

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

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

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

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

Revisions to the electronic version

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Colin Doig

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

31 August 2004

Jamie Norrish

Added link markup for project in TEI header.

27 August 2004

Jamie Norrish

**Corrected typo in caption following page 150 ("singals" to "signals").
Corrected order of photos following page 150 (swapped last pair with
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2 August 2004

Jamie Norrish

Added funding details to header.

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Jamie Norrish

Added missing text on page iv.

4 June 2004

Jamie Norrish

**Completed TEI header. Added omitted text (printer details) on title
page.**

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**NEXT REUNION: CHRISTCHURCH, QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY
WEEKEND, 1963**

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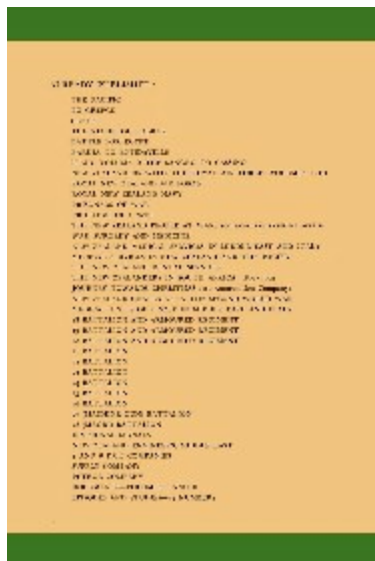
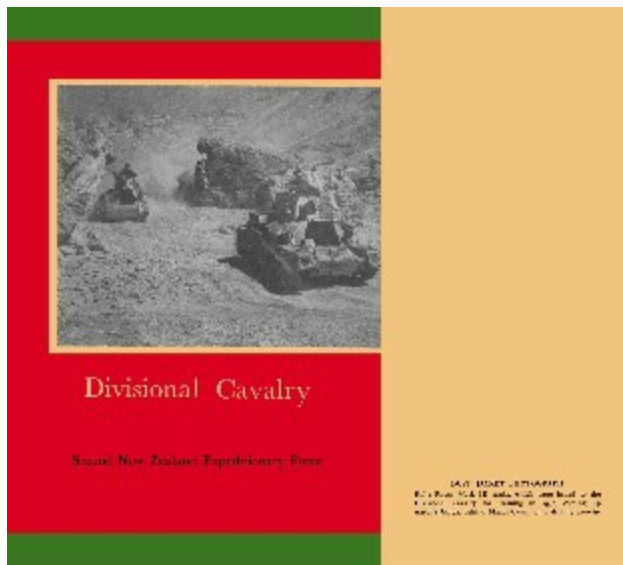
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Divisional Cavalry

by
R. J. M. LOUGHAN

WAR HISTORY SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS
OTTAWA, CANADA
1982

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

Divisional Cavalry

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DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

[FRONTISPIECE]



At the foot of Halfaya Pass, 11 November 1942

At the foot of Halfaya Pass, 11 November 1942

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

[TITLE PAGE]

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

R. J. M. LOUGHNAN

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

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DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

FOREWORD

Foreword



WINDSOR CASTLE

By

I FEEL GREATLY HONOURED to be asked to write the foreword to the history of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry. The Div Cav, as it was usually known in the 2nd NZEF in the **Middle East**, went overseas with the First and Second Echelons and fought in all of the 2nd Division's battles from **Greece** to **Trieste**. In Greece its role was that of rearguard: it delayed the enemy at important road junctions and bridges while the Division withdrew behind it, held him up with its fire while the engineers blew their demolitions, and scurried back to fight again. One squadron, under Major John Russell, saw hard fighting as infantry in **Crete**, but in the Second Libyan Campaign of November-December 1941 its squadrons filled their real role as the eyes of the Division, scouting over the desert in their Bren carriers and light tanks, reporting enemy movements, carrying orders on the battlefield. One of its squadrons took a prominent part in the negotiations with the Germans for the surrender of **Bardia** and the release from captivity of some 1100 prisoners, 650 of them New Zealanders.

At the Battle of **Alamein** the regiment fought in support of the 9th British Armoured Brigade under the Division's command, and in the long advance to **Tunis** it was back in its scouting role at the head of the

Division with the Royal Scots Greys and the King's Dragoon Guards.

In Italy mud and static warfare grounded its Staghound armoured cars and the Divisional Cavalry fought for much of the time as infantry. In November 1944 it became the Divisional Cavalry Battalion, and as such saw hard fighting in the last battles of the Italian campaign. After the war the battalion, as part of J Force, served on occupation duties in Japan.

The dash and high morale of the Divisional Cavalry were at all times a byword in the Division, and for this, tribute must be given to its commanders. Illness deprived Lieutenant-Colonel Pierce of his chance to lead the regiment in battle, and Colonel Carruth commanded it in Greece. Colonel Nicoll led it in the difficult days of 1941–42; Colonel Sutherland took it from Alamein to Tripoli; Ian Bonifant and Nick Wilder, both young officers who saw much service, commanded it throughout the fighting in Italy until January 1945, when Colonel J. R. Williams took charge for its last battles from the Senio to Trieste. When he was wounded on 29 April he handed over command to Colonel Tanner, and Duncan MacIntyre later took the battalion to Japan.

The Divisional Cavalry was a unit with a fine tradition and a grand record. I hope its story will be widely read.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

9 July 1962

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

DEDICATION

Dedication

THIS BOOK is dedicated to no one particular person but to an intangible something created by many hundreds of persons: something which completed their own and my own manhood and maturity and which gave me deep respect for the moral and physical courage of my fellow countrymen: something which, unlike us, will never die.

It is dedicated to: The Spirit of the Divisional Cavalry.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments

THOUGH my name appears under the title, this book is not just my own effort. True, it represents some years of all the patience I could muster, hundreds of hours of research and some hundreds of letters written. It represents great help from many people. A lot of them will recognise words drawn from their diaries and letters. I cannot name them all here, but rather do I hope that they will read my thanks in the fact that I have quoted them verbatim. Those whom I cannot thank in this way are Mrs A. E. Woodhouse of Blue Cliffs, who gave me the initial confidence to write anything; my father, Mr R. J. Loughnan, whose criticism at times was as sharp as only a father's can be and which never once failed to improve what I had written; the late **Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, whose succinct notes of encouragement I now treasure greatly because they so often allayed my frustrations and despairs; the staff of the **War History Branch** who kept me to the point, who prepared the appendices, biographies and index and arranged the illustrations; the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department who prepared the maps. And finally I must thank my wife and family who, for the sake of this book, have accepted so long and patiently, domestic chaos.**

RANGIORA

,
31 August 1962

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DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 1 – NGARUAWAHIA - SEA VOYAGE - ARRIVAL AT MAADI

CHAPTER 1

Ngaruawahia - Sea Voyage - Arrival at Maadi

A FEW MINUTES before midnight on 3 September 1939 the Governor-General received the following telegram from the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs. So portentous a message had a brief text: ‘War has broken out with **Germany.’**

Within a few hours a *Gazette Extraordinary* was issued at **Wellington declaring that a state of war with the German Reich had existed as from 9.30 p.m., New Zealand standard time, on the third day of September 1939. On the same day, 4 September, the Governor-General replied to the Secretary of State informing him that His Majesty's Government in New Zealand desired immediately to associate themselves with His Majesty's Government in the **United Kingdom** in honouring their pledged word. ‘They entirely concur with the action taken, which they regard as inevitably forced on the British Commonwealth if the cause of justice, freedom, and democracy is to endure in this world.’**

The same telegram contained the offer of assistance which was to lead to the despatch of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force; and the plans which had already been prepared in the event of such an emergency were immediately put into effect.

On 6 September Cabinet authorised the mobilisation for active service of a ‘Special Force’ comprising 6600 all ranks between the ages of 21 and 35 years. Enlistment was to be for the duration of the war and twelve months thereafter, or until lawful discharge.

In this manner was the nucleus of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force brought into being. Its overseas destination and the method of its employment were not determined until the first week in October. Negotiations for the supply of mechanical equipment were finalised when the War Office announced its intention to provide all War Department types for the theatre of war to which the force should be

sent. In the meantime, training in New Zealand would continue with the limited equipment available.

An interim Divisional Cavalry Regiment war establishment was drawn up to suit the mechanical equipment scale available —six Bren carriers to the regiment. This establishment embraced a Regimental Headquarters, an HQ Squadron and a Machine-gun Squadron. It was soon decided, however, that the establishment of the regiment should eventually conform with that of a British Divisional Cavalry regiment.

Three parts of the regiment were mobilised at **Ngaruawahia** Military Camp, a few miles from the outskirts of **Hamilton**, and the nucleus of a squadron went to **Narrow Neck**, near **Auckland**.

The first members of the regiment assembled at the camp on 27–30 September. The majority of these were officers and non-commissioned officers of the rank of corporal and above, representative of every mounted rifle regiment in New Zealand, and selected to form the framework round which the regiment was to be built. A bewildering range of hat and collar badges was displayed by these first-comers: 'Boar's Head', North Auckland Mounted Rifles; 'Eagle', **Auckland** – East Coast Mounted Rifles; 'Tui', Waikato Mounted Rifles; 'Tree Fern', Queen Alexandra Mounted Rifles; '6 inside Fernleaf', 6th Manawatu Mounted Rifles; 'Rearing Horse', **Wellington** – East Coast Mounted Rifles; 'Ram's Head', Canterbury Yeomanry Cavalry; 'Silver Shield', Otago Mounted Rifles.

The first few days were fully occupied in preparations for the arrival of the main draft. Tents were erected, cookhouses with civilian cooks provided, and messing arrangements made. Orderly rooms and Quartermasters' stores were established and supplies of bedding and other equipment made available. Time was also found for some elementary instruction of both officers and NCOs.

The arrival of the main draft was spread over the five days, 3–7 October, with later substantial additions to strength on 17–19 October.

New arrivals all received the same welcome. After being checked and officially 'marched in', the men were issued with eating utensils and introduced to the cookhouse for what was to many their first army meal. Suitably fortified, they were next issued with blankets and palliasses and allotted their bell tents, which were shortly to prove able to furnish highly Spartan wet weather features. The issue of uniforms to those who had arrived in camp in civilian clothes was a somewhat remarkable occasion. Many of the uniforms—really rather an unfortunate term—were the reconditioned rejects of former Territorial owners; they were odd in size, peculiar in shape, kaleidoscopic in colour, 'varying as the hues of the morn'; indeed, alike only in the possession, quite often, of twin arms and legs. Well aware of the limitations of his stock, the Quartermaster was compelled to feign enthusiasm for all but the most outrageous misfits. He who wore his uniform to camp was sartorially twice blessed in the possession of a uniform of reasonable size and colouring.

Queues for mess, queues for pay, queues for inoculations, medical examinations and inspections, dental parades and leave parades, taught patience to the impatient. Men from all walks of life and all parts of New Zealand soon thought less often of their civilian lives while surging together in an unfamiliar spate of parades, squad drill, rifle exercises, bayonet drill, PT, lectures and games. Daylight hours not occupied in training and queueing were enlivened by fatigues and guard duties. Mess, cookhouse, coal and sanitary fatigues, shower fatigues and fatigues so undesirable as to render their anonymity—until the last moment—essential, fell the lot of wary and unwary alike. A soldier fortunate or sprightly enough to miss a fatigue would be fairly sure to find himself down for the next guard or picket duty as an unwilling offering upon the altar of good order and military discipline. Spare time was limited and was spent in cleaning buttons and other brass, in letter-writing, or in playing cards or quoits in the recreation huts provided in the camp by the **YMCA, the Church Army and the **Salvation Army**.**

No general leave was granted in the first two weeks and only 50 per

cent of the unit strength was allowed to leave the camp area at the weekend of 14–15 October. From that date weekend leave was obtainable by a limited number, while day leave on either Saturday or Sunday was open to a fairly generous number. To many, the early weeks without leave assumed at least some of the proportions of a drought, since the camp possessed at that time no wet canteen.

During the early days of the regiment's training the traditional slouch hat was worn by all ranks. On 12 October, however, it was announced that from that date the regiment would wear the peaked hat as affected by the other units of the Special Force. This was to distinguish it from the Territorial Force. The order was of course obeyed, but certain ancient warriors declared that they saw the beginning of the end in this infringement of their privilege. Deeper were the sentiments of those who missed the early morning 'Stables' of the Mounted Rifles camps. They found it hard to turn out of bed and fall in on the vehicle park to attend to some cold metallic machines, covered with clammy dew, which could never render the mute, affectionate thanks that they had been accustomed to receive for the early morning grooming. It was hard—nigh impossible—to conjure up enthusiasm for the signals 'start up', 'mount', 'dismount', 'switch off', given by a shivering officer, himself missing the 'good old days' when, in his place, should have been a cheery-faced trumpeter blowing 'Feed!'

The first Commanding Officer of the regiment joined on 29 September 1939. He was **Lieutenant-Colonel Pierce**, MC, ED, ¹ Waikato Mounted Rifles, who retained command of the regiment until the end of February 1941, when failing health led to his return to New Zealand.

Major **Carruth** ² was second-in-command, with Captain Bell, NZSC, ³ as adjutant. The squadron commanders were: Major **Potter** ⁴ (No. 1 Squadron), **Captain Russell** ⁵ (No. 2 Squadron), Major Nicoll ⁶ (No. 3 Squadron—at **Narrow Neck**), Captain **Wallace** ⁷ (HQ Squadron), and Major Graves, **NZMC**, ⁸ was Medical Officer.

Early training time was taken up with parade-ground drill and

instruction on the Vickers and Bren guns. On 9 October a demonstration of the new drill in 'threes' was given by NCOs under the RSM, and adopted—though with some reluctance. Nearly all officers and NCOs had done training as Mounted Rifles so that the cavalry drill system died hard. Later they were to adopt a system of foot-drill, in column, which conformed with their old mounted movements. This, too, they jealously preserved as a tradition, almost indeed as a religion.

On 21 October the regiment was introduced to anti-gas precautions. Officers and men had a period of gas training under the RSM; three days later there came gas training for the whole regiment, with the most unwelcome instruction that respirators would in future, when and where practicable, be worn during working hours. Several route marches in steel helmets and respirators followed, with gas training practised on the march.

As efficiency was obtained in the more elementary phases of soldiering, more advanced exercises and work with the Bren carriers were introduced. The greater interest of this work, combined with PT twice daily and frequent route marches, led to an admirable standard of physical fitness throughout the regiment. Football, cricket, boxing and tabloid sports filled the need for recreational exercise. When practicable, alternate Saturday mornings were given over to interior economy. The wooden tent floors were removed, scrubbed, and left to dry in the sun, if any. Personal washing was done under squadron arrangements. Tent lines were inspected for cleanliness and orderly kit layout. In the afternoon, soldiers going on leave were paraded and inspected by the orderly officer. Special leave trains were run, and later, tickets at two-thirds normal cost were available. Within the camp evening entertainment was limited to occasional concert parties from [Auckland](#), [Hamilton](#) and [Ngaruawahia](#) who performed in the recreation huts. With the opening of the wet canteen another reliable entertainment was added to the list and many a contented evening was spent in queueing for and disposing of the beer ration.

The early weeks in camp were complicated by bad weather. Many of

the ancient tents were not proof against heavy rain and leaked badly, causing bedding to become saturated. Extra groundsheets were issued and drying-rooms established, but these proved inadequate for the large quantities of wet clothes and bedding that needed attention.

An epidemic of influenza so filled the hospital in **Hamilton** that soon only the most serious cases could be evacuated. Makeshift hospitals in EPIP⁹ tents were set up in the squadron lines to accommodate those not ill enough to be evacuated. With an improvement in the weather the outbreak subsided, but not before the training programme had been considerably disorganised.

November passed in hard training, with one eye cocked on the forthcoming trip to **Waiouru** in early December. This would involve advanced training with other units, including battle practice with live ammunition. The regiment had so far acquitted itself quite well on the ranges, but this would be a new experience to most and was being eagerly awaited.

On 30 November the units encamped at **Ngaruawahia** were inspected by the Governor-General, **Viscount Galway**, who expressed his appreciation of what he saw by a message which was received the same day.

The regiment moved to **Waiouru** on 3 December, part by troop train under Major Carruth and part by MT convoy under Lieutenant-Colonel Pierce, and returned by the same means on 10 December. Training there included squadron manoeuvres, field firing, and work as an advanced guard, both dismounted and in trucks with wireless communication. All were agreed that **Waiouru** in December was an excellent camp, regretting that a larger part of their training had not been carried out there. Those who, less than two years later, experienced the same camp under winter conditions were to express their opinions differently and more freely.

Inconspicuously absent during the **Waiouru** period was the

regiment's advanced party of 2 officers and 10 other ranks under command of Lieutenant **Ballantyne**,¹⁰ with Second-Lieutenant **Kelsey**¹¹ and one trooper of the attached 13 LAD.¹² This party began final leave on 5 December and sailed from **Wellington** with the divisional advanced party on 11 December.

On returning to **Ngaruawahia** all ranks were given a blood- type test at the Camp Hospital. Each man's blood group would appear on his identification discs, when these were issued, together with his name, religion and number. All rifles, LMGs and MGs were cleaned, oiled and stored under squadron arrangements. Christmas leave addresses and permanent home addresses were recorded; new khaki drill uniforms were issued. Final leave was for fourteen days and all ranks were warned that from midnight on 13 December they were to be on active service. Each man received fourteen days' pay in advance, a gratuity of £3, and a free rail warrant to his destination.

According to the distance they had to travel to and from their homes, drafts left **Hopu Hopu** on 13, 14 and 15 December and returned on 28–30 December. After Christmas the regiment returned to camp for the last few days of preparation before embarkation. Sea-kits were issued, embarkation rolls compiled, kits inspected and trial packs held. The Hamilton Law Society had offered its services free of charge for the making of soldiers' wills and many took advantage of the offer.

A bombshell was exploded after the regimental parade on the morning of 2 January when all ranks were informed that not more than £2 in New Zealand currency could be taken on board transports. This was unexpected and caused quite a sharp demand for Bank of England notes and dollar bills. On the morning of Wednesday, 3 January, a special parade was held in the Auckland Domain of all the **First Echelon** troops from **Ngaruawahia** and **Papakura** camps. There were farewell speeches, a lunch served by the women of **Auckland**, and a march through streets lined with people, many of whom, it was said, had come long distances to pay their tribute to the first members of the 2nd NZEF to leave for overseas service: then back to camp for the final packing

and tidying up.

At 10.25 p.m. on 4 January the regiment entrained at Hopu Hopu for the first stage of its journey to an unknown overseas destination. Despite the supposed secrecy of the move there were crowds of people at many of the stations on the route to **Wellington**. As so often is the case, the final rumours to reach the public had apparently been accurate. Further crowds were encountered at the entrance to the **Wellington** wharf as the troop train carrying the Divisional Cavalry moved in at 12.30 p.m. on the following day. It was drawn alongside the *Rangitata*, the troopship allotted to them, and men immediately began to file aboard. Embarkation was completed by 2.15 p.m. and the ship pulled out into the stream and dropped anchor. One by one the others followed suit: the *Empress of Canada*, the *Strathaird* and the *Orion*. Finally, during the afternoon, the cruiser HMAS *Canberra* steamed over to the end of the line and, like a hen with chicks, settled herself for the night. A launch sailed round the ships. Standing waving in its stern was **General Freyberg**.¹³ Those on board the *Rangitata* were not to see him again until, six weeks later and half a world away, he met the convoy at **Port Tewfik** and took their salute as they marched for the first time into the camp at **Maadi**.

There were messages from His Excellency the Governor-General, from Major-General Sir Andrew Russell,¹⁴ and from the Chief of the General Staff, Major-General Duigan.¹⁵ They sent their best wishes for a good passage and safe arrival, their congratulations to those chosen to be of the first contingent, and their confidence in the men of the young Division. The GOC replied on behalf of his troops with thanks for the encouragement and the assurance that all ranks would strive to justify their messages.

Somehow, lying there at anchor in the glassy water of Wellington harbour, with the peacefulness of the evening complemented by the thin, plaintive calls of the gulls, it was impossible to imagine that this was a scene of war—impossible to imagine that some would never see it

again. There was only the deep undercurrent of excitement in every heart, brought about by something new, and fertilised by the impatience to be away and to strike a blow lest the war should suddenly end before they arrived.

At 6 a.m. on Saturday, 6 January, the convoy pulled out into Cook Strait. There it was joined by two ships carrying the troops from **Burnham**. From now on the ships lost their identity and became His Majesty's Transports. There were the flagship, *Empress of Canada* (Z1), *Dunera* (Z2), *Strathaird* (Z3), *Orion* (Z4), *Rangitata* (Z5) and *Sobieski* (Z6), escorted by HMS *Ramillies*, HMAS *Canberra*, and by HMS *Leander* of the New Zealand Division of the **Royal Navy**.

The day they sailed was the day when, at heart, the troops became true soldiers. It was then that the words 'On Active Service' took their proper significance. At any instant now a torpedo could bring unwarned destruction; a remote possibility here, to be sure, but a thought to be considered soberly. Going to war was at last a reality; and now that certain fatalism which is part and parcel of every soldier asserted itself. It came unaccompanied by fear. Gazing over the rail at Mt Egmont fading into the mist, a soldier might make the casual and quite impersonal conjecture that one might never see it again. Far more manifest was the attempt to imagine, in the homecoming, the same sight clarifying out of the mist into a reality. The feeling of soft farewell—the lump in the throat—was not evident. Young bodies were too fresh for that, young minds too keen; and the last snow-cap of New Zealand faded into more matter of fact mist than would be caused by tears.

For the first few hours everybody settled into their quarters and found their way about the ship. In some respects the regiment was most fortunate in its transport. The *Rangitata* was carrying only 444 all ranks, of which the Divisional Cavalry complement accounted for 369. The staff of 2 NZEF Overseas Base, detachments of 13 and 14 LAD, 4 Field Ambulance, some RNVR ratings, and three Sisters of the **NZANS** made up the remainder. With the exception of the *Dunera*, which before the war was a transport carrying drafts of British troops to Indian and

Eastern stations, all the ships of the convoy were peacetime passenger liners and, as yet, were not altered much internally. Most of the contingent travelled in cabins with many of the comforts and facilities of the peacetime tourist. Officers travelled first class, warrant officers and sergeants second class, and other ranks third class.

Once well out into the Tasman, life settled down to such training as was possible. Troop training areas were allotted and training schedules made out. Schools of instruction were started and all NCOs and staff instructors reported each morning to the RSM for small-arms training. A 'Dormitory NCO' was appointed weekly by each squadron to ensure that Reveille and Lights Out were observed, and a ship's blackout patrol enforced regulations against smoking on deck or showing any other lights within the hours of darkness. Ships of the convoy checked each other for lights showing from portholes and took a certain pleasure in virtuously pointing out the smallest glimmer. There were careful inspections of rifles twice weekly to guard against the action of salt air on metal. On the morning of 9 January HMS *Ramillies*, escorting the *Empress of Canada*, left the convoy to disembark the General and his ADMS, who were to continue their journey to Egypt from Sydney by air. Brigadier Puttick, ¹⁶ commanding 4 NZ Infantry Brigade, assumed command of the contingent. The two vessels rejoined the convoy the next day, to be followed a few hours later by the transports *Orcades*, *Orford*, *Otranto* and *Strathnaver*, carrying Australian troops, and escorted by the cruisers HMAS *Sydney* and HMAS *Australia* HMS *Leander* then left the convoy. On 12 January the *Empress of Japan*, with troops from Melbourne, also joined the convoy which, with the naval escort, now numbered fourteen vessels.

Squadrons themselves arranged most of the training. This was in the hands of the NCOs since the officers had much of their time taken up with lectures. Lifeboat drill was of course a regular part of the routine, so that each man knew where to go in an emergency and how to tie his life-jacket properly. 'Easy dress' was the rule on board—jerseys, denim trousers or shorts, and deck shoes on parade—shorts or bathing trunks

when off duty. The increasing heat after leaving **Fremantle**, however, resulted in an order forbidding sunbathing and enforcing the wearing of felt hats during the heat of the day. Rubber-soled shoes were found to be dangerous on wet decks and they were blamed for much foot trouble during the voyage, owing to their bad ventilation. Many men bought themselves leather sandals at **Fremantle** and **Colombo**.

Time passed pleasantly enough in moderate training, deck sports, reading, card playing, or in just leaning on the rail watching the ships and guessing their identity. Reading matter was plentiful, thanks to the National Patriotic Fund and to Lieutenant-Colonel Pierce, who presented bundles of books and magazines for distribution to the troops.

A boxing tournament was held during the trip and this brought about some very keenly contested bouts after the vigorous training beforehand. A concert, held on the night of 12 January, revealed the presence of a surprising amount of talent. Thus encouraged, Major **Treadwell**,¹⁷ as editor, was soon calling for contributions for a troopship magazine.

The weather during the crossing of the Australian Bight was just bad enough to make the indifferent sailors seasick, a long swell proving the downfall of the queasy. Some rather lack-lustre eyes watched convoy manoeuvres on 16 January as the cruisers **Australia** and **Sydney** staged a mock attack on the convoy. The convoy closed in and increased speed and, at the signal of a whistle-blast from the **Dunera**, scattered in star formation. Under cover of a low bank of mist and a smoke-screen laid by the **Ramillies**, the other ships vanished from sight.

At 3 p.m. on 18 January the convoy entered Gage Roads off **Fremantle**. Leave was keenly awaited. Issues of New Zealand hat and collar badges and long puttees had been completed so that the troops on leave should be properly dressed. Leave was granted from midday until 11 p.m. on 19 January. The atmosphere at **Perth** and **Fremantle** was described by Brigadier Puttick in a report to Army Headquarters on 20 January as being 'one of almost hysterical goodwill and comradeship,

affecting soldiers and civilians alike.' The townspeople went far out of their way to make the troops' leave enjoyable. They not only took them in their cars to see the sights of the town but carried them off to their homes and entertained them royally. The good behaviour and bearing of the men was favourably commented on both by the people of **Perth** and by O'sC Troops. A good deal of lighthearted fraternisation occurred with the Australian troops from the other transports. The results of this were still coming to light a few days later when some of the men discovered to their amazed surprise that the only headgear they possessed was an Australian slouch hat of much superior quality to their own. A few men found that they had unwittingly changed ships. Although many badges and titles had been given away as souvenirs in **Perth** and were gone beyond recall, the exotic headgear was collected by quartermasters and exchanged with the Australians for the New Zealand variety found on board their ships.

The convoy left **Fremantle** at midday on 20 January with the escort augmented by the cruiser HMS *Kent* and the French warship *Suffren*. However, on the following day the two Australian cruisers left the convoy. The Commodore's farewell message wished both the Australian and New Zealand troops goodbye, good luck, and an early and victorious return.

The rapidly increasing heat, combined with vaccinations, led to some relaxation in the training syllabus. Some of those who had not previously been vaccinated spent some very uncomfortable days at this time. The heat of the nights in the cabins was intense, the portholes being closed for blackout purposes, so that permission was given for a proportion of the men to sleep on deck. This was a great blessing only slightly marred by the risk of being almost literally washed off the decks in the very small hours of the morning by an unsympathetic mariner who, having been himself roused some long time before, was probably more pleased than otherwise to compel others to join him in his quasi-nocturnal activities.

Two swimming baths were constructed on Z₅, one forward for officers and sergeants and one aft for other ranks, and these were much appreciated.

One day out from Fremantle there was a cry of 'Man Over-board'. The alarm was genuine, the subject of it being a man from the *Orcades* who was picked up by the *Rangitata*, the following ship in the convoy, thanks to a combination of good seamanship and good fortune.

During daylight, signal watches were set by the troops to maintain communication between ships. This gives rise to a story of two Div Cav men who were working hard to pass a message to the *Dunera* under very trying visual conditions. They had been interrupted by an apologetic message back: 'Cannot read Morse very well.' Such a glimpse of the obvious, combined with the heat of the sun and the effects of their recent vaccination, prompted the troopers to send back a message: 'Well, send steward on pushbike.'

The sighting of Cocos Island at mid-morning on 25 January brought all on board to thoughts of leave at their next port of call, Colombo, and on being informed that mail would be sent from there, bachelor and benedict alike turned to writing letters.

As though to relieve the tedium of those hot and humid days, HMS *Ramillies* staged a live shoot and practice smoke-screen and the flash of her guns through the smoke haze proved an impressive spectacle.

The Equator was crossed on 28 January but the usual ceremonies were not held for fear of complications in many of the vaccinal cases. A few stalwarts, however, managed their own ceremonies below decks that evening by attending on all those who, emboldened by the increasing distance from critical and outspoken families, had grown moustaches. That evening it was unofficially decreed that the moustache would be worn on one side of the lip only, which decree was forcibly, if painfully, carried out in the cabins.

The convoy arrived at **Colombo** at midday on 30 January and entered into a harbour of shipping of all kinds and sizes. Natives in sampans crowded round to sell pineapples, mangoes, durians and goods of all kinds. Trade was brisk but few on board could boast that they got the better of the wily merchants in the boats below. Those from the *Orion* and *Strathaird* went ashore the same day but the *Rangitata's* complement did not go until the next day. Then, after a march through the streets to the barracks, the regiment was given leave until five o'clock.

Colombo was the first glimpse, to most, of the East and it was an entertaining day. Rickshaw derbies were a favourite pastime, while others found in the local brew an experience they would gladly have missed. No one had much trouble in spending his pay of 10.20 rupees which, being unacceptable in the ship's canteen, had to be spent ashore.

The convoy put to sea again at midday on 1 February, escorted now by an aircraft carrier, HMS *Eagle*, with *Ramillies*, *Sussex* and *Hobart*. A French transport, the *Athos II*, which was on her way to Djibouti in French Somaliland, also joined the convoy. Training was resumed but not with much zest, so perhaps it was boredom that accounted for the appearance of a few Crown and Anchor boards. The inevitable concentration of the ship's currency in the hands of the few was speedily followed by an order prohibiting all gambling.

On 4 February an aircraft from the *Eagle* provided a diversion by crashing into the sea within sight of the convoy. The crew was rescued. On the following day the troops manned ship in salute to HMS *Ramillies* as she steamed down the line of transports before she left the convoy she had escorted for more than four weeks.

At Aden the convoy divided, the *Rangitata* amongst others calling in there for fuel. Leave was granted for the afternoon, but as there was no issue of pay, a mild blight was cast over what is, at the best of times, a dull and dingy port.

On board the *Rangitata* training was virtually ended. Equipment was stored for unloading, mail closed, library books returned, serge uniforms unpacked and final inspections made to ensure that every man had a snugly fitting set of web equipment. A final concert was held on the evening of 10 February. Both officers and men combined to burlesque the training and incidents during the voyage. Well-known songs were parodied in words to suit the regiment whilst not offending the more sensitive ears of the three members of the **NZANS** on board. The whole programme provided a witty and enjoyable summary of the voyage.

The short run up the **Red Sea** was made more or less independently. The *Rangitata* arrived at **Tewfik**, the port of **Suez**, in the early morning of 13 February. Only an advanced party which travelled to **Maadi** by truck disembarked that day.

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Mr Anthony Eden, had flown out from England especially to welcome the troops. He delivered his address of welcome on board the *Empress of Canada*, the first ship to arrive. He waited, however, for every ship and was very quickly recognised as he sailed by launch round the *Rangitata* with **General Freyberg**.

Before disembarkation the next morning, a kit inspection was held. This was an endeavour to locate at least some of the portable objects which had been souvenired; and these were gratefully accepted back by the ship's orderly room with no questions asked.

The regiment disembarked soon afterwards in lighters, which took them to the quay, and after a short march to the railway siding was introduced to its first Egyptian troop train. The wide Egyptian rail gauge made the coaches seem more commodious than those at home, but this was more than offset by the unforgiving character of the wooden seats. More fortunate than the majority was a special detail under Lieutenant **Neal**,¹⁸ which left in trucks for **Port Said** to pick up some of the regiment's motor transport and drive it to **Maadi**.

Before disembarking, all ranks had been paid in Egyptian currency. They were therefore equipped to meet for the first time the trading Arab. This encounter was with the money changer who boarded the train. His European suit and well-pressed tarbush, his smile displaying a generous expanse of gold, and his confidential helpfulness in explaining the new currency lulled even the most suspicious into belief in the scrupulous honesty of the Arab race. And the great handful of silver which he counted out in exchange for a pound note gave his customer the feeling of having become a millionaire. In figures the money added up to 100 all right, but, in fact, it came to far less than 100 piastres. In his generosity he had given a liberal quantity of five-millieme pieces, worth a tenth of the value of the five-piastre pieces which he should have tendered. Such was the first lesson from the artful Arab. Many a good man has tried to out-rogue him but the nearest any Div Cav man—and New Zealanders have proved apt pupils—ever got to ‘heading him off’ was he who traded an empty packet of issue cigarettes for the previous day's paper—but this was written in a language he could not understand.

The train journey from **Suez** to **Maadi** was full of interest, the more so because much of the route ran through genuine desert country. Indeed, the savage and tawny heights of Gebel **Ataqa**, west and south of **Suez**, are probably as impressive as any piece of scenery in North Africa. On the right-hand side of the line the prospect was more monotonous in gently rolling wastes of sand and small stones. Now and again, at wayside halts, there were poverty-stricken clusters of flat-topped dwellings. These the occupants seemed to share on equal terms with a motley entourage of scrawny fowls and feather-tailed dogs of unspeakable ancestry. At such stops the train would be surrounded by a vociferous corps of *wallads*. There were *wallads* with fly-whisks, *wallads* with lemonade, *wallads* with ‘eggs-a-cook’ and *wallads* with nothing but an insatiable curiosity, all alike only in the possession of dingy garments closely resembling nightshirts and with gnarled, flat, dusty feet. Only in the approaches to **Cairo** was there evidence of that fertility in the soil which supported, on the narrow irrigated verges of the **Nile**, a population approaching sixteen million people. Here the scent

of orange groves went far to expunge less fragrant memories. Not that anyone felt disgust at his first view of **Egypt**—far otherwise. It was all new, strange, interesting and a pleasant change after six weeks of confined shipboard living. The journey from **Suez** to **Maadi** took four and a half hours and, as they climbed stiffly out of the train, the regiment were met by the band of the 7th Hussars. It had been sent over as a gesture of welcome from **Digla Camp** to play them over their mile-and-a-half march through **Maadi Camp** to their area. The route was lined with troops who had already arrived and who, for the most part, turned out to see this cavalry regiment which had caught their interest in their lectures on tactics. On the roadside too, to take the salute, stood the GOC. Heads and eyes eagerly snapped to the right to catch a glimpse of the man who had been made their Divisional Commander and about whose name there arose such romantic stories of the previous war.

¹ **Lt-Col C. J. Pierce**, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born **Inglewood**, 5 Feb 1893; farmer; Wgtn Mtd Rifles 1914–19 (Capt); CO Div Cav Sep 1939-Feb 1941; died 31 Jul 1941.

² **Lt-Col H. G. Carruth**, ED, m.i.d.; born **Whangarei**, 6 Nov 1895; solicitor; CO Div Cav Feb-Jul 1941; Comp Trg Depot Jul 1941-Apr 1942; wounded 24 Apr 1941; died 13 Jun 1961.

³ **Lt-Col R. H. Bell**; **Christchurch**; born **Timaru**, 19 Jan 1909; civil servant; joined NZ Staff Corps 1 Sep 1939; wounded 30 May 1944.

⁴ **Lt-Col J. F. Potter**, VD; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 19 Jul 1891; school-teacher; CO 1 Armd Regt, RNZAC, Mar 1944-Nov 1948.

⁵ **Lt-Col J. T. Russell**, DSO, m.i.d.; born **Hastings**, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; 2 i/c Div Cav 1941; CO **22 Bn** Feb-Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

⁶ **Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll**, ED, m.i.d.; **Ashburton**; born **Ashburton**, 2

Feb 1900; farmer; CO Div Cav Jul 1941-Oct 1942.

⁷ **Lt-Col T. C. Wallace, ED, m.i.d.; Cambridge; born Auckland, 14 Apr 1905; farmer.**

⁸ **Col P. V. Graves, ED; Waverley; born Hawera, 1 Apr 1896; medical practitioner; RMO Div Cav 1939-40; ADMS Central Military District Sep 1942-Aug 1944.**

⁹ **European Personnel Indian Pattern.**

¹⁰ **Maj L. B. Ballantyne, ED, m.i.d.; born Waitahora, 18 Jul 1912; sheep-farmer; CO Comp Trg Depot 1942; died 13 Sep 1957.**

¹¹ **Col J. O. Kelsey, MBE, m.i.d.; born New Plymouth, 22 Nov 1904; sales manager and accountant; COME 2 NZEF 1941-42; ADOS 1942-45; DDOS NZ Corps Feb-Mar 1944.**

¹² **Light Aid Detachment.**

¹³ **Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Gk); born Richmond, Surrey, 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914-16; comd 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917-18; GOC 2 NZEF Nov 1939-Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand Jun 1946-Aug 1952.**

¹⁴ **Maj-Gen Sir Andrew Russell, KCB, KCMG; GOC 1 NZ Div 1915-19; Inspector-General, NZ Military Forces, 1939-41.**

¹⁵ **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.**

¹⁶ **Lt-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 Bde 1914-19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan**

1940-Aug 1941; 2 NZ Div (Crete) 29 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941-Dec 1945.

¹⁷ Lt-Col C. A. L. Treadwell, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Lower Hutt, 15 May 1889; barrister and solicitor; Wgtn Regt (Capt) 1915–19; DJAG and later JAG, NZ Military Forces.

¹⁸ Capt A. V. Neal; born Blenheim, 29 Jan 1911; farmer.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 2 — MAADI - GARAWLA - BAGGUSH - DABA

CHAPTER 2

Maadi - Garawla - Baggush - Daba

THE MAADI CAMP that greeted the **First Echelon** was still being formed. Until reinforcements began to arrive and training depots were organised, the camp was only a fraction of that which existed later.

The Division's Advanced Party, less those detailed for courses of instruction, had been attached to **7 Hussars** in the next-door camp at Digla. They had come over daily from that regiment with working parties to erect tents and to take delivery of stores.

The main road through the camp had been formed and the beginnings of the side roads. Water had been laid on to each area for ablution benches and cookhouses, but for the first few days, shower-houses were not in operation.

The Divisional Cavalry lines jutted out to the north of the general rectangular shape of the camp in the area which was later occupied by the Artillery Training Depot.

All ranks were accommodated in tents, one EPIP tent to eight men and one bell tent to two officers. Huts were being built and, in a week or so, there were sufficient of these for messing and administration. For a parade ground 4 Field Regiment shared with Divisional Cavalry the space between their areas and the two units also shared a common **Naafi**.¹

The sun in February was dangerous rather than hot and bare backs were strictly forbidden. The first route marches in shorts produced some ugly sunburnt knees which bore out the wisdom of this prohibition. As it was, the regiment's first loss was caused by the sun when, on 19 June, Trooper **Thompson**² was struck down with meningitis and died very suddenly.

In comparison with the days, the nights were surprisingly cold.

Within minutes of the sun setting it was dark; a little chilly wind rose and whispered across the sand. On one morning in the first week, the early risers found a thin film of ice on the ablution benches.



In such a climate the chill of the nights was as dangerous as the rays of the sun. Serge uniforms were compulsory in the evenings.

Equipment began to trickle in, beginning with sufficient transport to make the regiment mobile and independent, as well as a number of motor-cycles. During March the first AFVs ³ arrived: twelve Bren carriers and five old Mark III tanks. Carriers are well enough known, but the tanks, ancient as they were, do merit some description. They had armour and suspension somewhat similar to Bren carriers. The power units were beautiful Rolls-Royce motors with pre-selector gears. The turrets had a full traverse but they were without armament. In most cases the steering equipment showed signs of wear. These tanks could be decidedly temperamental, so that quite an understanding had to develop between man and machine before a tank could be persuaded to advance or, for that matter, retire on any given course.

There was one tank in particular known as 'Cappy's Pride' which had a personality truly original, and which showed those capricious, whimsical habits which suggest that far back in her ancestry— notwithstanding the impossibility of posterity attributed to that obstinate animal—there had existed a most contrary mule. Her best claim to fame amongst the ranks of the Divisional Cavalry was firstly, a

determined bid, thwarted just in time, to climb a tree in the streets of **Maadi**. Unsuccessful, she lulled her driver into a sense of false security by impeccable behaviour for a mile or so. Her next skittish prank therefore caught him unawares when she answered to the right steering lever by lurching headlong to the left, down a bank, and into the filthiest canal in **Egypt**. No one ever really broke 'Cappy's Pride' of her habits. On her final trip to **Abbassia**, condemned for steering mechanism beyond repair, she obeyed a last whim while passing a cartload of garlic. Her driver found it necessary to pull up suddenly. He trod hard on clutch and footbrake and pulled back both sticks to engage the steering brakes as well. Instead of coming to a quick and graceful halt, as any good-mannered tank should do, her reaction was to spin round sideways, skid a yard or so until square on, and plunge headlong into the cart, smashing it to matchwood against a brick wall. And there she stood—innocent, purring contentedly—in an atmosphere fetid with curses in four languages and rank with the smell of garlic.

Weapon training was done on the range at the end of the camp; for tank gunnery practice, squadrons were taken to the pellet range at **Abbassia**.

The pellet range was most ingenious and elaborate. Replicas of various tank turrets had been built and mounted the appropriate guns. On these were attached air rifles fired from the guns' triggers. The range itself was a large sand-table with moving targets which were operated electrically. By turning on other switches the turrets would swing a little from side to side and oscillate back and forth irregularly to produce the effect of shooting from a moving tank. Pellet range days were always followed by evenings that were noisier than usual in the **Naafi** because they had afforded opportunities for side wagers—debts payable in beer that night. For technical training in such subjects as wireless, gunnery, and driving and maintenance quite a proportion of all ranks went to **Abbassia**. Personnel from the tank troops were attached to 6 Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, and from carrier troops to 60 King's Royal Rifles.

General training started at a modest level and gradually grew more ambitious as each step was properly mastered. The regiment devised its own exercises and argued out its own problems one by one and, from the very early days, unobtrusively formed a system of tactics which enabled it later to build up a reputation for reliability, and to work at a surprisingly low casualty rate.

Little by little the exercises developed into manoeuvres both by day and night. Squadrons were often set tasks opposing one another. Sometimes these battles extended for days and raged up and down the hills at the back of **Wadi Digla. There were furious races to gain points of vantage, and by night, raids on foot which often ended in a stand-up fight or a shower of stones. Strangely enough nobody ever seemed to get hurt in these, though many a tin hat came home with a patch of paint missing.**

By way of change from ordinary routine the regiment took occasional days off to hold picnics at various places in and about **Cairo. These picnics were most enjoyable as they afforded the pleasure of being able to sit and lie about on the grass in the shade of green trees.**

By the middle of April the regiment was well prepared to assume its natural role in the brigade manoeuvres at **El Saff. For three days the squadrons were kept at full pressure doing reconnaissance or covering movements of infantry and artillery. The going was soft and most of the work had to be done in wheeled vehicles at a speed that should only be expected of tracked ones. The drivers earned and deserved great praise for skill and daring in the way they handled their trucks, and the General sorted out for particular praise the regiment's DRs ⁴ upon whom fell the task of maintaining communication between troops and their headquarters. This they achieved against soft sand, jutting rocks, hills and stony wadis: difficulties almost insuperable, but they never lost touch, day or night, and all this in contravention of the theory that the motor-cycle is useless in the desert.**

During the middle of June advanced elements of 7 Armoured

Division captured an Italian General. The story has it that on the way back to the Delta he was so surprised to see no troops about that he finally burst out in indignation, asking where were all the enormous reserves of armour that his Intelligence had led him to believe the British had in reserve. The incident arose from the fact that 6 Field Company, New Zealand Engineers, were suddenly ordered to produce a large number of dummy tanks. They enlisted the help of their neighbours, among others the Div Cav, and the job was carried out at high pressure, working in shifts from 6 a.m. until 11.30 p.m. The bulk of the work was done on one very hot day, 20 June, completed on the next two days, and on the 24th some Div Cav transport was detailed to carry part of the completed work to Mersa Matruh. This task was the regiment's first direct connection with the actual fighting of the war.

By the end of June the regiment had received 12 Bren carriers and 10 tanks. The additional AFVs helped a long way towards making the training interesting to men who were beginning to feel the enervating effect of their first Egyptian summer. Most of the training was now done in the early morning and at night.

The heat was really making itself felt. Good Friday had been an exceptionally hot day. At 9.30 a.m. a thermometer hanging two feet above a bucket of water inside the RAP ⁵ had registered 125 degrees. By the middle of June temperatures of 105 to 110 degrees in the shade were not exceptional. It was the season of the khamseens. Dust-storms arrived suddenly out of an atmosphere ominously still and brazenly hot. The mosquito had caused a few cases of malaria in the camp and the fly had earned for ever the hate of every man. Siesta, without a mosquito net to keep out these persistent pests, was a relentless purgatory. Zeers, large porous vessels which stood in the tent-lines to keep drinking water cool, were issued to all units and each tent was issued with a canvas bag for the same purpose. By night, however, these were put to a different use by any leave personnel returning from carousals in **Cairo. They soon found that the bags, given a sharp punch, would spurt water up to the tent roof to shower down upon the snoring bodies below.**

When Italy declared war on 10 June, the whole camp was dispersed to double its width. It could expand only one way, and many were the complaints from Div Cav who, living on the outer side, had to move well out into the desert to make room; but had the men been able to visualise the extent of the camp in later times, they would have remained silently grateful for the position they now occupied.

In July the regiment lost some personnel to the newly-formed Long Range Patrol. ⁶ They were marched out to **Abbassia** in three drafts, and by the end of the month three officers, Lieutenants Ballantyne, **Sutherland** ⁷ and **McQueen**, ⁸ and about fifty other ranks had gone.

Training in the summer heat, together with the general impatience to be doing some fighting, was by now definitely showing its mark on the men. A gradually lengthening crime list is usually a reliable barometer to record dissatisfaction in a unit, and Div Cav was no exception. The increasing number of defaulters alone indicated that the men felt themselves unfairly held back from helping to win the war.

Another indication of this impatience came at about that time. Volunteers were called for the formation of a parachute force and something else unnamed—rumour fluctuated between ski-troops and commandos. By this time every man had a very conscious pride in his regiment and in belonging to it. Yet there were cases where complete troops volunteered. There was, too, bitter disappointment, and even jealousy, on the part of some men who saw others chosen for the LRP. This was not of course eased by the romantic rumours that crept out concerning the Patrol's task.

Fortunately something happened at this time to ease the tension. The New Zealand troops were ordered to proceed to the **Western Desert** to build part of the Mersa Matruh defences. All units were divided into roughly two equal parts and formed into composite battalions. A camp site was allotted at **Garawla**, on the coast about four and a half miles east of the **Matruh** defences. The task was to dig the outer anti-tank ditch along Wadi Naghamish, which soon became familiarly known as

the Kiwi Canal.

All ranks, officers included, set to and dug with enthusiasm.

Strangely enough, here the sun was not too dangerous, even though it was midsummer, for men to work stripped to the waist.

General O'Connor came one day to inspect the work. He stood on the parapet looking down the line to spot someone in charge of the job whom he could congratulate on the way the men were toiling. Unable to pick anyone, he asked of the nearest man where he could find the officer in charge. A face with little rivulets of sweat running down through the dust, looked up and said: 'That's me, Sir.' The General controlled his surprise, said his say, and wandered along the line to the next party, this time being careful to watch for the colour of the men's boots—the only distinctive mark between officer and man.

The results of all the hard work did not last very long. Three years later, passing by on the way back from **Tunisia, the men saw their canal, now completely filled by drifting sand, once again an inconspicuous contour.**

Vehicles went in daily to **Matruh for supplies. At the second defence line there was a check-post manned by the Egyptian Army. Here a password was necessary, but it mattered little if any driver left camp without being given one. The guards were only too pleased to supply it in exchange for a cigarette.**

During the first week there was sign of enemy action: some high-altitude bombing about two miles from the camp. This was far from enough to satisfy the troops' keenness, for a special report on the task reads: '... at times it would appear that the men were anxious to fire at anything including our own planes if necessary.'

The work and the nature of the camp site had a wonderful tonic effect on all ranks. They rose early each morning and were taken to work in lorries. Lunch was brought out and they worked until two o'clock, toiling in the bottom of the trench with no breeze to temper the

heat of the sun. Then they marched home again and the remainder of the day was free.

Immediately on dismissal the men rushed to their tents, discarding clothes as they went, and raced for the sea. The water was crystal clear, lapping gently on the beach, and at almost blood heat. The aches of toil were washed from their bodies by its smooth caress; the hazy dullness infused into their minds by the monotony of the march home was wooed away by the tinkle of water in their ears,

Sweet, as to the toil-worn man,
The far off sound of rippling river

water which caressed the skin almost sensuously, as softly as thistledown, and made them glory in their life and youth. To swim with open eyes in its lambent depths was to dismiss completely the common world, for under the water the swimmer would be absorbed with wonder and admiration. Brown arms pushed past in long easy sweeps, the hands magnified, with every vein and sinew showing, the fingers cupped to catch the water. At each stroke myriads of little silver bubbles like globules of mercury seemed to fight and struggle for the inside position or come shooting upwards past his face, desperate to get to the surface. Beyond all this and deep down through the limpid water was a world of simple beauty. Strewn on a silver-white bed were rocks clad in green and brown and purple leaves; and in and out of their waving fronds were thousands of silver sparkles where the tiny bodies of sardines caught the deflected light of the sun. And on returning to worldly realities, there in the eye of the man swimming alongside—who too had been absorbing beauty—was that peace of mind which can salve every physical and mental pain.

Some predecessors had left the camp site dirty and the flies were more numerous and determined than any they had met elsewhere. But such a triviality is now slight and transient against the memory of the cool breezes and the tender caress of the sea. That memory will remain with the men for ever.

So the change of air and the change of work had had its effect. They had been necessary, too, as shown by an item of Routine Orders of 11 July: 'The attention of all ranks is drawn to the seriousness of the offence of a sentry or a picquet sleeping at his post. At the present time this offence is occurring far too frequently in this Division. Future cases of this offence will be dealt with most seriously.'

The glowing reports by the first half of the regiment, when they returned to **Maadi**, were reflected in the spirit of the others as they left to continue the work. The war diary for that day reports: '... a very jovial and enthusiastic spirit being noticeable amongst the men.'

This second draft had the distinction of being the first Div Cav men to open fire against the enemy. Full moon in August was from the 12th to the 16th and was marked by intensified bombing at Mersa Matruh. At midnight on 14–15 August the enemy bombed the **Naafi** dump and, three hours later, a single bomber flew over the camp at **Garawla**, its target being possibly the railway station. The regiment's AA posts opened fire and appeared to put the bomber off his target, as his bombs—incendiaries—were unloaded on a piece of unoccupied ground a mile to the east of the camp.

The excitement proved enough to put the posts well on their guard and they became very keen to shoot. Four nights later they opened fire again on a plane that failed to drop identification flares. But it was later learned that this craft was a **Blenheim** limping home on one engine.

About this time the regiment received orders for another digging task. It was to move to **Baggush** and there to prepare part of a defensive box similar to that at Mersa Matruh. Notification was received on 23 August and preparations were immediately put in hand. Leave was withheld while the area was tidied. Base kits were packed and sent to store and cameras collected to be left at Base. The officers' mess held a dinner and party in honour of the New Zealand nursing sisters at **Helwan**.

Half the regiment was still at **Garawla** and, on the morning of the 27th, it left for **Maadi**, while the other half set off in the other direction. Both broke their journeys at **Burg el Arab** to bivouac for the night. The **Baggush** party arrived at three o'clock the next day. The others spent two days in **Maadi** and rejoined the regiment as A Squadron on 1 September. The tanks and carriers arrived two days later, having gone by rail from **Tura** to **Sidi Haneish**.

The camp area was on some high ground a little east of **Baggush** and half-way between the main road and the sea. Areas were allotted immediately and squadrons set about digging in their tents and setting up AA posts. The weather was now cooler and the nights produced some heavy dews, which caused difficulty in disguising vehicles because they shone in the moonlight.

On 2 September the regiment started its task, the construction of defences at **Maaten Baggush** and, in conjunction with 4 Field Regiment, at **Maaten Burbeita**.

Bathing was, of course, a feature of the daily routine and all ranks were taken to the beach. Since there were strong currents here the bathers were ringed at all times by the stronger swimmers, who were detailed to float about in the deeper water to keep watch inshore. There was no difficulty in choosing these men as the regiment had held swimming sports at **Maadi** not long before the move.

As at **Garawla** the men worked with a will at their digging, but this time they were soon to regret their keenness. Within a week they had completed their allotment and were warned to move back to take over Line-of-Communication duties at **Daba**. This news was received with disgust as none relished leaving the camp that they were just making comfortable.

Someone has aptly observed that warfare consists of long periods of intense boredom interspersed with short periods of intense activity. The next four months, doing L of C duty under command of the **Western**

Desert Force, can well be described as of the former. No other four months of the regiment's life were ever so long. Morale, compared with the particularly high standard which had existed, fell back a little. Food was dull and uninteresting, the diet not sufficiently well balanced to maintain perfect health. Desert sores became prevalent, nasty festers, hard to heal, which formed on every bit of grazed skin. The issue of clothing was unsuitable. The weather was now definitely cold but there was no battledress available; yet strangely enough, in November when the warm uniforms would have been particularly welcome, all the base kits were brought up from **Maadi** especially for the men to take out their serge uniforms and hand them in to the Quartermaster.

The duties of this L of C area were heavy enough to engage a full-strength battalion. The Divisional Cavalry carried them out with a depleted regiment as C Squadron was still in England.

The camp was in a dust-bowl and it was only a matter of weeks before the whole area was cut by wheels and churned by tracks into a powder so fine that it could be felt 'squelching' under the feet like water. When wind raised the dust, men were sometimes reduced to such a state that they would not even go to mess, but just sat miserably in their tents wearing their respirators to get some breathable air.

As much of the regimental funds as possible was spent in buying fresh vegetables and fruit for the messes, and—one redeeming feature—the Medical Officer, Captain **McQuilkin**,⁹ had recommended, to keep the blood in order under these conditions, as much beer as could be consumed. This came from **Alexandria** in apparently unlimited quantity. It was weak and tasted more of onions than of hops, but it was beer and there was plenty. There were some uproarious nights in the squadron canteen tents which produced unexpected talent to surprise even the performers.

One famous impromptu monologue looked forty years into the future. It depicted also the attitude of the men at the time. It was a story of a party of sightseers passing through to Mersa **Matruh**, who saw

grey old men in tattered uniforms tumble out of the ragged remains of a tent to form a quarter-guard. When he was asked, 'Who might those be?', the guide replied: 'Those men are the Forgotten Legion. They were the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry who were left here by mistake. Those spectral figures are the old soldiers that never die. They are gradually fading away—The Forgotten Legion.'

Centred round **Daba** was a ring of six defensive positions. One squadron had the job of manning these and of supplying a guard on an ammunition dump and two troops on light AA duties on the aerodrome of 211 Squadron, **RAF**, a few miles up the road. The other fighting squadron acted as a mobile column, with one troop as inlying picket. As well as all this a quarter-guard had to be supplied on the main road and AA posts manned within the camp area.

Fortunately, towards the end of the first month, the Egyptian Army took over five of the defensive posts, relieving the pressure somewhat. But soon after, requests were made to the Div Cav for nightly pickets on a neighbouring supply dump.

Altogether the demands on the men were high and no one could envy the squadron SMs their job of allotting duties. Some troop officers earned the everlasting respect and gratitude of their men when they voluntarily turned out and gave a spell on these monotonous duties.

Above all this there was, eating into the heart of every man, impatience to be in the fighting line, and that impatience was mixed with the feeling that nobody seemed interested in moving them past garrisoning and guard duties.

Most impatient of all was a little man with a big heart, Lieutenant-Colonel Pierce; and he was a sick man. Doggedly he concealed his illness whilst, inwardly, he fought a losing battle to keep going until the time when he could lead his beloved command into action. As ill health gained power over him so was his command affected. Dully did each man feel that there was something wrong in the regiment. They felt

their morale lowering. They were conscious of petty quarrels coming between squadrons. They knew there was a vague something missing. Somehow the head of their happy family had lost his power to bind them: but not a soul knew why. No one knew of the Colonel's secret struggle. All the while this brave man fought against fate to keep them together. But he must have known that his was a losing battle; and the knowledge must have wrung his heart.

Some of the officers were lucky. Lieutenant **Robinson**¹⁰ was taken on a liaison trip with the Navy. He did an extensive patrol of the Eastern Mediterranean and was present at the bombing of **Sollum** on the night of 17 September. Captain Wallace, too, went on a month's visit to 7 Armoured Division and, whilst there, on the night of 22 August, went out on a fighting patrol with the **Coldstream Guards** against an Italian working party at **Bardia**.

The regiment suffered its first casualty from enemy activity on the last day of October. In an air raid on **Qasaba**, near **Baggush**, the Regimental Quartermaster, Captain **Foster**,¹¹ suffered numerous superficial wounds from bomb splinters. He had the added misfortune to be involved in a motor accident on the way to the CCS¹² but escaped without further injury.

On the 18th of the same month one of the DRs, Trooper **Winsor**,¹³ was involved in a head-on collision with the car of the CRE,¹⁴ **Western Desert Force**, and was killed.

During September some pleasure was gained by all ranks at the arrival of eleven new scout carriers. They had an added value, too, in giving the impression that the Divisional Cavalry were not entirely forgotten and that some equipment was at last coming along. These were followed the next month by nine Vickers guns for training and, in December, by two more carriers and two Mark III tanks, fully equipped. Though training was naturally limited by their duties, this equipment did at least stimulate the waning interest of the men. Permission was also given for the limited use of wireless sets, which allowed the training

of some driver-operators. In the middle of December the first issue of Ford V8 trucks arrived. These were 15-cwt vehicles to replace the 8- and 15-cwt Morris's then on issue.

At nights the enemy had been busy dropping booby traps along the Line of Communication. Warnings were given against touching such things as cakes of Lifebuoy soap—which would blow the hands off when wetted—and cakes of chocolate or fountain pens, for these would explode when handled. The B Squadron men were walking back from mess one day when a crowd gathered circumspectly round a small black object on the ground. It looked remarkably like a fountain pen. Indeed, it looked even more like one when its owner arrived, picked it up, and marched on.

The booby traps were not all false, however. The Division's first casualty, killed in action, was claimed by a 'Thermos bomb'. These became alive on hitting the ground. The next time they were disturbed they exploded. Numbers had been dropped round **Daba** and a demolition squad was detailed to explode them. They did this by rolling them over with LMG ¹⁵ fire or with a wire rope strung between two vehicles.

It was significant that, as soon as the regiment was detailed to supply pickets on the food dump, the meals in the messes became more varied. New Zealanders are discriminating looters and the Div Cav men were not slow to appreciate that it was impossible to prevent the Arabs from sneaking in from the open desert to pilfer. At the same time the men had their scruples. If a case of tinned milk or tomatoes or sausages—shame on the good Moslems that got the blame—was spirited away on the picket truck, it went straight to the squadron mess; but, if the case were found to contain something unsuitable, it was sent back the next night with full instructions as to where it was to be replaced.

Small wonder then, that the RASC officer in charge of the dump was praying for an air raid as being the only way to account for his losses. But those were the days when New Zealanders were trusted with rations!

By September the weather had become cool enough to think of football. Some games were played, but the desert was rough and hard, and the men's resistance to infection was so low that the inevitable grazed knees and knuckles turned into desert sores, and football had to be abandoned. Hockey was then introduced and the men turned to this with enthusiasm and several teams were made up in each squadron.

A windfall arrived about this time in the form of a shipload of apples, Sturmers from home: lovely, juicy and plentiful. Most valuable they were towards general health, and for once in history men were encouraged to eat even while standing on parades.

At the end of October 1 Battalion, Infanterie de Marine, took over the last of the six defensive positions. They borrowed a few personnel to give instruction on Bren-gun and carriers. All this had to be carried out through interpreters, but any trouble to the lucky few was more than made up to them by the enthusiasm and hospitality of their pupils.

With some of the daytime duties relieved by the French, more training could be done. Courses were arranged for the driver-operators and some of the driver-mechanics. Musketry and machine-gun practices were fired and squadrons found time for a few manoeuvres. Sun-compasses had been issued, but each time a manoeuvre was arranged to try them out, the day became overcast.

In the middle of November, the moon being suitable, enemy air activity increased. **Fuka** got most of the attention but **Daba** had plenty of alarms. These were caused, it would seem, because the headland nearby, **Ras el Daba**, was being used as a navigational point. One night, 16 October, **Daba** also came in for attention. Bombs were dropped but caused neither damage nor casualties as the nearest one landed 400 yards from the tent-lines.

The Wavell offensive opened on 9 December 1940 with attacks on the line of camps south of **Sidi Barrani**. The Italians were surprised and at **Nibeiba** a large number of M11 tanks were taken more or less intact.

The Divisional Cavalry was called on to salvage these, and on 15 December Lieutenant H. A. Robinson took a party of twenty-five other ranks up there for the task.

On the first Christmas Eve overseas, the CO and his RHQ officers embarked on a 'goodwill' tour of the regiment. Having escaped from the sergeants' mess, they set out round the squadron canteens. The CO had little to say as his conversation everywhere was limited to practically one remark: 'No, I've still got this one, thanks.' The following morning, at the Christmas service, the hymns were sung with plenty of vigour even if, here and there, the tune was completely ignored. At the regimental parade afterwards, the Colonel added to his Christmas wish the comment that he considered that the 'Merry Christmas' had been in full swing the night before.

On the whole, Div Cav did not like **Daba**. Certainly **Daba** did not like Div Cav. The year ended with a show of hatefulness by the weather. Throughout 30 December the wind blew from the west, strong and very cold. It raised the dust till visibility was nil. Men went to ground in their tents. They often crawled, fully clad, into their blankets for warmth. Exercise was impossible. There they sat in abject misery, watching with apprehension the tent roof as it bellied lower and lower with the weight of dust that accumulated, whilst the stout bamboo poles groaned under the load.

Suddenly, towards evening, all was still. Rain began to fall. The desert weather never does things by halves. On 26 November there had been a downpour like a cataract which had flooded tents, weapon pits, everything. This time it fell as heavily, but not for so long. Only enough rain fell to turn everything to a sea of mud: horrible, thick, creamy mud that could have drowned a man.

On 12 January the same spiteful weather rose to a farewell climax. Again from the west came the punishing wind and the dust to imprison every man in his tent. The penetrating power of that dust is hard to imagine. That day the dust, quantities of it, blew into everything. It was

impossible for men to go to mess. It had been impossible anyhow for the cooks to prepare a meal. In their tents the men opened the first tins of Christmas cake they had ever had from home: and it can well be believed that those cakes were precious. Time after time a cake tin with a soldered lid was opened and the contents found to be packed tight with dust, which had not only blown through the crimped seams of the tins but had impregnated the very cakes themselves.

There were men out in all this, for the wheeled vehicles were on their way to **Helwan**. After passing **Amiriya**, the convoy was held up for two hours with visibility nil and the men had to sit out the storm as best they could. To get breathable air they wrapped woollen scarves round and round their heads. Noses became blocked with dust, and all the while a layer of thirsty, arid dust stole precious moisture from their lips.

In any of the regiment's moves the DRs suffered most, as witness the war diary for that day, which reads: '... and at one place when one of them had a slight collision with the back of a vehicle, ten others piled up on top of him. Luckily no one was hurt and all were surprised to find how close they had been to each other.'

Few of the original regiment will forget **Daba's** farewell of hate.

¹ Navy, Army and Air Force Institute.

² **Tpr V. W. Thompson**; born NZ 16 Mar 1907; motor driver; died on active service 19 Jun 1940.

³ Armoured Fighting Vehicles.

⁴ Despatch Riders.

⁵ Regimental Aid Post.

⁶ This became the Long Range Desert Group on 31 Dec 1940.

⁷ Lt-Col J. H. Sutherland, MC; Masterton; born Taieri, 10 Dec 1903; stock inspector; CO Div Cav Oct 1942-Jan 1943.

⁸ Lt-Col R. B. McQueen, m.i.d.; born Henderson, 3 Jan 1907; farmer; CO Div Cav (J Force) 3 May-1 Sep 1947.

⁹ Lt-Col J. P. McQuilkin; Christchurch; born Ashburton, 18 Jul 1900; medical practitioner; CO 5 Fd Amb Jan 1942-Dec 1943.

¹⁰ Brig H. A. Robinson, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Waipukurau; born New Plymouth, 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; Div Cav 1939-44; CO 18 Armd Regt Mar-Jul 1944; 20 Armd Regt Mar-Oct 1945; twice wounded.

¹¹ Capt W. J. Foster, ED; Te Kauwhata; born Te Akatea, 21 Oct 1890; farmer; wounded 31 Oct 1940.

¹² Casualty Clearing Station.

¹³ Tpr W. Winsor; born Sydney, 6 Jul 1909; fencing contractor; died on active service 18 Oct 1940.

¹⁴ Commander Royal Engineers.

¹⁵ Light Machine Gun.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 3 – C SQUADRON WITH THE SECOND ECHELON

CHAPTER 3

C Squadron with the Second Echelon

SO FAR in this story the collective term ‘the regiment’, though convenient, has not been strictly correct since there was another squadron yet to join its ranks. But, for the sake of continuity, it has been necessary in the meantime to forget C Squadron. From the birth of the regiment until it was due to embark for its baptism of fire in **Greece**, this squadron led, by force of circumstance, a totally different and separate existence.

Virtually C Squadron came into being at the same time as the rest of the regiment, that is, when it was decided to adopt the British establishment. It had been decided not to train the whole regiment together but to hold one squadron in New Zealand to sail with the **Second Echelon**.

From the point of view of the building-up of a unit spirit under one leader this was an unfortunate decision, as the two different sections were bound to build up their *esprit de corps* severally and to attain efficiency by different means.

The first CO realised this and took what steps he could, while still in New Zealand, to have C Squadron made up to strength and join his command, but without success. Unfortunately this took up practically all his spare time and left him little chance to ensure all possible liaison with the nucleus of that squadron, at the time in camp, quite close, at Narrow Neck.

This was doubly unfortunate because, as a result, when after eighteen months of a more exciting, more interesting, and indeed a more enviable life, C Squadron was eventually united with its parent unit, the mark of the eventual weld still remained until obliterated by the annealing fires of battle.

As far as C Squadron itself was concerned, the decision to keep it

separate was fortunate, for as things turned out, the men fared far better in training facilities and experienced one of England's most delightful summers in many years, whilst the others were burning out their souls in envy and their bodies in the heat of the desert. While C Squadron had the Battle of **Britain** at its doors the others languished in that 'Forgotten Legion' atmosphere of impatience.

From October till the end of 1939 Major Nicoll had most of his officers and NCOs with him at **Narrow Neck**. In that time they were able to complete courses in such subjects as tactics and gas, they were inoculated and vaccinated; indeed, they had the great advantage of being able to get over their own growing pains without having at the same time to spoon-feed a large family of recruits.

After Christmas leave, the regiment having sailed, these men returned to **Narrow Neck**, and on 4 January they were moved to **Papakura** where they were joined, eight days later, by the drafts of recruits who were to complete the squadron.

It is unnecessary to describe in detail their early days in camp, or for that matter, very fully, their trip to England. One mobilisation camp is much the same as another and this was no exception. Memory now brings back only the inevitable queues—in alphabetical order—foot drill and small-arms training, more queues, gas and bayonet training. They lived in a more comfortable camp than had the others and had fewer interruptions in the training programme; the six Bren carriers were sent up to them from **Hopu Hopu** and, once again, were the subject of pride and envy, representing at the time, it was understood, the sum total of the AFV strength in the country.

By the end of three months the men could march reasonably well; they could shoot; they were fit and were beginning to look forward to the day when they would be joining the rest of the regiment in **Egypt**. Like all other New Zealanders they had at the back of their minds that impatient fear that the war would collapse before they had had a chance to strike a blow. By the middle of March these thoughts, becoming more

evident, were engendering a daily crop of rumours concerning the date of sailing. All ranks were given final leave from 13–15 to 27–29 March, and this served to aggravate the rumours since it came well before the date of departure.

The actual date narrowed down, however, to one of a few days when all troops from **Papakura** were taken to **Auckland** for a farewell parade. This took the same form as that of the **First Echelon**. There were speeches and a lunch at the **Auckland Domain** and the troops marched through the streets to the waterfront. When they arrived there they were dismissed for the remainder of the afternoon.

Auckland was enthusiastic in its desire to show a last hospitality to the men, some of whom were bound never to return, and they were hard pressed to do justice to the number of drinks offered to them. The result of this enthusiasm was evident when the time came to march back to the train. Slightly more time than usual seemed to be needed for the parade to fall in. In due course this was achieved and it speaks well for their discipline that, in spite of sometime embarrassing hospitality, the men marched steadily and at attention. But civilians are not covered by Army Act, Section 40; beyond being impressed by well-drilled soldiers, 'good order and military discipline' means nothing to them. Since the soldiers were not allowed to break ranks the civilians made up for it. The crowd broke and joined in on the flanks, and in next to no time the ranks of three had swollen into anything up to ranks of ten, all linked arm in arm. So they proceeded triumphantly along the streets, not marching so much as dancing a high-spirited jig suggestive of the crowd in the Cornish floral dance.

Embarkation was set down for 1 May at **Wellington**. This was supposed to be very secret but, with big ships in **Wellington** for some days previously, it was impossible to hide the fact. Indeed, the Div Cav men already knew that they were to travel on the **Aquitania**. Secrecy concerning the journey by train to **Wellington** was equally a farce. There were strict instructions that no one was to leave the train on the way down, and in fact the blinds of the carriages were supposed to be drawn

while the train passed through stations. But what was the use? They left **Papakura** during the morning and all the way down the main trunk line—at **Frankton**, Taumarunui, **Taihape** and Marton—there were tea and cakes set out for the men on trestles on the station platforms, and great banners had been tacked up along the station buildings: ‘Farewell 2nd Echelon’ or ‘Goodbye and Good Luck’.

In the early hours of 1 May the train was drawn on to the wharf at **Wellington** and men began to embark on the *Aquitania*. This was completed in daylight and the big ship pulled out into the harbour and dropped anchor. With the *Aquitania* were the three sister-ships, the *Empresses of Britain*, *Canada* and *Japan*. These four carried all the troops from the **North Island**, and after waiting till about midday on 2 May for the *Andes*, with the South Islanders aboard, escorted by HMS *Ramillies*, they formed up in convoy and steamed out into Cook Strait.

C Squadron was not so fortunate as the rest of the regiment who had had a ship to themselves. The *Aquitania* carried the **Maori Battalion**, a field company of Engineers, a company of ASC, and a battery of 5 Field Regiment as well as the Div Cav squadron. She was a big ship, and though there was not room to do much more than some PT, the troops were really not badly crowded.

After the Tasman crossing the convoy was joined by the *Queen Mary* and the *Mauretania* carrying an Australian contingent, and the convoy turned to pass through **Bass Strait** into the South Australian Bight.

Having arrived at **Fremantle** on 9 May the men on board the *Aquitania* found that there were disadvantages in travelling on such a large ship. Her draught was too great to allow her to tie up at the wharf so that all on board had to suffer the disappointment of seeing others going ashore in a port whose reputation for hospitality had come back in glowing reports from the **First Echelon**. This sense of frustration was increased by the fact that, tied up alongside them, was a fine Dutch tanker with broad decks which could have ferried them ashore. They had approached her master, a friendly smiling man, but he had pointed out

that to carry troops in British uniform would be violating his neutrality. He had therefore most reluctantly declined to help. But the following morning he was equally as eager to take the men ashore. Overnight, **Germany** had unwittingly intervened on their behalf: **Hitler's** armies had begun their invasion of the Lowlands.

However, he had now no need to help because the men were ferried ashore by harbour craft. **Fremantle** proved every bit as hospitable as it had been to the **First Echelon**, turning itself once again *en fête*. Any New Zealander who tasted a farewell from that city will remember it all his life. By his claims, one Div Cav man must have tasted well, for he declared that **Fremantle** got him drunk three times and sober twice that day.

Re-embarking in the evening produced, of course, the inevitable occasions of self-adjusting confusion, in personnel and, as usual, in headgear; and, sailing out into the **Indian Ocean**, many were the wistful smiles cast back towards Western Australia.

Some of the Div Cav officers, anticipating their tasks in the desert, were taking the opportunity of learning what navigation they could from the ship's officers. These amateur navigators arrived on deck on 16 May to find the sun rising on the wrong side of the ship. The convoy had changed direction overnight! Many rumours — mostly wild — immediately sprang to life. Naturally they were all inspired by the war news and mostly they centred round enemy raiders and submarines. The Germans, one would hear, had opened an offensive in the Ardennes and had broken through over the Meuse—quite true; **Italy**, one learned, was on the point of declaring war against the Allies and therefore her bases in **Eritrea** would be ideal points from which to attack a convoy of such valuable prizes as these; and so on. It was now certain, however, that the convoy was heading for **Capetown**. A fortnight later the arrival there of this convoy, including as it did the *Aquitania* and the *Queen Mary*, caused quite a sensation, especially since the German radio had just announced to South Africa that these same ships had been sunk in the

Indian Ocean. The sudden change of plans caused but one minor discomfort: because of the extra week's steaming, water had to be rationed until the convoy reached **Capetown**.

Here, as at **Fremantle**, the *Queen Mary* and the *Aquitania* drew too much water to tie up inshore, and for three of the four days' stay in **Capetown** the men could do nothing but gaze with envious eyes on the smaller ships and imagine the pleasure that they were missing ashore. They did, however, manage one day's leave. Owing to the swell that had been coming up Table Bay it had been impossible to take them ashore by lighter, but on the last day the two ships sailed round to False Bay and anchored in water smooth enough for lighters to land them at **Simonstown**.

With little else to occupy their minds at **Capetown** the men readily listened to another crop of wild rumours. The strongest of these was to the effect that the troops would be disembarked and taken to camps in South Africa for six weeks, and then would travel overland to the **Middle East**. Most rumours centred round disembarkation, due no doubt to the wishfulness of the ship's crew who, one and all, deplored the thought of their beloved *Aquitania* threading her way among all the U-boats lying in wait especially for her along the route to England.

But it turned out after all that England was the final destination and the convoy sailed north again on 31 May. A new atmosphere seemed to settle down overnight. One day the war seemed to be safely on the other side of the world and the next day it seemed to be all round them. A feeling of suppressed excitement was diffused through everybody, the feeling that a boy gets when, with his pads on, he is waiting in the pavilion to go out and play his first innings for the school, or of the competitor, all keyed up, in the show ring waiting for the judge to call the number of the next horse to go round the jumps. The war had indeed come closer.

The last port of call before entering the **North Atlantic** was **Freetown** in Sierra Leone. This was the assembly place for many convoys and the

harbour seemed full of a thousand ships, all kinds and sizes. Other than that, there remain now only the memories of the natives in their bumboats and of four nights in the humid, stifling, tropical heat.

As it left **Freetown** the convoy was joined by an aircraft carrier, HMS *Hermes*, and as it drew north it was met by more and still more men-of-war. First came majestically HMS *Hood* from Gibraltar, and daily, in ones and twos, came cruisers and destroyers, until in the Bay of Biscay it seemed that the whole British Navy was there, sailing in a solid screen of guns and steel. One felt rather like the first lamb of spring with half a dozen motherly old ewes fussing round, all claiming to have given birth to the one offspring.

Just as the war seemed to have come suddenly closer, now suddenly it came closer still, for the ships found themselves sailing through a sea dotted with flotsam. There were rolls of newsprint, bits of spars, deck-chairs, biscuit tins, all kinds of litter and rubbish; here, right in the mouth of the English Channel, a convoy ahead had been attacked. There had been more than one casualty. On the horizon ahead was a column of black smoke. This turned out, on drawing closer, to be a tanker, settled low down in the water and blazing furiously. It can well be imagined that hardly a soul who saw this did not rehearse mentally the crash of a torpedo against his own ship and his reaction to it. Those who did not rehearse soon had occasion to do so. The convoy had its own U-boat scare. One minute there was a state of stolid vigilance and the next there were destroyers darting everywhere. Then, as if drawn by a magnet, they all dashed to the one spot and dropped depth-charges. A kill was certainly claimed but, even without tangible evidence, the concussion of the underwater explosions tightened everybody's nerves like fiddle-strings.

In war there is rarely a tense situation that is not relieved in one way or another. On this occasion the tenseness was relieved by two Irish fishermen in their boat. Their course lay across that of the *Aquitania* and with native obstinacy they were determined, Cunard Line or no, or the whole British Navy for that matter, that steam would give way to

sail—th'was the Oirish Sea anyway—and they held their course. Doggedly they held it, till it seemed that their little cockle-shell would be smashed. But still they sailed on until they forced the *Aquitania* to make one of those surprising quick swerves that give the lie to that feeling of massive inflexibility of a big ship.

When one reads of young men of German descent who had never known **Germany**, whose parents even were born in **America**, who dropped everything at the outbreak of war and took the first boat to their Fatherland, one is inclined to be surprised. But there is a deep affinity between a man and the soil from which sprang his forebears. So too, sailing up the Clyde, there was not a man on the ship of Scottish descent whose blood did not tingle to the tune of the piper playing on the deck; there was not an Irishman aboard, whether or not his ancestors for generations had seen a shamrock in its native land, whose heart did not miss a beat when he woke and caught his first glance of the vivid rich green of the Irish coast; men who had, until now, called England 'Home' without quite knowing why, suddenly realised, and realised with deep pride, that it was more than just a loose term; soon they were to gaze with pride and affection at the broad face of what they now knew was their mother country and, with fervour, breathe 'This is England'.

The arrival of the **Second Echelon** came at a dramatic and appropriate moment. **France** capitulated on 17 June and it was a fitting turn of fate that Dominion troops should have arrived at Greenock the day before. Their motherland now stood alone.

But the faces that met the troops were not those of grim doggedness. They wore expressions of warm hospitality and genuine pleasure, as if the British people were flattered that their kinsmen should have just dropped in from the other side of the world on a friendly visit.

The disembarkation ran so smoothly and briskly that there was a delay of an hour or so before the train arrived to take the men to **Aldershot**.

The first stage of the journey took them to Edinburgh, where they had lunch. Then they moved on again over the border into England and on to **York** for another meal. Here the train was held up a while by an air raid farther down the line. The excitement caused by this was later doubled when the troops learned that the railway station at **York** had been bombed not twenty minutes after they had left. Surely they had reached the firing line!

The journey to **Aldershot** took all the afternoon of the 18th and all that night as well, and they arrived at the station of Ashvale on the outskirts of **Aldershot** in the early hours of the following morning. They waited in the carriages until dawn and, sending their equipment ahead by lorry, they marched to their camp area at Mytchett Woods.

The area allotted to Div Cav was in the woods themselves in a setting almost Arcadian in its loveliness. Tents were pitched among pine trees, up and down which were scuttling little shy squirrels; the ground was covered with a thick aromatic carpet of pine needles; in the mornings men woke to the soft cooing of wood pigeons in the branches above them. It is not surprising then that C Squadron, camped in such surroundings during what turned out to be the finest summer in forty years, was the subject of bitter envy by the rest of the regiment, who were just beginning to feel, and feel acutely, the discomforts of their first brazen Egyptian summer.

As with all the Dominion troops in England, the squadron was granted general leave. The War Office had ordered this with the object of quickening civilian morale before **Britain** had fully measured the disaster of **Dunkirk** and realised to the full her loneliness.

Dominion troops were encouraged to travel as far afield as possible so that people could see their unfamiliar uniforms and feel heartened to know that here were reinforcements, fresh and ready and keen to meet the invasion which loomed so threateningly close across the Channel.

New Zealand troops were very highly regarded in England, and when

General Freyberg pressed for it, they were equipped as fully as possible with what scanty material was available. The Divisional Cavalry were fitted out with their full-scale establishment of vehicles and practically all their weapons. The next step was to get them out and amongst the countryside where they could be seen and discussed. The light tanks on issue were Mark VI type, and for driving instruction in these, five instructors, an officer and four sergeants, were borrowed from a neighbouring RTR ¹ depot. These NCOs were amazed to find their pupils, according to their standard, so versatile, for they were used to recruits who had never driven in their lives. They were not expecting pupils who—most of them—had handled tracked vehicles on their farms at home. So they were somewhat surprised to find that their classes could short-circuit the first lessons with a few pertinent questions, climb into the driving seats, and straight away drive off round the field. By the end of the first hour's instruction, instead of a week as was usually expected, the tanks were out of the gates and rolling merrily along the road.

The officer attached to the squadron was a major from 4/7 Dragoon Guards who had fought with the BEF back to **Dunkirk** and who lectured the officers with first-hand information on the working of divisional cavalry in battle. Their first battle experience turned out to be similar rearguard actions in **Greece**.

A gloom was cast over the squadron when, on 24 August, during a training run with the Bren carriers, a man on the roadside threw himself under one of the carriers to commit suicide. Fortunately no blame was attached to anyone in the squadron.

With the invasion of **Britain** seeming imminent, **General Freyberg** had flown to England from **Egypt** and organised the New Zealanders there on a divisional basis. They carried out manoeuvres more or less weekly and, owing to the state of preparedness in the country, these were the more valuable for their realism; it was on these manoeuvres that C Squadron learned priceless lessons in working in closed country.

The New Zealand Force was honoured by visits from His Majesty

King George VI, Mr Churchill, and Mr Eden on 6 July, and also, three days previously, from Lord and Lady Bledisloe.

During the morning of the King's visit there was a parade and march past and, during the afternoon, His Majesty visited individual units. His call on Div Cav lasted some time and, because of the danger of air raids, was designed to give maximum dispersion. As a result he spoke personally with quite a few of the men. To one trooper in particular with whom he spoke this was a triumphant afternoon. The trooper had approached Major Nicoll previously and asked him how he would address His Majesty if he should speak to him. The Major treated his worries as a joke and refused to offer any suggestion. Repeatedly he assured him that he need not worry as there was no chance that the King would single him out for intimate conversation. Imagine then the man's triumphant sidelong glance at the Major when the King did pick out this particular trooper to speak to. No eyes ever said more significantly, 'There, I told you so'.

On 27 August the New Zealand Force was moved into the south of England near the coast. Here manoeuvres took on a still greater aura of realism, so much so that the men never knew whether they had been turned out on a training exercise or whether the invasion had really started. It was generally accepted that the German invasion would come in a weekend, so at the end of each week the General, determined to be in the fighting, would march all his troops down to the coast to meet it: just in case.

The New Zealanders were moved permanently into [Kent](#) in the first week in September. It being now late autumn and the weather getting colder, billets were found for the squadron in the village of Westwell.

In this village they have left their mark in perpetuity. There is a very old inn there known as 'The Wheel'. According to custom, the sign of the inn, a wheel, hung on the outside wall. This wheel was painted red. One evening someone remarked that 'The Wheel' had consumed so much of the squadron's pocket money that Div Cav should have by now bought

at least one of the spokes in it. This remark caught the imagination of the innkeeper, a bright soul, who decided, in honour of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, that he would paint one of the spokes in their regimental colour, green. Nor did he do things by halves, for he approached the owners of the building and had them draw up a legal agreement that at all times their tenants shall keep the wheel painted red with one green spoke.

His act is of historical interest when it is realised just how old the inn is. It has provided hospitality to the defending troops of three threatened invasions of England—the Armada, Napoleon's and **Hitler's**—while that part of England has suffered three invasions—by Julius Cæsar, the Vikings and William the Conqueror.

Westwell, typical of any English village, could not but impress its character on men from a young country, for that character is carried in its elegant age. The church on one side of the village square was originally built by the Normans and still stands in an atmosphere of age, with an air of solidity. The countryside bears the same temper as its inhabitants: quiet, patient men. The very buttercups in the fields, just in the way they grow, bring one to realise that in the time of King Alfred they were past remembering how long they had been patiently growing, flowering, fading away, year by year. Just across the road from the billets was a tiny stream operating a little old mill. The mill had been mentioned in the Domesday Book. The stream itself is symbolic of the countryside and the people. It flows quietly and gently and with the same patience that can be read in the gait of the farmer following the plough on the hillside beyond.

Throughout September and October the squadron carried out training. This was mainly in exercises near the coast, with the daily air battles overhead as the Nazi raiders passed on their way to **London** or were shot down or turned back en route.

By 11 November the squadron was back in **Aldershot**. This time it was sent to Farnham, where it was grouped round Swanthorpe House.

The officers lived in the house itself and the men were billeted in cottages and Nissen huts in the grounds. Life, with winter setting in, was made as comfortable as possible for them. Heaters were made available and there was an abundance of hot water.

They had done no proper parade-ground training since they were in **Papakura**, so they settled down to smarten up in preparation for a possible spring offensive. Other training that they did here was in camouflage and concealment, which was to stand them in good stead in **Greece** before six months had passed.

Until now all ranks had been particularly conscious of the advantages that they held over the rest of the regiment, but with the passing of the summer, and with it the Battle of **Britain**, the possibility of a German invasion had receded. Then General Wavell's offensive opened in **Egypt** and C Squadron had its turn of being envious of the parent unit, now so close to the fighting. The Third Echelon had arrived in **Egypt** and it looked as if the **Second Echelon**, so long expecting to be the first to be blooded, would miss. Little did C Squadron realise of the despair of the Div Cav men in **Egypt** languishing in the dust at **Daba** and feeling that they were destined never to see an enemy facing them.

As a matter of fact it was just at this time that plans were being made to reunite the whole Division. A short while before Christmas all the New Zealanders in England were granted leave. This was completed in time for every man to be back in his billets by Christmas Day. They had taken full advantage of this and disappeared over the length and breadth of England and **Scotland**.

The weather in 1940 did not come up to expectations and provide a traditional white Christmas. Instead it supplied a cold, raw, grey day. At dinner the men were issued with a rum ration and given free beer. This put them in a wonderful humour and they sang throughout the meal.

Two days later came the official news that the Force was going to **Egypt**. This was not unexpected as an advanced party had left a month

before. On 31 December the OC left to board the transport *Duchess of Bedford* at Newport. Over New Year men packed their kits and prepared their personal gear for the trip. Vehicles were handed back to an Ordnance depot at **Aldershot** and the squadron was ready to leave. It arrived on board ship on Saturday, 4 January 1941, and put to sea at 11.30 a.m. the following day.

As part of the convoy was delayed in the Bristol Channel the *Duchess of Bedford* spent a few days anchored at Belfast. This delay lasted until the following Sunday, when they raised anchor in the early morning. By daylight they were well at sea.

The *Duchess of Bedford* is a smaller ship than the *Aquitania* and, carrying about the same number of troops, her accommodation was fairly crowded. The first part of the trip was marked by a certain amount of illness. The approach of winter in England had affected the squadron, and followed by an outbreak of measles on the ship, things were rather uncomfortable for a while. Then a general inoculation of TAB² which affected the majority of the men added further to their discomforts. However, by the end of the first week the weather was getting warmer and everybody seemed to brighten up considerably.

They arrived at **Freetown** on 25 January to witness a spectacular display by the anti-aircraft guns of their escort. A French plane from Dakar, of unhappy memory, flew over the port and was given a lively reception. It is not surprising that enemy aircraft paid attention to **Freetown** at that time as the port had become a starting place for many **Atlantic** convoys and was usually very crowded. Indeed, when the New Zealanders arrived there were, at a conservative estimate, over ninety ships in the harbour.

The weather was very hot and close and, with anti-malarial precautions ordered—unnecessarily as it was afterwards learned — everybody spent four miserable nights trying to sleep, if sleep they could, in the hot and steamy atmosphere below decks. Had it been known that this was not the malarial season it may well be imagined that some

vituperative signals would no doubt have passed between the New Zealanders' ships. Sufficient to say that everyone was glad to be away from **Freetown** and to be back at sea, where at least some draught could reach below decks from the ventilators.

It took ten days to travel from **Freetown** to **Capetown**. During that time there was nothing of particular interest to do since practically all the available space on the ship had to be used for PT; and this was merely sufficient to keep the men reasonably fit. So they spent their days in a leisurely manner, reading and writing or playing occasional deck games. The escorting cruisers enlivened one day for them by staging a live-round shoot.

On arriving at **Capetown** on 8 February Div Cav found that this time they were more fortunate in their transport. The *Duchess of Bedford*, which drew less water than the *Aquitania*, was able to tie up, so the men were able to stretch their legs ashore. Major Nicoll took advantage of the four days in the Union to give his squadron route marches. From two o'clock till midnight he gave them leave ashore and, on the whole, their behaviour was good, except for minor breaches by the inevitable few who were late back to the ship.

On 12 February the troops began the last stage of their trip to the **Middle East**. Here it was that the Navy seemed to the uninitiated soldiers to be very confident of their mastery of the sea. One by one the escorting cruisers left the convoy until, approaching the Gulf of **Aden**, indeed right in sight of the coast of **Eritrea**, there was only one cruiser left. At the same time the speed of the ships was reduced and it was not until the morning of 3 March, well up the **Red Sea**, that **Egypt** could be seen on both sides. After nine weeks at sea there was nobody who was not glad to be packing his kit and nobody was displeased when, in the middle of the afternoon, the ships dropped anchor off **Port Tewfik**.

