	—	141	1	—	9 1
Egypt, 1942	9	107	—	—	—	—	20	—	341	—	—	7 —
Tripolitania and Tunisia	2	75	—	—	—	—	15	—	190	—	—	— —
Italy	13	217	—	—	—	—	52	—	835	—	—	5 1
Miscellaneous	—	—	1	42	1	—	12	—	—	—	—	— —
TOTAL	32	552	1	42	1	—	12	105	1607	1	—	78 10

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Honours and Awards

VICTORIA CROSS

2 Lt Te M. N. Ngarimu

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER

Lt-Col A. Awatere, MC

Lt-Col F. Baker

Lt-Col C. M. Bennett

Lt-Col G. Dittmer, MBE, MC

Lt-Col R. R. T. Young

Maj J. C. Henare

Lt M. Wikiriwhi

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Mr C. B. Bennett (YMCA, attached)

BAR TO MILITARY CROSS

Capt J. S. Baker, MC

Capt W. Porter, MC

Capt R. Royal, MC

MILITARY CROSS

Maj W. S. L. McRae

Maj H. W. Northcroft

Maj W. Reedy

Capt A. Awatere

Capt C. N. D'Arcy (NZMC, attached)

Capt I. G. Harris

Capt K. A. Keiha

Capt H. C. A. Lambert

Capt J. Matehaere

Capt P. F. Te H. Ornberg

Capt R. Royal

Capt Te M. R. Tomoana

Capt M. Wikiriwhi, DSO

Lt W. Porter

Lt Te R. W. Tibble

Lt J. P. Tikao-Barrett

2 Lt J. S. Baker

2 Lt B. G. Christy

2 Lt A. Huata

2 Lt P. O. Lambly

Rev W. Te T. Huata (Chaplain, attached)

DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL

WO I M. T. McRae

WO I A. C. Wood

Sgt R. Davis

Sgt J. W. Mataira

L-Sgt H. Manahi

Cpl H. K. Barrett

Cpl P. Rakena

Cpl W. Teneti

Cpl N. Tukaki

Pte T. Heka

Pte L. Helmbright

Pte P. Maangi

Pte C. Shelford

MILITARY MEDAL

WO II K. Harawira

WO II W. Pahau

S-Sgt K. Rangitauira

Sgt J. August

Sgt R. Cullen

Sgt G. Katene

Sgt R. C. H. Kirkwood (EME, attached)

Sgt M. Kupa

Sgt H. Mackey

Sgt T. Matenga

Sgt T. Pitama

Sgt W. Te Waiti

Sgt J. I. Walker

Sgt P. Walters

Sgt I. Weepu

L-Sgt T. Trainor

Cpl N. B. Cook

Cpl J. Heke

Cpl J. Pirihi

Cpl J. Tainui

Cpl T. Tamou

Cpl P. R. Te Rito

Cpl J. Tupene

Cpl R. Waaka

L-Cpl D. Alex

L-Cpl B. Hardiman

L-Cpl G. D. King

L-Cpl H. Ruha

Pte C. T. Apihai

Pte R. H. Bidois

Pte R. Bluett

Pte A. N. Carroll

Pte T. E. Duncan

Pte K. Edward

Pte H. Grant

Pte R. Hemi

Pte R. Hoani

Pte F. Jones

Pte J. Kira

Pte R. McLean

Pte G. Matthews

Pte T. T. Nathan

Pte J. M. Ngapo

Pte G. Nia-Nia

Pte W. Panoho

Pte M. R. Potae

Pte K. Rangi

Pte G. Sutherland

Pte F. Te Namu

Pte T. H. Tuhi

Pte P. Wilson

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

Sgt A. B. Goodwillie

UNITED STATES SILVER STAR

Pte J. Taua

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

COMMANDING OFFICERS

Commanding Officers

Lt-Col G. Dittmer	29 Jan 1940- 7 Feb 1942
Lt-Col H. G. Dyer	7 Feb 1942- 13 May 1942
Lt-Col E. Te W. Love	13 May 1942- 12 Jul 1942
Lt-Col F. Baker	13 Jul 1942- 2 Nov 1942
Lt-Col C. M. Bennett	2 Nov 1942- 20 Apr 1943
Lt-Col K. A. Keiha	22 Apr 1943- 11 Sep 1943
Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother	11 Sep 1943- 27 Dec 1943
Lt-Col R. R. T. Young	27 Dec 1943- 27 Jul 1944
Lt-Col A. Awatere	27 Jul 1944- 29 Aug 1944
Lt-Col R. R. T. Young	29 Aug 1944- 18 Nov 1944
Lt-Col A. Awatere	18 Nov 1944- 21 Jun 1945
Lt-Col J. C. Henare	21 Jun 1945- 23 Jan 1946

After **Lt-Col Dittmer** was wounded on 23 Nov 1941 **Capt Love** commanded the battalion until 7 December. **Lt-Col Dyer** then took command but was not officially given that appointment until 7 Feb 1942.

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¹Lt Te K. Wahapango; Poroporo, **Whakatane**; born **Whakatane**, 15 May 1918; labourer; wounded 26 Aug 1942.

²Not traced.

³Maj R. Wright, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born NZ 4 Aug 1919; wounded 18 Feb 1944.

⁴In loving memory of the Maori soldiers who fell on the battlefields of **Greece** and Crete.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.—St. John, xv. 13.

When a warrior dies on the field of battle, another arises to take his place.—Maori proverb.

From 28 NZ (Maori) Battalion, 2 NZEF.

25 September 1945.

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