¹ Royal Tank Regiment.

2 Typhoid A & B.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 4 – THE REGIMENT UNITED

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The Regiment United

was on the same plateau as **Maadi Camp**, on the east side of the **Nile** and about ten miles farther south, that is about twenty miles from **Cairo**. When the troops arrived there back from the desert they raised their favourite grouse about being the unfortunates who always had to break in the new camps for others to enjoy. But all the same they were well pleased to be there and looked forward to a period in a base camp with its prospects of leave at nights, its more regular routine, the inevitable reunions, and a hundred and one other pleasures that had been denied them for six months.

No man could hide his pleasure when he saw the quarters that were waiting for him. For the first time in the regiment's experience the men were accommodated in wooden huts. At first, as their huts had not been completed, the officers were in tents but they moved in as their quarters became available.

Then came another pleasure: the issue of battledress and berets. It seems strange now to realise that well over a year of the war had passed before some of the troops actually saw battledress. The issue was welcome to the men, who had worn nothing but khaki drill with jerseys right through the cold part of the year. The first occasion on which the regiment wore battledress was for church parade on 18 January. The berets were issued not as official headgear, but with instructions that they were only to be worn to keep grease and dust out of the hair during maintenance or whilst driving in the desert. But it was a foregone conclusion that they were soon to become the headgear of the Div Cav, and indeed its distinguishing mark in the Division. Nostalgia over the old slouch hats was gone for ever.

Within a day or so a training syllabus was drawn up. Leave into **Cairo** was once again a daily feature. Men were allowed to draw their cameras, base kits were issued, and once again routine settled down to

that of a base camp.

During December the Reinforcement Depot had been split up. Part of this had been formed into the Composite Training Battalion which carried reinforcements and training cadres for the Div Cav, Engineers and Signals. Major H. G. Carruth had been seconded as its OC. The regiment sent down a cadre of some fifteen other ranks and, in their places, the first members of the regiment to come back from the LRDG were marched in.

At the same time there came happy news from the LRDG. It had fought the action at **Ain Dua** and two of the Div Cav men in the unit had been decorated: Lieutenant J. H. Sutherland, MC, and Trooper L. A. Willcox, MM. ¹ These men earned the first decorations in the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force. But with this news also came some of a sterner kind. There had been losses. In the attack on **Kufra** Corporal **Beech** ² had been killed, Lance-Corporals **Roderick** ³ and **Adams** ⁴ taken prisoner, and Trooper **Moore** ⁵ reported missing, believed killed in action. He was later reported safe when, great optimist that he is, he was picked up marching steadily towards Tekro, some 300 miles away. The whole regiment was delighted to hear that he was granted the DCM for this feat.

Much of the training in the six weeks before what turned out to be the Greek campaign was designed in such a way as to draw the maximum enthusiasm from the men. The regimental sports were held on 23 January. Apart from the usual field events, there were driving competitions which turned the day into quite an exciting gymkhana and which contributed handsomely towards increasing the drivers' skill in handling their vehicles.

As the war in the **Western Desert** now appeared to be over, training tended more towards operations in European conditions. With this type of warfare in view it was necessary to train troops, especially those who would not be able to rely on heavy bridging equipment, to cross rivers. Such exercises, in the joint interests of security and recreation, were

disguised as competitions and proved to be full of fun. They were conducted both by day and by night. A backwater of the Nile was chosen which had a high bank that made an excellent grandstand and a list of races was drawn up. The small 'recce' boats that were used for canoe races supplied thrills for both competitors and onlookers alike, since they were inclined to be treacherous when being boarded. There were furious races in the big pontoons, and the men were practised in embarking their AFVs and paddling them across. Other units were doing the same thing and, as a climax, a divisional regatta was held in which the regiment competed with a certain amount of distinction.

The Divisional Cavalry also went out on an exercise in the El Saff area. This time they were to act, in conjunction with 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, as an enemy for 6 Infantry Brigade. The exercise served also to train them in rapid night movement across the desert, and in delaying action against superior but less mobile forces. All this entailed much movement and work and little sleep. The war diary of 30 January reads: '... all vehicles experienced great difficulty in climbing out of Wadi Hai as the sand was very soft and, as the enemy were getting close, a lot of hard work was crammed into a short time....' But the wheeled vehicles did not have all the difficulties for the diary goes on: '... it was a hectic night.... the A.F.V. crews also found many obstacles some of which they charged through and some of which they fell into.' That, the writer thinks, refers to an Arab graveyard; but perhaps the less said about it the better.

By the middle of February it could be guessed that something was afoot for the New Zealand Division. It was at last preparing to go into action. The regiment's establishment, less C Squadron, was made up to full strength on 19 February with a large intake from the Composite Training Battalion. The next week the regiment received advice that instead of its establishment of light tanks it was to be issued with armoured cars, and the following day a number of Marmon-Herrington cars was available for delivery, together with enough Bren carriers to complete the establishment.

The old training tanks, of which eight, *mirabile dictu*, were still in going order, were driven down to **Maadi** and handed over to the Composite Battalion, and work was begun preparing the new vehicles for action. Weapons and wireless sets had to be fitted, and as each crew was to be self supporting, there were many problems concerning the stowing of bedding and rations whilst not impairing the fighting efficiency of the vehicles. Some of the senior officers paid a visit to the headquarters of 11 Hussars at **Abbassia**, who were equipped with armoured cars and who helped considerably with suggestions from their own experience in action.

At the RAC ⁶ School at **Abbassia** several films were shown to members of the regiment. The nature of these might have given some indication of the intended destination of the Division, but nobody guessed. There were films on 'The Infantry Company in a Defensive Position', 'How Prisoners of War are Questioned', and 'Methods of Extracting a Bogged Vehicle'. A very appropriate day was chosen to show this last film, for during the previous night there had been an exceptionally heavy fall of rain which had tried the roofs of the huts to well past their limits, and the scenes inside the huts had been reminiscent of **Ngaruawahia** days when everybody kept a groundsheet handy.

It would perhaps be wise at this juncture to outline the establishment of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment. It consisted of three fighting squadrons, each of some 110 men, and a Headquarters squadron of about 140, all under a Regimental Headquarters.

Up until now the Divisional Cavalry had formed and trained as two separate entities, but C Squadron after nearly eighteen months had finally arrived. Until that day the only man who knew the whole of the regiment well, indeed, who did not regard C Squadron as some sort of a myth, was the General himself. So 5 March, the day that C Squadron turned up at **Helwan**, was a red-letter day—the regiment was at last united under one command.

Naturally it took some time for the men to get to know each other and to make new friendships, and many a tale was told and retold. The 'Desert Languishers', who up to this time had not actually seen an enemy, learned with envy how the 'Cook's Tourists', even if they had not been actually engaged, had at least smelt powder; while they on their part, who had spent all this time under the temperate skies of England, were now only too eager to take up and wear 'the shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun' of **Africa**. All were now tingling with excitement and anticipation that, at long last, they were all going into the real thing—and going in together.

When C Squadron turned up it had some difficulty in getting its equipment unloaded before the regiment moved to the assembly area at **Amiriya** and Major Nicoll had to make a fast trip to **Suez** on 12 March to hurry things along.

The Divisional Cavalry was due to sail to **Greece** (although they did not then know their destination) with the fourth flight, so by the time all the new equipment had been issued and the regiment was ready to move from **Helwan**, many units were already there. The regiment left **Helwan** on the morning of 13 March, the carriers with crews going by rail from **Helwan** station and the balance by road convoy.

The Western Desert, at any time notoriously temperamental, seemed to have worked up a full-sized hate at this persistent intrusion of its domains from which, only a couple of months earlier, it had staged a punishing and painful send-off. Once again the desert turned on a sandstorm such as happily is seldom found outside these regions. The dry, scorching wind swept in vicious gusts of incredible violence to carry enormous quantities of sand which permeated everything. Visibility was reduced to nil and everything had to stop. There were, in fact, instances of men actually getting lost in moving from one vehicle to another. Once again the DRs had to suffer most of all and only twelve of them managed to arrive with the main party. The remainder practically all experienced the same breakdown: sand forced itself into the carburettor

slides, jamming them, and the machines had to be picked up by the LAD. At the height of the storm the water cart ran off the road and capsized, injuring one man who had to be sent to hospital.

Another wretched trick the sandstorm played was on the armoured cars. The myriads of bone-dry particles of sand, so our scientists told us, constantly bombarding the steel sides of the vehicles gradually built up within them an extremely high electric charge. The cars, insulated from the ground by their rubber tyres, acted as huge condensers and stored this charge. The crews inside were of course unaffected, but there was a case where one man walked up and touched a car, which immediately released its charge, knocking him flat on his back. This storm persisted continuously for two days and only abated by the time the vehicles began to marshal for loading on board ships.

At **Amiriya** there was a **Naafi** tent next door to the RHQ area. These establishments were staffed by members of the local population especially selected for their intelligence and integrity. This Naafi did enormous trade for a while, but during the evening of 15 March it caught fire. This was neither the first nor the only time a **Naafi** tent was burned down. By coincidence other Naafis have suffered the same fate; and by coincidence, this usually happened while troops were moving out of the area; and, strongest coincidence of all, they were always destroyed whilst holding much money. It is a consoling thought, however, that the staff, sleeping right against the seat of the fire, always managed to save themselves and every stitch of their personal gear. But the cash was invariably destroyed. The nearest unit would be blamed and there the matter would rest. But what will you? *C'est la guerre!*

At this stage nobody was interested enough to ponder over the destruction of a mere tent. In everybody's minds and on their lips was speculation on where they were bound. Rumours from the most authentic and 'confidential' sources followed one another in rapid sequence of complete contradiction, though, as usual, the correct one was the last and outlived all others.

The vehicles were loaded by 16 March and the personnel of the regiment were warned to be on the train at **Ikingi Maryut** by 2 a.m. on the 18th. They arrived in the **Alexandria** docks at 4.30 a.m. and embarked on the Greek ship *Ionia*, which was also carrying the Australian 2/1 Battalion. By 3.30 p.m. they were at sea.

Once on the water, sealed orders were opened and a message was read from the General to all ranks. This message confirmed the last of the rumours. The regiment was on its way to **Greece**.

The principal appointments were as follows:

Commanding Officer **Lt-Col H. G. Carruth**
Second-in-Command **Maj A. J. Nicoll**
Adjutant **Capt W. R. Pigou**
OC A Squadron **Maj J. F. Potter**
Second-in-Command **Capt J. R. S. Sealy**
OC B Squadron **Maj J. T. Russell**
Second-in-Command **Capt F. W. Horton**
OC C Squadron **Maj E. R. Harford**
Second-in-Command **Capt I. L. Bonifant**
OC HQ Squadron **Capt T. C. Wallace**
Medical Officer **Lt E. Stevenson-Wright, NZMC**
Padre **Rev. H. G. Taylor, CF**

* * * * *

The Divisional Cavalry left behind it one broken heart. It was now, with its owner, back in New Zealand. Lieutenant- Colonel C. J. Pierce, MC, was a dying man and his beloved regiment was going to battle without him.

He must have known of his illness for a long time and kept it concealed. It is now obvious that, during the latter half of 1940, he was in constant pain and this must have been aggravated because his malady prevented him from eating much of the hard rations that were issued at the time. All this he suffered stoically and silently. His 'boys', noting his frequent visits to **Alexandria**, used to declare silently that he

had some attraction there. He had—the treatment that he was secretly taking. In those desert days, too, he found constant excuse to be off towards the fighting. He was looking for a job for his regiment so that perhaps he could get the chance to end his days the way he wanted: as a fighting man.

Charlie Pierce moulded his command with his own strong character. After his day, many men passed into the ranks of the Div Cav. They all knew the atmosphere of the regiment. Many wondered what it was: it was the spirit of Charlie Pierce. A later medical report on the regiment—part of the MO's routine—says in one place: 'There has never been any question as to the morale of the 2 NZ Div Cav Regiment. A lengthy story could be told of those who have carried on in the field with wounds, injuries, and diseases ordinarily justifying evacuation.' A man is like his master. Every trooper lived in constant dread of the humiliation of 'going back to Base'. That dread they inherited from their first CO.

But time betrayed the man. His ailment became outwardly manifest. He was sent to hospital, and two days later the stunned regiment received the news that he was seriously ill and would be flown back to New Zealand.

There were few of the men who stood on parade listening to such bleak news whose minds did not travel back to his first parade in **Ngaruawahia** and remember the startled surprise with which they heard the rough, invisible voice—for Charlie was a short man—which roared in one breath: 'Regiment-will- advance-in-col'mn-o'-route-from-the-right- Headquarters-Squadron leading- QUICK-MARCH!'

His envious and almost tearful farewell to the trooper whom he met in the streets of **Helwan** on the day of his departure—the very day that his regiment was up to full strength for the first time—typified the spirit which he instilled in it for all its life:

'I'll be back, boy. I'll be back even if they'll only give me the **YMCA** car to drive.'

Such was Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Pierce: God rest his soul.



GREECE

¹ **Sgt L. A. Willcox, MM; Wanganui; born Hawera, 25 Aug 1918; sawmill hand; wounded 19 Sep 1942.**

² **Cpl F. R. Beech, m.i.d.; born Picton, 24 Jul 1908; radio engineer; killed in action 31 Jan 1941.**

³ **L-Cpl L. Roderick; born Gisborne, 19 Feb 1913; linesman; p.w. 31 Jan 1941; killed in action, Italy, 6 Apr 1944.**

⁴ **L-Cpl W. R. Adams; Whangarei; born Auckland, 1 Aug 1918; salesman; p.w. 31 Jan 1941.**

⁵ **Sgt R. J. Moore, DCM, m.i.d.; Morrinsville; born Te Aroha, 10 Sep 1915; farmhand; twice wounded.**

⁶ **Royal Armoured Corps.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 5 – GREECE

CHAPTER 5

Greece

By 18 March, when the Divisional Cavalry left **Egypt**, three flights of ships had already taken the greater part of the Division to **Greece**. When the regiment's turn came it travelled on two ships, the *Anglo-Canadian* which carried the vehicles with skeleton crews, and the *Ionia* which took the bulk of the personnel together with the Australian 2/1 Battalion. Both ships were very crowded, but this mattered little as it was a fairly short trip.

The weather remained fair and the sea reasonably calm until the 20th, when the wind became colder and raised a choppy sea. In the middle of the afternoon some dive-bombers suddenly attacked, but there was still ample time to man the light anti-aircraft guns and, when the *Anglo-Canadian* was sorted out as a first target, the aircraft were greeted one after another with a tremendous hail of small-arms fire and forced to break away. The welcome they received was not to be wondered at for the ship carried as deck cargo two 3-ton trucks loaded with high explosive, whose presence was an incentive in itself to vigorous and accurate shooting. But the convoy did not get away unscathed. One ship, a tanker, was hit and set on fire and had to fall behind under escort of a destroyer.

The following day, 21 March, the convoy arrived at **Piraeus** harbour and disembarkation began almost immediately. Transport was waiting at the quay to take dismounted personnel to the transit camp at **Kifisia**.

Here at last the men found themselves once again on the same sweet, clean, green land as their own homes, and just for the sake of it they lay down for a moment on the grass under the young pine trees. Just for the simple joy of it they took off their jackets so that they could actually hang them on a twig. They bathed in the little streams just to be sure that cold water, as it had done since they were children, could still sting their skin.

The Divisional Cavalry saw little of **Athens**, for even before the vehicles were unloaded orders had been received to move to battle positions in northern **Greece**. But what little they did see of the city and its people they fell in love with. The populace appeared all unbalanced, for **Athens**, it seemed, was completely empty of men between the ages of sixteen and sixty. The young Greek women were beautiful and, though anything but forward, were quite friendly. On the trip north, where the manual labour on the roads was all being done by women, hardly a girl in any gang looked up until the oldest woman did so and smiled. Then, as if by signal, they all smiled and waved.

The various spirits and wines of the country took some learning. There was koniak. Major Russell's warning to B Squadron was alliteratively succinct: 'Koniak is a rough kind of brandy. It begins with a "k" and ends with a "k" and has a kick with a capital "K" at both ends!' There was ouzo, a white spirit, innocently smooth to the palate and tasting strongly of aniseed. Some had tried its like in **Egypt** under the name of zibib. To be drunk on it was to be drunk for days when any kind of liquid was taken: a frightening drink. Then there was the wine of the country, mavrodaphne; red, resinous, neither sweet nor dry. It was rather heady, indeed extremely so when taken as the beer-drinking New Zealanders did—in great quaffs—much to the surprise of the locals.

Unloading the vehicles went on apace during 23 and 24 March and there were losses on the quayside. Two trucks were written off, one when an armoured car slipped back out of its sling into the hold, suffering some damage, and the other when a guy rope on a crane snapped and the crane, with an armoured car and a truck in its sling, collapsed on to the quay.

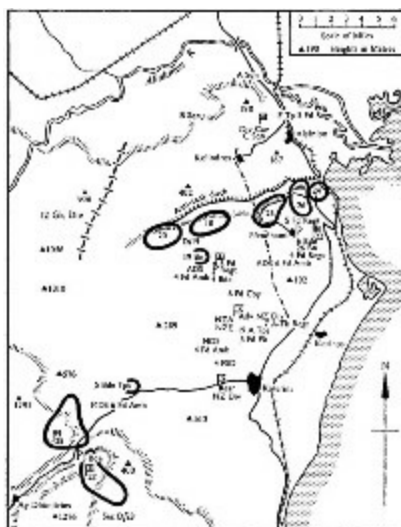
The tracked vehicles, two trainloads of them, and the wheeled vehicles started north on the 25th. En route the uninhibited warmth of the people's good wishes touched the New Zealanders' hearts. Without any effort the Greeks made them feel as if they were about to defend their own soil, for they wished them God-speed with a fervour that

should only have been possible to their own kith and kin.

Through towns like **Thebes**, steeped in history and legend, they passed, and in the great pass of **Thermopylae** they could almost feel the ghosts of the warriors of Leonidas and Xerxes. Wherever they went and whenever they stopped the men felt the warmth of the Greeks' welcome and blessing.

The original plans for the defence of **Greece** along her frontier were not adopted, partly because the bulk of the Greek forces was engaged with the Italians in **Albania**, but mainly because there was no definite indication of the co-operation

that could be expected of **Yugoslavia**. As this could not be regarded as certain and as, without it, there were not enough troops, the British force, with some help from the Greeks, prepared to hold the Aliakmon line. This was a chain of natural



THE ALIAKMON LINE. THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION'S SECTOR.
5 APRIL 1941

THE ALIAKMON LINE. THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION'S SECTOR, 5 APRIL 1941

defences running from the mouth of the **Aliakmon River**, through **Veroia** and **Edhessa**, to Mt Kaimakchalan on the Yugoslav border. The New Zealand Division was originally detailed to defend the sector from the sea to the **Veroia Pass**, but at the same time to be ready either to move forward to add weight to the lighter Greek forces holding the main

passes on the frontier or to retire to positions east and west of Mt Olympus.

Thus it could reinforce success if **Yugoslavia** decided to resist **Germany**. Subsequent events showed that neither happened. The Yugoslavs were soon overrun and the pressure everywhere had become so great that all thought went towards an orderly retirement. Under these circumstances the Divisional Cavalry was a unit that was extended to its fullest. But that is anticipating the story.

The Aliakmon line was still being built by the Greeks across the rolling country about 12 miles from **Katerini**. Two New Zealand brigades were now digging in along this line and it was Div Cav's task to patrol forward of it to the Aliakmon River. There it was to make the Division's first contact with the enemy, and after making all crossings impassable, to retire behind the main divisional line.

Forward of the Aliakmon and well north of the Division was the British 1 Armoured Brigade, based on **Edhessa**. This brigade's job was to carry out delaying actions between the Axios River and the Aliakmon line. To the right of the brigade, up in the hills of the border, was the Greek Cavalry Division. This formation was also to impede any enemy advance and to retire back into the main defensive line, using the route through the town of **Servia**. Thus Div Cav's interest in the enemy concerned those who advanced through **Salonika**, and the original plans made no mention of Allied troops forward of the river. Nevertheless, though the rail bridge and all secondary road bridges over the Aliakmon were to be destroyed, the main bridge, facing the road junction at **Yidha**, was to be left until the very last minute.

On arrival in the **Katerini** area on 26 March the armoured vehicles were immediately unloaded and camouflaged. Urgent work, and much of it, was required on the carriers to make them battle-worthy, for some of them had done as much as 500 miles in **Egypt** and they had been rushed forward as soon as they arrived in **Greece**.

Regimental Headquarters took up a position near the village of **Aiyinion** and the stretch of the **Aliakmon River** from there to, and including, the main road bridge became the responsibility of A Squadron. B Squadron covered a similar stretch of river upstream. C Squadron remained in reserve near RHQ.

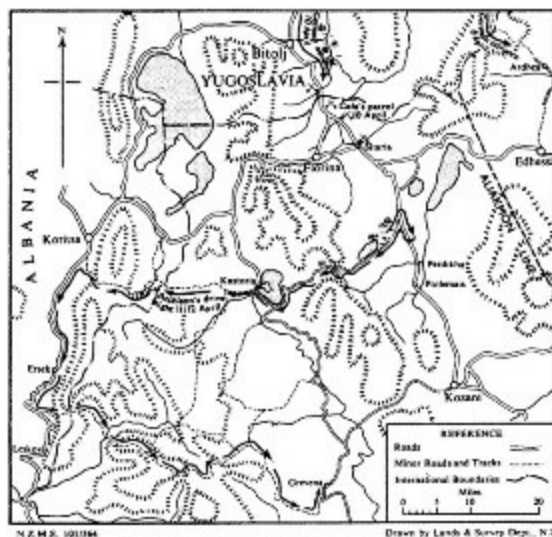
The large triangle of country between the river and the main divisional line was thoroughly reconnoitred, using as much as possible the armoured cars and some soft-skinned vehicles. The countryside generally caused some misgivings as both that and the roads, to a great extent, were suitable only for tracked vehicles.

Patrols also went forward of the Aliakmon; almost to **Salonika**; actually to **Veroia**, and well north to **Yiannitsa** to make contact with **4 Hussars** and the King's Royal Rifles, both part of 1 Armoured Brigade.

Maintenance and reconnaissance kept the regiment fully occupied until 1 April, when orders were received to move forward into proper battle positions, and from then on A and B Squadrons had some 14 or 15 miles of river to watch, from near **Aiyinion** to the village of Varia, where a secondary road crossed the river. This was considered impassable except at the bridges which, as has been mentioned, had been or were to be destroyed. Over and above such definite orders both Major Potter and Major Russell saw fit to destroy other material. In the A Squadron area, on the near side of the river, there was a large dump of timber suitable for bridge-building. Potter had this burnt. On the B Squadron front, near the secondary road, one of the troop leaders noticed a large crane standing by the far bank. Perhaps it had some connection with a large swamp-clearing contract in northern **Greece** which had been in the hands of a German firm. Nobody seemed to know. But there the crane stood; by its diary it had only been there a short while. Its control and driving mechanism were mounted unusually high—so high that it could stand in the middle of the river and still work either bank—and it appeared stout enough to handle tanks. It was destroyed with gun-cotton.

As the Armoured Brigade lacked any light armoured vehicles, arrangements were made with the New Zealand Division to send forward two troops of armoured cars from the Divisional Cavalry in exchange for seven cruiser tanks from 4 Hussars. Accordingly, on 4 April the C Squadron cars, under Lieutenants

Cole¹ and **Atchison**,² were ordered to report to Brigadier Charrington at **Edhessa**. Under his command they became the first of the Division to open fire on the enemy. Nor did they fail in this distinction, as we shall see. They suffered losses over the following ten days but these sacrifices were many times



THE COLE-ATCHISON PATROLS, APRIL 1941

justified. And the tale of their dash and resourcefulness is such that any division would be proud to recount. Cole stood up to close-range fire while a truckload of explosives was turned round right beside him on a narrow, greasy road and while his

troop returned machine-gun fire fierce enough to keep the enemy distracted. Atchison and his whole troop, twice in as many days, had to be left behind, written off, and through dogged determination, managed to turn up for more. It will be well to leave the main story for a while to

follow these two troops more closely.

Any Yugoslav resistance against **Germany** was overcome almost immediately, so the responsibility of covering the **Monastir Gap**, on the border, fell mainly on 1 Armoured Brigade. Atchison's first task was routine patrolling up and down the road to Bitolj in **Yugoslavia**. On 8 April, when the Germans were approaching the Greek border, he was sent up into the hills due north through Ardhea to watch developments on the Greek Division's front. This was a nerve-racking trip through steep, close country, where to put a wheel over the side of the greasy road could mean a fall of hundreds of feet. Refugees were streaming back, Greek troops were hurrying down the hills to join them, and with gunfire ahead he could see very few places to turn. Radio communication was impossible due to enemy jamming, so having been well forward without making contact, he returned to the most forward platoon of the British troops, where he left two of his cars to give support while he returned to the brigade headquarters to report.

But the German advance down the Axios River valley towards **Salonika** and **Yiannitsa** had turned the right flank of the brigade, forcing it to retire. Atchison arrived at **Edhessa** just as the brigade was leaving and was told to follow it if he could. He raced wildly back for the long 18 miles to withdraw his troop and the infantry platoon, and only just made it under the nose of the German advanced guard.

They managed to snatch about three hours of miserable sleep at the new headquarters at **Perdikha** before being roused at daybreak to go on a long reconnaissance towards the Albanian border. This was another arduous trip, cold as charity, and it took the troop past the town of Kastoria. Apparently fruitless, it later turned out for Atchison a most fortunate trip. However, we must leave him for a while, doing maintenance on his cars after his return, and pick up Cole's story again.

By the morning of 10 April the enemy had overcome all opposition in southern **Yugoslavia** and was approaching the border via the roads through Bitolj. Cole was sent forward to protect a detachment of Royal

Engineers who were to destroy bridges. The first of these to be chosen was just over the border, so paradoxically, the first New Zealand shots fired in the Greek campaign—and for that matter the first decoration won—were actually in [Yugoslavia](#).

The detachment arrived about 9 a.m. and Cole placed Corporal King's ³ car about a quarter of a mile up the road, with his own and Sergeant Sutherland's ⁴ cars closer to the bridge at either side of the road, while the sappers began to prepare the demolition.

It was going to be quite a lengthy task as the bridge was very solidly built of large hewn stones. But the enemy came into sight within twenty minutes. In the lead were several motor-cycle combinations, which were first engaged by King and then by Sutherland when he had backed off a little to gain a better fire position. Cole also backed down a little to observe his troop better. Then the sappers themselves, not unwillingly, as they became available, grabbed rifles and joined in. Presently some enemy vehicles moved up through the motor-cycles, bringing more troops, some mortars and heavy machine guns. The chances of completing the demolition were rapidly fading. The enemy were using explosive bullets and the outsides of the cars were rapidly getting stripped of such things as bedding and tools. Cole noticed that he had even lost some of his wheel-nuts; and his turret had become half jammed. With every hit on the cars the crews were being temporarily blinded by flying asbestos from inside the walls.

When Cole saw infantry deploying to both sides he realised that there was obviously going to be no demolition and he radioed King to draw back, fearing that he would be surrounded. King's reaction was to move forward and engage the enemy even more vigorously, replying that to pull back to the bridge would only concentrate all the fire there of all places, just when Cole had to get the explosives truck turned round in almost full view of the enemy. Cole pulled back close by it to make some cover and then recalled Sutherland to where he could give supporting fire to King, who was almost surrounded. King finally consented to return and everyone moved under cover. Suspecting a trap, the enemy

did not advance immediately and thus gave the detachment time to pull out.

They drove back helter-skelter for seven or eight miles before stopping at another bridge, this time a wooden one. The explosives truck had not stopped so they pulled off the railings and stacked them in the middle of the deck, soaked them with petrol, and set them on fire. (Sutherland recalls his great annoyance on this occasion when, having spotted the enemy about three-quarters of a mile away, and having reported this to his troop leader, all the party did was to line up on the bridge while the Engineer officer, a Captain Page, ⁵ took their photograph.)

They then drove on a short way and set the next bridge on fire in the same manner, but without the frivolity of taking photographs once the job was done.

Having now gained, so they thought, a good start on the enemy, they were bowling along homewards with more confidence when, at a crossroads a little short of the village of Sitaria, they had a sudden awakening. This shock was mutual to the New Zealanders and to the enemy troops whom they surprised there right on their line of retreat. The enemy were not expecting visitors—not British ones from that direction— and were mainly dismounted and grouped about a culvert enjoying the sunshine. Cole, who was in the lead, pulled up all standing and the two other cars were upon him before he had time to warn them. They all backed off behind a rise to take quick stock of the situation. They were trapped if they did not act pretty quickly for the enemy simply had to turn one vehicle sideways on and they were all ‘in the bag’. But success was the reward of quick wits. Everyone opened fire and they turned the surprise to their own advantage. The enemy troops bolted for their vehicles and made off down the side road whence they had come, while with every gun blazing, the detachment charged the position and was through. And even as they flew by they had the satisfaction of seeing at least four vehicles still standing near the

crossroads and of surmising that they had been put out of action.

We must now pick up Atchison's story again. On 11 April he was sent right across into [Albania](#) to make contact with the Greek troops there and to make sure that the bridges along the route had been prepared for demolition. Then the next day he was sent back as an escort for some Royal Engineers who were to destroy a particular bridge in [Albania](#). Each of these drives was all of 150 miles through mountainous country and over difficult roads, and they proved most exhausting. However, the work was done without complaining. Atchison even accepted quite complacently the fact that when he was almost back at [Perdikha](#) he found that he was now in enemy-held territory, since the brigade had been forced back in his absence and, before going, had blown a bridge. He had been left to work out his own salvation!

This he did. Stoically he turned his troop about and, after picking up all the petrol he could carry from a dump that the enemy had not yet found, he set off to get back through [Albania](#). All that night he led the way through this long roundabout route, hampered all the way by retreating Greek troops and by refugees, and by eight o'clock the next morning, while heading for [Grevena](#), he stumbled upon the brigade's B Echelon. Nor is there any report that he even complained on reporting to headquarters just to be told that they were surprised to see him.

From here on the story of both troops becomes a story of successive rearguards—forward to destroy bridges; back under fire—and of frequent vicious air attacks which cost them two lives: Trooper [Risk](#), ⁶ killed on 14 April, and Corporal King, who died of wounds on the 17th. They fought rearguards covering the Australians' withdrawal, oddly enough in company with the very same tanks for which the two troops had been exchanged by the New Zealand Division in the first place. Gradually the cars were whittled down and the two troops were merged into one under Atchison, while Cole was left to do road patrol work which finally landed him back almost with his own squadron during the parachute attack on [Corinth](#)—except that, and perhaps fortunately for him, he was on the wrong side of the canal at the time. Near [Thebes](#), Atchison's movements

coincided with those of A Squadron, and from then on until the evacuation his story merges with the squadron's.

* * * * *

From the moment it arrived along the **Aliakmon River** until the German attack, the Divisional Cavalry was fully employed, not just with intensive reconnaissance but also with preparations. Roads were far from satisfactory, and all available labour was used to improve those from the troop positions. Troop commanders had been ordered to dig in their vehicles and to camouflage them.

Attached to the regiment was Captain **Bevan** ⁷ with E Troop, 5 Field Regiment, and O Troop of 34 Battery, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, under command of Lieutenant **Patterson**. ⁸ The 6th Field Company, NZE, had sent No. 3 Section (Lieutenant Chapman ⁹) forward to take charge of demolitions, and also some small assault boats so that Div Cav could still do a limited amount of dismounted patrolling forward once the bridges were blown.

As wireless silence was imposed the Divisional Signals ran out a telephone line to RHQ from Divisional Headquarters. At the same time Div Cav took the precaution of netting in, on its forward link to squadrons, one of the radios in the cars sent forward to 1 Armoured Brigade. This step was very soon justified for, during the enemy thrust down the Axios River towards **Salonika**, a crossing of this river was also made just south of the Yugoslav border. The regiment thus had early warning of the advance towards **Yiannitsa** which turned the right flank of the Armoured Brigade.

It was doubly fortunate that the regimental forward link was used because the OC A Squadron, Major Potter, was thus immediately in touch with the situation, and when the last of the bridges was ordered to be blown he realised the importance of stalling for time as the tanks which were coming in exchange for Div Cav cars were to use this road bridge. They had not yet arrived, and furthermore, so long as the bridge

stood, it was an alternative route of retirement should anything occur to block the whole or part of the Armoured Brigade from getting back through **Veroia**. Potter compromised in the meantime by blowing the railway bridge and, with the personal assurance of Brigadier Charrington that there yet was no danger, coupled with the fact that the 'exchange' tanks were definitely coming, he sent forward Lieutenants Robinson and **Ward**¹⁰ to guide them in whilst he strengthened his position temporarily with a good strong standing patrol at the far side of the bridge. As well as this, he stood by with the sappers to order the firing of the charge should the worst happen.

This initiative was rewarded by good fortune. The Armoured Brigade got clear by the **Veroia** route and soon after daybreak on the 9th the tanks arrived.

The bridge was then blown and a temporary wooden structure beside it was hauled down with the help of the tanks. These were then guided back by Corporal Ryan¹¹ to the headquarters of C Squadron, which was still in reserve near RHQ.

A and B Squadrons could now only wait passively for the enemy to arrive. Refugees were coming back and quite substantial numbers using bullock wagons were fording the river in B Squadron's area. However, they were successfully dissuaded by firing bursts of Vickers gunfire along the river.

Until now the weather had been pleasantly warm and the ground reasonably passable for all fighting vehicles, but on the night of 11 April a heavy rain set in which very soon made the ground far too muddy, particularly in the A Squadron area, to risk leaving armoured cars off the road, as in the likely event of having to disengage at close range, this was going to need brisk movement with no delays. A Squadron therefore had to make a very uncomfortable changeover between carrier and car troops in the middle of the night.

All morning on the 12th, Easter Saturday, the forward troops, well

dug in along the riverbank, waited tensely.

Then.... The gunners saw them first.... Along the road from **Yidha** there was sunlight flashing on some windscreens.

Everybody lay low.

About 2 p.m., led by a group of motor-cycle and side-car combinations, some troop-carrying transport arrived. Not a shot was fired, not a soul moved, until the motor-cycles were right up to the bridge approach. Then suddenly the troop on the right of the road opened up with everything: rifles, machine guns, anti-tank rifles. The range was murderously close and only one of the motor-cycles escaped. There was a lull for a while before sniping began from the enemy side. Again the Div Cav men lay low. They would be provoked into betraying nothing; and the tenseness of the afternoon was kept up by the occasional cracks from the snipers' rifles.

The artillerymen were in the same mood. They wanted good targets or none at all. Just before dark the 25-pounders put down two ranging shots on the road back towards **Yidha**. And they too remained ready and poised.

After dark the enemy began to build up strength. The Divisional Cavalry waited for the dawn. When they hit they had to hit hard. Until a few days previously the Division had not been far behind them, but with its left flank threatened by the rapid German advance through **Yugoslavia**, it had been drawn back to positions in the **Olympus Pass**. The regiment was now the best part of 40 miles out in front and, with instructions not to get too heavily involved, savage fire on sure targets was needed to take the enemy's breath away when the moment came to disengage.

The morning was well advanced before things started to happen. About nine o'clock large lorries came forward from **Yidha** and the mortars were set up in the open. E Troop engaged them. Shortly after this the Div Cav positions at the near end of the bridge came under fire

from guns, mortars and machine guns, but this caused little damage to the troops well dug in under the banks. To begin with it provoked nothing from them until, under its cover, the enemy infantry came down to launch assault boats above and below the bridge. Once the boats were well started, down came a repetition of the previous afternoon's point-blank fire. Nothing escaped it.

Three or four times the enemy attempted these crossings but none succeeded. The guns were by now well into the fight. They steadily engaged mortars and transport and even joined in against the assault boats, landing shells without dropping a single one short, within 100 yards of the regiment. But all the while the pressure became greater. Infantry were working down along the river and armoured troop-carriers were coming forward, though with some superb shooting the guns destroyed two of these at over 9000 yards.

Under cover of the attack on the road bridge site another was threatening further downstream at the site of the railway bridge. This of course also threatened the line of retreat through [Aiyinion](#) and so the A Squadron reserve troop was sent forward there. On this front, as everywhere else, the enemy was jamming the radio links. He employed a voice which counted steadily up to ten in perfect English, sometimes ending with provocative or insulting remarks. The temptation itself to reply to these put great strain upon the operators! Potter managed, however, to get in touch with B Squadron and learned that Russell had been ordered to withdraw his squadron even though it had not yet been attacked.

A Squadron held on until Potter was sure that B Squadron was retiring. Heavy fire was now developing against his right flank, while the enemy on his left, at the road bridge, appeared to have had enough. The time had come to pull out. Just after midday the guns were ordered to withdraw and half an hour later the squadron began thinning out, one troop at a time, each coming under fire as it emerged from cover to scuttle back along the road. By four o'clock, with still no enemy across

the river, every troop was in position astride the road opposite the ruins of the railway bridge, and an hour later word at last came through from RHQ to be back at **Aiyinion** within an hour.

Though mud caused some bother getting the armoured cars out, B Squadron disengaged safely as the enemy seemed content to attack along the roads. During the night the squadron had heard plenty of movement towards **Veroia** and amongst the olive trees across the river. In the morning an enemy reconnaissance plane had been flying up and down the river at tree-top level, but the men were careful not to betray themselves by firing at it.

The retirement was made more or less cross-country to **Kolindros** and Lieutenant Capamagian's ¹² car troop, in preparation for this, had improved a cattle track as an alternative route to the road, as the track was completely covered from air observation. It was not needed, but when Capamagian was clear and looked back to see how the carrier troops were faring, he was surprised to see mortar fire landing right on the track, unoccupied as it was. There had been previous orders that, during action, no Greeks were to be considered friendly. In B Squadron at least these orders had been distasteful, as for some days the men had regularly received from a little boy, fresh milk still warm. But obviously all his village was not so genuinely friendly.

Once B Squadron was clear, Colonel Carruth, who had been forward to assess the pressure on A Squadron, withdrew his RHQ and made room for A to fit in just behind C Squadron, in reserve ahead of the anti-tank ditch. A small misinterpretation arose out of these orders for it was Major **Harford** ¹³ who had the responsibility of finally ordering the blowing of the route over the ditch, so Potter took his squadron right behind it. However, he had been hitting at the enemy pretty hard and they were not right on his tail, so C Squadron, in its turn, was able to withdraw and effect the demolitions without any trouble and without the need of cover from A. Oddly enough, a day or two later, exactly the reverse happened through another misunderstanding, though this time A Squadron did not manage to break clear quite so easily.

Having already had his nose thoroughly bloodied, the enemy did not come forward on the 14th with quite as much confidence. During the night there had been quite a lot of noise from tanks and transport mustering behind a low ridge, but this time no motor-cyclists heralded the attack in their nonchalant manner. Indeed, at dawn the first enemy to be seen was 'George'.

'George' had already been so constantly about the place that he had acquired this nickname, reminiscent of the inevitable Egyptian who turned up from nowhere away out in the desert at any halt on a route march, bearing a basket of tangerines on his head. This 'George' was a light Henschel reconnaissance aircraft which flew about the place, usually at tree-top level. Though not exactly welcome, he was not the kind of visitor that could be actively dissuaded, for he had a vindictive streak and a lot of Stuka relatives in the *Luftwaffe* and was also in uncomfortably close contact with them. So he flew about the place: ubiquitous, inquisitive, unwelcomed, vindictive and disliked.

C Squadron, straddling the main road at the anti-tank ditch, now held the forward line, with B Squadron on its left deployed well inland. A Squadron was in reserve, but its two armoured car troops were forward in place of Cole's and Atchison's if needed. Regimental Headquarters was behind C Squadron together with E Troop's guns, which were ready to bring down fire on the main road.

Major Harford sent his Intelligence Corporal forward at 6 a.m. to try to get some warning of the enemy approach. This NCO, Corporal Ryan, went rather too far and, though he was able to report plenty of enemy in *Kolindros*, he was fired on and very nearly cut off on the way back. Soon afterwards tanks came forward and opened machine-gun fire on the squadron to cover the advance of infantry and the setting up of mortars. As there was no river barrier here to cause the building up of a good target before opening fire, C Squadron had to engage as soon as the first enemy appeared. The Boys anti-tank rifles proved useless against the tanks and their .5 bullets appeared merely to splash off them, but Bren

and rifle fire accounted for a lot of infantry who seemed to be armed mostly with Tommy guns. The E Troop guns joined in with some vigour so the squadron was able to hold the position for about two hours. By then Lieutenant Van **Slyke**, ¹⁴ on the left flank, had reported German infantry working through the scrub between him and B Squadron, and at the same time armoured vehicles of some sort were getting round the end of the anti-tank ditch on the sea shore.

The Divisional Cavalry was too thin on the ground to do much more than delay such an advance, so to achieve this for even two hours was naturally quite satisfying.

B Squadron withdrew first, and the estimating of the time it would take to be clear of the road junction so that C Squadron could follow without pause had to be fairly accurate. The men themselves had to be steady under fire, for once B Squadron was clear, C Squadron needed to disengage suddenly and move quickly back to the next obstacle—this time a culvert which they blew.

It is hard to turn your back on an enemy at close range, for the moment you do so the skin prickles up and down your spine with anticipation. But once having run, it is harder still to turn and face him again.

By ten o'clock, when the enemy was reported to be approaching the blown culvert, word had come down from Divisional Headquarters for the regiment to fall back behind the main divisional positions. This order came down by wireless direct from the GSO I to the adjutant, Captain **Pigou**. ¹⁵

The 'G.1' at the time, Colonel Stewart, ¹⁶ has a stutter which has delighted many a trooper since long before the war. Its peculiarity is that it increases within each sentence until the important word arrives. Then the rest comes out in a rapid and fluent flow. The following exchange of extemporised radio security in a mixture of Maori and Arabic cannot get full justice from the written word:

'D-d-d-y' know th-th' meaning o-of h-h-Haeremai?' 'Don't get you.'
'D-d-d-y' know th-th' meaning of t-t-t- Tala hina?' ¹⁷ 'Yes.' **'W-w-w-w'**
bloody-well p-p-p-p- PUT-it-int'effect-immediately!'

That was not hard to do. Headquarters Squadron had been sent back already. B was on the move and went straight back to the foot of Olympus Pass. The guns were sent quickly back behind Katerini to cover the balance of the regiment as it leapfrogged back. But they were not needed and went straight back from there to revert to the command of their own regiment. B Squadron waited at the foot of the pass until the rest were through and then followed on. And by 4 p.m. the whole regiment was back under the wing of the Division.

Many a man glowed with satisfaction that night. For up to eighteen months now some of them had been worrying day after day whether they would be able to 'take it': whether they had the courage to stand up to a real enemy when the time came. It had come and they had not been found wanting— even in their own estimation. They were battle-worthy all right. They had proved themselves able to remain coldly calculating while a good target built up, and coldly calculating when they fell upon it. They had proved able to stand up against superior weight, on a forward slope, at close range; to fight; to retire suddenly; to turn and show fight again. They were a team. They had long trusted each other: now at last they trusted themselves too. So far they had not been seriously attacked from the air though they had seen many aircraft passing back over them. They had had their first casualties when a mortar was thought to have killed two men of C Squadron, but later these turned up in a prisoner-of-war camp. The vehicles threatened to give trouble, the carriers in particular. But their crews felt that, given half a chance, they would coax the work out of them somehow, even though three of them had come back over the pass under tow and one had been lost when its steering gear gave trouble at a critical moment.

The great difficulty became just how to find that half-a-chance. It was never found in Greece.

As the enemy had outflanked the Aliakmon line at its northern end, it had been decided that the New Zealanders and Australians would withdraw to **Thermopylae**. This would give the defenders a line to hold more in keeping with their numbers. Already the Armoured Brigade was being pushed back from **Grevena** towards **Dheskati** and the pressure round **Servia** was becoming too great. All routes of withdrawal converged on the town of **Elasson** so, at the Divisional Commander's conference on 14 April, Colonel Carruth was given orders to take Div Cav back there and prepare for another rearguard action through the pass at **Dheskati**. The regiment would work directly under General Blamey, who now commanded the newly-formed **Anzac Corps**.

The move began at five o'clock the next morning when B Squadron moved out, and by mid-afternoon the squadron, with No. 3 Section, 6 Field Company, and N Troop, 34 Battery, under command, was in a position between **Dheskati** and the village of Karperon. The sappers brought with them some 1 ½ tons of explosives and 200 mines, ample to prepare four road demolitions. These they immediately set out to do.

Regimental Headquarters with A Squadron took up a position near the village of Kephlovrysis and C Squadron, in reserve, was farther back near **Elasson**. Headquarters Squadron was sent back to **Tirnavos**, half-way to **Larisa**.

The country was not difficult to defend if sufficient troops were available, for it was steep and the roads were narrow; but to conduct a withdrawal was a different story. It began to rain within hours of B Squadron's arriving in position and the roads showed every promise of cutting up as soon as they were required to carry any bulk of traffic.

The regiment had long since lost its own radio communication with Cole and Atchison, indeed all contact with 1 Armoured Brigade. This was now under command of the Anzac Corps and was known to be withdrawing in the direction of **Dheskati**. So Lieutenant McQueen was sent forward with seven of the DRs to try to gain touch, but though he found by the next morning its camping site for the 15th, he was not so

lucky as Atchison at **Grevena** to tumble right on to it, for the roads in the meantime had become almost impassable. This added another to the regiment's worries, as completing the demolitions forward of **Dheskati** could have serious consequences if this cut off the line of retirement for the armour. Yet it would be hazardous for B Squadron to wait until actual contact with the enemy had been made before blowing the road.

The rain continued all night on the 15th and all next day, adding to the difficulties of 26 Battalion which had been near **Servia**, and which Div Cav met struggling to retire on foot through the steep country north of the road. At the same time Australian artillery units were coming back in dribs and drabs along the road, which was already cutting up. When 26 Battalion got back to the Div Cav positions its men were already heavy with fatigue and lack of sleep and there was no transport forward to pick them up. However, they did at least get a spell near RHQ while a signal was sent back for their transport. As well as this, all the regiment's B Echelon vehicles that could be mustered up were brought up to help carry them.

This small service initiated a warm understanding between the two units which lasted all through the war. Perhaps it was not coincidence that 26 Battalion, four years later, was chosen to train the Divisional Cavalry for a new task.

By the morning of 17 April **General Freyberg's** broad intention was to have Div Cav for a screen, with anti-tank support where necessary, covering the whole front of the Division as it retired. Rather than place squadrons under command of various brigades, however, he preferred them under their own RHQ. Thus he could retain direct control of them all, through Colonel Carruth, during their movements in what would be rapidly changing conditions, as well as keeping himself instantly informed of the changing circumstances over his whole front.

The **5th Brigade** was due to fall back from the north side of Mt Olympus and, far on the right flank, the enemy was breaking through in some strength in the **Pinios Gorge** and threatening to cut the withdrawal

route at Larisa.

The B Squadron carrier troops were left in the meantime with the whole responsibility for the **Dheskati** road. A Squadron, with P Troop, 34 Anti-Tank Battery (Lieutenant **Moodie** ¹⁸), under command, went to the road junction of **Elevtherokhorion**, north of **Elasson**, while C Squadron went back towards **Olympus** Pass after sending one carrier troop, together with O Troop (Lieutenant **Harding** ¹⁹) of the same battery, also under command, some six miles up the **Servia** road.

An effort was being made at the same time by a force under the Australian Brigadier Allen to plug the gap in the Pinios Gorge, where 21 Battalion was in serious trouble. B Squadron was to send an armoured car troop immediately and was then to withdraw from the **Dheskati** road and join **Allen Force**. Lieutenant Kerr's ²⁰ troop started for Pinios, but when one of his cars slipped off the road and was lost, Lieutenant Capamagian was sent with his cars.

So by the evening of the 17th the Divisional Cavalry was stretched out over 35 miles in one direction—48 miles by road—and, in the other, 17 miles—a further 34 miles by road. This was in rainy weather, in a general withdrawal—and there was never one without some confusion—over roads which were cutting up, in mountainous country, with radio equipment giving speech communication of only 15 miles under good conditions. The armoured cars were far too big and awkward for the type of country and the Bren carriers were due, and overdue, for replacement even before they went into battle. Command was thus tremendously difficult. Great responsibility fell on the squadron commanders while the efficiency of the whole regiment depended, to an extent they never dreamed of, upon the technical efficiency and the resourcefulness and steadiness of the troopers themselves.

This, of course, failed at times. Indeed, the very next day a serious situation arose because one man failed badly in his duty to deliver a message.

While the regiment had been well forward of the Division it had been spared air attacks, but now that it was back near the main defences it began to suffer its share. As soon as they were in position on the **Dheskati** road on 15 April, every squadron suffered heavy machine-gunning and dive-bombing attacks from the *Luftwaffe*. Movement had been very closely followed, and no doubt accurately reported, by 'George'. For his constant companionship he had been given only this quasi-affectionate nickname; otherwise he was left strictly alone. But even he had his moments of evil temptation and, for all the kindly tolerance shown to him, had little gratitude. For on the morning of the 18th he even forgot his manners so far as to start machine-gunning the regiment.

The Division retired steadily through **Elasson** all night on the 17th and at 7.30 the next morning C Squadron sighted enemy coming down from the **Olympus Pass**. He seemed to be



THE REARGUARD AT ELEVATIONOKHORION, MORNING 18 APRIL

intermingled with refugees with their flocks of sheep, and there was even a woman with a cart on which lay an old man, dying. To have to open fire on such a target was a horrible task but it had to be done. Very soon the squadron came under shellfire. Major Harford had just given the order to retire out of range when several tanks rounded the bend and opened rapid fire on the carriers. The guns of O Troop stopped the first

two in their tracks, but it was time to pull out. Harford's radio link was being well and truly jammed by the enemy and he sent back a DR to RHQ to say he was coming back. The messenger sped through RHQ, missing it completely, with the result that A Squadron, waiting to see C Squadron safely through before blowing the bridge, was caught unawares. Word had to go forward to bring in Lieutenant **Adams**,²¹ some two miles up the road and, the radio link proving impossible, Trooper **Sperry**²² was sent forward on a motor-cycle. He got the message through only just in time. In fact Adams had to abandon a carrier, which was hit by a shell too late to consider salvaging it.

Major Potter had already met Brigadier Puttick and learnt that **Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger**²³ was coming back down the road from the **Servia Pass** with the 4 Brigade rearguard, but he was not yet in sight. Firing broke out just along the road ahead of Lieutenant Robinson's prepared demolition, and presently tanks came rolling into view with one single New Zealand truck ahead of them. This truck was frantically beckoned on while the guns of P Troop opened fire and halted the tanks. But soon the squadron found itself under mortar fire, so Potter pulled it back, leaving Robinson to hold on as long as he possibly could. **Colonel Kippenberger** had not been accounted for, nor had Lieutenant **Macdonald**²⁴ of C Squadron who had also been left up the same road.

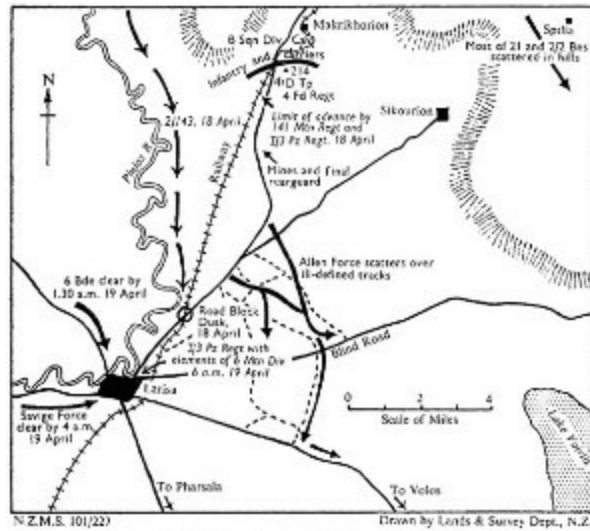
Robinson and the anti-tank guns hung on for over an hour, suffering vicious fire from the tanks. One of the armoured cars was hit on a wheel but remained mobile, and another suffered a mechanical breakdown at this awkward moment and had to be repaired under fire. Having caused this valuable delay Robinson gave the order to blow the bridge, by which time, had he but known it, **Kippenberger** had taken to the hills and got clear. Macdonald, on the other hand, did not have the long cross-country walk to **Elasson** that the 4 Brigade rearguard had to make. He, too, found the remains of battle where **Kippenberger** had been cut off but there was nobody in sight. So he drove until he could not get past the abandoned vehicles, 'bailed out' of his own, took to a nearby creek, and

in a few minutes had joined up with Robinson. Indeed, he was with him in time to join in some sniping against German infantry, who were by now trying to outflank the position along the hillside.

This effective little rearguard action managed to gain precious time. It can claim four tanks, two armoured cars and a lorry. Much of the credit goes to the anti-tank gunners, though they were not without loss in men killed and wounded and in knocked-out guns. But that is their story.

As B Squadron had not yet arrived back from **Dheskati the enemy had to be denied entry into **Elasson** at all costs. Slowly Potter withdrew A Squadron towards the town, until when within sight of it he came under the protection of the field guns behind. B Squadron had been ordered back when the enemy was reported at **Elevtherokhorion**, and since the various troops were placed at intervals along the **Dheskati** road, some of them took quite a while to retire. As a result, when RHQ passed through **Elasson** and found Major Russell there with his squadron headquarters, A Squadron was called back. Not until after this was it realised that Russell's squadron was not yet all accounted for and another hasty line of defence was organised north of the town. However, the last of B Squadron arrived by 10.30 a.m. after doing some further demolitions on the way. Regimental Headquarters, A and C Squadrons were able to retire through the 6 Infantry Brigade positions and move out as a guard on the left flank. B Squadron had other work to do.**

In the meantime RHQ and A Squadron had their troubles. The squadron had come back more or less in close order and, halting near **Elasson, was unable to disperse sufficiently. Together with RHQ this proved a tempting target, which was pounced upon by three Stukas which peeled off from a passing formation. Regimental Headquarters got the full force of the attack and suffered several casualties, including Trooper **Reeve** ²⁵ who was killed. In return for this unkindness the Stukas were met with a solid barrage of small arms, which shot one of them out of the sky and no doubt gave the pilots of the others some earnest thought when they came to survey the damage after landing.**



ALLEN FORCE WITHDRAWS FROM THE PINIOS GORGE, 18 APRIL.

ALLEN FORCE WITHDRAWS FROM THE PINIOS GORGE, 18 APRIL

As has been related, both the armoured car troops of B Squadron had gone to join Brigadier Allen in the Pinios Gorge, and now the balance of the squadron was sent to help in the delaying action at **Tempe**. It arrived at **Allen Force** headquarters just after midday, and by three o'clock was astride the railway near Makrikhorion. The infantry by now had been withdrawn and the squadron, with D Troop of 26 Battery, 4 Field Regiment, immediately behind it, was detailed to fight the rearguard. The enemy tanks kept up full pressure, coming through the trees, and though the squadron was being steadily forced back, it did this so reluctantly that it actually became intermingled with the enemy.

The 26th Battery commander, Major **Stewart**,²⁶ looking down from the hills at the time, commented afterwards that he could see Major Russell 'magnificently handling his squadron', and an Australian infantryman described the whole action as looking 'like a drawing by someone who had never been to a war, but the whole thing was unreal....'

The spirit of that afternoon had caught on for Stewart's remarks could just as easily have been applied to his own three troops, D, E and F, whose 25-pounders—and not without losses—steadily destroyed enemy tanks trying to overrun them as they leap-frogged back through

each other. Major Russell's instructions were to hold the enemy until 3 a.m., by which time **Allen Force** should be clear, but by dusk the Australian infantry towards which the squadron was retiring had pulled out and left it in the air. Nevertheless the whole retirement was made very slowly indeed. Trooper **Campbell**,²⁷ for example, fired his Boys anti-tank rifle at a tank but round after round just bounced off. In a furious rage he took out the lock and flung it from him as far as he could. This was not surprising even in a man of such placid temperament as Campbell, for though in the heat of close-range action much goes unnoticed, this particular weapon administers such an enormous kick that the blow along the firer's jawbone can cause mild concussion. To suffer that several times for nothing would be quite sufficient.

One carrier was retiring with its commander, Corporal **White**,²⁸ lying prone, firing his Bren gun over the back. The carrier was hit twice by shells from the tanks. One landed amongst the tins of water and petrol, almost in his face, while the other passed under him, through blankets, packs and everything, and finally bounced over into the front cockpit. But the carrier still kept going with the crew extinguishing a fire as they went. That carrier, long overdue for replacement like so many others in the regiment, stood up to a lot of punishment. The laconic remarks in White's diary for the next day read, amongst other things: 'Had good feed of beans and eggs. Had to hold in gears with my feet. Fine day'—and rather sadly for the next day, the 20th, now 50 miles farther back: 'Had to abandon carrier as fan belt's gone....'

After dark on the 18th, Russell himself got into trouble whilst disengaging. At the time friend and enemy were so intermingled that Russell's own DR had walked to within fifteen yards of an enemy tank in the dark, mistaking it for his car. Of all awkward occasions, it capsized while climbing up on to the road. Lieutenant **Wynyard**,²⁹ finding Russell was missing, made a wild dash back and rescued him. It could well be said, therefore, that the squadron disentangled, rather than disengaged, from the enemy. It began to pull back, but not before Lieutenant **Andrews**³⁰ had found time to lay some mines across the road. Shortly

afterwards, one of his troop heard a loud explosion, but it was impossible to find out if they had collected a tank or not.

By 11 p.m. the squadron had been forced back to a railway crossing a little short of **Larisa** only to be greeted by the news that the town itself seemed to be in enemy hands. Lieutenant Capamagian went forward and discovered that some Australian infantry, trying to pass through the town, had been turned back by machine-gun fire. It was established later that though the road here was blocked by the enemy, the town itself had not been occupied. It had suffered heavy dive-bombing, many buildings were on fire, and the place was littered with dead and the wrecks of ruined vehicles amongst the rubble. Had this been known at the time, no doubt Russell and his squadron, in the mood they were in, would simply have rushed the road block and opened it up again for everybody. But they were not to know this and they accepted the fact that there was no alternative but to try a cross-country run to get back on to the road at **Volos**.

Other troops had already gone this way and guides had been left to mark the turn-off. But these men had apparently not stayed long, so Russell simply had to turn east and hope that luck would hold while his squadron floundered along boggy farm tracks in the dark. The **Volos** road was reached by 4 a.m., but not without the loss of two cars capsized and three carriers abandoned. Two of these had broken down beyond quick repair and a third was hopelessly 'bellied' on a rock.

While B Squadron was embroiled with the Pinios action the rest of the regiment, together with the remaining eight 2- pounders of 34 Anti-Tank Battery, was still north-west of **Larisa** covering 6 Brigade's withdrawal. This brigade retired from **Elasson** by two routes, and Div Cav's task was to cover the left one and be ready to order the blowing of more demolitions, including the Pinios River bridge just north of the town, once everybody was clear. This was all done and the last of the regiment just clear of **Larisa** by 3 a.m. on the 19th. B Squadron was expected back by 3.30 a.m., about the time it was approaching the **Volos** road much farther south. Lieutenant- Colonel Carruth decided to wait

where he was while B Squadron was repeatedly and unsuccessfully called on the wireless. This had gone on for two hours when distant sounds of movement were heard coming from the **Trikkala** road. Guessing by the number of flares being fired that the noise was coming from an enemy force, Carruth decided to wait no longer and gave the orders to move off.

They had gone only about ten miles towards **Volos** when they met Brigadier Allen with Major Russell and his squadron, together with some artillery personnel, patiently waiting. So the drive back to **Volos** continued with the whole regiment being used as divisional rearguard. Though the weather was fine the *Luftwaffe* left them alone. It was concentrating on the inland road, the direct route from **Larisa** to **Lamia**. During the afternoon 24 Battalion was overtaken marching out on foot and Div Cav elected to halt while it wirelessed Divisional Headquarters for the battalion's transport to come back for its tired men. Once this had been organised it moved off again, rolling steadily on right through the night.

All this driving was taking steady toll of the vehicles. The ponderous and awkward armoured cars were very easily capsized and this misfortune befell Colonel Carruth's car during the night of the 19th. The carriers were also steadily cracking up, needing great efforts from the crews to keep them going at all. Physically, too, the men were beginning to show the strain. The majority of them had had little or no sleep for four days and this, try as they might, was making them unreliable. In the case of many vehicles it took teamwork to keep them running efficiently; and the men themselves, with normal body reflexes slowing down from fatigue, or with just momentary lapses into unconsciousness, were discovering that even driving was becoming somewhat hazardous.

Rearguard positions had been taken up by the regiment while waiting for transport to return for 24 Battalion but no action resulted. Nor was this necessary at **Almiros**, where a similar halt was made before finally retiring through **Lamia**. The Division was by now assembling at **Thermopylae** and making preparations for a prolonged defence there.

It was intended to hold the **Thermopylae** line with the whole **Anzac Corps** and, to that end, 1 Armoured Brigade had been retiring direct from **Larisa**. Brigadier Lee, in command of the Corps' medium artillery, was now responsible for covering this retirement, but was not certain of the position of Brigadier Allen's force coming back from the **Pinios Gorge**. He decided to prepare some demolitions just north of **Lamia** and establish a delaying force there. Here we again pick up the story of the two C Squadron armoured car troops which had by now been placed under the command of an Australian, Major H. G. Guinn.

They were now reduced to four cars and, merged into a single troop under Atchison, took up their places in this rearguard with accompanying tanks, two companies of Australian infantry, an Australian MG company, and six New Zealand anti-tank guns.

About midday on 20 April the usual German motor-cycle and side-car vanguard which arrived was thoroughly mauled. After a pause of an hour or so, enemy tanks came forward and were engaged by our cruiser tanks, with losses on both sides. By late afternoon the whole position was under fire from mortars and light artillery and it was time to blow the demolitions and get clear, under cover of the machine guns. By the time this was completed yet another of the armoured cars had been lost to enemy shellfire before the whole force retired through **Lamia** to **Thermopylae**.

The defence of the **Thermopylae** line was designed to be essentially a gunners' battle. Though few at this time knew it, already British troops, because the Greek Army's front on the Adriatic was crumbling and the whole effort in **Greece** had by now become hopeless, were preparing to leave the country. So **Thermopylae** became a battle to gain time to organise, however hastily, an evacuation.

In the Divisional Cavalry the men themselves were never actually told this. Rather did the truth gradually dawn on them. In the meantime it was just one more battle to be fought. Even after a week of difficult retirements morale was high, and the general feeling was that this was

merely some sparring for the most advantageous ground upon which the Division could really 'step its frame out'.

The regiment at long last was no longer needed as a screen and the chance was offering to do much-needed maintenance. It was sent back behind **Molos** with no active part to play in the battle in the meantime.

Right from the very first retirement through **Katerini**, HQ Squadron had been sent back, step by step, always just one bound ahead of the fighting squadrons. It now joined them for this period, and from now on its story merges with those of the other squadrons.

The period of rest, such as it was to have been, did not last more than twenty-four hours. The large island of Euboea, opposite the east coast, presented a potential threat to the right flank, since there was a strong possibility that the enemy could land there by boats taken from **Volos**. Greek sources had indeed reported that this was already happening. On 21 April the Corps Commander ordered that Div Cav should patrol the island. But the order could not be complied with that day as there was not a single vehicle which could move off at short notice without workshop attention, such had been the demands made on them.

The deterioration in Greek resistance farther west was bringing the distinct danger that the enemy would break through to **Corinth** and into the **Peloponnese**, denying the use of evacuation beaches there. The defence of **Thermopylae** therefore could not be a prolonged one, nor Div Cav's rest anything but short. Once the Division began to retire to the evacuation beaches either at **Marathon** or in the **Peloponnese**, the regiment would be back at work as a protective screen.

Though by 22 April **General Freyberg** had been informed that the British forces would be leaving **Greece** and told not to send any substantial forces to Euboea, anxiety about the island remained. Finally it was the Armoured Brigade which sent a patrol there across the great swing bridge at **Khalkis**, using Atchison's armoured cars and some Bren

carriers. Atchison continued to patrol during 23 April and managed to find a large party of some eighty Australians and New Zealanders who had worked their way south after the Pinios fighting and got on to the island. A little later some Germans were indeed encountered, but the patrol was able to return to **Khalkis** with the definite news that no real threat need be expected from the east.

An operation order of the previous day had detailed the plans for withdrawing from **Thermopylae**. The **5th Brigade** was to withdraw to the **Marathon** beaches while 4 Brigade, already in reserve, was to form a defensive position covering **Kriekouki** between **Thebes** and **Athens** whilst 6 Brigade disengaged and withdrew through it, and was then to embark. To screen the brigades through **Kriekouki** and—though plans were changed later—to screen 4 Brigade from there to the evacuation beaches, a force was formed under the command of the CRE, Lieutenant- Colonel **Clifton**.³¹ This consisted of the Divisional Cavalry less A Squadron, the carriers of 22 and 28 Battalions, 34 Anti-Tank Battery less N Troop, and a battery of the RHA. A Squadron and N Troop had a similar job to do for 1 Armoured Brigade, now at **Khalkis**, as it withdrew to the beaches at **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti**, east of **Athens**.

Increased German pressure against the **Thermopylae** defences coincided with the preliminary thinning out of the New Zealanders during 23 April, and came to climax on the 24th when an attempt to force the position with tanks was heavily repulsed by the guns. At the same time the *Luftwaffe*, by now with the air entirely to itself, hammered increasingly. The Divisional Cavalry, which had been delayed in starting for **Levadhia**, where it would be in a suitable position to cover the withdrawal, until the early morning of the 24th, had therefore to travel by daylight and suffer all the consequences of so doing. Messerschmitts swept low along the roads, strafing the traffic from almost ground level. Stukas kept at it all day with dive-bombing attacks, and even Dornier bombers, with their flaps down to decrease flying speed, were used to keep the attacks incessant. The regiment was not the only unit to find—in fact every unit found—that, considering

attacks of such intensity, the total damage for the day was most amazingly small. Colonel Carruth's armoured car was caught during the morning. He and his driver were both wounded and the OC 34 Battery, Major **Jenkins**,³² who was with them, was mortally wounded. The car had to be abandoned. Nor was that all the Colonel's bad luck for that day, for later on he lost another car when it was set on fire by machine-gunning.

A Squadron suffered just as much difficulty that day trying to get back to **Khalkis**. For some unknown reason it did not start until 8 a.m., some seven hours after the order to move had arrived. As soon as it came out of the cover of the trees at **Cape Knimis** it was pounced upon by the *Luftwaffe*. Major Potter struggled to keep his squadron moving but by the middle of the afternoon, having lost an armoured car and a carrier, he had to give up and wait under cover until the evening brought enough respite to allow him to reach his destination.

The next day, the 25th, 6 Brigade was due to move back and **Clifton Force**, whilst covering it, had the task of making the final demolitions at various points down the road. Once again there was a delay, the brigade not managing to get clear until 5 a.m., but as luck would have it, the *Luftwaffe* was not nearly so active as on the previous day and the convoys were able to roll back through **Thebes** and **Kriekouki** with less interruption, Div Cav having duly picked up in passing two C Squadron troops which had been guarding a vital crossroads since the night before. By mid-afternoon **Clifton Force**, the last of the Division, was back through the 4 Brigade positions and the Divisional Cavalry, still less A Squadron with 1 Armoured Brigade, was tucked away amongst the young pine trees south of **Kriekouki** beyond the little village of **Mazi**.

That evening orders were changed again. **Clifton Force** was relieved of its job of covering the withdrawal of 4 Brigade, which now had to hold on for another twenty-four hours. The beaches of **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti** could not hold as many troops for embarkation as originally planned, and 6 Brigade, which was to have embarked there, was now to go back through **Corinth** and embark from beaches in the **Peloponnese**. In its

place 1 Armoured Brigade was ordered to take up positions round Tatoi, some 20 miles north of **Athens**. It was later to embark at **Rafina** and **Porto Rafti** whilst 4 Brigade withdrew to another defensive position just south of **Corinth**.

The bridge over the **Corinth Canal** thus became a vital feature and C Squadron was ordered, together with 22 and 28 Battalions' carriers, to add to the force guarding it until both brigades were across it and the bridge blown.

The balance of the regiment, now including HQ Squadron, was to move across to the Armoured Brigade to help there, and to cover its withdrawal to the beaches.

The Divisional Cavalry had had all its share of hardships in the withdrawal from the Aliakmon: strain, hunger, lack of sleep, and more strain. But it was spared, thank Heaven, the greatest unhappiness of all. Unlike many other units, it did not have to suffer the distress of having to accept the expressions of friendship, and faith in a lost cause, by the people of **Athens**. It passed through the city during the night and thus was allowed to avoid in defeat the tearful, indeed the loving, farewell of a brave people. A few of the regiment had to go through this trial and that was enough. The following afternoon a patrol was sent back north of **Athens** under Lieutenant Wynyard as there had been a report of German motor-cycles within 15 miles of the city.

Regimental Headquarters, HQ and B Squadrons arrived at Tatoi at daybreak on the 26th and dispersed amongst the trees for the day. A Squadron retired steadily as cover for the Armoured Brigade as it came through Skhimatarion and Kalosalesi to Malakasa.

There was no fighting that day and by late afternoon the men were ordered to destroy equipment before embarking that night.

Little should be said of that destruction. It was a painful business. It is hard to take the parts of a weapon, for months cleaned and oiled to a

state of silky perfection, and just throw them over your shoulder out of sight for good. Fire would have been a kind and quick destroyer for the vehicles, but fires were as forbidden as mortal sin. It is hard and cruel, after long periods of straining every sense and sinew to keep a motor turning, ever turning, to drain out its oil and water and set it turning for the last time. Some of those motors took a long time to die, and a painful death too. As they overheated, the smell was cruel and heathen in the nostrils, and the laboured scream of overwrought metals was prolonged and agonising before they seized up with a thud. It was a painful form of human ingratitude.

A Squadron arrived during the afternoon, and by early evening the regiment, now with only sufficient vehicles to carry it there, left for the **Rafina** beach. By midnight it was embarking. A strong swell was running and only the lee side of the ship, the *Glengyle*, could be worked. As a result, by 3 a.m. when she had to leave, though there were over 4000 men on board, there were still some 700 men on the beach, 150 of them from the Divisional Cavalry.

Deprive a soldier of his weapons and you render him as powerless as Samson shorn of his locks, for not only is he physically powerless, but morally too, and will lose much of his hope and much of his resource. It was a disconsolate band that wandered back up behind the beach to hide up for the 27th. There was little cover: a few stunted trees, bushes of laurel and myrtle, and on the ground great patches of the little rock-daphne. What help was that to these men, fought to exhaustion, now weaponless and powerless? There seemed nothing left to do but sleep and wait the inevitable.

However, the sleep itself was a help and by the time the afternoon was well advanced they were refreshed enough to set out, when orders came from Brigadier Charrington, to march to **Porto Rafti** where 4 Brigade, because of events at the **Corinth** bridge, was now to be embarked. But they were turned back because the enemy was between them and this beach and, still in reasonable order, they returned to **Rafina**.

Luck was with them. Hope returned as evening gave place to night and they patiently waited for something they did not expect. It came. HMS *Havock* arrived at **Rafina**, and by the small hours of next morning they were on her firm decks, sleeping the sleep of the exhausted as they headed at high speed for **Crete**.

About this time most of C Squadron was also on the water but not as guests of the Navy. Some men had left **Greece** in commandeered caiques. Others were still looking for such craft.

We last heard of C Squadron as it was setting out for **Corinth** to help in protecting 4 Brigade's withdrawal route. Major Harford's orders on the 25th were to report to the OC of ' **Isthmus Force**' (Major **Gordon** ³³ of 19 Battalion) at **Corinth** and, once 4 Brigade had passed through, to go to **Patrai**, prepared to resist any landing of enemy forces coming across from **Agrinion**, and thence proceed down the coast road for embarkation at **Kalamata**. The swift passage of events precluded the carrying out of much of these orders.

After a slow and difficult move from **Mazi** during which the squadron had a lot of engine trouble, probably through being given high-octane petrol intended for the **RAF**, it crossed the canal bridge about 3 a.m. on the 26th. Harford swung his column down a side road to wait for daylight and a chance to seek detailed orders. In turning off he lost touch with Lieutenant Macdonald, who had been at the back of the column with a truck to pick up the crews of any vehicles that simply refused to go any farther, and with the carrier platoons of 22 and 28 Battalions. Macdonald and his troop were gathered up later by Colonel Clifton and used to help with demolitions farther south.

The Divisional Cavalry learnt a lesson in **Greece** that it never forgot. Never again did it pull into a position at night and laager in such a way that it was not ready for instant action either in the dark or in the dawn. At **Corinth**, as the sky began to lighten, Harford ordered his squadron to disperse and camouflage. But this order was already too late.

The *Luftwaffe* took control, and an attack began at full pressure before the squadron was properly ready.

It was dispersing amongst some anti-aircraft guns which opened up against the first aircraft—high-level bombers. That marked the end of any further movement as these very guns had been chosen for complete annihilation. The moment they were located down came the Stukas in such numbers that they simply wiped the guns out of existence, though the ‘Tommy’ gunners fought back magnificently. Without pause the immediate area of the canal was subjected to a tremendous softening-up of bombing and strafing, and from the moment it started, every living soul was pinned to earth. The strafing Messerschmitts came down until they were almost touching the vines and oat tops as they flew round and round in increasing circles, neutralising the whole area.

All this could prelude only one thing. The parachute attack which followed was launched with such perfect timing and perfect drill that it was almost paralysing. There was a short while in which people could look up: and there they were, wave after wave of big slow Ju52s in arrowhead formation, fuselage doors open, and only about 300 feet up. Literally in seconds the air was filled with the fascinating but chilling sight of hundreds of parachutes in several colours, mainly white. When Harford gave the order to open fire, everything possible was turned on them, belt after belt, magazine after magazine.



CRETE

This is better described in Cpl Adams's ³⁴ words:

'... Tony Connelly's ³⁵ Vickers was the first to open up. He had twitched it up with wire to a log on a bank as we had no tripods. You could always tell Tony's gun. He could tune it to 50 rounds faster than anybody else. Garth ³⁶ saw him rake the fuselage of one Junkers from end to end.... Garth was firing the Bren out of the turret as hard as Tommy ³⁷ could hand him up magazines. That was the only time I ever saw Tommy without that comical twinkle in his eye, for he was as grim as a morgue. Like the rest of us he was hoping for the best but expecting the worst.... Then Bonny ³⁸ turned to me and said: "See if you can get Div." I had no callsign and no frequency. I searched and searched; for anybody; squadron frequencies, regimental frequency; any English voice; for no matter what I did now I could not make matters worse—only better. But the machine was dead—dead as mutton....'

It takes only a matter of seconds for a paratrooper to descend 300 feet. It was an impossible task for any squadron to wipe out a thousand men in this time. These well-drilled soldiers seemed literally to fall out of their harness as they touched the ground, take a quick look round for a red coloured parachute—the leader's—rally there, and each group was off to its appointed task in short, quick rushes.

No contact had yet been made with **Isthmus Force and Harford set out for **Corinth** to find its headquarters before the enemy had time to organise. But he found the way hopelessly blocked by a huge bomb-crater in the town, with other vehicles already jammed against it. Before he had extricated himself from this situation he had been straddled by a stick of bombs and had been fired at from the buildings.**

Nobody could have failed to recognise the tremendous clap of thunder when the canal bridge blew up, so he knew now that there was no question of 4 Brigade fighting its way through. He decided to take his squadron back clear of the area, to try to locate the carrier platoons,

and then to make some decision on what to do next. Communications were bad, owing to the low state of the wireless batteries, and he could only hope that those of his squadron whom he could not reach by this means would be keeping an eye on him when he set off for a rendezvous about a mile back. After waiting there for those who were able to disengage and follow him, he decided to follow the road he was on as his map promised that this should be a reasonable track south through the hills to the road south of **Corinth**. If he could reach this he could perhaps prevent further penetration southwards. But a mile or two farther on he was in trouble again. The road, such as it was, ended at a village, and nothing but a goat track continued. Either he turned back and tried to fight his way through to **Corinth**—and even then he had to find a way through the town—or he abandoned all the vehicles and set out on foot for **Navplion** some 30 miles away. He decided on the latter as a more hopeful choice.

An hour before midday all the vehicles had been smashed by running them into a deep ravine, all possible food and weapons collected and, with a guide from the village, the party had set off. Nor was this before time, for they were not out of sight of it when a strong enemy patrol arrived in captured vehicles, looking for them.

One man had failed to catch up and his tale bears telling. When Harford ordered dispersal at first light, Lieutenant Van Slyke had a position of very poor observation and, being on the right flank, no contact farther right. He had gone forward a short way to get a place of better view for his troop. He was caught out in the open when the attack started and was pinned with his face to the ground until it was all over. It was more than an hour before he got a chance to return and by then the squadron was gone. He could actually hear it making off in the distance and managed to follow the track-marks for quite a way, ducking into the crops when any planes came over. But he was spotted and three of them dived at him in quick succession. When they had passed on, he looked up into the barrels of a whole section of German Tommy guns. He was looted of anything of any value and held prisoner

for about three hours. By then there was quite a group of prisoners and the paratroopers had decided to shoot them. They had all been lined up and already one, a Greek, had been shot when a party of infantry crashed in and shot up the guard, releasing them. Later Van Slyke was picked up by a truck and taken to **Navplion**, where he was put on a destroyer that landed him in **Crete**.

It was a well defined route that the squadron took and it was given a fresh guide at each village it came to, and after long drinks of cold water and perhaps a little food, the crews set off again over the next of many barren ridges. Finally, just on dusk, at the limit of endurance after the pace set by this series of fresh guides, they arrived in sight of **Navplion**.

Embarkation was still going on and they took their place at the tail of a long column. They waited their turn until 3 a.m. on the 27th when, just as they were almost to the ship.... She was full.

They were advised to head towards **Argos** to a defended locality along the gulf, so they set off again. But the gruelling walk in the heat, the cold wait, the disappointment proved too much. They rested for a few hours and pushed on again, not arriving until mid-afternoon. Here they were divided into boatloads of twenty and waited in vain all that night. The next morning, the 28th, embarkation was decided for them, but in quite another form, for enemy troops had made contact with their lightly-held perimeter. They took all the caiques they could find and set out to row.

Many stories are told of boatloads of men who rowed or sailed to **Crete**. Every single one is an epic of courage. The greater part of C Squadron made such a trip, one way or another. Harford's boat actually was the first to arrive, having been rowed in continuous shifts day and night till 1 May by the dozen men on board. They had cause and reason to work hard. Harford was very ill with dysentery and his men never let up trying to get him into proper hands until they were taken aboard a scow, which they met at the island of Antikithira, by some Greeks who were themselves heading for **Crete**.

For the next two or three weeks men were arriving in small groups. Mostly they arrived in **Crete**, the next logical step from **Greece**; some finished up in **Egypt**, after being picked up at sea; one at least arrived there much later, after having come through **Turkey**. Not one of these was without his tale of the extremes of courage and unselfish help given by the Greek people. Many a man, in his gratitude and his admiration for these people, arrived with a deep resolution to go back after the war, and if he could trace her, marry the brave girl who had helped him.

¹ **Maj D. A. Cole, MC; Tikorangi; born NZ 2 Oct 1913; farmer; three times wounded.**

² **Maj A. C. Atchison; born NZ 30 Aug 1907; farmer; died Clevedon, 25 Jul 1955.**

³ **Cpl J. J. W. King, MM; born Oamaru, 6 May 1917; lorry driver; died of wounds 17 Apr 1941.**

⁴ **Capt W. C. Sutherland; Howick; born NZ 20 Mar 1909; bank officer.**

⁵ **Royal Engineers.**

⁶ **Tpr A. T. Risk; born NZ 16 Aug 1911; truck driver; killed in action 14 Apr 1941.**

⁷ **Maj T. H. Bevan, DSO, m.i.d.; Onehunga; born London, 27 May 1909; builder; Bty Comd 7 A-Tk Regt and 4 Fd Regt; wounded 17 Dec 1942.**

⁸ **Lt-Col D. B. Patterson, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 30 Nov 1910; assistant architect; 2 i/c 14 Lt AA Regt Apr-Nov 1944; CO 14 Lt AA Regt Jun-Jul 1944; comd Miles Wing, PW Reception Gp (UK), Jun-Sep 1945.**

⁹ **Capt St.G. W. Chapman, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Lower Hutt, 23 Apr 1915; engineering student; wounded 26 Apr 1941.**

¹⁰ **Capt F. L. Ward; Christchurch; born Blenheim, 21 Aug 1914; student; wounded and p.w. 18 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.**

¹¹ **2 Lt W. J. Ryan; Cambridge; born NZ 6 Jan 1913; grocery manager.**

¹² **Maj H. B. Capamagian; born NZ 1 Mar 1905; farmer; died 6 May 1960.**

¹³ **Lt-Col E. R. Harford, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Waitara; born Nelson, 8 Mar 1904; farm manager; 2 i/c Div Cav Jan-Apr 1942.**

¹⁴ **Maj A. Van Slyke; Waerenga-o-Kuri, Gisborne; born Wellington, 27 Aug 1899; dairy farmer; wounded May 1941.**

¹⁵ **Lt-Col W. R. Pigou, ED; Spring Creek, Marlborough; born Tua Marina, Marlborough, 18 Apr 1900; farmer; Adjnt, Div Cav, May 1940-Jun 1941; Chief Instructor, AFV School, Waiouru, Dec 1941-Dec 1942; CO Otago Mtd Rifles Dec 1942-Jun 1943.**

¹⁶ **Maj-Gen Sir Keith Stewart, KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); Kerikeri; born Timaru, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 NZEF 1917-19; GSO I 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; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949-Mar 1952.**

¹⁷ **Arabic: 'Come here!'**

¹⁸ **Lt-Col J. W. Moodie, DSO, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1907; warehouseman; Bty Comd 4 Fd Regt Nov 1942-Apr 1944; wounded 26 Nov 1941; comd 16 Fd Regt (K Force) Aug 1950-Apr**

1952.

¹⁹ **Maj A. F. Harding, MC; Wellington; born Wanganui, 27 Nov 1916; accountant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.**

²⁰ **Maj E. W. Kerr, ED; Cave; born NZ 24 May 1908; farmer.**

²¹ **Capt M. L. W. Adams; Orere, Auckland; born Blenheim, 27 May 1914; farmer; wounded 20 May 1941.**

²² **S-Sgt A. Sperry, MM and bar; Hamilton; born Auckland, 20 Aug 1918; shop assistant; wounded 30 Mar 1943.**

²³ **Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916-17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939-Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, Crete, May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942-Jun 1943, Nov 1943-Feb 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div, 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; comd 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group (UK) Oct 1944-Sep 1945; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946-57; died Wellington, 5 May 1957.**

²⁴ **Capt R. A. M. Macdonald; Orari; born NZ 29 Aug 1914; farmer.**

²⁵ **Tpr H. C. R. Reeve; born NZ 22 Jan 1912; labourer; killed in action 19 Apr 1941.**

²⁶ **Col G. J. O. Stewart, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 22 Nov 1908; importer; CO 4 Fd Regt Aug 1942-Mar 1943, Dec 1943-Mar 1945; CRA 2 NZ Div 22 Feb-16 Mar 1945; wounded 3 Mar 1943.**

²⁷ **Tpr L. T. Campbell; born Scotland, 23 Sep 1909; barman; wounded 4 Dec 1944; died Christchurch, 21 Aug 1961.**

28 Capt R. F. White; Hororata, Christchurch; born England, 21 Mar 1910; farmer.

29 Capt J. G. Wynyard; born NZ 17 Aug 1914; farmer; wounded 25 May 1941; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

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

31 Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and 2 bars, MC, m.i.d.; Porangahau; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); BM 5 Bde 1940; CRE NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer, 30 Corps, 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb-Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped, Germany, Mar 1945; Commander, Northern Military District, 1952–53.

32 Maj A. V. Jenkins; born NZ 30 May 1903; civil servant; died of wounds 26 Apr 1941.

33 Maj R. K. Gordon, ED; Wanganui; born Bulls, 19 Feb 1899; school-teacher; wounded and p.w. 26 Apr 1941.

34 Sgt A. C. Adams; Te Awamutu; born NZ 11 Jun 1915; radio-electrician.

35 Tpr A. Connelly, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 1 Nov 1911; motor driver; p.w. Apr 1941; escaped and returned to unit via Turkey.

36 Maj G. T. Seccombe, DCM, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born Whangarei, 27 Oct 1915; Regular soldier; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

37 Tpr T. N. Bradford; Christchurch; born NZ 13 Feb 1913; chainman.

³⁸ Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; **Adelaide**; born Ashburton, 3 Mar 1912; stock agent; CO **25 Bn** Sep 1942-Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943-Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3-27 Mar 1944; **5 Bde** Jan-May 1945; 6 Bde Jun-Oct 1945; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 6 – CRETE

CHAPTER 6

Crete

THE EVACUATION of Greece cut the regiment into several groups, and of the major ones of these, RHQ and most of HQ Squadron were taken to Egypt, while parts of all the three other squadrons, together with a few from HQ Squadron, went to Crete. Of these, the A and B Squadron men and most of those from HQ Squadron were landed at Suda Bay on 27 April, and those of C Squadron at Kastelli on the 29th. The regiment's strength on Crete was 194 all ranks, but a few were evacuated to Egypt before the fighting began.

For the best part of a month, in ones and twos, others continued to arrive until the very day before the attack on the island began. Every one of these men had a story of excitement to tell, stories of the resource of any New Zealander who is determined not to be locked up in a prisoner-of-war cage. They told too of the bravery of the Greek peasants who helped them as they rowed or sailed down the coasts, gave them food, hid them by day, and decoyed enemy searching craft away from them.

The Navy served the troops faithfully, tirelessly, and cheerfully during the Greece evacuation. Precious ships had crept in to the shore night after night, boldly taking shocking risks which, six weeks later, were gladly repeated at the Crete evacuation; and the tales of those it was impossible to embark, who nevertheless drew on their own resources of courage and still got away, must be sufficient proof to the Senior Service that its efforts were worth while.

By the end of May only forty-nine men were not accounted for. Forty-five of them were later confirmed as prisoners of war, two of them wounded; one was missing and one wounded and missing—both were later reclassified as killed in action. Two others, it was later established, had been killed: Trooper Grattan ¹ was killed when Sergeant Sutherland's truck was caught in an air raid in the Peloponnese and Corporal

Woodward ² was also posted killed about the same time. This brought the regiment's losses in **Greece** to seven killed.

Crete gave peace to the soldiers—for a week or so. It is a beautiful spot. Its people are simple and kindly. Sometimes they resented the soldiers a little when they felt that their presence would bring the war down upon them, but they were made of the right stuff: philosophic, a little fatalistic, and humane. But when a terrible war did descend upon them, it refined, if that were possible, the best that was in them.

The country rolls back from its narrow beaches in spurs covered with little groves of olives, or in terraces covered with vines. Here and there the **Cretans** grow small sweet oranges and patches of wheat and barley. Further inland the country rises, gradually becoming more rugged and open, to a range of hills capped with snow. Beyond that it falls, more suddenly, down to the sea on the southern coast.

The days were hot—it was pleasant in the shade—and the nights were cold. With no clothes to spare and only odd blankets, men huddled together for warmth at nights or took their sleep in the daytime.

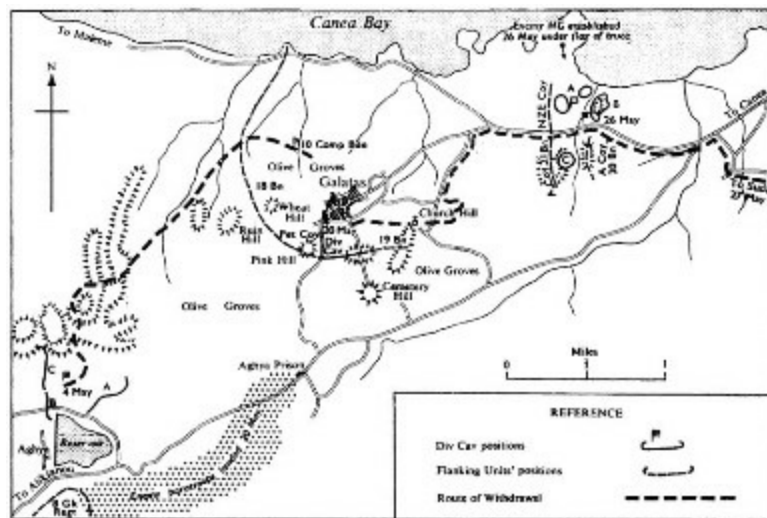
It was a period of reorganisation—and of surprises. Each day someone would turn up; someone who had been thought dead, and he with news of others still alive. Rest alone, at this stage, made the men fit. The Cretans sold them bread and eggs and sometimes gave them oranges. Each day a certain proportion of each unit was allowed down to the coast to bathe. Extra socks and underclothes were rare enough to be considered luxuries and the owner of a book was the subject of universal envy.

There was a feeling of unreality about those days. After the movement and excitement of **Greece**, the peacefulness was hard to understand, and the men found the time dragging and worried a little as they wondered whether they would be able to pick up the old threads when this wretched war was over. They had time to think of home, and they fretted lest their people would hear and believe any of the feckless

rumours that always float around. Between their games of 'Pontoon' or Five Hundred or Bridge—the last was always popular in Div Cav—they thought of the Germans who were coming but they felt quite happy about this. They knew themselves superior, man to man, and this time the Hun would bring no panzers.

At this time there was very little in the way of arms and equipment, but gradually supplies came to hand until every man had a rifle and each troop an LMG. There were also some grenades and bombs made of M & V tins. ³ A training

pro-



N.Z.M.S. 101/155 DIVISIONAL CAVALRY POSITIONS IN CRETE, 4-26 MAY 1941 Drawn by Lands & Survey Dept., N.Z.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY POSITIONS IN CRETE, 4-26 MAY 1941

gramme

was drawn up which consisted of rifle exercises, demonstrations, and pleasant route marches on which the men used to stop and sample the various wines and omelettes in the villages.

The defence of **Crete** was based on the assumption that it would be attacked from the air and sea simultaneously. Little or no air support could be expected by the defenders; but the Navy, vigilant and keen, could be expected to guard the sea approaches. The south coast of the island provides no suitable harbours and the inland hills are unsuitable

for air assault. The northern side of the island, however, is a different proposition. The beaches are suitable for landings and the ridges and gullies behind them afford plenty of cover. The only major road follows the coast; lateral roads are few and poor.

It was decided, then, to divide the defences into four sectors. At **Heraklion**, farthest east, was a mixed brigade of British, Greeks and Australians. At **Retimo** was **19 Australian Brigade** of four battalions and six Greek battalions. At **Suda Bay** was the equivalent of about eight battalions, British, Australian, New Zealand and Greek.

The balance of the island, from **Suda Bay** to **Maleme**, was the New Zealanders' sector. The **5th Brigade** defended **Maleme** airfield itself. The 4th Brigade was to be a mobile reserve until it was clear where the sea landing would come. The rest of the New Zealanders and two Greek regiments, the 6th and the 8th, were formed into a new brigade, the 10th, under the command of **Colonel Kippenberger**. This was disposed round the village of **Galatas**.

But not quite all of it; running south-west from **Canea** is a road to the village of **Alikianou**, six miles away. Half-way along this road are prison buildings and, a mile farther on, a reservoir and a power-house. This is where Div Cav settled down to wait.

'Russell Force', as it was now known, consisted by 19 May of 194 all ranks under the command of Major J. T. Russell. He organised his force into three squadrons of three troops each. These squadrons were commanded by Lieutenant H. A. Robinson, Captain F. W. **Horton**,⁴ and Major E. R. Harford. The Adjutant was Captain I. L. Bonifant and Lieutenant Reeves⁵ was Quartermaster.

Early in May Russell Force moved up to **Aghya** and settled round the north and west sides of the reservoir. On the opposite side, beyond the **Canea** road, were also 'amateur infantry', men of the New Zealand Divisional Petrol Company, but the ASC companies were withdrawn to positions round **Galatas** and replaced by **8 Greek Regiment**.

Suda Bay and Maleme had been regularly bombed by the *Luftwaffe* for a fortnight or more, and daily Russell Force went religiously through the stand-to periods. There had been several Intelligence reports of the probable date of the attack and everyone was beginning to become a little sceptical.

On 19 May the *Luftwaffe* was considerably more active than usual, not just attending to two or three places, but ranging further afield.

Then came the 20th of May.

The air activity of the previous fortnight was continued in the morning, heavier than ever. High up were patrolling fighters. Below this screen, steadily coming in over the sea, were medium bombers and also dive-bombers and fighter-bombers which pounced, wailing and screaming, to bomb or strafe anything that looked like a target. It seemed that the day had arrived.

It was time to stand down for breakfast when transport planes began to come in over *Maleme*. Some were towing gliders, which they released to sail overhead towards the prison with an eerie, swishing sound that nobody had heard before. Each big lumbering transport, flying at the height of only a few hundred feet, began to spew out of its belly twelve forms which plummeted a few feet before their parachutes opened above them.

For a short while it seemed quite unlike the beginning of the fierce attack that it proved to be. A hush had settled over the whole valley as the bombing ceased. It was like that moment, after the whistling of the wind, when there is a muffled silence that makes you look up to the window and see the first flakes of a snowstorm.

But these snowflakes did not curl down lazily. They were coming straight down with a purpose. Below each one was dangling a man, armed—a man trained to kill.

Mostly they fell out of range on the far side of the reservoir. Two

landed in the lake itself and took no further interest in the proceedings. The Greeks on the opposite side of the lake killed many, but except for some odd shots at long range, the Divisional Cavalry did little at first. John Russell himself did some good shooting on the crew of a quick-firing gun of about 40-millimetre calibre that landed near the road to the prison. Any parties of Germans that organised themselves and began to make towards the Div Cav positions were promptly discouraged, when they came near enough, by small-arms fire. It was later learned that many of them had been in several landings, all unopposed, and they were quite indignant to have been shot at.

A telephone line had been laid from **Aghya** to Brigade Headquarters but the first time it was required for a serious purpose it was discovered to be out of order. Major Russell sent Sergeant Hood ⁶ back as a runner, but he was wounded crossing some rising ground towards the prison. He returned with the news that this route was denied them, so Russell, appreciating the danger of being cut off and the fact that his force would be doing no good by staying, decided to carry out the Brigade Commander's previous instruction should these circumstances arise, and withdrew towards **Galatas** by making north over some steeply rising ground and then turning right to enter the town from the west.

The withdrawal began at two o'clock. Passing through the 4 Field Regiment positions, the Divisional Cavalry came under intermittent fire and took shelter for a while in a drain where there were some short bamboo stakes. A sliver from one of these ran into Major Russell's thigh as he stumbled, and made him lame for the rest of the campaign. He refused to allow himself to be taken to hospital, even when the wound began to fester and his leg to swell, but stayed with his men throughout the fighting.

There were two things reluctantly left at **Aghya**. One was a 15-cwt truck which had been issued only the day before and which had to be wrecked. The other was a sad and sentimental loss. Alan Sperry had to abandon his bagpipes. These had piped the regiment on its route marches from the first days in camp and it was sad that they should

have to be left to fall into the unappreciating hands of the Philistines.

Approaching **Galatas** from the west, Russell Force had to cross some rising ground with wire along the crest. This spot was covered by enemy fire and had to be crossed in little groups. Each group, as it dashed up to the wire, found itself delayed in a very uncomfortable position. This delay might have caused casualties but for the coolness of Keith **Stobie**,⁷ who had been one of the first to go up. He lay in some small cover by the fence and, as each group arrived, he stood up and parted the wires to let the men through quickly. Neither he nor any of the others was hit.

At this time **Galatas** was wide open to the Germans but their chief aim seemed to be to annihilate the Divisional Petrol Company positions west of the village lest, when they occupied it as they hoped, they would leave themselves with a flank there exposed to counter-attack.

The regiment entered the town unopposed. Most of the streets were deserted and, passing through them from the north to the south end, it was met by only a little intermittent fire from snipers. The Greek regiment to the south of the town between the left flank of the Petrol Company and 19 Battalion were very keen to fight, but they were armed only with captured Italian rifles with practically no ammunition. So **Colonel Kippenberger** sent Major Russell to stiffen up this part of the line with his men.

Russell extended his force into some sort of a line, and with surprisingly little bother they moved out to the south and began to probe towards 19 Battalion and the Petrol Company. It was a very uncomfortable position for the last hour before dark. The forward positions which they took up followed the general line of a stone wall supporting a terrace on the forward slope of the hill. A few scattered olive trees provided the only cover and the slope was under accurate enemy fire.

There were no prepared positions there and the men had to dig themselves in as best they could with tin hats, bayonets, jam-tins;

anything, even their fingernails.

By now there had been nine casualties: six wounded and three killed—Lieutenant **Studholme**,⁸ Sergeant Van **Asch**⁹ and Trooper **Wildash**.¹⁰

Blessed and welcome dusk allowed some respite.

The ground in the vicinity of the reservoir was by now occupied by a fairly numerous enemy, who therefore constituted quite a threat to the whole Division. Elements of these enemy troops had followed up the withdrawal to the **Galatas** area and appeared to be the vanguard of an attack designed to encircle the regiment. Two companies of 19 Battalion, together with three light tanks from **3 Hussars**, were sent forward but were recalled next morning before they came to grips with the enemy in the prison area.

After dark, patrols were sent out, one as a standing patrol on the front of **Pink Hill** to secure that flank, and the others to reconnoitre. They found many Germans killed by 19 Battalion and the Petrol Company and arrived back with various enemy supplies and equipment, including entrenching tools, automatic weapons and ammunition, from a cache at the bottom of the hill. All these were put to good use. The weapons, with others that were captured later, were kept in action more or less until the evacuation, and the entrenching tools were much sought after by the men, some of whom had been digging with their bare hands.

The Divisional Cavalry position was bounded by two roads, both of them running from **Galatas** to the **Canea- Alikianou** road. The one on the right joined it just short of the prison, and that on the left, east of **Cemetery Hill**. B Squadron was on the right, C Squadron in the centre, and A Squadron joined 19 Battalion at the eastern road. In reserve were the Greeks, a band of somewhat varying strength, now under command of Captain Michael Forrester of the Queen's Royal Regiment.

On the 21st the *Luftwaffe* arrived at first light and the regiment had to accept, with everybody else, its share of bombing and machine-

gunning. An A Squadron patrol opened the day with a grenade fight against a German patrol which it met at the top of a hill. The Germans got only second prize this time and withdrew.

On **Cemetery Hill** there were two enemy machine-gun posts threatening the A and C Squadron positions and part of the 19 Battalion area. Two platoons of the battalion attacked, supported by C Squadron and some light tanks of **3 Hussars**. This attack also produced some useful loot in the form of four MMGs with ammunition. The hill soon came under heavy mortar fire and 19 Battalion had to withdraw. Nor could the enemy make use of it as they could not get support for it on one flank and it provided little cover; so it just became a no-man's land. But at least Div Cav found that it could now strengthen the line by pushing forward some posts. The action cost one man killed, Trooper **Nicolson**, ¹¹ and four others wounded.

That night, as the men lay on the hillsides looking out to sea, they knew by the flashes and the glare that the seaborne enemy would never arrive. The Navy was cutting it to pieces.

The following morning, 22 May, started with a violent cannon and machine-gun attack on a nearby ridge by Me109s and 110s. It was a brilliant fireworks display, and very thrilling too, because one never knew whether the attack would switch suddenly and put the spectators to ground, taut with anticipation. But nothing of the sort happened and the attack died down. For the rest of the morning the regiment, and in particular A Squadron whom the aircraft could not get at owing to the contour of the hill, busied themselves by annoying parties of Germans around the prison with machine-gun fire. This was at rather long range but it at least retarded the enemy's activities.

During the afternoon the enemy aircraft came again in support of an attack on **Galatas**. This attack developed round the Petrol Company positions on **Pink Hill** and the flank of B Squadron. In one place the enemy broke through the Petrol Company's left flank, occupied the summit of **Pink Hill**, and threatened the regiment's right. A counter-

attack by a troop under Lieutenant Wynyard with a platoon of 19 Battalion and some fifty or sixty Greeks was organised.

The previous day Captain H. M. **Smith**¹² of 23 Battalion, who spoke some Greek, and Captain Forrester had made arrangements with Major Russell to keep the Greeks together if possible and hold them in reserve.

When the Germans occupied the summit of **Pink Hill** they set up their machine guns in a cluster of cottages dominating the ASC positions, on the slopes facing **Galatas**, and also those of the regiment, though to a lesser degree owing to the greater density of trees there. Nevertheless Russell realised that the situation was very dangerous to his B Squadron flank and took Sergeant-Major Seccombe round by the outskirts of the village to see how Div Cav could participate in the attack on the position. On the way they met the Greeks, their ranks now swelled by a collection of civilians from **Galatas**, including even the village policeman complete with shotgun, and women and children. This party they led round the slopes of **Pink Hill** to a little sunken road that skirted **Galatas** and which was, at one place, about 200 yards from the summit of the hill. Here Russell turned to Seccombe and said: 'We've got to try and clear the top of the hill. See what you can do.' He then went back to his headquarters.

Seccombe led the Greeks along the road to find the best point to launch the attack. They attracted some fire from the hill which unsettled the Greeks a little. They were hard enough to control at any time, since Seccombe's only means of indicating his intention to them was through a junior officer who spoke a little English, and whom they questioned fiercely all the time. The point that Seccombe chose for the attack was partly sheltered by the slope of the hill, and at the time the Germans were occupied in firing at the Petrol Company's positions to the right. This was most fortunate, for when Seccombe gave the order to charge and rushed up the hill a few paces, nobody followed. The Greeks were still too busy arguing the situation. Seccombe went back and tried again. He repeated this performance four or five times until the whole

situation was becoming quite farcical. Then all of a sudden, with eyes rolling and with bloodthirsty yells, they surged after him brandishing rifles, Tommy guns, carving knives, bayonets. Their impetus carried them up the hill and right amongst the houses on the summit. There was only a handful of Germans there, but very well armed. They did not see the attack coming, and not one survived.

Once wound up to go the Greeks could not be unwound. They got the smell of blood and wanted to slaughter every German in **Crete**; the last the infantry platoon and Alan Barton's ¹³ Div Cav troop, who were in support, saw of them, some were still going, headed for the prison nearly a mile away.

From down below, the rest of the regiment watched this performance. They realised its importance to their positions and in their excitement they stood up, wildly cheering it on like a football match, while three of them, Sergeant-Majors **Conway** ¹⁴ and **Chambers** ¹⁵ and Trooper **Dalton**, ¹⁶ climbed trees and brought deadly fire to bear on the retreating enemy.

The day's fighting cost the unit two more men killed, Corporal **McDowall** ¹⁷ and Corporal **Marshall**, ¹⁸ and eight more wounded; but twenty-five enemy were reported killed and a number of mortars and machine guns, with ammunition, were captured.

A feature of the fighting round **Galatas** seemed to be the 'morning counter-attack'. After breakfast there would be a drive to push the enemy machine-gun posts back towards the prison and generally to remind the Hun that they were still there. The Germans usually retired with but little persuasion, so the attacks did have a good effect on the morale of the men. From the very beginning everyone considered himself far superior to his enemies and was impatient for an attack that would clean out the whole valley, right to **Alikianou**.

Major Russell's personality was an inspiration to the men. He positively exuded confidence as he waddled about amongst them; he

always had walked with a roll, and now with his gashed leg stiffening, he had a decided limp. Men would do anything for him. Even when they were down to smoking tea- leaves rolled up in airmail paper, one trooper parted willingly with his last precious Craven A which the major spotted and demanded—he was a discriminating smoker—with the remark that if the trooper wanted the cigarette as much as he did, he would have smoked it long since.

Perhaps he had his men too confident. Sometimes they took some holding.

But high morale does not last for ever and by the morning of the 23rd the men were more restrained, having had several days of fairly hard fighting. After watching the enemy bombardment of **Canea** and seeing him receiving supplies all the time, and with the cumulative effects of the strafing by the *Luftwaffe*, they were now content to hold what they had; they suffered the aerial bombing and the mortar fire with more patience, but they continued to resent any intrusion.

On the 24th it was decided that two men should be placed in some dead ground ahead of the FDLs ¹⁹ to report on any forward movement. Troopers **Dean** ²⁰ and **Kean** ²¹ volunteered for this job. They crept down with binoculars and a rifle to where they could get a good view of the prison. Dean climbed into a tree and presently sent Kean back to report a mortar detachment 'setting up shop'. The Germans must have seen Dean for they began by bombing all around him. He stuck it out for as long as he could but had to make a run for it after they had landed a bomb in the far side of his tree. But later, undeterred, the same two men set out with the intention of keeping watch until after dark. This time they stayed on the ground. After a while some Germans appeared out of the bushes about thirty yards below them and set up a machine gun with which they began to fire up a gully towards **Galatas**. Since there was only one rifle between them, Dean decided to crawl back and borrow one of his troop's two Bren guns. The Germans became suspicious and turned their gun towards Kean. He hung on, but they were using explosive bullets and some of these burst in the branches above him, wounding

him in the back and shoulder. He crawled back, but not before the Germans had decided that the area was too unhealthy for them.

Like all the other New Zealanders the Div Cav men were natural looters and, in attack or patrol, every man had an eye for enemy equipment. A patrol would arrive back with a gun and ammunition and by next day someone had mastered it, had instructed others in its operation, and had turned it against its rightful owners. 'Watty' Weir²² and 'Snowy' Nicholas²³ earned fame for this. Nicholas sited his German gun a little behind the squadron lines where, for several days, he brought fire to bear round the German headquarters at the prison. Weir used his gun at great personal risk, and with such deadly effect during one attack which forced part of his squadron back, that he virtually halted the whole advance on his own, so allowing his mates to rally and organise a counter-attack which brought them back again into their original positions around him.

The 5th Brigade had been forced off the Maleme aerodrome by 22 May and from then on the troops had to watch, quite powerless to do anything about it, a stream of transport planes, seemingly endless and daily increasing in numbers, flying in low beyond Theodoroi Island to deliver more troops and material to Crete.

Bombing and ground strafing also became worse each day. Over came the Stukas, circled a while to pick signals from their own troops or to watch for their flares, then down they came, nose to tail as if playing a kind of perpendicular leapfrog, motors screaming hysterically, mad malice in the very upswept line of their wings. Their bellies disgorged bombs which wobbled a little in the air, then steadied, then howled as if in anguish as they curved down to earth to throw up great billows of ugly smoke from a final 'crump' that sent angry shards buzzing into the trees: and the revelled air punched the bodies on the ground, slapped their faces and plucked at their clothes.

As the intensity of the air attack increased and the German ground forces were reinforced, so the volume of their mortar and machine-gun

fire increased. For its part Russell Force managed to a certain extent to cope with this crescendo. Throughout the morning of the 25th they suffered the heaviest air blitz of the whole campaign. A general attack began to develop from about midday onwards. First the Divisional Cavalry and Petrol Company positions, to the south of **Galatas**, were warmly engaged and, as the afternoon drew on, repeated infantry thrusts were made, stronger and stronger, against Petrol Company round **Pink Hill** and against 18 Battalion on **Wheat Hill**, nearer the coast. B and C Squadrons brought down enfilade fire on this flank, halting these thrusts and allowing the line to hold fast.

Eventually the attack overwhelmed one company of the 18th, and the enemy concentrated against this breach. A first counter-attack failed, but a second one did manage to stop it a little farther back. The rattle of machine-gun and rifle fire developed into a steady roar, punctuated with the 'scream-and-bomp' of the rapid mortar fire.

Towards evening the pressure against Div Cav began to increase until the troopers realised that they no longer needed to feel awed by the volume of fire raining down on their right; they were getting almost as much themselves.

Galatas had become the key to **Crete**.

Then suddenly **Wheat Hill**, the key to **Galatas**, was lost; abandoned with little or no warning. This exposed the centre of 18 Battalion's line and every man in the regiment, even though fully occupied with his own front, could tell that the 18th, somewhere, were falling back eastwards through **Galatas**, fighting stubbornly as they gave ground.

By eight o'clock it appeared that the whole of the battalion was east of the village, because Div Cav, still heavily engaged on its own front, was beginning to suffer sniping from the village behind it. Be that as it may, the men of Petrol Company and Div Cav, left 'in the air' now with their right flank wide open, had been impressed with the stubbornness with which the 18th had fought back as they were forced to retire, and

they were fully determined to follow the example. Russell sent word back to **Colonel Kippenberger** reporting his position, but since the enemy had eased the pressure a little, he continued to hang on.

Then, towards dark, the firing all around began to intensify and the mortars to whistle down again. B and C Squadrons still kept up heavy fire to deny the enemy access to their front and the ASC's, whilst about half of A Squadron was withdrawn and formed into a reserve. The Germans had had one experience of attacking the Petrol Company area through the enfilade fire from Div Cav and, not surprisingly, this had been enough. They remained content to answer with a fair amount of fire, from a sensible distance.

At last came the counter-attack into **Galatas** which would extricate these two units. Behind them, within the village itself, could be heard the unmistakable sound of two Vickers guns. Of all the British weapons, the Vickers gun is the easiest to distinguish because of its absolutely perfect rhythm—the rhythm that is so steadying to fluttering nerves and so demoralising to an enemy. These guns were in two tanks of **3 Hussars: Mark VIs**, the very kind that Div Cav had wanted ever since it arrived in **Egypt**. Their firing stopped for a while and then, after a gap of twenty minutes or half an hour, started again accompanied by the uproar of a bayonet charge.

Now immortal for its ferocity, this attack by two companies of 23 Battalion and parties of 18 and 20 Battalions was designed to retake **Galatas** and re-form the line, or if that were impossible, at least to extricate the units still there. But though the village was regained, it was yielded again on divisional orders during the night, and the men reluctantly retired. A shorter line had been established to the east.

Major Russell and Captain **Rowe**,²⁴ in command of the Divisional Petrol Company, had been firmly resisting a vindictive enemy all the afternoon and, by the evening, they had no justification to hold on much longer. They therefore withdrew, the Divisional Cavalry taking the eastwards route on to **Church Hill** behind 19 Battalion. The withdrawal

was anything but easy as there were planes overhead waiting to pounce on anything that moved, and the men had to work up along a ridge exposed to machine-gun fire from the enemy north of **Galatas**. They suffered five casualties, including Lieutenant J. G. Wynyard, who had his lower jaw shattered by a bullet.

By the time it was fully dark all three squadrons were on **Church Hill** and for some hours they dug positions there.

At one o'clock in the morning of the 26th they were ordered to join what was left of 21 Battalion, under command of Lieutenant-Colonel **Allen**,²⁵ on the main coast road, about half-way between **Canea** and **Galatas**. Colonel Allen formed a position in two lines which straddled the road. The battalion, now reduced more or less to one company strength, was south of the road and nearest **Galatas** with C Squadron in support. On the other side of the road was a company of New Zealand Engineers supported by A Squadron. A few hundred yards behind C Squadron was a company of 20 Battalion, and across the road, between there and the beach, was B Squadron.

These positions were on a feature which became nicknamed 'Hellfire Hill'—and rightly so. The Divisional Cavalry arrived there after a night's digging, followed by a long tiresome march in the dark with no food and very little water. Like everybody else they were now far from fighting fit. All through that day they were bombed from the air and mortared from the ground, and machine-gunned from both.

The Germans had, under a flag of truce as it seemed, set up a machine-gun post on the right flank. This caused many casualties among the men as they tried to take shelter under the grape vines. In the area was a CCS in a building, and during the morning an emissary was sent up from there to tell Div Cav that if they did not remove their right forward machine-gun post, the enemy, in their efforts to knock it out, would endanger this hospital.

So the post had to go, leaving the engineer company, already very

tired, in an exposed position and unable to retaliate, to suffer punishment and casualties by heavy mortaring from the direction of **Galatas**. The Divisional Cavalry lost two killed, Sergeant **Edwards**²⁶ and Corporal G. W. **Smith**,²⁷ and several wounded, during the day. For this punishment all they could claim by way of retaliation was a motor-cycle combination knocked out by an anti-tank rifle and several snipers liquidated. They had, however, with the use of their machine guns, prevented the enemy from getting round the right flank during the middle of the morning.

It was a terrible day, the 26th, and one can imagine the depth of feeling which prompted Alex Atchison to write in his diary:

‘We could see the Huns bringing up mortars but could do very little about it. Late in the afternoon he began plastering us so that we were pleased when darkness came. A long—long day. Hell from the air.’

Darkness that night eased the strain on only a few of the senses. After midnight, together with 21 Battalion, the troopers marched back six or seven miles to arrive near **Suda Bay** at four in the morning. They passed through an area where parachutists had been dropped on the first day of the attack, only a week—but a week of ages—ago. These parachutists had been completely wiped out, and for some hundreds of yards the men marched through the stink of rotting flesh. Overhead the *Luftwaffe* still hovered like vultures. Unlike vultures they were not content to wait for death but did all they could to hurry it along. As if resolved to force their prey to collapse and die of mental exhaustion, the planes continuously dropped parachute flares which lit the place like day. Nerves now taut with the week's punishment seemed to knot up inside, until they could almost be felt physically, like twisted rubber bands; and nothing did those torturing aircraft do but drop their fiendish flares to hang in the sky while they flew back for more.

‘All that day we had longed for darkness—and all that night we prayed for daylight to release us from this ruthless persecution.’

The **21st Battalion** took up a position at 42nd Street. This was a track near **Suda Bay**. It took its name from the 42nd Field Company, RE, which had been working on supply routes and dumps in this neighbourhood for some months. The Divisional Cavalry was again the reserve for the battalion here. Until daylight some men dug themselves in. Others, physically more tired—or stronger in the nerves—preferred to take their chance by day and stole some sleep.

Daylight on the 27th brought little attention from the enemy, but by eight o'clock he began to press forward again. Ammunition was running short and, what was worse, men were thirsty and hungry. The day was hot, but despite their parched throats the men still worked to improve their trenches. Here they did at least have shovels. At **Suda Bay** there were more shovels than they had ever dreamt of and they used them willingly, remembering a long week ago when they had bruised their fingers and barked their knuckles and broken their nails wrenching up rocks at **Galatas** to make shelter.

The line now ran almost due south from the most western point of **Suda Bay**. Touching the sea and in front of **Suda** village itself were **19 Australian Infantry Brigade**, and on its left was 5 New Zealand Brigade.

In the middle of the morning the enemy infantry began to make contact with this line and, by 10.30 a.m., had arrived in strength. The 19th, 28 (Maori), and 23 Battalions, together with 2/7 Australian Battalion, counter-attacked with the bayonet and pushed the enemy back a full three-quarters of a mile along the whole front. Some men of Div Cav followed the Maoris in. Many of them had no bayonets but, considering whom they were supporting, this was a negligible worry. The Maoris were only too thorough in their work. The Divisional Cavalry had no need for bayonets; many German dead were left on the field from the fire of their rifles and machine guns.

On the night of the 26th two battalions of Commandos had been landed at **Suda Bay**, too late to help defend **Crete**, but not too late to help cover the withdrawal of the forces already there. By the afternoon

of the 27th the Australian and New Zealand line, running south from the coast, consisted of 19 Australian Brigade, 21 Battalion with Div Cav in reserve, 19 Battalion and 22 Battalion. Now there was a danger that the Germans would make a drive in an easterly direction, south of 22 Battalion, and cut off the only line of retreat to the south coast—the road across the hills to **Sfakia**.

A general move towards **Stilos**, on the road to **Sfakia**, was ordered after dark on the 27th. The Divisional Cavalry was amongst the first to be drawn back. At nine o'clock the men began to move towards **Stilos**, arriving there at 4 a.m. They formed the extreme right of a defensive line, with 23 Battalion on their left and 19 Battalion to the left again. Here they managed to catch some sleep until daylight. Nothing much happened on the ground in the morning until the enemy opened fire on 19 Battalion about eight o'clock. Before this there was a certain amount of activity in the air, but by this time everybody had become inured to air attack. Men had become filled with a sluggish disregard for aircraft—a sort of desperation of weariness—and considered only the enemy on the ground. Against him at least they had a chance to retaliate.

About 10 a.m., A and C Squadrons made contact with enemy patrols moving across their front and prepared to make a counter-attack. They were moving out over some flat country with plenty of cover in swampy ground that wet some of them up to their bellies, when orders were received to withdraw through **Vrises** towards **Sfakia**. Each squadron left its LMGs to cover its withdrawal. When they had done this the LMG crews covered each other's retirement: some guns fired over the whole front as the others moved back and took up new positions, whence they in turn could give covering fire. The last two gun-crews were nearly cut off, but they escaped by wading down a canal and were rescued by two tanks which happened along at the critical moment, and upon which they clambered after a desperate sprint.

During this action there were three casualties to mortar fire, of whom Trooper **Weight** ²⁸ was killed and Trooper **Graham**, ²⁹ wounded, died later as a prisoner of war. A timely diversion probably prevented a

greater number of casualties. A large column of Italian prisoners of war, who had been held in **Crete**, had been let loose and they went straggling down the road towards the German lines, inadvertently blocking, at the critical moment, the enemy's line of fire.

So the last, and worst, march began. There was a long and gruelling climb ahead of the retreating troops. Overhead the *Luftwaffe* was not active—fortunately so—for had there been any strafing, many would have been killed. The men were too tired to care: too tired to be frightened: too tired to take cover. They marched until 2.30 p.m., when they reached a small village at the foot of the pass where they halted and lay dispersed under cover. About an hour before dark they began to climb the pass, slowly and painfully. The columns in front were constantly halting. When this happened, try as they might to prevent it, some would fall asleep, officers and men, and it was difficult to keep the troops together and moving.

Lieutenant Atchison writes of this march:

‘At 6 p.m. we started the up grade over the mountain towards **Sphakia**. A great number of the boys had sore feet, and just wanted to sleep, not caring what happened. I felt proud of my troop.

‘Sometimes ahead of me I noticed some of them carrying two rifles and supporting some poor devil who had all but thrown in the towel.

‘At times we in the rear were not too gentle with poor chaps who had given up hope and just wanted to sleep till the enemy caught up with them.

‘It was a gruelling night, but very peaceful as far as noise was concerned—no shots, no aircraft.’

About the middle of the night they reached the top of the pass and laid up in some deserted houses where they stayed most of the next day, the 29th. Again, men just slept where they fell. They pooled their rations and had one meagre meal: about two biscuits and a sip of water to each

man. Here Major Harford took over command. Major Russell, not before he had been assured that his men would be evacuated the following night, allowed himself to be taken off. Together with some walking wounded, he had succeeded in reaching the top of the hill only by pure grit. They had managed to hitch-hike a little as there were a few vehicles of sorts going up; but guts—the will to win—had got them there.

When men are hard-pressed there are always some characters which rise above all difficulties to bear the others up with them. Of such was John Russell.

Another, though less conspicuous figure, was Lieutenant J. W. Reeves, 'Hellfire Jack' or 'Jeeves', the quartermaster for the campaign. He was a born 'scrounger'. On the first wild evening at Galatas he found some old benzine tins and the ingredients for a soupy stew, which he dispensed to everybody when darkness had spread its comforting mantle and the reaction was just setting in after the fury of the day's fighting. All that week he spun out the meagre rations so that the cook could put them to their best use. Then, on the final punishing, thirsty march over the hills, he rose to his best occasion. He walked miles on raw and blistered feet looking for water—and found it. It was in an old well and somewhat foul, and all he could find to put it in were some filthy tins; but to the men, as they filed past him and drank and filled their bottles, it was Elysian nectar. Jack Reeves had found the something that spurred their failing strength enough to finish the journey.

A fairy godmother usually does act inconspicuously. There was another like Jack Reeves who was now more or less voluntarily in enemy hands. He was Jim Cameron,³⁰ medical corporal from C Squadron. At Galatas, Jim took over a little brick hut which was used for drying olives. It was very close to the road that ran past Pink Hill to the prison. In this building, which was exposed to all the bombing and machine-gunning and which attracted as much or more than its share, he tended the wounded. After the charge on Pink Hill the hut was full and overfull of wounded and dying. The doctor was elsewhere, so Jim acted as doctor,

nurse and orderly to friend and enemy alike. He stayed with them when **Galatas** was overrun, and later, after the evacuation, was taken to **Kalivia**. Here again he continued to tend the wounded until he was taken away to the mainland of **Greece**.

In doing all this he gave everything that was his best. He had a heart great in proportion to his stature and it was set in the right place. To stay with the wounded must have broken his heart, so that one part went with his friends who escaped the island while the other remained to maintain life until the end of the war, through the years of anguished longing for freedom.

The Divisional Cavalry rested throughout most of the 30th on top of the range, the men taking what shelter they could from the hot sun and gazing towards the cool sea. Each one could have drunk a gallon without drawing breath. A check revealed the regiment's strength at this stage to be 14 officers and 105 other ranks. Apart from the ten killed in action, one more, Trooper **Seaton**,³¹ died of wounds while a prisoner of war. Seven more were to be lost as prisoners of war and with them another nine wounded. One man reported missing later escaped the island and came back to **Egypt**. There had been 4 officers and 36 other ranks wounded and some of them were still with the unit.

While they were resting, Divisional Cavalry was given orders that it was to act as rearguard to **19 Australian Brigade**, but later the orders were countermanded and the men slept in the same positions till five o'clock the next morning. Then they began to move down towards the coast, hundreds of feet below, near to Force Headquarters.

A few vehicles had come over the mountains with the first troops. These had been bombed and set on fire and the charred remains of bodies were scattered about and in the twisted metal. The sight of these and the horrible smell of decay made everyone wonder at the inactivity of the **Luftwaffe**. The retiring troops perhaps were not the only tired men on the island.

Down near Force Headquarters there were wells, and as the men settled amongst the pine trees on the rocky hillside, all who could were ordered to shave.

There was water to drink. And food: from where, Heaven only knows, but Jack Reeves had gleaned some—about three teaspoonfuls of M & V per man or a 12-ounce tin of bully beef to seven men. Some found a few broad beans in a garden and ate them raw.

The last day on [Crete](#) can best be described directly from Alex Atchison's diary:

‘... from a nearby well we drank our fill and filled water- bottles. The water cheered everyone considerably. We rested all morning.

‘In the afternoon 20 O/R's and an Officer from each squadron were asked to go back up the mountain to reinforce the position there.

‘When my troop volunteered to a man I could do nothing else but volunteer too. We built up the 20 O/R's from other troops and started up the mountain....’

Just imagine their tired legs starting to tremble with the strain on the way up and forcing them to rest!

‘... Robbie ³² took the A Squadron boys. The hours up there seemed like days particularly when we thought we would be staying there. Excepting for m.g. fire going over our heads occasionally there wasn't much doing.

‘After dark we were withdrawn and moved back to our units. I felt happy. Later in the night we marched over the rocky country to [Sphakia](#). We had a small meal yesterday and nothing but water and two biscuits today. My boots are through to my feet.

‘Shortly after midnight we boarded barges and were taken out to the H.M.S. [Abdiel](#), a modern mine-layer in commission only a few months.

‘Only organised parties could be taken off. We passed through a unit with fixed bayonets to keep the odds and sods off. It seemed hard on them.

‘The ship's crew gave us biscuits and hot cocoa. It seemed the best meal we had ever had. Afterwards the Officers brought us whiskey and offered us their beds. Everyone was so tired that I am sure those who slept on the floor were just as happy as the ones with beds.

‘At 4.30 a.m. the ship moved off and so ended **Crete for us: but what of the poor devils still there?’**

¹ Tpr P. S. Grattan; born NZ, 10 Dec 1910; taxi driver; killed in action 23 Apr 1941.

² Cpl F. V. Woodward; born **Whakatane, 11 Apr 1918; clerk; killed in action 24 Apr 1941.**

³ Meat and vegetable stew.

⁴ Maj F. W. Horton, ED; **Blenheim; born **Blenheim**, 18 Oct 1903; barrister and solicitor.**

⁵ Lt J. W. Reeves, MC; born NZ 15 Aug 1907; farmer; killed in action 16 Dec 1942.

⁶ 2 Lt W. A. Hood; **Blenheim; born NZ 28 Oct 1916; accountancy clerk; twice wounded.**

⁷ L-Cpl K. McD. Stobie; **New Plymouth; born **Feilding**, 21 Nov 1908; joiner.**

⁸ Lt M. P. Studholme; born NZ 2 May 1903; farmer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁹ Sgt J. F. Van Asch; born Te Puke, 14 Mar 1917; shepherd; killed in action 20 May 1941.

¹⁰ Tpr R. F. Wildash; born NZ 6 Sep 1911; garage attendant; killed in action 20 May 1941.

¹¹ Tpr W. B. Nicolson; born NZ 15 Jun 1917; motor mechanic; killed in action 21 May 1941.

¹² Capt H. M. Smith, ED, MC (Gk); Dunedin; born Dunedin, 26 Apr 1906; journalist.

¹³ Capt A. M. Barton; born NZ 17 Nov 1914; shepherd; p.w. 25 Oct 1942.

¹⁴ Lt F. G. Conway, DCM, EM; Seddon, Marlborough; born Blenheim, 24 Sep 1916; farmer.

¹⁵ WO II E. Chambers, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Aust., 8 Aug 1914; diesel engineer; wounded 1 Sep 1942.

¹⁶ Tpr J. J. Dalton; New Plymouth; born NZ 4 Apr 1917; farmhand.

¹⁷ Cpl H. C. McDowall; born London, 17 Mar 1910; railway employee; killed in action 22 May 1941.

¹⁸ Cpl H. R. Marshall; born Marton, 17 Sep 1916; farmhand; killed in action 22 May 1941.

¹⁹ Forward Defended Localities.

²⁰ Sgt A. J. P. Dean, m.i.d.; Tauranga; born Thames, 18 Oct 1915; mechanic.

21 Tpr J. Kean; Christchurch; born Dunmurry, Nth Ireland, 9 Jul 1914; storeman; wounded 24 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

22 Sgt W. T. Weir, DCM, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born NZ 14 Sep 1907; bus driver; twice wounded.

23 Sgt V. R. Nicholas, m.i.d.; Hawera; born NZ 14 Jul 1919; motor mechanic; twice wounded.

24 Capt H. A. Rowe, MC; Piha; born Hokitika, 12 Aug 1914; salesman; OC Pet Coy 20 May-1 Jun 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

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

26 Sgt R. G. Edwards; born NZ 17 Apr 1915; motor mechanic; killed in action 26 May 1941.

27 Cpl G. W. Smith; born NZ 22 Nov 1918; farmer; killed in action 26 May 1941.

28 Tpr D. V. Weight; born Wanganui, 9 May 1914; tractor driver; killed in action 28 May 1941.

29 Tpr J. C. Graham; born NZ 1 Feb 1919; labourer; wounded 28 May 1941; died of wounds while p.w. 20 Jun 1941.

30 L-Cpl J. B. Cameron, m.i.d.; England; born NZ 23 Jul 1907; motor driver; wounded 15 Apr 1941; p.w. 25 May 1941.

31 Tpr G. A. T. Seaton; born NZ 24 Oct 1918; lorry driver; died of wounds while p.w. 30 May 1941.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 7 – REORGANISATION AND BACK TO THE DESERT

CHAPTER 7

Reorganisation and Back to the Desert

THE DIVISION had been beaten in battle; beaten by an enemy whom the New Zealanders considered, man to man, was not their equal. But they had lost. The campaigns in **Greece** and **Crete** were an unhappy introduction to battle.

A dangerous sense of frustration could be discerned in every man in **Helwan**. You could recognise it in the criticism of other units; in the bitter nickname given to the **RAF**—the 'R' stood for its rarity—which had been pounded into the ground tackling odds a hundred times more hopeless than the Army's. In the **NAAFI**s you could hear men remark, after 22 June, that **Russia** would collapse in a fortnight. All these are the symptoms of that defeatism which signifies low morale.

How was this state of affairs to be righted? Give the men something to do, some interest, and give it straight away. The strength of every soldier, and the New Zealander is no exception, lies in his self-discipline. That appeals to his pride and stiffens his morale.

Only about half of the Divisional Cavalry had come straight from **Greece** to **Helwan**. They had arrived in the early morning, exhausted. After a hot meal they were each given a blanket and a palliasse. They took these to the huts and were soon fast asleep. In the afternoon a large mail arrived and there were few who did not get a parcel. The next day new clothes were issued and a routine drawn up. By the end of the first week the regiment had been issued with no fewer than thirty new carriers.

Major Nicoll, who was in command while Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth was in hospital, spoke to the regiment, stressing the vital necessity of hard training and firm discipline. The reaction was immediate. Despite the heat, despite their chaffing against authority, men began to look to their new vehicles, their crews, their troops, and took interest. You could see the pride rising in the way they trooped off to the tailors in

their spare time to have their clothes altered to fit smartly.

But those were anxious days in May 1941. Everyone had a best friend in **Crete** and all through the month they worried; worried in the heat of **Helwan**. There were route marches and parades. They drank their beer in the **Naafi** or sat in the suffocating heat of the cinema; they lost their money on the Crown and Anchor boards—there was a wave of gambling in the Division at the time—and all the while they worried. Before the fighting began some men arrived from **Crete**, bringing with them a freshening breath of high morale. Mostly they were men who had escaped from **Greece** after the evacuation and they brought news of friends still alive.

But it was work and interest that kept spirits from falling to dangerous levels. The acting CO, true to form, demanded smartness on parade. Wisely was he firm and prompt in dealing with defaulters, for had he been indulgent, the lesser crimes would have opened the door for more serious offences.

Thus by the end of May a firm foundation of discipline, smartness and orderliness had been relaid, upon which on 3 June those who arrived from **Crete** tired and battle-weary could rebuild their own self-reliance which, in their case too, was threatening to crumble.

At that time there was something else in the regiment that made every man keen. A rumour went the rounds.

Rumour based on fact is marked by certain peculiarities which force the most sceptical to give it thought and decide that, in time, it will be authenticated. It is always vague; it is backed by no tangible source of reliability; one hears it only casually; it seems to be whispered through the air rather than to come by word of mouth: but it persists. Such a rumour went round that the Divisional Cavalry was to supply a cadre for an armoured training school in New Zealand. On 1 June the rumour came a step nearer to reality when thirty-nine other ranks were marched out to the RAC School at **Abbassia** to take instructors' courses.

The very next day a large detail of reinforcements was marched in from the Composite Training Depot, and the regiment was once again up to full strength. In their keenness alone these reinforcements came like a breath of fresh air. Their spirit was high, for in New Zealand most of them had been moulded into soldiers by a notable soldier, a man who was proven brave, who had himself absorbed—and even inspired a little—the spirit of the 1st NZEF; who had already visited Div Cav to see what was needed. He was Lieutenant-Colonel R. P. Harper, DSO, MC, DCM. ¹

And so the regiment, having licked its wounds, settled down to hard training and steady routine in the summer heat. Men took their leave and came back impecunious but freshened. There were the divisional sports at the **Maadi** Club and swimming sports in the **Helwan** baths; there was leave to **Cairo** at nights; and all the time they trained, looking to the day when they would yet be able to prove that they could beat any enemy that met them.

Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth took over command of the Composite Training Depot on 26 July and was succeeded as CO by Major Nicoll, promoted lieutenant-colonel.

About this time there was a lot of celebrating to be done. There were reunions of every body or club or type of civil employment. Some men seemed able to produce a birthday once a week, and that of course coincided with pay-day. Failing that there would be someone's second cousin's wedding anniversary, or a wife had won a free ticket in the next Tattersall's consultation. Anything was an excuse for a party, with spirits running high. They were great days. Those who had gone to **Abbassia** had completed their courses and, 7 officers and 66 other ranks in all, were soon off home. They had to be farewelled. One of the regiment's officers, Captain Crisp, ² was married in the **Cairo** Cathedral to Miss Winifred Johnson. The officers' mess had presented him with a salver inscribed with the regimental badge and, excepting those on duty at the time, they all attended his wedding. Indeed they were great days.

Soon one could see signs of an impending move from Base. On 22

August the arrival of fourteen new carriers brought that part of the establishment up to full strength, and by the end of the month, except for a few motor-cycles, the full quota of 'B' vehicles had been taken over. Training had got to the stage of manoeuvres and the regiment had been out to the south of the camp on several exercises, alone and with the brigades. On one of these, incidentally, it had narrowly missed being shot up by the Artillery, who were firing a live shell barrage.

Early in September the regiment began to prepare for a move. Base kits were sent to store, messes were disbanded and barrack equipment returned to Ordnance, and on the 14th an advanced party, under the second-in-command, Major Russell, left **Helwan** for the **Western Desert**.

Here the Division had a role in the major desert strategy. Whilst completing its training it had to man the defensive 'box' at **Baggush** which the **First Echelon** had built the year before. This was one of a series of fortresses that sprang into being along the coast of **Cyrenaica** and **Egypt**—at Mersa Matruh, at **Tobruk**, and at **Maaten Baggush**. In a month or two Div Cav were to find themselves, under command of 3 South African Brigade, attacking a similar fortress at **Bardia**. The **Baggush** Box had on its perimeter, and within it, a system of concrete pillboxes, wire and minefields. For a while, under command of 4 Infantry Brigade, the Divisional Cavalry had to man one sector. This occupied two troops from each squadron until early in October, when the regiment again came under command of the Division and moved down to the coast to Ilwet ez Zeitun, just outside the eastern boundary of the **Box**.

The Divisional Cavalry had no tactical function while at Ilwet ez Zeitun and could concentrate on training and on attaining physical fitness. The area was clean and there were no flies. The ground was unsuitable for football but space was cleared for hockey, which was played hard and with enthusiasm. The coastline consisted of a series of rocky ledges and was therefore unsuitable for bathing, except when the sea was dead calm and the men could bathe in the pools between the rocks. What they did discover, though, was that the rocks harboured

quite a lot of fish. Some men had success with line and rod but soon a more interesting means came into vogue. The mines laid nearby were of local manufacture and were easily dismantled. They contained gelignite. If you could find fuse and detonators—in other words, if you had sapper friends—well, as the French say: ‘What would you?’ A single bomb on one occasion brought to the surface enough fish to feed one squadron.

In certain parts of the regiment, however, mines were a more touchy subject. Several times during September, officers went out to the forward areas on reconnaissance. The first of these parties ran on to a minefield south of **Charing Cross**. One truck was blown up and damaged and Major Sutherland sustained a severely bruised leg.

This month, too, marked another item of historical interest. The GOC gave the regiment permission to wear black berets whilst on leave from the desert. Officially all headgear changed with the seasons, but never after that, summer or winter, could Div Cav be persuaded to wear any other head-dress.

September and October are two of the most pleasant months in the desert. Along the coast the weather is cool and the wind fresh. The nights are damp but the dew disappears at dawn with the first ray of sunlight.

By the middle of October the regiment had been out on exercises south of **Baggush**, twice working with brigade groups and once alone. These exercises involved the necessity of being able to find one's way about by means of compass and map, but thanks to previous training, the standard of navigation was high. And it had to be—at night, on a featureless desert. Moreover, the unit administration was tested under such difficult conditions and proved to be working smoothly.

Then AFVs began to arrive for the tank troops. They were light tanks, Mark VI, and though old, they were well equipped and in sound mechanical condition, having only just been overhauled. Some came direct from **Abbassia**, some from Divisional Workshops, and some from

Mersa Matruh from a Hussar regiment that had been re-equipped. Twenty-six arrived by the end of October—two fewer than the regimental establishment. They were allotted to squadrons and training in them was pushed on apace.

The Mark VI tank was, for those days, quite fast. It was not heavily armoured but relied on its speed to get out of trouble. It was powered by a Meadows Marine engine with an ordinary 'crash' gearbox. The suspension was very similar to that of a Bren carrier, though the tracks were a little wider and there were four bogey wheels instead of three. It carried a crew of three: driver, commander and gunner-wireless operator. The turret had an all-round traverse and carried two Vickers guns adapted for tanks, of .303-inch and .5-inch calibre, the latter firing armour-piercing solid shot similar to that of a Boys rifle. These guns were co-axially mounted and had a common telescopic sight. Every tank had wireless communication. Though the wireless set was the responsibility of the gunner-operator, in action the actual working of the set was arranged as the job of the commander.

The matter of operating the wireless brings up a question of some importance which might have been, but fortunately never was, driven home with tragic emphasis. The Divisional Cavalry, in the first three years of the war, was always short of wireless operators. This was possibly due to the fact that men are more prepared to become proficient in manual rather than mental dexterity, and there was never a surfeit of men who were keen to master the techniques of tuning a wireless set, of observing a strict procedure whilst talking, of learning to talk in the prescribed jargon, or of mastering the Morse code. A trained wireless operator had to be able to do all this as well as to execute minor repairs. Now, every man was capable to a greater or lesser extent of driving any vehicle in the regiment; everyone could handle the weapons with accuracy; but never more than one man in five was capable of pushing a switch from 'Receive' to 'Send' at the right instant and saying: 'O.K.—Off.' The degree of proficiency required for this was small and the occasion when it would be needed, other than for regular operators,

would only be when in actual contact with the enemy; and that is when communication is most vital. Yet, though an operator could become a casualty just as easily as any man, as often as not there was no one else in his crew to carry out his responsibilities, even for a few minutes. His vehicle—and if that were a carrier, his whole troop—was completely out of touch and therefore out of control. In any case, if the operator was also the gunner, in action his hands and head were far too full to be working on a wireless set; again, he was out of touch at a time when communication was vital.

The Signals Officer was fully aware of this dangerous state of affairs, but he was of junior rank and not in a position to insist that all crew commanders be trained in at least R/T ³ procedure, so that not until the end of the African campaign were there any serious steps taken in this direction. Most of the senior officers were content to snap up any good wireless operators and hold them at all costs until they ‘cracked’.

It seems, therefore, that the lesson is that every man in every vehicle should be interchangeable, and should be regularly interchanged. For that matter, if ever again a war comes, and if a man, irrespective of the arm of the service he is in, intends to survive it, let him make sure that he can work the wireless set. No body of men can afford to trust entirely its communications to one individual.

There was blood in the sun as it went down on 6 November. West of the Div Cav lines much transport had been moving in the **Baggush Box** and a haze of dust ‘like the Pomptine fog at morn’ hung in the lazy atmosphere. As the sun went down its white light turned slightly lemon which, as the sun dropped behind the haze, tinged from yellow to gold; and the lower it crept, deeper behind the dust, it took the colour of violence—and yet of beauty. You could look boldly at its orb glowing like a polished blood-orange. All around, the haze merged from pink to rose and the whole sky was crimson as the sun hovered doubtfully on a distant escarpment before disappearing, as it does under those skies, with dramatic suddenness under the curtain of night.

In the Divisional Cavalry lines that evening all was bustle. Carriers and tanks were packed with heed, each man taking meticulous care to stow his gear in a way that would not impair the fighting efficiency of his vehicle.

In the morning the fighting squadrons moved out independently and took the main road to Mersa Matruh. Past Matruh they took the **Siwa** road and travelled south for an hour or so before swinging west into the desert. At dusk they laagered and the next day continued by easy stages. On the 9th they ambled on whilst the CO visited the headquarters of 4 Indian Division. The next day RHQ, B and C Squadrons, under command of 4 Indian Division, moved to Alam el Seneini whilst A Squadron went forward about ten miles to come under command of 4 South African Armoured Car Regiment; HQ Squadron remained about 12 miles back with the South Africans' B Echelon.

So the major part of the regiment lay up well concealed and waited for the word to go. The **Central India Horse**, who were to patrol west of the Wire, handed over to A Squadron the task of patrolling a ten-mile stretch of the east side and of manning three observation posts there. B Squadron sent one patrol through the Wire to reconnoitre the **Trigh el Abd** as far as **Bir Gibni**.

One troop of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment and a troop of 57 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment were placed under command of the Divisional Cavalry. This latter troop distinguished itself on the 14th by shooting down an Italian 'recce' plane at El Rabta. During the week an Air Support Control tentacle was attached to the regiment.

Just east of **Sheferzen**, then, the Divisional Cavalry, as part of the Division, waited to move forward when the whole Eighth Army rolled into **Libya**. The New Zealanders had been tried once. If they had lost every battle they had not lost their pride, for every man knew there was no need for shame; they had been tried but not found wanting; they had been beaten by superior weight and lack of support. But this time they had everything with them. The Allies had superiority in the air and

equality of numbers in tanks. The men had stout hearts and were trained to the limit; they were fighting fit. The Army was going forward in its own chosen time.

The regiment's principal appointments during the second Libyan offensive were as follows:

Commanding Officer	Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll
Second-in-Command	Maj J. T. Russell, DSO
Adjutant	Capt J. L. Rayner
OC A Squadron	Maj J. H. Sutherland, MC
Second-in-Command	Capt G. H. Stace
OC B Squadron	Maj J. H. Garland
Second-in-Command	Capt E. R. Andrews
OC C Squadron	Maj I. L. Bonifant
Second-in-Command	Capt A. Van Slyke
OC HQ Squadron	Capt R. B. McQueen
Medical Officer	Capt J. R. J. Moore, NZMC
Padre	Rev. H. G. Taylor, CF

¹ Captain, Canterbury Mounted Rifles and OC NZ Machine Gun Squadron in 1914–18 War; appointed Area Commander, South Canterbury, 1941.

² Maj P. S. Crisp; **Blenheim**; born **Invercargill**, 15 Nov 1913; local body officer; DAQMG, 2 NZEF (**UK**) Reception Gp, Sep 1944-Dec 1945; wounded 5 Nov 1942.

³ Radio Telephony.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 8 – THE ‘CRUSADER’ CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 8

The 'Crusader' Campaign

WHEN GERMAN TROOPS arrived on the North African scene early in 1941 they refreshed the badly defeated Italian army there; moreover, General Wavell was committed to fighting over an enormous area, for he was conducting operations in **Eritrea**, he had troops opening an offensive in the **Balkans**, he had the task of overcoming the Vichy French in **Syria**, and as further distraction there was a revolt in **Iraq**. It is small wonder then that General Rommel, who had decided, as it were, to stretch his legs in front of the **El Agheila** positions, should, when he found himself only lightly opposed, make a bid—a largely successful bid—to recapture **Cyrenaica**.

But Wavell was a man of foresight. As he withdrew towards **Egypt** he left an uncomfortable thorn in the side of the Axis troops by turning **Tobruk** into a fortress which was to be held regardless of the cost. By doing this he constricted the Axis line of communication by the constant threat to its flank, and the Axis forces could not therefore advance with any degree of safety beyond the Egyptian border until **Tobruk** was in their hands. And so, when General Auchinleck formed the Eighth Army and began to prepare an offensive, the first step was to seek out and destroy the enemy armour and then relieve **Tobruk**.

During the summer the Axis forces had been busy building up a series of defended areas along the border from **Sollum** as far south as **Sidi Omar**. Tactical surprise could not be obtained by a frontal assault on this line so the attack was to go round its flank.

The Eighth Army was divided into four groups. The 30th Corps, containing the bulk of the armour, was detailed primarily to destroy the enemy armoured forces and also to link up with the fourth group, namely 70 Division in **Tobruk**, which was to be making a sortie to meet it. The 13th Corps, the second group, comprising a greater proportion of infantry, was given the job of surrounding and destroying the frontier

forts one by one; then, once the Axis army had had its claws drawn, it was to drive forward and destroy what remained. The third group does not come into this story. It was based on the oases to the



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south and had the task of creating a diversion against the lines of communication round **Benghazi** and, if possible, seizing that port.

The offensive was timed to start on 18 November and 13 Corps, less the New Zealand Division, was to take up a line from **Sheferzen** to the escarpment overlooking the coast south-east of **Sollum**, thus containing the enemy positions from the east and denying any sortie south and east into **Egypt**. The New Zealand Division was to pass through the Wire north of and parallel with **30 Corps**, then wait until the time came to strike northwards.

For a week Div Cav had been lying up east of the frontier, under the command of 4 Indian Division, well camouflaged and waiting for the day. Some troops had been doing the routine patrolling of the Wire itself and one patrol had slipped along the **Trigh el Abd** as far as **Bir Gibni** without incident; but at dusk on 17 November the crews pulled off their camouflage nets and stowed them. Regimental Headquarters and A Squadron moved up to laager opposite **El Beida**; C Squadron drove along ahead of the Division to laager facing El Rabta; while B Squadron came

under command of 7 Indian Infantry Brigade. This brigade continued forward, screened by B Squadron, across the Wire at **El Beida** and made towards **Bir Gibni**. Thus B Squadron became the first British troops in the whole operation to move over the border; that is apart from the **Oasis Group**, the LRDG and the SAS, ¹ who of course were no respecters of any borders or frontiers.

Those on picket that night could sense in the sky a preview of events. The wind blew from the north from under frowning clouds which seemed occupied with their own battle. Brilliant lightning was stabbing between the cloud layers as if Mars and Thor were brawling, Mars ripping with drunken illiterate hand a great shaky 'Y' of lightning which lit the earth below, each flash followed by Thor's growl of defiance rumbling between the clouds.

Dawn on the 18th disclosed a kind of restlessness over the desert, where units and parts of formations were jockeying themselves into position. This restlessness appeared gradually to impart momentum throughout the day to the whole Army, until in the late afternoon the desert was covered with a moving mass of machinery plunging steadily forward. Then it was and here it was that every man in Div Cav, forming the spear tip of this powerful thrust, was overtaken with a feeling of minuteness—a minuteness within which was compressed, nevertheless, unlimited vitality—and overwhelmed with a feeling of pride. Within a man's body the blood tingled a little stronger, giving the feeling of straining at invisible traces which were to draw this great mass of guns and lorries just a little faster towards its goal.

Never in the history of the Division was morale so high and in the Div Cav this was no exception. When B Squadron went off with the Indian brigade, it took two 'stowaways' from B Echelon, Sergeant-Major Chambers and Corporal **Dawson**, ² who had made up their minds that they would be amongst the first to open fire on the enemy.

C Squadron set off to cross the Wire well ahead of the time scheduled for the divisional columns. The gap had been made at El

Rabta and, after passing well clear of the frontier, the squadron headed north-west towards **Bir Gibni**. RHQ and A Squadron set off from their laager about the same time as the Division and, passing through the gap at **El Beida**, held a course due west until they met C Squadron forming laager about ten miles short of **Bir Gibni**, in the position designed to be the head of the divisional column. The chilly wind could dampen the spirits of no man and there was little warmth in the sun as it set, giving the signal to hurry the last meal of the day before darkness prohibited fires; and when darkness fell the wind developed a knife-like sharpness. But instead of matching their mood to the falling temperature, everybody's spirits rose in anticipation of the success that the morrow must undoubtedly bring.

The regiment formed its laagers on the same defensive principle as the early American covered-wagon trains, with the 'A' vehicles in a rough circle facing outwards and, in the centre, any soft-skinned, or 'B', vehicles which, at the discretion of the squadron commanders, were with the fighting squadrons.

Sited thus, each armoured vehicle had its weapons facing outwards so that, in the event of a surprise raid by night, it would not fire into its own laager in the excitement of the moment: moreover, if the laager were discovered and attacked by aircraft, every vehicle had only to drive a few hundred yards the way it was facing and the whole squadron was immediately dispersed, leaving nothing but a baffling cloud of dust under the aircraft's illuminating flares. Fortunately this manoeuvre never had to be used for, though sometimes it was expected, never once did the regiment have any laager attacked by night.

B Squadron's function on the 18th was to man a patrol line along the **Trigh el Abd** from the flank of the Indian brigade near **Sheferzen** to within a mile or two of **Bir Gibni**. Its troops were in position at first light and could see a mass of vehicles on the slightly higher ground round **Sidi Omar**. Major Garland ³ decided to move his headquarters to a place of better observation, and while he was doing this, some unidentified vehicles appeared in the north and brought the headquarters under light

shellfire just while it was a little bunched, thereby considerably accelerating the process and giving rise to the words of Jimmy Little ⁴ in his parody about the campaign:

... and the Dispersal of the squadron was a picture to see!

About the same time Lieutenant E. W. Kerr's troop on the right flank was engaged by some enemy tanks. Three of these, which Kerr identified as German Mark IIIs, came forward until they were in range of the two-pounders attached to the squadron. ⁵ These opened fire and drove them off after an exchange of shots. Later five or six more came down for another try and this time the little guns managed to disable one, but unfortunately it was towed away by another as they retired. For the remainder of that morning the right flank suffered a little light shelling and some machine-gun fire which did not worry it.

Towards midday the reconnaissance screen of 4 Armoured Brigade, armoured cars of the KDG, ⁶ appeared to the left rear. The brigade was to move in on the left of B Squadron, but the screen was rather to the east of its proper line of advance. Seeing armoured vehicles ahead of them, the KDG proceeded to 'capture' Second-Lieutenant Fowler's ⁷ troop. A very bright little action it was, too; brighter was the sight of the Tommies' faces when they found whom they had captured. No harm was done, however, and they went off on their proper line, flattered by the comments on their troop tactics.

The supporting weapons which the Indian brigade had placed under command of B Squadron were a section each of Bofors anti-aircraft guns and two-pounder anti-tank guns. The AA officer was a Lieutenant Dodds who had played for his country against the 1936 All Blacks, a team which had included the troop leader of No. 3 Troop, Lieutenant J. G. Wynyard. The anti-tank officer, Lieutenant Smith, was a strange figure. He was drawing a pension from a hand crippled during the war in 1918, had lived in **New York** between the wars, and claimed to be the first American to serve in the Eighth Army; he had an uncanny knack of disappearing from the back of the squadron column while it was groping

along in the dark to an appointed position, and on being given up for lost, would be found waiting nonchalantly in the right place with his guns. He had a trick also, when the column halted, of calling plaintively for the squadron second-in-command and then of acknowledging that officer's frigid arrival with a formal salute, a knowing look, and a colossal tot of whisky.

About 3 p.m. on the 18th, when the squadron was retiring in the face of what was thought to be a strong force of tanks, Smith was determined to stand and fight; and on being reminded that the desert was quite flat and that there were some fifteen tanks against his four little two-pounders, he roared: 'No. We're anti-tank and we'll shoot 'em up here', and had to be formally ordered to retire before he would allow himself to be led away, breathing fire and slaughter.

Major Garland was beginning to worry on realising that there was only a very light line opposing these tanks, and guessing that they would probably be supported by artillery, he was doing the only thing possible in retiring. This was allowing a force of enemy armour to thrust between two of our formations, but just as the situation was beginning to look very serious and when Garland had wisely destroyed the Eighth Army's Order of Battle which he had on his person, 4 Armoured Brigade arrived to save the day by driving the enemy off with its guns.

The Armoured Brigade then continued its sweep in a northerly direction until it came in contact with, and fought a brisk action in the late afternoon against, one of the reconnaissance units of the German *Africa Corps*.

At dusk B Squadron pulled back a mile or so to form a tight laager with the supporting guns facing outwards from each corner.

There had been a certain amount of trouble in keeping communication with the squadron Intelligence Corporal, who had been left at Brigade Headquarters to maintain a wireless link. Most of the time wireless reception had been very poor and almost all the

communications had to be passed by motor-cycle. This made the interchange of messages desperately slow and cut down the amount of information that could be sent by the Brigade Commander.

At first light on the 19th the remainder of the regiment fanned out from their laager positions and cooked their breakfasts. It was a fresh, keen morning and everybody was impatient to get on with the fight. Fretting against the powers that kept them waiting when there was a perfectly good enemy just over the horizon simply asking to be knocked about, the men spent the morning going over their vehicles and weapons once again. About noon the Division had orders to move up and breast the **Trigh el Abd**, and the CO was preparing orders to move off when word came through that **Bir Bu Deheua** had been occupied by the Indians.

This news was brought to Divisional Cavalry headquarters by none other than Major John Russell. John, as we have seen, had taken a most energetic and, at times, spectacular part in the campaigns in **Greece** and **Crete**, and it was not surprising that **General Freyberg** had expressly ordered that he be included in the 'Left Out of Battle' personnel, for he knew Russell well enough to anticipate that he, despite normal specific instructions that 2 i/c's remained LOB, would do everything in his power to stay with the regiment even to the extent of 'stowing away', exactly as happened in B Squadron.

At the risk of breaking continuity it is interesting to recall a stowaway story against John.

During the first Libyan campaign when the regiment, green with envy, were watching all the Australians travelling west to **Bardia**, two of John's own men, Troopers **Magan**⁸ and Campbell, disappeared and had to be posted as deserters. Some days later they arrived back under close arrest and, according to his custom, John had them brought to his tent to give them a severe tongue-lashing before they appeared before him formally. He thought that they had gone back to the fleshpots in **Cairo**, and as they stepped into the tent they were met by a pair of cold eyes as

John said:

‘Well? How far did you get?’

‘The bloody Redcaps picked us up half-way up Hellfire Pass. The Aussies we were with tried to bluff them but we had to show our paybooks.’

‘Ooooh!’

We can leave the story there with the remark that it is certain that within seconds he would have had them both sitting with him on his bed and probably accepting his sympathy in the form of whisky from his tooth-glass. But to get back to **Libya....**

Those who knew John Russell would also know that ‘Spirit of the Regiment’, and were not surprised when they heard that, as he told Colonel Nicoll, he had ‘talked the Old Man into letting me come and act as a “roving liaison officer”.’⁹

The regiment set off towards **Bir Gibni just before 3 p.m., working on a one-squadron front, with C Squadron forward and A in reserve at RHQ. The forward squadron arrived at the **Trigh el Abd** well before dark and there watched 4 Armoured Brigade, which was heavily engaged to the north-west with a battle group from *21 Panzer Division*.**

B Squadron was still under command of the Indians and in the morning had been sent back to its previous day's positions to watch the left flank of the brigade while it advanced on **Bir Bu Deheua. By midday the Royal Sussex Battalion, with supporting arms, had advanced along the **Trigh el Abd** to Bir Gibni and swung right to take **Bir Bu Deheua**. This task was accomplished by two o'clock, without opposition. This was not surprising since it was only a dummy fortress after all. The infantry had carried on farther north so as to be surrounding the **Omar** positions. From west of **Bir Bu Deheua** the squadron took up a line facing north-west but found little to report except occasional shelling from the **Omar** fortress; and most of this was falling among the infantry. Towards dark**

Major Garland sent his 2 i/c over to the Brigadier, who thanked him for the squadron's help and told him that B Squadron was to revert to its own regiment at **Bir Gibni**.

The 20th again was not a very eventful day for the Division since the enemy armoured forces had not been destroyed. In the morning 4 Armoured Brigade came to grips again with the same battle group north of the **Trigh el Abd** and B Squadron was sent out to its previous day's patrol line as a cover for the Division, which now sat in the gap between **Sheferzen** and **Bir Gibni**. About 8 a.m. a small German car, which must have been driven through the lines of the Indian brigade, sped across the squadron front. A message was immediately sent to the troop at the end of the line to 'Stop small car'. Second-Lieutenant Ward ¹⁰ never dreamt that it was an enemy one and sent his motor-cyclist after it. Imagine his surprise when the car stopped, the DR parked his machine, climbed in, and was driven off to the west—and to *Stalag*.

C Squadron was sent out on a similar role to B, but closer to **Bir Gibni**. Here everybody had a front-seat view of the tank battles to the north. In the morning they watched the battle against *21 Panzer Division* and in the evening another heavy engagement in the same area against *15 Panzer*. The lighter British tanks were outgunned and had to use a combination of naval tactics and cavalry charges to get within range of the German tanks, thus turning to their advantage their superior speed and the thorough training of their crews. The battles were therefore very spectacular, with the Germans working themselves into hull-down positions and engaging the British squadrons as they manoeuvred in for the charge. These columns, usually in line ahead, would gradually become hidden by a grey-brown cloud of dust and smoke before they swung into line and charged, often with the squadron commander standing out on the hull of his tank or even charging in with them in a little 15-cwt truck, signalling them forward with a big blue flag.

There is no doubt of the bravery of these British tank crews nor of the coolness and dash of their commanders, who seemed to know no

fear. The C Squadron wavelength was close to that of one of these squadrons, and right in the heat of the battle the whole C Squadron net heard the voice of one of the British majors—that inevitable detached, almost casual, voice: ‘Hello Baty 4. Hello Baty 4. Baty calling. For God's sake turn right, man: turn right. What the devil d'you think we practise these things for on manoeuvres?’

There was some concern in the New Zealand Division that the Armoured Brigade might not be able to cope with the enemy armour, and the question arose whether it might have to withdraw through the Division. **General Freyberg** was impatient to get into the battle and welcomed the suggestion. During the day he sent a liaison patrol from Div Cav over to Brigadier Gatehouse to offer support. This was not accepted but the troop came back with some information about the general situation.

In the light of later experience of desert fighting it perhaps was rather a pity that this support was not accepted; for, had the armour fallen back through the Division and been pursued by the German armour, this could have been chopped about badly by the New Zealand guns. After all, that would only have been a case of turning the Germans' own tactics against themselves. Until General Montgomery took charge of the Army some nine months later, we were too inclined towards the ‘seek out and destroy’ principle in which we used to suffer rather much destruction ourselves while we were doing the ‘seeking out’. It took the Battle of **Alam Halfa** to prove this.

There was no change until the morning of the 21st when the **Support Group** of 7 Armoured Division, together with a regiment of 7 Armoured Brigade, fought its way on to an escarpment facing north, by the mosque of **Sidi Rezegh** and just over 20 miles from **Tobruk**.

The *15th* and *21st Panzer Divisions* were racing westwards to deal with this threat to their rear, pursued by 22 and 4 Armoured Brigades, and it seemed to the latter that the enemy was properly on the run. The Italian *132 Ariete Armoured Division* was still at Bir el Gubi glaring at 1

South African Brigade. The enemy armour was thus fully committed and already was thought to have suffered heavy losses; so it was considered time for 13 Corps to take a more active part in the battle.

Looking back on it now we can see again how completely wrong it was to use tanks, particularly our lighter ones, to destroy tanks when we had any quantity of guns, the proper weapons, which should have been used in conjunction with the tanks. The British tanks had to go out and find the enemy, and that meant fighting on ground more or less of his own choosing, and they had not only suffered heavy losses but had also overestimated the enemy's losses. If only the Army Commander could have sent his armoured corps, in a solid mass, direct to Sidi Rezegh and sat there in a phalanx of guns— which he had—then the enemy would have had to come and smash himself the same way.

Early on 21 November General Freyberg received word to begin his drive northwards, past Fort Capuzzo and Sidi Azeiz, to the edge of the escarpment overlooking Bardia. Thus 13 Corps would have the fortress area on the frontier isolated and would be able to cut it up bit by bit.

The Divisional Cavalry led off soon after midday covering a front of eight or ten miles, with A Squadron on the right, B on the left and C in reserve; and, with each squadron, was a half troop of 34 Anti-Tank Battery, whilst RHQ retained the troop of 4 Field Regiment which was under command. The patrol line had not gone far when Colonel Nicoll sent A Squadron off to raid Sidi Azeiz. To keep his patrol line complete he edged B Squadron over to the right and brought C Squadron up on the left. A Squadron bowled up to Sidi Azeiz, having put up some seven or eight enemy transport which they left to be handled by B. Sidi Azeiz appeared to be occupied so two troops were sent to gain touch. These troops first shot up and captured two motor-cycle combinations, then, stopping just short of the buildings, they roared for the two-pounders, which fired a few shots through the huts. These incidentally scared the wits out of an elderly Italian officer in charge, who was not expecting callers and was having a bath. The Div Cav troops made a quick rush to

find a stark-naked figure, with dust and rubble sticking to his wet body, waving a towel in surrender. (As one trooper remarked: 'His underpants would have been as effective under *those* circumstances.') Besides the officer there were forty-eight other ranks of the Italian *52 Anti-Aircraft Battery* and six other ranks, German and Italian, of lorried infantry and artillery personnel. Amongst the material captured was a list of the code-names for *15 Panzer Division*. The transport which A Squadron had allowed to go, scuttled westwards along the *Trigh Capuzzo*, right across the front of B and C Squadrons, but everybody was taking the job of screening the Division far too seriously and ignored them, much to the indignation of those who wished to rush up and capture them but who, in every case, seemed to have some senior to remind him of his primary role.

The last ten miles of the advance to the escarpment, though comparatively uneventful, left several vivid impressions. One remembers the fragrant carpet of blue-green thyme whose scent was crushed out under the tracks of the vehicles, the innumerable mounds of yellow earth, so misleading to navigators, where wells had been dug, the lurching of the carriers as they swayed over the windswept hummocks of sand, the sting of the cold wind in one's eyes; but most of all one remembers still that curious, eerie sense of offensive impatience that seemed to permeate the whole Army.

C Squadron arrived at the edge of the escarpment first and, as each troop stopped, it formed part of a line that reached from *Bir ez Zemla* to about three miles west. Along this line there were odd outposts in the form of rock sangars containing machine guns or mortars. The troops manning these were completely unaware of the presence of any British and were walking about unconcerned at their approach until they had stopped quite close and opened fire.

This skirmishing was indecisive as darkness fell soon after it had begun, so the squadrons pulled back a little and laagered independently. B and C Squadrons chose positions a mile or so back from *Bir Zemla*, RHQ a few miles south again, and A Squadron in reserve a little farther

south near the Trigh **Capuzzo**, about five miles west of the scene of its afternoon's engagement at **Sidi Azeiz**.

By dawn on the 22nd 4 New Zealand Brigade had moved up into position a little to the east of the Divisional Cavalry and halted with the head of the column near **Bir Zemla**. Almost immediately a company of 20 Battalion was sent down the steep rocky face towards the **Bardia-Tobruk** road which runs along the flat, and started up a brisk engagement with transport there.

Meanwhile two troops of C Squadron had attacked and cleaned out some Italian machine-gun posts near Point 127, capturing an engineer officer and suffering one man wounded.

Throughout the day all three squadrons enjoyed intermittent fighting. C Squadron was now firmly placed on the edge of the escarpment overlooking the flat to the west of where 20 Battalion was engaged and was firing on any targets which could be found within small-arms range. Directly below Point 127 was a group of vehicles, some trucks and staff cars, and a few tents. During the day this was identified as probably a headquarters of the **Africa Corps**, and even before they knew this, Div Cav were asking for gunfire to be brought down on the spot; but the guns were fully occupied in firing on some tanks which were reported to be counter-attacking 20 Battalion. Later, however, in response to a call from A Squadron, Captain J. W. Moodie brought forward a troop of 4 Field Regiment and opened fire on some enemy anti-tank guns and machine guns which were engaging several pin-point targets on the ridge.

During the day A Squadron captured three grounded aircraft and some prisoners and also recaptured a Bofors gun and its supply of ammunition, which was used with considerable effect by a scratch crew of the 34th Anti-Tank men then under command. B Squadron had also been busy and had captured five ambulance cars with their personnel. The disposal of prisoners was a problem in the regiment as it was a unit designed to be constantly on the move and so had not the facilities for

passing back prisoners. On this occasion, however, the ambulances provided transport for the prisoners who, after they were interrogated by the Divisional Intelligence Officer, were sent back with the B Echelon convoy.

Some of the mass of material that A Squadron sent in proved to be most interesting, especially the *Luftwaffe* material: there were marked maps, ground-to-air signalling codes, notes on Army-Air Force co-operation, the performance figures of various aircraft, and some very good photographs of **Tobruk**.

Headquarters Squadron had a certain amount of trouble on the 22nd when the 'C' Section Signals' workshop truck, together with transport from other B Echelons, got badly bogged in patches of mud in the desert and was left behind when the squadron moved on from **Bir Gibni**. When they were all extricated the trucks were assembled into a convoy; but nobody knew the destination. However, the 'C' Section truck had an experimental D/F ¹¹ loop aerial which had been made during the stay at **Baggush** and, using this to receive signals from Captain McQueen's wireless set in HQ Squadron, it managed to lead the convoy safely in.

That evening the regiment's patrol line was taken over by units of 5 Brigade, and the Divisional Cavalry, less C Squadron, moved off to **Sidi Azeiz**. C Squadron was to come under command of 4 Brigade for its advance on **Gambut**.

It will be necessary, in order to get a clear picture of the whole campaign, first to follow C Squadron over the next ten days, since that was the squadron which became involved in the critical fighting round **Sidi Rezegh**, and then to go back and trace the movements of the rest of the regiment afterwards.

To do this it is necessary to consider the topography of the Cyrenaican desert and the way in which the main plateau falls away towards the coast. From well into **Egypt**, this plateau ends abruptly in an escarpment which runs parallel to the coast. At the western end of

the Gulf of **Sollum** both the coastline and the escarpment swing northwards and the two lines meet near **Sollum**, continuing as one to **Bardia**. Here the escarpment swings westwards again, but not quite so high because from **Sollum** to **Tobruk** there is a rugged and broken coastline which eases off to a flat terrace along which runs the main road. The escarpment itself does not continue in an unbroken line for it gradually loses height towards the west and breaks into a series of parallel ones which, for convenience, we shall supply with names. The first one, running a little north of west, fades out about ten miles beyond **Gambut**: the **Bardia** or **Gambut** escarpment. The main plateau itself maintains a fairly constant height, and so, about half-way between **Bardia** and **Gambut**, the ridge divides, the southern branch continuing due west until it also flattens out south-west of **Gambut** near **Bir el Chleta**: the **Bir Chleta** escarpment. A little farther west it comes into being again at **Ed Dbana** and its crest is marked by several memorable features— **Zaafran**, **Belhamed**, **Ed Duda**—the **Belhamed** escarpment. This overlooks the wide terrace falling away right to **Tobruk**. South of **Bir Chleta** another escarpment rises and runs westwards past **Point 175** to **Sidi Rezegh**, beyond which it flattens out again: the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment. This is overlooked by yet another, in the south, which can be called the Southern escarpment.

All these escarpments have rocky crests and can be negotiated only with difficulty by wheeled or tracked vehicles except in a few places, usually where gullies run up into more gentle re-entrants. The terraces are more or less flat and are narrow enough to be dominated by mortar or shell-fire from above. The main road, running along below the **Bardia-Gambut** escarpment straight to **Tobruk**, was bypassed after August 1941, opposite **Belhamed**, by a road ('Axis Road') which turns south to swing round the **Tobruk** perimeter through **Ed Duda** and **El Adem**. There is also a desert track of note, the **Trigh Capuzzo**, which runs from the frontier near the fort of that name to **Bir el Chleta**, whence it runs westwards along the foot of the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment and on past **El Adem**.

The 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades, in full cry after the German

armoured formations, soon found them not to be in full retreat but to be racing westwards to prevent help arriving at Sidi Rezegh for 7 Armoured Brigade, already there, and the Support Group of 7 Armoured Division, which was with it. These formations were too lightly supplied with infantry and guns to carry out a prolonged defence, and 5 South African Infantry Brigade could not get there as some German armour was in its way. When the New Zealand Division advanced northwards to isolate the frontier fortress line, 6 New Zealand Brigade, organised as a self-contained formation for the purpose, was directed westwards along the Trigh Capuzzo ready to occupy the area by Gambut. But, by nightfall on the 22nd, the tank battles near Sidi Rezegh ended in the defeat of the armoured brigades of 30 Corps, and in the afternoon 6 Brigade was sent hot-foot towards Sidi Rezegh to help the Support Group which was reported to be surrounded there. The other two New Zealand brigades were hastily redispersed in the Bardia – Sollum – Capuzzo area on the night of the 22nd to allow Divisional Headquarters and 4 Brigade to move westwards.

At 7.30 a.m. on the 23rd this brigade group, with two squadrons of Matildas of a British 'Infantry tank' battalion, 44 RTR, set off towards Gambut led by C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry.

For most of the morning the columns trundled westwards unmolested in the pleasant sunshine—all unmolested except the three Div Cav tanks that were detailed to follow along the top of the ridge on the northern edge of the terrace and watch the main road on the flat below. These tanks were making good time and, while reporting one of their bounds clear, had stopped fully five minutes on the very crest of the escarpment to keep a close watch on a self-propelled gun, which came down the main road, swung off on to the desert, stopped, and suddenly opened fire with alarming accuracy. One tank had to travel quite a distance back across the flat before it was out of sight. While doing this it had to dodge at least three shells literally while they were in flight. To do this the wireless operator kept his eye on the enemy gun and each time it flashed he called to the crew commander, who

immediately ordered a sharp turn one way or the other, with the result that, when they had gone a chain or so, a shell would land practically on the spot where they had turned. As a matter of fact, throughout its whole life as an armoured unit, the Divisional Cavalry suffered surprisingly light casualties, and it is fair to claim that this was largely due to the care with which the men were originally trained and their skilful handling of their vehicles in tricky situations like this.

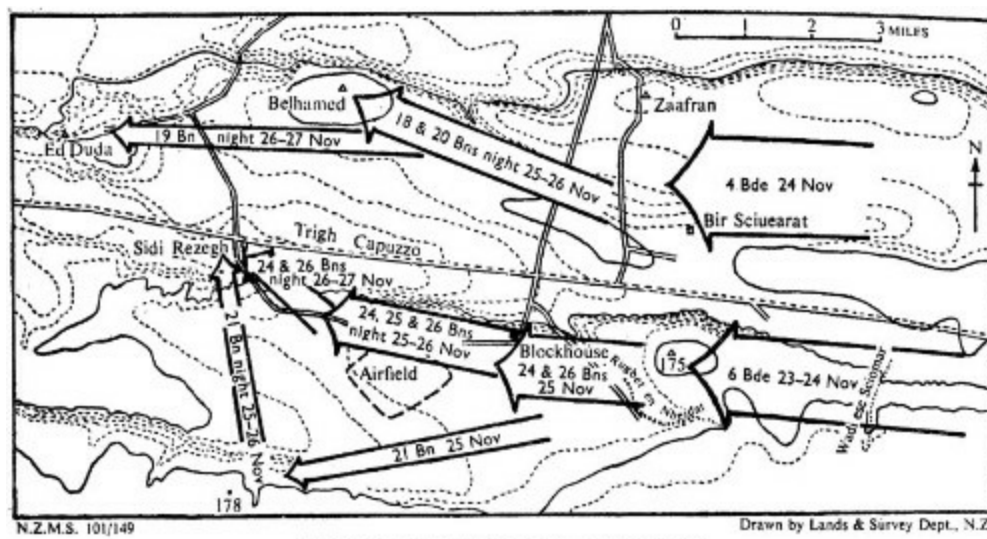
Towards midday the carriers in the centre of the patrol line could recognise **Gambut** by the several buildings, some tents, and what appeared to be a large naval-type gun. Two or three armoured cars came out to have a look, and one of the carriers drove up to a solitary Bedouin in the middle of the desert to see if he could identify these vehicles, friend or enemy, before it gave chase. The Arab greeted their approach with a carefully correct Nazi salute, and then, realising his mistake, broke into a huge smile with the words: 'El-hamdu-lallah, il Ingleezi!', ¹² climbed aboard, unslung his flintlock rifle, and demanded that the battle should begin. He took quite some dissuading from his warlike intentions, the crew of the carrier being more apprehensive of the effect of his firing off, just over their heads, the dangerously heavy charge that he rammed down the muzzle of his rifle than solicitous for his safety.

While this was going on, the brigade was brought to a halt by heavy gunfire from the higher ground near **Bir el Chleta**, but the guns of 46 Battery came into action smartly, driving the enemy away and allowing the column to advance again. The Div Cav line was halted while the brigade drew forward until the line of I tanks was in the lead.

At first there was some shellfire which fell amongst the transport, but on getting closer to **Gambut**, it could be seen that there would be little infantry resistance as figures around the buildings were on the run. As the advance continued, Major Bonifant was ordered to send his faster armoured vehicles up through the line of tanks and rush the position, firing every automatic weapon they possessed to increase the confusion. The little tanks and carriers had just passed through the line of Matildas when they met the near edge of the aerodrome. They bounded across the

flat surface of this at full speed, with every weapon blazing at anything at all. At the far side they careered off through the dispersal area, past rows of wrecked aircraft, bomb dumps and petrol dumps, and out on to the desert beyond. Here each troop swung right to form a line along the edge of the escarpment and pepper the enemy, who had fled before the onslaught and were now ducking and diving down through the rocks to the flat below.

The troops kept this up until their own infantry, who had now debussed and made off down the escarpment, had come to grips with the enemy; then they rallied and made off back to the aerodrome, where they were able to clean their guns and prepare a meal before darkness set in. So flushed were the men with the afternoon's success that they barely noticed the shell



THE ADVANCE TO TOBRUK, 23-27 NOVEMBER

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and mortar fire that was again coming from near [Bir el Chleta](#).

The next morning, the 24th, the firing began again and patrols were sent out south and west to see if they could identify the gun and mortar positions. One troop advanced boldly towards the foot of the escarpment; too boldly, for as one of the carriers stopped for the commander to level his glasses, a shell landed right between the tracks. It did no serious damage to the carrier but wounded two men running over from one of

the other carriers towards it.

It was this enemy group that was attacked and driven off by 20 Battalion as it came along the **Trigh Capuzzo** to join 4 Brigade opposite the end of the Bir Chleta escarpment.

Among the aircraft captured on the aerodrome was a Hurricane which the Germans had been using. In this, one of the squadron's tank gunners discovered the guns loaded with an assortment of .303 ammunition—ball, tracer, explosive, armour-piercing—all of which he gleefully appropriated.

While the attack on **Gambut** was going on, 6 Brigade was working its way along the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment and had become involved in the critical action of the whole campaign, in which the enemy, throwing caution to the winds, made a headlong attack with all three armoured divisions upon 5 South African Brigade at the **Sidi Rezegh** landing ground. This attack also came against 26 Battalion, with field and anti-tank guns, to the east of the South Africans. The South Africans were overrun but the losses in German tanks gravely weakened the *Africa Corps*.

By that evening 25 Battalion, after hard fighting, had occupied part of **Point 175** on the escarpment about five miles east of **Sidi Rezegh** and, by 3 p.m. on the 24th, 20 Battalion had chased away the last of the enemy along the **Trigh Capuzzo**; **Divisional Headquarters** had linked up with 4 Brigade and the next step was to bring that brigade up level with 6 Brigade, on the terrace above, ready for a drive farther westwards.

So C Squadron was sent off again to form a screen between **Ed Dbana** and the **Trigh Capuzzo** and to drive west, ahead of 4 Brigade Group. Spirits were running high, and one troop in particular was making the pace fast when some Italian diesel trucks on the Trigh started up and lumbered off north-west-wards towards a wadi beyond **Zaafan**. Unfortunately they could not be overtaken before the head of the brigade arrived opposite **Point 175**, so, with the light beginning to

fail, the patrol line was recalled.

In the evening it was decided that 6 Brigade would force its way westwards along the escarpment in the early hours of the next morning, the 25th, to clear out the enemy infantry in the wadis west of **Point 175**. The 4th Brigade had not yet met much opposition, though the C Squadron reports showed that it should be meeting something fairly soon. Accordingly, 6 Brigade advanced in a silent attack with the bayonet—which was put to its proper use—and by daylight 26 Battalion, on the left, had reached the edge of the **Sidi Rezegh** landing ground, but the 24th was held up farther back for some hours. The 4th Brigade rested overnight and continued its advance at first light. Since it was expected to meet resistance fairly soon, the I tanks formed a line immediately behind the Divisional Cavalry screen.

There was a slight mist which the sun had barely dispersed and the cold air was still bringing water to rheumy eyes when the forward screen ran into the expected opposition. This comprised infantry with anti-tank guns just east of **Zaafran**. The squadron screen halted while the infantry debussed behind and the tanks passed through to take the lead. The advance continued, with the C Squadron line close up to the heavy tanks to protect them from enemy infantry interference; the 4 Brigade infantry followed on foot, for some three and a half miles, until well within sight of **Belhamed**. Here the infantry dug in while the tanks carried on up the rising ground, almost to the feature itself, but suffered considerable damage from the 50- and 88-millimetre guns opposing them. Part of the Div Cav line followed, gathering the enemy prisoners as they gave themselves up, and when the tanks turned and came back to their rallying point, Div Cav swung also to herd their prisoners, now numbering some two hundred, back to where the 4 Brigade infantry were consolidating their positions.

That part of the squadron's line which did not follow on behind the tanks was the troop on the extreme right, which turned down a wadi which breaks the line of the escarpment about half-way between **Zaafran** and **Belhamed**—very probably the same re-entrant down which the

Italian trucks had fled the previous evening. This troop was tempted, indeed almost fatally, by a pet German ruse. As the advance drew level with the top of the wadi the three tanks comprising the troop saw two light enemy trucks start up and bolt headlong down to the flat below. The tanks set off after them, but the leading one suddenly pulled up in suspicion when the crew saw, facing them, a single wire shining in the morning dew. This marked the near edge of a minefield and the troop realised just in time that they were being decoyed on to this and probably within range of anti-tank guns. It is interesting now to read **Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger's** account of the advance of 20 Battalion, which he commanded at the time, upon **Belhamed** that night. This same wadi put him off his course, with the result that he led his battalion headquarters, complete with two truckloads of mines, right across the minefield, blissfully ignorant of its existence.

The squadron took no active part in repelling the counter-attacks which followed the advance towards **Belhamed**, but later in the morning, when tanks were seen approaching along the **Trigh Capuzzo**, it was sent to identify them before the guns of 4 Field Regiment were switched round to disperse them.

Major Bonifant was at this stage instructed to establish his headquarters near **Divisional Headquarters** so that the General could order patrols at a moment's notice. Bonifant left his patrol line facing east for the rest of the day, with its right flank resting on the Trigh near **Sidi Muftah**. There was little to report from the troops, but Squadron Headquarters had its afternoon enlivened by a squadron of Stukas which bombed **Divisional Headquarters**.

By now the battle had resolved itself into a struggle for the triangle of land, **Sidi Rezegh – Belhamed – Ed Duda**, since whoever held that had control of the vital bottleneck of communications and, when held by the Eighth Army, it provided a point of contact with the **Tobruk** garrison. If we held the important triangle we held a corridor into **Tobruk**; if the enemy held it he could command a dangerous soft spot in the enlarged

Tobruk perimeter.

After 23 November the armour of **30 Corps** was virtually out of the battle for a few days; but so were *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* and the Italian *Ariete Division*, since General Rommel had made the mistake of thinking the battle was won and had hurried off with all his remaining armour to trap the British forces besieging his posts on the Egyptian frontier from both sides. This proved harder than it looked and the move failed to justify itself.

While the two New Zealand brigades were battling to link up with the **Tobruk** forces there was no specific job for C Squadron in that neighbourhood, and it was kept at Divisional Headquarters to watch the rear and flanks of the Division. It took no part in the attacks which secured **Belhamed** and the blockhouse at **Sidi Rezegh**, nor in the obstinate defence which held these positions against counter-attack; nor in the final assault on the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment near the mosque and the link-up with the **Tobruk** forces at **Ed Duda** on the night of 26–27 November.

The question of maintenance was becoming critical within the squadron as every vehicle had to be kept in a state of instant readiness, but very little could be done. Indeed, the drivers who were able to do any running repairs at all were those who, while they were stationary on the patrol line, contrived to steal a chance to go over their tracks, to replace any broken pins, and to pump a little grease into the bogey bearings. Wireless communication was becoming rather difficult, too, as there was no chance of getting fresh batteries. The Mark VI tank is equipped with a generator for charging its own wireless batteries, but in most cases this was not working. However, the operators did manage to struggle through by interchanging their batteries or, at night-time, by obtaining the use of little charging motors which were fitted on some of the neighbouring units' trucks.

The protective screen was maintained on the 26th and again on the 27th when Squadron Headquarters was moved a little east to Hagfet esc

Sciomar, where there was a track up the Sidi Rezegh escarpment and patrols could be immediately sent across the upper or lower terraces as required. Two troops were sent up this track and then west to Ed Duda to watch the front of 24 and 26 Battalions, since these were now badly depleted and were tiring, but which nevertheless were holding an enormous front with very few men. Fortunately the enemy there was inactive so the day was quiet.

During the afternoon four Stuart tanks, which had been captured from 4 Armoured Brigade earlier in the fighting and then later recovered in working order but out of petrol, were offered to C Squadron. They were received with enthusiasm, the men being delighted at the prospect of using tanks mounting 37-millimetre guns and with a fair turn of speed. These tanks were taken over by Sergeant-Major Mack¹³ and there was considerable competition amongst the various spare personnel, who were living now with the squadron fitters, for a job in the new troop. Nobody knew much about Stuarts with their radial aircraft engines, their Browning machine guns, their 37-mm. cannon and their strange wireless sets, but after an afternoon's experimenting, the crews were quite capable of taking them into action, though no occasion arose for a day or so.

As there was an increasing possibility that the German armoured columns would be on the way back from the frontier, on 28 November the squadron's patrol line was extended so as to cover all approaches from the east. One troop was placed on top of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment and the line reached as far north as the edge of the Gambut escarpment, overlooking the main road, a lateral distance of seven or eight miles. Individual positions had to be carefully chosen in order to cover this increased front, since a portion of the squadron had to be held back for other jobs. During the morning 22 Armoured Brigade was involved in a tank battle to the south of Point 175 and two troops—or six vehicles—were sent to do liaison work between this brigade and the New Zealand Division. In the afternoon the Commander of 4 Brigade wished to clear the area between Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh of some

pockets of resistance. He used 44 Royal Tanks with strong artillery support and a company of 18 Battalion. There were not sufficient Matildas left so two troops of carriers from the Divisional Cavalry completed the line of armoured vehicles, one to each flank. The attack, covered by artillery concentrations from both 4 and 6 Field Regiments and by Vickers gun-fire from near **Belhamed**, was most successful. It swept the area from east to west almost to **Ed Duda** and then swung north to a rallying point west of **Belhamed**. Mortar and machine-gun posts and anti-tank guns were destroyed and about 600 prisoners taken. One of the troops captured three guns described as 'naval'. The other troop was cut about, the troop leader, Second-Lieutenant Ivan **Rutherford**,¹⁴ and his driver, Trooper **Budd**,¹⁵ being killed and their gunner seriously wounded.¹⁶ The squadron felt very bitter about the way in which these men were lost because the carriers had to maintain the same pace as the slower tanks and were unable to use their acceleration and mobility to avoid trouble. The advance was well under way, and many prisoners were coming in with their hands up, when one group climbed out of a sangar containing an anti-tank gun. Rutherford had swung over towards the prisoners to signal them to the rear when, at point-blank range, two Germans who had stayed behind the gun fired a single shot and then walked out themselves with their hands up, expecting quarter. They got none.

This engagement gave the Division full control of what had been a troublesome little piece of ground and which remained of great tactical significance; but by now there were not enough infantry left to hold it securely. The 5th New Zealand Brigade was not available and 1 South African Infantry Brigade was having difficulty in arriving to reinforce the position. Furthermore, General Rommel's armoured columns were back from the frontier and an attack was clearly expected. This was borne out by some marked maps gained the next morning when 21 Battalion captured General von Ravenstein.

The Div Cav patrol line had been reporting all the afternoon a large column looming up along the **Trigh Capuzzo**. Squadron Headquarters

was consistently, and somewhat hopefully, declaring that it was probably 1 South African Brigade, and though Lieutenant **Wilder**¹⁷ thought he could identify half-tracked troop-carriers, he was told to go forward and make contact. The three tanks advanced cautiously until they were fired upon. On reporting this cordial greeting they were still assured that the column must be friendly and were told to go forward and investigate further. By now the column appeared to be splitting, one half continuing along the Trigh directly towards **Divisional Headquarters**; and Corporal **Tippett**,¹⁸ the troop's operator, sagely and appositely observed: 'They'll be able to do their own identifying soon!' The other half swung along the top of the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment. The troop leader reported this, now adding that it was definitely enemy. He was then asked whether it was German or Italian and was told: 'Go closer and make sure.' That was just too much. Under heavy fire, exasperated by Headquarters' persistent passion for detail, Tippett made the best use of what he thought were his few remaining moments by throwing his switch to 'Send' and spitting out: 'What? D'you want me to bloody well shake hands with them? OFF.'

The same headquarters was to be convinced only too well. Soon after, there was a frantic call from just behind the squadron laager for some armoured vehicles to repel an infantry attack against 8 Field Regiment, RA—under command of the New Zealand Division. Both the Div Cav tank troops and, at last, Mack's troop of Stuarts, together with one of the carrier troops, were sent scuttling back. They arrived just in the nick of time to save the 25-pounders from capture, as enemy infantry were in the act of debussing to make a rush at the harassed gunners. For the last few minutes of dusk, all Hell was let loose, with tracer criss-crossing in every direction. Lieutenant Wilder's troop which had been reporting the advance, and was therefore close at hand, hurried back and arrived just in time to catch a wave of German infantry scrambling up towards them, desperately trying to get away from the machine-gun fire of Lieutenant Cole's tanks. Wilder's gunners, in just the right mood after what they had had to take for the previous hour or two, enjoyed themselves immensely dealing with this target and

then attended to several machine-gun posts that had been set up to bring down plunging fire upon the 25-pounders. The darkness which ended the fighting seemed to bring a sudden silence, made all the more vivid by the glare of three enemy vehicles blazing merrily on top of the ridge.

The three troops on the lower terrace were called back to laager while they were still having a fruitless argument with two anti-tank guns, but No. 2 Troop, which was still on top of the ridge, was left there with the instructions to try to locate the Main Dressing Station which, it was feared—and correctly feared—had been overrun. The troop failed to find the hospital and, on the way home, stopped to investigate some knocked-out German vehicles. These they explored to the extent of finding at least one camera, when the men were alarmed by the sound of tanks approaching from the east. Much to their relief these turned out to be British cruisers making a sweep of the area. The tanks' commander suggested, also much to their relief, that since the hospital must have been overrun, and because the area was dangerous for light tanks, the troop should accompany him until it was deemed safe for it to return home.

The evening engagement had cost one casualty, Corporal **Crossan**,¹⁹ who was killed by machine-gun fire. The whole squadron stood to all night since the whereabouts of the enemy column were not known. The early morning of 29 November showed that part of it, one vehicle at least, was not far away at all, for it had spent a restful night right within the squadron laager, its occupants no doubt surprised and delighted not to be detailed for picket. For many months the C Squadron men, in their lighter moments, used to declare that, had they realised that there was an extra vehicle in the laager, they would have insisted that its occupants, Hun or Anglo-Saxon, should share the picket. The Germans for their part must have been very startled to wake up and find English spoken on all sides. They were not too startled, however, to make a smart get-away, and without omitting to show their gratitude for a peaceful night by loosing off a Parthian burst of machine-gun fire.

No. 1 Troop set off in hot pursuit but did not get far when it, too, found that it was certainly not amongst friends. The three tanks ran right into an anti-tank troop, which they immediately engaged with their Vickers guns whilst trying to run them down. The enemy guns had the advantage of slightly lower ground, though the German infantry covering them had been properly scattered. But with the dawn light behind them, they could only be located by their gun-flashes. Two of the tanks were quickly knocked out, the drivers in each case, Corporal **Read**²⁰ and Trooper **Falloon**,²¹ being killed; and of the crews, all the rest except one man were wounded. Cole's own tank accounted for one gun at least before it too was hit, Cole and his gunner being both wounded. The driver, Lance-Corporal **Gollan**,²² used great skill and initiative in breaking off the action, for although he lacked any control from his crew commander or any covering fire from his guns, and though his tank sustained two further hits, he managed, by zig-zagging violently, to reach some cover at Squadron Headquarters.²³

The enemy column apparently turned north during the night down the track which ran from **Bir el Chleta** to **Gambut**, since, on the morning of the 29th, **Divisional Headquarters** came under mortar and shell-fire from the east, below the escarpment, and lost several of its lorries. An attack began to develop from this new quarter, but Sergeant-Major Mack took his four Stuart tanks to the edge of the ridge and managed to hold it. He accounted for several tanks all heavier than his own by advancing until just his guns and sights were showing over the edge and, quickly picking a target, delivering one accurate shot from each gun; then, reversing out of sight to reload, he would creep up somewhere else. For this he was awarded the DCM.

Nos. 2 and 5 Troops (Lieutenants Wilder and **Laing**²⁴) had been sent up the escarpment to watch for movement south of Bir Chleta. They had a bad time. As they were breasting the hill they looked back and saw Cole's troop being cut to pieces and were powerless to do anything about it. Then a few minutes later they approached the New Zealand MDS which had been captured the night before. In Wilder's words:

'I looked back and called him [Laing] up alongside me in his carrier. At the same time the German picquet round the Field Amb. [i.e., the MDS] were picking themselves up from their night's sleep. They were far too strong for us, with at least a Regt. of tanks behind; and all our wounded lying about not far away....I can see him now, sitting in his carrier waiting for the signal to come up. I can also see the look on his face when he saw what was in front of us.'

The two subalterns were by now only too well aware, after seeing the end of the other tank troop, of the hopelessness of trying to regain contact with the MDS with three Bren carriers and three Mark VI tanks, and swung away to the south. In doing this they narrowly missed being cut off by the tanks of *15 Panzer Division* now advancing on **Point 175. They were being bounced about the desert like so many pieces of flotsam on an ocean comber.**

Once the remnants of 21 Battalion were overrun on Point 175 the rear of the New Zealand Division, under pressure from the east, was brought under shellfire from the ridge above it to the south. The enemy was making a determined effort to close the corridor at **Ed Duda, so the Division was virtually surrounded, although there were two armoured brigades, the 4th and the 22nd, and the guns of the **Support Group** harassing the enemy from an outer ring to the south and west.**

At first light on 30 November patrols were sent up the escarpment again. They reported that the Main Dressing Station had for certain been captured, that the enemy was holding **Point 175 in strength and that a closely packed column was approaching from the east. ²⁵ Were these the long-expected South Africans? But no: the patrols were not sure and, on investigating further, were fired upon. Every gun in the Division was trained on this, an artilleryman's dream, and the Divisional Artillery commander gave the order to fire. Like so many wailing banshees the shells came howling over the patrols' heads and in a few minutes a cloud of red-brown dust and grey smoke had enveloped the whole close-packed column. Here and there were angry stabs of light where shells exploded,**

or a dull red glow under a mushroom of heavy black smoke where a truck caught fire.

So the Division, even hard-pressed, short of men and surrounded, was able to show that it still possessed a sharp sting, and Mussolini's much vaunted *Ariete Armoured Division* fled from the punishment, leaving much transport blazing and two tanks knocked out completely.

But that did not end the New Zealand Division's troubles as it was under constant and accurately observed shellfire from the escarpment above, and gradually the toll of casualties mounted. One mortar bomb landed almost under the tail of the C Squadron fitters' truck and wounded three, one of whom, Corporal **Wood**,²⁶ died in hospital. That day Squadron Headquarters was indeed an uncomfortable place to inhabit for there was nowhere to go and nothing to do when the shells and bombs began to fall; one just had to sit and take it. Out on patrol the men could at least get out of sight, if not out of range. Certainly, Squadron Headquarters was a cheerless place that day.

As the afternoon drew on the situation became worse and worse. First 24 Battalion, and later most of the 26th, were overrun: *15 Panzer Division* with fifty tanks had **Sidi Rezegh**. As soon as dusk fell preparations were made to fall back into **Tobruk** if the need arose, for in the morning the whole of the Division would be under direct observation from the ridge above. If only the South Africans could take **Point 175**; but they could not manage this; and moreover, due to bad atmospheric conditions, wireless contact with them was temporarily lost.

The last contact with 1 South African Brigade had indicated that it was trying to recapture **Point 175** so, with 25 Battalion and 8 Field Company, NZE, still in position west of this point, **General Freyberg** considered it both essential and possible, if **Point 175** were retaken, that the South Africans should push on through 25 Battalion and retake **Sidi Rezegh** also by dawn. He told Major Bonifant to send a troop to take a message to Brigadier Pienaar ordering the recapture of **Sidi Rezegh**.

Bonifant considered this far too much to ask of any junior officer and elected to go himself. It entailed finding his way by dead reckoning, and certainly running the gauntlet right through enemy positions. Courage he could expect of any of his officers, but he could not ask them to be lucky too. Lieutenant Wilder volunteered to go with him.

They selected two Bren carriers as being smaller targets and lower to the ground than tanks, and perhaps a little more reliable, and set out for the Blockhouse. This is on the escarpment about half-way between the **Sidi Rezegh mosque and **Point 175**, and was still held by 25 Battalion. Here they learnt that the enemy was still on **Point 175**, and in the darkness they could see the lines of fire of both the enemy's and what they presumed was the South Africans' gunfire. Bonifant decided, therefore, to head south until he was in a position to run at right angles straight between this duel. The patrol got safely through but, once clear of the lines of fire, it eventually happened upon some transport which, by listening to voices, they could recognise as German. The two carriers drove straight on unobtrusively and passed through and out of sight. As Corporal Ryan writes:**

'[it] was like waiting for a hand to pluck us out of the dark. Soon after this we were bearing left but heading away from **Point 175 when we discovered we were following a patrol of some kind. [Imagine the nerves then.] It was impossible to say who they were so we crept along behind unobserved, as we thought, until they disappeared into a slight depression. This could have been our end, as we followed at a safe distance only to find the patrol had fanned out and was waiting for us to come along. We obliged and were halted at a reasonable distance and Bonny made no bones about it—just carried on, just us covering him.'**

The patrol turned out to be of South African armoured cars and the two officers were whisked away to meet Brigadier Pienaar, to whom they delivered the message. This of course, in assuming that the South Africans had already taken Point 175 and needed only to pass through the 25 Battalion and 8 Field Company positions to counter-attack on the

Mosque, turned out to be asking the near-impossible, since they were some 13 miles short of the Point. General Norrie, who was near at hand, agreed that, were the brigade able even to take [Point 175](#) during the night, or if it were just by-passed, it was still physically impossible to recapture the Mosque at first light.

So the two officers were sent back to the New Zealand Division with these dismal tidings. And furthermore, they had to get there!

In making a big detour out to the south they completely missed the Blockhouse and at dawn found themselves with a German armoured column between it and themselves.

‘Without any hesitation [writes Ryan] Bonny gave the order straight through the lines to the Block House. We took off with Nick [Wilder] in pursuit and everything went well until we had cleared the lines and [were] half way across the flat to the Block House. 3 or 4 German tanks on our left opened up and the chase was on. Fortunately everything kept passing just over the top of us until one scored a direct hit on Nick's carrier. Looking round I saw it disappear in a cloud of dust and smoke, slow right down, and come again.’

Both carriers were still under fire as they clattered and slithered down the escarpment, and full praise must go to their drivers, Troopers [Bloxham](#) ²⁷ and [Gambirazzi](#). ²⁸ The latter's carrier just made 4 Brigade Headquarters though holed in several places, including one in the sump. It never went again.

By now the battle had been raging and swaying in this vast cockpit for two weeks. Our wireless, and probably the enemy's too, had been playing tricks, so that friends and foes appeared in unsuspected places and both adopted the same technique— to loose off a shot and see what answer it provoked. Even by using this method both sides were often mistaken, because to some extent they were using each other's weapons. Small wonder then that nerves were frayed while the tension lasted.

Soon after daylight on 1 December the expected attack came from

Sidi Rezegh against **Belhamed** and forced the remnants of 6 Brigade to fall back through 4 Brigade to **Zaafran**. The **20th Battalion** was overrun by tanks and the survivors captured. This attack also split 19 Battalion properly in half, for part of it was at **Ed Duda** and the remainder at **Zaafran**. The 18th was also cut off and joined the **Tobruk** garrison. The Corridor had ceased to exist.

The Division was no longer capable of offensive infantry action; but the field guns, the anti-tank guns—though both of these had suffered heavy casualties—and the last few heavy tanks of the gallant 8th and 44th Royal Tanks were still capable of hitting back; capable, ready, and willing to smack at the enemy whenever and wherever he showed himself at close quarters. And we still had the most telling defence of all — high morale.

That day the attacks came in from all sides on the stubborn circle, but these were not pressed hard, for at every indication of an attack the guns stabbed back, while the **RAF** bombed *15 Panzer Division*.

The sun set behind a cloud of dust where a last attack was being prepared. The guns and the few remaining I tanks held this off while the remains of the Division were forming into a tight column for the drive back to the frontier. They were to leave behind them the last few tanks, with those lion-hearted crews gallantly intending to fight a rearguard action alone. By 6 p.m. the column was on the way back along the Trigh **Capuzzo**. The Div Cav squadron, guided by flares from 1 South African Brigade, led the way to the top of the escarpment by the track its men now knew so well. Once on top, the column passed through a South African rearguard and travelled due south for an hour before making a beeline for **Bir Gibni**, about 30 miles away.

It was a hard night. As soon as the column was clear of the enemy area, reaction set in; but the men, particularly the drivers, all utterly exhausted, found themselves contending with an even more persistent and relentless opponent, sleep. The night was dark as Erebus and the whole 30 miles of the journey was a waking nightmare. Mile after mile

the drivers, peering through monotonous darkness at the murky shapelessness of a vehicle ahead, were continuously fighting a losing battle for consciousness.

The column reached **Bir Gibni** at 4 a.m. on 2 December and, the tension now relaxed, every man was asleep in a matter of seconds, many of them before they had got into their blankets.

The Division, less 5 Brigade, was headed for **Baggush** to rest before beginning to refit, and the journey was continued at 11 a.m., through the gap at El Rabta. The Divisional Cavalry Regiment was now under command of 3 South African Brigade at **Bardia** and, as the New Zealand 4 and 6 Brigades had passed the frontier, C Squadron halted before heading north to rejoin the other squadrons.

General Freyberg sent for Major Bonifant to say goodbye and, in so doing, gave him a most heartening word of thanks. He congratulated him on the work of the squadron, saying that it had done every job asked of it in the true cavalry spirit and that valuable information had been gained by its efforts.

¹ Special Air Service.

² **Sgt C. J. Dawson; Trentham**; born Aust., 24 Jan 1914; fitter and turner; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

³ Maj J. H. Garland, ED; **Whangarei**; born **Waiuku**, 4 Apr 1911; farmer; OC B Sqn Jul 1941-Apr 1942; 2 i/c Div Cav Apr-Nov 1942; CO 1 Bn Northland Regt 1952-55; Hon. Col Feb 1962.

⁴ **Lt J. R. Little**; Hawarden; born **Christchurch**, 4 Mar 1910; stud master; wounded 18 Feb 1944.

⁵ These were a section of 259 Bty, 65 A-Tk Regt, RA; a section of 171 Bty, 57 Lt AA Regt, RA, was also attached.

⁶ King's Dragoon Guards.

⁷ Maj M. G. Fowler, MBE; Papakura; born Motueka, 11 Nov 1906; Regular soldier.

⁸ Cpl J. C. Magan; Papakura; born Gorge Road, Southland, 29 Oct 1916; labourer; wounded 21 Oct 1944.

⁹ Which was, in fact, the truth.

¹⁰ Lt T. F. L. Ward, m.i.d.; Tangiteroria, Kirikopuni; born Ohaeawai, 30 Nov 1917; farmer; wounded 1 Sep 1942; Deputy Commander (Col), 1 Inf Bde Gp, NZ Terr. Force, 1962-.

¹¹ Direction Finding.

¹² 'Thank God! The British!'

¹³ Lt-Col C. W. Mack, DCM; Wellington; born Dunedin, 9 Nov 1913; schoolmaster; DAEWS, Army HQ, Sep 1960-.

¹⁴ 2 Lt I. Rutherford; born Christchurch, 11 Oct 1914; labourer; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

¹⁵ Tpr L. W. Budd; born England, 14 Nov 1913; car painter; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

¹⁶ The gunner, L-Cpl D. S. Clark, was so seriously wounded that the casualty lists had him entered as Died of Wounds. Some months later, in Syria, he returned to the regiment in time to admire his own photograph amongst the Roll of Honour in a newly-arrived Auckland Weekly News.

¹⁷ Lt-Col N. P. Wilder, DSO; Waipukurau; born NZ 29 Mar 1914;

farmer; CO Div Cav Apr 1944-Jan 1945; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

¹⁸ **Cpl K. E. Tippett, MM; Te Awamutu; born Lyttelton, 27 Sep 1914; car painter.**

¹⁹ **Cpl H. McA. Crossan; born NZ 26 Oct 1914; civil servant; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.**

²⁰ **Cpl E. C. Read; born NZ 30 Jan 1914; farmhand; killed in action 29 Nov 1941.**

²¹ **Tpr J. E. Falloon; born Masterton, 6 Feb 1918; farmer; killed in action 29 Nov 1941.**

²² **L-Sgt S. C. Gollan; Auckland; born NZ 12 Oct 1914; despatch clerk; twice wounded.**

²³ **Tpr J. A. Stanley, one of the wounded, lost his life when the merchant ship *Chakdina*, which was taking wounded back to Alexandria, was torpedoed shortly after leaving Tobruk. One other of the troop, Cpl R. J. M. Loughnan (the author), who was being evacuated on the same ship as a stretcher case, was saved by the unselfishness and gallantry of a man from C Squadron, Tpr M. W. Stewart, who came within seconds of losing his life in so doing.**

²⁴ **Lt H. M. Laing; born Invercargill, 14 Nov 1912; farmer; died of wounds while p.w. 4 Jul 1942.**

²⁵ **There was an imaginative phrase used in describing this column and it stuck with the regiment for all time. Thereafter any collection of men, materials, or machinery was always referred to as a 'heap-o'-guts'.**

²⁶ **Cpl C. Wood; born England, 28 Dec 1908; labourer; died of wounds 30 Nov 1941.**

²⁷ Tpr A. F. Bloxham; Balclutha; born Kaitangata, 28 Jan 1918; coal-miner; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

²⁸ Cpl J. J. Gambirazzi; born Gisborne, 28 Aug 1916; surfaceman.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 9 – THE CAPTURE OF BARDIA

CHAPTER 9

The Capture of Bardia

THE NEW ZEALANDERS' thrust, which cut off **Bardia** from the west, implanted between **Bardia** and **Sollum** a firm wedge into the enemy's fortress line on the frontier; so, when the greater part of the Division made off towards **Sidi Rezegh** on 23 November, 5 Brigade Group was left under command of 4 Indian Division, and later of **13 Corps**, to hold this position and exploit it until the brigade could be relieved and allowed to rejoin the Division. Despite the fact that the other two brigades were desperately in need of reinforcement and that the arrival of a third brigade would have entirely changed the whole course of the fighting, this could not be done, for there was no brigade to replace the 5th.

During the previous evening, the 22nd, the regimental patrol line was taken over by units of 4 Brigade, and the regiment, less C Squadron, which remained where it was to join up with 4 Brigade for the advance on **Gambut**, was to come under command of 5 Brigade; and so it retired to laager positions near the **Trigh Capuzzo**. In the morning it assembled at **Sidi Azeiz**, which was held by 22 Battalion. There was no call on the squadrons that day, the 23rd, and the crews took advantage of the lull to do what maintenance and small repairs they could.

That night the squadrons found themselves required to laager with the infantry. In an infantry unit the type of laager adopted is of a very set form because, owing to the large amount of transport, it would be impossible in the dark to find any particular headquarters. The men of the cavalry squadrons, accustomed to forming little circles just as each troop happened to arrive at the end of the day, voiced, rather unreasonably perhaps, their disgust at this 'parade-ground' type of laager.

On the 24th Brigadier **Hargest**,¹ who had sent 22 Battalion to **Menastir** and had moved his own headquarters to **Sidi Azeiz**, gave the two squadrons an extensive patrol line which ran in a huge semi-circle

of a radius of about ten miles round Sidi Azeiz. The line began at **Bir Zemla** in the north, ran along the top of the escarpment past the **Bardia** defences, south to Fort **Capuzzo**, and then more west to Bir Hafid. This was a very long line to be covered by two squadrons, totalling at most only twenty-six vehicles. Its function was to link up the 22 and 23 Battalion positions.

Overnight the Brigadier received word that enemy armoured columns had left the main battle and were thrusting east to their frontier positions and doing what damage they could to our lines of communication. One of these columns was coming along the **Trigh el Abd** and was therefore expected to meet the Wire, and possibly pass into **Egypt**, at **Sheferzen**. Brigadier Hargest, on the 25th, asked for two carrier troops to patrol a line south of **Sidi Azeiz**, running west from **Sollum Barracks**, through **Musaid** to Bir Hafid, upon which line they could give warning of an enemy approach.

These patrols made no contact with the enemy, but word came through during the day that a column was indeed on the Egyptian side of the Wire, was heading north, and by dark was some 20 miles away, under attention from the **RAF**. So, in the evening, the Brigadier took the precaution of sending his transport well away from **Sidi Azeiz** to the protection of 22 Battalion at **Bir Zemla**; whither Captain McQueen went also with HQ Squadron.

At 5.30 a.m. on the 26th it was thought that the squadron had got lost and was blundering back into **Sidi Azeiz**. There were indeed transport vehicles coming right into the B Squadron laager but these turned out to be enemy. The squadron opened fire and the attached troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery knocked out a staff car containing two doctors. At this stage of the fighting it was not uncommon for small parties of enemy transport to be picked up anywhere, since General Rommel had impatiently forged ahead leaving, straggled all over the desert, any vehicles which could not keep up.

All day on the 26th the two squadrons patrolled the same line,

picking up odd prisoners whom they handed over to Brigade. These prisoners were from many different units, mostly lorried infantry, but they included quite a variation of troops: tank and anti-tank, field artillery, signals, reconnaissance and medical. Altogether there seemed to be quite a lot of disorganisation among the enemy.

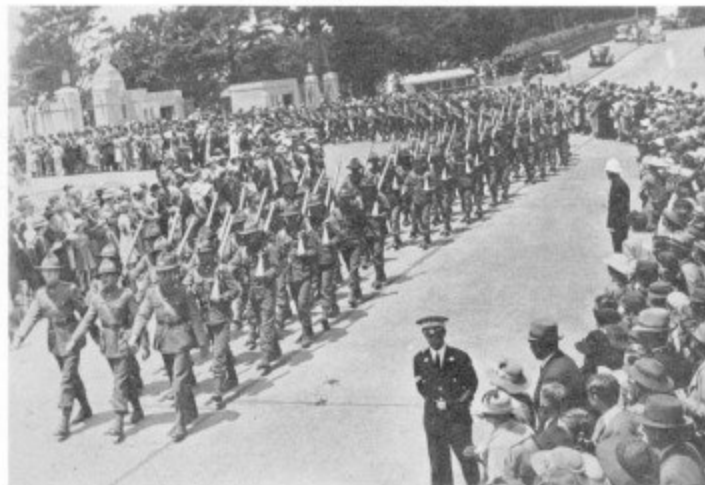
Rommel's move to the frontier was designed to catch the British forces besieging the frontier positions and, attacking them from the west, to crush them against his fortress line.



Breaking camp at Ngaruawahia, 4 January 1940

Breaking camp at [Ngaruawahia](#), 4 January 1940

Divisional Cavalry leaves Auckland Domain after the farewell parade, 3 January 1940



Divisional Cavalry leaves Auckland Domain after the farewell parade, 3 January 1940



First Echelon convoy in the Indian Ocean

First Echelon convoy in the Indian Ocean

Arrival in Egypt—marching in to Maadi Camp



Arrival in Egypt—marching in to Maadi Camp



Lt-Col C. J. Pierce (*left*) and Capt R. H. Bell (Adjutant) at Maadi, August 1940

Lt-Col C. J. Pierce (*left*)and Capt R. H. Bell (Adjutant) at Maadi, August 1940

Colonel Pierce's driver (Sgt A. T. Caley) sets his sun compass



Colonel Pierce's driver (Sgt A. T. Caley) sets his sun compass



Arriving to take part in the Anzac Day service during manoeuvres at El Saff, April 1940

Arriving to take part in the Anzac Day service during manoeuvres at [El Saff](#), April 1940

Training with Mark II light tanks, Wadi Digla, 1940



Training with Mark II light tanks, [Wadi Digla](#), 1940



At Helwan Camp, January 1941. *Left to right:* C. B. McIntosh, W. T. Weir, R. J. Loughnan and M. G. Loughnan

At Helwan Camp, January 1941. *Left to right:* C. B. McIntosh, W. T. Weir, R. J. Loughnan and M. G. Loughnan

The train journey north through Greece



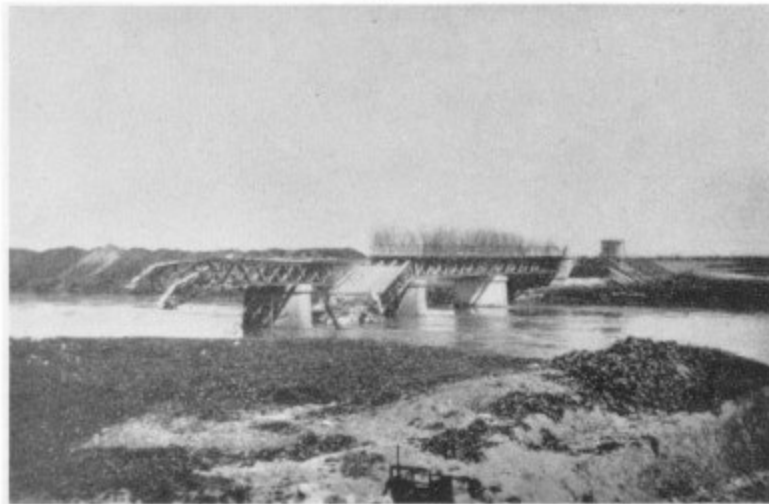
The train journey north through Greece



Marmon-Herrington armoured car in Greece

Marmon-Herrington armoured car in Greece

The Aliakmon bridge after its destruction



The Aliakmon bridge after its destruction



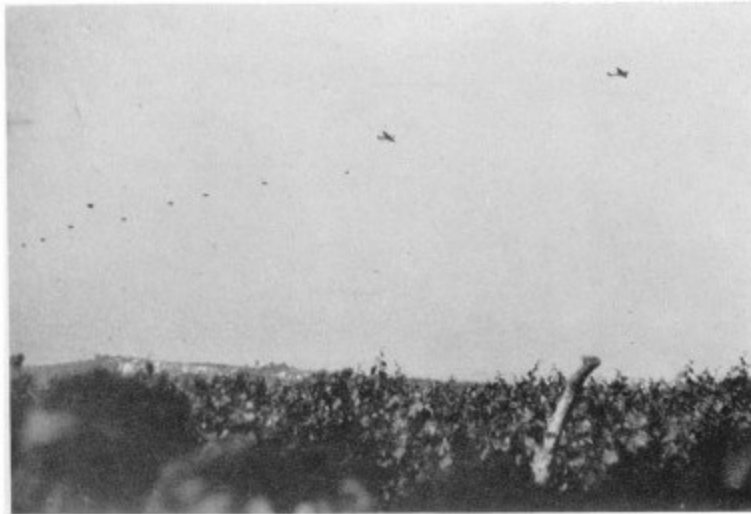
German dive-bomber shot down by the Divisional Cavalry during the withdrawal in Greece

German dive-bomber shot down by the Divisional Cavalry during the withdrawal in Greece

'The morning we landed in Crete'



'The morning we landed in Crete'



German parachutists land near Galatas

German parachutists land near Galatas

These soldiers rowed an 18 ft open boat 150 miles from Greece towards Crete until taken in tow by a Greek scow:

Sergeant-Major G. T. Seccombe (*nearest camera*); (*behind him*) Sgt T. Hayward of 28 (Maori) Battalion; (*in tin hat*) Sgt Dick Rakanui of 28 Bn; (*centre, amidships*) Maj E. R. Harford; (*by gunwale*) Tpr A. J. Jonson; (*with towel round his head*) Lt M. P. Studholme, Tpr R. Baker, Tpr R. Wildash (*at oar*); (*behind Studholme*) Tpr H. Andrell, Tpr C. Lovell (*centre*), Tpr T. Bradford (*hand on rowlock*); Tpr W. Greenwood (*in bows*); *Absent*, Cpl W. J. Ryan (the photographer)



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C Squadron crew with a recaptured Stuart tank. WO II C. W. Mack, Cpl P. L. Titchener, Tprs A. J. Kennington and T. G. L. Hawkins

C Squadron crew with a recaptured Stuart tank. WO II C. W. Mack, Cpl P. L. Titchener, Tprs A. J. Kennington and T. G. L. Hawkins

B Squadron tank at Bardia. *Left to right:* A. G. Scott, A. McMahon, R. Stokes, P. Fullerton-Smith. *On right:* The mosque at Sidi Rezegh



B Squadron tank at Bardia. *Left to right:* A. G. Scott, A. McMahon, R. Stokes, P. Fullerton-Smith. *On right:* The mosque at Sidi Rezegh



Prisoner-of-war compound, Bardia, 2 January 1942

Prisoner-of-war compound, Bardia, 2 January 1942

General Freyberg inspects the Regiment at Maadi, 4 March, 1942



General Freyberg inspects the Regiment at Maadi, 4 March, 1942



Captured German staff car, retained by the Divisional Cavalry,
bogged down on the Homs-Tripoli road

Captured German staff car, retained by the Divisional Cavalry, bogged down on the Homs-Tripoli road

Convoy halts beside Lake Tiberias en route to Egypt, June 1942



Convoy halts beside Lake Tiberias en route to [Egypt](#), June 1942



The first issue of Honey tanks, 8 July 1942

The first issue of Honey tanks, 8 July 1942

RHQ signals control truck in communication with squadrons,
July 1942



RHQ signals control truck in communication with squadrons, July 1942



Mr Churchill meets Sgt Alan Sperry during his visit to 2 NZ Division at El Alamein, August 1942

Mr Churchill meets Sgt Alan Sperry during his visit to 2 NZ Divison at [El Alamein](#), August 1942

Dust



Dust



Wheel tracks, El Alamein

Wheel tracks, El Alamein

Divisional Cavalry convoy in Halfaya Pass, 11 November 1942



Divisional Cavalry convoy in Halfaya Pass, 11 November 1942



Bivouac near Bardia, November 1942

Bivouac near Bardia, November 1942

Lunch halt at El Adem, December 1942



Lunch halt at El Adem, December 1942



Near Tmimi—morning brew before stowing the bivy

Near Tmimi—morning brew before stowing the bivy

Trooper Reg Bird, near Tocra Pass, 9 December 1942



Trooper Reg Bird, near Tocra Pass, 9 December 1942

When this plan did not meet with much success he concentrated on increasing the confusion round our Lines of Communication, while at the same time he was bringing supplies to his own frontier forces. Arrived at the frontier, he split his force into two columns so as to sweep northwards on either side of the Wire. The column on the Egyptian side had the aggressive role but the other was not a fighting force: it comprised a huge supply column bound for **Bardia**. This convoy took practically all day to pass between **Sidi Azeiz** and **Bir Zemla** but, due to shortage of ammunition, the guns of 5 Brigade could do little about it. The Divisional Cavalry was almost as powerless as there were protecting tanks interspersed through the column of soft-skinned vehicles. Lieutenant **Murchison**² of A Squadron made one daring raid on the transport but was very quickly engaged by a large tank before he could do much damage. He was awarded the MC for his dash and gallantry.

The enemy column on the Egyptian side of the frontier attacked supply depots and workshops and barked its knuckles against 4 Indian Division before advancing towards **Halfaya**. Here, under cover of fire, it attacked Point 207; then, further dividing into three groups, it attacked 23 Battalion at **Musaid**, **Sollum Barracks** and **Capuzzo**, before continuing on into **Bardia**. All these attacks were beaten off and the enemy suffered quite considerable losses.

While the attack was developing against 23 Battalion in **Capuzzo**, two troops of Divisional Cavalry were sent from Sidi Azeiz to chase off some enemy armoured cars which were commanding the road into the fort, and to escort back a lorry-load of ammunition for 5 Field Regiment. This patrol successfully cleared the road and pressed on to **Capuzzo**, only to find that all the vehicles carrying the ammunition had been sent away; so they had to return empty handed.

Four South African armoured cars which had been on the way to **13 Corps** Headquarters at Bir el Hariga, about ten miles to the west, were unable to get there because of the presence of an enemy column on the route, so they were attached in the meantime to 5 Brigade Headquarters.

After dark they were sent, under command of Captain E. R. Andrews of B Squadron, to **Bir Zemla** as an escort to the brigade LAD and some of the **RAF** detachment, and to escort back four guns and supplies of petrol, food and ammunition.

At first light on the 27th the squadron patrols detailed to occupy a line east of **Sidi Azeiz** had barely left the laager before they began to send back in quick succession a series of disquietening reports. The first came from an A Squadron troop which had captured a wireless truck, and all its personnel, which drove in from the east. The troop leader was suspicious of the deliberate way in which this truck had driven up to him and of the smugness of the captured crew. Then a report came from a B Squadron troop leader who said that some thirty or forty tanks with guns and transport were approaching from the east. The previous suspicions were therefore well grounded as this column had been led in by the 'pathfinder' who had just been captured. Lieutenant-Colonel Nicoll immediately drove over in his tank to Brigadier Hargest and was in the middle of warning him that a strong attack was almost upon them when the first shells began to fall.

The Brigadier had no choice but to fight where he stood; but there was no use in having a mobile unit sitting there under the shellfire, so he ordered Div Cav to get out as best it could. The greater part of the squadrons were already out on patrol, but Nicoll led the balance of the regiment boldly across the enemy front as this force was deploying for the assault. He suffered surprisingly small casualties in so doing. The **RAF** observer's truck was hit and did not get away; some of the regiment's B Echelon and one DR were left behind; the IO's carrier was hit but did not stop, though the gunner, Corporal **Bridge**,³ was wounded. Bridge sat there nursing a smashed leg which he subsequently lost, and gritted his teeth until he could be given attention when the regiment was clear.

Meanwhile the squadrons had been forced to retire in face of the attack, A Squadron to the west and B Squadron to the east; and from these positions, powerless to do anything about it, the patrols watched

the whole Brigade Headquarters take the bitter thrashing that they, too, might have suffered. A little before 9.30 a.m.—less than an hour after the attack had begun— the patrols had to report that the whole position seemed to have surrendered and that the enemy column had formed up and moved off westwards. The whole regiment then rallied about five miles to the south and set off to join 7 Indian Infantry Brigade at **Sidi Omar Nuovo**. This was an unfortunate decision, for Div Cav should have kept contact and then would have known that it could easily have recaptured the New Zealand prisoners being marched off to **Bardia** only lightly guarded. But the chance was lost.

En route to **Sidi Omar**, two carriers and a tank had to be abandoned owing to mechanical breakdowns, so on arrival every man got busy on the maintenance of his vehicle.

Headquarters Squadron was still at **Bir Zemla**, some 25 miles away, with enemy troops possibly ranging the intervening country. The squadron was known to have been involved several times in the fighting while under the protection of 22 Battalion. A and B Squadrons were badly in need of their B Echelons so, while patrols were sent out to the north and west, Lieutenant **Sommerville**⁴ was sent to **Bir Zemla** to inform Lieutenant- Colonel **Andrew**⁵ how the rest of the brigade had fared and to guide HQ Squadron back to **Sidi Omar**.

The patrols found that the situation in the frontier area seemed to be quietening down again, an impression borne out by an intercepted enemy message to the effect that their armoured formations were being recalled westwards. There was little to report other than a few enemy armoured cars, which were not engaged, and a lone German soldier wandering about the desert, who was made prisoner.

Colonel Andrew had thought it unwise to allow the Div Cav B Echelon to set out for **Sidi Omar** so lightly guarded, since **Bir Ghirba** was still in enemy hands, and as he was now able to move southwards himself, he kept the squadron till after dark when he was moving his own battalion.

Early in the morning of the 26th the Divisional Cavalry set out for **Fort Capuzzo** and met 22 Battalion at **Point 201**. Colonel Nicoll passed on instructions to Colonel Andrew from the Commander of 4 Indian Division to take command of 5 Brigade Group and the attached troops and to hold a line from **Capuzzo** through **Musaïd** to the barracks overlooking **Sollum**; he was to set Div Cav patrolling west of **Bardia** to prevent any movement between there and **Tobruk**. Thus all the enemy-held positions on the frontier would be isolated.

Upon meeting the fighting squadrons HQ Squadron refuelled the AFVs before continuing on to **Sidi Omar** with the surplus transport from 22 Battalion, which was carrying prisoners and wounded. The battalion, with the Div Cav in the lead, headed for **Musaïd**, where the regiment laagered a little to the west of the fort.

At first light on the 30th A Squadron began patrolling north as far as the **Bardia- Tobruk** road and B Squadron towards Bir Ghirba. The regiment now had a South African anti-tank battery, less two troops, attached; and attached to each of the squadrons was a troop from 5 Field Regiment, a troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery, and a platoon of No. 4 Company, 27 MG Battalion.

Major Sutherland of A Squadron soon had occasion to call on his field guns against a convoy leaving **Bardia** along the road to **Tobruk**, but which smartly turned back under the gunfire.

There were eighty New Zealand wounded at **Sidi Azeiz** whose evacuation to the 23 Battalion's RAP at **Capuzzo** was organised by Lieutenant J. G. Wynyard.

In the evening it was decided that the New Zealand brigade group should assume a more mobile role operating from Bir Zemla, and accordingly it was relieved by 5 Indian Infantry Brigade. The move to **Bir Zemla** was made on 1 December, with Div Cav forming a screen round the front and flanks of the brigade column.

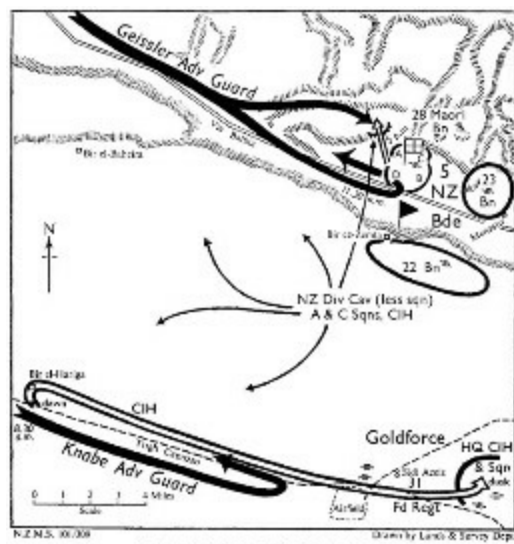
The duties of the brigade group now were to cut all communications between **Bardia** and the west, to begin clearing the area of any enemy in the coastal region west of the **Bardia** perimeter, and to form two mobile columns which could harass any enemy who tried to make contact with the frontier posts.

On 2 December, while A Squadron maintained its patrols along the main road, B Squadron put out a protective screen to the south and west. Brigade Headquarters needed time to reorganise and RHQ helped during the day to put together new Intelligence and signals establishments.

Both the squadrons worked well to the west, almost level with **Gambut**. They took three prisoners from the German *8 Tank Regiment* and A Squadron reported much material hidden in the wadis which ran down towards the coast. This country was too difficult to cover completely with AFVs so co-operation was arranged with A Company, 28 (Maori) Battalion, to ferret out these supplies.

In the morning, the 3rd, the company went out and began collecting any material that would be useful to us and destroying what was not wanted. A flank guard to the west was being mounted by A Squadron which, before long, was reporting a column of about a hundred vehicles with guns approaching.

The company began falling back towards **Bir Zemla**, covered, as it went, by the squadron. The retirement was done very steadily so as to entice the enemy into a trap which was being laid by the whole **Maori Battalion**. The Maoris were lying in wait in slit trenches below the escarpment. They held their fire and made no movement until the leading enemy vehicles, part of *Geissler Column, 15 Panzer Division*, were right upon them. Then they opened fire with everything they had. This was the signal for 22 Battalion on their flank, and for 5 Field



AMBUSH AT MENASTIR, 3 DECEMBER

Regiment on top of the escarpment which had kept the enemy's attention engaged with desultory fire, to open up also. The enemy put up some resistance, their guns incidentally ranging on Divisional Cavalry RHQ, which was enjoying a grandstand view from the top of the escarpment, but the Maoris had gained the enormous advantage of surprise and the enemy fell back, mostly on foot, leaving many vehicles burning.

During the afternoon a detachment of Maoris with a troop of carriers from B Squadron followed up the success by chasing the enemy further afield. The cost to the enemy from the whole action was 130 prisoners, of whom 20 were wounded, about 100 killed, many vehicles destroyed and four guns captured. Two of these, 50-mm. calibre, were gladly taken over by the South African anti-tank gunners attached to Div Cav who had stayed with the Maoris for the battle.

Once the enemy had been led into the ambush the regiment did not take much part in the fighting, but while it was going on Corporal Alan Sperry earned a bar to his MM. He rode forward on his motor-cycle under mortar and machine-gun fire and drew an accurate picture of the enemy's dispositions. Then later, when he noticed some of his own B Echelon vehicles heading unwittingly for the enemy's positions, he rode out again through some very rough country and, under fire, headed

them off and led them back.

While the final mopping up of *Geissler Column* was going on a Div Cav troop brought back six Italian prisoners and an Australian seaman off the ship *Parramatta*, sunk outside **Tobruk** some days before.

There was more than one probe eastwards by enemy columns. The next day, 4 December, RHQ and the two fighting squadrons continued their harassing role on the main road while the brigade moved off to relieve 5 Indian Brigade at **Capuzzo** and **Sollum**. Late in the morning RHQ heard that fifteen enemy tanks were advancing eastwards along the **Trigh Capuzzo**. Patrols out in that direction were advised and RHQ, with the attached troops, moved into the shelter of the re-entrants along the escarpment, hoping to repeat the previous day's ambush; but this was not to be, for no attack developed. Nor was there any clash with a further twenty-nine tanks that were reported on the escarpment during the afternoon. Second-Lieutenant **Ormond**⁶ did his best to bring the enemy to blows when, ignoring the fire from three tanks on his flank, he led his troop in to engage six armoured cars. These withdrew hurriedly but, try as he might, Ormond could not catch them. This exploit was one of several for which he was awarded the MC.

A troop of the **Central India Horse** had attached itself to RHQ during the morning, and in the afternoon broke up an enemy patrol which was operating a telephone line a few miles west of **Bir Zemla**.

The regiment had made contact with the enemy in several different places throughout the day, and when the squadrons came in at dusk, the whole unit made off south-east to laager near **Gabr Ahmar**, about five miles from **Capuzzo**. It is never wise for a light unit when patrolling alone to dally long in any particular spot, for there is always a possibility that the enemy, having reasoned out its laager position, might move a strong force there overnight. The regiment maintained its value by keeping mobile, pricking and probing, and using its eyes to gain information and its fleetness to keep out of trouble. At most times there were guns attached to it as protection against a sudden raid; but to

anticipate a raid is better protection. The technique of the regiment on such occasions when, responsible for its own protection, it had made contact with enemy forces, was to move off after dark, to all appearances aimlessly—and the more aimlessly the more confusing to a possible raider— and laager five or ten miles away. Colonel Nicoll, like succeeding commanders, used the regiment, and used it wisely, as a foil: riposte—retire—thrust; and it was probably that same motive that brought the regiment through its cavalry days with such an extraordinarily small casualty list.

* * * * *

While the ambush was going on against *Geissler Column* at **Bir Zemla**, C Squadron was on its way from El Rabta to rejoin the regiment. Its route led along the frontier track to **Sidi Omar**, where the squadron paused for the rest of the day to do its first maintenance in twelve days. The squadron waited at **Sidi Omar** the next morning, 4 December, for a convoy which it escorted past enemy-held **Bir Ghirba** to 5 Brigade Headquarters at **Capuzzo**. Here it met HQ Squadron, the first of the regiment it had seen since setting off for **Gambut** on 23 November. With HQ Squadron, as with the rest of the regiment, whom they met at **Gabr Ahmar** on the 6th, the C Squadron men found themselves subjects of both interest and envy—interest at the stories they had to tell of the fighting round **Sidi Rezegh**, and envy for the recaptured tanks that they brought back. As he caught sight of the General Stuarts, the eyes of every man in the regiment glowed. There was not a man who would not have gladly exchanged his carrier or his Mark VI tank for a ‘Honey’ with its powerful motor and burst of speed; with its quick-firing gun that had already proved what it could do in the hands of a determined man.

The 4th Indian Division had been ordered to join the fighting round **Tobruk** and was being relieved by 2 South African Division. So on the 4th Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew was ordered to take his brigade back to the **Sollum – Capuzzo** area and relieve 5 Indian Brigade. Under the new command the New Zealand brigade's duties remained the same, namely to contain the enemy's frontier forces and to maintain mobile columns

working westwards.

On 5 December 'Nickforce' was formed, comprising the Divisional Cavalry, 258 Battery of the South African anti-tank regiment, two troops of 32 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, a troop of field guns from 27 NZ Battery, and a platoon of 27 MG Battalion. But this column never operated as such since 5 Brigade left the area a few days later.

In the meantime the squadrons went out in an all-round defensive screen and, during the afternoon of the 5th, patrols made contact with the **Central India Horse, which was leaving to rejoin 4 Indian Division, and with the headquarters of 3 South African Brigade, which was moving up towards **Menastir** to stage a demonstration against **Bardia**.**

The regiment's patrol positions remained the same on the 6th and the enemy gunners in **Bardia showed that they were on the alert by firing with uncomfortable accuracy on any movement within range.**

On the 7th the system of mobile columns began to operate. B Squadron formed two columns, 'Vic' and 'Mac', with the Imperial Light Horse Battalion, 3 South African Brigade; and A and C Squadrons, with the attached field and anti-tank guns, formed respectively 'Gold' and 'Flake' columns. All four columns began sweeping westwards, 'Vic' and 'Mac' astride the main road, and 'Gold' and 'Flake' along the Trigh **Capuzzo to within a few miles of **Bir el Chleta**. There was not much excitement that day and 'Gold' and 'Flake' returned to laager at **Gabr Ahmar** while the other two laagered out. RHQ went back to **Bir Zemla** on the 8th while 'Vic' and 'Mac' columns began a sweep back, this time to the north of the road. On arriving back they reported some twenty-nine tanks in a wadi near the coast.**

Nothing was done about these that day and on the 9th, 5 Brigade being ordered to join the main battle to the west, the liquidation of these tanks became the responsibility of 3 South African Brigade, under whose command Div Cav remained.

A column consisting of C Squadron, two troops of South African 25-pounders and one troop of 32 NZ Anti-Tank Battery set out along the main road, while A Squadron spread along some higher ground to the south to protect the flank.

Though twenty-nine tanks sounded a formidable task, the area was a tank recovery workshops and not all the tanks were in fighting condition. The regiment's AFVs took up position on the edge of the wadi in which the workshops was located so as to prevent any escape, while twenty or thirty men went in on foot. Resistance was light and gave the Germans time only to set fire to their tanks. Thirty prisoners were taken and the Div Cav men completed the job of putting the tanks beyond any possible repair.

B and C Squadrons spent that night in laager with the Imperial Light Horse and in the morning, when infantry began to probe towards Marsa Lucch, through country too rough for AFVs, they returned to [Bir Zemla](#).

The AFVs had by now done almost twice the mileage that was considered safe without a complete overhaul. They had been constantly on the move now for eight weeks without a chance of any 'heavy' maintenance, and crews were hard-pressed to keep them in going order. But no rest was in sight, so they just tinkered and improvised and nursed their vehicles along from day to day.

Jimmy Little's parody expresses the situation perfectly:

... carrier men;

**You can find them patching up
Their lousy little battle-wagons
Any old time.**

The 2nd South African Division was new to the desert and was not fully trained, so when the battle moved on towards [Gazala](#), this division was brought up to keep the enemy frontier positions isolated.

The South Africans were openly pleased to have attached to them

troops whom they considered veterans. They relied rather too much on these troops' experience and took somewhat optimistic views of their capabilities, at the same time being inclined to underestimate the enemy. They had not been very well equipped in the way of transport or in automatic weapons. When Div Cav first became attached, it handed over to the South Africans several dozen German automatic weapons which were received with alacrity.

Though the Divisional Cavalry and the British artillery regiments attached to this division realised that they were out of the fighting while they imparted to the South Africans some of the lessons they themselves had learnt, they were only too glad to be on their ration strength as they found themselves well supplied in South African cigarettes, coffee, and an occasional keg of Cape brandy.

For about the first week, from 10 to 16 December, the regiment had the task of setting up a chain of posts by day and night between the **Bardia– Sidi Azeiz** track and the **Bardia— Capuzzo** road, in order to prevent enemy movement between **Bardia** and his strongpoints to the south.

The job was dull and the weather showery and miserable. By day the enemy guns in **Bardia** attended diligently to any movement about the posts. Lieutenant **Poolman**⁷ suffered one day at the hands of a German gunner. Poolman's troop was trying to erect a tarpaulin for shelter from the rain. Each time they began to tie it up to the side of a carrier the Germans would begin to shell them and they would have to give up: very funny for everybody but the troop in question.

One cold evening, when B Squadron was on the way out, Lieutenant Kerr's tank broke down outside the South African MDS near **Sidi Azeiz** and the driver could raise no life out of the motor. Kerr, wise man, spent a most comfortable night at the MDS. It really must have been the cold that affected the tank for in the morning it started up and ran perfectly!

There was one squadron in reserve all the time and its men could

wash and clean themselves up and do maintenance on their vehicles and weapons. Mostly they spent all the time they could spare in foraging round the old enemy dugouts at the foot of the escarpment. From there they used to return with an assortment of loot: beds and bedding, groundsheets and pieces of canvas to make shelters.

It was about this time that the fashion started for a type of shelter that soon became universal in the regiment. A sheet of tarpaulin was clamped along the top edge of the carrier: piping from an old truck canopy frame was ideal for this. When not in use it could be rolled up and left strapped there, and in a matter of minutes it could be rolled out over two short pegs and pinned to the ground as a lean-to tent for the whole crew. With the passage of time these tents became more elaborate. First another piece of canvas was attached which fell down the side of the vehicle and along the ground, forming a breakwind and a waterproof floor. Then later, ends were added, and then, for sun-shelter with a draught and with protection from the flies, pieces of mosquito netting were added. In time they became snug little summer and winter homes, lightproof so that a primus could be lighted inside or a little festoon lamp hung which worked off the wireless or starter battery.

The foraging parties brought back a surprising assortment of food: Danish butter, Portuguese sardines, tinned ham, or sauerkraut. Some found German beer, Chianti and cognac, and one night A Squadron had such a party that it was said that the **Bardia** garrison, disturbed by the noise, was on the point of coming out and surrendering.

When anyone visited the 2 i/c of C Squadron, Captain Van Slyke, after dark he would often explain that he had to go out and 'milk Gretchen'; he would disappear into the dark with a bucket, presently returning with it half full of Chianti.

On 16 December **2 South African Division** undertook to attack **Bardia**. The plan was to infiltrate one battalion, the Rand Light Infantry, through the northern part of the perimeter and another, the Royal Durban Light Infantry, through the south, while the Cape Dutch

Machine Gun Battalion, assisted by C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, watched the centre sector for any break-out and A Squadron stood over the **Tobruk** road. Artillery support came from one of the South African field regiments and from British medium and 6-inch howitzer batteries.

The attack was not very successful because the South Africans found, much to their surprise, that the whole perimeter was strongly held, and they managed to do little more than just pierce the outer defences. Not much further success was reported on the 17th, and on the 18th the two battalions retired to holding positions. B Squadron took over the job of patrolling the road and A Squadron went into reserve, whilst C Squadron covered the area between the road and the escarpment.



OPERATIONS ON THE FRONTIER, 16 DECEMBER 1941-17 JANUARY 1942

During the 18th Lieutenant Wilder was reconnoitring the enemy's road block when one of his tanks was knocked out by gunfire. Its driver, Trooper **Galvin**,⁸ was badly wounded in the legs but the other two of the crew, Sergeant **Riddell**⁹ and Lance-Corporal **Lovegrove**,¹⁰ managed to get him out and into a fold in the ground away from the tank. There they gave him first aid and all three lay low throughout the day while enemy mortars searched the ground for them. They managed to work their way back to safety after dark. For this, both Riddell and Lovegrove

were awarded the Military Medal.

The attack was now at a standstill and all units remained where they were until it was resumed a fortnight later. As Christmas approached the whole battlefield became quieter and quieter, with both sides content to sit suffering the cold, miserable weather. Christmas Day was just as miserable as any other and the spirit of festivity existed only in isolated places where some crews had saved a few delicacies or a flask of cognac for the occasion. The CO could do little but send greetings to all squadrons, promising at the earliest opportunity a day to celebrate; but this was poor cheer to men sitting in their overcoats with water dripping down their necks and, for the despondent majority, the prospect of a Christmas dinner of bully beef and biscuits. At RHQ Padre Taylor ¹¹ held a short service which was attended by Brigade Headquarters. The sight of their South African neighbours poring over Christmas mail made the men no happier: they were damp and dirty, forlorn and forgotten.

Essentially the battle continued—business as usual—for, during the day, operation orders were received from the South African divisional headquarters for the continuation of the attack in a few days' time.

On such occasions as this one realises just how important to morale is mail from home. The morale of the regiment at this time was not really low though the men were in need of a rest. But they would have been much happier and better soldiers had they been able to hear from home. On Boxing Day a small parcel mail arrived—the first mail for over seven weeks—but letter mails seemed to have gone astray.

Between Christmas and New Year the softening-up of the **Bardia** garrison grew in intensity. The guns were now supplied with plenty of ammunition, and in addition to this the **Gambut** aerodrome had been brought into use and medium bombers based there were employed to blast the inside of the perimeter.

The regiment had very little to do and most men had the feeling that they were being wasted where they were. The infantry OPs ¹² were doing

all the observation necessary and the enemy troops seemed to be showing no inclination at all to break out.

If there was not a cold wind blowing showers from the west there was another from the south just as cold but dry and, what was worse, driving with it a punishing dust which reduced visibility to a few hundred yards.

During this week 5 New Zealand Brigade passed back over the Wire, leaving Div Cav the only New Zealanders now in **Libya**. Major Russell, who had been with the brigade to **Gazala**, now returned to the regiment. It was not long before he had sounded out the South African Divisional Commander's hospitality. In a very short time he was on excellent terms with the General and was in a position to call on him whenever he felt himself in need of a dram of 'hospitality'.

Having underestimated the enemy on their first attempt, the South Africans were correspondingly thorough in their second. As well as the **RAF**'s bombing crescendo there was to be, for those days, a considerable artillery barrage from 150 guns, consisting of the three South African field regiments, a Polish regiment from **Tobruk**, a regiment of the RHA, and all the medium regiments already in the area. The attack was to be launched by the Imperial Light Horse and the Royal Durban Light Infantry, supported by an Army Tank Brigade of Valentines and Matildas. The assault was to be carried out in the south and centre while, in the north, the Rand Light Infantry with Div Cav in support were to create a diversion.

A 'Deception Officer' had previously arrived at RHQ with some dummy General Stuart tanks, and on the 30th, the day before the attack, B and C Squadrons created a diversion by simulating a large number of tanks massing in the area. Then during the night some fifteen dummy tanks were erected in 'hull-down' positions while a troop of Bren carriers supplied the appropriate sound effects by moving about with much starting and stopping and gear-changing. At first light on the 31st Lieutenant Reeves, now in command of the four C Squadron

Stuarts, opened the offensive by moving in and out amongst the dummies, firing off every weapon he had in the general direction of the enemy. This produced the required effect for the enemy guns put down fifty or sixty rounds among the dummies, blowing most of them over. To re-erect them Lieutenant McAulay¹³ brought up his troop and put down a smoke screen which, incidentally, drew a hail of small-arms fire. Undeterred, Reeves went forward on foot and put the dummies up again. The whole operation was most successful, and for his coolness Lieutenant Reeves was awarded the Military Cross.

By 9 a.m. the troops on the northern sector had little left to do as the tanks supporting the attack proper had completed their first phase. The enemy was well bluffed in the north and shelled the dummies again during the afternoon. At 7 p.m. the RDLI were ordered into divisional reserve, leaving the task of watching and harassing the perimeter between the escarpment to B and C Squadrons and B Company RDLI.

The momentum of the attack slowed down a little on New Year's Day and there were some counter-attacks which were repulsed. Through the day the bluff in the north was kept up by Second-Lieutenant Fowler, who lit large smoky fires in the area to give the impression of a large force encamped there while B and C Squadrons kept probing at the perimeter forts.

The infantry and tanks renewed the attack proper during the night and at first light on the 2nd a large column of smoke could be seen rising just north of Bardia harbour, while on the northern side of the perimeter white flags were flying on some of the forts.

Lieutenant E. W. Kerr had been sent with his troop to harass the outer defences near the main road when a series of dramatic messages began to come from him. Firstly: 'Am embarrassed by about 50 Italians who wish to surrender.' Then a little later: 'Now about 150 including some Huns. Am investigating.' Then: 'German emissaries with flag of truce arrived and wish to surrender Bardia. What shall I do?'

He was told to wait a little, but before anybody could join him there came another message: 'Huns want to take me to their General. I am going in.' There was a silence for a while. Then: 'Have skidded off the road and shed both tracks. Operator knocked out. I am going on in another tank.'

Kerr had been hurtling down the tarmac road at full speed with the German emissary perched on the front of the hull when they hit an enormous pothole. The tank bounced, spun a good 90 degrees left, shot off the road and stopped dead, catapulting the German officer off the front and knocking out the wireless operator inside, who hit his head against the gun-butts. Kerr called up his sergeant's tank, upon which he continued—no doubt at a more reasonable speed—to the headquarters of the garrison commander, General Schmitt. The General was very annoyed to be actually discussing the surrender and arranging to be conducted to General de Villiers while still under shellfire. He had sent a staff car out through the road block in the early hours of the morning with headlights full on, only to have the car shot up in the dark (this had been done by a C Squadron patrol, who naturally could not see the flag) and now, with white flags flying on the outer defences, there was still shellfire coming down. Kerr managed to pacify him a little, however, on the way out to the divisional headquarters by upbraiding some artillery officers whom they met on the way.

Meanwhile B Squadron and RHQ had followed on into the perimeter. After Kerr's troop, they were the first British troops to enter the perimeter, and though all the way they were passing troops waiting to surrender, they had thoughts for only one thing: the prison compound. They found it near the town itself, and pouring out of it some 1100 bearded figures in ragged battledress. There was wild excitement—the hand-shaking and back-slapping, the smiles, the cheerful faces—and there were the regiment's own boys. There was Bob [Dillon](#),¹⁴ his face one huge grin, and Jack [Haley](#)¹⁵ and Jack Oxenham¹⁶ and all of them; even 'Wan-wan-oh-faive—Trooper P. Kearns'¹⁷ —Paddy, of the face like a map of [Ireland](#), his voice now shrill with excitement as he told the

squadron: 'An Oi kipt tellin' the beggars Oi wuz Oirish an' theerforr neutral an' they jist laffin' at me.'

One of the released prisoners had been searching round in a dugout and he arrived with a portable gramophone which he set down on the side of the road, and the men clasped each



other and danced round and round for pure joy. But as the excitement wore down a little they suddenly remembered their six weeks' starve. Immediately the regiment's Christmas parcels, which had arrived the day before, were slashed open; the tucker boxes were emptied out; and everyone sat down to eat heartily, bully beef even appearing to go down with as much relish as fruit cake. The former New Zealand CRE, Colonel Clifton, had arrived back from finding the German ration dumps. The B Squadron trucks were immediately detailed to go down and carry back to the compound as much food and water as they could.

Officially the South Africans were to have captured **Bardia**, so as soon as things were beginning to be properly organised, Div Cav was ordered to assemble outside the perimeter and help to collect prisoners and march them off.

Joe **Smyth**, ¹⁸ the sergeant cook with HQ Squadron, has never really managed to live down the incident with one of the columns of prisoners. Joe was known for his famous brews of strong tea. One column of Italians on its way to **Tobruk** laagered near HQ Squadron. Joe was told to make a brew for them. They sipped it doubtfully, and Joe asked their spokesman if they did not like the tea.

'Tea? Coffee! Verra good, the coffee.'

Those that know Joe's brews will agree that the mistake was pardonable. So also will they agree that Italians are, on the whole, more polite and diplomatic than, say, the average Div Cav trooper.

So that is the tale of how the Divisional Cavalry stole the South Africans' thunder and became the unofficial captors of **Bardia. They had not liked being left behind when the rest of the Division returned to **Baggush**; they were due for a rest and it took much hard work from every crew to keep its vehicle running; at times they had felt forgotten and lonely; and the weather had been bad—indeed, on the very night after the fall of **Bardia** there was such a heavy downpour of rain that many of the men who were sleeping in captured German bivvy tents were flooded out, so that, one and all, the regiment were impatient to leave the desert behind them.**

There was a little delay in having the regiment detached, firstly from **2 South African Division and then from **30 Corps**, so the 3rd and 4th were days of impatience. The 5th was spent in packing up ready for the move on the next day, and on the 6th the trip back to **Baggush** began.**

The regiment left the desert carrying something, however, which gave every man pride and satisfaction. The CO carried a letter to **General Freyberg from General de Villiers:**

In the Field 5.1.42

MY DEAR FREYBERG,

Your NZ Div Cav are returning to you tomorrow after having been lent to me for the past month or so. I feel that I cannot allow them to leave without letting you know what a tremendously important role they played in these operations and how efficiently they performed the duties allotted to them.

I was compelled by force of circumstances to work them very hard,

but their willingness and spirit was such that they not only never groused, but on the contrary looked for more work.

It must be very gratifying to you that they materially assisted in achieving the early release of so many of their comrades.

I consider them a very fine unit indeed—ably commanded and thoroughly well officered.

This goes to you per Lt-Col Nicoll who has been asked to convey the contents hereof to his Unit.

Yours sincerely

(*signed*) I. P. DE VILLIERS

¹ **Brig J. Hargest**, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Gk); born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; MP, 1931–44; Otago Mtd Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn, Otago Regt); comd **5 Bde** May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped, **Italy**, Mar 1943; killed in action, **France**, 12 Aug 1944.

² **Capt I. L. Murchison**, MC; **Timaru**; born **Timaru**, 29 Oct 1911; farmer; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

³ **Cpl C. L. Bridge**; **Hamilton**; born **Hawera**, 8 Jan 1917; bank officer; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁴ **Capt C. L. Sommerville**; **Raetihi**; born **Raetihi**, 4 Jul 1914; farmer; wounded 26 Oct 1942.

⁵ **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–Feb 1942; comd **5 Bde** 27 Nov–6 Dec 1941; Area Commander, **Wellington**, Nov 1943–Dec 1946; Commander, Central Military District, 1948–52.

⁶ Maj A. R. W. Ormond, MC and bar; Wallingford, Waipukurau; born Wallingford, 27 Jan 1916; farmer; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

⁷ Maj F. H. Poolman, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Whangarei; born Greenmeadows, 11 Jan 1905; Govt rural valuer; Sqn Comd and 2 i/c Div Cav, 1944; twice wounded.

⁸ Tpr J. Galvin; born Roxburgh, 29 Dec 1905; labourer; wounded 18 Dec 1941.

⁹ Sgt A. J. Riddell, MM; born NZ 8 Nov 1904; cartage contractor; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ Sgt L. H. Lovegrove, MM; Kawerau; born Wellington, 14 Aug 1914; P & T telegraphist; accidentally injured 10 Feb 1944.

¹¹ Rev. H. G. Taylor, DSO; Auckland; born Foster, Aust., 12 Mar 1908; Anglican minister; wounded 23 Mar 1943; SCF 2 NZEF (Japan) 1947–48; Senior Chaplain, Royal NZ Navy.

¹² Observation Posts.

¹³ Lt H. A. McAulay; born NZ 27 Aug 1907; carrier; died of wounds 26 Jan 1943.

¹⁴ S-Sgt R. A. Dillon; Masterton; born India, 23 Apr 1910; farmer; wounded Mar 1943.

¹⁵ L-Cpl J. W. Haley; Wellington; born NZ 21 Mar 1906; storeman and pipe fitter.

¹⁶ Tpr J. Oxenham; Tikorangi, Waitara; born NZ 14 Aug 1915; labourer.

¹⁷ Tpr P. Kearns; born Londonderry, Nth Ireland, 9 Feb 1916; labourer.

¹⁸ Sgt E. H. J. Smyth; Hawera; born Wanganui, 19 Mar 1914; farmhand.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 10 – THE SYRIAN HOLIDAY

CHAPTER 10

The Syrian Holiday

IT WAS A GOOD FEELING to be returning to the Division though the journey began into a miserable south wind which was whipping up a dust-storm. Coming through this, up to Sidi Omar, were convoys of big supply lorries, the lifeline of the Eighth Army, lumbering along ten or twelve abreast in the murk like herds of elephants.

The journey started on 6 January, each squadron picking its own route along the frontier to Sheferzen, then east about 40 miles to Sofafi, down the escarpment there and north across the flat to Buqbuq. Thence the route lay along the main road to Baggush.

Passing Sidi Azeiz, C Squadron paused at Headquarters 30 Corps to hand over its four General Stuarts, now on their last legs. The whole regiment regretted losing them; though they had shown their value they would have been a hindrance as they were now in a bad state, having already come through two sets of hands which had no proper means of servicing them.

Once down the escarpment at Sofafi the squadrons crossed desert undisturbed by the recent fighting. The rains had set the surface and everything seemed fresh and peaceful, with the wild thyme putting out shy little buds and here and there patches of little lilies which had sprung out of the earth for brief joy in the sunlight.

One felt then, that the war was all over and that the desert was again becoming a place of quiet, with those patches of beauty as fitting places of rest for the many New Zealanders who would remain.

In comparison with the other units, the Divisional Cavalry casualty list was small; but so was Div Cav, and every loss was a personal loss. One officer and eight other ranks had been killed in action, three officers and 27 men wounded; six were prisoners of war, one of them wounded.

The trip to **Baggush** took over three days for by nightfall on the 8th A Squadron was still at **Matruh** and odd vehicles were strung out along the road. The drivers of these had no cause to be ashamed of their breakdowns as not one of the vehicles which had left **Baggush** had done fewer than 1000 miles, the accepted safe maximum without a major overhaul. This was preferred at 500 miles, but five vehicles had done over 2000 miles while the average mileage was 1762. Of the original 44 carriers and 28 tanks, 8 carriers and 20 tanks had been lost in the field, only three of this total abandoned through mechanical breakdowns. These figures say a lot for the standard of maintenance under difficult conditions and for the ingenuity of both the crews and the squadron fitters in repairing defects when and how they could.

The next three weeks at **Baggush** were marked by the inevitable reaction after a campaign. A quarter of the strength at a time was allowed a week's leave, and those that remained sensed a feeling of celebration and good humour. For one thing a list of honours and awards had been published: the General had been knighted; there were five decorations to the regiment for the **Greece** and **Crete** campaigns, and two earned in the LRDG; and for another thing, there were the official Christmas celebrations with their general relaxation of convention. Even a severe dust-storm on 'Christmas Eve' (16 January) failed to subdue anybody's ardour.

No serious training was done beyond some firing practices, during which all weapons, including captured ones, were used; and some day and night navigation exercises were staged for the benefit of some officers on exchange from the Composite Depot.

January the 23rd being a week after the official Christmas Eve, the men decided that unofficially they would hold a 'New Year's Eve' and with this they brought the sojourn at **Baggush** to a climax in a positively riotous evening in the squadron canteens.

A movement order to return to **Maadi** on the 26th came soon after, and the regiment packed up; but the inevitable dust-storm that seemed

to mark all comings and goings again materialised that day so that the order suffered a last-minute cancellation. Three days later, however, both road and rail parties set out in clear weather.

The wheeled vehicles did the trip in two easy stages and the leader of the convoy was somewhat startled to find, of all things, a guide to lead the way from **Mena** to **Maadi**. The only unusual thing about the regiment's arrival in **Maadi** was, this time, the variety of transport. Apart from the normal MT, now well battle-marked, there was an assortment of German Fords and Opels still with the *Africa Corps* sign on them, and a beautifully appointed Mercedes ambulance. Joe Smyth's cooks' truck was a sight to see: with cookers installed, the truck bowled along the road, chimney smoking and boiler full of stew which could be produced piping hot only a few minutes after halting. The CO had gone ahead from **Baggush** for conferences and he had been astute enough to get authority from his G.1 to bring the enemy vehicles to **Maadi**. It would have been impossible to search the whole convoy at the **Mena** control post so, as a matter of course, a great variety of useful enemy equipment came too. There were enough Italian tank tarpaulins to cover almost every tent floor in the regiment; there were enemy pistols, too, and automatic weapons; Italian groundsheets—far more suitable than our own for making up bedrolls; a German ten-line telephone exchange with enough telephones to go all round the regiment; some very useful medical equipment and some typewriters; all sorts of things so handy in a base camp, particularly the telephones, since Div Cav was not issued with L/T ¹ equipment.

For the first time the regiment settled in an area with tents already pitched and in a pleasingly central position, which made some of the **First Echelon** men smile as they remembered having considered this same spot, their old vehicle park, as the very edge of beyond. Right opposite RHQ, the beautiful new Lowry Hut was now standing on the very spot where the regiment's furthestmost AA pit had been—then, seemingly, a day's march from the mess—now almost the hub of the camp.

Originally it had been calculated that the expenditure of manpower in the Divisional Cavalry would be heavy and by now there were plenty of reinforcements in the Composite Depot, giving scope for an exchange which would transfuse plenty of good fresh blood into the regiment. This exchange was completed by the first week in February and the regiment settled down to a smartening-up process upon which, resulting as it did in the improved turnout and the crisp drill of the men, Lieutenant-Colonel Nicoll took care to extend his congratulations.

The balance of February was devoted to routine training, with the week's leave continuing for those returned from **Libya**, and ample day leave to **Cairo**, though this latter was a little upset by some political unrest there which required that the regiment, in its turn, should be under short notice to move. There were day and night exercises, both on foot and mounted, for all squadrons, all weapons were fired on the ranges—together with some unofficial practices with captured pistols—and the Signals Officer conducted a course in wireless for the troop leaders. On 12 February leave was granted to allow the men to watch a ceremonial parade at which General Auchinleck presented awards to men of the Division. The decorations of particular interest to the regiment were a DSO to Major J. T. Russell, who had left Div Cav to take command of 22 Battalion; Major E. R. Harford, DSO; Major H. A. Robinson, MC; Sergeant W. T. Weir, DCM; and Corporal A. Sperry, MM.

Notification came on 23 February of an impending move into **Syria** and a few days later the CO announced this news on regimental parade. On 4 March **General Freyberg** inspected the regiment and then addressed the officers and senior NCOs, giving a brief and valuable review of the lessons learned in **Libya** and an outline of what the Division would probably do in **Syria**.

The officers decided to wind up their Mess with a sherry party for the commanders of all the New Zealand units and the various services in the area. This developed into a dinner and was followed by a dance to which were invited a number of nursing sisters, VADs and friends of the

regiment.

The move to **Syria** was rather complicated and covered a week from 13 March, the regiment moving by road and in two rail parties. Twelve of the best carriers had been overhauled in anticipation of the move but had to be handed in to Ordnance. This was just as disappointing as the order to take the Mark VI tanks, which were not worth keeping battle-worthy and which became an embarrassment when next the regiment smelt battle.

The general course of the war in southern **Russia** pointed towards an Axis thrust through **Turkey** into the **Middle East**, so the New Zealand Division, now greatly in need of a period for reinforcement and reorganisation, was ordered to build a defensive line across the **Lebanon** valley and to be prepared to defend **Syria**. The immediate plan was therefore to build the defences while making a thorough reconnaissance of the country and then, treating the **Lebanon** position as a second defence, to practise mobile defence in front of it.

Building these positions, together with hard route-marching, was going to bring the Division up to a high pitch of physical fitness, and indeed the weather that greeted the New Zealanders, rain and sleet with snow in the hills, convinced them that fitness was essential.



EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Part of the line ran down a spur across the valley between the villages of **Ras Baalbek** and **Djedeide** and then high up into the **Lebanon** hills along the **Wadi Fara**. The Divisional Cavalry was allotted road-building tasks, one at **Laboue** and the other up the wadi where strong gun positions would have to be supplied. A camp site was allotted the regiment on the spur below **Djedeide**. It was a difficult place to pitch tents as there was barely enough soil covering the rocks to hold tent pegs, and no sooner had the first parties got settled than the cold wet wind from the south caused several nocturnal disasters.

This weather continued for several days and nights and ended with a hard frost as the wind dropped, leaving the whole of the **Lebanon** fresh and sweet and thinking of spring.

Besides preparing the country for defence there was another task that the New Zealanders, eminently suited, set themselves: gaining the goodwill and respect of the Arabs, hitherto very frigid towards the British.

Running through the Div Cav lines was a track used by the Arabs who, it was soon discovered, were expert thieves. Under the noses of the pickets they stole four tents in as many nights: and that was not exceptional since they could steal anything that was loose at one end. To them stealing was both livelihood and sport; from a daring theft they acquired honour; they earned shame not in being jailed for theft but in being caught.

But the Army was not there to entertain or clothe the natives, so on the night of 26 March the OC of HQ Squadron, Ralph McQueen, set a trap. Round a bait of tyres, among which he laid booby traps, he planted an ambush crew, armed mainly with Very pistols. These were loaded with an assortment of captured cartridges, most notable of which was one whose flare took a crazy course through the air, emitting a dreadful whistle which struck terror into your heart the first time you heard it.

The thieves arrived and were tempted; and over their heads there

broke a pyrotechnic pandemonium. They fled in terror, sped by a few shots round their ears, abandoning as they went their 'B Echelon' of three mules and a donkey. With these animals was also a cloak, now twice damning to its owner in that it identified him, and in that he who lost his cloak in a fight disgraced himself.

The animals were held as ransom while the identification papers in the pocket of the cloak were taken next morning to the Field Security Section. In the afternoon, with an escort from the regiment, the local gendarmerie went to the village of Fara, where the interlopers lived, and interviewed the Muktar. That worthy, in open contempt for the men who could be beaten so thoroughly by the 'foolish Ingleesi', undertook to send the men to the local 'caracol' for a flogging, a receipt for which they would return to Div Cav in exchange for their animals. This complicated transaction was duly completed some days later.

The Divisional Cavalry, having earned some respect for craftiness, then continued to add to this with kindness and friendliness. The inhabitants of **Djedeide** were amazed one evening to see a little old woman, still protesting volubly, arrive home accompanied by a soldier who was carrying for her an enormous load of firewood. That and similar stories simply flew round the hills.

The regiment's Medical Officer, Captain **Moore**² —he of the broken nose and the nickname 'Slap-happy'—built up, in the words of the war diary, 'quite a little practice' with the Arabs. A poisoned leg here, a bad gash there, a victim of a stabbing affray to be patched up and convinced he was still alive, an angry tooth extracted, an anæmic woman's life saved with a blood transfusion from one of the regiment's officers (from that moment she, and her whole tribe, considered him as her brother of the same blood), even a confinement and delivery: all these were marrow to his bones. The Signals Officer, 'Rusty' **Ball**,³ too was always delighted to talk with the Arabs. He had set about learning Arabic with such success that he could sometimes be heard arguing a point of grammar with an Arab. He used to amuse them with sleight of hand, in which he was expert, or try to expound to them the mysteries of a wireless set.

Later, when the friendship was returned, Lieutenant Ball led parties from the regiment to visit the Dandaches, one of the local tribes, who regaled them with feasting and whom they entertained with feats of strength and taught to play football. Such gestures as these did much to build up among the Lebanese at least a respect and goodwill towards the British, whom the Arabs had long regarded with coolness and distrust, and indeed had often treated with open hostility.

All through March and April the road work continued, two squadrons to each task and everybody marching to and from work. There was day leave into **Baalbek** to see the ruins, and to the pretty little village of **Zahle**; there was leave in the evenings to **Djedeide**, where the men could buy the Syrian beer or sip the local cherry brandy. One night the Div Cav did more than just sip at the liqueur and, resulting from the disturbance that followed, a regular picket had to be detailed, a fatigue that was quite sought after since its duties never seemed to be more onerous than to sample the hospitality of every house in the village. On Sundays parties went ski-ing in the **Lebanon** hills. There were skis for hire in **Baalbek** and a party only had to drive up one of the roads until blocked by a drift, and the men could walk up the hillside in the snow and tumble and slide to their hearts' content.

While all this was going on the Intelligence personnel were busy all over the country covering every road and track to build up a complete picture of the wheel-route conditions.

The seasons seem to change very suddenly in **Syria**. One week it is full winter and the next week it is joyful spring. Hardly had one begun to enjoy the warm days when they became too hot; irksome battledress gave way to shirts and shorts. At nights, too, came the mosquitoes, for **Syria** is a bad malarial country; by the middle of April anti-malaria precautions had been published and by the end of the month everybody was sleeping under nets. The rules took very little obeying when the mosquitoes began to sting. Then, as the days became hotter and hotter, it was found advisable to change the working hours. In the first week in

May, reveille was put forward to 5.30 a.m. when, after a snack, working parties marched off in the cool to do some digging until breakfast arrived in the squadron transport. Work went on until the midday meal, after which the men marched home before the afternoon heat became too oppressive. There was no official siesta period though the afternoons were more or less free. Some men indulged in fierce games of basketball or those that were so inclined spent their afternoons devising special weapon mountings for their carriers.

There was great emphasis on anti-aircraft defence—or offence, as the general outlook would be better expressed—for everybody had discovered that their best ground defence weapons were their wits and speed. By the time the regiment left **Syria**, practically every Bren gun could be brought instantly from ground to AA action, and besides these, there were similarly mounted a collection of .303 and .5-inch Vickers guns, Boys rifles, Spandaus and a Besa. **Greece** and **Crete** still rankled, and some day the men would have vengeance against the *Luftwaffe*.

With the hotter weather the quartermasters had trouble keeping perishable food; this problem was solved by sending a truck up **Wadi Fara** for a load of snow which, when packed down hard, was found to keep for several days. One of these trips also revealed the interesting fact that the road up the wadi led into an airstrip that must have been built as part of the German strategy when the Vichy French had control of **Syria**.

During the night of 8 May the pride and joy of the CO, his caravan, was gutted by fire. Salvaged at **Bardia**, it was presented to him; it had originally, so the fable has it, been an Italian mobile brothel; but the CO had no silly qualms about living in the comfort of this beautifully appointed 'Pash-wagon', as it was familiarly known, notwithstanding its original reputed character.

In the middle of May the digging tasks came to an end and routine settled down to serious training in preparation for manoeuvres, which were going to be carried out in turn with 4 and 6 Brigades in the

Palmyra desert near Forqloss.

The regiment was reshuffled for this work, A Squadron in carriers forming a proper cavalry squadron, C Squadron all in tanks taking the part of a heavy infantry support squadron, while B Squadron acted as enemy. B Squadron took its job very seriously, even to the length of dressing as far as possible in enemy clothing. It found the manoeuvres very valuable nevertheless, since they provided occasion for much rapid movement over desert country.

On 20 May, the day before moving out to Forqloss, a composite squadron of 4 officers and 80 other ranks paraded with 6 Brigade for a review by HRH the Duke of Gloucester, after which he, with Generals Wilson, Holmes and Freyberg, and their staffs, were entertained to tea by the Div Cav officers.

For the regiment the manoeuvres began on a tragic note with a shooting accident. In the early hours of 21 May, Trooper Andrews⁴ was accidentally shot with a pistol and later died. He was given a military funeral at Ras Baalbek.

The manoeuvres were essentially the same with either brigade. They consisted of marches in close column both by day and by night, followed by an approach march against an enemy. After contact had been made, the tank squadron advanced up through the column and on to an objective under a live-round shoot by artillery, mortars and MMGs. From a cavalry point of view the exercises were a complete success, though the A Squadron commander was a little disconcerted at times to find that, at the wave of an umpire's flag, a successful action against armoured cars might turn into one against medium tanks.

Between the two manoeuvres there was a gap of several days which the regiment employed in maintenance, games of cricket and football, and in a gymkhana—sports meeting with a trip to Palmyra for the winners. There was a morning devoted to practising with aircraft in the various means of ground-to-air communications, and A Squadron tried

out an exercise with the **Maori Battalion**, operating as a 'Jock' column in reconnaissance and attack.

The exercises with 6 Brigade were finished on 1 June and, after a day's maintenance, the squadrons travelled back to **Djedeide** independently, the last of the regiment arriving by the afternoon of the 4th.

From then until the middle of the month the regiment devoted itself to training. One squadron spent a day with 6 Brigade, working with each battalion in turn as cavalry supporting an infantry advance by laying smoke from a flank. A group of officers and NCOs took wireless sets mounted in PUs ⁵ to demonstrate to the same brigade the internal workings of cavalry in reconnaissance. This was done on the Turkish border, working from **Aleppo**, and after a day or two the group transferred to 5 Brigade for the same purpose, moving out to the Euphrates River.

The days were by now extremely hot but, wherever they were, the men had a chance to bathe in lovely cold water, crystal clear: in the **Orontes**, the Euphrates, or in the baths at **Baalbek**.

Amidst all this peace and pleasure though, there gradually became infused again that strange atmosphere: restlessness, excitement, anticipation; hard to recognise but easy to feel. In some way it was associated with events in **Libya** where things were not going right with the Eighth Army. But **Libya** was a long way away; perhaps it was something else. Then what was it? Why did the little girl from **Djedeide** refuse to take washing home in case she could not have it back 'in time'? Why did she assume a solemn face and say: 'You goin' to *sahara*' when the manoeuvres had just been completed? Why?

Then, on 16 June, the regiment received notice that it would be leaving four days later, by a highly secret move, for an unknown destination; and that atmosphere of mystery started the pulse of excitement. Once again it was rumour time. Boats to take the Division

home were waiting at **Port Tewfik**: boats to take the Division to England were waiting at **Port Said**: no, perhaps back to **Greece**; a landing in Unoccupied France. Boats, boats; and while the Eighth Army's news became darker and darker the rumours centred round shipping. No rumour took the Division to **Libya**, the obvious place. Was it wishfulness? The news from there was bad but there was no talk of going back to the **Western Desert**.

¹ **Line Telegraphy.**

² **Maj J. R. J. Moore; Wanganui; born Dunedin, 15 Aug 1915; medical practitioner; wounded 15 Jan 1943.**

³ **Capt R. L. Ball, MBE, m.i.d.; Double Bay, NSW; born Blenheim, 7 Jan 1910; theatrical artist; served with UNRRA and International Refugee Organisation in Africa, India and Middle East, 1945–50.**

⁴ **Tpr W. J. C. Andrews; born NZ 9 Oct 1908; transport driver; died on active service 21 May 1942.**

⁵ **'Pick-up': an 8-cwt truck.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 11 – THE RACE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 11

The Race for Egypt

THE MOVE BACK to the Western Desert was the first of several secret ones made by the Division. To anyone taking part in it the secrecy appeared futile and ridiculous though the idea caught the imagination of the troops, who studiously painted out all identification marks on their vehicles, hid their hat badges and shoulder titles, and in Div Cav—and in other units too—even went so far as to forego rolling their own cigarettes, a distinguishing habit of New Zealanders.

While these precautions were being taken it was rather disconcerting for the officers' mess to be suddenly visited by the civilian contractor who had been hiring out equipment, with the demand for the return of all his furniture and full payment; it was disconcerting to the men to have the complete population of a village, in an effort to be friendly, wish them farewell and 'good shooting in Libya' when they themselves did not know their actual destination. Odd men throughout the Division who were AWL, ¹ having heard through quite unauthentic sources of the move, suddenly decided to stage a prodigal's return.

And yet, despite all this, it was understood a full month later that General Rommel refused to believe that 2 New Zealand Division was not in Syria.

To the majority of Div Cav, despite the wishful rumours about going home, it soon became obvious that they were headed for Libya again, and by the time they had crossed the Suez Canal there was no gainsaying this. Before they had left Rayak, those with the AFVs had guessed their destination because, on the 18th, they were ordered to exchange twenty of the best carriers for old ones from 5 Brigade. It was obvious that the brigade was going straight to a forward area while Div Cav would be following on after re-equipping.

The regiment became split into three main components for the move, two travelling by rail and one on its own wheels. These three

groups soon got so completely out of touch with each other that, at one stage, the regiment was spread the full length of Palestine; at another it was strewn between **Daba**, **Maadi** and **Kantara**; at another it was strung out between **Mersa Matruh** and **Alexandria**, with part of the latter group en route for **Abbassia**. And all the while no one part of the regiment knew where in the **Middle East** were the rest. It was midsummer, with heat so oppressive that at times truck drivers were in trouble through petrol vapourising in the fuel lines. At one stage an AFV party, mainly C Squadron's, was detrained and, with no apparent prospect of railway trucks to carry them onwards, the men were left sweating in the filth of a railway siding at **Haifa**, with no washing facilities, with only reserve rations, haunted by the smell of the cool sea only a few hundred yards away, tantalised by the thought of iced beer in the town just as close the other way, and with the temperature one of **Haifa's** highest on record.

The motor transport left **Syria** on 20 June, the day before **Tobruk** fell—the news of its capitulation accelerated the Division's move and caused the Divisional Cavalry to be sent straight to the desert mounted on all the oldest AFVs in the Division. Driving as much as possible in the cool of the mornings and pausing only at **Tel el Kebir** to draw some new trucks, the convoy arrived at **Maadi** on the afternoon of the 23rd. The very next morning it left for **Matruh**, arriving on the afternoon of the 26th. Here the regiment found the advanced party under the CO, together with the first rail party, mainly the A and B Squadron AFVs, which had outstripped it, all settled in amongst the lovely white sandhills between the sea and the salt lagoon. One could not have wished for a better camping place after such a hectic week. The convoy had literally to force its way against the bulk of the Eighth Army's transport streaming eastwards; streaming in full retreat but not quite routed; not quite in a panic yet thoroughly disorganised, and with every soul startled to see troops driving westwards.

There was no news of the second rail party, which was by then being aimlessly shunted back and forth at **Alexandria**. It had managed to get away from **Haifa** after two days' purgatory, and then only through the

efforts of the civilian station-master who managed to find enough trucks. Then, discovering a 'first priority' in the **Middle East**, it made a very fast trip as far as Tanta, in the middle of the **Nile Delta**, before the general confusion slowed it down again. Arrived at **Alexandria**, the old Mark VI tanks had been unhooked and railed back to **Abbassia** in the hope that they would be exchanged for General Stuarts; but these never materialised. It was a good riddance, however, and some days later the drivers arrived in six 3-ton trucks, destined for delivery at an enemy-held point, which were avidly taken over by Div Cav.

By 25 June the enemy were well across the Egyptian frontier; indeed they were at **Sidi Barrani** in force. **General Freyberg**, deciding that he would not throw away mobility, his most valuable weapon, took the Division out of the **Matruh** fortress that evening. The 6th Brigade was held back at **Amiriya**; the 4th and 5th Brigades he led out to a place 25 miles to the south. Here, at **Minqar Qaim**, the two brigades dug themselves in round the edge of a rocky plateau to wait for the *Africa Corps*.

The Divisional Cavalry was not yet organised enough to be considered a fighting force so, until it was complete, it was left in **Matruh**, now occupied by what remained of 10 Indian Division which had scrambled back from the frontier. Tucked away near the beach, away from the strained atmosphere of retreat, the men were content to drink in the clear sunlight and the fresh **Mediterranean** breeze. The Division was 'out there somewhere getting its feet planted' ready to deliver the enemy a smashing blow some time and, with any luck, the rest of the regiment would soon arrive and enable Div Cav to get organised and cruise off down in time to help in the delivery of that blow.

That was the general feeling on the 26th. Imagine, then, the dramatic moment when Lieutenant-Colonel Nicoll opened his conference with the words: 'Gentlemen, we now constitute the front line.'

The fighting strength of the regiment was twenty-four carriers, half

of which were anything but new, and six Mark VI tanks in such unreliable state that it was decided then and there to abandon them. There was no question of just waiting for the other AFVs. The CO decided to pool all the carriers to make Major Sutherland's B Squadron up to full strength and send it hot-foot down to the Division. He sent his second-in-command, Major Garland, straight back towards **Daba** to try to locate C Squadron and get another allotment of carriers. He found twenty-one new carriers still on rail at **Fuka** and, as nobody seemed interested in them, he had them removed and sent up the road in charge of some of the second rail party, whom he also met at **Fuka**, together with a message to the effect that he had located the remainder at **Amiriya**.

B Squadron—as the squadrons were rather mixed up it will be best for the next week to identify them by their commanders —got moving back along the main road to **Garawla**, from where it was to strike southwards to the Division. Unable to take to the desert owing to the minefields of the **Matruh** fortress, Major Sutherland found it impossible to keep the squadron together in the congested traffic and his perplexities were further increased by constant dive-bombing attacks. The result was that, having led off from **Matruh** at 5 p.m., he took four hours to travel the 12 miles to **Garawla**, and the tail of the squadron took six hours. From here the route followed the **Siwa** telephone line, the first few miles of this line running through rather broken country. It was almost full dark when the squadron met, on its right, some unidentified tanks which opened up with a hail of machine-gun and anti-tank fire. Two carriers were lost, including the OC's, but without serious casualties, before the column could turn left and scuttle off into the dark. This move also divided the squadron into two, of which Dan Ormond assumed command of the second part and continued to lead it out to **Minqar Qaim**. Having assured himself that there was no serious damage, Sutherland also pressed on and almost immediately ran into a regiment of 25-pounders, whose CO he asked to return the fire but who assured Sutherland that they were a British armoured regiment who were 'always trigger-happy in the dark'. He was probably correct but, being

over- confident, he refused all suggestions to accompany the squadron to **Minqar Qaim**. He must have been pleased with his decision for, at first, wherever Sutherland moved he was fired upon, until he found a shallow wadi where he could lie low until daylight. By midnight the gunner Colonel would have been of a different mind about moving, as elements of the German *90 Light Division* overran his laager while Div Cav had to stand helplessly by, unable to tell friend from foe, and listen to the gunners being rounded up.

As soon as the eastern sky was grey Major Sutherland and Captain Wynyard reconnoitred either side of the depression and found that they, too, were surrounded by tanks.

These were more thinly grouped on the eastern side so, risking the failure of cold engines, Sutherland decided to make a dash for it. He succeeded in breaking away though the enemy, despite the surprise, sped him on the way with heavy shellfire, first from the tanks and then from what was probably those beautiful new 25-pounders which really should have been with the squadron. Reward for boldness: only one carrier hit, but not disabled, and one DR was wounded and made prisoner.

Sutherland arrived about 8 a.m. at **Divisional Headquarters**, where he found Ormond with the other half of the squadron who had suffered the same experiences, countering them with exactly the same tactics—tactics which both had learned in the LRDG.

The squadron was then sent to some higher ground farther south, **Bir Khalda**, to relieve 21 Battalion of the task of guarding that flank of the Division's position. Patrols were sent out to the south and west of **Bir Khalda**, where they spent all day investigating any vehicles moving in the area and watching the Division repulse attacks as its whole position gradually became surrounded. Major Sutherland had left Lieutenant Murchison at **Divisional Headquarters** to maintain a wireless link but, as the day advanced, communication became impossible owing to the number of different wireless groups, including the enemy's, being on the same frequency and jamming each other.

By seven o'clock in the evening the Division was almost surrounded, the General had been wounded, and Brigadier **Inglis**,² now in command, had decided on his famous break-out through the enemy laagers. Murchison, having had to break through the enemy cordon in his little truck, brought this news to Sutherland, together with the information that the Division's next defensive position would be round Fortress 'A', a defensive box south-west of **El Alamein**.

Now, on his own initiative, Sutherland decided to make for the fortress by a course right out to the south, to the very edge of the **Qattara Depression**, and then along it. Thus he could be sure of simply disappearing into the 'blue' well away from any chance of confusion in the dark with the divisional columns as they broke free, and secure in the knowledge that he would be traversing country that the enemy would be shy of entering. During the day he had gathered under his wing some eighty vehicles, mainly from British units that had become disorganised. These he formed, with his own squadron, into three columns. Thanks to the efforts of Bob Dillon, the squadron quartermaster, who had previously obtained about 600 gallons of petrol from an Indian unit, Sutherland found that he would be able to make the journey just comfortably.

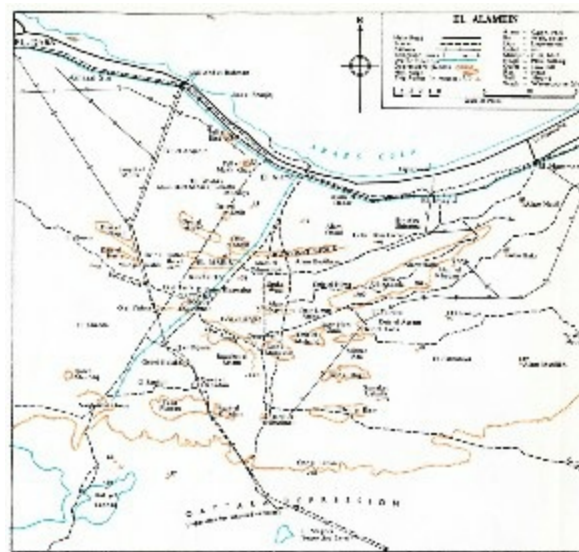
After dark he formed up his columns very closely with himself at the head of one, Jim Wynyard of another, and Dan Ormond of the third. At the rear of each column he placed a troop of the best carriers, all in wireless touch with the head, their duties being to keep control of any stragglers or destroy any vehicles which broke down.

Mention must be made here of the wireless operators who kept their sets working throughout the night. In particular, there was Owen **Wares**³ who had operated his set all the way from **Matruh**, all through the next day against the strain of bad interference and, refusing relief, all the following night, back to the **Alamein** positions. It was an exhibition of great stamina in a man who had foregone a lot—he had even resigned a commission in the **RNZAF**—to get to grips with the enemy. His fighting

career was painfully brief (about ten days) and his life did not last long after that: he was drowned among a shipload of prisoners of war who were sunk en route to **Italy**.

The squadron reached the edge of the **Qattara Depression** in the early hours of 28 June and then turned east towards the **El Taqa** plateau where the southern end of the **Alamein** line was to be. Actually the course led a little more to the left and met the track from **Alamein** and **Fortress 'A'** a little north of the fortress—one may as well call it by the name which it was given by the New Zealanders, the **Kaponga Box**—and turned down the track to the Box, where Sutherland found Brigadier Clifton with his 6 Brigade Headquarters.

The following morning, the 29th, witnessed another joyful reunion. B Squadron imagined that everybody whom they last saw in **Matruh** would have been soon surrounded and would now be prisoners of war. Those of the regiment who remained in **Matruh** thought the same of B Squadron for, on arriving at the **Alamein** positions, all that Lieutenant-Colonel Nicoll could gather was that the G.1, Colonel Gentry, ⁴ had sent the liaison officer off on a decidedly risky mission through the enemy lines with instructions to his OC to withdraw to **Kaponga**, after which the squadron had simply disappeared.



EL ALAMEIN

Nicoll with the wheeled transport—all he had left—had got through from **Matruh** only by the narrowest of margins. He had become decidedly restless and, at 9 a.m. on the 27th, had led off towards **Fuka**. There was little traffic on the road so the convoy enjoyed something comparatively rare for that week—an easy trip on a main road. The Indians were in action south of the road at **Garawla** but the Div Cav managed to slip by unscathed less than an hour before the road was cut. At **Baggush** Nicoll met the new carriers coming along to meet him and these he took back to **Fuka**, where he halted the convoy for the rest of the day. Here, while the A Squadron men busied themselves preparing the new carriers for battle, a patrol went out to the south-west but gleaned only the rather depressing, though unsubstantiated, news that the Division had been surrounded and overrun and the General critically wounded.

To the CO it seemed that his one serviceable squadron was lost, but he had some encouragement in the new carriers, sufficient to make up another squadron.

He sent his Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant **Fisher**,⁵ off to find **13 Corps** Headquarters and at 1.30 a.m. on the 28th this officer arrived back with happier news from a British armoured car regiment, namely that the Division was not yet overrun but was withdrawing. There was also a report that an enemy tank column was headed for **Fuka**.

Having allowed most of his men to sleep, the CO somewhat unwillingly decided that it was time to move on again, and at 3 a.m. he began to dribble the regiment back towards **Daba** in small groups, the last of which was there by daylight. There they spent the 28th, thus again keeping clear of the confused state of affairs behind them whilst being in a position still to give warning of any unexpected enemy approach. One troop was still on the escarpment west of **Fuka**, and by the middle of the afternoon this patrol was back to say that the enemy column would be by then at **Fuka**.

Again it was time to move back; this time to within seven miles of **Alamein**, and here the regiment laagered between the road and the

railway. The **Kaponga Box** was now within reasonable wireless distance, so Nicoll immediately drove off there with a set to establish a link. There he found Divisional Headquarters, which had arrived back from **Minqar Qaim**, but no B Squadron nor any news of it.

At daylight on the 29th the CO ordered the regiment to join him behind Divisional Headquarters. The column arrived from one direction not two hours before Jimmy Sutherland arrived, exultantly leading his squadron, from another.

All through the Division the same joyful reuniting was going on as parts of units or parts of brigades rolled triumphantly back, drawn straight to **Divisional Headquarters** as if by some uncanny form of magnetism. Though it had fought and retired; though it had lost for a while its dashing warrior General; though the rest of the Army was looking over its shoulder and considered the Kiwis just a little demented to be looking forward, the Division had won.

Nothing, nothing at all, could beat it at this moment.

¹ **Absent Without Leave.**

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

³ **Cpl O. Wares**; born Dunedin, 24 Jul 1914; Equipment Officer, **RNZAF**; died while p.w. 17 Aug 1942.

⁴ **Maj-Gen Sir William Gentry**, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **London**, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO II NZ

**Div 1939–40; AA & QMG 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–
Sep 1942; comd 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of
General Staff 1943–44; comd 9 Bde (Italy) 1945; Deputy Chief of
General Staff, 1946–47; Adjutant-General, 1949–52; Chief of
General Staff, 1952–55.**

⁵ **Lt J. W. Fisher; born NZ 18 Sep 1913; sheep-farmer; wounded
15 Apr 1941; killed in action 16 Dec 1942.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 12 – THE ALAMEIN SUMMER

CHAPTER 12

The Alamein Summer

FOR ALL INTENTS and purposes the defence of the **Alamein** line started on 30 June. Again the Army was disposed in the defensive boxes and little 'Jock' columns which had proved so ineffective at **Gazala**.¹ There was no doubt that the Army, dazed by heavy defeat and a long retirement before a persistent and energetic pursuit, was looking over its shoulder and possessed few offensive ideas. Indeed, the complete evacuation of **Egypt**, a crime shameful in its magnitude, was contemplated.

The various formations, some unbroken and some newly arrived, which took up positions on the **Alamein** line were able to maintain it chiefly by virtue of the fact that there were only about 20 or 30 miles of navigable country between the coast at **El Alamein** and the **Qattara Depression**. Because of this a reasonable line, though at first not thoroughly organised or properly co-ordinated, was formed. In the north 1 South African Division manned the prepared defences round **El Alamein**; 18 Indian Brigade, with the very weak 50 Division in support, held a position at **Deir el Shein** at the west end of **Ruweisat Ridge**. Farther south there was the New Zealand Division round the **Kaponga Box** aiming at keeping itself mobile and offensive, and to its south-west, at Naqb Abu Dweis, there was a further brigade of Indians. Between here and the **Kaponga Box** and operating from the Taqa plateau, at the edge of the **Qattara Depression**, the country was guarded by several 'Jock' columns, really only of a hit-and-run value and without much stopping power. These seemed to be independent of everybody and each other; so independent that two of them are credited with having begun one day by shelling each other for a short time while a similar enemy column looked on approvingly. Most certainly, to begin with, the **Alamein** line was such that it depended for its strength on the weakness of the enemy.

On 30 June various formations and units were still finding their way back, and the first task given to Div Cav was to put out a screen of

patrols to the west and south of the **Kaponga Box** in order to identify friend from enemy. For its protection A Squadron was given two six-pounder anti-tank guns, while four 25-pounders were attached to B Squadron.

In the south A Squadron made contact with a column of the Free French which was following along the edge of the **Qattara Depression**, while to the right B Squadron met nothing but odd vehicles coming back. The squadron was able, however, to identify by its shellfire an enemy formation about ten miles away to the north-west.

On 1 July A Squadron, which had spent the night laagering by itself out on the Taqa plateau, continued patrolling in the same area as the day before and found the work rather trying since all sorts of Allied vehicles were still arriving, while all the time the squadron was expecting to greet an enemy column. The tension was not relaxed in any way when B Squadron, to the right, reported that it had at last made contact.

This squadron was shelled from the north while the forward patrols were reporting some approaching lorries. The squadron stood its ground until the six-pounders were able to open fire on the transport, forcing it to withdraw. This did not silence the shelling, however, and after suffering it for altogether an hour and a quarter, the squadron, forced to abandon a carrier which was undergoing urgent repairs, withdrew, still under heavy shellfire, to the **Kaponga Box** and then east to the RHQ position in **Deir el Munassib**.

That night the regiment was at last able to reorganise on its normal three-squadron basis, for Major Garland arrived to say that he had found the last train party, had brought it up, and that it was now laagered just a few miles to the east. He had found it on 26 June still on railway trucks, shunted on to a railway siding at **Amiriya** and to all intents and purposes abandoned. There it remained that night and all the next day cynically enjoying the confusion of traffic around the **Amiriya** crossroads. Confusion it was; retreat indeed, an ugly retreat at that. It

appeared even worse when one got close enough to read the panic in the eyes of some of the transport drivers.

By 4 p.m. on the 29th Major Garland had been advised that it was hopeless to expect a train westwards as the rail was being kept open for eastbound traffic, so on his own initiative he off-loaded the vehicles. They were packed up beyond fighting capacity, but he produced sufficient, if somewhat apocryphal, authority to coax some 3-ton lorries out of the Army Reserve to carry the surplus material, and set off west. To attempt the main road was hopeless, choked as it was four-deep with traffic headed east, so Garland chose the desert route and managed to get almost to **El Hammam** before it was time to laager. On the 30th he forged ahead again until he made contact with some 20 Battalion carriers making rapidly eastwards. The officer in command of these reported that the enemy was right on his tail and told him that the Division was supposed to be to the south-east. Unable to keep up with the infantry carriers owing to the poor mechanical state of his own, he headed south-east, feeling almost beaten but hoping for the best. Towards dark he ran across an RASC unit with which he formed laager. As this unit was heading east in the morning and could only advise that the Division was supposed to be at a place now certainly in enemy hands, Garland decided to make off to the south towards this unit's brigade headquarters. He found it in the late afternoon of 1 July and from it ascertained the position of his own Division. Leaving his column under its original commander, Captain **Rayner**,² he set off to find Divisional Headquarters. Half-way there he found Div Cav at **Deir el Munassib**. Next morning, 2 July, Captain Macdonald, who was to command C Squadron until Major Bonifant returned from a course, went out and guided Captain Rayner's column to Deir Munassib. Lieutenant-Colonel Nicoll at last had his regiment numerically complete.

All three squadrons were mounted on carriers, some of which for the next few weeks were a severe trial to the crews who had to keep them going. Some of the fighting vehicles, in RHQ for example, which had less immediate prospect of actual enemy contact, were trucks; but they

had to do.

* * * * *

Rommel's first thrust came in the north. Meeting resistance there, he immediately adopted the natural desert tactics of feeling for the flank. So the first attack which the New Zealand Division sustained was not without its warning. The Ruweisat Ridge runs east and west through the **Alamein** defile. It is not particularly prominent but whoever stands on it has an uninterrupted view of the whole desert. North of the western end of the ridge there was the defensive position round Deir el Shein held by the Indian brigade. The enemy stormed this position on 2 July and by that evening had a foothold on the edge of the ridge. The transport which B Squadron had engaged that day probably carried lorried infantry trying to outflank **Deir el Shein**.

The 2nd July was a very critical day for the Eighth Army, indeed for the whole of the **Middle East**, for the enemy fixed a wedge in the very centre of the **Alamein** line, from which he could dominate the whole battlefield. By that evening he was exchanging fire with the New Zealand guns in the **Kaponga Box** to the south. The New Zealand Division was the one fresh formation in the line at the time and was not content to sit behind minefields until compelled to retire. Leaving 6 Brigade to hold the **Kaponga Box**, the other two brigades, each with its regiment of field guns, sent out columns to probe towards Ruweisat. While A Squadron maintained its watch to the west, B Squadron made and kept contact with the enemy to the north, and by the middle of the morning C Squadron, now also fit to move, came up to the right of B. The enemy thrust, feeling again for the flank, had come further to the south-west and was now taking in the **Alam Nayil** ridge. B Squadron lost one carrier to anti-tank fire and, the enemy being far too strong for the squadrons to attack alone, B and C Squadrons sat under what cover there was, watching for further enemy movement until our counter-attack developed. This came during the afternoon when a column under Brigadier Weir ³ arrived and opened fire with its field guns in support of some British tanks attacking from the east along the **Alam Nayil** ridge.

The counter-attack did not seem to make any substantial gains but it at least halted the enemy in the meantime.

The next move was to advance towards **Alam Nayil** from the south, and on the morning of the 3rd Brigadier Weir's force, with the help of the same British tanks, advancing from its right flank, put in a very spirited attack and took the position together with about 400 prisoners and 44 guns belonging to the *Ariete Division*. Since the force had business elsewhere the **Alam Nayil** ridge was left in charge of C Squadron, which had by now arrived to guard the captured guns until they could be demolished. In the early afternoon some sappers arrived up to do this. They packed the muzzles of the guns with explosives and, while these were being ignited, the squadron drove over the crest of the ridge out of sight. This move brought it within direct view of **Ruweisat Ridge** and the squadron found itself engaged by accurate gunfire from there. For a few minutes the situation was decidedly delicate for, in order to keep behind cover from the demolitions, the squadron had to accept shellfire from the enemy guns which were firing over open sights. Though the fire was accurate the squadron was able to do this without suffering any casualties, vehicles scuttling hither and thither independently until it was safe to slip back over the ridge again.

There was no form of close liaison with, or for that matter between, the three 'Jock' columns operating in the south, so A Squadron went out in the morning to reconnoitre round **Gebel Kalakh**, which lies between **Kaponga** and the Taqa plateau. Nor were movements within the Division properly co-ordinated at that time for, while moving out from Deir el Munassib, the squadron was shelled by 6 Field Regiment in **Kaponga**, fortunately without suffering casualties. Two troops ventured about eight miles to the north-west of **Gebel Kalakh** as far as the **Qaret el Yidma**, where they engaged some twenty trucks of a battalion of the *Trieste Division*. Of these trucks they destroyed two, capturing an Italian soldier and releasing three Indian prisoners.

Besides the success at **Alam Nayil** on the 3rd, the Division was

interested in another action. The **5th Brigade** swept round the **Kaponga Box**, swung north, and without completely taking the position, neutralised the infiltration into the **El Mreir Depression** about three miles south-west of **Deir el Shein**.

By these two moves the Division narrowed the wedge which the enemy had driven into the **Alamein** line, to such an extent as to make that foothold rather precarious and certainly unsuitable as a starting place for an attack north against the South Africans at **El Alamein**.

Of that first critical week it could be said that 3 July was the day in which most of the impetus was taken out of the enemy's efforts to reach the **Nile Delta** in one bound. At the time, the day's fighting did not seem so important since the whole situation still seemed so very critical. Besides that, one felt that the enemy had not been properly halted until he had been forced to retire, even just a little, along the whole line.

During the night of the 3rd it was decided that the Division would make a bold counter-stroke straight towards **Daba** and thus cut the head off the enemy's spear while it was still slender. The Divisional Cavalry was ordered at first light on the 4th to send one squadron north-west from its laager area at **Deir Alinda**. The squadron was to make contact with 5 Brigade at **El Mreir** before continuing on towards **Daba**; but it never got even as far as **El Mreir**, for at 7.15 a.m., still five miles short of this first bound, it was bowling along confidently with one troop out in front as 'point' when the troop was ambushed by a tank and some armoured cars. Two of the carriers were hit and one 'brewed up' immediately, their crews being taken prisoner. The troop leader, Lieutenant H. M. Laing, was badly hit and later succumbed to his wounds after being taken prisoner. The squadron commander, Captain Macdonald, was on the point of rushing the ambush—never a hard decision to make when you see your friends shot up before your eyes—when he was ordered to get his squadron under cover and wait. Later in the morning the squadron was relieved by two troops of B Squadron and retired again to **Deir Alinda** to wait for a different task.

With the **El Mreir** route blocked, the next strike towards **Daba** was from the **Qaret el Yidma**, whither A Squadron had sent patrols at midday. In the late afternoon Major Robinson, who had that day returned from a course and taken over command from his 2 i/c, Captain **Handley**,⁴ was given the order to set out towards **Daba**. Followed by C Squadron, he led the way through the **Kaponga Box** towards **Mungar Wahla** to the north-west. Once again the move came to a halt in its initial stages as, after dark, a heavy mist formed which badly affected wireless communications, and before very long both squadrons, completely out of touch with RHQ, were forced to stop.

Each day the enemy was bringing more and more pressure to bear on the southern end of the line and from 4 July for several days the *Luftwaffe* gave the New Zealand positions particular attention. Gun positions and the headquarters of brigade groups were the main targets for dive-bombing attacks, while some of the more forward elements had suffered strafing attacks by fighters. A Squadron had two men wounded this way on the 4th. But on the whole the squadrons were rather inclined to enjoy the Stuka attacks since their own harbouring areas were usually allotted on the edge of a brigade area and they were thus able to make much of the opportunities of shooting up the attacking aircraft without being unnecessarily embarrassed themselves.

It was just as well that A and C Squadrons had been forced to stop before reaching **Mungar Wahla** for the enemy was there in force and far too strong to allow a break-through. A Squadron approached as near as possible until it came under heavy shell- fire from the north, and spent most of 5 July reporting on enemy movement west of **El Mreir**. The squadron was thus forced to retire southwards, but not before one man, Trooper Kelly,⁵ had been killed, and to join the other two squadrons which had been enjoying a fairly quiet day near **Qaret el Yidma** waiting to be relieved by 4 Brigade Group. After that they had not much to do except for a certain amount of 'duck-shooting' against the Stukas which were in close attendance for the rest of the day.

By now it was obvious that the Division's attempt to reach **Daba** was to be opposed, since the enemy was firmly placed in front and trying to reach round our southern flank. The Divisional Cavalry's attempt to break out into the flat desert towards **Daba** had been easily contained and the squadrons had not even managed to relieve the pressure on 5 Brigade, which held only part of its **El Mreir** objective.

The 4th Brigade moved out between **Mungar Wahla** and **El Mreir** on the 6th, its front being patrolled in the morning by A Squadron and by B in the afternoon. That major part of the regiment not on patrol enjoyed a quiet day harboured near **Qaret el Yidma**. It was a busy day, too, for some of the crews as a number of the much needed carrier replacements had arrived and been issued, and it takes a crew several hours to transfer weapons and equipment from one carrier to another and fit it all out according to each man's fancy. The regiment was much heartened to see this new equipment arrive since some of the old carriers had done some enormous mileages. Their motors would begin to boil almost as soon as they were started up; oil consumption in them was such as to be most alarming, especially in view of the prospect of a long march towards **Daba** with replenishments temporarily cut off and breakdowns in enemy territory possible. But these dangers were now receding; drivers had gone back to bring up the first issue of General Stuart tanks.

The day was quiet, however, for the fighting squadrons, for throughout the day the Division was closely attended by dive-bombers and the squadrons were spared the attentions of these only by virtue of the fact that they were neither attractive targets nor were they harboured close to suitable ones. Headquarters Squadron on the other hand, tucked in amongst Divisional B Echelon at **Deir el Munassib**, suffered much more, and it must be pointed out that a bombing raid in HQ Squadron is considerably more unpleasant than in the fighting squadrons, since soft-skinned vehicles do not give that feeling of security afforded by armour-plate. Nor are all the vehicles in HQ Squadron equipped with the small arms to throw something back. A barrage of small-arms fire, though it appears to take no effect, probably

does; and in any case it is far less strain to stand up and shoot back when watching and considering each aircraft, quite often each bomb as it falls. So instead of a man's mind flooding over with fear from the thundering and howling, he could and did maintain a reasonable level of self-control simply by throwing back something lethal; he could watch the bombs, know when to duck for cover, and jump up and fire off another magazine. Indeed, a bombing raid could become almost exhilarating.

But in B Echelon he simply had to get down in a trench and make an effort to keep control of his sanity while every bomb seemed to be screaming down into the very small of his back.

The Division made one last attempt to reach out round the enemy's flank on the 7th. Before daylight the Divisional Cavalry received word that the way was clear for a drive towards the coast. The 4th Brigade moved up to be on the western flank of 5 Brigade, and B Squadron of Div Cav set out to form a protective screen to the north and west while 4 Brigade was moving towards the open desert. But the squadron soon found out that the way was not clear and that the enemy was there in some force. So the advance came to a halt again. More information was demanded about the enemy strength, so A and C Squadrons were also sent up into the patrol line. A Squadron went to the right of B, facing north, and C Squadron to the left, facing west. In the middle of the afternoon one of the B Squadron troops, trying to catch some prisoners for identification, lost its troop leader's carrier, and Lieutenant Jimmy Logan ⁶ and all his crew were themselves made prisoner. Both A and C Squadrons spent much time investigating some twenty tanks which were reported to be working south round the flank of the Division, but all they found were two squadrons of South African armoured cars which had not seen any movement either; so it was assumed that the South Africans had been reported as the enemy tanks.

Enemy tanks did approach the Division, however—from the west and later in the afternoon. They came on in a most determined way but the C Squadron line stood its ground until the tanks had come well up and

stopped. This brought them well within range of the guns with 4 Brigade, and these soon sent them scuttling back the way they had come.

That was the last of the Division's attempts to thrust diagonally across, and behind, the enemy's battle groups; none of these attempts had got very far. Had any succeeded, this would have been very decisive since the same battle groups were living from hand to mouth and, cut off from their supplies, could not have lasted long. Though this was not to be, however, the New Zealand Division, fresh and keen and therefore the most battle-worthy formation in the Eighth Army, did manage to focus the enemy's attention on itself and deal with that attention vigorously enough to halt the drive to the Delta, while at the same time providing time for the northern end of the **Alamein** line to become better consolidated.

The Division now had to fall back a little so as to conform better to the general line of defence. The 4th Brigade, in danger of having its rear attacked by the enemy's flanking movement to the south, had skipped back during the afternoon of 7 July protected only by the light Div Cav screen, and leaving in the air for an hour or so the western flank of 5 Brigade. Nothing happened before dark and this brigade was able to pull back under the same screen. The **Kaponga Box** was also to be abandoned, and as 6 Brigade withdrew from there, the Div Cav screen, still as divisional rearguard, began to come back.

By daylight the squadrons were passing just to the south of **Kaponga**, reluctant to be giving ground; and by 7 a.m. the last squadron was back in **Deir el Munassib**, where all hands were able to look forward to at least half a day's rest. Wireless operators were at this stage of the war very scarce in the regiment and some of them had done over twenty-four hours' continuous work. They were glad to switch off their sets and curl up in the sand for a few hours' sleep.

Waiting there in Deir Munassib were fifteen General Stuart tanks for the regiment: a heartening sight, and those in the tank troops could

hardly believe their eyes. The tanks were not brand new; indeed, some were in rather a poor state, particularly as regards their guns. But to think of them, those wonderful 'Honeys'—each with a real quick-firing gun and racks full of 37-mm. shells—no one could be worrying about a bit of rust or dirt: just to think of the speed and the punch of them compared with anything the regiment had had before made one want to walk up and stroke them lovingly. Inside were the new No. 19 wireless sets with their greater range and better fidelity of tone and containing a proper internal communication— 'i.c.' from now on—for every man. The days of taps on the elbow and kicks in the back were gone; everyone now had a sensitive microphone and spoke to any other of the crew, and he could answer with words and—better still—query with words, rather than make mistakes.

There were five tanks to each squadron and more were on the way. At last the regiment could rearrange itself properly. The Quartermaster was released from his extra job of providing a rear link to **Divisional Headquarters**, and the forward link to squadrons was properly organised, with a special administrative link from the RSM and SSMs to the Quartermaster at B Echelon.

By the afternoon of the 8th the new arrangement was working smoothly, everyone was pleased, and aggressive thoughts reached a higher pitch. There was a sign that someone in authority had similar ideas, as a New Zealand anti-tank battery, less one troop, was attached to the regiment.

For A Squadron the spell lasted only till midday as it was warned to stand by for a job. The **5th Brigade** had moved through the **Deir Alinda** with the enemy in close attendance and 22 Battalion was in need of a reconnaissance screen to its front. The squadron moved out early in the afternoon to gain and keep contact with the enemy. This it did and remained out to laager in the Deir all night.

Now that the enemy had been definitely stopped, the Eighth Army began to weld its line into something more solid. Valuable time had been

gained in which the Australians had arrived and deepened the north end of the line behind the South Africans, so, in the south, the New Zealanders concerned themselves with consolidating their own part of the line. While this was going on Div Cav was employed to put out its protective screen. B Squadron worked forward until it gained contact with the enemy south-east of **Deir Alinda**, while A and C Squadrons worked north towards the **Alam Nayil** ridge. It was indeed found that these patrols were very necessary because the enemy followed close on the retirement of the Division.

It was while maintaining this patrol line that the squadrons had to gaze on a great cloud of greasy black smoke rising from the **Kaponga Box**. This was caused by a party of men who had completed the demolitions and set fire to the fuel which the New Zealand transport had been unable to lift when 6 Brigade withdrew. Soon after the enemy occupation of the Box (a classic full-scale attack following the textbook so closely that it even had an imaginary enemy!) A Squadron on the north-west corner of the patrol line found itself hard-pressed in **Deir el Angar**. Heavily mortared and shelled, it was forced to withdraw into the shelter of the northern banks of **Deir Alinda**.

As the Division worked itself into a sound defensive position the regiment was called upon unceasingly to keep up its screening operations. The three squadrons kept as close as they possibly could to the enemy without becoming unnecessarily involved. C Squadron spent 10 July watching enemy movement round and along the **Alam Nayil** ridge, while A Squadron, to the left of C, did the same. It was found impossible to move far either to the north or west as any movement in those directions was very soon discouraged by strong shellfire either from the **Alam Nayil** or the **Kaponga** positions. The two squadrons caused a certain amount of alarm when they both reported the same tanks advancing along the **Alam Nayil** ridge. The reports from both squadrons were forwarded to Divisional Headquarters as they came in. At Div HQ someone made successful arithmetic of them and our guns were very smartly turned on to the tanks, causing them to retire briskly.

B Squadron had again been entrusted the southern end of the patrol line where enemy tanks made a vigorous advance towards it. The squadron's troops made every effort to decoy these tanks within effective range of the Division's guns. They managed to do this quite successfully, but not without suffering themselves quite a considerable amount of shellfire from the tanks.

All three squadrons remained where they were for the first half of the night, thus maintaining a covering force while the Division rearranged its dispositions by withdrawing 5 Brigade further east through 4 Brigade. This move was completed by about midnight, allowing the regiment to retire also; and that move was completed by about 2 a.m. on the 11th.

Though having wrested the initiative from the *Africa Corps* the Eighth Army had not succeeded in making its northerly drive across the rear of the enemy, so the New Zealand Division undertook no offensive operations while the Australians made a frontal attack on *Tell el Eisa* in the north. The purpose of this operation, regardless of territorial gain, was to keep the enemy reserves of armour moving backwards and forwards along the front. The Eighth Army, with its shortened lines of communication, could better afford to do this than the *Africa Corps*, whose armour was by now sorely tried and replacements for which were almost impossible down such long lines of communication.

Thus it appeared to the New Zealanders that, having gained the initiative, it was to be thrown away again. The enemy was now facing the Division more or less on three sides. In the north he still had a strong foothold on the Ruweisat and Alam Nayil ridges and in the country between them. He faced the Division in the west from the recently evacuated *Kaponga Box*; and he was now gradually infiltrating through the *El Taqa* plateau into the *Gebel Himeimat* area south of the Division.

By 11 July the Australians had pushed out a salient along the coast road as far as *Tell el Eisa* and had the enemy worried. Just as against

our advance in the south he had drawn the German infantry from the centre of the line to reinforce the Italians, so he did the same against the Australians' attack whilst still holding the salient of the western end of Ruweisat Ridge. This plan was a worry to the Eighth Army for there was also a very soft spot in the extreme south which was covered by light 'Jock' columns of 7 Armoured Division—these columns bore the names of months of the calendar—and by B Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry. Altogether it was not a good stopping force.

Once again an army commander found truth in the adage: 'Attack is the best form of defence'. It was planned to straighten out the most embarrassing of these salients by an attack on the **Ruweisat Ridge**, and it was hoped that this attack would develop into the southern claw of a pincer which would link up with the Australian penetration in the north.

The first move was to clear the **Alam Nayil** ridge, and this was done during the morning of the 11th by the tanks of 1 Armoured Division which swept along the ridge from the east. Then in the afternoon, 4 and 5 New Zealand Brigades advanced north towards Ruweisat as far as their intended start line. A and C Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry had begun the day on a line running from the eastern end of the Alam Nayil ridge to the western end of **Deir el Munassib**. They had been unable to move far ahead of this line but, by the time the infantry had reached their objective south of Ruweisat, both squadrons had been able to advance. They took up another line, which still ran at an angle across the map, across the flat country between the Ruweisat and **Alam Nayil** features. There they remained as a screen to the brigades while they dug in. The stage was now set for the attack.

Meanwhile B Squadron had spent the day operating with three of the 'Jock' columns in exerting as much pressure as possible in the broken country south of the Division's area. The squadron's five tanks managed to penetrate well to the west as far as Qaret el Khadim and engage three tanks and three armoured cars, driving them away to the west.

For the next three days, until the attack on Ruweisat took place, the

squadrons took up the same positions. The patrols felt forward each day until engaged by shellfire and then kept probing here and there to make sure that the enemy did not steal up to our infantry. On the 13th the enemy made his final infiltration into the **Gebel Himeimat** area, forcing the Motor Brigade to withdraw, so B Squadron was called back into regimental reserve; but the following day the five tanks in the squadron slipped out to the south-west to test and adjust sights and try out the new guns. They had some targets on the crest of a ridge and had been conducting a considerable little private war against them when, to their delight, they found that a great many of the shells, passing over the crest, had been landing in amongst some enemy lorried infantry, causing them acute discomfort and not a little consternation.

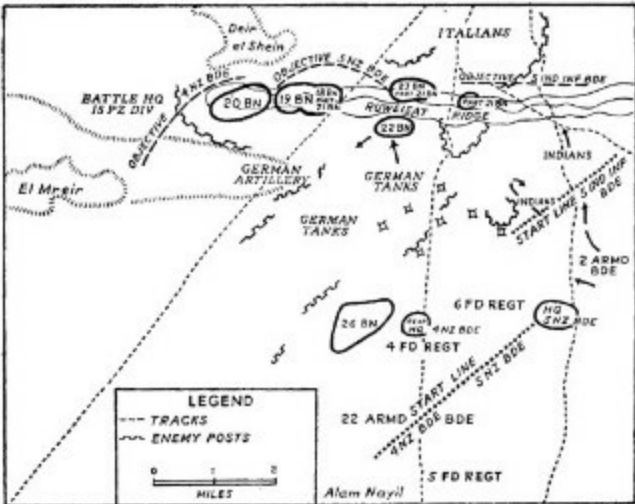
The Division now faced north whilst the big salient which the enemy had pushed into the line to the south was completely ignored by the New Zealanders, who left the care of that sector to the light armoured elements of **13 Corps**, namely 7 Armoured Division and 7 Motor Brigade.

With everything facing this way in the Division, HQ Squadron was moved even farther west from its old position so as to get into **Deir el Munassib** and thus be right behind its own fighting squadrons when the **Ruweisat Ridge** had been taken.

After dark on the 14th, A and C Squadrons formed up in close column behind the Divisional Reserve Group ready for the attack to begin. It was intended that they should follow this group forward until the morning, when the whole was to swing and face the western flank left open by the advance. It was planned also to send part of the two Div Cav squadrons forward through the enemy FDLs and co-operate with the tanks of 1 Armoured Division which, it was understood, were to work through from the east and push the enemy right off the end of the ridge.

That was the plan of the attack. Though it achieved substantial success it ended in disaster. The valour and dash of our infantry was to a great extent wasted by the complicated nature of the whole operation and by the failure of the armour to give the promised support.

As far as the two Divisional Cavalry squadrons were concerned the attack did not involve them much. They spent all night in close column waiting for something to happen. They could see nothing but an occasional glow lighting up the northern skyline and heard only now and again the distant



RUWEISAT RIDGE, DAWN 15 JULY 1942

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crump of mortars and shells. Even their own artillery blazing off quite close meant little to them. It seemed to have been nobody's job to explain what it was all about.

In the morning it would appear that the same applied to 1 Armoured Division for its tanks were not within miles of the west end of **Ruweisat Ridge**. The infantry were on their objective but both brigades were isolated. One was without supporting arms and they were now being attacked from their rear—the south—by a strong force of enemy tanks. Ugly disaster stared them in the face.

With the approach of daylight the Reserve Group shook itself out and the two Div Cav squadrons took up positions right out on the left flank between the western ends of the **Alam Nayil** and **Ruweisat ridges**. Ahead of them they could see smoke rising from burning vehicles, while up on the ridge itself the infantry were beginning to suffer increasing mortar and shell-fire as they tried to consolidate their positions. Away to

the east was a string of prisoners headed south-east.

The immediate prospect in front of the Divisional Cavalry was not good. Firmly entrenched behind its own minefields was a very strong pocket of enemy, including a number of tanks, through which the infantry had passed during the advance. At daylight these tanks, in their turn, attacked northwards and, overwhelming 22 Battalion, marched it off to the west almost complete. It was impossible to gain contact with 4 Brigade Headquarters on the ridge. Try as they might, in daylight, the squadrons could find no way through the enemy pocket until the early afternoon, when an infantry attack was organised to clear the pocket right out. The tank troops of both squadrons took part in this attack and one of them carried on up to the trig point 63 on the ridge, where it found the headquarters of 4 Brigade. This was about 3.45 in the afternoon; but the tanks did not stay there very long, coming back smartly to see if they could guide some supporting weapons up to the ridge ready for the counter-attack that was expected from enemy tanks from the west, and heralded already by severe shellfire.

But the support weapons never got there in time. The expected attack came in soon after the Div Cav patrols had left and, exposed as it was on the rocky ridge, the whole brigade, helpless, was overrun despite the presence of 1 Armoured Division not three-quarters of a mile away. It was small wonder that 4 Brigade, indeed the whole Division, was for a long time very bitter about anybody who wore the black beret.

The *Luftwaffe* had reacted violently to the attack and all day on the 15th the Division had been subjected to intermittent dive-bombing raids. The chief targets were the guns and transport, so A and C Squadrons, being more isolated, were able to send up considerable barrages of small-arms fire without themselves being directly attacked; but B Squadron, in reserve in *Deir el Munassib*, was more in the thick of things. Even then it suffered only one casualty when a man was wounded by a piece of falling shrapnel.

After such a brilliant attack to gain the *Ruweisat Ridge*, after

standing up to counter-attacks against such overpowering odds—the fighting alone earned two VCs—the Division had to suffer the disappointment of giving up its hard-earned objectives. Overnight the companies of 5 Brigade that had been spared in the counter-attacks were withdrawn to a line three-quarters of a mile south of the ridge, and by the morning of the 16th were dug in facing it on a line which later became the northern edge of the New Zealand defensive box.

From now until September the New Zealand Division was forced more and more by circumstances to conform with the Eighth Army's practice of shutting itself up in 'boxes'. What remained of 4 Brigade returned to **Maadi** to reorganise while the other two brigades, with all the divisional troops, dug themselves in, in what became known as the **New Zealand Box**. The Divisional Cavalry, responsible only for its own protection for the first week, lived very quietly until it was given the task of watching the southern flank; and that faced the least aggressive of the enemy's forces. Three of the new tanks struck unplotted minefields but were recovered and repaired; otherwise life was uneventful except for the Stuka raids which arrived with Teutonic regularity, and which were given receptions ever increasing in warmth and accuracy, not only from the ground but also from above, where our fighters could be seen on their regular patrol all day. Nevertheless the bombers claimed some casualties in the regiment. Of these, three lost their lives. Sergeant Jack Riddell was killed and Corporal Russell **Ferens** ⁷ and Signalman **Russell**, ⁸ of C Section, Signals, attached to B Squadron, died of wounds.

Life became purgatory for friend and no doubt for foe, for the sun was hot and brazen and so was the light wind which each day breathed relentlessly across the rocks and sand, depositing a salty crust of dust on everybody's lips. On such moments—and they went on all day—one required double the strength of will to keep one's hands from the precious day's quart in the water bottle.

Until the desert was cleaned up there was a smell of rotting flesh all about. But the flies were the greatest trouble of all. They came in such

numbers that they defied control and, being avid for water and sugar, they could not be driven away. If you waved your hand over something on which they were greedily feeding they just skipped high enough to dodge your hand before dropping back where they had been. Sometimes they were even too greedy to do that and appeared merely to duck their heads without even lifting their filthy snouts. They were suicidal in their greed, and cannibal too, for you could slap a dozen to death on your bare knee and in seconds as many more were feeding where they had been or were sucking the moisture from the still twitching bodies. In those days there was need to wake no man at dawn because, in a few minutes before sun-up, the first of the day's flies, still sluggish with sleep, were crawling over the most sensitive parts of his skin, his lips and eyelids, and as he opened his eyes they just jumped slightly and then settled down to try and steal the moisture from his tear-ducts. From then until dusk they were about in their millions. A man walking past presented a black mass on the back of his shirt where the flies were drinking up the moisture in his sweat, while a black swarm followed along waiting for a place to drink. Some men would bare their backs in self-defence, preferring the crawling brutes on their skin to the inevitable swarm attracted by the damp patch on their shirts. If a man's face was in the lee of the breeze they settled on it until he had only to purse his lips to trap them by the feet as they tried to steal his own precious saliva. If his hands were out of the sun for a moment they were damp, and he could transfix a fly with the point of a lead-pencil without looking down. If there was sugar on his food they would fly into his mouth in their desperate attempts to steal it.

Such is a plague of flies: they drink the sweat of the living and eat the dead for the sugar in their flesh. Truly they were the direct descendants of those that troubled the house of Pharaoh and the houses of his servants and corrupted all the land of [Egypt](#).

The MO never gave up looking for some means to combat the pest. Traps made of petrol tins and mosquito netting, though they caught, each one, literally gallons a day, seemed to make no difference. A dish of

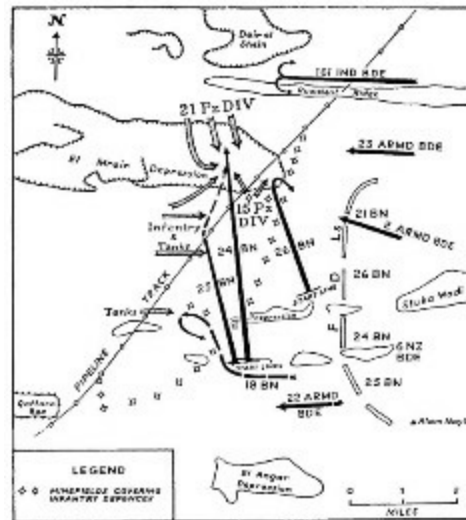
formalin and water was quite a help. The flies came down to drink and were overcome by the fumes; but the doctor's supply of formalin soon ran out. Every man had brought a mosquito net down with him from **Syria** but they had mostly been buried in the sand at Mersa Matruh, now 100 miles behind the enemy's lines. Some had been buried near **Deir el Munassib** and one or two men, much to the envy of the rest, had found their way back there to dig, and returned with the precious nets which they managed to rig up somewhere to give at least partial relief.

Lieutenant Logan arrived back on 18 July from what the war diary describes as '... a protracted tour of enemy territory'. Having been made prisoner during the attempt to get to **Daba**, he was held in a prisoner-of-war cage at **Sidi Barrani**, whence he escaped in company with some British officers.

One last attempt to gain a decision on the south end of the line was made on the night of 21 July when 6 Brigade tried to straighten out the salient at **El Mreir** with an attack from the south. The newly arrived British 23 Armoured Brigade was to follow this up in the morning of the 22nd with a strike westwards through the breach and deep into enemy territory. This was to be followed by an attack along **Ruweisat Ridge** by 161 Indian Brigade. Coinciding with 6 Brigade's attack, and to cover the rear, 18 Battalion was to make an attack westwards but well to the south of the brigade.

Once again the attack was fated before it began, and this only because we would not profit by our former experience at Ruweisat. The whole scheme was far too complicated. We had liaison this time with the armour, but insufficient co-ordination. The result was that the battalions reached their objectives in the depression but the armour again failed to give support. The tanks made a brave and brilliant attack in the morning but made it in the wrong place, ran on to a minefield, pressed on amongst murderous fire from several directions, and were more or less wiped out. Again the infantry were left at the mercy of the enemy tanks counter-attacking at first light, because most of the brigade's anti-tank weapons, having run on to a minefield in the dark,

failed to arrive on the objective. In any case, those which did arrive had no chance to dig in before the enemy tanks attacked, and were quickly knocked out.



EL MREIR, 21-22 JULY 1942
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The Divisional Cavalry had no part in this action, but in the morning of 22 July two troops were sent out to make contact with 18 Battalion. They were held up by an enemy pocket, and it was while considering how to get round this that the commander of one of the C Squadron troops, Lieutenant **Thwaites**,⁹ was killed. Jimmy had halted his troop just at the crest of some rising ground where he could keep the enemy pocket under observation and, while waiting developments, was making breakfast for his crew. He had the usual cooking gear of those days, an old ammunition tin with a fire-bar through it. Into this had been shovelled some sand; petrol had been poured on top and set alight. In this case Thwaites had done a dangerous thing. He had splashed some more petrol on the fire out of a tin. The whole lot caught alight and the resulting flames and black smoke attracted attention. A little while later when he was bending over the billy stirring the stew, a single shell landed literally at his feet.

After the **El Mreir** attack the third and last of the New Zealand brigades now found itself crippled by its losses, and the Division was

incapable of further offensive action though it still had its full complement of guns and sufficient infantry to protect them. It still had its divisional troops, so that in defence it could deliver a considerable punch. Reluctantly, therefore, it became resigned to building a defensive box of mines and wire. In that box everything was dug in, even the Div Cav tanks and carriers, for they now had to take the place of infantry weapons. The regiment was allotted the southern end of the Box and took a line running east for 4000 yards from the [Alam Nayil](#) trig.

The line was manned by A and C Squadrons while B Squadron still kept a mobile role, patrolling south to [Deir el Munassib](#).

Actually the regiment did not go to ground properly until the end of the month and, for the last week or two, squadrons were employed patrolling as far as [Deir el Angar](#) and a little north-west of the [Alam Nayil](#) trig, while the third squadron remained in reserve with RHQ to the north of Deir el Hima. It was decided, however, that since movement much past the eastern end of [Deir el Angar](#) or west of [Alam Nayil](#) was impossible, these patrols were achieving no more than attracting shellfire. Even when this movement was stopped the regiment still managed to cover its allotted ground with A and C Squadrons, thus keeping B Squadron and RHQ mobile against any emergencies. The two static squadrons moved up on to the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge on 31 July to begin digging in their vehicles. Any New Zealander hates the idea of enforced immobility but, of all units, the Divisional Cavalry liked being enclosed even less than being dismounted. There was small compensation for this disagreeable state of affairs in that 28 Battery, 5 Field Regiment, was attached to Div Cav and also 34 Battery of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment with its six-pounders.

Much disgruntled, the A and C Squadron men spent the first half of August digging pits for their vehicles and for the carriers' guns. They also laid a minefield along their front. These vehicle pits soon became a source of interest to the enemy fighter-bombers and were visited regularly each day.

The regiment was, however, never as completely fenced in as other units, for when on 14 August it was decided to enclose the Division fully with a minefield along the eastern side of its box, RHQ and HQ Squadron elected to remain outside the perimeter and actually there was less than half the numerical strength fenced in.

The days settled down to a dull routine. One was awakened by the flies and then had to compete with them to eat one's breakfast. Most people next began to think about their toilet and many found that this could be managed reasonably well, using no more water than could be held in a round 2-ounce tobacco tin. First the teeth were brushed, a function that can be performed with practically no expenditure of water. This was followed by a shave which left the water soapy. The hands could be cleaned by squeezing the shaving brush and rubbing the lather round and round them. This removed all the dirt, which came off in little rolls as the soap dried. A little of the remaining water was poured into one cupped palm to rinse the hands and face while the last of it could be used on alternate days to wash one knee or, as some preferred, to rinse dried sweat off the hocks.

For the first fortnight, August seemed to consist of nothing but digging; making defences or improving them—as much against the flies as against any human enemy. Until about ten in the morning the air was clear and visibility good—for whatever use that was to Div Cav now—and both sides did a certain amount of shelling. A visit could be expected about this time from enemy fighter-bombers, and two minutes before their scheduled time, those that remembered could be seen looking to their anti-aircraft weapons. After the flurry of the aircraft visitation things usually settled down to a fairly quiet day. The sun became more and more brassy, the sky pale blue, almost white hot, the whole desert began to shimmer, and strange mirages were to be seen in every direction. Asked for a report one midday, one of the B Squadron troop commanders replied: 'Two London buses inverted, each supporting a haystack.'

The shrivelling wind lazed across the sand carrying its light haze of salty dust to settle on everyone's lips. Nature has subtle forms of torture, for if the precious quart in your bottle ever met those lips during the heat of the day, it was gone. The usual rule was not to broach the bottle until 4 p.m. when the day had begun to cool just a little; but it took strong self-discipline to practise this.

Each sluggish day the hours passed reluctantly. In the evenings several large-calibre reminders landed with a crump on the end of **Alam Nayil** ridge, indicating that it was high time to cook the last meal. Though it happened daily, this ranging caused only one casualty in Div Cav. Corporal **Denz**¹⁰ was killed on 9 August.

Only moments after the sun had burned its way below the horizon the air was fresh again; the flies were gone, the dust was gone, and spirits rose to normal again. Everyone began to move about and exchange pleasantries or drank their occasional beer issue. Sometimes there was an issue of rum which was usually added to the last cup of tinned coffee saved for the occasion. Anyone who had managed to hoard enough water slipped off his clothes in the dusk and enjoyed the pleasure, the almost sensuous pleasure, of a complete sponge down.

But the return of high spirits was short-lived. Within half an hour men were suddenly sleepy. They unrolled their bedding—but not before they actually needed it lest a scorpion might creep in too—and put it in their shallow pits, which were protection from the cold midnight wind as much as from shrapnel. Each one set the weapon of his choice (rifle, pistol, or hand grenade) in its usual place close-handly in case of surprise—those in the habit of saying their prayers found that these lost none of their sincerity when said as accompaniment to such mundane routine—and then crawled feet first between the blankets. This was the only really private moment of the day. So, gazing at the wealth of stars in the sky, a man could let his thoughts drift round to that sad, brave smile that had farewelled him on the other side of the world, as he slipped into a dreamless sleep. This usually ended all too soon with the crunch of

feet as someone came to waken him for picket: or else it was those beastly flies again on his lips.

The only men not completely strange to the General Stuart tanks were those who had done courses while the regiment was in **Syria** and, since the Division's stay there was curtailed, this number was small. Quite the best way to learn about a weapon is by personal experience under battle conditions, but with such highly technical equipment as a tank, mistakes often cannot be foreseen. So, during the lull in early August, the tanks' crews took every chance to increase their knowledge, and most of them stole time to slip away to **Deir el Ragil** to try out their guns.

Eventually the sojourn as infantry came to an end. A and C Squadrons were relieved by regiments of the Buffs and the **Royal West Kents**, of 132 Brigade, 44 Division. This was on the 17th and 18th and it allowed the two squadrons to move out of the Box and join B Squadron and RHQ where they could breathe again the breath of freedom and feel happier to be able to move about a little.

The principal appointments in the regiment at this time were as follows:

Commanding Officer	Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll
Second-in-Command	Maj J. H. Garland
Adjutant	Capt P. D. Hall
OC A Squadron	Maj H. A. Robinson, MC
Second-in-Command	Capt W. G. Handley
OC B Squadron	Maj J. H. Sutherland, MC
Second-in-Command	Capt J. G. Wynyard
OC C Squadron	Maj I. L. Bonifant
Second-in-Command	Capt R. A. M. Macdonald
OC HQ Squadron	Capt R. B. McQueen
Medical Officer	Capt J. R. J. Moore, NZMC
Padre	Rev. H. G. Taylor, CF

Major Bonifant left the regiment on 15 August to join (and later to command) 25 Battalion and was replaced as OC of C Squadron by Wilson

Handley, who became Major.

The New Zealanders had had wrought in them a certain amount of change by the three battles they had fought since coming back to the desert in June. They had arrived with their morale in a magnificent state, and the struggle to move up to Mersa Matruh against the tide of their own retiring army had, if anything, strengthened their spirit, until at times it was almost at a point of arrogance. The battle of **Minqar Qaim forged them into a solid weapon. The two big spoiling battles which had followed, though they reduced the Axis momentum to a complete halt, were costly because they robbed the Division of its infantry and its offensive power, so that it was forced to adopt the tactics common to the Eighth Army at the time and curl up in a defensive box.**

In some way or other this type of fighting induces an outlook decidedly defensive, and in one respect bad, because the moment a formation is shut up it begins to look over its shoulder for another defensive position behind. Aggressive ideas fade away. By the beginning of August the New Zealanders were catching this germ. They were indeed ordered to reconnoitre positions in another box behind them—a little closer to the **Nile—‘just in case’; and all the time it was obvious that the next move would be started by Field Marshal Rommel.**

Then one day things changed. One looked across the desert and noticed that there were not so many of the usual vehicles about. One of the C Squadron troopers strolled over to gossip with his next-door neighbours, a Bofors gun crew, and happened to remark that their lorry was gone. ‘Yes. They have taken it back to **Burg el Arab and given us a load of A.P. instead!’**

The trooper, a little puzzled to know how the gunners could retire to the other box if the occasion arose, tackled his troop officer a little later. ‘That's quite right. When the attack comes there will be no retiring. We shall fight here. And this tank too is now a pill-box. Just forget it has a motor.’

Overnight a breath of clean air from 'Blighty' had blown right through the Army. It appeared to be related to the rumours about a new Army Commander: '... a spartan little "joker"... who is going to smarten things up; who is going to see that everyone does his job where he stands—or else. There are going to be no more brilliant attacks ruined for want of armoured support at dawn: the support will be there. And in the meantime the reconnoitring of routes back to the alternative box at **Alam Halfa** is "out" because there is no alternative box. Rommel will be beaten—here—finish.'

Overnight General Montgomery became an oracle to the Eighth Army. Rommel would be attacking in the south— because 'Monty' said he would. He was going to be allowed round the southern flank and then be stabbed in the ribs. He was going to be beaten—Monty had said so—and that's all there was about it.

From that moment Rommel was beaten.

The attack did come in the south as foreseen. Early in the morning of 31 August the enemy began to move through the minefields between the **New Zealand Box** and the **El Taqa** plateau.

¹ These columns took their name from their originator, Brigadier Jock Campbell, VC. They were, in effect, little armies in miniature; in strength, about two companies of infantry with a battery of field artillery and a troop of anti-tank guns. They were ideal for harassing or hunting a retreating force along but, carried away with their successes in this field, we were rather inclined to use them at any time.

² **Capt J. L. Rayner**; Kawakawa, Bay of Islands; born Warkworth, 24 Jul 1906; county clerk.

³ Maj-Gen Sir Stephen Weir, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; **Bangkok**; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO **6 Fd Regt Sep** 1939-Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941-Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944-Sep 1946;

Commander, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, 1951–55; Chief of General Staff, 1955–60; Military Adviser to NZ Govt, 1960–61; NZ Ambassador to Thailand, Oct 1961.

⁴ Maj W. G. Handley, MC, ED and bar; Wanganui; born Maxwell, 28 Dec 1913; farmer; wounded 15 Jan 1943.

⁵ Tpr D. T. Kelly; born NZ 7 Mar 1917; taxi driver; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

⁶ Capt J. D. K. Logan, m.i.d.; Longbush, Masterton; born Masterton, 11 Sep 1919; clerk; p.w. 7 Jul 1942; escaped, Sidi Barrani, 12 Jul 1942; wounded 20 Feb 1944.

⁷ Cpl O. R. Ferens; born Wanganui, 1 Jan 1919; bank clerk; died of wounds 16 Jul 1942.

⁸ Sigmn C. E. Russell; born NZ 18 Aug 1916; labourer; died of wounds 17 Jul 1942.

⁹ Lt W. J. Thwaites; born Christchurch, 9 Aug 1913; farm labourer; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ Cpl L. F. Denz; born Auckland, 12 Sep 1910; traffic inspector; killed in action 9 Aug 1942.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 13 – THE BATTLE OF ALAM HALFA

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The Battle of Alam Halfa

THE DESERT BATTLE which raged through the first week of September 1942 was, for once, a winning defensive battle. It turned out to be a critical one for **Britain**, for from that time forward we were fighting a winning war. As a battle it did not go entirely according to plan: no battle ever does: but it was decisive enough. Rommel's thrust towards the **Nile Delta** was repulsed with heavy losses, especially in tanks, and it became Eighth Army's turn to take the offensive.

The general plan was to give the enemy every chance to advance at will through the southern end of the **Alamein** defences. In doing this he would have to wallow through a series of sandy-bottomed depressions—**Alinda**, Munassib, Muhafid and Ragil—whilst being contained in these defiles. The further his line of advance was stretched the more vulnerable became his flank and the greater the number of his troops who came into the trap, whilst the bad 'going' used up his precious reserves of petrol. To ensure that the route was voluntarily taken, General Montgomery had contrived to have fall into enemy hands some maps of the **Alam Halfa** area on which the going had been wrongly described. It was known that the enemy was in grave difficulties over supplies of petrol, so having passed well clear of the New Zealand positions in the south of the line, he would naturally try to swing north and pillage supplies of petrol in the Eighth Army's rear area. Once committed to the big gamble of opening this attack, Rommel was doomed to failure, for where he would turn north on the rising ground at **Alam Halfa**, our reserves of armour sat ready—ready and waiting on ground of its own choosing—in hull-down positions, where our tanks could bring down plunging fire on the enemy as he struggled up out of the soft going. It was calculated that at this stage Rommel would have his columns stretched to the limit, and that by the time our armour had begun to repulse the head of the columns the greatest possible number of troops would be trapped, and trapped in range of our guns.

It was then that the guns were meant to open up properly and our light armour was designed to get in amongst the soft-skinned transport from its flank.

The Divisional Cavalry, however, had other work to do before this situation arose. It had to keep contact with the flank of the advancing columns and report progress; it had to goad them along with a few probes from the flank, not showing strong resistance, not getting too much involved, but generally giving the enemy false confidence whilst pricking in the flank. Thus also the enemy would be forced to use extra men as flank guards.

On 22 August the regiment began to take part in the Corps' practice for the forthcoming battle. From the south-west corner of the **New Zealand Box**, three lines of minefields, completing the **Alamein** line, ran down towards **Himeimat**. These were covered by columns of 7 Motor Brigade and 4 Light Armoured Brigade. **July Column** was instructed to retire before the enemy, but not without making it as difficult as it could for him to open gaps in the minefields. After that it was to swing north and complete a line on the east flank of the Divisional Cavalry facing south. This manoeuvre alone was calculated to cause at least half a day's delay.

While it was being practised Major Robinson of A Squadron, who had ideas to post his attached anti-tank guns well forward in **Deir el Muhafid**, rehearsed the rather tricky job of withdrawing them under cover of smoke laid down by shells from his tank troops.

During the day Lieutenant-Colonel Nicoll had as his guest General Horrocks, the Corps Commander who was controlling the manoeuvres.

The Divisional Cavalry, as divisional mobile reserve, was also given another job to do about this time, namely to dig gunpits and lay mines in the north-east corner of the **New Zealand Box**, whither it might be sent should **5 Indian Division** be pushed back on the **Ruweisat Ridge** and the New Zealand Division's positions be threatened from that quarter.

Intelligence reports, taking into account Rommel's characteristic consistency, calculated that he would open the attack about the time of the full moon, the 26th. So as each day passed, the Eighth Army waited a little more impatiently as that extraordinary lift in morale, which the new Army Commander seemed to have instilled by his mere presence, grew within the Army. His habit of letting himself be seen by the private soldiers showed immediate effect; as can be read in Colonel Nicoll's diary, where he comments that during a tour round the forward minefields he had run into exalted company, and adds— perhaps with some concern—that he 'had never seen an Army Commander so far forward.' That, of course, would be all the more noticeable to a private.

Mr Churchill also visited the Army during this period and met representatives from all units. From the Divisional Cavalry were the CO and Sergeant Sperry, the only other rank with two decorations. Again, Mr. Churchill's mere presence—most people were quietly convinced that his private wish was merely to get himself shot at once again—had this same effect on morale. Undoubtedly, at the time, these occasions were needed in the Eighth Army.

Spirits within the Divisional Cavalry were always lifted by the same thing, more equipment. On the 25th the last eleven tanks, bringing the regiment up to full establishment, were delivered. The thought did occur to Colonel Nicoll to re-establish the regiment on the basis of one complete squadron of tanks; but he abandoned the idea. At this time, too, he was offered Crusaders instead of General Stuarts but he elected to retain the Stuarts. The Crusaders were fine looking tanks and, if anything, more comfortable to live and fight in and very fast, but mechanically they were not as reliable as the ugly old 'Honeys' which roared round the desert looking for all the world like bath-chairs gone juvenile and skittish.

On the 27th the regiment had as its guest for several days a very fine and charming gentleman who, incidentally, was most disgusted to have to leave just as the fighting started. He was Colonel (later Brigadier)

Bobinski, Commanding Officer of the Polish Carpathian Lancers, whom General Anders, in his book, had occasion to mention. The Carpathian Lancers were the reconnaissance regiment of the Polish Division and Bobinski came to Div Cav to study its establishment, tactics and methods. He was a delightful guest and the regiment was very flattered by his interest, and even more flattered by his praise since his unit had been the one which, as horsed cavalry, had stood up against the German panzers during the attack against Poland in 1939.

Four days had passed since the full moon and still no major Axis attack had been made on the Alamein line. Impatience and confidence permeated the whole Army.

The Divisional Cavalry was disposed along the edges of the allotted depressions with A and B Squadrons forward and C Squadron in reserve.

When the attack did come nobody was surprised or worried. Everybody for once was ready, and though the codeword TWELVEBORE came through in the small hours of 31 August and the regiment was ordered to stand to, there were even a few who at the cheerless hour of 2 a.m. could raise at least a cynical smile. Those who were doing picket at the time could afford some sardonic satisfaction that for once everybody had to share the same sleepless discomfort.

The fight began well. There was nothing to cause undue excitement, and in the Div Cav everybody's attitude seemed to be just a normal type of pre-breakfast chagrin that the Germans should choose this of all uncivilised hours to start a blasted battle.

Some days previously Colonel Nicoll had sent Lieutenant Tom Ward to the July Column as a liaison officer with a wireless link direct to RHQ, so during the opening stages of the battle, when current reports of the retirement of the column were of vital interest to Div Cav, they were coming, not with several hours' delay as they worked back to Corps Headquarters and down again, but direct and even while the movement was actually in progress. This was a vitally fortunate step to have taken

when, by 7 a.m. on the 31st, **July Column**, which had done its delaying at the first two minefields and retired behind the third one, passed through B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry (which had swung down there to give it a hand) and through some misunderstanding, disappeared out of sight and away to the east. B Squadron stood its ground, nevertheless, all day and at least managed to discourage any advance through part of the minefield. The real embarrassment came the next day, as we shall see. The Corps Commander ordered **July Column** back on the flank of B Squadron but it never managed to get there. Probably the enemy had lifted mines there fairly quickly and was already advancing past the line. Certainly, throughout the day he did advance quickly, even though engaged all the time by 4 British Light Armoured Brigade, and by dark his leading elements were in **Deir el Muhafid**.

That night Rommel most likely thought the battle half won. He had cause to: but he had one or two things yet to discover.

The Divisional Cavalry had been able to hold its positions all day and the squadrons remained where they were in battle positions for the night. The CO was startled a bit about half past four in the morning when the General, in one of those impulsive moments of his, suddenly rang up on the telephone and ordered the regiment to 'lift the minefields in front and patrol vigorously westward.' Nicoll, with awful visions of having to face the entire *Wehrmacht*, together with every Italian from Mussolini down, rolling towards him hurling fire and brimstone, said he would 'try and do so immediately but it might be rather difficult to lift the mines in the dark', coupling this with the remark that Div Cav had seen 'an entire Anti-tank regiment pulling in right opposite the front at last light.'

'All right, Nicoll, all right you're the expert. You know you've the finest unit in the Division.'

It was a very puzzled Commanding Officer who got in touch with the G.1 to see what this was all about and why the General should suddenly make that remark on a very ordinary morning, and to ask, incidentally,

if the 'Old Man ever goes to sleep during a battle.' However, all the satisfaction he got was that the 'Old Man' was in a high good humour with the progress of the battle and was very pleased with the way Div Cav had acquitted itself so far.

By first light on 1 September B Squadron had every cause to live up to this opinion as the enemy was well past its flank and beginning to work in behind it. Without the cover of the July Column the squadron was presented with a very difficult problem of disengaging, whilst at the same time pivoting back on its northern flank to fall into the same line as A Squadron. This was managed, however, quite successfully and without breaking the squadron's line, though the enemy, who followed close on the heels of the squadron, was allowed to push farther north than intended for that sector. However, nothing came of it and no damage was done to the general plan of the battle. RHQ had to make room also and it was moved back about 3000 yards to Divisional Headquarters.

During the morning the two A Squadron tank troops carried out the orders which the General had given during the early hours. They did not have to go far to find something to be aggressive with. They found a group of eight Italian M13 tanks near Point 98 and engaged them hotly. They were not credited with any knocked out, but they did drive them off to the west hot-foot before they were recalled.

Such little incidents used to give quite a lot of quiet joy to the regiment at the expense of the GOC. He had a habit of ordering the most outrageous things to be done. Someone went off to do it in a great flourish and, as often as not, ran into grave difficulties; whereupon the General ordered them to stop immediately while he sent help, at the same time counselling the CO not to let them 'do anything silly, now.'

As the morning developed Div Cav became engaged with its full share of the battle. Ten tanks and two 88-mm. guns advanced up out of **Deir el Muhafid** looking for trouble. They got it, and pretty smartly, for Colonel Nicoll brought down fire on them from 26 Battery, which was

attached to the regiment, and drove them back, but not before one at least was knocked out on the spot. First hit on this tank was actually scored by John Pavey ¹ of 34 Anti-Tank Battery, also attached to Div Cav. In some classic shooting he scored five hits out of thirteen at a range of over 2000 yards.

To the 23rd Armoured Brigade, on the Divisional Cavalry's east flank, B Squadron's retirement with the enemy hot on its heels, and then this engagement, all appeared as a big attack on the squadron's rear. The brigade reported it accordingly to Corps. By 3 p.m. orders had come to RHQ from Corps Headquarters to 'engage immediately'. The Divisional Cavalry, enjoying the battle immensely and justifiably proud of what it had achieved in the past thirty hours, had long since anticipated that order and was in the happy position of being able to ask: 'What the hell have we been doing since 0600?' The Corps Commander was well pleased to know that the regiment had been in the thick of things all day and to learn what it had done, and called up especially to say: 'Well done, Div Cav'.

The two squadrons, A and B, remained where they were through the night though the enemy crept up fairly close. At first light on the 2nd, Colonel Nicoll called for and was supplied with his first 'stonk'. This was a concentrated shoot from the whole Divisional Artillery, and was perhaps tried out for the first time during this battle. Later it became quite the practice and one became used to it, but at this juncture it was a most delightful novelty. All one had to do was to send back a map reference together with a codeword, in this case oxo, and in a few minutes every gun in the Division had shells wailing down on the spot. On this occasion the 'stonk' came down on the northern edge of [Deir el Muhafid](#).

This was a definite reminder to any enemy that any attempt to advance northwards round about there would meet with a warm reception. Nevertheless the enemy armour was not yet completely beaten at [Alam Halfa](#) and it was still briskly probing all along the northern flank. It was at this stage that Sergeant Peter [Cullen](#) ² lost his

life. He was killed by an anti-tank shell which deflected off his open turret lid. The regiment took his loss badly as everybody liked him. Bad luck seemed to have gone with him all through his service, right from the time when his armoured car had capsized and rolled on him in **Greece**.

The 2nd September actually marked the turning point of the battle, though by now its focal point was almost entirely to the east of the New Zealand positions at **Alam Halfa**. The Divisional Cavalry spent the day gleefully watching at close quarters the **RAF** medium bombers employing their pattern-bombing technique. Several squadrons of these bombers ran a shuttle service over the enemy throughout the whole battle. They came in close formations of eighteen, chose their target as they approached, wheeled over it, and at a given signal dropped their loads together. You could watch them with field glasses and sometimes the signal could be seen in the form of a flare fired from the leader's aircraft. Away came the bombs, looking for all the world like a shower of yellow rice. To be below them must have been terrible. Presently a patch of desert erupted in founts of dirty grey smoke and brown dust from a hundred different places. These all merged into one and floated gently upwards to disclose the damage.

But air activity was not entirely confined to the **RAF**. The *Luftwaffe*, though overshadowed these days, was also active, particularly after dark, and paid much attention to the New Zealand Box. Its night tactics seemed to depend on moral effect rather than upon physical damage. During the battle of Alam Halfa the New Zealanders were introduced to a new kind of anti-personnel bomb which in the dark was both spectacular and alarming. It was a butterfly bomb which emerged in numbers from a single canister. This canister burst apart in mid-air releasing the smaller ones, which became charged on falling when an outer casing swung apart and began to revolve, setting the fuse at the same time as giving a delayed and erratic descent. These 'breadbaskets', as they were soon nicknamed, made a flash in mid-air followed by a number of smaller ones, and then a further series of flashes as they landed, popping and

hanging all over the place. On one night of this battle the Hun delivered over the **New Zealand Box** quite a pyrotechnic display with his butterfly bombs, with parachute and Very flares, and with occasional indiscriminate bursts of tracer. Indeed, Colonel Nicoll in his diary comments that it was 'like the **Auckland** harbour on New Year's night.'

All the while the **RAF** was seeking compensation for this a mile or two farther south where the medium bombers' 24-hour service was kept up unrelentingly. At night-time, as each squadron arrived, one aircraft would unload parachute flares to illuminate the target. Then down went the bombs; and one by one the flares burned out in the air or landed on the ground. But before the last of these had died another stick of them lit the sky again.

What a pounding those troops suffered; and what a pounding for a hopeless cause! Three days and three nights they suffered it, what time they struggled against the softest surface of the desert. By the night of 2 September the armoured spearhead was dulled, damaged, bent; and Rommel was forced to accept utter failure for a gamble which was doomed, had he known it, from the start. He had no course but to turn tail and find his way back as best he could, leaving behind him a large proportion of his precious armour knocked out, and with great quantities of his petrol—just as precious—used up to no effect. But the extent of his greatest disaster was not revealed to the Allies until later. His troops, now so close to the **Nile Delta**, expected to be enjoying leave in **Cairo** within a week. To suffer as they did in the advance, and then to realise gradually that the whole venture was a failure, was too much. Morale suffered badly. And, what is more, they had to fight all the way back.

As soon as the advance was judged to have lost all forward momentum, in fact, when the greatest number of the enemy was in the trap, then was the time to spring it. Plans were made for the **New Zealand Division** to strike southwards from **Alam Nayil** down into **Deir el Munassib** and there bar the enemy's line of retreat. This attack was set down for the night of 3 September and was to be carried out by 5 Brigade and the **British 132 Brigade**, with 26 Battalion being used to deepen the

salient to the west. The British brigade was very raw indeed, being fresh out from England. The men had not even got their knees browned when they took over from Div Cav a fortnight previously and it was very evident that they had much to learn. They seemed surprised, almost incredulous, to be on an actual battlefield and not on manoeuvres; one of them had even asked where the nearest **Naafi** was. He was thirsty, and it being only 9 a.m., the trooper whom he approached asked why his water bottle was empty. The reply was startling. He had not drunk the water, but under orders from his Company Sergeant-Major had used it all for shaving!

The enemy's retirement began to gain momentum during 3 September and the Divisional Cavalry maintained its patrol line along the northern flank all day whilst 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 7 Motorised Brigade harassed the enemy from the east. After dark, when the regiment was ordered into the Box to take up the role of mobile reserve for the impending attack, B Squadron remained where it was ready for orders to swing back down to the positions it had held the previous week on the third minefield.

The balance of the regiment was to follow up 132 Brigade and pass through its objective, in the early hours of 4 September, down to **Deir Alinda**, where it was to exploit the success of the attack by playing havoc amongst the enemy transport there and generally to do the same as the other light armoured formations had been doing further east. Presumably this was also to be the prelude to an infantry consolidation still further south to seal off the enemy columns entirely from the west.

The infantry attack was timed to start during the early part of the evening. It was planned as a silent attack, so for quite a while after zero hour, nothing much of interest was to be seen. It was, however, somewhat nerve-racking for anyone within the Box since the **Luftwaffe** was trying to create as much distraction as possible away from the southern areas by cruising about at low altitudes and turning on the pyrotechnic display just mentioned.

As the attack developed one could see the signs, and from them could form some kind of imaginative picture of what was going on and how far the assault had progressed. These signs took the form of the usual crop of Very flares fired into the air, and bursts of tracer from the enemy machine guns fired on fixed lines. One could recognise vaguely the individual weapons from a distance by the direction of their fire and their source, and could even form some sort of imaginative picture of the character of the gun crews by the length and frequency of the bursts as they squirted along in flat arcs looking like little fiery beads on an invisible string. The progress of the attack could be visualised by the fact that, one by one, these strings of beads ceased to appear.

On the 5 Brigade front, to the south-east, though the **RAF** was still keeping the sky permanently illuminated, there was little to be seen. There was a certain amount of shellfire coming back on to the **Alam Nayil** ridge, but one gained the impression that it was being put down as part of a previously arranged programme. Actually, during the advance, 5 Brigade ran into quite a lot of excitement when the Maoris went beyond the northern edge of **Deir el Munassib**, their final objective, and got down into the depression itself. There they raised Cain amongst the German transport. All this, however, was out of sight of the start line and the 5 Brigade front appeared relatively quiet.

But to the immediate front, that of the British brigade, there were all the signs that affairs were not happening as they should. The usual Very flares soared upwards and tracer squirted about the place, but none of this seemed to be getting quenched. Right on the axis of the brigade's advance something large, presumably a lorry, was burning fiercely and illuminating the whole battlefield. This vicinity seemed to be attracting a great quantity of mortar and shell-fire. Enemy aircraft had been attracted, too, and were adding their share to the confusion.

What actually had happened was that the brigade's transport—and there was far too much of that—advancing on a timed programme, had telescoped up on the assaulting companies which were late crossing the

start line, and had got shot up. In no time some of it had been set on fire and the assaulting companies, with Brigade Headquarters now right on their heels, were forced to advance without the protection of darkness and were thrown into confusion by the heavy enemy fire on the spot.

The Divisional Cavalry, less B Squadron, was supposed to have followed close upon Brigade Headquarters and be ready to leap-frog through the forward battalions at first light. But Colonel Nicoll, realising that the brigade was rather unwieldy and in danger of bunching on the objective, wisely decided to let the advance go ahead in the meanwhile and hold the regiment back near the start line until the early hours of the morning, when the brigade should have had a chance to consolidate. His two squadrons would then have been able to move forward much more briskly and without interfering with the advance of the infantry support weapons and the attached reserve of tanks.

So Nicoll sent only one troop of three carriers forward with Brigade Headquarters to send back word when the Brigade Commander thought the time ripe for the exploitation to begin. The damage done to this troop gives some indication of what would have happened to the regiment had it gone forward and become tangled up in the crowded area taken up by Brigade Headquarters.

The liaison troop, under Lieutenant Don [Ross](#),³ brought up the rear of the Brigade Headquarters, crawling nose to tail through the minefields below [Alam Nayil](#). The crowding and slow pace were his first worries, indicating as they did a similar lack of dispersal should the advance not go quite as it should. Furthermore, once the Brigade Headquarters was clear of the minefields and took up its position about half a mile forward, it was still far too crowded. The result was that the support weapons and the reserve of infantry and tanks began to suffer heavy shellfire. Within five minutes heavy mortar fire was coming down as well and casualties were rapidly mounting among the infantry. The Div Cav troop suffered this with them for the best part of an hour and it was more or less inevitable that it should receive its share. By midnight

practically the whole troop were casualties and all three carriers as well. When the first carrier was hit, Ross tried to move away a little until things quietened down. He had gone only about fifty yards when the next carrier was hit and he had to crowd all three crews on to his own. He kept easing away to the east with the intention, if necessary, of getting back to RHQ round that end of the minefield, but he had gone only a few hundred yards, and was still under heavy shellfire, when the carrier hit a mine and blew up. Now completely immobile, he advised Squadron Headquarters by wireless while the troop immediately set about digging slit trenches. The first man took a mighty swing with a pick and sunk it into a mine, so that plan was smartly abandoned and only shallow shelter was scratched in the surface sand for the wounded whilst the remainder took cover behind the carrier. After a while Ross decided to send back all who could walk, he himself remaining with the wounded. Making their way back, some of the men were given a lift in a truck belonging to **27 MG Battalion**. It in its turn hit a mine, thus raising the tally of one of the Div Cav men to being four times blown up in a night without becoming a casualty. Strange things happen in battle. When the first carrier was hit a bottle of rum placed handy on a shelf flew up in the air and came down on the head of its owner, **Jim Norton**,⁴ without even breaking, adding no doubt quite a little to his discomfort since at the same instant he suffered shrapnel wounds in two other places.

By 5.30 a.m. on the 4th it was obvious that the Divisional Cavalry would not be able to get down into **Deir Alinda** through 132 Brigade. On the 5 Brigade front the objectives had been reached but the Maoris had overshot them and were not consolidated; so a route through that brigade was impracticable and the whole regiment was sent to its old positions east of the Box. Nor were those who had been with it overnight sorry to go. Like everybody else there they had suffered a very wakeful night indeed, and at first light RHQ and part of one squadron were horrified to find themselves parked right against a huge stack of New Zealand Engineers' mines. They could only stay there, keeping very still and hoping they would not be noticed, but when the word came to move

off they did so with a briskness which no doubt drew much praise from their neighbours concerning the efficiency with which Div Cav got off the mark.

A Squadron became the reserve for all day on the 4th while B and C Squadrons were sent out to the edge of **Deir el Muhafid** with the artillery Forward Observation Officers watching for suitable targets for a 'stonk'.

Virtually the battle of **Alam Halfa** was over. The Axis columns rolled steadily westwards through 4 and 5 September. Everyone in Div Cav was disappointed to be robbed by pure accident of its chance to get in amongst them, particularly as they had been previously getting stories of their opposite numbers in formations further east harrying the retiring enemy. They had been licking their chops at the prospect of a day's similar sport in **Deir Alinda**. Nevertheless, on the 5th, tank troops under D'Arcy Cole, Dan Ormond and Jack Reeves did manage to get at the enemy a little and do some shooting, Ormond actually penetrating right down into **Deir el Muhafid**.

Two days later, near the same place, he earned a bar to his MC. Probing about here and there, he ran across a minefield through which the Germans had a gap covered by anti-tank and machine-gun fire. He stopped his troop and walked forward under machine-gun fire to make sure that the gap was genuinely clear of mines, then got back into his tank and charged through and right on to one post, so close that he could not bring fire to bear on it. Down he jumped again, shooting two men before his pistol misfired. The other three in the post he took to with fists and boots—and he had a nippy little kick when he played second five-eighths at school—and hustled them up, thoroughly subdued, on to his tank. By now the stationary tank was under anti-tank and high-explosive fire from a flank and this was too much for the three prisoners, unnerved as they were. They jumped down and tried to run away, but Ormond cut them down with a burst from the anti-aircraft machine gun on the outside of his turret before he opened up on and silenced the anti-tank gun. While this was going on the tank suffered a

direct hit of HE, ⁵ and though it temporarily blinded the driver, Ormond managed to guide him straight at and over the top of the gun, the survivors of which he wiped out also before setting off back to the rest of the troop.

The General was at RHQ at the time and was highly delighted to hear the current reports coming back from B Squadron while all this was going on. He demanded that the prisoners be sent back to him as soon as they arrived at Squadron HQ. There is no record of how the CO explained the lack of prisoners later, for only those present were to know the full facts at the time. Nor is there any record of what sort of a bloodthirsty fellow he thought Ormond was.

Perhaps there is some explanation for Dan Ormond's extreme aggressiveness and disregard of danger that day. The day before he must have felt deeply a loss which saddened many people within the Division, particularly amongst 22 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry—above all, amongst the regiment's original B Squadron.

On 6 September Lieutenant-Colonel John Russell, DSO, was killed while commanding 22 Battalion. John was too good a soldier to die so soon; but what other fate could you expect of a man of such tenacious courage? Fate was unkind to him. It should have allowed him to be killed crashing forward at the head of an assault instead of allowing his humane instincts to be the cause of his end. He was driving through a gap in a minefield to see a friend—he had close friends everywhere and only an hour or so previously had been to see his 'first-born', B Squadron—when a carrier ahead of him blew up on a mine. John knew only too well the awful mess a mine makes of a carrier crew and jumped down to rush forward and help. He jumped on a mine himself and was with his Maker that instant.

If it was an unkind means, it was at least a kind end. There were no lingering cruel wounds, no uphill fight against inevitable death, none of that ghastly effort—though John would never have faltered in making it—to mask his suffering when he saw his hurt reflected and magnified in

the anguish in his friends' eyes. It was clean and sudden. Fear, a stranger in his life, could not intrude in his death, which came without warning and came when his heart was abundant with kindness.

¹ **2 Lt J. Pavey**; born Somerset, England, 18 Jul 1911; farm manager; accidentally killed, 9 Sep 1953.

² **Sgt P. T. Cullen**; born NZ 3 Jun 1916; carpenter; twice wounded; killed in action 1 Sep 1942.

³ **Capt D. I. Ross**; Dunedin; born England, 30 May 1918; warehouseman; twice wounded.

⁴ **Sgt J. P. Norton**; born Picton, 13 Dec 1913; slaughterman; wounded 4 Sep 1942.

⁵ **High explosive.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 14 – THE BATTLE OF ALAMEIN

CHAPTER 14

The Battle of Alamein

YOU COULD FEEL it in your bones that the tide was at last on the turn. Were not the Germans halted for good and all in [Russia](#)? They had faded out at [Stalingrad](#); they were foiled at [Leningrad](#); they fell short at the Caucasus, and were halted now by sheer bloody exhaustion. The other prong of this huge pincer, designed to meet somewhere amidst the wealth of oil in Asia Minor, rested at [Alamein](#), softened and blunted. Had these closed they would then have fused into a greater one aimed at meeting the Japanese somewhere—perhaps in [India](#). But to consider this is not within the scope of a mere unit history.

In the Divisional Cavalry the men had the same feeling as in the rest of the Division, or for that matter in the whole Eighth Army, that what Mr Churchill has called the beginning of the end was at hand. There were hard fights ahead but, given a short breather, they would be ready for anything. They needed only a spell from the dust and thirst and the filthy flies and from the monotony of constantly wishing for the temporary respite given by the dusk, yet answering immediately to their natural instincts by fervently wanting to see yet another dawn. As each dawn came it brought hope and warmth, but it brought also yesterday's discomforts all over again.

The order for a spell came to most men almost simultaneously with its execution, and on 10 September the squadrons moved off eastwards. By the following afternoon the men were sitting round their vehicles in an agreeably calm hollow south of Burg el Arab, listening to the band of 6 Brigade. To add to this pleasure word came round that nearly half of the regiment's strength would be granted four days' leave to [Cairo](#), and the remainder were to follow them when they got back.

A short spell 'with the lid off' had a most wonderful effect. By the end of the week all the lined faces, previously hard and grim, were again smiling: dulled eyes came back from leave sparkling. Not even the

dyspeptic or alcoholic remorse which accompanied some of the men back could lower their spirits, and every face asked the same question: when was the war-winning to begin in earnest? The men's very actions carried this query as they went about their routine jobs. Life was fun again. Each squadron carried out a practice shoot which both perfected the gun teams and afforded recreation. As the shooting improved, fresh gazelle meat occasionally found its way into the stews.

A fortnight slipped smoothly away, ending in a three-day divisional manoeuvre out in the desert to the south, before the regiment returned to its bivouac area near **Burg el Arab. Two days later, on 30 September, the regiment, together with 27 MG Battalion, was inspected by General Montgomery. By his mere presence and by his quiet and infectious confidence, the fighting spirit of the men was raised as high as ever it had been. Something was afoot; something big; soon they were to deliver the knockout punch. Some of the men had actually seen new tanks: Shermans, hundreds of them, manned by a British brigade, the 9th Armoured, which was to be an integral part of the Division, and whose crews were even now proudly painting on them the silver fern of the Division.**

Leave was still available by October but no one asked for it, not even for a day in **Alexandria. Big things were afoot and no one was interested. Besides, one might easily get left behind. As it was, there was quite a big exchange of personnel going on with the Composite Training Depot. So nobody even dared show the slightest interest in being away from the regiment. One pitied the unfortunates, and there were quite a few, who succumbed to attacks of jaundice, an illness you could not conceal.**

He who deserves the greatest pity of all for a cruel stroke of luck was the regiment's own Commanding Officer, Lieutenant- Colonel Nicoll. He had gone down to **Maadi to arrange this exchange and late one night was set upon in the dark by a group of drunken soldiers. He was hit with a bottle and left lying on the road with a badly broken jaw, little more than a hundred yards from his tent. So he passes out of this story a bitterly disappointed man. He had led the regiment through difficult**

times. His brand of discipline was stern, but those under him reacted to it well for he demanded and received respect. He was a man of restraint and a resourceful soldier, and many of those in the regiment probably owe their lives to his skill in handling not only situations but men. It was a sorry day on which he lost his command, just as he was to taste the sweets of victory. Colonel Nicoll was evacuated to hospital and Major Sutherland assumed command.

The following day, 6 October, the first step was taken in the planning for the Battle of **Alamein**. At a squadron commanders' conference to discuss training 'for an offensive action in moonlight beyond an enemy minefield, assuming that the gap would be narrow', a technique was evolved for squadrons to pass through a lighted gap and then fan out on the other side. This was practised first by day and then after dark, and in a few days each squadron commander felt that it was perfected.

About this time **General Freyberg** decided that he would be better equipped to command a mobile division if he used a fast tracked vehicle, and accordingly demanded that Div Cav should send him one of its 'Honeys'. The first one that RHQ parted with seemed to suffer stage-fright on greeting a general officer and promptly broke down, so the General was given the next best one. His tank had to mount two wireless sets so, in order to make room for the crew, the gun was removed and replaced by a dummy, which not only served to block up an unsightly hole but made the tank thoroughly recognisable by the jaunty angle of its gun-barrel. This appendage indeed made the tank look more like a unicorn than an armoured fighting vehicle, and thenceforth, as the General was notorious for a greater aptitude for getting into trouble than getting out of it, he had to be given another whole 'Protective Troop' from the Div Cav so that he was doubly distinguishable within the Division. Everybody was able to notice a group of four tanks roaring along, the leader, with its saucy gun, setting a rollicking pace and the others toiling valiantly along after it, trying to keep up close enough to do some protecting when and where necessary.

The signs of an approaching offensive continued to grow. On 11 October some twenty-three of the regiment's carriers arrived back from Workshops with new motors, and the following day the CO attended a conference with the administrative staff to iron out the problems of a complicated forward move. About this time, too, the senior officers attended an exercise carried out by 5 Brigade and the **Royal Warwickshire Yeomanry** in their new Sherman tanks. Then, on the 15th, the Divisional Cavalry made its first move towards the impending battle. This move served also to perfect the technique of moving in the dark along a line of lights.

The principal appointments were now as follows:

Commanding Officer **Lt-Col J. H. Sutherland, MC**

Second-in-Command **Maj H. A. Robinson, MC**

Adjutant **Lt P. S. Crisp**

OC A Squadron **Maj G. H. Stace**

Second-in-Command **Capt M. L. W. Adams**

OC B Squadron **Maj W. G. Handley**

Second-in-Command **Capt J. G. Wynyard**

OC C Squadron **Maj A. Van Slyke**

Second-in-Command **Capt R. A. M. Macdonald**

OC HQ Squadron **Capt R. B. McQueen**

Medical Officer **Capt J. R. J. Moore, NZMC**

Padre **Rev. H. G. Taylor, CF**

All the time the pitch of excitement was rising, and with it a fear in everybody's heart lest he should be left out of the show. For the next four days the regiment camped close enough to the beach for parties to be offered bathing. Round Burg el Arab there is a lovely beach of snowy white sand and playful surf, but though transport was available for the men to go swimming, very few elected to go. The vehicles were their homes, and where the vehicles had to stay the men usually chose to stay also. That tie which in the days of peace had bound them to their horses was now binding them to their inanimate machines.

So they stayed where they were and lazed about or continued the

interminable tinkering with their equipment until the evening of 19 October, when the regiment made the next move forward as far as **El Hammam**.

The CO arrived back next day from a reconnaissance of the forward areas and a series of divisional conferences and, accompanied by Lieutenant Lane, ¹ his IO, with marked maps, visited every squadron in turn, telling them the whole and complete story of the coming battle. Nothing that he knew did he withhold from the men; and the same was going on at the time right through the Army. The importance of security was stressed and the men reacted to the confidence placed in them. The Divisional Cavalry was told that the battle (Operation LIGHTFOOT) was timed to start at 10 p.m. on 23 October prefaced by a terrific barrage, such as they had never before witnessed, which was to open up exactly twenty minutes earlier. The battle would consist of a break-in, 'dog-fight', break-out and pursuit. It might be over in ten days; it might last for a fortnight. All this depended on the enemy's capacity for punishment. The Eighth Army would consist of three corps, the 10th, the 13th, and the 30th. In the break-in stage the enemy was to be attacked simultaneously in the north and south, the former attack being carried out by **30 Corps**, which was to form a bridgehead from the **Miteiriya Ridge** to the coast, namely where the main enemy defences and gun areas were located. The 10th Corps was designed to pass through this bridgehead once it was cleared and break out beyond to complete the victory. In the south **13 Corps'** plan was to try to draw the enemy's reserves of armour there whilst at the same time launching a light armoured brigade, the 4th, round the southern flank to secure the enemy's supply and maintenance organisations at **Daba**. The 30th Corps' attack was to be on a frontage of four divisions: 9 Australian on the coast; then 51 (Highland) Division, come to avenge St. Valéry; then the New Zealand and 1 South African Divisions. Opposite them were 15 *Panzer* and the Italian *Littorio Divisions*, on and north of **Tell el Aqqaqir**, with elements of the *Bersaglieri Division* on the coast, and the German *164 Division* and Italian *Trento Division* on and around Miteiriya Ridge. In reserve, on the coast road, were the Italian *Trieste*

Division and the New Zealanders' old enemy—now almost their personal adversaries—the German 90th Light.

The New Zealand Division had a dual role. First it was to take part in the break-in battle and then become, with two armoured divisions, part of 10 Corps for the break-out, later named Operation SUPERCHARGE. The 9th Armoured Brigade was to take its place as an integral part of the Division. This time there would be no fear that the infantry, having captured their final objectives, might be overrun for lack of armoured support against a counter-attack, because the Armoured Brigade was to follow on the two infantry brigades' heels and actually pass through them before first light. The Divisional Cavalry was to go through, too, and try to gatecrash into the enemy's rear.

All this and more, each squadron in turn learned, sitting back there in the comparative peace of El Hammam. It came to them in a quiet, unimpassioned, almost laconic speech to which they listened gravely and in a mood restrained and sober; though all around could be seen glittering eyes as each man realised that at last they were certain of winning. After that speech there was no cheering, nothing spontaneous, for it had really been quite unnecessary to tell them that against a strong and brave enemy the fighting would be bitter and hard, and that for a single unwounded man there was to be no surrender. What they really did appreciate was the confidence placed in them to allow them to visualise the whole battlefield at any stage so that, when they were in the thick of it, they would not have to suppress that horrid feeling that the whole of the enemy's forces were concentrated against them. The plan captured their imagination when they visualised themselves milling around in the enemy's rear, carving up his supply vehicles, cutting his communications and thus causing confusion in his various headquarters. Had they not been denied that same satisfaction in the last battle simply because things went wrong on the infantry start line? This time it just could not happen.

In the late afternoon of 21 October the regiment slipped forward another five miles and settled down near El Imayid for the next day,

camouflaged and quietly waiting for the next forward move. Each one of these moves gave the impression that the whole desert for 20 miles back was covered by a huge game of General Post, one formation slipping into an area vacated by the one ahead. This illusion was increased by the fact that those right in front could not move forward, and so with each move the squeeze became tighter until the whole Army, brought under pressure from behind, came to a crisis at zero hour and burst forward through and over the enemy. Each move was done unobtrusively in the dark, and for daylight camouflage all armoured units had their tanks fitted with 'sunshades', canopies painted to represent lorries. Though the crews were not to know, they probably were taking up positions previously occupied by real or dummy trucks, so that, to enemy reconnaissance aircraft, the scene on the ground never appeared to change.

During the 22nd the GOC visited the regiment and issued a further operation directive giving a definite axis of advance and definite bounds to clear. The squadrons were to finish up round and north of Deir el Abyad, about four or five miles south-west of **Miteiriya Ridge**. They were instructed not to become involved in an armoured battle but to concentrate in causing destruction and confusion. If the regiment was confronted with heavy armour it was to retire behind 9 Armoured Brigade, whose heavy Shermans and Grants would take care of it with their 75-mm. guns.

After dark the general post took place again and by 9 p.m. Div Cav was in its jumping-off position near **Alam el Onsol**. Twenty-four hours to go!

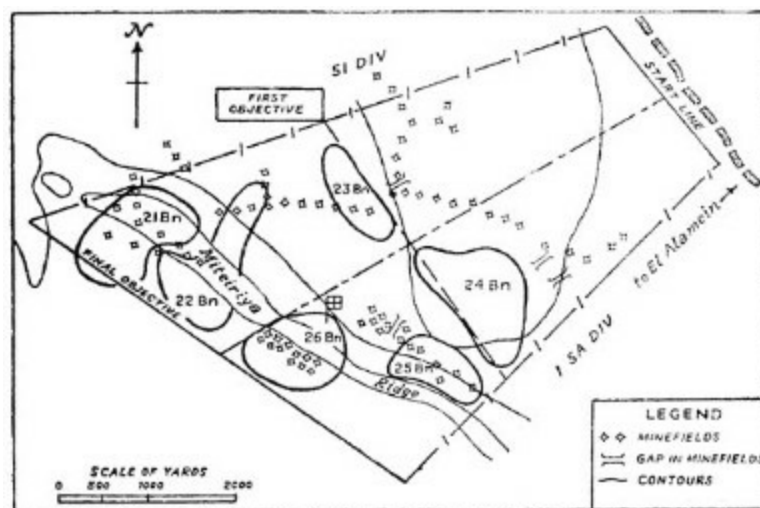
All day on the 23rd the men rested, perhaps impatiently, though the temper of the regiment was of a quiet, determined kind. They were not grim nor were they light-hearted. One who did not know his New Zealanders might say they were phlegmatic. But anyone who did know would read in their eyes and in their actions, as they meticulously polished their guns of the last speck of dust, that they were thinking of

their natural job in an attack, the exploitation task, of which they had been so often robbed. Conversation centred round crew drill, or perhaps here and there they were discussing who next within the troop could make best use of the next pair of captured binoculars.

The Corps had some six parallel routes for the axes of the attack, each of which was marked. There were the 'Sun', 'Moon', 'Star', 'Bottle', 'Boat', and 'Hat' tracks, all recognised by a line of petrol tins on standards, with the appropriate sign cut out from the rear side and lit at night from within. The Divisional Cavalry had been allotted the 'Boat' track for its final move into the fight. This track led to the axis of 6 Brigade's advance. The timings of the whole attack had been meticulously worked out and the regiment moved off at 8.5 p.m. in the following order: A, C and B Squadrons, RHQ, and the attached New Zealand Engineers' party. As anticipated, it was a slow trip with many hold-ups over the whole 15 miles, and the tail of the regiment had barely passed our gun lines when the great barrage opened up.

Though in later days there were many more intense barrages than at [Alamein](#), it was the original one which remains most vividly in the memory for it came with such a shock; it seemed so revolutionary, so concentrated, so murderous. To find a good verbal description is most difficult. Imagine a factory chimney made of hand-grenades in place of bricks; loop a great hawser round its base and suddenly wrench away the foundations. The opening of the [Alamein](#) barrage rent the air as suddenly as would those thousands of grenades burst upon the ground. It was a crash, with no warning, which lasted for hours. There was no crescendo in its volume as it was fortissimo within a couple of seconds of starting, so perfect was the timing of the gunners' watches. No camera has truly recorded the sight because a photograph 'freezes' its subject and fails to grasp the eerie colour of the light. Some of this appeared in stabs, some in flashes, the far-away ones as mere flickers and the near ones as angry flames belching out, giving an instant silhouette of a gun and its crew. The noise of the barrage at close quarters shocked the system, since it was more than the senses could

contain. It seemed to be just noise to an infinite degree.



MITEIRIYA RIDGE—DAWN POSITIONS 24 OCTOBER 1942

MITEIRIYA RIDGE—DAWN POSITIONS 24 OCTOBER 1942

The next morning, standing where the shellfire had fallen, it was impossible, for thousands of yards in any direction, to put a foot on the ground without treading on shrapnel fragments. Blue-grey with the heat of explosion, crystalline and jagged from rending into small pieces, they lay:

Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks

In Vallombrosa.

Out on the **Miteiriya Ridge** in the morning there was a knocked-out Italian tank. Under it were two dead Germans who had dived there for shelter and built a barricade of boxes of ammunition; but both men had been killed by shrapnel which had actually passed between the tank's tracks and bogeys and then through the crevices between the boxes.

So, it was right amongst the guns that the Battle of **Alamein** opened for the Divisional Cavalry. It seemed to be guns, guns; hundreds of them in the dark.

Gradually the regiment worked forward, part of a wave 30 miles

deep, surging steadily on. There was nothing much to see except the lighted signs looming up and then disappearing behind in the murk. Little by little the moonlight faded as the dust-cloud became thicker. Now and again a stationary figure was passed, a provost perhaps; or figures walking back, probably walking wounded; or a stationary vehicle, perhaps blown up on a mine. On the ground to either side of the column were white tapes which marked the edges of a cleared lane. On and on the columns crawled, slowly through the dark and dust, and ever and ever there was the clamour of the guns. The trip lasted all night, but the leading squadron of Div Cav was not on **Miteiriya Ridge** until daybreak. There for the time being the regiment came to a halt. The 6th Brigade had reached its final objective but had not managed to open the minefield in front, so the first chance of getting through was lost and the whole regiment was forced to pull back for the day just behind the brigade. It was considered suicidal for the Div Cav's own detachment of Engineers to try to open a gap in daylight.

After dark, however, the push was on again for the armour now that a gap had been made in the minefields. B and C Squadrons passed through on the original axis acting as a screen for 9 Armoured Brigade's tanks. The gap was under shellfire and, as the squadrons passed through, they came by a Sherman tank which had caught fire right at the mouth of the gap and which was burning so fiercely that its whole steel shell stood out in the darkness as a great glowing beacon for all to see. Naturally this was a bad place for anyone to linger and the leading troop was met by heavy anti-tank and machine-gun fire. Lieutenant Poolman, in command of it, charged straight through this but got only a short distance ahead before he ran into more mines. He was still under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire, but nevertheless he dismounted and managed to find a way through. Just after this, Mike **Murphy**² found trouble when his carrier ran into dannert wire. He too leaped out of his carrier, went forward on foot, and cut a passage through.

After passing through the gap the squadrons immediately fanned out in a line facing south-west and began to advance, lengthening their line

as they went. But they never got more than a quarter of the way to their objective as they were enfiladed by murderous fire from tanks and field and anti-tank guns. The 9th Armoured Brigade pressed on, however, smashing its way out into the dark. It had been mooted that the heavy tanks should use the smaller Div Cav vehicles to draw fire but this was quite unnecessary, since anything at all that moved drew fire, often at point-blank range. The heavy tanks pressed on, smashing, crushing and shooting, bent on straddling the enemy gun line and blowing it to pieces regardless of their own heavy casualties. In Div Cav the losses amounted to 5 tanks and 4 carriers for the night. Two sergeants were killed, 'Ginty' McInnes ³ and Percy Titchener, ⁴ and four troopers: Carr, ⁵ Davies, ⁶ Manson ⁷ and Jensen. ⁸ Four others died of wounds: Troopers Hardyment, ⁹ Jones, ¹⁰ McCallum ¹¹ and Scragg. ¹² Some twelve others were wounded, and all of them had occasion to bless Alf Bayliss ¹³ that night for staying to care for them after the squadrons had been withdrawn under cover of the ridge, and for remaining out until they could be evacuated.

The battle lasted all night, the regiment experiencing its heaviest fighting when the big tanks drew back to join it. The anti-tank fire which caused most of the damage seemed to be from some kind of shell which did not penetrate but burst on the outside, showering its target with burning oil. It was rather effective as a tank-killer, though it did not cause the usual proportion of man casualties since most of the men managed to leap out of their burning vehicles and get back to the gap in the minefield to wait until the rest of the vehicles retired before first light. The Div Cav could not claim much certain damage in answer to what it had lost: only one anti-tank gun, one heavy mortar, and some infantry eliminated, and definitely no prisoners.

By daylight on the 25th everybody retired to the shelter of 6 Brigade and stood by, ready to repel any counter-attack or to repeat the operation of the night before; and in the evening Div Cav was withdrawn and became part of the Divisional Reserve Group. The 26th October was spent just off the Qattara road not far behind the original infantry start

line. It was a relatively quiet day except for a Stuka raid in which Trooper **Coventry**¹⁴ was killed and seven others wounded, of whom Sergeant **Dunbar**¹⁵ and Trooper **Crozier**¹⁶ later died. The following day the whole regiment moved right back to its original jumping-off place near **Alam el Onsol**.

The next three days were more or less quiet ones for the whole regiment while it took over new vehicles and prepared to join in the battle as soon as demanded. During this time the Australians had launched an attack in the northern end of the line and pushed out another salient there. The 'dog-fight' stage of the battle was nearly completed and Operation **SUPERCHARGE** was coming due. One more bulge was now needed and this would surely burst outwards to complete the victory.

At 4.30 p.m. on 30 October a movement order arrived instructing the regiment to move forward again at four o'clock! This was rather a tall order no doubt, but the regiment did its best and by five o'clock it was speeding along towards **El Alamein**. The move was fast and very dusty since 9 Armoured Brigade was also on the move. No doubt Div Cav came in for some solid cursing from those in the heavy tanks, but Operation **SUPERCHARGE** was getting under way and everyone simply had to be up to a schedule, regardless of such things as movement orders arriving late. Considering the complexity of the whole operation the staff work was masterly, and such mistakes as did occur could usually be rectified with a little extra effort somewhere.

The general plan for **SUPERCHARGE** began rather similarly to that for **LIGHTFOOT**, with **30 Corps** creating a salient through which **10 Corps** could pass; but this time it was designed to pass out in pursuit of an enemy beaten in this last slogging match. The New Zealand Division had responsibilities in both phases and, since it was impossible for our infantry to be whipped up and away in their lorries when the break-out occurred, 151 and 152 Brigades of 50 and 51 Divisions respectively were given the job of making the required bulge. There was to be an even heavier barrage than for **LIGHTFOOT** and the infantry were to keep right

up to it, leaving any pockets of armoured resistance to be cleared by the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade which would be on the heels of the assaulting battalions. Each of the three regiments of this brigade would have a squadron of Div Cav attached to complete its mopping up, and when they reached the infantry's final objective the tanks were to continue to their own objective, a gun line along the Rahman track, straddle it as before and again blow it to pieces.

The attack was delayed a day and finally began at 1.5 a.m. on 2 November. On 1 November Div Cav was placed under command of 9 Armoured Brigade. A Squadron was attached to 3 Hussars, C Squadron to the Warwickshire Yeomanry. B Squadron was attached to the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry and began the battle, together with RHQ, following the brigade's tactical headquarters. At 6 p.m. the armour lined up at El Alamein station, moving off at 8.20.

The trip forward was again slow and dusty and the heavy tanks were rather delayed by having to clean up enemy pockets overrun by the infantry. As daylight approached, the armour was not yet quite abreast of the infantry's final objective and there was a risk of the whole operation being jeopardised by failure to launch 1 Armoured Division; so General Freyberg ordered 9 Brigade to press forward without waiting for gaps to be made in the minefields, but instead, to use the Div Cav and, if necessary, to sacrifice it to pilot the heavy tanks over them. This advance was intended to be covered by another artillery barrage, but the plan did not work out quite like that, as the advance, delayed as it was, outlived the barrage, which could not be kept up indefinitely. Moreover, daylight intervened, thus even adding to the tank casualties, disastrously heavy as they were expected to be. Nevertheless the job had to be done regardless of ill fortune; and those Tommies, bearing so proudly the silver fern, were men of 'guts' primed up to do anything—anything at all—that the New Zealand Division asked. They knew that this job alone would redeem the Tommy tank-men for ever in the New Zealanders' eyes.

The Hussars, on the right, had suffered heavy shellfire during the night, and though they had lost all their anti-tank guns, they reached the Rahman track at daybreak. In the centre the Wilts also got there but only after awful battling in the half light. The Wilts ran on to an anti-tank screen and dug-in tanks which had every advantage. Undaunted they pressed on, with their leading Crusader squadron fighting a grim and gallant action in a suicidal headlong charge at six 88-mm. guns. The squadron wiped out four of these, then and there, but at the cost of every tank it had. The Wiltshires' two squadrons of heavy tanks were then hotly engaged, but fought bitterly for the ground and got up to the Rahman track, though by the end of the day this regiment's armour was more or less annihilated for the second time in ten days. Its strength in 'runners' was one heavy tank and one Crusader. B Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry was lucky not to suffer the same fate here for it was actually following right after the Wilts when they struck the worst of the fighting. The squadron did, however, get quite a thrashing from anti-tank guns which had been overrun without being eliminated, and did suffer losses, amongst whom was the gay and gallant Jim Wynyard. Poor Jim: he never lived to achieve his ambition of driving a carrier down the Unter den Linden. Peter [Fullerton-Smith](#)¹⁷ was also killed and Trooper [Loe](#).¹⁸ Six others were wounded, of whom Lance- Corporal [Eves](#)¹⁹ died that day.

On the left flank of the attack the Warwicks mistook some high ground a little to the south for the proper objective, Tell el Aqqaqir, and got slightly off line, but though hotly engaged on three sides, accounted for every anti-tank gun opposing them.

In that grim and bloody battle full honours went to 9 Armoured Brigade, for though it did not reach right out to its objective, it did the job it was asked and wiped out the gun line. But at what an awful cost. In one day's fighting its strength of 150 tanks was reduced to 15 Shermans and Grants and 12 Crusaders; and then if you please, what was left of the brigade, amounting barely to squadron strength but determined to carry on, linked up with 1 Armoured Division until the

fight was over.

Though the Divisional Cavalry had been used as a trial-and- error (mostly error) method of finding minefields and as a screen to go ahead and draw fire, its casualties were amazingly light, despite the fact that a Bren carrier hitting a German Teller mine means certain death for one, if not two, of the crew.

Now that the heavier armour was well launched, the regiment, except for C Squadron which remained with the Warwicks all day, was sent back.

The 2nd November 1942 was really the climax of the whole African campaign, for that was the day whose events forced Rommel to begin the withdrawal which ended in **Cape Bon in **Tunisia**.**

By 3 November it was becoming increasingly plain that the great Battle of **Alamein was nearly over. True, there were still tank battles going on in other sectors of the line, but the columns of smoke in the enemy's rear could not all be caused by the Royals' armoured cars which had been gatecrashing again. The enemy shelling was definitely spasmodic and A Squadron of Div Cav had actually had some of its vehicles out of the north side of the salient into open country on the heels of a definite withdrawal. The battle in **30 Corps'** bulge had gained its purpose, as once **10 Corps** was launched it had severely mauled enemy armour both north and south of the salient. Now its 2nd and 8th Armoured Brigades had sallied out again across the Rahman track, whilst other armour had broken out further south and was thrusting north-west. The time had come for the New Zealand Division to get on wheels, burst right out, and complete a huge encirclement that would put the whole **Africa Corps** in the bag.**

The Divisional Cavalry needed some re-equipping and, at dusk on 3 November, moved back to the south-east corner of the salient. But the idea was soon dropped as time was too short, and the squadrons went back to the middle of the salient and stocked up with all the petrol and

water they could carry. The regiment again came under command of 9 Armoured Brigade until the advance was well under way. At 9 a.m. on the 4th, the first move forward began when the brigade was ordered to deploy ready to move west. There were not enough gaps for the Division to pass through and the congestion inside the salient certainly seemed dangerous. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade, the Divisional Cavalry, and 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade, more or less nose to tail, were slowly milling round in huge concentric circles on flat and featureless ground. It would have been a perfect massed target for enemy bombers but they had all been beaten into the ground by the **RAF**. Many a veteran of the **Greece** and **Crete** campaigns had vivid memories that morning of previous experience when the enemy then had command of the skies. Gradually the crowding eased and by 2 p.m. Div Cav was out in the open and following the line of pursuit to the south-west.

After five months of being caged in, tighter and tighter, the Army was out once more on the offensive, with elbow room for everybody and clean ground to fight on. It was here in the open that the utterness of the victory was realised. To the north there was still some armoured fighting, but it was a running battle and running into the west, the right way. To the south and east there were groups of enemy, lost and disorganised and waiting for someone to 'capture' them, tell them where to go, give them water, just show interest. Some of these had actually organised themselves into bodies and were wandering off in a general easterly direction. Occasionally a motor-cycle or a truck came up, using its white flag more as a means of attracting attention than as a sanctuary. Their defeat was utter when such people were completely ignored or were merely shooed off by a casually indifferent thumb over the shoulder. Tanks, guns, trucks, all looking broken and beaten—so lifeless—littered the desert in places. Even coming through the regiment's forward wireless link was a disconsolate Italian voice bawling like a motherless calf, hour after hour, for 'Numero Otto e Numero Sei'. But for all anyone cared, No. 8 and No. 6 had had bullets through their heads.

Across this despondent wailing came a message to all squadrons: 'Move on as the axis advances.' One operator cheerfully added a note to his log: 'Move on as the Axis retires!' So all these: soldiers confounded and amazed, disorganised vehicles, bleating Ities and beaten Huns; all were left to look after themselves; for the race was on to complete the victory and surround the lot. Before this was fully realised, night had fallen and Div Cav was in laager at a place called **Agramiya**, 20 miles south of **Daba**, led there by the glow of a burning truck which had suffered in some skirmishing a little while before.

The whole Division was rolling forward again before first light on the 5th, with the regiment acting as a flank guard to the north. The axis of advance was parallel with the coastline, and the first object of the Division was to take charge of the high ground behind **Fuka** and then, perhaps the following day, to secure the landing ground at **Baggush**. So fast did the advance continue on that day that Colonel Sutherland, whose tank broke down, had either to delegate his command to Major Handley or lose touch through being beyond wireless range; and once the tank was repaired, it took Sutherland a whole day to catch up with RHQ, despite the fact that the whole advance was checked for a while by an enemy rearguard action, and by a delay south of **Fuka** when the whole Division had to pass through the defile of a minefield running south from that place.

Orders for the 6th were for the New Zealand Division and 4 Light Armoured Brigade to advance swiftly, seize the defensive box at **Baggush**, and garrison the landing ground until the **RAF** could take over. This time Div Cav acted as forward screen.

Dawn had revealed a suspiciously clear atmosphere and it was not surprising later in the morning to encounter an occasional heavy shower of rain. This, however, did not have any immediate effect on the advance, and within an hour after midday, the regiment's patrols were on the prominent trig point 163 overlooking **Sidi Haneish**. Twelve months before, some of the men had been sent up to the escarpment to

occupy as pickets the line of pillboxes at this very same place, as this was on the southern edge of the **Baggush Box**. At nights they used to grouse bitterly at the apparent futility of guarding against an enemy raiding party from the south when he was assuredly a hundred miles away on the other side of the Egyptian border. Little did they ever imagine swooping down on it from the south themselves.

Some of the B Squadron carriers drove straight across the aerodrome and down the escarpment on to the main road, whilst troops of C Squadron found their way down further east. The enemy had occupied quite a large area round Sidi Haneish, and very soon reports were coming back that Div Cav patrols were beginning to ferret out various Germans and Italians who had been, or elected to be, left behind. These prisoners were despatched back along the main road under their own initiative as soon as they were collected into parties of reasonable size. B Squadron released about 500 prisoners from the Indian division who were in the prisoner-or-war cage at **Sidi Haneish**, and then went back to make a hasty search of broken-down tanks, trucks and aircraft. The men did not allow their personal interest in such articles as binoculars, cameras and pistols—no doubt quite a strong interest—to blind them to the significance of a quantity of interesting documents which they collected and passed back via 9 Armoured Brigade headquarters. As far as the regiment was concerned, the most interesting find of the day were the quantities of aviation petrol, sufficient to give the whole regiment a complete fill up and thus retain mobility just at a time when replenishment was very difficult.

By mid-afternoon the suspicions aroused by the clear morning materialised in the form of a rainstorm which quickly attained the dimensions and intensity of a cloudburst; it was accompanied, moreover, by a curious radio phenomenon. All the operators had been noticing a regular click in their receivers. The tempo of this click gradually increased to a buzz which upset reception, and then, a minute before the rain really came down in earnest, it increased to a roar which, for about half an hour, blotted out everything.

By the time it was over, the squadrons were able to report that they were refuelled and ready to go anywhere, so the whole regiment set off hot-foot up the main road towards Mersa **Matruh**, with the Ford motors of the carriers roaring their delight at this new-found stimulation, and the big Continental motors of the tanks 'pinking' sorely in disgust at the ersatz petrol that was being fed to them. The leading squadron managed to get only about three miles up the road when the whole regiment was ordered to turn left up the escarpment to make contact with 9 Armoured Brigade. Here the B Squadron carrier men, who had driven merrily across the **Sidi Haneish** landing ground, were given over to more sober thought on the arrival of RHQ, because an admonition of caution came down to them when the adjutant's tank was blown up on a mine.

As evening approached, the rain showed no signs of abating. The surface of the desert had greedily soaked up the rain for half an hour, but great sheets of water were now beginning to form and there were quite substantial rivers running down the wadis. Everybody was wet to the skin and a dismal night was obviously approaching, since there was no possible chance of finding a place to erect bivvies. Most of the tank crews elected to sleep inside their tanks, huddled in the corners to escape the drips, while the carrier crews drew their tarpaulins over the tops of the vehicles and snuggled in round the motor compartments.

The rain was so persistent that on the following morning, the 7th, to look across the face of the desert was to see a mass of vehicles bogged down to the axles. The Divisional Cavalry was the one exception since it, by happy chance, had halted on some rocky ground and along the tarmac road leading to the landing ground. So, with its vehicles high and dry and its fuel tanks brimming, it was in an enviable state. But the rest of the Division was anchored, and there was nothing that Div Cav could do except to move across to the high ground at Point 163. There the crews were able to take a most welcome spell, and since the rain was beginning to abate, to indulge in a wash and a clean up. About dusk HQ Squadron arrived, the men very proud of being the first New Zealand B Echelon to get out of the bog a few miles away.

The 8th November dawned clear and sunny and the surface of the desert began to dry out quickly, so that by midday practically all the wheeled vehicles could move. The drive westwards was on again. The Divisional Cavalry was still attached to 9 Armoured Brigade and pushed on to a forming-up point about a mile north of **Minqar Qaim** to laager behind the heavier Grants and Shermans, many of them still down to their bellies in the sloppy desert. They still could not move the next morning, and Div Cav had to sit and watch the whole of the rest of the Division, with **General Freyberg** in the lead, roll by, heading for **Charing Cross**. The regiment did not get much further than here by nightfall as, much to its disappointment, it was not sent on ahead until after midday; and when on the morning of 10 November it was heard that the regiment was to revert to the command of the Division, it really set out to cover some ground. Indeed, 21 miles were covered before breakfast. The Division was making for **Sidi Barrani** with all speed, and Div Cav had to make up arrears of lost ground regardless of the fact that all vehicles were seriously in need of maintenance. The bounds that the leading squadron made were rather prodigious, so that by nightfall the regiment had almost covered a whole map and was ten miles west of **Sidi Barrani** when the time came to form into laager.

Halfaya Pass fell to a surprise infantry attack during the night and soon the Division and 4 Light Armoured Brigade were beginning to stream up the winding road. The Divisional Cavalry arrived at the bottom of the pass about midday and, for the first time in many days, had to wait. The whole Division had to negotiate the pass in single file. The regiment was at the top at 4.30 p.m. and immediately made a fast move to **Capuzzo**, and then along the **Trigh Capuzzo** to within three miles of **Sidi Azeiz**.

Once again there came up from under the tracks that lovely sweet smell of crushed thyme that had, the year before, made the desert seem such a place of beauty. It now looked surprise- ingly modernised, with a railway running right across the landscape. Nevertheless everybody talked and thought of the year before; of scavenging—looting if you will

—round the deserted enemy dugouts, of all the funny things that happened, for one is inclined to forget quickly the painful things; of how ‘Chook’ Fowler and Ted Andrews tried out a 2-inch mortar and landed a bomb right amongst RHQ; how Captain Van Slyke used to go out at night to ‘milk Gretchen’ for his visitors and come back with a bucketful of liquid more vinous than bovine.

The westward sweep continued the next day and Div Cav formed the divisional screen, with A Squadron driving along the top of the escarpment and the other two abreast of the main road. The spirit of the chase was somewhat damped near the 88 Kilo peg, on the way to **Gambut**, when enemy mines engendered more caution upon B and C Squadrons. Firstly a New Zealand Engineers' lorry, following C Squadron Headquarters, accidentally cleared a mine by the quick means when its wheel, swinging for a moment off the tarmac, found a mine which sent it flying. A moment or so later B Squadron had two men killed on the same minefield. Its carrier troops were deploying out to the right of the road and making haste to get up into line when one of the carriers blew up, killing Sergeant **McGlashan**²⁰ and Lance-Corporal **Ballantyne**.²¹

Gambut proved to be the regiment's westernmost limit for the time being, as the Division had now halted to take a week or two's rest. On 13 November one patrol scouted west for about ten miles without incident. The **Gambut** aerodrome was reconnoitred and was immediately reported as clear of mines, so that the very next day, aircraft of all sorts were landing there with every appearance of having come to stay.

Five days were spent in bivouac round the **Gambut** roadhouse, during which time the long overdue maintenance was completed. Some new vehicles arrived up from Workshops to bring the regiment up to full strength; battledress was issued (just in time to be christened by a thunderstorm); memorial services were held; and there were some unofficial trips to **Tobruk**.

Tobruk was now a place of filth, indescribable filth; cold, battered, dead, and desolate, it had an unhappy wind moaning through the rags

and the rust, depositing dirty dust upon dirty dust as it came slinking round the husk of a building here, or over a heap of ghostly rubble there. The whole place was a miserable scrap-heap: the ort of a war.

In those few days the pursuit of the *Africa Corps* carried the Eighth Army away across *Cyrenaica*, whilst the New Zealanders were left behind to rest and gather strength. The Divisional Cavalry, no longer needed as a screen, was called back on 19 November to a more central bivouac area near *Menastir*. A few tents were erected, telephone lines were laid, a training directive was drawn up, football and hockey grounds were cleared and, in fact, general arrangements were made for a stay of some length.

¹ **Capt H. J. Lane; Kati Kati; born East Grinstead, England, 27 Dec 1912; PWD draughtsman.**

² **S-Sgt J. M. Murphy, MM; born NZ 9 Apr 1906; watersider; joined J Force; died of sickness, Japan, 19 Jul 1946.**

³ **Sgt I. H. McInnes, MM; born Waipu, 8 Jun 1908; labourer; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.**

⁴ **L-Sgt P. L. Titchener; born Dunedin, 24 Jul 1912; student; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.**

⁵ **Tpr C. J. Carr; born NZ 9 May 1916; truck driver; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.**

⁶ **Tpr C. T. Davies; born Nelson, 27 Mar 1917; tram conductor; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.**

⁷ **Tpr S. G. Manson; born Greymouth, 18 Feb 1914; millhand; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.**

⁸ **Tpr J. A. Jensen; born Mangaweka, 14 Jun 1917; labourer;**

killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

⁹ Tpr C. H. Hardyment; born Eketahuna, 5 Nov 1913; farmer; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁰ Tpr H. T. Jones; born NZ 29 Oct 1917; farmhand; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

¹¹ Tpr R. A. J. McCallum; born NZ 22 Nov 1901; labourer; died of wounds 25 Oct 1942.

¹² Tpr A. S. Scragg; born NZ, 1 Jun 1918; shepherd; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

¹³ Sgt A. Bayliss, MM; Manaia, Taranaki; born Faringdon, England, 13 Feb 1902; farmer.

¹⁴ Tpr C. M. Coventry; born England, 22 Oct 1909; herd tester; killed in action 26 Oct 1942.

¹⁵ Sgt D. A. H. Dunbar; born Wyndham, 26 Apr 1917; clerk; died of wounds 26 Oct 1942.

¹⁶ Tpr D. Crozier; born NZ 29 Aug 1918; painter and paperhanger; died of wounds 26 Oct 1942.

¹⁷ Cpl P. H. Fullerton-Smith; born NZ 1 Aug 1917; farmer; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

¹⁸ Tpr A. G. F. Loe; born Ward, Marlborough, 6 Feb 1919; farm labourer; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

¹⁹ L-Cpl L. P. Eves; born NZ 29 Oct 1910; diesel engine operator; died of wounds 2 Nov 1942.

²⁰ **Sgt D. A. McGlashan; born Greymouth, 12 May 1916; farmhand; died of wounds 12 Nov 1942.**

²¹ **L-Cpl J. A. Ballantyne; born NZ 18 Sep 1917; shepherd; killed in action 12 Nov 1942.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 15 – THE LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

CHAPTER 15

The Left Hook at El Agheila

THE DIVISION enjoyed about three weeks' rest round **Bardia** while the Eighth Army pursued the *Africa Corps* in its headlong flight past **Tobruk**, **Derna**, **Benghazi**, to its old defensive position round **El Agheila**; but this time the enemy was so exhausted that he was unable to bound out and mount a counter-offensive. This time, too, it was obvious that General Montgomery was not going to attack until he had his lines of communication with **Tobruk** and **Benghazi** open and working smoothly, and had built up a sufficient reserve of supplies.

The Divisional Cavalry employed the rest period in a comparatively light but interesting training programme. There were route marches to keep the men hard, and excursions to **Bardia** for sea bathing. And it was here that the regiment was able to enjoy the use of some hot showers which had been captured intact. There were periods of maintenance set down in the daily syllabus, but since all the major maintenance had been completed within days of the regiment's withdrawal from the pursuit, the vehicles' crews found that they could devote these periods to more unorthodox work. By now every 'A' vehicle had a bivouac permanently attached to it which was large enough for the whole crew, one that could be erected or stowed in a matter of minutes. In most cases these consisted of a tarpaulin rolled round and strapped to a pipe or rod clamped along the side for travelling. Besides this, practically every crew had obtained from the canopy of a wrecked truck another sheet, which lay against the side and tracks of the vehicle as a wind-break and spread out on the ground for flooring. At either end of each bivvy there was usually a triangular piece of canvas sewn on to make it completely snug and light-proof, so that a lead could be brought in from the headlight terminal. The 'B' vehicle crews had mostly arranged their bedding inside the vehicles, some in the form of bunks, some arranged as seats and cupboards during the day, and others made so that they could fold away to make room for normal loading. Some of the fitters had arranged their trucks almost luxuriously. According to later

standards they were perhaps a little primitive, but for those days they were reasonably equipped workshops besides being reasonably comfortable. Usually across the front of the tray there was an engineers' workbench, and down one side perhaps a lathe. The other side might sport a welding unit, often a captured one, for in the course of time the enemy provided the regiment with some beautiful engineering equipment; and all available space was taken up with metal bins.

In Base the Divisional Cavalry fed under squadron arrangements but, in the field, crews quickly became adept at improvising something hot to eat at a moment's notice in action. ' **Benghazi** boilers' were much in evidence. This was the name of the picnic thermettes one buys in shops nowadays, and they were usually made so that they would come to the boil on a two-ounce tobacco tin of petrol. Rations included a liberal proportion of M & V—tinned meat and vegetable stew. Most of the Bren carriers and the Ford trucks carried a tin or so of M & V lying in the hollow between the engine blocks where they kept at engine temperature, and whence they could be brought out on the move so as to provide at least a lukewarm meal.

The Tommies used to say that they could trace the progress of the New Zealand Division by the rugby goalposts scattered all over North Africa. That is probably so, but anyone in the Division could identify the place where Div Cav had been by the little ovens dotted all over the place. Fruit pies, meat pies, scones and such delicacies could be made perfectly in an oven of two benzine tins, an empty milk tin, and a little mud. One benzine tin was split along the seam and the other placed inside it; and a layer of mud was put over the lot. A fireplace was scooped out underneath, and the milk tin sufficed for a chimney to draw the heat up between the two larger tins. Many a mother, or an aunt, or a wife must have wondered at the diet of the Army when she was asked, with every food parcel, to put in a good-sized tin of Eno's salts, which made a perfect substitute for baking powder. It was not necessary to eat stew at every meal when you could fry the tinned bacon—and an occasional egg, too, if there were Bedouin about—or fritters; or perhaps

tinned potatoes, diced and fried in tinned margarine. A frying-pan, did you say? Why; no trouble. There were millions in the desert. You just got the case of a German Teller mine, took it over to the fitters' truck, and rivetted or welded a handle on it. The most popular piece of equipment was, however, the fire-bucket. This was indeed the universal mark of any Eighth Army vehicle and invariably hung, rattling and sooty, under the tailboard of a truck or at the very back of an AFV near the shovel. As, invariably, it was a steel ammunition tin with the lid torn off, two Italian bayonets made perfect firebars. At almost any halt the bucket was unshipped; in went a couple of shovelfuls of sand; petrol was splashed into this; a billy of water—a lighted match thrown in—and *Voila!*—an Eighth Army brew of *shai*. If the head of the column moved on while you were waiting, you usually could still time it because it was so quick. Up came the water to the boil, in went the tea, a second more on the boil; grab the billy, kick over the bucket, and the last man hooked it up and leaped aboard as you moved off.

In the Divisional Cavalry the internal arrangements of the tanks seldom suffered any change. Each man had his own pet place for his bedroll to sit on the outside of the hull. An odd bedroll placed inside the vehicle was usually much frowned upon as it was inclined to cramp the fighting compartment, and moreover, added to the fire hazard. The Bren carriers lent themselves much more to changes both in equipment and armament. Originally they were issued with a Bren gun and a Boys anti-tank rifle; but by the end of 1942, a Boys rifle was becoming quite a rare thing in Div Cav. Instead there was a variety of weapons sticking out of the fronts of the carriers. To begin with, there were several Vickers guns with various ingenious mountings; here and there could be noticed a Besa gun, salvaged from a wrecked British tank and usually mounted for anti-aircraft purposes; and there were several 20-mm. cannon off enemy aircraft. One of these had a particularly ingenious mounting. It was a Solitherm cannon from a Messerschmitt, and it had been discovered that the mounting trunnions of the gun were a perfect fit for the axle holes of the tailwheel of the plane from which it came. So the forks of this wheel were salvaged, complete with their tapered socket, and mounted

upside down. Thus the gun had a perfect lateral swivel and it elevated right at the point of balance. Since it was designed to be fired electrically and from a fixed mounting, a pair of handles, rather like those of a bicycle, were fitted across the breech casing and the self-starter solenoid from a Ford truck was attached to the trigger. Current for the solenoid came from the wireless batteries to a thumb trigger on the handles—the starter button from the same truck. Naturally enemy ammunition could not be had through normal channels but the squadron sergeant-majors kept their eyes open and, though supplies got rather low at times, those guns never went short.

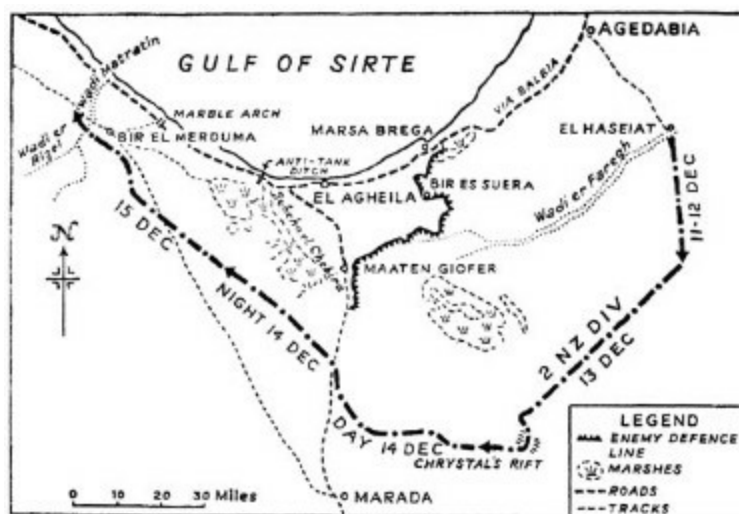
It is not claimed by any means that the Divisional Cavalry had any monopoly of such ingenuities, which indeed were shared by the whole Division who, at all levels, found uses for their equipment that were never contemplated by the makers of it.

By the end of November the time was drawing near for the attack on the **El Agheila** line. This line was rather like the **Alamein** line in that it consisted of a series of defended positions in a narrow portion of land between the coast and the marshes along the **Wadi el Faregh**. The German High Command had considered it impossible that these marshes could be outflanked as the going was too soft, and the difficulty of supplying any large body of troops that might succeed was thought to be prohibitive. Nevertheless General Montgomery had a route reconnoitred by the LRDG and decided that it was quite possible to outflank the position by sending his supply trains forward first to make dumps of petrol and water. The New Zealand Division and 4 Light Armoured Brigade, being completely mobile and self-contained, he considered suitable to make this outflanking move.

The Divisional Cavalry began its move across the bulge of **Cyrenaica** on 2 December when the wheeled vehicles moved off from **Sidi Azeiz** to begin a 350-mile drive in four days. They drove past the old battlefields at **Belhamed**, **El Adem**, Bir Hacheim, and thence straight to **Msus**, where the route swung south to **El Haseiat**, a track-junction south-east of **Agedabia**. Meanwhile the 'A' vehicles had been loaded on to tank

transporters of No. 6 Company, RASC, and were being carried by the Italian-made paved highway over the coastal belt through **Barce** and **Tocra** to **Benghazi**, and thence by a fast move to **El Haseiat**. This last speeding-up was brought about because of reports that the enemy was getting restless at **El Agheila**, where it was essential to hit him as soon and as hard as possible.

The convoy of transporters reached **El Haseiat** at dusk on 10 December and the AFVs were immediately unloaded. Waiting at the unloading area was a small group of old friends, mostly ex-members of the regiment. A party from the LRDG had been detailed to make contact with Div Cav and lead the way through the track that they had reconnoitred round the **El Agheila** line. At 6.30 the following morning the B Echelon began to move south to its first staging area, and at midday the fighting squadrons followed it so as to catch up in the evening. Here the regiment halted all day on the 12th.



LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

The drive was on again next morning, 13 December. Most of the day the axis of advance was in a general southerly direction over desert whose surface appeared never to have felt the imprint of wheels or tracks. As far as the horizon in every direction, the surface undulated like waves on a immobile and lifeless ocean marked only by the new

track marks of this, the very first convoy ever to cross it.

There had been a shower of rain the night before so no dust rose, and where the tracks had broken the surface there were to be seen all sorts of exciting colours: pinks, greens, and even ochre where they had lain hidden through the ages under the round grey pebbles of the surface.

Something in the newness of the marks, in the clean air, in the impatient bustle across this patient piece of earth caught the imagination. The clear light of the rising sun made the ground gleam except where dark grey shadows in the track marks, twin ribbons urgently, feverishly unwinding beneath them, curled behind:

**... as when the sun new ris'n
Looks through the horizontal misty air
Shorn of its beams....**

Sitting up on the engine casing in the lee of the turret, swaying with the movement of the tank, squinting in the bright light of the sun, soothed with the powerful roar of the motor and the warm air curling up from it, it was easy to fall into day-dreaming for long moments, mesmerised by the ribbons pouring out below. They cross and recross others of the same newness, or meet them, kiss for a yard and swing away again, never dead straight. Their long gentle curves, swinging back into infinity, make a soothing lullaby, yet untruthful, for they prelude the nightmare of a war to which they are leading.

In the afternoon, after passing 6 Brigade, the regiment refuelled for the last time. It gave quite a thrill to realise that, but for one refilling dumped ahead, what the vehicles now carried was the last of the fuel to be had until the enemy was forced out of [El Agheila](#). Nevertheless Div Cav's petrol situation was well in hand since the carriers carried every spare tin of petrol they could stow, and on the hull of every tank there sat a 44-gallon drum which had to be used before the enemy was encountered. Refuelling at the last dump was completed about sundown

and in the early darkness the regiment moved some miles further to laager at the most southerly point of the whole drive.

The next morning, the 14th, was foggy and the start was delayed until 8.30. Now the axis of advance was to the north-west. The Divisional Cavalry had to make a little extra time during the day. The Greys, who were attached to the Division at this time, ran out of petrol temporarily, and while they were immobile, Div Cav was transferred from the Divisional Reserve Group to come under command of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, and had to move up in time to laager with it that night so that the next morning a squadron could be put out as a screen to the brigade. This job fell to C Squadron.

The objective for the 15th was some high ground overlooking the main road a few miles east of **Marble Arch**, but during the day this was altered to a similar position much further west, the axis of the advance being taken round behind Merduma.

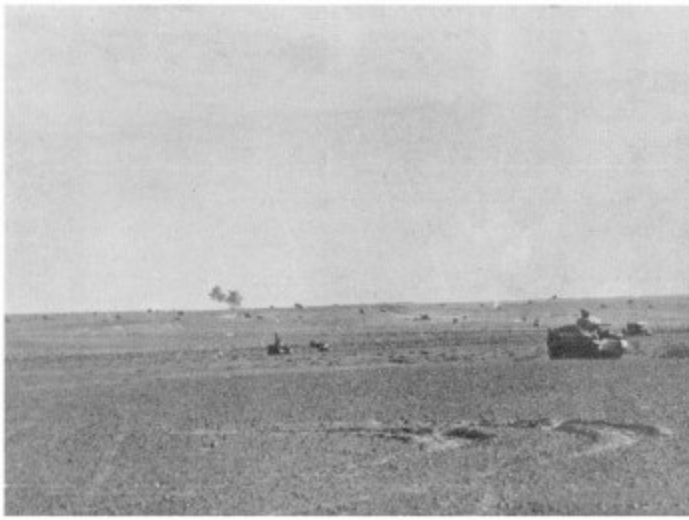
There was always the same kind of thrill when one of these long marches drew near its end. It was the same squadron which came swooping out of the 'blue' a year earlier to take the enemy by surprise at **Menastir**. Now, a year later and about the same hour, it was coming down on a similar enemy flank, expecting again to arrive suddenly at the edge of an escarpment with the road below and the sea beyond.



A halt on the left hook at El Agheila

A halt on the left hook at **El Agheila**

An enemy shell bursts among transport near Buerat

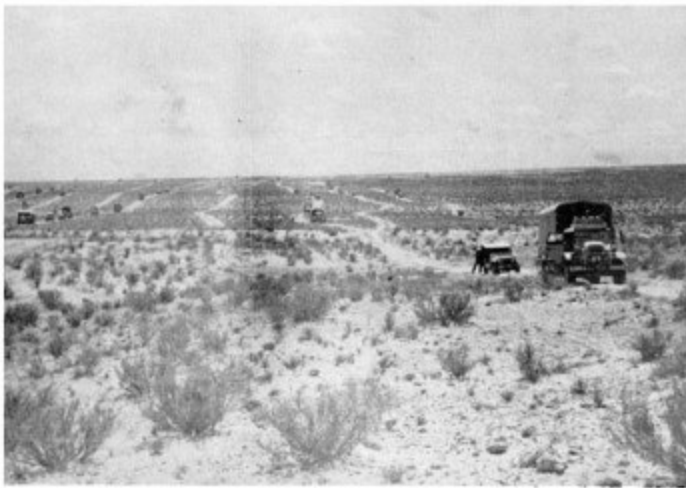


An enemy shell bursts among transport near [Buerat](#)



The Regiment's Bren carriers pass the saluting base at [Tripoli](#), 4 February 1943

The Regiment's Bren carriers pass the saluting base at [Tripoli](#), 4 February 1943



New Zealand Corps on the left hook to Tebaga Gap—as seen by
the Divisional Cavalry advanced guard

New Zealand Corps on the left hook to Tebaga Gap—as seen by the Divisional Cavalry advanced guard

German shelling at Enfidaville



German shelling at Enfidaville



Sgt D. Lunn's crew, Tunisia, April 1943. *Left to right:* Tprs Ken Chick and Don Beck, Sgt Lunn, and a captured Italian medical officer, wounded in the leg, who had been given a lift

Sgt D. Lunn's crew, Tunisia, April 1943. *Left to right:* Tprs Ken Chick and Don Beck, Sgt Lunn, and a captured Italian medical officer, wounded in the leg, who had been given a lift

Padre Taylor ('Harry Kaitaia') conducts a church parade at Maadi, July 1943



Padre Taylor ('Harry Kaitaia') conducts a church parade at Maadi, July 1943



On the way up to the Sangro, 20 November 1943

On the way up to the Sangro, 20 November 1943

C Squadron moving from Gissi to Monte Marconi, 20 November
1943



C Squadron moving from Gissi to Monte Marconi, 20 November 1943



Cassino. The railway on the left enters the Liri Valley; Route 6 is in the centre of the photograph

Cassino. The railway on the left enters the Liri Valley; Route 6 is in the centre of the photograph



At Atina: RHQ welcomes the spring sunshine

At Atina: RHQ welcomes the spring sunshine

An A Squadron Staghound in the Atina-Belmonte area.
N. Meaney (*left*) and A. Dykes



An A Squadron Staghound in the **Atina- Belmonte** area. N. Meaney (*left*) and A. Dykes



Near Sora. W. J. Tipler
and Lt S. A. Morris

Near **Sora. W. J. Tipler and Lt S. A. Morris**

A group of No. 2 Troop, B Squadron, beside the Italian 1914-18 war memorial at Castiglion Fiorentino. The Staghound is equipped with a 3-inch howitzer and bridging trays. The troop sergeant (*extreme right*) is Dick Lewis



A group of No. 2 Troop, B Squadron, beside the Italian 1914–18 war memorial at **Castiglion Fiorentino. The Staghound is equipped with a 3-inch howitzer and bridging trays. The troop sergeant (*extreme right*) is **Dick Lewis****



Bivouac near Riccione. *From left:* V. R. Ashley, W. G. Harvey, S. Willcox, D. O. Wairoa, D. Hedges, R. Chick, A. Evans, M. F. Hulme

Bivouac near **Riccione. *From left:* V. R. Ashley, W. G. Harvey, S. Willcox, D. O. Wairoa, D. Hedges, R. Chick, A. Evans, M. F. Hulme**

Waiting in Rimini



Waiting in Rimini



R. A. Loomes and N. N. Phillips in their Staghound at Rimini

R. A. Loomes and N. N. Phillips in their Staghound at Rimini

Watching Allied bombers passing overhead north of Rimini



Watching Allied bombers passing overhead north of Rimini



The last attack in Staghounds. Passing through San Giorgio di Cesena, 21 October 1944

The last attack in Staghounds. Passing through San Giorgio di Cesena, 21 October 1944

Mud near Faenza, December 1944



Mud near Faenza, December 1944



Crossing the Lamone River into Faenza

Crossing the Lamone River into Faenza

Panzer Grenadiers captured in the Faenza area



Panzer Grenadiers captured in the Faenza area



Col J. R. Williams receives
DSO from General Freyberg,
March 1945

Col J. R. Williams receives DSO from General Freyberg, March 1945

Sgt Jim Kidd lines up the starters for a 'Donkey Derby'



Sgt Jim Kidd lines up the starters for a 'Donkey Derby'



Flame-throwers strafe the Senio stopbank, 9 April 1945

Flame-throwers strafe the [Senio](#) stopbank, 9 April 1945

Wrecked enemy battery near Medicina



Wrecked enemy battery near [Medicina](#)



A group of Divisional Cavalry Battalion officers at Trieste.
Back row, from left: Capt L. T. G. Booth (Adjutant), Capt D. A. Gordon (MO), Lt J. G. Ross (IO); *in front,* Lt-Col V. J. Tanner and Maj D. MacIntyre

A group of Divisional Cavalry Battalion officers at Trieste

Back row, from left: Capt L. T. G. Booth (Adjutant), Capt D. A. Gordon (MO), Lt J. G. Ross (IO); in front, Lt-Col V. J. Tanner and Maj D. MacIntyre

COMMANDING OFFICERS

C. J. Pierce



C. J. Pierce

H. G. Carruth



H. G. Carruth



A. J. Nicoll

A. J. Nicoll



J. H. Sutherland

J. H. Sutherland

I. L. Bonifant



I. L. Bonifant

N. P. Wilder



N. P. Wilder

By 4 p.m. the rest of the regiment, with one battery of 3 RHA attached, had drawn away from the Armoured Brigade whilst the two leading troops of C Squadron had arrived at the edge of the escarpment and had a peep at the road below. Right at their feet, on the near side of the road, was the whole *15 Panzer Division* in laager—immobile, had Div Cav known it, for lack of petrol—while the road lying beyond was full of transport streaming westwards. The first troop to see this, a tank troop, belonged to that impulsive man, Jack Reeves. Without much more than a message to his troop to 'Follow me' he led the way down the hill right into the middle of the laager. As the three tanks clattered down into the midst of the laager the amazed German crews did nothing

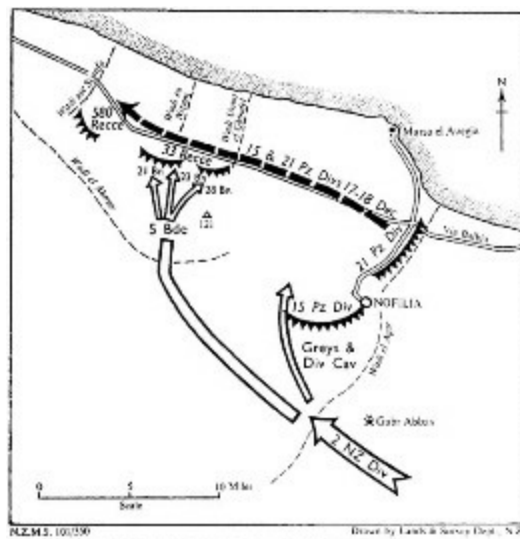
much more than stare. There was little more that they could do anyway, since they could not even start up their engines; but not a gunner thought to open fire. Since there was no fight forthcoming, Reeves, just as calmly, turned his back on the enemy and drove up the hill again out of sight. By the time he got there, Div Cav had two squadrons lined up along the crest, together with the battery of guns, while some of the enemy gunners had so far recovered from their surprise as to open fire. The British gunners replied, knocking out one enemy gun, before they concentrated on the transport on the road, forcing it to scatter.

This skirmishing went on until darkness, when the regiment pulled back about a mile behind the escarpment and formed a laager. It was to have been joined by 6 Brigade but this brigade had taken the wrong track, with the result that the regiment spent its night in isolation, happily ignorant that the rumble of moving vehicles a mile or so farther east came not from 6 Brigade moving into its appointed position, but from *15 Panzer Division*, now refuelled, getting ready to pull out to the west at first light. However, ignorance is bliss, and everybody slept well.

At 5.45 a.m. on the 16th, Headquarters **30 Corps** ordered the Division to try to destroy the enemy which it now had in a trap. Accordingly the GOC warned his artillery, the two infantry and one light armoured brigades, and the Div Cav to expect an attack from the east by about a hundred enemy tanks. In order to come into its proper position in the defensive line the Divisional Cavalry began to move back south-west along the axis of its previous night's advance and had gone about six miles. It was bowling happily along in column of squadrons enjoying the pleasant morning sun, led along a shallow wadi by Colonel Sutherland in a jeep. Where this met a similar wadi, the Colonel came face to face with a Volkswagen leading a German column. The surprise was mutual, as each column was led by an officer, neither of whom was armed. For a moment they just stared at one another before they both swung about to give warning behind.

Word came to Div Cav in a very cryptic message over the wireless:

'We are being attacked from the flank! "Orange ¹", come out in a screen.' A Squadron accordingly swung left by troops to breast the ridge between the two wadis, and engaged the enemy with everything that would shoot, while the rest of the regiment swung the other way and, under cover of this, scuttled off across the Wadi er Rigel. While carriers, jeeps, trucks, and everything bolted helter-skelter across the rough bed of the wadi, every accelerator hard on the floorboards, A Squadron, outgunned and outnumbered, held the enemy's attention for the necessary few critical moments for the whole regiment to avoid being completely overrun. By the suddenness and the fury of its shooting, the squadron managed to steal these minutes from the enemy, together with enough time to break off the engagement itself, when the crisis was passed, with surprisingly few casualties. No serious damage was done to our vehicles while at least one enemy Mark III tank was damaged. We had two subalterns killed, Lieutenants Reeves and Fisher, and three NCOs, Corporal **Hardy**, ² and Lance-Corporals **Nevill** ³ and **Taylor** ⁴; one other rank was seriously wounded. Both the officers were killed by being caught standing outside their turrets. The enemy column consisted of between thirty and forty tanks with a large number of trucks; and, these latter being rather a tempting target, Colonel Sutherland, after having joined up with 5 Brigade and got his squadrons re-formed, despatched A Squadron to 6 Brigade and B Squadron to 5 Brigade to see if they could get after the column and shoot up the transport. But neither squadron had any luck since the enemy, in the meantime, slipped through the gap between the two brigades and got away. Towards evening the regiment, still under command of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, moved off a mile or two farther west and formed laager.



OUTFLANKING NOFILIA, 17-18 DECEMBER 1942

OUTFLANKING NOFILIA, 17-18 DECEMBER 1942

On the 17th the advance continued again, towards the village of **Nofilia** in the north-west. The Divisional Cavalry acted as northern flank guard to the Armoured Brigade and, about midday, encountered the enemy rearguard in the wadis south and west of the village. Here some lively exchanges of fire were made, in one of which a B Squadron tank, suddenly meeting a German Mark III tank, got in the first vital shot and managed to knock it out. B and C Squadrons lost a carrier apiece, the troop officers, Lieutenants Ormond and Hardwick, ⁵ being wounded in each case. The advance came to a halt when the Greys' commanding officer was killed just as his regiment was preparing to make a frontal assault on the village. Presumably it was decided then not to attack the village direct but to switch the attack further west so as to cut the road and seal off the whole enemy rearguard. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade made repeated attempts to do this but each time the enemy resistance proved too dogged, and by nightfall the enemy still held **Nofilia** as well as the western escape route. He managed to get away in the night with only light losses.

C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry had spent the afternoon tucked in amongst the low sandy hills south and west of the village, watching for any restlessness amongst the rearguard and searching for any possible cover under which the armoured attack might be launched. But the search was fruitless and it was obvious that a headlong attack across

the flat ground would be suicidal. So at last light the squadron withdrew to join RHQ and B Squadron and form a laager about five miles west of the village. A and HQ Squadrons spent their night in laager with 6 Brigade.

The day had been rather hard on the nerves, particularly because part of it was spent facing **Nofilia** in anticipation of a Balaclava charge which, however, never came off. It was obvious that the enemy would be pulling out overnight. With the incident near **Wadi Matratin** still fresh in their minds, everybody was well keyed up for a possible similar encounter, this time in the middle of the night. This illusion was not lessened by the sound of machine-gunning to the north and the rumble of transport which could only be enemy on the move. RHQ and the two squadrons formed a tight and very careful laager and, though there was no stand-to, orders were that the crews were to remain in their vehicles and were allowed to sleep if they wished—that is to say, if they could. The uneasy night passed ever so slowly and without incident until the small hours of the morning, when the dark silence was suddenly pierced by a dreadful eerie howl, as if someone had trodden on the tail of the scrawniest cat in Kilkenny. Those who, in waking, could jump in the air, did so; those who could not, merely hit their skulls on gun-butts, steering wheels, rifle racks, ammunition cases, wireless sets, traversing handles, or any one of the thousand things that the designers of warlike machines leave protruding to catch the tenderer parts of the anatomy. For a full thirty seconds no human voice was heard, and after that there was just the one spontaneous and explosive monosyllabic oath from some unfortunate who popped his head out of a tank turret to have it hit a second time when his ear caught the butt-plate of the anti-aircraft gun. All the while the high-pitched screech continued, completely drowning by its proximity the only other voice to be raised. Colonel Sutherland who, out of consideration for his wireless operator working at the set, had curled up in the driver's seat so as to be out of the way, and had stretched out his legs in his sleep, was now roaring to all and sundry to 'Stop That Bloody Row!' But the row only began to die away into a mournful moan when, in an effort to get more power into his lungs, the

CO drew up his knees and, in so doing, took his foot off the pedal of the traffic siren in his own tank.

Needless to say, nobody slept much after that, and in the early morning twilight, when impossible things take on impossible shapes, there were one or two rather itchy trigger fingers. As soon as it was light enough to make out features on the ground a strong tank and carrier patrol was sent back towards **Nofilia**. This patrol was carefully covered by 5 Brigade and by the Greys. But caution was not now needed. The enemy had made the most of his chance to escape during the night. The village was deserted, and word was sent back to bring up some sappers to start clearing the airstrips nearby.

This time it was fully expected that the enemy rearguard would make a long bound to the west. The Division was to stay near **Nofilia** for a week or two; but Div Cav had one small job yet to do. The Desert Air Force had, ever since **Alamein**, been following hard upon the heels of the Army, clamouring for forward airfields. The next known enemy one was about 30 miles west of **Nofilia** at a place called **Sultan**. The Divisional Cavalry was ordered to send one squadron to guard this, with some sappers under its command to clear the ground of mines as soon as possible, and then the main road back to **Nofilia**.

C Squadron was given this job and, on the 20th, taking under command a detachment of 7 Field Company, NZE, and a troop each from 5 Field Regiment and 34 Anti-Tank Battery, it went forward to form the northern end of a static patrol line manned by 4 Light Armoured Brigade. In the early afternoon next day the squadron was at **Sultan** and the sappers at work clearing mines. The road, particularly its verges, was heavily mined, and wherever the enemy engineers had envisaged our stopping, at a blown culvert for example, or a well, he had sown the vicinity with anti-personnel 'S' mines. These were a fairly new form of cussedness and, even before the squadron had got into position, it had lost one man killed, Trooper **Doak**.⁶ The 'S' mine was particularly hard to notice even if you were looking for it, there being only three fine metal prongs just sticking out of the earth. When these were trodden on

there was a light explosion, a second or two's delay, then a small metal cylinder shot up about ten feet in the air and burst, flinging out small metal balls in every direction.

The **Sultan** landing ground was cleared by 23 December when A Squadron relieved C, and the troop of 25-pounders reverted to the command of its own battery.

So another Christmas had come, but this time everyone felt that he was a good step nearer home. It was a dusty, desert Christmas, but to those who had been living hard for some years, what extra they were given for the occasion was enough to make it festive. On Christmas Eve everyone was given a bottle of beer and fifty cigarettes, and on Christmas morning geese, puddings, and other good fare arrived from the **Naafi**. Ovens had been prepared, good big ones, made out of 44-gallon drums this time, to cook a whole squadron's meal at once; and some really splendid meals were cooked. On top of all this, and best of all, was a big mail of parcels and letters the next day.

The Divisional Cavalry was not actually concentrated in one area until 27 December, on which day A and B Squadrons were called in from patrol duty. The next fortnight can well be covered by the trite words 'rest and refit'. The squadron fitters and the regimental LAD went to work on the vehicles; eighteen new carriers arrived; and in no time the regiment was well desert-worthy and ready for the next phase of the campaign. The regimental sports committee got together and arranged to continue competitions which had been curtailed by the move from **Bardia**. Squadrons got a chance to send everybody over for hot showers at the Mobile Bath Unit, and to the dentist.

For all the fortnight's rest, however, everybody had **Tripoli** in mind: **Tripoli**, the goal that had been on every tongue when the Division first crossed into **Libya** over a year ago; **Tripoli** that seemed so far away, six months later, when the Division was hurrying down from **Syria** to stem the enemy advance into **Egypt**. Any man could look about, round his own squadron and over next door, and know that everybody had **Tripoli**

in mind. Yes: that's what they were thinking about as they tinkered with their vehicles.

¹ A Squadron's call-sign at the time.

² Cpl M. R. Hardy; born NZ 23 Jul 1916; farmhand; killed in action 16 Dec 1942.

³ L-Cpl J. T. A. Nevill; born Salisbury, England, 24 May 1907; farmer; killed in action 16 Dec 1942.

⁴ L-Cpl F. L. Taylor; born NZ 5 Sep 1917; labourer; killed in action 16 Dec 1942.

⁵ Capt D. H. Hardwick; **Auckland; born NZ 9 Jun 1917; caterer; three times wounded.**

⁶ Tpr F. Doak; born NZ 19 Sep 1910; chainman; killed in action 20 Dec 1942.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 16 – ONWARD TO TRIPOLI

CHAPTER 16

Onward to Tripoli

occurred in every second sentence.

‘I expect that we shall be playing the finals in **Tripoli**....’

‘This BMA ¹ money is issued because they say the Germans have been printing the local stuff.’

‘It will see you to **Tripoli** all right and then after that you might get a new one.’

‘They say it's a lovely town....’ Even the New Year's inevitable dust-storm was of secondary conversational interest to the practices in desert formation to be employed on the next lap.

The ‘A’ vehicles were sent off to **Nofilia** on 8 January for loading on to transporters, each of which set off independently down the main road as it was loaded. The next day the main part of the Division was rolling westwards again, practising en route a desert manoeuvre with the wheeled vehicles of the Divisional Cavalry acting as the usual screen.

It was expected to meet the first enemy rearguard somewhere in the **Wadi Tamet** area, so the ‘A’ vehicles were unloaded east of there to wait for the Division near Wadi Bei el Chebir, about 25 miles west of **Sirte**. Here they married up with the wheeled vehicles on 14 January and the whole Division moved forward in proper tactical formation to laager a mile or so farther west of a landing ground on the edge of a wadi.

The advance of the Army was to be a three-pronged one, with 51 (Highland) Division on the coast, 7 Armoured Division in the centre, and the New Zealand Division swinging round to approach **Tripoli** through the broken hills of the **Gebel Nefusa** to the south. More or less daily the New Zealand Division's screen trod on the heels of the rearguards of **15 Panzer Division**; the Divisional Cavalry had most of the fun, but for the Division as a whole it was just a long monotonous ride.

The advance proper really started on 15 January as A Squadron crossed the **Gheddahia- Bu Ngem** road and soon ran into a screen of fire from anti-tank and heavier guns. This held it up all morning. B Squadron meanwhile probed further south until it, too, ran into dug-in tanks and guns. Major Handley came forward to direct the outflanking of these, for they held high ground of good observation. There was one particular 75-mm. gun which was holding up this move, and one of the squadron's tank gunners, Trooper **Priddle**,² did some superb shooting to knock it out with his little 37-mm. gun and to wipe out the crew. The way was then clear for Handley to push his whole squadron through the enemy line to dislodge other enemy anti-tank guns and destroy a half-tracked troop-carrier. Then, in the afternoon C Squadron, with the Greys in close support, made an effort to follow this up with a hard knock in the centre of the line. Here, however, the enemy stood more firmly than was expected; he hung on doggedly, and by the time the Greys had come trundling through the C Squadron positions to add weight to the attack, it was getting too dark to do much.

Actually **General Freyberg** got a nasty fright up amongst the C Squadron line. He had more or less made Div Cav his battle group for the advance on **Tripoli**, and during the afternoon had brought his own troop up here to try to get through to the left where B Squadron had made the greater progress. He was pulled up short by shellfire which landed almost exactly under his leading vehicle, forcing it to back off hastily into some cover and incidentally giving the Protective Troop officer, Lieutenant D'Arcy Cole, a very dangerous little wound in the throat. His carotid artery was actually nicked.

In the failing light the Greys did hurry the enemy's retirement which, however, was not made without some telling Parthian shots. The C Squadron forward patrols were gingerly extricating themselves from cover into which they had scuttled pending the arrival of the Greys, when the enemy put over behind them a parcel of heavy shells which landed amongst Divisional Cavalry Headquarters, killing Sergeant K. D. **Jones**³ and Corporal **Sturm**⁴ and wounding several others. Of these,

Lieutenant H. A. McAulay and Corporal Wachter⁵ later died.

The MO, Captain Moore, was unable to attend the wounded, as he too had been hit, but the Padre came forward to help dress their wounds and supervise their evacuation. Even when that was done, and still under heavy and accurate shellfire, he insisted on conducting a burial service.

The rearguard withdrew overnight, but without the company of several deserters of *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, who quite willingly showed the way through the minefields left by their comrades.

For the 16th the line of advance ran roughly north-west to Sedada, and from daylight the General himself set a cracking pace. At one stage, with his faster tanks, he had completely outstripped Div Cav and indeed was choosing his own axis of advance as he went, regardless naturally of the 'going' reports automatically continuing to come in from the forward screen, now behind him, when he came suddenly upon four M13 tanks of *31 Regiment, Centauro Division*. The crews of these were blithely brewing tea, a ceremony which he rudely interrupted by taking them prisoner. One of his staff, naturally alarmed because he was far in the lead of the Division, remonstrated that this was no place for a General and that it should be Div Cav who should be doing this sort of thing. He got the bland reply: 'Well, Div Cav are just not here. They get no loot.' A catching disease, souveniring! No wonder it was notifiable.

The day's run stopped about that area, a mile or so short of the landing ground at Sedada, on the high ground above it and, as had happened the night before, the day closed with a little piece of enemy hate. This time it came from enemy fighter-bombers, which caused one casualty only in the regiment, a man wounded. But during the day the regiment had suffered losses in vehicles. One tank had been lost through a 37-mm. shell exploding in the breech of a gun, and a carrier was destroyed by anti-tank fire from the Wadi Nfed. The day's total casualties were six men wounded.

All the way to Tripoli the pressure was on and the General's

inevitable order during that long week, 'Push on!' became a catchword in the regiment lasting till the end of its days. Time and again the leading squadron was sent out of laager while it was still too early to show a light, and was often kept hard at it till well into the afternoon, with everyone craving for a chance—just a couple of minutes—to make a brew.

C Squadron actually started off from the **Sedada** laager in pitch darkness. The regular track down from the plateau on to the landing ground in the **Wadi Nfed** had been mined, and before it was light enough to see and suspect, one carrier had blown up on a mine, killing the driver, Trooper Evans. ⁶ This naturally caused a hold-up because the whole Division had to pass down this mined defile. The Divisional Cavalry found its own way down elsewhere. It was a very tricky route even for the tracked vehicles and took an hour or so, a delay which still had to be made up. Apart from the fact that the General was hustling the screen along, there was always plenty of indication that the enemy rearguard was not far ahead, which also kept up the pace; actually, on this particular day a straggler of *125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* was picked up.

By midday the leaders, travelling up the **Wadi Nfed**, had reached the **Wadi el Merdum** and swung westwards towards **Beni Ulid**, and still there was no let up. The General made a point of travelling near Colonel Sutherland's tank which carried the forward wireless link to squadrons, and at every halt he would come over and listen in on the operator's spare earphones. Thus from the various reports on the going he could decide instantly which was the best route for the divisional column. The operator soon learnt to drop a hint to his squadron operators when he saw 'The Face at the Window' approaching, and they, on hearing this, would drop their operators' jargon and, whilst still keeping within the bounds of wireless security, adopt for his sake more acceptable language. Thus able to size up the situation instantly, the General invariably said: 'Tell them to push on.' Time after time that was all they got at the squadrons, where all were longing for just five minutes' respite. It got

round towards mid-afternoon on this particular day before the leading squadron found itself reporting back without a hint of 'The Face'. The tea water was just coming to the boil—seconds to go and Squadron Headquarters would have got its first drink for the day—when the General arrived at RHQ and down came the order to push on. Push on indeed: his disappointment and exasperation drove the operator to risk a serious charge of insubordination. Tired, hungry, lips and tongue cracking, in feigned ignorance of the exalted ears taking it in, he came back on the air: 'Push on! What the hell have we been doing all day? You get a brew every time the Old Man wants to stop and enthuse about the scenery. Wait till I've finished drinking my breakfast. I-say-again: BREAKFAST! OFF!'

Inside his stern appearance and despite his relentless driving, the General was very human. He must have accepted the rebuke in silence, and remembered it too, because the rest of the day, though he pushed the screen just as hard, he did so more kindly.

Laager was formed in the bed of the Wadi Merdum, and though for once there was no evening brush with the enemy ground troops, there did occur what might have been an unhappy incident. Just as the column halted it was dive-bombed by some Stukas. Only minutes later, a second squadron swung in from out of the setting sun, almost at ground level, and began to draw fire from the leading Div Cav vehicles, until by their frantic weaving the pilots managed to show on the under-sides of their wings the big white star of the United States Air Force.

The advance towards **Beni Ulid** on the 18th was across the roughest going that the Div Cav found anywhere in North **Africa**. The whole face of the desert was covered with great slabs of rock over which the AFVs crept, in constant danger of breaking track-pins, at a pace which held up the whole divisional screen. The lorries lurched over these rocks with the drivers expecting broken springs, or even the chassis to give up under the constant twisting. The poor DRs weaved their motor-cycles between the rocks where they could and in places simply had to bounce them over the tops.

Considering the country, it was not surprising to find abandoned enemy equipment, since for days his hard-pressed rearguards had kept only just out of sight. That day, for instance, the 18th, the Divisional Cavalry found some eleven M13 Italian tanks, two 10-ton trucks, an armoured car, and one of the latest type German 75-mm. anti-tank guns.

The General left B and C Squadrons to carry on straight towards **Beni Ulid** on the original axis through this country, while he led the Division on another line further south. This left the two squadrons well out on their own, but the General still ordered them on and, before the evening's rendezvous for laager, B Squadron had actually gone right in to **Beni Ulid**, down the side of the great wadi on which this romantic looking old fortress perches, and out on to the **Tarhuna** road on the northern side of the wadi.

There was a formed road through **Beni Ulid** but this had been partly demolished, and though the tracked vehicles of B Squadron had got down and back again, reporting the area clear of enemy, the demolitions were sufficient to make this, the only route, impassable for the wheeled vehicles. So, if no other unit was pleased, Div Cav, after suffering for some days, was delighted for the half-day's delay while the sappers were clearing the track. The 6th Brigade was able to start trickling through about midday on the 19th and A Squadron was sent ahead of it as its protective screen. By the late afternoon the brigade was well clear, and the remainder of the regiment was ordered to pass through and set off northwards along the road towards **Tarhuna**. A Squadron had halted half-way there and the rest of the regiment had to make a very fast move along the tarmac road to come up with it before dark.

The three lines of the Army's advance were now converging and on the 20th, B Squadron, patrolling out to the right of the road, gained touch with a unit of 7 Armoured Division which was now advancing into the eastern face of the **Gebel Nefusa**. B Squadron got a report that this Division was going to be held up by more demolitions at **Tarhuna**. There

was another road running to **Tripoli** from **Garian** in the south, so the New Zealand Division swung westwards again through the broken country towards this road.

Patrols of Div Cav reached the village of **Tazzoli** during the afternoon and there swung left to push along a secondary road towards **Garian**, and late in the evening B Squadron found and marked a possible route out of the hills to the north side of the road. Immediately the CRE, Colonel **Hanson**,⁷ came forward and set his sappers to work making this route passable for the Division. They must have worked furiously hard and certainly all night, for by the morning Div Cav was able to lead off again through what was now a winding sandy track. By midday the regiment had broken finally out of the hills with the whole Division pressing hard behind.

Tripoli at last felt within reach. But the intervening ground, the direct route, looked pretty difficult since it presented, for the first mile or two, big dunes of very soft sand. Nevertheless C Squadron set out to reconnoitre them as the map showed a road-end not so very far away. The squadron was accompanied by a battery commander of 4 NZ Field Regiment, who however got his truck badly stuck. This was most unfortunate for it happened in a position of rather poor observation and less than a mile from where the C Squadron forward patrols were held up by fire from enemy rearguard guns. This bit of bad luck was offset, however, in that by chance a battery headquarters halted within a hundred yards of Div Cav RHQ, and it was not long before urgent and appealing calls from C Squadron for shellfire on an appetising target were coming back. These found their way by word of mouth to the Battery Command Post and in no time the cavalrymen found themselves acting in lieu of a Forward Observation Post, using their own unconventional phraseology, which resulted in a wireless conversation something like this:

Forward Observation Post: 'Miles out to the right; they never batted an eyelid.'

RHQ: 'All right, try this for size.' (Pause followed by a shell passing over.)

FOP: 'That rocked 'em, try another 50 yards left.'

RHQ: 'How's that?' (Another shell.)

FOP: 'Right in the breadbasket. Give 'em both barrels!'

...and so on. It is to be hoped that 'The Face at the Window' was not hovering round RHQ at the time, or more still, his fairly constant companion in those days, the CRA, Brigadier C. E. Weir. Nevertheless, even if somewhat inefficiently, C Squadron did manage to get the shellfire right down on the rearguard and sent it bustling off. Full marks must go to the Battery Sergeant-Major whose resource and interpretation made this possible.

Those were the days when, within the Division, the various arms were only just beginning to learn the rudiments of each other's techniques, and this incident was not forgotten in Div Cav later when chances came to study how other people did their work. It is very important, when it comes to specialised work, that there should always be someone on hand who can fill such a gap for a while.

It was obviously out of the question to try to get the Division through the dunes even if there was a formed road fairly close ahead. So early next morning A and B Squadrons pushed out west until they crossed the **Garian road and then swung north. They soon met resistance from guns, tanks and armoured cars forward of the village of **Azizia**. There were infantry round the village itself as small-arms fire could be heard when our aircraft went over. The Greys came up to try and push deeper, while C Squadron was sent further out to the left, on the western flank. This squadron was also held up at some high ground overlooking a road which ran north-west into **Azizia**. The whole afternoon was taken up poking here and there south and south-west of the village, but enemy resistance was dogged and no appreciable advance was made. After dark all three squadrons collected near the**

road and C Squadron was detailed to join in a night advance through the village by 5 Brigade. This proved impossible, however, and, well into the night, C Squadron was back with the regiment.

We now know that the troops at **Azizia** had been instructed to hold on only until that night, for pressure from the east was forcing the enemy completely out of **Tripoli**. At first light on the 23rd, A Squadron, on being sent to reconnoitre towards **Azizia**, found it unoccupied. Moreover, by eleven in the morning it had pressed on to find that the village at the next crossroads, **Suani Ben Adem**, was also empty.

Now the way really was clear to **Tripoli**. Perhaps the Division was not to be the first there but it was racing down the tarmac nevertheless. The air of urgency in what was in fact a scramble for the middle of the town was most infectious as the whole column sped down the road, past vineyards and rows of gum-trees and the Italian colonial houses. Looking up or down the column, everyone really felt the speed; passing a crossroads, for instance, where the leading troop would normally have stopped and reported a bound clear.

Actually, at the end of the day the Divisional Cavalry was pulled up near the **Garian** gate and went to a laager position about four miles from the city itself. The next day the regiment was allotted another area at **Bianchi** where, as it turned out, it remained for about a week before being sent to a permanent camping area amongst the scrub-covered sandhills round Castel Benito.

The Divisional Cavalry arrived at **Tripoli** with only 11 tanks and 22 carriers in a fit fighting state and a further 5 tanks and 11 carriers still running. The balance which had left **Nofilia**, other than those which had been lost by enemy action, had been left behind for recovery simply when it was humanly impossible to keep them going. The regiment, both men and vehicles, had been driven almost to breaking point, as witness for example that petulance of the operator, a humble corporal, who in his desperate weariness had snapped back at the GOC. At the time it was the way the General mercilessly drove himself that made him so

respected; it was that trait of his that made him so lovable when, perhaps in the urgency of a battle, he would administer the salve of a kindly message. In the same operator's log not two days later appear successive entries for two squadrons: 'Big Shot realises he is working you to a standstill but wishes you to push on to "Neptune" ⁸'—and—'Big Shot realises he is working you to a standstill and appreciates your work.'

On 28 January the regiment was really startled. Right at the top of the morning's routine orders appeared a message addressed to all ranks from Lieutenant-Colonel J. H. Sutherland, MC. He had gone: been taken away: our Jimmy: the 'Trooper's colonel'. The shock was matched by the grief to be read between the lines of his farewell message:

'To the Div Cav Regiment.

'Officers, NCO's and men who have served me well.

'The time has come for me to say "goodbye"—I have left for CAIRO on the first leg of the journey back to NZ on a tour of duty. I don't want to leave you. I love the Regiment and you all. I could not stand in front of you and say goodbye, so I must write it.

'Thank you for your wonderful loyalty to me, both as a Squadron leader and your Colonel. I trust you will serve my successor, Colonel Bonifant, as well as you have served me.

'You probably will have hard fighting again soon—get ready for it. I shall be with you in all your troubles, please always remember that. The very best to you all, and good hunting.'

Men read it in silence and with an occasional dry swallow when they realised what his distress would have been had he had to stand before them and say these things.

During the next week Captains McQueen and Macdonald and several NCOs were sent back to Maadi to do tours of duty there, whilst at the same time reinforcements were absorbed, including some five extra

officers who were attached for instruction.

A tour of duty at Base should by all rights have been something to look forward to at any time. Comfortable beds, regular meals, plenty of leave amid the fleshpots of **Egypt** should have tempted any soldier. Yet very rarely did anybody in the regiment greet news of this sort with anything but bitter resentment. Always—under any circumstances—one's aim was to stay with the regiment: under any circumstances indeed. A comment of the RMO, Captain J. R. J. Moore, written under the heading 'Morale', bears this out:

'A lengthy story could be told of those who have carried on in the field with wounds, injuries, and diseases ordinarily justifying evacuation; shrapnel wounds penetrating the bone, minor fractures, pneumonia, and infective hepatitis, ⁹ to quote a few instances....'

This was the state of affairs even during the drive to **Tripoli**, the hardest drive of all, and yet those sent back to Base when it was all over felt as if they had been sentenced to Field Punishment. Fear of an 88-mm. shell right through the tank and right through your innards; fear of being blasted into unrecognisable pulp if your carrier hit a mine; these were small compared with the more abstract fear of having to go back to Base.

When the civilians around **Tripoli** got over their fear of the British they became quite friendly and were prepared to barter eggs, fresh vegetables and quantities of the local wine to the troops. Water was plentiful. Clothes were being washed under Army contracts. Squadrons began to cook their meals in bulk again and the officers' and sergeants' messes began to operate for the first time since the regiment left **Syria**.

There was plenty of the local wine, a most appalling compound, staining, as it did, the lips, teeth and tongue a brilliant blue and being quite capable of removing the galvanising off a bucket overnight. Small wonder it soon earned the name 'Purple Death'. 'Sudden Death' would have been more appropriate when the troops first tried it, for, in their

ignorance, they drank it in pannikins like beer, with direful consequences.

Leave parties went on a daily roster into **Tripoli**, but though it was a very beautiful town there was nothing much to do there. The shops were empty of any goods of souvenir worth and the shopkeepers did not understand the new BMA currency. No food could be bought and, after wandering round and examining the architecture, there was nothing for one to do except perhaps watch or join in a clandestine Crown and Anchor game down a back street or just wait for the lorry home.

The port was absolutely demolished and all stores had to be unloaded by hand from tank landing craft. The New Zealand Division took its turn at this work and the regiment used to send in for night shifts parties of 320 strong. There is not a New Zealander who has no eye for food supplies, so the Div Cav men, like the rest, soon saw that the ration boxes on their vehicles were comfortably stocked up for the next phase in the campaign. They even managed to smell out the issue rum which was cunningly hidden, one bottle at a time, in tins of uninteresting looking boiled sweets; this was not wolfed then and there but was carefully tucked away too, back at **Castel Benito**, until it could be put to its proper use when next in action.

A training programme had been made out, but this was completely disorganised and virtually abandoned when the dock labouring took up so much of the men's sleeping hours. More interest was taken in the divisional sports meeting and the rugby, soccer, and hockey competitions. It cannot be said that the regiment distinguished itself particularly in any of these since it was unfailingly knocked out in the first rounds. But the sports committee did arrange some most enjoyable games with units who had suffered the same fate.

During February the Padre collected a number of men and started rehearsals for a concert. This concert party he placed under the stage-management of Lieutenant R. L. Ball, the Signals Officer, who infused such keenness into it that when the concert was given for the regiment

in the **Castel Benito** theatre, it took the shape of a thoroughly professional revue and was received with such boisterous enthusiasm that it was decided to take it 'on tour'. Thus the regiment was able to return the compliments of several other units who had sent over invitations to their concerts.

Quite the most eventful occasion during the spell at Castel Benito was the parade for Mr Churchill. Now, a private soldier never actually admits enjoying being on a parade, but inside he remembers the tremendous satisfaction in his first week in the Army when, to their surprise, the whole squad sprang to attention simultaneously, and the very next day when his platoon marched a whole fifty yards, every man in step. Always after that there was the daily moment of pride as the Company Commander took over and the company stood at ease with a snap. Battalion parade was a nuisance but—well, you marched off feeling it had been worth while because once again you had shown the CO that he owned the best battalion in the Division. When it came to a brigade parade—and they did not happen very often—you just had to show everybody else it was true; besides, a brigade parade was usually held for some visitor and you had to show him too. So, if you convinced nobody else, you at least convinced yourself that New Zealanders could drill with the best of them: and you, and the whole world, knew they could fight. Yes, you looked back on a brigade parade with pleasure. They had all been there; company after company; firm, strong, resolute; every man had looked the inspecting officer squarely and proudly in the eye.

This was a divisional parade, something which happens perhaps only once in a soldier's career. When the parade was assembled and waiting there were a few moments to look about you and see something rare, literally acres solid with proven fighting men. There was no best company, no best battalion. They were all good—good to the core.

And then he arrived. It would have taken him hours to walk round the Division, but he drove slowly round each brigade block standing up in a jeep, and when he went back to the saluting base there was not a man, not a single man, who had not felt those piercing blue eyes look

right into his and instil in him the strength to win any battle, any campaign—if necessary single-handed—that the man should command.

Small wonder the New Zealand Division never felt better, or looked better, or was better than when it marched past Mr Churchill at **Tripoli**; and it marched off the ground with the thrill of his words still in its ears:

‘Far away in your homes at the other side of the world all hearts are swelling with pride in the deeds of the New Zealand Division.... far away in New Zealand, throughout the Motherland, all men are filled with admiration for the Desert Army....’

¹ **British Military Authority.**

² **Cpl E. Priddle, MM; Wellington; born Blenheim, 6 Jul 1919; hairdresser.**

³ **Sgt K. D. Jones, m.i.d.; born Karangahake, 3 May 1903; office manager; killed in action 15 Jan 1943.**

⁴ **Cpl W. C. Sturm; born Wairoa, 5 May 1909; garage attendant; killed in action 15 Jan 1943.**

⁵ **Cpl B. W. Wachter; born England, 6 Jan 1908; brewer; died of wounds 19 Jan 1943.**

⁶ **Tpr E. J. Evans; born Hawera, 5 Apr 1913; mechanical shovel driver; killed in action 17 Jan 1943.**

⁷ **Brig F. M. H. Hanson, DSO and bar, OBE, MM, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Levin, 1896; resident engineer, Main Highways Board; Wellington Regt in 1914–18 War; OC 7 Fd Coy Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div 1941–46; Chief Engineer, 2 NZEF, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works, 1955–**

61.

⁸ Codename for [Azizia](#).

⁹ Jaundice

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 17 – TUNISIA

CHAPTER 17

Tunisia

THE MARETH LINE was originally built by the French to guard the southern border of **Tunisia**. Its necessity had been obvious in the days of Roman history, for there are still visible on the inland side of the Matmata Range the remains of the Roman defences built after the Third Punic War.

General Montgomery had collected sufficient supplies by the end of February to break this line and the New Zealand Division was ordered forward from **Tripoli** to take part. The Divisional Cavalry moved out from **Castel Benito** on 2 March, the AFVs being carried, as usual, by transporter. The regiment was not at full fighting strength, having only 24 tanks and 37 carriers; but more were coming.

The main appointments had undergone quite a few changes and were now as follows:

Commanding Officer Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant, DSO

Second-in-Command Maj L. B. Ballantyne

Adjutant Capt P. S. Crisp

OC A Squadron Maj H. A. Robinson, MC

Second-in-Command Capt H. H. North

OC B Squadron Maj G. H. Stace

Second-in-Command Capt F. H. Poolman, MC

OC C Squadron Maj A. Van Slyke

Second-in-Command Capt M. L. W. Adams

OC HQ Squadron Capt J. L. Rayner

Medical Officer Capt J. R. J. Moore, NZMC

Padre Rev. H. G. Taylor, CF

By the afternoon of 3 March, squadrons were over the border into **Tunisia** and camped near the main road just short of **Medenine**. The next morning the Divisional Cavalry came under command of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, pending an attack which was expected at any time, and moved forward to a suitable position just south of the road, behind 5

New Zealand Brigade's positions, as a mobile reserve.

There was a stand-to on the 5th at dawn but nothing happened, and the attack came the following day. Field Marshal Rommel sent the tanks and lorried infantry of his panzer divisions out against the centre and left of the Eighth Army, whose defences had been sited to shepherd this armour into enfiladed positions. As a defensive action this one went according to the book, for by the middle of the day Rommel, having suffered crippling losses to his most valuable weapon, the armour, began to retire behind the **Mareth line.**

On the 7th the enemy was seen still to be pulling back into the **Matmata Hills, and while A Squadron was sent south towards **Foum Tatahouine** to reconnoitre the eastern end of the hills, B and C Squadrons formed up into mobile columns with the heavy tanks of the **Staffordshire Yeomanry** and troops of 25-pounders, to go forward along the base of the hills to harass the enemy and generally hurry his retirement. This harassing was done at the cost to Div Cav of two wounded, one of whom, Trooper **Dix**,¹ died almost immediately, when the B Squadron Intelligence Corporal's truck hit a mine.**

For the next five days the regiment maintained a line of observation patrols on the divisional front linking up on either flank similar patrols of **11 Hussars and the Free French Flying Column. Enemy movement could be seen all along the hills, but every height was picketed and the road running south-west into the hills was blown. The enemy had shut the door and was guarding it zealously, so that any attempts to penetrate into the hills promptly drew small-arms fire by way of warning.**

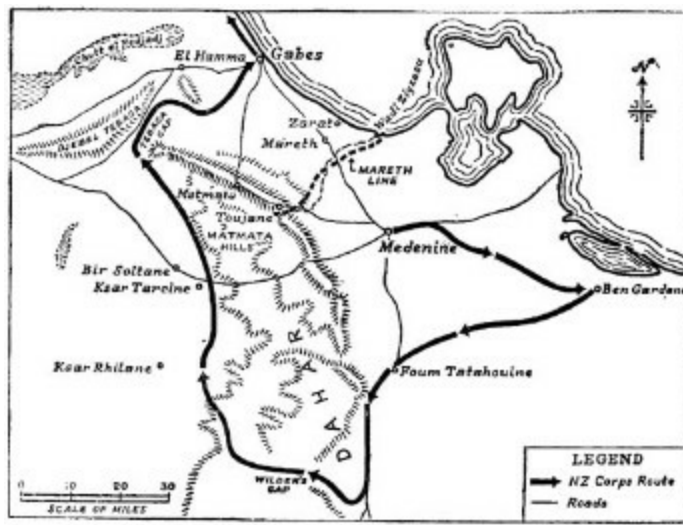
By the 12th the Eighth Army was assembled and ready to attack the **Mareth line. This attack was to consist of a frontal assault in the coastal area while the New Zealanders made another 'left hook'—this one, in the words of General Montgomery, a 'knock-out blow'—right round the back of the **Matmata Hills** to break through the weak inland flank into the town of **Gabes**.**

For this action the Division was formed into a corps, **General Freyberg** taking command also of the King's Dragoon Guards, **8 Armoured Brigade**, a regiment of British medium artillery, some British anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, and General Leclerc's column from Lake Chad. The route ran once again through some really difficult country on the very edge of the Great Sand Sea itself towards the narrow gap between the **Matmata Hills** and the high, rugged **Tebaga Range**, barren, forbidding and completely impassable.

The southern entrance for this outflanking move was by a pass through the hills known as 'Wilder's Gap', after the regiment's own Nick Wilder, who had been in charge of the LRDG patrol which had reconnoitred the route many months before.

The regiment left its patrol line on 13 March and, all next day and the following night, moved back towards **Tripoli** to **Ben Gardane** and then south past **Foum Tatahouine** to a divisional assembly area; there it waited for the tracked vehicles which came most of the way by transporter. So far the move was completely veiled in secrecy as it was originally intended to gain tactical surprise by moving the Corps up by night and lying under camouflage by day. The drivers quickly realised that difficult and most tiring work lay ahead of them, an impression not dispelled on the first night move forward when the Divisional Cavalry came up to the head of the Division in the evening of 19 March and headed the way over the first 40 miles. The drive took until almost midnight, when the column stopped to bed down.

The next morning, however, camouflage nets were stowed and the regiment was told that, since the enemy had learned of the Corps' movements, it was decided to push on with all haste by day. Armoured cars of the KDG formed the forward screen for the Corps, while Div Cav sent out two squadrons as



LEFT HOOK AT MARETH

LEFT HOOK AT MARETH

guard on the right flank. Though it was quite an uneventful day, it was a most heartening one as troop after troop played follow-my-leader over the spurs and gullies at the base of the hills. The crests of the spurs gave a panorama looking out over the whole Corps. Away out in front in a great half-moon were the tiny specks of the KDG cars, each with its attendant puff of dust. Rearward, the body of the Corps stretched back for miles in nine columns: no parade-ground precision here but each one following the nature of the going. Here two lines would almost meet; two over there; in some places all nine were forced in on a narrow frontage. The nearer machines looked like countless toys, each with its little plume of dust, all merging in the simmering haze into an indistinguishable smudge.

By nightfall on the 20th it was obvious that the greater part of the trek was done, for away in the north-west could be seen where the last shoulder of the Matmata Range dropped away to meet the foot of the frowning **Tebaga Range**.

The flank guard for the 21st was more static, RHQ taking up one position for the day near where it had laagered, and patrols from two squadrons standing guard at the foot of the hills as the Corps rolled on to do battle. It was another quiet day except when one of the A Squadron patrols met and exchanged shots with some Italians, who quickly and

sensibly withdrew into the hills.

By the afternoon, contact had been made with the enemy in the **Tebaga Gap** and the GOC had decided to attack that night. The Divisional Cavalry was ordered to follow this attack up at first light and exploit the gap forced by the infantry. So at 4 p.m., leaving B Squadron to guard **8 Armoured Brigade's** B Echelon which was still coming forward, the regiment moved up to laager just behind the gun positions which were being surveyed ready for the supporting barrage.

The attack, carried out by 6 New Zealand Brigade, was a complete success; by first light a gap had been cleared in the minefield and the anti-tank ditch at the end of the gap had been filled by a bulldozer. C Squadron was accordingly ordered forward.

The gap between the two ranges was actually about three miles wide. The country was not dead flat but rolling, with a hill, **Point 201**, near the point of the attack and behind the enemy forward line. This hill dominated the whole line, and the infantry seized it just in time before the German *164 Light Division* arrived round from **Mareth** to do so.

Getting across in daylight from the start line to the first bound, the back of **Point 201**, was not just a morning joyride, because the track leading there ran over a low crest and down a few hundred yards of gently sloping flat which was still under observed fire from the enemy's guns, so it was necessary to run the gauntlet over this, troop by troop, with uneven intervals between each vehicle. One carrier hit something hard and broke a track-pin just at the critical moment and, since the carrier was at full speed, it cast the track and pulled up all standing. The next carrier came roaring into view, then pulled up alongside. Without a word everybody but the two drivers baled out, and with the strength of desperation picked up the broken track weighing many hundredweight, and appeared almost to throw it back on its bogeys. In point of fact they laid it out in front of the carrier, whose driver, by locking the steering mechanism on the trackless side and driving slowly forward, forced the machine along on its other track as his helpers fed the track back over

its bogeys and drove in a new track-pin. Not a shot was fired at them. Perhaps the enemy was too busy admiring the feats of strength and skill; anyhow, the track-mending competitions designed against such emergencies, which had featured in many regimental sports meetings, had once again proved their worth. Indeed, some days later Sergeant W. R. Brown ² was awarded the MM for doing such recovery work under fire.

Once across the minefield and under the lee of **Point 201** the squadron found itself pinned to ground by shellfire from both sides of the hill and had to sit and take this for an hour or two. However, it was parked among some sand dunes which provided reasonable cover, and moreover the soft sand smothered the burst of the shells, so there were no casualties.

Fighter-bombers of the *Luftwaffe* were very active—one man actually collected down his neck some spent machine-gun cartridges, still hot, from one of these as he crouched in the sand—but they caused only one casualty, and rather an extraordinary one. A bomb, dropped at too low a level, failed to explode, skidded on the ground, and bounced up to break the arm of an attached LAD officer, Second-Lieutenant **Murphy**.

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As the morning advanced, the enemy fire gradually slackened, while heavy tanks of the Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire Yeomanry began to work forward and fan out beside **Point 201**. A Squadron also came up and then RHQ, so that by the middle of the day the regiment managed to form a line abreast and right of the hill. It was, however, pinned fast for the rest of the day by the enemy guns and tanks which had come up to reinforce their line.

By the end of the day the Divisional Cavalry had captured a troop of guns with their crews and some 140 prisoners, all Italian, who went to swell the total day's bag of 1500.

B Squadron arrived up from its flank-guard duties late in the afternoon and the whole regiment formed its night's laager out in this

open ground. The night was not peaceful enough for sleeping as the enemy gunners were active and, though no damage was caused, shells were landing uncomfortably close.

Next morning (the 23rd) B and C Squadrons started to work out to the left front of **Point 201** towards the old Roman wall, which was still quite easily discernible in the form of a low mound cutting across the valley. Some of B Squadron managed to work well forward on some rising ground on the left flank in positions of good observation where the patrols could report on gun-flashes and the movement of enemy tanks and transport. The squadron managed to destroy some fifteen 77/28 guns and also capture quite a number of prisoners and documents which were sent back through 6 Brigade Headquarters.

Padre Harry Taylor has been hovering in the background of this story for some time now. He is a man of extraordinary charm and many gifts. A good padre is an invaluable asset to any unit for he carries the enormous responsibility of the unit's morale. As has already been pointed out, the morale in Div Cav was as high as anywhere in the Division and the greater part of the credit for this must go to Padre Taylor. At 'acquiring' anything he had few equals, and at one time he used to get about in a carrier, strictly not on the vehicle strength of the unit and, if the truth were known, most likely not in a fit state to be darting round a battlefield. However, he made it his duty to be up with the patrol line of the forward squadrons some part of every day and, as his little truck would arouse suspicion and draw fire on his hosts, he had found a carrier; where and how he got it is nobody's business. In it he always seemed to be carrying just what somebody was short of; at one time, for example, he carried round a great 200-pound bag of precious sugar. Where he got it nobody was ever tactless enough to inquire.

Early in the war Div Cav gave him the nickname 'Harry **Kaitaia**', by which he was so universally known that some people thought the regiment had a Maori padre. He was given this title in a squadron canteen one night when it was decided that he was 'too good a joker to have been just a Vicar—they should have made him a Bishop.' This was

no sooner said than his pre-war parish was voted an honorary see, and from that moment onwards he was Harry Kaitaia.

Give him all the credit for maintaining the high morale of Div Cav, for when the great test came when he was wounded on 23 March, he was as game as any trooper. His wound was a deep, painful gash and he should have been sent straight back to hospital on a stretcher, but he defied the MO in order to bury his friend, Private Moss,⁴ who had been killed by the same shell. The Colonel ordered him back so, when RHQ withdrew to the shelter of Point 201, Harry Kaitaia forgot to stop and arrived at one of the forward squadrons with half his pants torn off, and entreated them to keep his whereabouts a secret. A lesser character would have been court-martialled for insubordination, but Harry got more appropriate treatment. Every man in the regiment rejoiced in his immediate award of the DSO.

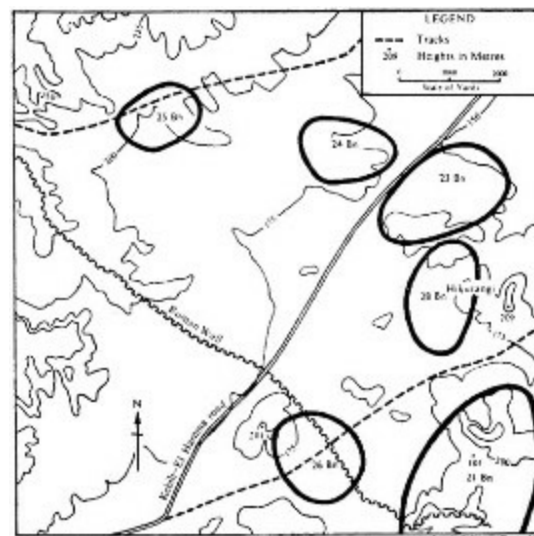
The New Zealand Corps had broken and consolidated its gains in the Mareth defences but the main assault was not so successful. On the coastal sector the break-in was accomplished, but by 25 March our troops had been more or less thrown back to the start line with heavy losses. The Army Commander decided to exploit the New Zealanders' gains and sent 10 Corps to reinforce them. His plan was now to launch a full-scale daylight attack, so timed that 1 Armoured Division, without even stopping at the end of its march, would leap-frog through as the New Zealanders arrived on their final objective and go crashing on. The infantry attack was to be supported by everything that would 'move, fly, or go bang', and in the words of one troop officer, 'Jerry is going to be at the receiving end of everything but the kitchen sink.'

In the meantime, from the 24th to the 26th, there was a general jockeying for start-line positions and Div Cav needed only to employ one squadron at a time; so the others were able to do maintenance jobs on their vehicles. Each day the squadron detailed for patrol was sent out to the higher country to the left end of the line, where there were good sheltered positions for observation which, on the afternoon of the 24th,

provided a grandstand view of a tank battle immediately in front. On the 25th the patrols were employed to mark their position with coloured smoke as an orienting point for some Hurricane 'tank-busters' which attacked the same enemy tanks. One of these planes crashed in no-man's land and the pilot, himself a New Zealander, was rescued by a C Squadron carrier crew. He was the second pilot to be rescued in a few days.

Among the captured documents brought in on the 25th were the plans for an exercise for the repelling of a British attack on the Italian coast. Coming events were indeed casting their shadows!

Being faced by New Zealanders, the enemy was naturally expecting another night attack, so complete tactical surprise



THE BREAKTHROUGH AT TEBAGA GAP, 26 MARCH 1943

was gained when the **RAF** began its 'softening-up' at 3.30 p.m. on the 26th, with the heaviest close air support the Eighth Army had been given. A bombing line had to be marked on the ground and this was done by means of orange-coloured smoke. The little canisters which emitted this smoke burned only for a few minutes, so the timing had to be exact. The Divisional Cavalry had the job of marking one end of the line and this was done with a double signal, in blue and red.

Until the appointed time there were just the usual, almost casual, shells going over; then high up on a spur of the Matmata Hills five miles away, twin puffs of blue and red stretched out in the wind and pointed themselves like accusing fingers at the enemy. As if waiting for such a signal, right across the valley a row of brilliant orange followed suit and simultaneously the aircraft came into sight, just clearing the hills at the far end of the line, flight after flight; and as each reached its appointed position it swung to the right in a low flat dive straight at the enemy. The execution of this was as perfect as the timing, and in next to no time columns of black smoke from burning trucks and tanks were merging with the dust and bomb-smoke until some ten square miles of country was in seething confusion, with the aircraft ducking and diving overhead, no doubt directed by a single man soaring five miles above.

At four o'clock the guns, two hundred of them, opened up and the tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** began to roll forward, comfortably hidden by the dust of the bursting shells; a few hundred yards behind, the infantry rose up out of the earth to start walking steadily forward. Back in the south, rolling across the downs, were the leading tanks of **1 Armoured Division** coming rapidly forward to make the second battle-wave.

The Divisional Cavalry moved on with the attack, through the hills on the flank, finding little to do but keep an eye on a few tanks which had worked themselves out of the way to that side. **B Squadron** found a handful of enemy infantry to deal with but otherwise there was no actual engagement. The regiment's only losses were one man killed, **Lance-Corporal Chapman**,⁵ and one wounded when a Kittyhawk fighter-bomber pilot made a mistake amongst the swirling dust clouds and shot up a Bren carrier.

Laager was formed beside the **Kebili- El Hamma** road near the **New Zealand Corps'** objective, and the next morning, the 27th, the regiment set off up the road again with **B and C Squadrons** ahead trying to get in touch with **1 Armoured Division** to get what news they could of its

movements and those of the enemy. But regardless of recognition signals, they were held off by gunfire and it was not until late in the afternoon that liaison was effected. It was here that the regiment happened on a new kind of mine made of wood—to prevent its being located by the British mine detectors—which unfortunately killed Trooper **McCartney** ⁶ and wrecked a carrier.

The village of **El Hamma** was due to fall to 1 Armoured Division; the enemy was evacuating the coastal defences at **Mareth**; so the axis of the **New Zealand Corps'** advance now swung east towards **Gabes**. On the 28th Div Cav put out its usual two-squadron screen which, together with the KDG, made contact with the retreating enemy, and by midday on the 29th **8 Armoured Brigade** had dealt with what turned out to be a rearguard of **15 Panzer Division**, thus allowing the light armour to arrive at the northern outskirts of the town. The enemy in retiring had blown the road in several places and mined the verges, and yet another carrier went up on a mine. All three of the crew became casualties, of whom Lance-Corporal **Littin** ⁷ was killed.

The regiment did not stop at **Gabes** but was ordered north along the main coast road which led to **Sfax** and **Sousse**. A few miles up this road a culvert over a wadi had been destroyed, and though there were signs that a small enemy rearguard was still amongst the palm trees round the village of **Oudref**, this did not particularly interest Div Cav at the moment. Light AFVs could cross the wadi more or less where they liked, but they were seeking a place where the Division could cross on a nine-vehicle front. A suitable place was found on the morning of the 30th, and C Squadron pushed on beyond the village while some B Echelon men travelling with RHQ were set to work improving the crossing. The two leading squadrons worked further forward until they were able to see movement beyond the **Wadi Akarit**.

It was obvious that the enemy would defend this position in force and that a full-scale attack would be needed, for it was



GABES TO ENFIDAVILLE

his last chance of preventing a union of the Eighth and First Armies. Divisional Cavalry patrols contented themselves with getting as far forward as possible unobserved and sending back all the information possible about enemy dispositions. This patrolling went on for some days until 5 April, while preparations were being put in hand for the attack. Each day two squadrons went forward accompanied by guns of 46 NZ Battery, which was attached, and twice the gunners got some shooting:

once on a truck whose owners appeared to be laying mines, and once on another truck which could not be identified because it suffered a direct hit and burst into flames.

During the few days' wait at **Wadi Akarit** all the available officers and NCOs in the regiment attended an address by General Montgomery at Headquarters 5 Brigade. The General is by no means a polished orator but his personality instils tremendous confidence. He seemed to aim at being unconventional yet strict, for when he arrived, one would have thought he almost deliberately avoided the salute of the officer commanding the parade, **Brigadier Kippenberger**, by ducking round the wrong side of his car and straight into the middle of a perfect hollow square, where, without even standing the men at ease, he ordered them to '... come up closer—closer still. Sit down! You may smoke but you may not cough. Now, we are going to fight this battle....' Needless to say,

nobody dared to smoke.

The **Wadi Akarit** defences ran east and west between the sea and some salt marshes, the wadi itself providing the tank barrier. The troops holding this consisted mainly of Italians of doubtful reliability, with a stiffening of the German *90 Light Division*, whose reserve of armour was very weak. The *Africa Corps* was really feeling its disaster at **Medenine**, but nevertheless the position was such that a full-scale attack was required to break through it. The plan was to use the three infantry divisions of **30 Corps**, 50 Northumbrian, 51 Highland and 4 Indian, for this. The two mobile divisions, 2 New Zealand and 1 Armoured, were to be held until a break had been made, and then they were to pass through and deploy out over the open country beyond, overrunning everything they could.

The infantry assault opened up with a tremendous barrage about four o'clock in the morning of 6 April, so that if the defences had crumpled completely then and there, the exploiting Corps would have had all the same day to work. However, this was not to be, for the defence was far more determined than expected and it took all day to force a breach.

It was while the reserve division was waiting that some Div Cav men opened the eyes of some Tommy tank crews nearby. A single sheep came wandering back through the columns looking for a place to hide from the noise and confusion. It ran down into a shallow wadi and under a culvert where it stuck, and was immediately pounced upon by the ex-farmer troopers, hungry for fresh meat, who saw their opportunity. In five seconds its throat was slit and in five minutes it was skinned, disembowelled and quartered (the muzzle of a Bren gun serving as one hook of the gallows) and turned into mutton. Some chops and the liver were promptly offered to the Tommies, who were so taken aback that they almost forgot to express their thanks.

The reserve divisions were able to work forward a little during the day and A and B Squadrons went forward to find routes across the anti-tank ditch. They made slow progress across numerous small wadis and

ran into some shellfire, but in any case there was little room to move until the defence collapsed and by last light there had still been no orders for a general advance. But the enemy had had enough.

In the morning the breach was complete and the reserves went pouring through. The New Zealand Division swung left through a pass in the Djebel er Roumana and out into the plains beyond. Here the troops of two squadrons shook out on a wide arc to enjoy the day of their lives, for the enemy, in pulling out, had left behind a large and varied assortment of prisoners and material to be captured. By the end of the day the regiment had covered 30 miles and claimed a bag of 27 officers and 1315 other ranks, amongst whom had been identified 361 and 433 *Panzer Grenadiers*, the *Spezia* and *Pistoia Divisions*, and 5 *Regiment of the Superga Divisional Artillery*. Four British six-pounder anti-tank guns had also been recovered and three American 75s mounted on White half-tracked cars, a jeep, and a quantity of American rations. All these had presumably come from the First Army front. Of enemy equipment the regiment claimed eight 149/35 guns, ten 75-mm. and two 50-mm. guns, two 10-ton trucks with trailers, a Volkswagen, and twenty-five assorted motor vehicles. The majority of the prisoners were quite surprised to find themselves captured and a great number of them, imagining themselves safe and secure behind the front line, were unarmed. Altogether it was a most satisfying day for Div Cav, crowned as it was by the news that during the afternoon the Signals Officer had made direct wireless contact with an American formation working eastwards near *Maknassy*, sufficiently clearly to exchange situation reports with it.

This rapid rate of advance was continued next morning, the 8th, when the regiment took its position in a battle group containing the KDG, 8 Armoured and 5 NZ Infantry Brigades, and some artillery. The Divisional Cavalry advanced on a one- squadron front for another 20 miles until that squadron was held up by tanks and guns. This, however, did not hinder the Shermans of 8 Armoured Brigade, which then took over the job of screening the Division. The Divisional Cavalry was halted

for a welcome afternoon's spell, and at five o'clock it concentrated into one column, followed along the axis of advance, and arrived at the head of the Division late at night.

The Tunisian plain west of **Sfax** allowed some 50 or 60 miles of room for manoeuvre, and the general plan was for the Division to hurry northwards as hard as it could and outflank **Sfax** to trap enemy forces there. The countryside, however, was becoming more closed-in, with large olive groves in which anything could hide. So the heavy armour continued to cover the advance while Div Cav was given the job of guarding the eastern, or inside, flank which lay against some of this tree-covered country. B and C Squadrons were accordingly sent out to this side of the divisional axis, where they spent the day watching for any signs of aggression in the enemy flank guard there. This consisted of tanks, guns and infantry and was considered much too strong to be attacked. But there were some troops attached to the regiment at the time who were not in agreement. Just before the attack at **Wadi Akarit** a squadron of the fiery Greek Sacred Brigade had been attached to the Divisional Cavalry. These men travelled in jeeps, mostly mounting captured enemy automatics, and it was understood in Div Cav that they had all taken a fatalistic oath to die at the hands of the enemy. That day the B and C Squadron men were quite willingly obeying their instructions not to attack anything unnecessarily formidable, when a troop of these enthusiasts suddenly decided to become aggressive. They saw a large German tank halted amongst the trees across a flat valley and made at it full-speed with their guns blazing. The tank must have been carrying tins of spare petrol on top of the hull, which caught fire, and in next to no time the tank was ablaze and the Greeks were returning triumphantly with not a man hurt. They were far too gentlemanly to suggest it, but must have thought, if they were capable of making that wild dash, that they were attached to a very chicken-hearted unit.

The Arabs in **Tunisia** were, in the main, very much pro-German. But they are an inexplicable race, for some of them, well aware of the

presence of some Div Cav men with a broken-down carrier nearby, were careful not to reveal the fact to the crew of a German armoured car who stopped to speak to them.

The enemy flank guard covering the retirement from **Sfax** was evidently under the same instructions as the Divisional Cavalry had been, namely to avoid committing itself if possible; and accordingly on the 10th, when the drive was on again towards **Sousse**, it was ignored by our troops. There was a march right across the olive groves to the village of **Triaga** and thence up the road to **La Hencha** on the main road. A and B Squadrons probed forward on a line parallel to 4 Light Armoured Brigade on their left, right to El Djem, and camped there the night. Though the day had passed with no brush with the enemy, it had been very unnerving because the earlier part of it had been spent in a trek across country covered in one immense olive grove. This was so perfectly laid out that, for hours, passing down between the lines of trees, the patrols found themselves opening out a series of revolving lanes, down any one of which an anti-tank shell might have come from nowhere. But the enemy was retreating fast with the whole Eighth Army hot on his heels, hoping perhaps to catch him while he took breath in **Sousse**. There was no time to stop and admire the well preserved remains of the huge Roman amphi- theatre at El Djem which the road actually encircled.

Sousse was the immediate target and haste was so essential that, the night before arriving there, the regiment bedded down in normal daytime formation, for patrols had already been up to the outskirts of the town on the 11th. Without waiting for breakfast the next morning the advance was resumed, and by 8.30 the leading squadrons were well past the western outskirts of the town, while RHQ had turned in to join in the welcome given to the New Zealanders by the inhabitants. Amidst cries of 'Vive' and 'Victoire', amidst much hand-clapping and back-slapping and waving of flags—mostly the 'Stars and Stripes' presumably dropped for the occasion by the United States Air Force—flowers, wine and brandy, cake and apples were pressed on the troops. The inhabitants

thought that these, the first Allied troops they had seen, were Americans, but when they discovered they were *Nouvelles Zélandaises* they were, for a few seconds, far from being reassured; for they had not lost the fear with which the enemy troops, particularly the Italians, had infected them that the New Zealanders were black, man-eating savages who would slit their throats just for the fun and joy of it.

It was amusing to realise that such a reputation had gone before, and it was pleasant to see again comely French lasses, who were well worth looking at, sights which had not been seen since leaving the beaches of **Alexandria**. But by way of an offset to these manifestations of Gallic ebullience is the story of a Maltese of the Secret Service, one Sergeant Reahardy, whom Div Cav picked up. He said that the French had been just as friendly to the Germans when they were knocking at the gates of **Alexandria**. But perhaps he was prejudiced, for it was surprising to learn that there were any Germans in **Tunisia** at that time.

It may not be out of place here to mention that on entering some of the villages the men were horrified to find the trail of wanton destruction the enemy had left behind. In one instance a troop of Divisional Cavalry had entered the house of a well-to-do French family, so close on the enemy's heels that the remnants of his looted breakfast were still warm. Remnants, yes: for he had had time to wreck the room and smash everything in it, and on the floor was a pathetic litter of fragments of dainty china and delicate crystal, broken furniture, and fine linen slashed and torn to ribbons. In the cellar he had broken the bottles of all the wine he could not carry away, slit the bags of barley and poured kerosene over the contents strewn over the floor.

While **Sousse** was 'en fête', A Squadron pressed on up the main road. It was slow going, for the road ran through rolling country with trees and scrub which provided plenty of opportunities for a determined rearguard; and the squadron had managed to cover only some five miles when an armour-piercing shell struck the driver's visor of Lieutenant Murchison's tank, killing Troopers **Williams**⁸ and **Woodhead**.⁹ Murchison was wounded and knocked unconscious. The fourth member

of the crew, Trooper Bear, ¹⁰ was wounded also, in the knee and face, but he removed the driver's body and drove the tank into dead ground, where he could first attend to Murchison before getting back on to his wireless set and calling up his squadron commander. He remained there under mortar and shell-fire, acting as a radio relay station to his troop until this minor action was successfully concluded.

The two other squadrons swung west, B Squadron bagging a half-tracked troop-carrier, killing or capturing its complement of eleven Germans, while C Squadron also took a few prisoners, and at Kalaa-Srira found thousands of jerricans and petrol drums abandoned, and a number of trucks loaded with a huge and varied quantity of ammunition. Particular satisfaction lay in finding no fewer than thirteen trucks of 88-mm. shells, Div Cav's pet fear. Truly the enemy was retreating in disorder and it was not hard to believe the Intelligence reports coming forward from **Sfax** telling of valuable stores and installations being found intact there.

Under these circumstances it was justifiable to drop the caution of a regimental laager and the squadrons spent the night where they were. Thus they were able to press on again in the morning on a two-squadron front. By nightfall on the 13th they were within ten miles of **Enfidaville**, and the following morning they were coming up to the defences of Berlin Radio's 'Fortress of **Tunis**'.

The town of **Enfidaville** rests in the curve of the Gulf of **Hammamet** where the coastline swings out along the **Cape Bon** peninsula. Behind the town the country rises steeply into high, broken mountains; in front of it, cut only by a wadi half a mile away, is a flat plain reaching from the marshy ground at the coast to a mountain chain, roughly parallel with the coast and the foothills ten to fifteen miles inland. This plain boasts a few olive groves and some cultivated ground among high cactus hedges, but the greater part of it is completely open. Round this area the New Zealand Division was destined to stay, applying all pressure possible, until the assault on the First Army front broke into **Bizerta** and **Tunis**

and spread out round **Cape Bon** to end the campaign in **Africa**.

It was apparent that the Divisional Cavalry would not be needed for any screening roles until an attack had been launched and a breakthrough accomplished, so RHQ was established in some cover just ahead of the guns of 4 Field Regiment and squadrons operated from there, probing about for any information that could be gleaned. Through some mistake, the **BBC** had reported **Enfidaville** in our hands. This was not true because, on the 15th, C Squadron advanced on it along the coast side of the road and was shelled very energetically. The going was very soft, but this was a blessing since the shells sank well into the mud and their explosions did little harm. The squadron reported that the town was still occupied, but it had not done this before several unfortunates had driven innocently in there and into captivity, these including one of the regiment's own quartermasters.

A full-scale attack went in at 11 p.m. on the 19th. B Squadron was attached to 5 Brigade for this action, while the rest of the regiment had its usual role of waiting for a gap to push through and exploit. The attack made ground but the enemy line still held, and the regiment, less of course B Squadron, sat out in the open in desert formation all day on the 20th with nothing to do but watch the terrific bombardment which the village of **Takrouna**, perched up on top of its hill, was taking from attackers and defenders alike, and wait for a chance to advance. But no chance came. An A Squadron patrol went into Enfidaville and beyond, looking for a place to break through, but found none, and by nightfall Div Cav was back amongst the guns.

And so for another three days, from the 21st until the 24th, the regiment resumed its probing tasks. Now and again one troop would insinuate itself through the enemy front line only to be held up. On one of these sallies Lieutenant **McFarlane**¹¹ was wounded by a mortar bomb and succumbed to his wounds. RHQ came in for its share of shellfire, too, since the enemy was particularly active against our guns; Major **Robinson** was also wounded by shrapnel, and Lance-Corporal **Eddie**,¹² who died a few days later. Then, on the 24th the whole regiment was

disengaged, as the Division was being relieved, and two days later was sent back ten miles to a rest area. All vehicles and guns were immediately given a thorough clean-up, all the blankets were put through a disinfestor, and as many people as could were given a chance to slip down to the coast for a bathe. Squadrons went out on route marches—cavalry-length marches of course—to keep the men fit; but otherwise there was just a week of glorious lazing, playing Bridge, or just lying amongst the wild flowers marvelling at the number of our fighters and bombers—hundreds of them—which passed overhead all day, purposefully heading for the only little piece of **Africa** left to attack.

The rest period came to an end all too quickly with a warning order for a move forward coming at midday on 3 May. The very next morning the regiment was waiting at an assembly area while Colonel Bonifant and Major **Stace** ¹³ went to see the new area to be taken over. This was further west than the **Enfidaville** positions and was occupied by 4 Light Armoured Brigade, linking the **Enfidaville** front with the one held, and held rather thinly, by the Free French Algerian Division.

The Divisional Cavalry was able to man its part of the line with one squadron at a time, and once again there was little to do but get as far forward as possible and then sit and glare at the enemy. His forward line was very heavily mined and practically every mine fitted with some sort of a booby trap, so that even if the enemy gunners, who were so touchy that they fired at anybody who showed more than an eyebrow, would have allowed it, getting forward would still have been a slow process. Despite the fall of **Bizerta** and **Tunis**, the enemy on the southern sector was proving as obstinate as ever.

On 8 May the regiment, less C Squadron which stayed under command of 5 Brigade, moved back opposite **Enfidaville** to follow a break-through by tanks the next day, but this never eventuated since the First Army was launching a drive right across the base of the peninsula to **Enfidaville**. All that day and the next, indeed until the 12th, there was little to do but wait, expecting almost hourly the final

surrender. But the enemy facing the Eighth Army, containing as it did, at least one valiant division, the *90th Light*—old adversaries of the New Zealanders, well known since the days in [Greece](#)—was determined to fight until nothing remained. Our artillery concentrations which were fired during those days were continuously keeping some part of the hills completely obscured with dust and smoke, and in return the enemy gunners kept our forward positions under heavy bombardment.

All that remains as a recollection of those few days is a nightmare of guns that, both in the distance and close at hand, rumbled and barked and roared to the accompaniment of a continuous howling and wailing of shells overhead.

Some of the Div Cav wireless operators heard, on the 12th, the calls by the Eighth and First Armies for unconditional surrender, and the enemy's curt refusal. And still the guns belched out their defiance at each other, stubborn as ever. But next morning word came through that the cease-fire was ordered for 10 a.m. ¹⁴ Until that hour the guns on neither side indicated in any slackening of their fire that any such orders had been given, except perhaps that the enemy guns seemed to be firing more indiscriminately, as if the gunners were trying to use up all the ammunition they could in the allotted time. At the appointed hour, but for one or two shells that went over a few seconds late—obviously from the odd gunner who wanted to say that he had fired the last shell in [Africa](#)—the whole world became silent. You could feel that a weight had suddenly been lifted from your body so strange was the silence.

But what was it that had so vividly turned a day of brutal war into a smiling spring morning? What was it? It was something so completely peaceful, so long forgotten, as not to be immediately recognised. And when recognition did come, the wind was whispering it in the grass and the little wild poppies nodded their approval; for up above ... a lark was singing.

¹ [Tpr R. A. Dix](#); born NZ 7 Dec 1913; transport driver; killed in

action 7 Mar 1943.

² Sgt W. R. Brown, MM; born NZ 24 Apr 1917; fireman, NZR; died of wounds 21 Dec 1943.

³ Capt F. J. Murphy; Levin; born Lismore, NSW, 24 Mar 1914; motor mechanic; wounded 22 Mar 1943.

⁴ Pte J. R. Moss (4 Fd Amb, attached); born 22 Jul 1912; musician; killed in action 23 Mar 1943.

⁵ L-Cpl L. H. Chapman; born NZ 13 Aug 1919; farmhand; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

⁶ Tpr J. E. McCartney; born NZ 12 Jun 1914; labourer; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.

⁷ L-Cpl I. A. Littin; born NZ 1 May 1916; grocer's assistant; killed in action 30 Mar 1943.

⁸ Tpr C. St.E. Williams; born Rio de Janeiro, 23 Nov 1912; dairy factory hand; killed in action 12 Apr 1943.

⁹ Tpr G. E. Woodhead; born NZ 27 Feb 1919; cheese factory hand; killed in action 12 Apr 1943.

¹⁰ 2 Lt F. H. Bear, MM; Tirau; born Tirau, 30 Mar 1917; butcher; wounded 12 Apr 1943.

¹¹ Lt R. O. McFarlane; born NZ 16 Aug 1913; service station manager; died of wounds 21 Apr 1943.

¹² L-Cpl G. T. Eddie; born Hastings, 22 Jul 1916; shepherd; died of wounds 24 Apr 1943.

¹³ **Lt-Col G. H. Stace, Order of Phoenix Silver Cross (Gk); Omaka, Blenheim; born Blenheim, 26 Apr 1912; farmer; CO Div Cav 4–27 Mar 1944.**

¹⁴ ***First Italian Army*, commanded by Field Marshal Messe, surrendered at 11.45 a.m. on 13 May.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 18 – ‘PASTURES NEW’

CHAPTER 18

'Pastures New'

IT WAS RATHER UNCANNY to be able to spread blankets out in the sunlight or to wander about carelessly when, only twenty-four hours ago, every single action had been wrapped up in caution and all movements, even the subconscious ones, had been made in relation to possible enemy reaction. Now that there was no danger, life seemed strange and it was hard for men to reconcile themselves to wandering around anywhere as if they were just out on manoeuvres and were having a day's spell.

Men naturally wanted to go into **Tunis** to see the place which had been the Eighth Army's goal. Two truckloads of them set off the day after the cease-fire, the plan being to camp one night at a staging area near the city and to return late the following day. This would have allowed a new party to go every other day. But such plans came to an abrupt end when a movement order came down just after the first party had left. The tanks and carriers were to be prepared for handing over to other units in **Tunisia** at no more than two hours' warning.

No one was reluctant to see the vehicles go, even though these had been their homes for so long. Everyone was sick and tired of fighting. All they wanted to do was to rest. They were really tired.

A puzzling feature of this movement order at the time was the instruction that the men to be detailed to act as skeleton crews for the vehicles, and therefore to remain behind when the others moved off towards **Egypt**, were not to be men of the first three echelons. This feature, of course, gave birth to a number of rumours, none of which, strangely enough this time, came anywhere near the truth, even though there had been of late quite a lot of frivolous talk about men being sent home to New Zealand for furlough; indeed, the Hon. F. Jones, in his address to the regiment late in April, had dropped hints to that effect.

The long drive back to Base began on 16 May. There was a run across country to strike the main road near **Wadi Akarit**, and the trip

continued day by day in stages of about 120 miles, with spells of a day at **Tripoli** and **Benghazi**, where it was possible to let men have showers and a general clean up. At nights en route there were shows by the **Kiwi Concert Party** and films shown by the Mobile Cinema Unit. On these occasions everybody took along an old petrol tin for a chair or just lay about relaxed in the sand. There was one evening when a film broke off in the middle. This produced immediate comments on what was to be expected back in **Maadi**, where the cinemas were run under civilian contract. But the comments were quickly silenced when the operator's voice came booming forth from the sound unit below the truck which bore the screen:

‘Would Corporal **Roberts**¹ of HQ Squadron, Div Cav, please report to his truck immediately as his eggs have started to hatch.’

Famous words—famous hen. George used to drive a petrol truck and this hen was his constant passenger and companion. At any halt she used to fly down from the truck and scratch about in the desert for food. However she was fed, she did well, for she kept her friend and master supplied with fresh eggs for many months. But there came a time when neither battle nor bomb could stop Mother Nature asserting herself, and George's hen became more and more crotchety at the suggestion that her daily egg so generously laid—and at such physical effort too midst shot and shell—should be removed. So George, the kindly master, found her some eggs worth mothering and Henrietta, if such were her name, gladly adopted them. Thus, in due time, Mother Nature had contrived yet another means of halting for a moment the entertainment of some hundreds of soldiers.

The drive back, a matter of a fortnight, was without incident and had become almost monotonous. Outwardly the men were as phlegmatic as ever as they sat there hour by hour screwing up their eyes in the wind, or dozing or playing cards, or arguing over the cooking of the next meal; but, as the last few stages approached, there grew and came welling up in their minds a curious and indefinable feeling of excitement, which had its origin in the realisation that they represented

a body of men who had fought its way over every mile of this same ground, and had taken seven months over it. This feeling was difficult to reconcile with the present situation. Nevertheless the men were triumphantly proud of the sight which the convoy would make to a casual observer: the canopies bleached by the sun; here and there a windscreen stripped off for convenience or safety; the noise from a muffler once punctured on a rock; an occasional shrapnel hole; the untidy old fire-buckets and blackened tea billies hanging at the back, the unofficial insignia of the Eighth Army. They knew there would be no victorious march through cheering throngs; that they would just swing down past **Mena** House and through the ordinary work-a-day traffic of a remote corner of **Cairo** to **Maadi**; but even if they were only going to drive past a few natives, they were going to let them know that this was not just a convoy of soldiers returning from some routine exercises. No casual glance could reveal that, hidden in many a pack, was a personal trophy, and tucked up in many a bedroll were the once arrogant Nazi flags— great red ones with a black swastika on a white circle—and Italian tricolours, good big ones too. These had been quietly measured up against the sides of the trucks so that they could be tacked there when the big day came. Some ingenious person had even made a flag for the occasion. It depicted a kiwi breaking with its beak the sign of the **Africa Corps**, a palm tree bearing a swastika on its trunk.

The day of triumph arrived. On 1 June, at 6.40 a.m., the convoy left **Wadi Natrun**. By nine o'clock the top of the great Pyramid of Cheops could be seen peeping over the last hill. Lorry after lorry swung through a control post and began to grind its way up the hill, at the crest of which, as each driver flipped his lever neatly into the top gear, his passengers, their eyes hungry for the sight, gazed once again upon the fertile Nile Valley.

The route from **Mena** to **Maadi** was no busier than usual for that time of day, but taxi, donkey cart and bicycle alike stopped at the side of the road as the great convoy rolled past, its passengers now grinning broadly. They had already been given at least one warm welcome as they

came through **Mena** Camp. At the ATS compound there, the Palestinian girls had quickly gathered in knots, behind the fence, to raise a cheer and blow an occasional kiss.

So back to **Maadi** they came. The desert campaign was truly over.

At **Maadi** another surprise was awaiting them. All the rumours born of the fact that the first flight to return to Base consisted entirely of personnel of the first three echelons had soon died and the coincidence had been forgotten; but on 2 June the reason for this became vividly clear. Colonel Bonifant sent round a big list of the names of men to report immediately to an RHQ tent. When they were all assembled, he walked in and announced in a matter-of-fact voice:

‘All you men have had your names drawn by ballot to be sent back for three months’ furlough in New Zealand.’

It would be almost an understatement to say that the silence could be felt. The dramatic suddenness of the news was followed by a curious and complete silence; for the message took some time to sink in. Presently the spell was broken by a voice somewhere at the back—and there is not the slightest doubt that its owner, either then or to this day, knows that he ever spoke a word. This matters little, for we can safely call it that same ‘Spirit of the Regiment’ that was quite distinctly heard in a half-whisper: ‘I don’t know that I particularly want to go.’

Once full realisation sank in, however, everyone could sense the silent current of excitement which flowed through the group of men; it flushed their faces and set their eyes aglow or, in some cases, unashamedly misty.

Can anybody remember a single other matter of interest on that day?

For the greater part of June nothing much was done. The furlough draft moved out and left for New Zealand on the 15th. In the Div Cav lines all the men had been in action and were therefore due for a

fortnight's 'survivors' leave', and for about half of them this began on 3 June, with the remainder going off as soon as they arrived back. Despite the fact that an intake of reinforcements marched in on 11 June, it was still very difficult to find enough men to fill the usual daily lists of duties and fatigues.

One particularly bright day in an otherwise quiet period was 24 June, the day that Major Godfrey Stace was married to Sister M. Prior, **NZANS**. The reception was held in the regimental officers' mess.

On the last day of the month the general sleepy silence that seemed to pervade the lines began to give place to the more usual bustle as the men who had been left behind with the AFVs at **Enfidaville** arrived in from **Alexandria**. They had remained a few days camped near **Homs** and had then handed over all the Bren carriers to 51 (Highland) Division. The tanks also had been left behind, and some of them were at a later date to be seen on the quayside in **Alexandria** like Goldsmith's Traveller, 'remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow', and now looking like dreadful old death-traps to a regiment which was shipping its brand-new armoured cars to **Italy**. Man is fickle in his affections, for had not the sight of the first of these now rusty old 'death-traps' lifted the morale of the whole regiment no less than twelve months before, with their new speed and power and punch and seemingly impenetrable armour?

The vehicle party had been taken from **Homs** to **Tripoli** to wait for sea passage back to **Egypt**. At **Tripoli** they had had the great honour of being selected to supply a guard of honour to **HM King George VI** on the occasion of his visit there.

The arrival of these men back in **Maadi** more or less coincided with the return of the last of the others who had taken 'survivors' leave'; so that it can be said that, with the first week of July, the regiment opened its eyes, yawned and stretched, and rose up again fit, refreshed, new blood in its veins and that old glint of mischief once again in its eyes. The furlough men had been replaced by a big draft of keen reinforcements, incidentally the most fully trained who had yet arrived.

There was no question this time of pushing a certain number of men into each squadron and letting them find their own niches, as these men were all fully trained, each in his own trade, and could be marched straight into their appointed troops.

Nevertheless the reinforcements, quite confident in their own efficiency, had many surprises coming to them before they felt themselves to be completely integrated in the regiment—surprises where they least expected them—as witness the following tale.

Being very conscious of the reputation of the Divisional Cavalry, they naturally expected to find everything ‘standing at attention’. But no: not always. A certain fatigue party was detailed to go and dig a hole somewhere, and paraded with shovels, expecting to be fallen in and marched away. All they got from the laconic corporal who met them was: ‘Come with me!’ as he led them straight across the parade ground—heinous crime at **Burnham or **Waiouru**—towards the appointed spot. As they strode off the parade ground and past some tents they came by one of the occupants standing in a basin outside, dribbling water over himself with obvious pleasure; and a glance showed that not an inch of his body was a stranger to the sun, either. He looked up at the corporal.**

‘How're ye doin', Jim?’

‘Fine thanks, Harry. Goin' to **Cairo on the bash?’**

‘No. Just having a quiet wash.’

After they had passed, the Corporal turned to his charges and said:

‘Don't forget him. Whitest man in the regiment. He's the Padre; a Major. Got the DSO the other day.’

The reinforcements had a few things to learn; and to absorb a new brand of discipline was one of them. But all of them were thoroughly competent in their jobs, and the regiment needed no more than new equipment and a little field training to be as fit as ever to take the field.

Moreover, there were stories of wonderful new equipment—lovely big brand-new armoured cars weighing the best part of 15 tons and fast as the wind—just waiting at **Tel el Kebir** to be issued.

In everybody's mind was the same thought, 'Right, let's get this basic training brushed up again and have at 'em.' On 5 July all personal weapons were re-issued and the next few days were spent at the rifle and LMG ranges. Regimental parades, guards and route marches automatically smartened up and everything was done with a will; for in everyone's mind was the same thought: 'The sooner we prove ourselves fit for it, the sooner we get our new equipment.'

Colonel Bonifant and the 2 i/c, Major Robinson, went over to **Abbassia** on 13 July to see the new cars, and they had not been back half an hour before the whole regiment was buzzing with the news, and what was more, knew of their approval.

'If Bonny says they're all right, you bet they'll be the goods: just the cunning gears.'

By this stage of the war the Division had its own Armoured Training School at **Maadi**, and it can safely be said that there was no better equipped school in the **Middle East** nor were there any less enthusiastic classes in one. Indeed, when it came to turning out in the evenings for such things as night compass marches, the most common excuses for avoiding these—and genuine ones, too—came from those who wished to go over to the school to work; to practise shooting on the pellet range; or to take part in a wireless scheme or to finish overhauling a motor.

About a fortnight after the CO saw the new 'Staghounds', as they were officially called, all the troop officers were taken over to **Abbassia** to see them. There was no doubt about the officers' enthusiasm and by the next day everyone's eyes were gleaming from the mental picture of some real fighting vehicles. New; brand new: with three years' research behind them: two great GMC motors so powerful that they had to be governed back to 50 m.p.h.: fully automatic transmission—not even a

clutch pedal on the floor: hydraulically operated steering: hydraulic power-operated traverse in the turret, with the guns fired electrically: the last word in crew comfort: and, above all, they were brand new and completely equipped down to the minutest detail.

The regiment was really in top gear by the end of July. Everything, whether changing the guard or peeling potatoes in the cookhouse, was done with a will. Regular cricket and tennis matches were being held and there was plenty of swimming in the **Maadi baths. Both the officers' and sergeants' messes held dances. Round the lines at nights, everyone who was not singing appeared to be whistling; and the daily lists of petty crimes reached an all-time low level.**

The divisional athletic sports were held at the Farouk Stadium in **Cairo on 11 August but Div Cav did not cover itself with glory. The first six Staghounds had arrived just three days before, and the regiment was almost entirely in its own vehicle park in **Maadi**—in mind if not in person.**

The training syllabus naturally was amended as soon as the first Staghounds arrived, and there was tremendous competition to get into a class which had anything to do with them, while interest in the Training School waned considerably (“To hell with all these lectures on stabilisers. There are none on the “Stags””). Steadily, about once a week, train-guards were detailed to go down to **Tel el Kebir to take delivery of more of the lovely things. Never was any equipment so carefully checked over. It was midsummer, but those guards, to the astonishment of the British Ordnance people delivering the cars, worked steadily right through their siesta hours to get their Staghounds checked and on to rail. Never was any equipment so carefully and jealously guarded against petty thieving by the natives on the way back to **Maadi**.**

During the middle of the month the bulk of the new reinforcements marched in and were absorbed by a regiment brimming over with enthusiasm and efficiency. And to look back just a short six weeks it seemed amazing that a regiment then so ‘punch-drunk’, so dull in the

eye, could now be so virile and fit and keen. Why: each morning the squadrons marched on to the regimental parade with their heads held high and their arms swinging, and stood on those parades rigid and steady, even pleased that the CO should take so long over his inspection. Was it not worth his while to be so painstaking? Were not they worthwhile to inspect? Sure, they were; and they knew it and they felt it; and so did the CO. He must have been proud of his command at that time. And the reason for all this stood on the vehicle park not fifty yards behind them: rows of solid, tough, fighting vehicles, sleek and swift, and carrying a real punch. ('If only we could've had 'em six months ago! We'd have shown 'em! We'd have K.D.G'd 'em!')

Was there ever born a New Zealander who did not want to alter, however slightly, a manufactured article to suit his own tastes? The very first day that Staghounds stood on the Div Cav vehicle park the regiment regarded them in the light of recent battle experience. Where would the bivvy be best attached? What about extra water and rations? They had the armour, these cars, and the shape and the size and the comfort so important for conserving crews' battle-worthiness. They had ideal communication and inter-communication, and 'run-flat' tyres and jettison tanks ('Nice handy things if yer liberated a big vat o' plonk, eh?'); they had ample clearance against that deadly mine-blast; they had the power, and the speed, and the punch with those guns. Oh, but had they? The war was going to **Europe** now; close country fighting; sometimes confined to roads; ambushes with anti-tank guns that could not be by-passed and which would need shellfire, preferably indirect. The 37-mm. gun with its flat trajectory could only supply this over open sights.

Lieutenants Mack and Little knew the answer and within a month they had found, fitted, and calibrated a 3-inch howitzer in the gun cradle of one of the cars, and a week later had demonstrated it to the General. The result was that this modification was approved by GHQ MEF ² for one car in every Staghound troop.

Tyre chains were issued and naturally had to be carried where they

be immediately available, so racks were welded to the hulls between the front mudguards. Ammunition boxes were attached to the back mudguards, and extra water tins above them. There was the question of sleeping quarters for the crews, and the inevitable tarpaulin lean-to bivvies were bolted along the top edges of the hulls. These tents could now be made at leisure in Base and could incorporate all the ingenious refinements of the various former ones.

Five troops in each squadron were issued with Staghounds and the sixth with 'Dingoes', much lighter vehicles—popularly referred to as 'mobile slit-trenches'—armed with a Bren gun apiece. They were normally open at the top but were provided with an ingenious lid of armour-plate which could slide over easily and quickly. Their function, since they were very manoeuvrable, was for quick reconnaissance where heavy resistance was not expected, but which might call for a quick getaway. Within squadron headquarters there were also some other most necessary light armoured vehicles, long overdue for issue. Until now the medical orderlies and the fitters had operated in soft-skinned 8-cwt trucks. Neither shrapnel nor small-arms fire shows any respect to the **Red Cross**; nor was it always possible for a fitter to effect urgent repairs to a fighting vehicle and remain under cover; nor for either of them to get where they were urgently required with safety. And so it had always been difficult for squadron commanders to avoid committing men in soft-skinned vehicles to any more danger than necessary. Now this problem was solved, since the fitters and the medical orderlies were issued with White scout cars, which were built of light armour-plate and rather on the lines of the American ranch-wagons.

By the end of August the training syllabus had been completed up to a stage when the squadrons could hold manoeuvres to make sure their various components were intermeshing comfortably; and the first week in September was employed by each squadron in turn taking a trip to **El Saff** for a day's manoeuvres. One or two Staghounds found themselves in difficulties in soft sand, but generally the vehicles with their power-assisted steering were a joy to handle. Driving along the main road to

and from these manoeuvres, the gunners found an entertaining though unconventional means of learning perfect control over their power-operated turret traversing. The movement of the turret was worked from a handle rather like the handle of a spade. This was grasped in the left hand and turned over in a 90 degree arc to left or right. The further it was turned the faster the turret swung round. During the day the road along the Nile is fairly busy, with the traffic moving at a brisk pace. The gunners amused themselves by drawing sights on oncoming taxis. This entailed a very slow but accelerating traverse as the vehicles drew abreast, but of course had to stop when the muzzle of the gun came close to protruding into the roadway. With the co-operation of the crew commander it could be continued at full speed the instant the two vehicles had passed, and an imaginary 'snap' shot was fired into the rear of the taxi. The reactions of the taxi drivers were delightful. As they noticed a gun holding them in their sights they were flattered, and waved back energetically; but when the gun swung round and laid on them from the rear, anyone could tell by the erratic driving that they were anything but assured that the initial move had been just a piece of playful friendliness.

The squadron manoeuvres brought the regiment to a high peak of fighting efficiency and there remained only manoeuvres as a regiment to top this off. The time was drawing near, it seemed, for the Division to be off and back into the field. Physically, too, the men were in great fettle. Many of them had elected to go through the summer in Base without making use of the siesta period in the middle of the day, but rather to use that period for sports of their own choosing. Swimming, of course, was the most popular, and this led to a swimming sports meeting in the Maadi baths on the evening of 9 September, in which C Squadron won the squadron cup.

During the first half of September, after the squadrons had done their manoeuvres, the time was allocated to troop leaders who wished to work their own troops, and to various demonstrations to other arms within the Division. At the same time the regiment was visited by

demonstration teams from these arms, gunners and sappers for example, whose expert knowledge was eagerly sought after; for in the desert campaign many occasions had arisen in which the regiment had been in difficulties through not being competent to cope with unexpected situations at short notice.

On 13 September there came the first indication that the Division was due to move out of **Maadi**, when all cars were grounded for final mechanical checking. Two days later a movement order was issued which defined the date as the 17th and the destination as **Burg el Arab**. Thursday the 16th was a day of great bustle and activity within the camp as the regiment virtually folded up its tents again. Since its fighting equipment was now ready for action, there really only remained the job of handing in all base equipment, which task was done by midday.

The move to **Burg el Arab** went off without a hitch as it was a fairly leisurely one, taking from 5 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. What really did please Div Cav, though, was the fact that the rest of the Division, as part of its hardening-up programme, had to march the full 100 miles there while the regiment was allowed to go on wheels. Let it be said that in the next few weeks



ITALY MAP No.1

nobody in the regiment dared to mention the subject of route marches or 'footslogging' outside its own lines for fear of hearing some cutting and justified sarcasm. The Divisional Cavalry did not get off scot free on the question of marching, nevertheless, since the first three days at **Burg el Arab** were more or less devoted to this form of hardening up, even if the length of the marches, by comparison with the long walk along the Desert Road, could still be referred to as the usual 'cavalry-length' ones.

They were well worth while, however, if they did nothing more than make everybody appreciate the sea bathing afterwards. September is a lovely month to spend on the shores of the **Mediterranean** and the regiment was camped amongst the date palms right at the foot of snowy white sandhills, beyond which the inviting sea pounded on the beach.

Regimental manoeuvres began in the **El Daba** area on 20 September and turned out to be fast and furious. B Squadron went out first as the 'enemy', followed by the other two squadrons an hour later. As soon as contact was made round the old **Alamein** battlefield a tremendous running fight ensued all the way to **Daba**. There C Squadron took up a defensive position and was hotly attacked by B Squadron. Laager was formed that night at **Daba**, and the following morning all three squadrons moved off to the beach to calibrate the 37-mm. guns and fire practice shoots.

The electrically fired guns proved to be an unalloyed joy. At the trigger of each gun was a small solenoid, each of which was worked by a switch, exactly like the dip-switch in a motor car, at the gunner's foot. He could thus lay on a target with his .30 Browning and let it have a good burst. Since it was co-axially mounted with, and used the same sights as, the 37-mm. gun, the gunner could, by a slight movement of his foot, end the burst of small-arms fire with a 37-mm. shell—a most demoralising treatment for some future and unfortunate enemy. On one occasion at least, this electrical system produced a surprise for a crew. The gunner, a man of rather slow reflexes, had put his great foot down

on the 37-mm. trigger switch and left it there after the gun fired. His loader, on the other hand, was quick in his reactions and had spent many spare hours in **Maadi** practising fast, neat loading. He had the first shell 'up the chimney' and stood with the second clasped to his bosom in the approved manner. Now the gun, being an SAQF, ³ automatically ejects the empty shell and cocks the firing mechanism; the new shell entering the breech automatically closes it. This time the second shell sped away a mere two seconds behind the first, and the reproachful look on the loader's face was a picture to behold as he gazed at his fingertips, which the returning breech had caught with a playful smack. In his surprise he could have thought a scorpion had walked down the barrel and stung him. It says a lot for the design of the Staghounds though, and of the gun, that those two shells landed 800 yards away within 1½ inches of each other.

The rest of the month was taken up in a busy routine: early reveille, bathe for all ranks before breakfast; route march in the morning; maintenance on the vehicles in the afternoon, or leave into **Alexandria**. On 22 September everybody voted in the New Zealand General Election, but in Div Cav very little interest seemed to be taken in this, as New Zealand and its politics seemed so very far away. Indeed, there was more interest taken in an injection for all ranks against typhus that day.

The regiment did not take part in any of the brigade manoeuvres after six of the C Squadron Staghounds had gone out to sweep the area set aside for 6 Brigade's scheme, and four of them had developed the same fault in their gearboxes due to the unprecedented strain in some particularly soft sand. Instead of these manoeuvres Div Cav continued to hold battles of its own.

Those of the first three echelons who had not drawn a marble for the first furlough draft had by now been told that they, too, were to go back to New Zealand, and some of them, those that could be replaced readily, had stayed in Base when the regiment moved to **Burg el Arab**. The greater proportion had remained with the regiment, surplus to strength, for the extra few weeks until their replacements had grasped the

intricacies of their jobs. These men, with the exception of about a dozen NCOs, left for **Maadi** on 28 September. That day was marked also by an informal regimental parade at which the CO, who had returned hurriedly and unexpectedly from a course, announced that the Division was shortly to go somewhere by sea. The destination was naturally a secret. That is to say, it was an official secret, but there was really only one possible destination: **Italy**. Where else at the time could troops be going from the **Middle East**? Where else, indeed, would the new issue of winter clothing be needed? Every street-Arab in **Alexandria** had been making a point of wishing the Kiwis good shooting in **Italy**.

The move to **Italy** was quite the most complicated one in the history of the Division, and from the private soldier's point of view the movement orders had been embellished with such a mass of detail as to make them almost impossible to carry out. Primarily, they were made out in such a way as to split up every unit into four cross-sectional components, so that in the event of a ship being sunk on the voyage, no unit would be completely crippled.

The major appointments in the regiment at this time were as follows:

Commanding Officer	Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant, DSO
Second-in-Command	Maj H. A. Robinson, MC
Adjutant	Capt G. P. R. Thomas
OC A Squadron	Maj J. B. McMath
Second-in-Command	Capt C. L. Sommerville
OC B Squadron	Maj G. H. Stace
Second-in-Command	Capt F. H. Poolman, MC
OC C Squadron	Maj N. P. Wilder, DSO
Second-in-Command	Capt D. A. Cole, MC
OC HQ Squadron	Maj R. B. McQueen
Medical Officer	Capt P. F. Howden, NZMC
Padre	Rev. H. G. Taylor, DSO, CF

Well; the first three weeks of October for anybody below the rank of Brigadier—and probably above it for that matter (this historian not being

presumptuous enough, nor sufficiently informed, to express an opinion)—was the most exasperating period anyone could imagine. Units were all split up into little groups spread from **Suez** to **Ikingi Maryut**, in inhospitable staging camps or dirty dockyards, each feeling that nobody loved it and that the whole world was conspiring to make its life uncomfortable, filthy, underfed, and frustrated. The Div Cav men were no exception from the rest, and they found that the only way to work off their superfluous energy was by getting into trouble. Chiefly the theme of this was a last effort to catch up with the shrewdness of the Egyptian shopkeepers by dint of some studied shoplifting. This form of entertainment was fun without being fruitful, as witness the bag of one trooper who arrived back at the docks—and it was far more difficult to get in than out of such areas of strong security—carrying a dozen clothes-pegs, a woman's bathing cap, a cheap ashtray, a bottle of vinegar, and an article of intimate underclothing completely useless to anyone of the male persuasion. His mates had been more successful and on his arrival handed him a glass of whisky, part of a case that had found its way, under the nose of a guard, per the car's escape hatch on its off side, from a dump of **Naafi** stores that was about to be loaded on to a neighbouring ship.

The greater part of the regiment, those due to travel 'dismounted', were embarked on three different ships in **Alexandria** on 17 September. It would be wiser to say that they embarked themselves; for every man, loaded up as he was with full kit and personal arms, together with a collection of gear—heavy or bulky—which the powers-that-be had decreed should be carried by the personnel, needed only a beehive and a mousetrap to appear reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's White Knight. And as most of them staggered and lurched up the gangway, they could have fallen in the sea just as easily as that gentleman regularly fell off his horse.

By way of contrast, the voyage, though space was generally crowded, was pleasant, clean and uneventful. The announcement of **Italy** as the destination caused, of course, no surprise at all. Moreover, by the time

everyone was at sea it was quite accepted that there would have to be considerable inconvenience until such time as the various convoys arrived and units could be married up again. The main port of disembarkation was **Taranto**, but the convoys with the heavy equipment went to **Bari**. One of the ships carrying Staghoums developed a mechanical fault which entailed the convoy's stopping at **Malta**. Here the ship in question put into the Grand Harbour at **Valetta** to effect repairs. Nobody was allowed ashore, but the men were pleased to be able to gaze at close quarters with a certain amount of awe upon the habitat of a gallant people who had stood up so obstinately and so long to the pounding of enemy bombing attacks and, in its siege, had just gritted its teeth and tightened its belt another notch and waited with infinite faith for relief.

Italy was not particularly hospitable as regards its weather. The first few days produced either violently spectacular electrical storms or damp overcast skies; and there was mud everywhere. The war had passed over them too recently for people to be anything but shy, and they were not to be seen much in the streets. The shops were mainly closed and, though there was a certain amount of leave into **Taranto** for everyone while they were camped near the city, there was nothing much to do there nor, after admiring the architecture of the place, much to see. However, the month of discomfort and disorganisation was near its end, and on 30 October the first of the regiment's own trucks arrived from **Bari**. The Colonel drove straight back there to make sure his AFVs were not delayed in disembarkation. The following day he drove into the town of **Altamura**, on the outskirts of which the regiment had been allotted a pleasant area for its camp site while it reorganised itself again as a single unit. He found most of the transport already there and sent it off to **Taranto** to collect the men. The next day, 1 November, while the last of the AFVs were being unloaded, refuelled, and despatched to **Altamura**, the men were brought up from **Taranto** so that by the evening the regiment was once again complete and ready to move forward.

It was a relief to get away from **Taranto**, which had left an

impression of cold dank atmosphere, muddy streets and locked doors; and to get away into the clean countryside where the grass was green and the leaves of the olive trees sparkled, even if it was only from the raindrops on them. The village people, too, were not nearly so shy and were much readier to respond to overtures of friendship. It was lovely to lie once again beside a car or a truck—in an almond grove. They were indeed amidst ‘fresh woods and pastures new’.

¹ Cpl G. Roberts; born NZ 16 Aug 1914; bus driver.

² General Headquarters, Middle East Forces.

³ Semi-automatic, quick-firing.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 19 – OPERATIONS ON THE SANGRO FRONT

CHAPTER 19

Operations on the Sangro Front

THE DIVISION once again found itself a part of the Eighth Army and, even before it was completely assembled in **Italy**, there was a job waiting for it. It was to form the Army reserve whilst being in a position to cover the airfield at **Foggia**. The area chosen as being suitable for this task was a few miles north of the town of **Lucera**, and arrangements had already been made to send the Division's heavy equipment here, straight from the ships.

The Divisional Cavalry, one of the first units ordered forward, set off in a single convoy on 4 November to do the trip in one bound from **Altamura**. On later trips the men got quite used to travelling about in settled country, but this trip remained a particularly vivid one in most people's memories. It was fun, after so many years of the empty desert, to be bowling along through country which was actually inhabited. It was in fact completely novel to practically the whole regiment, for there remained only a mere handful of men who had actually been in **Greece**. There they had been very green troops, whereas now they were proven troops and knew it. They were proud to realise that they were as good as any fighting men in the world: so that now their mental attitude had none of that vague, subconscious apology for being there at all.

The roads, by comparison with anything the regiment had ever found, were excellent. The Italian engineers certainly know their jobs and have a happy knack of putting an almost artistic finish to their work. The very edges of the tarmac gave the impression that they had been neatly snipped off with scissors before being marked off with little rectangles of stone, painted white, inlaid, and in perfect alignment. Such little touches—and there were many of them—somehow can give a trace of asceticism to such an unpromising subject as an ordinary highway.

Though it was on a dull November day, the trip had a gayness about

it. The tang of the air on the cheeks was stimulating, as too was the tug of the scarf-end flapping behind in the wind. But from town to town the attitude of the local people varied. Here they turned out to watch with only stolid interest; there they smiled shyly; but everywhere the little boys held out their hands calling hopefully, and usually not fruitlessly, for some 'beesqueet'. Actually the trip, on the whole, was uneventful, the only incident of note being when one of the Staghounds struck something on the verge of the tarmac, broke a spring shackle, swerved off at speed and capsized.

The area set aside at **Lucera** for the regiment was a fairly flat piece of ground dotted with groves of oak trees. Though the ground was drying out after the recent rains, it was still rather sodden, but the place promised to be a very pleasant camping spot. The matter of settling in was no trouble to the New Zealanders, trained as they were by some years of desert movement. So, within an hour of its arrival, the regiment was fully organised for a stay of some time; and by midday the next day, football fields had been marked out and a series of matches between squadrons had been arranged. Now that the colder weather had set in, the anti-malarial precautions were relaxed. A lot of the training was devoted to finding out just how the new Staghounds were going to behave in this close country, and it was essential to find out the limitations of all vehicles in wet and muddy terrain. Consequently there were many trips up the various hillsides in the neighbourhood, over turf land, on boggy surfaces in the gullies, and even over wet ploughed ground. On the latter surface particularly, it was most gratifying to find that the Staghounds were capable of climbing as far and further than some Sherman tanks whose crews were carrying out the same tests. But the most pleasing performance was put up by the White scout cars which proved that they could outstrip anything.

But no sooner had the regiment settled in, anticipating quite a few weeks' stay—hot showers had even been erected—than the air became filled with strong rumours of a move forward; for **Divisional Headquarters** moved in to the adjoining area on 7 November. The very

next day the CO and his Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant **Kavanagh**,¹ left with the GOC's party to reconnoitre more forward areas.

The Division was ordered forward to increase the pressure on the enemy's **Sangro River** line, and Div Cav was again to be the first unit to move up. The enemy was showing every intention of holding this line along the **Sangro** for the whole winter, and the New Zealand Division was being sent up to the inland end of it into the country in front of **Atessa**.

The Divisional Cavalry pulled out from **Lucera** on 12 November and again travelled in one big convoy. The roads forward ran through fairly hilly country and were found to be rather winding and, in places, narrow. The wet, sticky nature of the countryside promised much trouble if the vehicles were going to be forced off the formed roads. However, the regiment was lucky to be amongst the first to go forward and the roads were not particularly busy; but nevertheless the move was a slow one since the route entailed by-passing many demolitions.

The main reason why Div Cav went forward first was so that it could get into position to cover the left flank of the Division while it was on the move, and also to establish contact with **1 Canadian Division**, already in the line.

The regiment's first destination was a position just forward of the village of **Cupello**. Here the road ran round the brow of a hill where there was a reasonably level spot. Arriving there in the middle of the afternoon of the 12th, the squadrons deployed in the fields above and below the road. Here at last the men felt that they were getting somewhere near the fighting because, through a saddle in the hills to the north-west could be seen, about 20 miles away, the valley of the **Sangro River**.

The camping area—they could hardly call them laagers now— was, like the whole countryside at the time, very muddy but fast drying out. The amount of space for dispersal of the squadrons was somewhat restricted, too, but nevertheless each troop commander, within his

limited scope, took great pains in the siting of each vehicle, visualising the possibility of being ordered off to carry out some task at short notice.

The job of posting the flank guard for the Division was to fall on B Squadron, so on the next day, the 13th, a patrol of one troop from that squadron went forward to reconnoitre the village of **Castiglione**. But the following day it was decided not to send the whole squadron forward, and the only job done by it was that allotted to the Dingo troop which went forward to try to make contact with the Canadians. This reconnaissance was also rather upset because one of the little cars managed to tip over a bank, slightly injuring the troop officer, Lieutenant **Dickie**.² Another patrol went forward, however, and got into **Atessa**, but did not penetrate right into the town as the position there seemed rather obscure.

In retirement the enemy had been, as usual, thorough with demolitions, but had failed in the destruction of one bridge; and this was a most important one for the New Zealand Division since it was on the very road which was to become the divisional axis. The bridge, as it turned out, had been saved from destruction by a sapper of 8 Indian Division, who had dashed quickly forward as his section arrived there and snatched away the burning fuse just in the nick of time. It was natural that the enemy should be very keen to rectify this upset in his plans and so the bridge in question, over the Sinello River immediately below the village of **Gissi**, had of necessity to be carefully guarded. Fighting patrols of the enemy had already tried to get back and finish off the job but had been driven off. The whole of Div Cav was therefore ordered forward to set up camp in the bed of the river all round the bridge.

There was quite a lot of trouble, despite the previous care of the troop officers, to get cars out of the sticky ground on to the road and to do this according to timetable. An added handicap was the increasing volume of traffic on the road itself, since the traffic had to be held up from time to time when it became necessary to run out a winch rope across the road. Many of the drivers of the through traffic which was

being held up showed signs of impatience, and this did not help soothe the temper of the LAD officer, Captain **Pierce**.³ There came the occasion, moreover, when he was striding back on to the road to supervise the winding of his winch once more. There he found a staff car weaving its way forward past the line of waiting Staghounds and appearing as if its driver was going to be just one more to ask to have the rope slackened so he could drive over it. Joe was working against the clock and, in justifiable annoyance, he rushed up on to the road towards the car roaring: 'Wait-a-minit-can't-er? What's the hurry? Where the Hell's the fire?' when he found himself gazing into the eyes of the passenger, General Montgomery.

Even so, Joe got the regiment mobile by the scheduled 9 a.m., regardless of delaying mud and impatient generals. But the hazards of these proved small in comparison with what was to be experienced later in the day. The weather deteriorated and a storm blew up from the west, carrying hail and sleet, into the teeth of which the column had to drive. The route ran through some really mountainous country, and here the New Zealanders, coming as they did from a mountainous country and having driven, in their time, over some steep terrain, could not but notice and be amazed by the achievements of the Italian engineers. They had built what, by New Zealand standards, would be first-class roads through, by the same standards, absolutely impossible country. There was one place in particular where the road had been carried in a zig-zag from a high ridge down a virtually perpendicular bluff of solid rock many hundreds of feet high. At one or two corners the big Staghounds had to be reversed up to negotiate the turns, and this gave the crews some breathless moments as they looked over the edge and wondered what sort of a mess they would make if a driver made one slight error and precipitated them and fifteen tons of armour-plate on to the traffic below.

Up on the ridges the sleet and rain reduced the crew commanders' voices to a mere croak, but coming down into the valleys, and particularly in one place where the enemy had demolished a really sharp

corner, the thrill—call it fear if you wish, and you would not be far wrong—of negotiating the turns had them glowing with warmth and oblivious of the wind howling round their ears.

The move from **Cupello** to **Carpineto**, in the riverbed below **Gissi**, was barely 20 miles but, mainly due to the one difficult deviation, the trip took all day and the last of the regiment was not in until after dark.

A Squadron immediately mounted guard over the bridge which the enemy had not yet given up hope of destroying. The previous night there had been an abortive attempt to get at it, and it was also under spasmodic shellfire from a mobile gun.

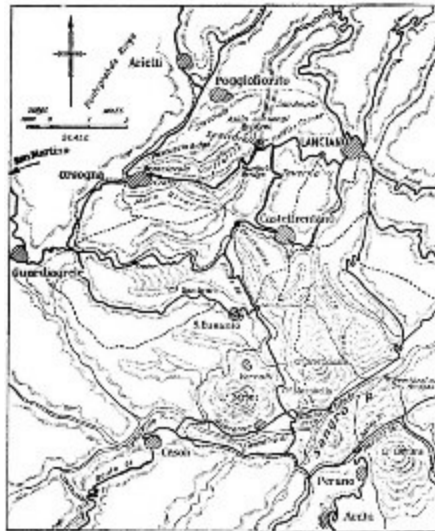
From **Carpineto** the regiment was given several tasks which kept the various squadrons apart for many weeks. On 17 November, during Colonel Bonifant's absence at an Army Commander's conference, the second-in-command took a reconnaissance party out south-west of **Atessa** to see if it was a feasible proposition to relieve the **Essex Regiment** of the job of guarding that area, the left flank of the Division. But the country proved far too mountainous to be covered properly by armoured cars. B Squadron nevertheless moved off there the next day to do this job until 22 (Motor) Battalion could get forward to take over.

Two days later, 20 November, C Squadron and RHQ pulled out to advance up into the forward line. This again was only a relatively short drive of some ten or twelve miles but it took most of the day. Once again the move in this higher country was made in miserable sleety weather, though down in the valleys there was little wind or rain.

The destination was the village of **Monte Marconi** and the squadron actually laagered on the village green, which was hidden from full view of the enemy lines across the **Sangro** by the Marconi feature itself.

The squadron was greeted by some enemy shelling, which was possibly provoked by the smoke that someone put up as soon as he started to make a brew of tea. The shelling produced one casualty, and the unfortunate victim was one of the new reinforcements for whom the

war had lasted only a few minutes.



THE SANGRO FRONT, NOVEMBER 1943 - JANUARY 1944

He was in one of the last two vehicles to arrive, and his driver had barely turned off the ignition before this man received a wound which sent him back home to New Zealand.

The attack on the **Sangro** was originally scheduled for the night of 20 November, but during that afternoon a spate in the river brought about the first of several postponements that delayed the attack for seven days.

During this period A Squadron was relieved of the job of guarding the bridge and remained with B Squadron in reserve at **Carpineto**. C Squadron was employed patrolling the right flank of the Division and told to make contact with the left of **5 Corps**. The contact was established, but only on foot as the road had been demolished in three places. During the attempt to negotiate one of the demolitions two of the three cars in the patrolling troop were stuck, and came under shell-fire which was rather too accurate for comfort. They had to be left there for two days. Patrolling also went on down a track into the riverbed and on the 22nd, in the middle of the day, one NCO decided to follow it further. He managed to get across the river on foot, and get back again to report that though the river was high at the time, there were fords

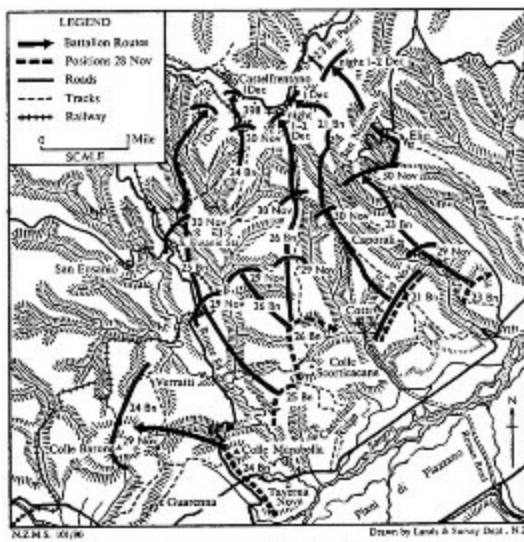
across each stream which, with the river at normal height, would be quite shallow and firm enough for armoured vehicles.

Zero hour was fixed for 2.45 a.m. on the 28th. C Squadron was scheduled to follow 19 Armoured Regiment about 3 a.m., sending the Div Cav man who had located the fords as a passenger on its leading A Squadron tank so that he could guide the way to the opposite bank. Even with the help of a bulldozer of 5 Field Park Company, the crossing proved only just possible, as the tanks, wherever they turned, cut rather heavily into the riverbed shingle. With the exception of one tank which got stuck in the first ford, and one or two others which got off the side of the track leading to the river and stuck, the 19th was successfully shepherded across the river; but to little avail, as the sticky state of the ground on the far bank was far too much for its tanks.

Lieutenant Mack's troop was detailed to follow the leading tank squadron so that it could pick up its NCO, who had been the guide, at the far bank. But only one of the cars of this troop managed to complete the crossing, the other two getting stuck in the fords where the tanks had cut up the shingle; and since word had come back that practically all the tanks were getting stuck in the boggy ground beyond the river, the balance of C Squadron was ordered to stay in the meantime on the south bank. So the general plan of getting some Divisional Cavalry across in close support of the infantry, and as cover for the right flank of the attack, had to be abandoned for a few hours at least.

During the course of the day two other troops tried to get across and up with the infantry, but they too suffered the same fate as the first one.

RHQ moved into **Monte Marconi** as C Squadron moved out and during the day the CO called B Squadron forward to join him there.



ADVANCE TO CASTELFRENTANO, 28 NOVEMBER - 2 DECEMBER 1943

ADVANCE TO CASTELFRENTANO, 28 NOVEMBER - 2 DECEMBER 1943

A bridgehead had been well established by the 29th and the whole day was devoted to building this up. C Squadron spent the whole day trying to get patrols across and up in support of 23 Battalion. In the morning one troop made the crossing with surprisingly little difficulty and by 2 p.m. the cars of the other two troops had been extricated.

The next orders were for one of these three troops to work its way forward along a track up some rising ground on the right flank. Its objective was the village of **Elici**. Another troop was directed along the base of the hills to try to make contact with the left of 8 Indian Division at La Defenza. Both troops were held up by mines which they had not managed to clear by nightfall, and since the river had risen again a little, they both went to Headquarters 23 Battalion to spend the night.

Overnight the remainder of the mines were lifted for them and on the 30th they were able to resume their probing tasks, and this time they were more successful. Before 8 a.m. the one troop had made contact with the Indian division and then it got on to a road leading up a long spur in the direction of **Lanciano**. The troop continued to feel its way along this road all day until it arrived at a point about due east of **Elici**. Another troop felt its way up the road past 23 Battalion headquarters and then on to a track straight for **Elici**; but its advance was held up by some accurate shelling from a gun position almost due

south of the village.

While this was going on there was work for the regiment right on the other flank of the Division as **Casoli** had been reported clear of the enemy. At dawn three troops of B Squadron had been sent to probe along the road in that direction to make sure. There was a bridge across the **Sangro** just west of **Perano** but it had been destroyed and the B Squadron troops had been instructed to try to ford the river. They got as far as the ruins of the bridge by 9.30 a.m., but found it neither possible to ford the river nor to negotiate the remains of the bridge with the cars, so a foot patrol was formed which continued to work along the road.

Truly Div Cav was beginning to realise its limitations in close and mountainous country during wet weather. It was becoming increasingly obvious that, as far as divisional reconnaissance was concerned, the Divisional Cavalry was not suitable to cover the whole front as it had been able to do in the wide and navigable desert, and that reconnaissance in future was going to be done by infantry. The function of a light armoured unit of exploiting after a successful attack was here proving to have severe limitations, for though the actual crossing of the **Sangro** by the Division had gone according to the book, it was not possible to get Div Cav forward to exploit the bridgehead during its build-up. This came about simply because the nature of the ground had prevented its even keeping up with the advance, let alone passing through to hold the newly gained ground. There was only one other job in close country which the regiment had ever undertaken and successfully carried out, and that was completely outmoded; a lot of the war had been won since the campaign in **Greece**. So much indeed had been won that now there was absolutely no question of Div Cav ever being called on for that work again, namely covering the retreat of the Division.

Once the bridgehead was securely established, the next general objective was to get up on the high ridge round the head of the **Moro River**, capture the town of **Castelfrentano**, and then work westwards along the road to **Guardiagrele**. The Division, once it got this far, would

be in a position, with a reasonably good supply line, to launch an attack against **Orsogna** and thus open up a route right to the Adriatic coast north-eastwards, or one north-westwards on to **Route 5** which ran right across **Italy**.

On 1 December B and C Squadrons resumed the previous day's drives. A patrol of 23 Battalion had already reported **Elici** clear and, by mid-morning, one troop of C Squadron had occupied the village and carried on past it in a north-westerly direction. Two different tracks had actually been taken up the hills from the road along the north bank of the **Sangro** and, as they climbed up these tracks, the patrols found them gradually improving until they developed into reasonably good second-class roads, which joined up about a mile east of Castelfrentano and led across a plateau to **Lanciano**.

No enemy were encountered on the extreme right, but there were all the signs of recent occupation and of hasty departure. The left-hand troop of the two worked away in advance of 23 Battalion in the direction of **Castelfrentano**, but as soon as it had reached the edge of the plateau, its road swung off towards **Lanciano** and ceased to be of use. The cross-country going slowed the cars down straight away and very soon the infantry had passed through and left them well behind.

After struggling unsuccessfully all day on the 30th to ford the river, RHQ and B Squadron had the problem eased when the New Zealand Engineers completed a Bailey bridge that afternoon. Supporting arms were now able to get across faster, although there was quite some delay from the softness of the approaches, which would take some days to dry out enough to allow the congestion of traffic near the bridge to get over and clear away.

Of these supporting arms it was more important to get tanks and field guns across urgently; and by the time these were over, Div Cav got its turn. By 8 a.m. on 1 December, B Squadron was across and off up the road towards **San Eusanio**.

Route 84, climbing from the **Sangro** to **Castelfrentano**, follows the valley of a small river which runs back into the **Sangro**. In its turn the small river is fed by two others joining it from the west. The ridge between them carries a secondary road which loops round the whole catchment to join the road from **Orsogna** to **Route 84**, and the head of this loop runs quite close to the village of **Guardiagrele**.

B Squadron was ordered, on the 2nd, to work along this road and try to break into **Guardiagrele**. One troop got well in sight of the village before it suddenly came under fire from an 88-mm. gun and lost one car which went on fire. There were no casualties but, while retiring towards Squadron Headquarters, it did suffer one when Lieutenant Ian Van **Asch**⁴ was severely wounded.

Early in the morning of the same day 24 Battalion had advanced into **Castelfrentano**. The enemy had cleared out during the night, so it was reasonable to assume that his defences all along the forward slope of the ridge between **Castelfrentano** and **Orsogna** had also been vacated. Accordingly the GOC directed the weight of the Division's advance at **Orsogna**, on his left front, with the intention of capturing that town and driving on towards **Chieti**, which lies astride **Route 5** to the north.

Orsogna, the immediate objective, was to be attacked from the south-west through **Guardiagrele**, and from the eastern side, via an old Roman road running down from **Castelfrentano**, across the **Moro River**, to join a secondary road between **Orsogna** and **Lanciano**.

C Squadron was interested in both these approaches. Three troops were forward. The first sat out on the hills north of **Elici** guarding the right flank of the Division from any threat from the direction of **Lanciano**. The other two entered **Castelfrentano** just behind 24 Battalion and were directed to join up with the tanks of 18 Armoured Regiment, which were wrapping up the last of the defences along **Route 84** towards **Guardiagrele** and **Orsogna**. As an integral part of the enemy's defences this road had been on the reverse slope and most of it was in full view of **Orsogna**. Now, of course, it was—and most uncomfortably so

—very much on our forward slope. Indeed, not many days had passed before the stretch of road running from Castelfrentano to the Brickworks had earned the nickname of the ‘Mad Mile’. As it was, one of the C Squadron troops was able this day to pinpoint gun positions in front of Orsogna, about the head of the Moro River, and later had the satisfaction of seeing these tormentors being thoroughly attended to by both gunfire and fighter-bombers.

The other troop was commandeered by Brigadier Parkinson⁵ to help with the reconnaissance of the Roman road for the ‘back-door’ approach. This troop had quite an entertaining day ferreting out enemy troops who had, so it appeared, been more or less forgotten during the retirement and were left there.

Either that or they had just been brought into the line, because they did not seem to know how to site their defences. Another point about them was that some of their camouflage efforts betrayed their lack of elementary farming knowledge: an absolute give-away to the farmer/soldiers whom they were now opposing. At various places round the hillsides there were haystacks which, for no particular reason, were unnecessarily small. Having thus caught the eye, other points about them created suspicion. They were built without sufficient pitch to turn a heavy rain, let alone melting snow: the hay in the walls did not lie so as to turn the weather downwards but so as to soak it inwards: nor were they built in places convenient for carting out in the wet winter. Without more ado, each of them was given a ‘serenading’—a burst of machine-gun fire—to set it alight. And the American .30 ammunition on issue at the time was ideal for this, with its liberal proportion of tracer, incendiary and explosive rounds. With each stack an anti-tank gun inside it was destroyed.

The enemy troops about the place were quite an embarrassment as the reconnaissance was well ahead of the infantry to begin with and the prisoners could not be collected. One group of them was given a particularly harrowing time. These men were originally flushed by a burst of machine-gun fire into a small vineyard and they ducked into a

patch of cabbages. Another burst sent them helter-skelter into a small house. A 37-mm. explosive shell on the latch blew the door in, and a canister of shot was fired into the fireplace beyond. It killed nobody for they all came outside again at high speed, and were last seen scuttling off rapidly downhill through an olive grove in the general direction of the Adriatic Sea, looking, in their urgency, as if they could have easily crossed to the Dalmatian coast without taking a breath or getting their feet wet.

This reconnaissance was primarily the responsibility of C Squadron, 19 Armoured Regiment, whose gunners seemed to be having as much fun as the Div Cav men. Indeed they, not being in wireless communication with the tanks, waited for them after they had been halted at the **Moro River**, with some qualms lest they, too, should suffer a brief 'serenading' of 75-mm. shellfire. However, nothing so uncomfortable happened.

The patrol ended at the river itself in the early afternoon. The bridge had been blown, leaving a gap of at least 30 feet across a very steep gully.

But the day's work had altogether borne quite a lot of fruit. Reconnaissance had been made for 6 Brigade's advance into **Orsogna** from the east and plans for this looked promising though, at this juncture, **Orsogna** was not the main objective, but **San Martino** which lay on the road to **Chieti**. Progress had been made along the road from **San Eusanio** almost to **Guardiagrele** as well as along **Route 84** from **Castelfrentano** to where it meets this other road. About here the enemy was promising vigorous defence, but nevertheless, once this was overcome, the way would lie open for a meeting of 6 Brigade heading westwards through **Orsogna** and 4 Armoured Brigade advancing northwards from **Guardiagrele**. Each prong of this advance was dependent on the success of the other, as 4 Brigade could not get past **Orsogna** while the enemy occupied it, and 6 Brigade could not take and hold **Orsogna** while **Guardiagrele** was held by the enemy.

The 6th Brigade's attack on **Orsogna** went in on 3 December and was very nearly successful, part of 25 Battalion penetrating right into the middle of the town, but the counter-attack could not be contained; nor could 4 Brigade penetrate past the road junction between **Orsogna** and **Guardiagrele**. B Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry had patrols up to this point but the enemy defence was far too vigorous to allow for any further advance.

To the right of the Division, in the meantime, 8 Indian Division had been making steady progress and had captured **Lanciano**. Since it appeared that the New Zealanders had found a fairly hard nut to crack in and around **Orsogna**, it was decided to try to exploit the new weakness on its right and launch the main weight of the attack meanwhile towards **Arielli**. Permission was asked and given for Div Cav to pass through the Indian division's area in this direction.

B Squadron, which had been under command of 4 Armoured Brigade for the **Orsogna** attack, was withdrawn on 4 December and, together with A Squadron, which had now been called forward across the **Sangro**, was placed under command of 5 Brigade and set off to find a way through the village of **Frisa** by a secondary road running due north from **Lanciano**. A patrol was carried out quite successfully until one of the A Squadron cars struck what was presumably a box mine just short of the bridge over the Foldrino River. A wheel was taken cleanly off by the blast, but nobody was hurt. This came as a great boost to morale within the regiment, the majority of which had travelled so long in Bren carriers and to whom a mine meant certain death to at least one of the crew.

The patrol was held up only a few hundred yards farther on by a demolished bridge. This delayed it until the early afternoon, when engineers from the Indian division effected repairs. Once over the bridge, a B Squadron troop continued on up the road until it met a troop of **6 Lancers** and some tanks of 1 Canadian Regiment.

Just short of the bridge, about where the car was blown up, an old

Roman road cut off to the left. It ran down over the **Moro River** and up across the **Orsogna- Ortona** road three or four miles north-east of **Orsogna**. It passed through **Arielli** to the north-west and, on the map, met the Foro River about ten miles north of **Orsogna**. As a new axis of attack this looked most promising since it completely by-passed **Orsogna** and could completely cut it off. So a patrol from A Squadron did an initial foot reconnaissance along this road, getting within half a mile of the **Moro** where it passes round the eastern end of Sfasciata Ridge.

There was a certain amount of alarm, about this time, on the rear left flank of the Division. For two or three days, little villages up on **Monte Majella** had been suffering at the hands of the German 5 *Mountain Division*, which had been carrying on what appeared to be quite aimless destruction. From time to time, high up on the slopes, there could be seen columns of smoke from these villages, indicating that whoever was there was ruthlessly destroying them. This gave no particular cause for alarm in the New Zealand Division but it did serve to worry the civilians in **Casoli**, who were sending in reports that German patrols were visiting the town. Accordingly a strong patrol from the Divisional Defence Platoon and a troop of B Squadron's Staghounds were sent back to the town. They arrived there in the early evening and took up a position in the town itself, prepared to come to blows with an enemy force said to be about a mile away. If they could not produce any fighting for them, the excitable and imaginative Latins did at least manage to produce a most delightful false alarm during the night. On the morning of the 5th the patrol reconnoitred back further towards the south-west until held up by demolitions. Reports still had it that some two hundred Germans on horseback were advancing to do bloody battle, and these eventually did turn up near **Archi**, though they were a somewhat smaller force. They consisted of two wretched deserters who had been making for our lines.

The Roman road leading towards **Arielli** was still the subject of A Squadron's interest but the going was very poor. On 5 December a troop made another attempt to get across the **Moro**. Getting down the hill, and

still short of the river, it came to blows with and routed a machine-gun post, taking three prisoners of *200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*. But as soon as it had forded the river the troop was held up by the muddy going and got no further.

The obvious thing to do now was to try to work still further to the right; and another patrol linked up with some Canadian tanks in a thrust up the road through **Frisa**. This little force also got to the **Moro** but found the bridge destroyed and the river unfordable. Enemy troops could be seen upstream of them. They managed to get to grips with some of these, back along the road a little, and collected another three prisoners from the same panzer regiment. This brush later caused interest from enemy guns whose shellfire forced the patrol to retire.

On the 6th B Squadron tried to get to **Guardiagrele** up the rising ground from **Casoli**, but this proved out of the question owing to the impossible terrain.

It was very frustrating having to compete with all these physical difficulties. Defence was so much easier in close and hilly country. The Divisional Cavalry alone, probing and poking at the enemy defences, had tried every possible route forward over a frontage of some 12 miles, and everywhere had been held up initially by the nature of the ground, and then warned off by shellfire. In the desert such a frontage would have supplied perhaps dozens of little weak spots to exploit and, having been exploited, they could have been expanded. But here the nature of the country not only limited the possible approaches but also precluded every chance of the necessary support when boldness was used to get a wedge into the enemy defences. All the Div Cav could do now was to wait until a break-through was made and then try to exploit that.

And all the time the enemy was strengthening his defence of the line which the Division faced, while the weather became steadily more and more wintry. The days were damp and the sky watery; visibility was often poor, and often there were light and misty rains.

The Germans seemed determined to hold the area round **Orsogna** and **Guardiagrele**, and they vigorously resented any movement in this direction. So, in the drive towards **Chieti**, the New Zealand Division had to accept a stalemate while the main thrust went in nearer the coast. In order to contain as much as possible of the enemy's strength, an attack was planned to get firmly astride the **Orsogna– Ortona** road, thereby containing *26 Panzer Division* now in **Orsogna**.

For the next few weeks, therefore, the Divisional Cavalry had only small jobs to do, these requiring only one, perhaps two, troops at a time. As a unit nevertheless, it had to be prepared to exploit any successes should the Division break substantially into the enemy defences. B and C Squadron headquarters were brought back a mile or so behind the line into positions that would allow patrols to get forward quickly if they were needed. A Squadron stayed forward under command of 5 Brigade up on the **Sfasciata Ridge**.

On two further occasions there was restlessness over the safety of the bridge at **Carpineto** so vital to the Division's supply lines, and each time a troop and some dismounted personnel were sent back there on guard for a few days.

The squadrons remained in their reserve positions until the end of the month, and on some four occasions during this period, patrols from B and C Squadrons were sent forward to try the **Guardiagrele** defences. Intrusion there was very promptly attended to, the patrols being held off each time by the inevitable shellfire. B Squadron suffered two men wounded in one such sortie on the 16th, and then on the 20th had a car destroyed. This time, too, the crew commander, Sergeant W. R. Brown, MM, received severe wounds from which he died the next day. A Squadron, during this period, was doing similar work in probing towards **Arielli**. Two troops, in fact, went forward in high hopes on the 22nd because the village had been reported clear of enemy; but the report proved false.

A Squadron remained with 5 Brigade until 31 December, when it was

pulled back to **Castelfrentano**; but not before it also had suffered casualties. On the night of the 29th it had come in for some shelling which cost it one wounded and two others killed—Corporal **Anderson** ⁶ and Trooper **Thorn**. ⁷

While the squadrons were in reserve positions they took the chance to have their anti-aircraft mountings fitted on the Staghounds. One or two at a time, troops were sent back to Divisional Workshops to have the welding done.

Some of the crews took advantage of this trip to fit up heaters for drinking water on their cars. In most cases these consisted of two shell-cases brazed together, end to end, to make a cistern. This, with the uppermost percussion cap loosened so as to unscrew for filling, was mounted beside one of the silencers at the back of the engine compartment. A coil of copper tubing, usually salvaged from a hydraulic brake system, ran from top to bottom of the cistern round the muffler. A drain-cock salvaged from a radiator and a strip of tin round the whole assembly completed the job.

These little thermo-siphons were surprisingly effective—if the engines were working hard they could actually boil the water— and allowed for a round of hot cocoa for the crews when boiling the billy was quite out of the question. He has probably forgotten the incident, but the mystified look on Brigadier Parkinsons face was a joy to behold in the cold afternoon when a C Squadron car stopped to report after that first reconnaissance to the **Moro River**. The crew commander suggested to him that a cup of cocoa would go well, and he politely but somewhat abstractedly replied: ‘Yes, wouldn't it be nice’, before turning back to his wireless operator. Ten seconds later a steaming cup was thrust into his hand.

Christmas Day came and went. The CO and 2 i/c visited every squadron; there were special church parades; a party of officers was entertained lavishly to dinner by a baron in **Casoli**. But to the greater part of the regiment, it was much the same as any other day in the year.

New Year's Day, on the other hand, will take a lot of forgetting. It was ushered in by a heavy fall of snow and a high wind in the middle of the night. Tents had been issued, about one to every troop, and nearly all of these collapsed at the height of the blizzard. The storm came up with dramatic suddenness, and when the heavens dropped their great blanket of snow to crush the flimsy tents, there was not much anybody could do but try to sleep in the misery until daylight came. After all, it made little difference for the meantime as nobody had been really dry for weeks.

New Year's Day was certainly a happy one for nobody; nor, for B Squadron, was the following day. With Nos. 7 and 9 Platoons of **27 MG Battalion under command, it was sent forward as infantry to take over the sector between **San Eusanio** and **Guardiagrele**.**

This was part of the rearrangement of the whole front on a more static basis. Reserve troops were now being brought forward on the extreme left flank to replace 2 Parachute Brigade (at the time under command of the Division), which was being moved right over on to the right flank.

Taking over the sites was a long and tiring job for everybody, struggling as they had to through the snow, waist deep in places. The Staghounds were left at Squadron Headquarters near the main road and all supplies had to be manhandled forward. It was not until late in the afternoon, two days later, that the last of the machine-gunners' equipment and supplies had been carried up into the forward positions. During 3 and 4 January the squadron was joined by 34 Anti-Tank Battery and two troops of the 33rd which came under command; and the supply situation was relieved on the next day when an Italian mule detachment also came under command.

The frosts which might have been expected after the snowfall were never heavy enough to freeze the snow hard, so that the partial daytime thaws caused it to form a thin, breakable crust, with underneath, the same six inches of slushy mud that had been there for weeks. Walking anywhere with a load was therefore a trial, as often as not, beyond the

limits of both temper and physical powers. But necessity forced the issue, and by 10 January alternative tracks had been dug back to Squadron HQ.

As the object of this move was to get into positions of static offence, a regular system of foot patrols was put into operation. This was somewhat novel to troopers and gunners alike and, under guidance, they all became thoroughly enthusiastic about these new infantry tasks, particularly when white clothing was issued for patrolling.

If the snow made for miserable conditions when it came, it certainly broke the December spell of cold raw weather and, with little exception, the pattern of the weather changed. When the sun did come out it was warm and the air was clean and crisp.

A Squadron, still under command of 5 Brigade, was due to take part in further plans, and on 7 January it moved back from [Castelfrentano](#), prepared to come under command of 4 Armoured Brigade. However, nothing came of this during the following week.

By 13 January the usual crop of rumours which inevitably foretold a major move was given some support by the hurried departure of the regiment's 2 i/c for some undisclosed destination. Further evidence came two days later when officers from 4 Indian Division, which was to take over the New Zealanders' sector of the line, went out on a reconnaissance with the CO.

B Squadron finished handing over to its relief by 19 January and final preparations for the whole of the regiment to move completely out of the forward area were made the same day. That night, still with the attached machine-gunners and anti-tank batteries under command, they moved back across the [Sangro](#).

Next day, the 20th, the regiment set off back along the same coastal route by which it had arrived in the line, for [Lucera](#), and arrived there late in the afternoon. It was by now quite obvious that the Division was to travel over to the Fifth Army's front. And Div Cav was to be ready to

move off the very next day.

¹ **Capt G. S. Kavanagh; Dunedin; born NZ 3 Oct 1915; clerk.**

² **Lt M. H. Dickie; Waverley; born Waverley, 24 Feb 1916; farmer.**

³ **Maj J. H. H. Pierce, MBE, ED; Mount Maunganui; born Waikino, 4 Dec 1909; garage proprietor.**

⁴ **Lt I. T. Van Asch; Blenheim; born NZ 9 Oct 1911; labourer; wounded 2 Dec 1943.**

⁵ **Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Christchurch; born Wellington, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO 4 Fd Regt 1940–41; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; 6 Bde Apr 1943-Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div (Cassino) 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun-Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1945; Commander, Southern Military District, 1949–51.**

⁶ **Cpl E. A. Anderson; born Frankton, 20 Mar 1909; farmhand; killed in action 29 Dec 1943.**

⁷ **Tpr S. G. Thorn; born NZ 8 Aug 1912; brickworker and baker; died of wounds 31 Dec 1943.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 20 – CASSINO

CHAPTER 20

Cassino

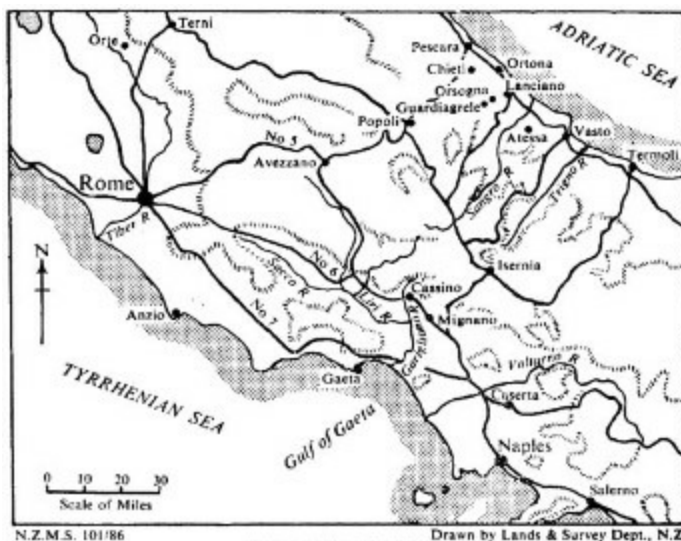
ROME was the immediate target. The intention was that the city should fall to a triple thrust by the Fifteenth Army Group: from a drive through **Route 5**, across the narrow waist of **Italy**, made by the Eighth Army after it had gained **Chieti** and **Pescara**; from another by the Fifth Army, along **Route 6** through the **Liri** valley; and from a third coming along **Route 7** from a seaborne landing in the south-east. So far the German **Winter Line**, though breached by the **Sangro** river crossings, had not been penetrated, and stalemate arose with **Chieti** untaken. The landing at **Anzio** beach south of **Rome** was being prepared. Now the main weight of the attack had to come from the Fifth Army, already breasted up to the **Gustav Line**, along the Rapido River and at **Cassino**, a defensive position which had proved of classic strength as long ago as the 4th century.

Since there was no immediate chance of the mobile New Zealand Division exploiting a break-through along the Eighth Army's front on the Adriatic, it was sent, augmented for the occasion into a corps by the addition of 4 Indian Division, round to General Clark's command, where it would be ready to burst forward once a break was made in this **Gustav Line**.

The area chosen for the Division was on the pleasant wooded slopes above the **Volturno River**, the Divisional Cavalry being allotted a position round the village of **Raviscanina**.

Arrived there on 22 January, the regiment was settled in within an hour or two and all arrangements were made for freshening up in preparation for the work to come. A training syllabus was drawn up: route-marching, maintenance of vehicles and weapons; showers were erected; there were lectures—mainly on enemy weapons—periods for football, leave parties to Pompeii. **Naples**, being thoroughly disorganised, was not in bounds. There were night driving practices in preparation for the expected mobile work, and experiments in exploding mines with

instantaneous HE from the 37-mm. guns. The ground, being well drained, was reasonably free of mud, and though hard frosts at nights made the issue of leather jerkins and charcoal braziers very popular, the air was clean and the sunlight warm. Nevertheless mud tyres were fitted to all vehicles.



THE ROADS TO ROME
THE ROADS TO ROME

There were parades to smarten up the squadrons, and on 1 February a visit was received from **Prince Peter of Greece**, who was an interested spectator at a practice shoot organised for the Staghound crews.

When Major Robinson was transferred to 18 Armoured Regiment there was quite a change-round in the various commands within the regiment, in which the major appointments were as follows:

Commanding Officer Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant, DSO

Second-in-Command **Maj G. H. Stace**

Adjutant **Capt G. S. Kavanagh**

OC A Squadron **Maj J. B. McMath**

Second-in-Command **Capt C. L. Sommerville**

OC B Squadron **Capt G. P. R. Thomas**

Second-in-Command **Lt P. M. Keith**

OC C Squadron **Maj N. P. Wilder, DSO**

Second-in-Command **Capt D. A. Cole, MC**

OC HQ Squadron **Maj R. B. McQueen**

Medical Officer
Padre

Capt P. F. Howden, **NZMC**
Rev. H. G. Taylor, DSO, CF

During this period the Fifth Army was steadily hammering at the door of the **Liri** valley. Both the assaults it had made had been contained and it became steadily more obvious that the **New Zealand Corps** would have to be used during the making of the breach as well as in exploiting it. Accordingly, on 6 February the regiment found itself moving to an assembly area further forward, at Stazione di Toro, on **Route 6**, and within the next day or so all the officers had been taken forward to **Monte Trocchio** to view what was to be the battlefield. And by the 9th the Divisional Cavalry had been allotted in the forward line a sector which it was to take over from 21 Battalion. This sector was on the near bank of the Rapido opposite the village of Sant' Angelo.

The next night, the 10th, in miserable cold, wet weather, the Divisional Cavalry became genuine infantry for the first time. The real and permanent change was not to come for many months yet; but this was the first taste. Amongst a division of such experienced infantry as their own New Zealanders, Div Cav, in lightly describing themselves as 'Infantcavalry', grimly and with rather rueful modesty laid emphasis on the first half of the word. They certainly felt themselves back at the recruit stage though they were very much at the uncomfortably 'sharp end' of the war. They had their Signals sergeant, Sergeant Lovegrove, shot up by some of their own infantry whilst trying to organise parties to repair telephone wires broken during the day. They had all the misery of mud and rain and the strain of listening and watching for enemy patrols more experienced than themselves. They had a hard initiation. By day the whole battlefield was completely under the observation of the monastery of **Montecassino**, and though they tried to reassure themselves, as did many thousands of others, that it was not occupied by the enemy, its great mass frowned and its windows looked coldly down upon them from the other side of the valley.

When the rain lifted, it left the area a sea of glutinous mud which

not even the jeeps could get through. With both sides glaring at each other across the river, the days were fairly quiet, but for Div Cav in particular, green as it was to this work, the nights were unnerving. Enemy patrols came into the area and often could not be located in the blackness. When they could, they were driven off, or 'stonks' were called for from the supporting artillery. Even these were frightening. Pat **Smith**, ¹ the Intelligence Corporal in A Squadron, writes:

'... the Artillery had box barrages arranged to bring down fire on the river banks. I recall the codename "Minnesota" covered our front, and you just had to breathe it in the telephone to have all hell let loose about 50 yards in front.'

The destruction of the Monastery has no real part in this story; the rights and wrongs of it will be argued for many years yet. To Div Cav—well: it had glared at them: when it went up it was spectacular. The regiment was quite phlegmatic. Bob **Pinney**, ² for ever the farmer at heart, said:

'... on the morning of the 15th the Flying Fortresses came over in hundreds it seemed. They dropped 1400 tons of high explosive on it. I wish they'd dropped that much lime on Glen Ngaio. That would've brought the clover on.'

Two days later the **Maori Battalion** put in its attack along the railway line into **Cassino**. Essentially this attack was designed to gain an entry into the town from its southern flank, or at least to seal it off from that direction while the defenders were occupied with the Indian Division's vigorous attempts to take the **Monastery Hill** from the hills on the other side. The Maori attack was also intended to gain a foothold across the Rapido, and its tributary the Gari, so as to get a point of emergence into the **Liri** valley for the whole Division.

The major difficulty in launching this attack was the narrowness of its front, for there was sufficient space to give room for only two companies. **General Kippenberger** needed therefore to give the enemy the

impression that the whole attack was on a much broader front. Accordingly the Divisional Cavalry and 24 Battalion, on its right, were given a heavy machine-gunning and mortar programme to put down on their fronts. Then, during the daylight hours of the 18th, they were to help the Maoris by keeping a screen of smoke across their front.

Naturally, during the night of the 17th, the enemy accepted the bluff that an attack was pending towards Sant' Angelo and reacted vigorously by sending back a lot of small-arms and mortar fire on what he imagined would be the start line, namely Div Cav's front. However, this caused little damage, there being only one casualty when Second-Lieutenant Little was wounded.

It is not surprising that the enemy reacted so vigorously opposite Sant' Angelo, for it was about here that a previous attack by **2 US Corps had been thrown back across the Rapido with bloody loss, and the regiment was still discovering, and reporting to the American Graves Department, one or two very dead GIs; B Squadron, too, found a grim relic of the attack, in the form of an amputated leg in a boot and, scattered about, some surgical instruments, indicating that this rude operation had been completed under difficult circumstances. Even some time later than this, in April, when Div Cav was back in the same area, one unfortunate man on a standing patrol near the river spent some time in a slit trench in company with an American soldier then dead some three months.**

The Maoris' attack got as far as the railway station: but only just, and no support weapons got across the river. So the two companies looked forward to a grim day of holding on desperately against the German counter-attacks. The only protection that could be given them in the meantime was gun-fire against the forming-up places for these attacks, and smoke which was laid on the new front to hide them from observation from directly above, on **Montecassino. Further down the Rapido the scheduled plans were able to help to a certain extent as the smoke drifted across on the sea breeze from the Gulf of Gaeta. The task of laying the smoke screen fell to 24 Battalion, to Div Cav, and to the**

defence platoon of 5 Brigade Headquarters. It was very heavy work as the viscid, mucid mud was impossible even to jeeps, and the smoke canisters had to be carried forward on men's backs.

Whatever help those on the flank could be, and what greater help the guns in the rear could give the intrepid Maoris, was not enough. By late afternoon they were forced back over the river—what was left of them. We had opened the door into the **Liri** valley, but just a chink, and had slipped our toe in it too. But it had been firmly closed again, badly bruising the toe.

The Divisional Cavalry had been looking forward to getting back on its wheels once the breach had been made, and to leading off towards **Rome**. But it had to accept the disappointment of the further prospect of infantry work in the mud of the Rapido against this more experienced—indeed particularly cunning—enemy infantry.

On the night of the 20th, two enemy self-propelled guns, protected by mortars and at least one *nebelwerfer*, sneaked up close to the river. Between them they brought about a lot of excitement and confusion in Div Cav.

To begin with, one troop which was sheltering in a house, suddenly found this rattling round their ears and had to get out. In the confusion someone tripped over a flare wire that



had been set, and the resultant pyrotechnic parabola of the flare itself found its terminal point in a haystack. This would have been a very happy accident had it been triggered off by a prowling enemy patrol, as was intended, for the stack was alight in no time and the whole place silhouetted in a lurid glow. Naturally the enemy took full advantage of all this and began dropping mortar bombs about with great enthusiasm. Presently the gun started a game of hide-and-seek and moved about popping shells in from one place after another. The

Divisional Cavalry brought into play its own usual but unconventional system of flash-spotting and sound-detecting and passed the results back verbatim to 46 Battery, 4 Field Regiment. This battery's 'stonks', after the reports had been translated into the gunners' own unintelligible but efficient jargon, added speed to the game. This went on until well towards midnight, and with such variations that Div Cav was soon quite unable to follow the changes and wisely desisted from adding more confusion with incorrect information.

The battery, however, eventually rang up for more news since, in the words of the Gunner Adjutant, the enemy gun had 'taken a personal dislike to my house and is trying to remove its foundations.' The regiment did its best to help but by now it was really reaping the whirlwind, and this almost literally, for the shells of both sides seemed to be clearing RHQ'S roof by mere inches. The Divisional Cavalry lost

interest lest somebody, friend or enemy, had trouble with his arithmetic.

Whether or not the beginning of this episode gave birth to the idea is not known, but on the night of the 21st, A Squadron set fire to three more haystacks which were blocking its view of the river. They were well clear of the squadron's positions, but nevertheless the job entailed some fairly cunning patrol work as the stacks were right under the enemy's nose.

Though it had not rained for several days the heavens opened again on the 23rd, the day that had been chosen for Div Cav to move out of the line. The regiment was relieved by **1 Surreys** of 78 British Division. It moved back a mile or so to positions round the base of **Monte Trocchio**.

Though in this area the regiment was relieved of some of the strain of the forward line, it was far from free from shell- fire of heavy calibre guns. On the 25th, A Squadron had one man killed, Lance-Corporal **Dunn**,³ and on the 28th C Squadron suffered six more casualties, of whom Second-Lieutenant **Batchelor**⁴ died later that night.

That night, too, a stormy one with heavy rain, A and C Squadrons carried out the relief of 23 Battalion in positions round the base of **Monte Trocchio**.

Above **Cassino** the defiant hills, crowned with ruins, stared coldly and hatefully down upon the plains below and the soldiers reeling in the mud.

The Divisional Cavalry was now feeling the steady whittling losses that cut without remorse into infantry battalions: a man killed here; three wounded there; a couple evacuated sick. Day by day it learned that its respect for the infantry battalions had never been misplaced. On 2 March at a moment's notice it lost its CO, Ian Bonifant. But he was not whittled away. He was taken away. The whittling was more serious—for the whole Division—for he took over temporary command of 6 Brigade from Brigadier Parkinson when **General Kippenberger** was seriously

wounded. Major Stace took command of Div Cav.

The fight went on. The restless days, cold and grey; the drizzling rain, or the cruel, sleety, driving rain; the nights of biting cold, of suspicion and fright: nights that made men pray for the comfort of daylight whether it brought grey cloud or watery sun: all these made men feel prematurely old.

The regiment held the sector on its own until 5 March, when two companies of 23 Battalion came back into the line alongside them. Two nights previously Second-Lieutenant **Kingscote**⁵ led a patrol down to the Bailey bridge which had been erected where the railway line used to cross the Rapido. From the time the Maoris had retired back from their attack, this bridge had come in for considerable enemy attention. It had been a target for much fire from heavy guns and at least one demolition party, and was somewhat knocked about. There was a suspicion that the enemy was placing a standing patrol at the western end each night. But even before Kingscote's patrol reached the bridge it had met an enemy patrol. This was allowed to go on its way whilst Kingscote's continued on to the bridge. Sure enough, there they found a man on guard. He was summarily disposed of and they lay in ambush for two hours for the return of the enemy patrol. On its return they managed to shoot one man without suffering any casualties themselves.

From then on a listening post was set up by night regularly at the near end of the bridge.

Once the 23 Battalion companies had come back into the line, C Squadron and part of B Squadron were able to take a spell from patrolling for a day or so. Nevertheless it was not possible really to relax by day, for once back with the Staghounds, the tension was not relieved very much. The whole countryside was dominated by **Monastery Hill**, and the big cars were difficult to hide behind buildings.

Exactly the same misfortune that robbed the whole Division when **General Kippenberger** stepped on a Schu mine, struck again within Div

Cav on the night of the 6th. Lieutenant David [Tripp](#)⁶ was leading a patrol through a minefield marked with the usual white tapes. Using one of these for a guide, he followed it faithfully to where something, mortar bomb may be, or shell, had blown it off the line, and he too stepped on a mine, suffering injuries from which he died an hour or two later.

The patrolling went on night after restless night, both sides quick on the trigger; both sides determined to show aggression. Regimental Headquarters, a little further back than the squadrons, suffered its share. One night it received the most unwelcome attentions of a big 170-mm. gun. The shells—well-borers they were soon termed—could drill as far as twelve feet into the ground before they exploded. Fortunately thus they did little damage; but they were shocking on the nerves!

For over a fortnight now the [New Zealand Corps](#) had been waiting day by day for the next assault on the town itself; waiting for a morning, just one morning, of fine weather for the preliminary bombing, and with it the prospect of two days of fair weather for the operation. This state of high tension continued until 15 March. The Divisional Cavalry was scheduled for no part in the attack other than to be prepared to assist with machine-gun fire if called upon, and to lay smoke across the bridges to cover the advance of the assaulting companies when the bombing programme finished.

Warfare had certainly hardened these young men's hearts. They had dispassionately watched the destruction of an historic and peaceful building. And that destruction had been to no avail. Now they were to witness the destruction of a peaceful town which for many centuries had lain nestled in the valley under the benign and kindly surveillance of that quiet monastery. Just as warfare had made them fateful of their own possible extinction at any moment, so were their thoughts for [Cassino](#): they simply dismissed it as being an unlucky town for happening to be there.

The New Zealand infantry in the town had been quietly withdrawn before dawn, and punctually at 8.30 the first squadrons of aircraft

arrived. They came in superb tight formations, the mediums obviously more practised than the heavies. The first squadron had scarcely unloaded and wheeled before their bombs struck the very centre of the town. There were vicious stabs of yellow light which were soon shrouded by their own ugly grey smoke and by white clouds from masonry now pounded into dust. From then until midday, under this writhing cloud which climbed towards the calmness of the heavens, the town quaked and tumbled and disintegrated into a heap of rubble, whilst the air round it shuddered and rumbled, and the air above it drummed and droned from the motors of the relentless aircraft.

The very moment the last squadron turned for home the massed guns of the Corps opened up on every known occupied enemy position: in the town, behind the town, and on the hills above it. The attack was on.

The Divisional Cavalry had nothing to do that day. Nor did it know much of the progress of the attack.

By nightfall it was known that this had been anything but a walk-over and that there were great difficulties in getting tanks forward or sappers up to clear the way for them. As well as this the enemy troops in the town itself had not been completely obliterated, as was expected, but had come up out of the cellars below the ruins, stunned and shocked but still with fight in them. By daybreak on the 16th other protection was required for the attackers. Smoke was needed, and lots of it.

The regiment was assigned the task of keeping the **Route 6** bridge over the Rapido constantly hidden by smoke. This job fell the lot of C Squadron and kept more or less the whole of it busy carrying the smoke canisters forward to the point of emission. In the late afternoon the *Luftwaffe* made a determined attempt to destroy this bridge when some eighteen Focke-Wulf 190s came in suddenly, but their bombs fell wide of the mark. This gave the smoke party, even though they suffered a casualty, some satisfaction over the effectiveness of their work.

This continued right through the next day and constantly until the 20th. By then C Squadron had really begun to feel the strain. Some 400 canisters weighing 20 lb. each had to be carried forward on foot through about sixteen hours each day, over country which was under enemy observation and attended by sniping, mortaring and shellfire. As a result there was a steady stream of casualties, eight men being cut down on the 18th, Sergeant **South ⁷ dying of his wounds. Trooper **Ramsay** ⁸ died of wounds on 17 March and Trooper **Johnson** ⁹ was killed on the 20th.**

A particularly vivid account of this smoke-laying, written by Trooper **Buchanan, ¹⁰ won a competition organised by the 2 NZEF Times. It describes the mortaring:**

‘... there was a crushing explosion in the field about 20 yards to the left ... and we dived for cover in the water channel on the right hand side of the road. We huddled down knee-deep in mud and water.... One fell on the road itself and the rubble spurted up about 18 inches from my head. I was swearing at each crash and flinching...’

At one time, shelling and machine-gun fire was so intense and accurate that the smoke party was pinned for a considerable time and there was a grave danger that the bridge would become exposed to enemy observation. Trooper **Jim Barnard ¹¹ earned an immediate award of the MM by coolly going forward under direct observation and setting more canisters alight. This eased the pressure from, at least, observed fire and allowed the work to go on. Buchanan continues:**

‘I grabbed a couple of canisters ... and placed them out in the open at an angle favourable to the breeze, tore open the fuse, exposing the grey-black powder, and dropped in a fusee. The stuff burned readily, with a hissing sound, the small flame glowing green and yellow and giving off a dense column of grey smoke that spread quickly. In a few moments the structure was obscured from me, and from the observers on the hill.’

Enemy shellfire cost B Squadron one Staghound destroyed, and a bombing attack accounted for three of C Squadron's Staghounds as well

as a White scout car. By now the men were well used to being away from their cars. They were resigned to the fact that what use they could be in this type of battle would not entail any thrusting movement forward or reconnaissance, but they realised that once a break-through had been achieved at **Cassino** they would be hurried forward along the **Liri** valley at the head of 5 Brigade, which was being held in reserve to exploit the breaking of the line.

But the battle had not yet got past the stage of the break-in which had been planned to be completed in the first night. As 5 Brigade gradually became reconciled to the fact that it was not going to be used in following up a routed and defeated enemy, so too did Div Cav realise that its contribution to the battle was going to be just unspectacular drudgery helping to maintain what slender hold had been made in the town itself. The New Zealand Corps was going to be too exhausted to do any following up, even if it did manage to gain complete possession of the town.

A rest from the steady grind of laying smoke came on the 20th when the regiment was relieved by 56 Reconnaissance Unit of 78 Division. The men were not reluctant to pull back for a rest, even though they had not taken any particularly dramatic part in the actual fighting. The regiment had not taken such punishment as the infantry of 6 Brigade, nor the armour of 4 Brigade, nor the New Zealand Engineers. It had not toiled day and night like the gunners, or the ASC who kept them supplied. It had been forced to stay behind the start line waiting to be thrown in for the break-out which never came, whilst slogging away to keep a vital forward link hidden by smoke. The men had been fed more or less regularly. They had taken some punishment but had been unable to hand any back, and at least one squadron had been kept slogging away at an unobtrusive job; so when relief came the regiment was not loath to accept it. Even then, when it had moved back to an area some miles behind the line and it was found that the relieving regiment could not manage to take over the job of laying smoke until the 23rd, A Squadron was sent forward to carry on with the job yet another day.

After over a week of fighting to make the first night's intended gains, the **New Zealand Corps**, whilst reluctant to admit that it had not won the battle, was certainly not going to admit that it had lost it. What gains it had made were to be consolidated and handed over to the next formation to be sent forward, whilst the line down the Rapido River was taken up once again. To Div Cav was assigned the left flank of the divisional line, the same area that it had occupied over a month before, along the Gari River, north of its confluence with the Liri. Two days had been taken in tidying up and reorganising. The 25th



NEW ZEALAND POSITIONS, 28 MARCH 1944

March had been used in reconnoitring the old area, and that night, now under command of 38 Brigade, 78 Division, it went back into the line. To its right was 21 Battalion and to its left, 44 British Reconnaissance Unit. In support was No. 3 Company, **27 MG Battalion**, and the 3-inch mortar platoon of the Maori Battalion, under command. Two days later the unit on the left was replaced by **3 Moroccan Spahis**, and the Maori mortar platoon was replaced by a detachment from the Coldstream Guards.

C Squadron had lost its ration truck the previous night from shellfire, suffering four serious casualties, of whom Trooper **Lawrence** ¹² was killed and Trooper **Reed** ¹³ died shortly after.

Active night patrolling by both sides continued until the end of the month, and by day the enemy kept up a certain amount of mortaring; in return he was enlivened by shoots from 3 Company's Vickers, these shoots being mainly aimed at the roads on the outskirts of Sant' Angelo. One of the observation posts spotted smoke across the river, obviously from someone making breakfast. For his carelessness his fast was broken by some accurate attention from the 3-inch mortars. Later that day a heavy mist suddenly lifted to expose several men running for cover. Speed was lent to their heels, too, the same way.

During the night of 31 March an enemy patrol worked its way into the A Squadron area and adopted the brazen ruse of talking loudly. This succeeded in putting our outpost temporarily off guard so that, when the patrol was challenged, the reply came in the form of a grenade which wounded two of our men and began a lively exchange in kind, together with other small arms. One German was wounded and died half an hour later. The patrol had taken the precaution of removing all badges of rank and identification. But the wounded man had not been thorough enough and a small pocket diary he carried, which was translated at Div Cav before being sent back, established that he had arrived in the **Liri** sector on the 22nd and that his *flottesasken*—a little rubber pontoon for getting over the river—was in good order. Later, word came down to Div Cav that the diary contained an officer's name which traced him as belonging to *276 Panzer Grenadiers, 94 Division*, last reported in the coastal sector.

For over a week this went on; provocation and patrolling by night, suspicion by day; and the regiment was lucky to lose only one man, Trooper **Cochrane**,¹⁴ who died of wounds on 7 April. One of the night patrols was led by Sergeant Freddie **Marks**¹⁵ who, not satisfied with his efforts for nearly two months now, to keep his squadron's communications intact by going out, usually under fire, to mend the telephone lines, volunteered to go down to the Rapido to investigate an enemy working party.

Both sides were thoroughly trigger-happy. During one morning a civilian casualty, an Italian woman, found her way to the Div Cav RAP with Spandau bullet-wounds in her arm. She suffered the first aid stoically, for the peasant women are made of stern stuff. In fact, when one of the orderlies went over later to see how she was faring, he found her nursing the *bambino* as usual—presumably right on time—mother and babe quite content.

The battle for **Cassino** ended for the Divisional Cavalry as it had begun, patrolling in the mud down along the Rapido. Even the regiment's relief, by 22 Battalion on 9 April, was carried out under the usual climatic conditions—heavy rain. The only difference was that the regiment had arrived there in winter. As it left, the first shy buds of spring were opening to the now daily mellowing sun.

¹ **Cpl P. G. Smith; Auckland; born NZ 25 Oct 1910; accountant.**

² **Tpr R. Pinney; Mihiwaka, Otago; born Ireland, 20 Apr 1907; sheep-farmer.**

³ **L-Cpl H. G. Dunn; born USA 14 Apr 1916; labourer; killed in action 25 Feb 1944.**

⁴ **2 Lt F. H. C. Batchelor; born NZ 9 Apr 1910; sheep-farmer; died of wounds 28 Feb 1944.**

⁵ **Maj R. G. F. Kingscote, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 27 Aug 1922; student; later company commander, Indian Army, Burma.**

⁶ **Lt D. M. H. Tripp; born NZ 26 May 1918; farmer; died of wounds 6 Mar 1944.**

⁷ **Sgt G. M. South; born Timaru, 5 Sep 1904; motor engineer; died of wounds 18 Mar 1944.**

- ⁸ Tpr A. J. Ramsay; born NZ 23 Jan 1920; tractor driver; died of wounds 17 Mar 1944.**
- ⁹ Tpr D. H. Johnson; born Dargaville, 11 May 1916; labourer; killed in action 20 Mar 1944.**
- ¹⁰ Tpr D. G. Buchanan; Dunedin; born NZ 29 Sep 1909; reporter; wounded 1 Apr 1944.**
- ¹¹ Tpr J. W. Barnard, MM; Feilding; born Stratford, 2 Feb 1920; stock clerk.**
- ¹² Tpr F. A. Lawrence; born NZ 23 Jul 1914; slaughterman; killed in action 27 Mar 1944.**
- ¹³ Tpr J. R. Reed; born Bluff, 8 Apr 1904; auctioneer; died of wounds 27 Mar 1944.**
- ¹⁴ Tpr T. D. Cochrane; born Auckland, 8 Dec 1920; car painter; died of wounds 7 Apr 1944.**
- ¹⁵ Sgt F. A. Marks, MM; Whangarei; born NZ 29 Jan 1919; grocer's assistant.**
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DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 21 – PURSUIT TO FLORENCE

CHAPTER 21

Pursuit to Florence

THE NAMES **Filignano** and **Montaquila**, on their native tongue, are lovely liquid words which sound like springtime. They sound like the little streams which rustle off from the hills round these villages looking for their parent, the **Volturno** River. They are names which suggest the delicate green of new buds on the olives, the oaks, the chestnuts, and the shy pink of the almond or cherry blossom. They suggest clean air, and violets and primroses among the new grass. And to the Divisional Cavalry they will always suggest happy days of rest, and a nightingale singing in the late evening.

The New Zealand Corps was disbanded and the Division went into the **Apennines**. The 6th Brigade was placed high up in the hills as protection for the right flank of **2 Polish Corps**, and Div Cav, under command of the brigade, was allotted rest areas near these villages in the western catchment of the **Volturno**.

Small parties were allowed to go to **Naples** on leave, and others to **Caserta** to see wounded friends at 2 NZ General Hospital.

For protection, two troops from C Squadron were sent well forward along the **Venafro–Atina** road to the villages of Cerro Grosso and **La Selva**, and the majority of the regiment was put to work turning the track between **Filignano** and **Montaquila** into a reasonable road. Six of the officers, all of whom had seen continuous service since the forming of the **First Echelon**, left for furlough in New Zealand. They included Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant, and command of the regiment went to Major Wilder, who was promoted lieutenant-colonel. A new second-in-command was appointed, Major **Burns**,¹ who was imported from 18 Armoured Regiment. All the cars equipped with 3-inch howitzers held practice shoots which were most successful and every car got a smart new coat of paint.

By the end of April the spring weather had come to stay. The snow

on **Monte Cairo** had gone well back and the frosts were out of the nights. It was now the time for the horrid little anopheles mosquito to be singing round in the night air and paraphernalia for anti-malarial precautions were issued. The malaria squads issued forth and cleaned out with commendable fervour all ditches and damp places. The MO, not to be outdone of course, then issued dire warnings against the local snakes, which were nasty little ones of a viper variety.

The enemy was not backward in reminding everybody, however, that there was a war going on beyond **La Selva**. Three times in the first week of May the regiment's forward guards in and around these villages were shelled and mortared. On one of these occasions the enemy followed up with an attack on the platoon of 2 Independent Parachute Brigade just along the road. On another occasion an A Squadron troop, which had also been sent there, suffered heavy shelling for two hours, during which time the house where they were living was hit eight times and so badly damaged that the troop had to find another home.

There was a full moon on the 8th which the *Luftwaffe* put to use for night bombing, dropping some butterfly bombs round **Filignano**. And the next day the little garrison in **La Selva** had to find another house as shellfire scored a direct hit on the roof of the one they were in.

Some officers of the **Royal Canadian Dragoons** visited Div Cav one day to discuss working experiences with the Staghounds. It was a pity that they were not there a week later because, during a night change-over in garrison duty between A and C Squadrons, there was a collapse of the road which let one car over the bank. The car rolled over and fell about thirty feet but, other than a few bruises, no one was hurt.

By 10 May General Clark was ready to make his next attempt, his successful one, to break the **Gustav Line** and drive for **Rome**. He now had both the Fifth and Eighth Armies poised on the one front, the former on the coastal side and the latter reaching from the **Liri** valley right up into the mountains further back than **Monte Cairo**. The New Zealand Division, with 6 Brigade in the forward line, held this extreme

right flank.

The CO held a conference on the 11th and warned the squadrons that they were due for a difficult move straight across the watershed between the **Volturno** and Rapido rivers to take up positions held by the **Kimberley Rifles**, 12 South African Brigade, round **Vallerotonda**. This village lies about six miles north-east of **Cassino**.

The countryside here is wild and mountainous and slashed with deep gorges and ravines. Supply was going to be difficult and mules would have to be used. The mule trains were under the care of some 700 Italians who were to come under command. They were a mixture of Commandos and Marines known as the **Bafle Battalion** and, to quote the war diary, 'appeared more exotic than martial'. To add to the difficulties, the road from **Casale** to **Vallerotonda** was under the strictest traffic control, with movement subject to passes issued only by Divisional Headquarters, for this was the main supply route for the Polish Corps and for 6 Brigade further forward across the Rapido towards **Terelle**.

Opening with a tremendous artillery barrage on the night of the 11th, the last battle for **Cassino** began on a 20-mile front with both the Fifth and Eighth Armies fighting to establish bridgeheads simultaneously. The break-in succeeded but the dog-fight part of the battle was to last for nearly a week. The break-through was made in the first instance by the Moroccan Spahis, who accomplished a brilliant and deep penetration along the heights of the **Aurunci Mountains** to outflank the German defenders facing the Eighth Army. The British 78 Division, supported by 6 Armoured Division, was then thrown in and smashed its way through to **Route 6** well beyond the town. Up on the Eighth Army's right flank the Poles had made a two-brigade attack to descend upon the ruins of **Montecassino** but had been thrown back. They came down again, linked up with the 78th on **Route 6**, and the hill was now theirs once and for all.

Full praise must go to the Spahis. These *goumiers*—the New Zealanders invariably knew them by the collective word 'Goums'—were

wild, fierce Arabs who wore the *burnous* and fought, for preference, with a knife. Many blood-curdling tales about them did the rounds of the Division; how they carried a satchel containing what appeared to be dried apricots but which turned out to be the ears they lopped off their victims! Such tales were easy to believe in Div Cav, which had been next door to the Goums during early April. Moreover, they were tremendous thieves and sometimes violent in their robbery.

After all, similar tales about New Zealanders were told both by enemy and friend. Back in the desert, when there was always a chance of collecting a gazelle, one Div Cav man always wore on his belt, no doubt as part of his pre-war trade, a shepherd's skinning knife and steel. This knife was seen and coveted by a British sailor, whom nothing would convince that it had not been issued for slitting enemy throats at night-time and who eventually stole it. That knife now probably lives in a glass case in some little English parlour. Well; similar tales were not hard to believe of the Goums.

As the left front of the battle began to show some general forward movement, the Divisional Cavalry, with 22 and 24 Battalions and No. 2 Company, **27 MG Battalion**, was formed into 'Pleasants Force', which was ordered to come up and take over the positions from the **Kimberley Rifles**.

The day before moving out from **Filignano** the regiment held an athletic sports meeting organised by Second-Lieutenant Best.² The meeting contained the usual track events up to a mile, field events, and an invitation relay race with other units. On a points system, C Squadron had a comfortable win, whilst some of A Squadron did themselves just as well by running a totalisator.

The road forward ran from **Filignano** to **Acquafondata**, and thence down a valley to a turn-off, for A and C Squadrons and RHQ, to climb to **Vallerotonda**. Corporal **Davie**³ of A Squadron writes:

'Stopped at Mule Point at **Acquafondata**, & then about 8 miles over

the most winding road I have ever seen. Our truck had no reverse and had to be towed backwards before we could get round some of the corners....'

B Squadron continued on to the village of Sant' Elia Fiumerapido. From here, as from **Vallerotonda**, all further movement to the squadron positions was by foot along mule tracks.

C Squadron, on the right, linked up now with the flank of 2 Independent Parachute Brigade; A Squadron carried the line from here to Valvori; and B Squadron carried it down along the very headwaters of the Rapido. B Squadron had its headquarters on top of a conical hill and the route there, when Colonel Wilder visited it, earned the name of 'Perspiration Col'. A Squadron Headquarters found a house to take over in the village, and the war diary records:

'Reports have it that this house is equipped with hot and cold water and a tiled bath—but so far no invitations have been forthcoming.'

Perhaps with such a rare luxury, if it did exist, excuse may be found in the reasoning of: 'Invite the few and offend the many.'

Forward movement in the **Apennines** lagged behind the general advance. So long as this went on straight for **Rome** there was no point in forcing vigorously in the hills. Until the 26th things were reasonably quiet on the Pleasants Force front. The Divisional Cavalry suffered a little shelling and mortaring and did a little patrolling at night. Life could have been worse with the first of the cherries ripening, and fresh peas and beans to be had—by purchase or stealth.

A soldier never realises how far his thoughts get from home during his work-a-day routine until he suddenly finds a civilian from home beside him, and realises with a shock just what a stranger he has really become to his native land. On the 25th the Prime Minister arrived with Generals **Freyberg** and Puttick, to talk to Div Cav. Everyone stood in a ring amid the dusty green olive trees listening to his speech and straining to put minds back into civilian life for a short while. To the

young men watching him through the pale young grape vines that waved lazily in the oppressive heat of mid-afternoon, it all seemed so strange in their present surroundings.

At the same time Mr Fraser must have thought that some of the regiment were rather wild young men. A troop of Staghounds had been detailed to go back to **Divisional Headquarters** to take him forward near the 'sharp end' of the war. The headquarters was dispersed in a quietly pleasant spot and, while waiting for their passenger, one of the crews was, as usual, deep in an interminable Div Cav argument: gunnery. To prove a point somebody stamped on a trigger, and Divisional HQ went to ground at the ear-splitting crack of his 37-mm. gun. The culprit had completely forgotten about the standard practice of always having 'one up the spout'. However, the only damage done was the sudden cessation of the argument.

That day C Squadron was withdrawn to pick up its cars and was sent to Sant' Elia at the entrance of the **Belmonte** valley, where it was to be followed by the other two squadrons the next day ready to make a drive up the valley to **Atina**, the Division's immediate objective. The enemy was now on the run.

Lieutenant Mack's troop was sent forward first. On arriving at the forward lines of 23 Battalion, which had passed through **Belmonte** ahead of it, the troop found the road barred by a large tree which the enemy had felled. The infantry were unable

to say if this contained any booby traps. So the first car hooked its tow-rope on and pulled it clear. Once this was done they moved on, much to the delight of the infantry as the enemy mortar crews switched their attention to the Staghounds. Mack himself collected a direct hit right on top of his turret but,



FROM CASSINO TO BALSORANO
FROM CASSINO TO BALSORANO

other than ringing ears for a while, nobody inside was the worse for it. They went on cautiously but steadily as they were now also attracting much attention in the way of machine-gunning from some of the houses along the way. So they carefully shot up windows and doors as they went. By the end of the day moreover, their gunnery, even with the higher trajectory howit- zers

, had developed great accuracy and, according to Mack, fire commands were containing such details as: ‘... pop'er through the top right-hand pane, eh?’

‘On.’

‘FIRE!’

Some weeks later this troop had occasion to go back there and the locals, who were most impressed, showed them the results of their marksmanship, even ‘dis lettle *bambino* one’, a 37-mm. solid shot embedded in the inside wall directly opposite the door-catch.

By evening the troop, which had temporarily lost two cars and been augmented by another troop, making four cars in all, had passed through **Atina**. The troop leader himself was over the crossroads beyond,

when there was a tremendous explosion behind him. When the smoke and dust had subsided, there was the car behind standing with both front wheels blown off. It had hit a double Teller mine. Mack then realised that he himself was right in the middle of a minefield so he naturally took some time to get out, as he preferred to clear the way himself rather than call for the sappers whom he knew were hard-pressed. Though perhaps slow, his system was effective and safe. As each mine was found, a piece of wire was attached to it and it was dragged clear by the car so that it could be disarmed without the danger of a booby trap going off.

By the 28th RHQ had moved to **Atina**, whilst C Squadron Headquarters was just beyond the town and troops were probing down every road. Another composite troop was now made up of Mack's and Best's and this worked its way towards **Vicalvi**. Not far beyond **Atina** there is a straight stretch of road, about three-quarters of a mile long, that dips steadily down and rises again. Well along this stretch could be seen a lot of camouflage nets at the side of the road. The patrol kept these under intense observation for well over half an hour before hopefully deciding that they were there against air observation. The road itself was the only way forward so, when the patrol finally decided to advance, they did this one car at a time and at full speed. Before it was abreast of the nets the first car, all 15 tons of it, was registering 50 m.p.h. About the very bottom of the dip there was another minefield. There was a mighty explosion and one front wheel, shorn clean off, bounded down the road in two or three great leaps and flew over the fence a good fifty yards away. Still expecting the nets to be hiding anti-tank guns, the crew clambered out and took cover. Armed only with .38 pistols and with a Tommy gun between them, they expected to be rushed at any minute and at least made prisoner. Nothing happened, and after a while they plucked up enough courage to emerge, and then marched back, quite unscathed, to the troop.

The mines were cleared and Best's troop went on. By that night it had penetrated to within five miles of **Sora**, on Route 82, before it ran

into enough opposition in **Vicalvi** to hold it up.

It had been all of five months now that Div Cav had been in action with the Staghounds and nowhere had they been able to make much appreciable use of them. Now this kind of work was bringing back to the troopers their old dash and their gay spirits. Furthermore, though the expenditure of armoured cars was proving heavy—two cars had even been put out of action by slipping over banks—their crews were able to forget their old dread of going back to B Echelon and missing the fun, because vehicle replacements were now coming forward at anything down to twelve hours' notice.

The push was on again the next day, the 29th, and two more cars went up on mines round **Vicalvi**. No. 1 Troop (Lieutenant **Cooke**⁴), with the help of a bulldozer to work on the road, made an effort to outflank **Vicalvi** on the left. This troop managed to get to the little village of **Tillaroco** abreast of it, thus opening up a route for the **Maori Battalion** to make a night assault on the hill, **Colle Mastroianni**, to wade across the **Fibreno River**, and to take **Colle Monacesco**. At the same time **Cooke** was sent forward in support, together with a troop of **Shermans**. **Vicalvi** meanwhile fell to 21 Battalion and by the 30th, B Squadron was forward, its headquarters being established on the far side of the town.

Though the regiment's forward patrols were now within three miles of **Sora**, the road they were on was not yet serviceable as the bridge over the **Fibreno** had been destroyed. So B Squadron covered the site until another bridge could be brought forward. At the same time one troop was sent back along a side road to **Posta** at the head of the river, about a mile across country from **Vicalvi**, and two others managed to find their way across the river and make their way in the direction of **Campoli**, thus providing a flank guard as well as lengthening this right flank of the **Maoris'** advance across country to take **Brocco**, just short of **Sora**.

However, the nature of the country precluded this and the **Maoris** went on their way merrily without the support. For wheeled vehicles the going was made most difficult by a succession of vineyards and gardens

laid out amongst irrigation ditches. The two troops were being attended by spasmodic mortar fire, not enough to worry them, from a wooded hill on their right, when the leading car got its front wheels bogged in one of the ditches. Second-Lieutenant **Gee**⁵ hooked on the tow-rope of his car to pull the other one back, and immediately got bogged as well. In next to no time all five cars of both troops were stuck, either from trying to tow or in trying to get by to keep up with the infantry. The enemy mortar fire was intensified as soon as anyone appeared on foot to hitch on a rope or dig at a wheel. Here again a car collected a hit on top without much ill effect, but when eventually one NCO received a scalp wound it was thought advisable to stay in the cars or take cover in a nearby house. The wounded man was sent back on foot to Squadron Headquarters and on the way he met Brigadier Stewart, who called down an artillery 'stonk' in the general area of the mortars. This thoroughly discouraged them.

Since no car was able to get out without help, and no infantry protection was available overnight, the crews were forced to walk back to Squadron Headquarters. By morning, with **Brocco** in the Maoris' hands, the enemy round **Campoli** had retired and the cars were able to be recovered at leisure.

While B Squadron was discovering that there was still plenty of fight in the enemy, C Squadron was doing the same. One troop was sent back to the north-east of **Vicalvi**, through **Alvito** to **San Donato**. On getting there this troop ran into quite a pretty little battle and was lucky also to suffer only one casualty. It was estimated that the enemy were 300 strong in the hills above, and here also an artillery 'stonk' had to be called down to cool their enthusiasm. After that effort it was considered wise to leave C Squadron in the area, with a patrol right in the town, for the 31st.

A Squadron was given the responsibility of holding **Posta** until the **RAF Regiment** came up to take over the area. Once the bridge over the Fibreno was completed, RHQ was able to move forward to **Brocco** and B Squadron to **Sora**, thence back along **Route 82** towards **Isola**. It was

given instructions to make contact with 8 Indian Division which was reported to be coming up from the south. At **Brocco**, RHQ suffered a casualty when it came under shellfire and Trooper **Simpkiss**⁶ was killed.

B Squadron kept working away on 1 June. Its headquarters was now half-way between **Sora** and **Isola** and various troops were working along all the roads south and south-west of there, like ferrets in a rabbit warren until, during the day, the first elements of 8 Indian Division arrived in **Isola**.

The Gustav Line was now history.

North-west of **Sora** the valley of the Liri River runs back some 25 miles, with high mountains on either side, to the town of **Avezzano**. This valley carries the main road and rail routes from **Naples** to meet **Route 5**, which, as described earlier, runs right across **Italy** from **Rome** to **Pescara**. **Rome** was due to fall any day. In fact, once the **Gustav Line** was breached and the offensive had broken out of the **Anzio** beach-head, General Clark was developing quite a race for the capital. The right flank of the armies was therefore naturally to make its pursuit up the **Liri** valley to **Avezzano**. The first objective of the Division was now **Balsorano**. There was no scope, in such a narrow valley as this, for a whole regiment of armoured cars.

A Squadron was put under command of 5 Brigade to travel along in case it was needed, and the balance of the regiment, joined now by HQ Squadron, went into laager near the banks of the Fibreno to sleep and sun-bathe, and refresh themselves with swimming.

The advance up the **Liri** valley was slow. The roads were heavily mined and there were many demolitions. The enemy had still plenty of sting and fought a hard rearguard action before **Balsorano**. On 4 June word came down that the Fifth Army had entered **Rome**, so any more rearguard actions would surely be out of the question. But it was a case of pushing on and making sure. Two troops were able to report **Balsorano** clear by the 6th and, in their turn, learnt that the Second Front was

opening up in **Normandy**. It was still a case of pushing on, even if it was just for the sake of tidying up.

Patrols of 24 Battalion had also entered Colle Piano and there they had found four seriously wounded civilians shot by the enemy by way of registering thanks for hospitality. These four were given morphine and evacuated as quickly as possible.

By the 9th, the enemy having now succeeded in breaking clear, the road had been opened as far as **Civitella Roveto** and many escaped prisoners were beginning to come down out of the hills —British, South African, Indian, a New Zealander from the LRDG, Russians. Many of them had been at large for anything up to nine months.

The main part of the regiment had enjoyed only a short respite. On the 5th 'Wilder Force' came into existence. It consisted of the Divisional Cavalry, less A Squadron, with under command two companies of infantry and a squadron of tanks, and with the whole 6 Field Regiment in support. The job had been to take over from 5 Brigade whilst 6 Brigade was still fighting for **Balsorano**.

The evidence of enemy brutality amongst civilians had proved somewhat disturbing and had given rise to a series of vague reports that other wild men were loose round the countryside filling the abdomens of various residents with lead in an excess of Nazi exuberance. This added excitement to an alarm in RHQ in the early hours of one morning. The profound stillness was shattered by several bursts of Tommy-gun fire. In less than no time everybody was stalking about armed to the teeth. The pale blue moonlight of romantic **Italy** proved capable of turning a collection of male legs and issue underpants, as various 'patrols' flitted from tree to tree, into a spectacle truly reminiscent of *Les Sylphides*. Moonlight can do wonders. So, too, can the thought of vipers amongst the grass do a lot for choreography. But there was no occasion for anybody to prove his valour, for the disturbance turned out to have been made by two very drunk 'Kiwis' who had fired into a cave. They said there were Germans in there, smoking. Perhaps they were fireflies with a

slight *Tedeschi* look about them.

A Squadron was pushing steadily ahead up the valley and Wilder Force followed up through **Balsorano**, stopping on the 8th at a little village with a name almost longer than itself, San Vincenzo Nuovo Valle Roveto. The further up the **Liri** valley the advance went the faster it managed to go. **Rome** was now well in our hands—indeed, orders had already been published in Div Cav that it was as yet out of bounds. By the 10th A Squadron patrols had reported **Avezzano** clear of enemy and that they were getting a tremendous welcome in the square. From then on, for some days, the war became a gay affair. A Squadron patrols worked down **Route 5** to link up with 12 Lancers coming up from the direction of **Rome**, and who



ITALY MAP No.2

arrived in Carsoli half an hour ahead of them on the 12th. At **Avezzano** the squadron headquarters spent several days in one riot of German prisoners, escapees, signorinas and vino, Fascist spies and partisans.

It was a melodramatic Italian interlude. Many of the escaped prisoners seemed very reluctant to leave this beautiful countryside with its affectionate people. The lack of any restrictions, together with the fun of chasing the odd Fascist spy, was in many respects an ideal

existence. A sociable Indian dropped into RHQ for a chat. He spoke good English and better Italian. Captured in **France**, he had been loose in **Italy** the following year. Now he was, if you please, escorting four red-lipped signorinas to church, dressed in his Sunday best with a pale blue shirt and a sports coat, from the pocket of which protruded a Luger pistol. The Church Militant indeed!

Though the countryside is always dangerous with mines and booby traps and delayed demolitions, liberating is great fun. The squadron collected a very smelly bunch of Germans of *85 Mountain Regiment* whom the partisans had locked in a house while they worked themselves up to murder pitch. One of the Germans had already been shot—from behind of course—by a brave partisan. The squadron also picked up a South African WO II in a very weak condition who was evacuated through the ADS,⁷ and two Indian Army officers, captured at **Tobruk**, who had been at large since the Italian collapse and who were dressed as locals with forged Italian passports, the speciality of a Greek naval officer.

But by the middle of the month the enemy had retreated so far to the north that any further advance along the central axis was unprofitable. The Division was withdrawn to **Arce**, about 20 miles northwest of **Cassino**, to go into training again.

For the next four weeks, life in the Divisional Cavalry differed little from that of any other unit. Parties visited **Cassino** to gaze with awe at the wreck that had so long denied them passage. Day trips were made into **Rome** where, to quote one of the more phlegmatic, they 'saw the Pope, appreciated the small high breasts of the ladies, and missed the truck home.' B Squadron found several German timing devices for delayed action demolitions which were greatly appreciated by Divisional Headquarters. There were trucks running daily down to the **Liri** for swimming and, at the 4 Armoured Brigade swimming sports, Div Cav managed to score a narrow win from 22 Battalion. There was a training scheme with 26 Battalion, as a result of which it was decided to equip some of the cars with the infantry radio sets for closer communication

with the battalions.

All this came to an end by 10 July, when word came down that the Division was moving forward again. The next day the regiment began a two-day trip of over 200 miles to near **Cortona**, just north of **Lake Trasimene**. Elements of the enemy were forward of **Arezzo** but steadily retiring.

B Squadron was put under command of 6 Brigade and sent forward to **Castiglion Fiorentino**, on the road to **Arezzo**, with a view to clearing a secondary road between **Castiglion** and Palazzo del Pero, which is about five miles south-east of **Arezzo**. Some of this patrolling had to be done on foot, but with the support of a troop of Shermans from 18 Armoured Regiment, some wheeled patrols gave protection and coverage to 144 Field Squadron, RE, of 6 British Armoured Division, which managed to open up two-thirds of the road by 14 July and glean evidence that the opposition was coming from elements of the *Mannitz Battle Group*, remnants of *94 Infantry Division*. By the next day they had reached their objective, the crossroads on Route 73 about five miles from **Arezzo**, but were clearly well out on a limb and had to pull back. The **26th Battalion** had not yet established itself at a point, nearly three miles behind, which was to be used as a jumping-off place to take Usciano, close to this same spot.

Early on the 16th a B Squadron patrol was able to report that Palazzo del Pero was clear of enemy but under fire from the high ground beyond. The 10th Corps, however, was about to take over the sector and 6 Brigade Group was able to pull back, but not before B Squadron had lost a man. Trooper **Angus**⁸ was killed near the crossroads by stepping on an 'S' mine. Some sort of definite front was beginning to establish itself again for the battle for **Florence**. **Arezzo** was going to be a job for 6 Armoured Division.

The front that was now resolving itself on the maps was really a series of outposts of the **Gothic Line** which the enemy was preparing with the intention of holding it the following winter. If this were to fall

before then—and by the condition of the ripening fruit, autumn was approaching—then **Florence** had to fall into Allied hands as soon as possible. It had been declared an open city but there were defences in the hills eight or ten miles south of it, north of the Pesa River. The attack on these, and the subsequent capture of **Florence**, was ordered of the New Zealand Division, with 8 Indian Division on its left and 6 South African Division on its right.

During the Division's move to face up to these **Florence** defences, the **Paula Line**, the Divisional Cavalry drove due west from **Castiglion** through San Savino to **Siena**, where it turned north to **Castellina**. On the trip one of the C Squadron cars had a spectacular fall over a bank.

It appears that the Staghounds had one mechanical defect in the form of a steering drop-arm which was not strong enough, and which sometimes broke under the strain of fast convoy driving. In this instance Sergeant Eivers's ⁹ car came to grief and was thrown completely out of control on a bend and shot over the side. It did a complete somersault sideways while it fell forty feet, and disappeared through the roof of a factory below. It landed on its wheels on the ground floor in a room only large enough to accommodate it. The wall had to be knocked down later to get it out.

Eivers's troop leader, following next in the convoy, missed him at the corner and, seeing the marks where the car had left the road, stopped and looked over. What had happened was obvious, and he scrambled down the hill fully expecting to find one-third of his troop dead. He got to the car to find the whole crew, somewhat dazed, climbing out unscathed except for patches of skin knocked off them. One of Eivers's first comments was: 'My whisky! Oh, my precious whisky! I only got it up with last night's rations.' Welded on the outside of the car was a tucker box, and when they looked in it, there stood the bottle right way up, but broken off at the neck. There was only one thing to do with that whisky and by the time the four of them had done it they were suffering from neither shock nor depression.

On arrival at **Castellina**, A Squadron was sent straight forward from the RHQ position south of the town to come up in support of 23 and 28 Battalions some five miles ahead, advancing on **San Casciano**. By 22 July the rest of the regiment had arrived at **San Donato**, about a mile short of A Squadron Headquarters. The fighting was steadily becoming more stern, for the enemy was not prepared to give any ground cheaply and Nos. 1 and 3 Troops lost two cars whilst supporting a 23 Battalion



THE ADVANCE TO FLORENCE

attack. One of the troop leaders, Second-Lieutenant **Dick**,¹⁰ had his car destroyed in a duel with a self-propelled gun, which he succeeded in forcing out of a house, but not before it had put a shot through his fuel tank. The other car blew up on a mine, and even a third car came out of action with a punctured tyre.¹¹

The enemy was making full use of every suitable bit of cover and was lying low until the advancing forces were right on him before opening up with everything. In this instance he had even caught the 23 Battalion men riding on the outsides of the cars.

No. 2 Troop, together with two troops of 18 Armoured Regiment, went forward through Tarnavelle and Noce as support to an engagement by 28 Battalion, but the armoured cars were unable to give much active help here as the countryside could only be traversed by the tanks. So

they had to be content with covering the Maoris' open left flank and preserving themselves intact for the hard fighting that was obviously coming any day.

The next day did not produce very much progress but it was one of very heavy shellfire for the whole regiment. An A Squadron troop was sent out to the right to make contact with the South Africans. This trip started with a difficult period of waiting while a demolition was made passable. The work was carried out under steady shellfire; in fact it turned out to be just the first of several similar incidents that day. One car got a near miss which cleared its engine covers only by a foot, and hit the wall of a house against which the car was sheltering. It was lucky to get away with just a puncture. At another place, held up again by a demolition, the troop leader, Lieutenant Purchase,¹² was investigating on foot when he was engaged by machine guns. He managed to get back to his car unhurt in time for the whole troop to return the fire with considerable vigour. They finished the day with all the gear normally stowed on the outsides of the vehicles, bedrolls, water tins and everything, well and truly riddled.

The advance on **Florence** was beginning to show signs of accelerating and the General decided to try a quick thrust, using the speed of Div Cav to catch the enemy off balance. Thus 6 Brigade could follow up quickly into positions dominating the city. Orders were given for B and C Squadrons to prepare for this. At the time this plan looked feasible but, in the light of later events, the taking of **Florence** did not prove so easy. Even by that afternoon, stronger enemy resistance was making itself felt. The **23rd Battalion** had silenced the enemy in the village of **Sambuca** and part of A Squadron crossed the **Pesa River** to lend support in the advance to the next village, **Fabbrica**, a mile or two away. There were two demolitions along the road, the second of which could not be passed, so an attempt was made to get forward across country. The enemy rearguard in the village, however, had been withholding fire until our troops were well within range. When it did open up it put the forward infantry platoon to ground and fired on Company Headquarters,

killing Major Hoseit. ¹³ Having been pinned by plunging fire from the village, the forward platoons were forced to pull back under cover of the Staghounds, which were later able to retire without help.

Next morning, the 24th, C Squadron came under command of 5 Brigade, which constituted a force known as ' **Arm cav**' in conjunction with A Squadron of 19 Armoured Regiment, No. 2 Company of 22 Battalion, 1 Troop of 31 Anti-Tank Battery, some engineers and signallers, a bulldozer and a bridge-layer tank. This little force, a sharp spearhead for the brigade, moved out from near **San Donato** the next day, took **Fabbrica**, and pressed onwards towards Bibbione. Regimental Headquarters, in the meantime, came up to la Fornace and B Squadron replaced A, which was glad of a breather.

San Casciano, the key to the jumping-off place for the fight for **Florence**, was now within reach, but the enemy was also fighting hard for every furlong of the way. **Arm cav** battled its way into Bibbione the next day against this increasing resistance, mortars and shellfire taking its toll of the infantry. After securing the crossroads beyond Bibbione, C Squadron pushed up Route 2 for another half mile. The other two squadrons worked forward in support of the Maoris. They took one road each, north from **Tavarnelle**, and by the end of the day their patrols had met at the crossroads round **San Pancrazio**. Forward elements of 28 Battalion were still with them. It takes a lot to stop the Maoris. At the crossroads the B Squadron cars were held up by mines, which could not be lifted by the 6 Field Company sappers attached, owing to the heavy fire from the houses beyond. So the troopers took to blasting these about and finished up with the inevitable embarrassment—prisoners, some thirteen of them, which they gladly handed over to the Maoris. Of the A Squadron advance, Davie comments:

'On pulling up beside a house [we] got a hell of a surprise to see a Jerry sneaking round one side of it about 75 yards away and a few seconds later another. A third one noticed us and came back for a second look just as we let off the How. Next the Maoris arrived and I was

very interested to see the way they went about storming it. Result; 1 dead and 2 prisoners.... Several mortar stonks on us when we advanced further.'

This left flank of the advance had now got a little ahead so, on the 26th, it remained a little more static. The **21st Battalion** was to come up and take **Poppiano** and an air attack had been asked for on **San Casciano**. On the other side of the **Pesa**, **Arm cav** too was waiting for the air support but remained well in touch with the enemy. With no need in the meantime of the thrusting strength of the Staghounds, and since they were difficult to tuck away out of sight against the walls of buildings, Major Poolman sent his Dingo troop (Lieutenant **Monckton** ¹⁴) forward to keep constant observation. This must have been a particularly nerve-racking job because any form of armoured vehicle will attract fire, and to remain stationary expecting it all the time is particularly hard in the open-topped Dingo's. The crews not only had to suffer the fears that come with inactivity, but also they would be aware of possible plunging fire, or of grenades, on top of them from some daring or desperate enemy soldier who may have been hiding in, or had sneaked into, the buildings against which they were sheltered.

In order to maintain the close contact, one Staghound troop had to move forward a little way. Sergeant Flynn's ¹⁵ car went first, but since it was about to enter a tree-covered defile leading to a crossroads, Flynn stopped to take a good look before going on. Lieutenant **Nicol** ¹⁶ walked forward to him to discuss the move, but unfortunately he got caught by a burst of machine-gun fire and was killed.

Once the air attack was completed, on the 27th, **Arm cav** went forward to mop up, after which it was disbanded. C Squadron remained under command of 4 Armoured Brigade on the right flank. It lost a car on a mine near Caserotta. There were three casualties in the crew, fortunately only wounded.

A further two cars were lost that day, one destroyed by a mine and the other by shellfire, when A and B Squadrons were sent up on the left

of the river near **Cerbaia**. B Squadron produced a prisoner from **71 Panzer Grenadiers**. This was valuable information because it was the first indication that **29 Panzer Division** was committed to this area.

Sergeant **Lewis** ¹⁷ writes:

‘There was a bad demolition still under enemy fire and the work was held up. This holdup seemed unexpected, since before long all the armoured cars plus sundry MT from other units approached nose to tail down a narrow road in full view of the enemy....Banks on either side of the road made dispersal impossible.

‘Presently an airburst exploded above us...and for the next half hour every five minutes brought its hail of shells.... Wireless messages rattled back and forth: “Can you move forward?” “No!” “Can you move back?” “No!” “Try to disperse!” We were bound to be hit sooner or later if we remained on the road, so my car smashed its way through a hedge and out on to the open slope. Attempting to take cover behind an olive tree in full view of the enemy seemed rather like the act of an ostrich. Other cars had also managed to disperse a little and though we seemed to be in the centre of a turmoil of bursting shells only one car was hit and from this the crew escaped unhurt....’

Once his troop had been extricated from this it continued searching for crossings. They were looking for a way round yet another demolition when an infantry officer asked for help. Lewis continues:

‘... it appeared that 20 Germans were holding out in a nearby house watched from a safe distance by a couple of dozen or so assorted Partisans.... He wanted us to put a few shots into the house while the infantry approached it on foot.... We drove the cars over and began to fire on the house with all the guns we had, a 3” howitzer, two 37m.m. guns, and several machine-guns. The last we saw of the Germans was as they disappeared into the bushes with the Partisan forces in hot pursuit....’

Yet again, on the 28th, another car went up on a mine. The job for

the day was to find suitable crossing places over the **Pesa** between **Cerbaia** and **Geppetto**. There were none; not without considerable bulldozing, and this would be quite impossible against such accurate enemy gunfire as was coming down at the time.

But **San Casciano** was well in our hands now and the Division had at least a foothold on that side of the river. C Squadron, still under command of 4 Armoured Brigade, did not make so much progress. It had been working along the same **Geppetto—Cerbaia—San Casciano** road but coming up from **San Casciano**. Extensive demolitions were blocking the way and it was obvious that it was going to take a day or so before the Division could be poised ready for the final attack. In the meantime A and B Squadrons continued ferreting around this way and that. On the 29th they continued patrolling on either side of the river, in the vicinity of **Cerbaia** and Castiglioni, constantly engaging— and with some effect— mortar and machine-gun posts. Though they were under considerable shellfire all day they steadily pushed the protection for the enemy guns out of the way. And as the protection was pushed back, so went the guns.

Late that afternoon word came down that the regiment had to take over the responsibility of the left flank from 21 Battalion, so B Squadron HQ moved up to **Montegufoni**.

Montegufoni is a property that has been owned by the English family of Sitwell for many years. Naturally none of this family was in residence at the time and the house had been taken over by the Italians to store what was a most priceless collection of paintings from Northern Italy. Apart from being structurally a suitable storage place, by happy chance its situation also preserved its treasures for, during that afternoon, in the heat of battle one Div Cav troop leader, faced with three houses amidst difficult country to clean out, had shot at and set fire to two of them and, on second thoughts, only because it was in a hollow and therefore not so likely to be a defended position, had spared the third.

That happened to be **Montegufoni**. But the story of how the war

passed over it is best told in the words of B Squadron's Intelligence Corporal, Bob **Cotterall**.¹⁸ His was a common christian name and he was invariably known by the nickname 'Ponsonby' after that suburb of **Auckland**.

'It was a lovely evening with the sunset all pinks and blues when **Collins**¹⁹ interrupted me by saying: "Ponsonby, old boy, do you realize that in that castle place over there is an absolute patrimony of art? You've read about the Sitwells? Well, that's their house." I followed him, and the place certainly looked English with the Lion Rampant on the battlements and—well, I always had a soft spot for the Auckland Grammar. So we went in. The only occupant seemed to be a gentle old Italian with the air of a Major Domo. We felt rather like Barbarians in this house with its aristocratic atmosphere and we in our common army boots. Stacked around the walls were dozens of pictures and the largest of all was leaning against a table. This huge dark canvas commanded our attention. There it was! I knew it! The original! I'm no art connoisseur, but I knew that this was Botticelli's Primavera. We were rather awestruck. Naturally we didn't know that UNRRA were waiting to take care of the place, but we knew it should be reported immediately.'

The New Zealand Division was full of personality surprises. Here were two men, a junior NCO and a trooper, instantly aware that they were in the presence of some of the world's most famous art and that it must be protected immediately. They gave it the respect it deserved; more than its previous viewers, the Germans. But in return for this they demanded just one small thing. They knew of the Sitwell visitors' book. In one room was an antique revolving set of drawers. **Cotterall's** story continues:

'We pulled out one drawer and looked at a letter. It was from old Sir George who had been tearing a strip off his son, Osbert, for not paying his bills. We were rather embarrassed for reading private correspondence and put it back. Presently we found the book: not a very big one: vellum covered. It seemed to contain the signatures of all the blue blood of

Europe. The English peers had signed with their surnames, and I particularly remember the signature of the Princess Bibesca. I turned to Collins and demanded his pen. Whoever stole that book afterwards will be intrigued with the last entry, for I handed back the pen with the comment: "Collins old boy, the culture of the New World is now irrevocably joined to the culture of the Old." In a firm but not flamboyant hand I had written: "Ponsonby **Cotterall**".'

This peaceful place did not return to its unwonted quiet as quickly as some. The end of the month came with savage fighting still in progress. The dense grape vines all over the country provided excellent cover for dug-in infantry, who took advantage of it until the last possible moment. A Squadron patrols found themselves right in the thick of it on the 30th. Whilst B Squadron maintained touch with the Indians on the left flank, three troops of A Squadron, together with tanks of C Squadron, 18 Armoured Regiment, had been working their way forward to probe between **Geppetto** and **San Michele**. A demolition held them up and No. 2 Troop (Second-Lieutenant **Stace** ²⁰) was trying to get across country with the tanks. To add to their difficulties, vines were growing on the terraces along which they were working, and Stace had just made a brief halt for observation to the front, when slight movement on his immediate right, amongst the vines, caught his eye. It was the business end of an *ofenrohr*. ²¹ His urgent command 'Gunner- traverse right- ON- FIRE!' gave him the split second to get in the first shot and, though it was a 37-mm. shell, its blast created enough delay for Stace to follow it up with a couple of hand grenades which killed both Germans in the pit.

The troop then worked further forward to a position where the terraces ended abruptly. Here there was good observation of the enemy positions amongst the houses on the other side of the valley and the troop spent a good fifteen minutes shooting AP and HE into the buildings, and machine-gunning any likely positions in the open. The guns began to get hot. Stace writes:

'During this firing Jim **Copland** ²² was on my left. Guns were hot and his Browning co-ax. jammed badly. He dropped back a few yards under

cover from his immediate front to clear the gun. He was apparently not under cover from the higher ground across the valley and to the right, and while in this position, the Staghound received a direct hit on the turret by a 50-mm....'

Copland was killed outright and Trooper **Linnell** ²³ mortally wounded. The driver, Trooper **Begg**, ²⁴ took one look back at the shambles in the turret and set off to the forward infantry positions several hundred yards behind, where he could set about getting the wounded out and under the car to give them first aid. But he was badly hampered by heavy mortar fire and was eventually wounded himself.

There is no doubt that the enemy discipline and concealment was of the highest order, and so was his respect for the Red Cross. These defending troops remained well hidden and withheld their fire until the last minute and, on this occasion, having scored heavily, they then held it again to allow the stretcher jeeps to evacuate the wounded.

This spirited fighting embroiled even the A Squadron commander, Major Cole. Since it was holding up the progress of his patrols he decided to go forward himself to direct the attack personally. Because of its smallness and flexibility, he elected to go by jeep. But on the way he got caught up by fire from an enemy tank and was blown out on to the ground, suffering badly from blast and a wound in the eye. He stuck to his original intention nevertheless and stayed forward until the position was cleared; and even then he preferred to stay with his headquarters and have his wound treated there than be evacuated to hospital.

The general axis of advance, once it reached **San Casciano**, swung a little to the right, aimed at the western outskirts of **Florence**, and the final assault was intended to employ all three brigades. The 11th South African Armoured Brigade, on the Division's right, was aimed at the centre of the city. Beyond it was 24 Guards Brigade. To the left of 6 NZ Brigade, 21 Indian Brigade was coming forward since 8 Indian Division intended crossing the **Arno** round **Signa**. The start line of the New Zealand Division was therefore more or less a line through the villages of

San Michele and **la Romola** to **Sant' Andrea** against the **Greve River**. On the ridge about a mile ahead were **San Maria** and **la Poggiona**, and once these had been gained, the country would fall away to the **Arno River** and **Florence**.

A Squadron was held in reserve on 1 August and B Squadron sent patrols northwards from **Montegufoni** towards the **Pesa**. But shellfire denied much advance to all except one of these. One troop managed to cross the river and linked up with patrols of C Squadron which were working towards **Geppetto**. Then, during the day, B Squadron was also brought back into reserve with A to be used in what the General expected would be a break-through of the main defences that night.

This left only C Squadron to cover the left flank of 6 Brigade and, though various civilians told its patrols that the enemy had cleared out of **Geppetto**, they took half the morning to negotiate demolitions and clear mines, and even then they could not get into the town itself. So they concentrated on working towards **San Michele**, pushing aside opposition in the form of mortar and machine-gun fire. They had arrived there by mid-afternoon and were under shellfire from **San Maria**; but they were unable to stay there overnight since they had no infantry protection.

Major Poolman had his patrols at it again next morning. This time they managed to get into **Geppetto**, where they met their right-hand neighbours from the Indian Division, and also were able to make use of another route northwards to **Pian dei Cerri**, which was the immediate objective. Neither of the routes was a particularly good one, the one through **San Michele** being not much more than, in places, a grassy farm track. Apart from the demolitions and mines, the going was made hazardous as the track was inclined to crumble at the outside verges. Early in the afternoon, patrols were pushed forward through 24 Battalion's positions near **San Michele**, with a view to provoking some fire from around **San Maria**. This was successful as they managed to open fire on some enemy at **Baggiolo**, though at the cost of one car

which was disabled on a mine.

A patrol coming up from **Gepetto** with the same intentions managed to reach to within less than a mile of Pian dei Cerri and almost up to our own 25-pounder fire being put down in front of 25 Battalion. It was quite obvious that the enemy's heavy weapons were being steadily pulled back as the Staghounds applied pressure on their infantry protection.

Early in the day a German Tiger tank had been spotted, and the report to Major Poolman was that it appeared to be slowly retiring. He sent Lieutenant Mack forward to shadow it with his troop. This he did and presently realised that it was being used as cover to minelaying parties. So he advanced steadily, lifting the mines again as he came to them, disarming them, and tossing them to the side of the road. He even ran across something new in the form of a mine made of a circular plastic ring, rather the shape of a motor tyre, with a centre firing charge, covered by a glass cap, holding the detonator. By the end of the day the troop had lifted over a hundred mines before orders found their way down through RHQ to the effect that all mines were to be left strictly alone as the enemy was now wishing some brand-new form of hatefulness on them! Mack was rather amused.

That night the Division began its final lunge forward with 28 and 23 Battalions in the lead. Poolman decided to push a troop forward on the left flank of the Maoris. They were headed for **Scandicci**, the southernmost suburb. He aimed at San Martino, further west. The road forward contained much cover on either side, and a number of houses. For light armoured vehicles this was going to be a harrowing trip as, made in the dark, it removed all chances of getting in first shot if the cars were to be attacked at short range. The whole 6 Brigade had been pulled back to be ready to establish itself beyond the **Arno** if required, so there was no spare infantry. Flank cover for the cars had to be supplied by sending forward one troop dismounted. Mines were also a problem since the usual counter, acute eyesight, was no use at night. Sappers therefore undertook to lead the way, sweeping the whole road with mine

detectors. Mack comments:

'If it was hard on the nerves, then I can't express too much admiration for those Sappers. We at least had steel round us, and flank cover, but they walked forward as large as life with earphones masking their ears, concentrating absolutely on the job in hand. That's what I consider bravery. They never did refuse when we asked for them. I suppose it was that they knew we always lifted our own mines if we possibly could.'

As 5 Brigade's advance gained momentum, RHQ moved up to **Tavernaccia behind the **Maori Battalion** headquarters, and B Squadron was ordered up with the forward companies to reconnoitre a route on their left front, since their right was temporarily held up. A Squadron of 20 Armoured Regiment was sent forward at the same time to give support, and for a while there was a certain amount of crowding and delay between the two. However, the cars were needed first and so were given priority, and in the late afternoon managed to get ahead of the infantry as they reached i Cipressi.**

No. 4 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Gee) took the lead and scampered down a hill to the banks of the Vignone stream. Here he found the bridge on the road to **Scandicci was blown and reported back that some reconnaissance along the bank would be needed to find a suitable crossing for the tanks. These were waiting at the top of the hill and, though they warned the troop following, No. 2 (Lieutenant M. H. Dickie), that it would run into anti-tank fire, there was only the one way down, the road; and they had to go. A suitable crossing had to be found as soon as possible: and that was that. No sooner had the last car arrived at the bottom of the hill than it collected a shell right through the turret and the motor, killing Troopers **McDowell** ²⁵ and **Pengelly**, ²⁶ gravely wounding Trooper **Washer** ²⁷ and Corporal **Coleman**, ²⁸ and setting the car on fire. The wounded managed to get out, and off the road, on their own, even though Coleman's leg was virtually amputated and he was seriously burnt. Washer, though he was able to be evacuated on foot,**

succumbed to his wounds the next day. Coleman survived. As Bob Pinney puts it: 'Don was just too obstinate to die.' In point of fact it was Pinney's first aid, though he would deny it, administered under small-arms fire at close range which really saved Coleman's life.

By immobilising the last car the enemy prevented the escape of all five others. Fortunately the gun could not be depressed any further than to fire a shot which gouged a deep scar along the top of Sergeant Scott's²⁹ car, and that only a second or two after he had jumped down to order the other crews to bale out. They were all pinned to the ground by machine-gun fire and other cars could not get down to rescue them; but they were saved from capture by D Company of the Maoris, who came through in the dusk and overran the enemy position.

B Squadron formed a laager for the night amongst 28 Battalion whilst C Squadron still struggled to come forward on the left to link up. By dawn it was within a few hundred yards, after having slaved away to remove great numbers of trees which had been felled across the track as far back as Mosciano. And it had got almost into **San Martino** as well. By nine o'clock this flank had reached the village, but the right-hand patrol was held up by a demolition short of the B Squadron positions. B Squadron was now getting across a ford through the Vignone.

The last dash for **Florence** was on. D Company of the Maori Battalion was headed for the town through **Scandicci**, over the Greve River by a ford 'dozed beside the inevitable blown bridge. B Squadron went with it.

But not the whole squadron headed for the city. There was still the responsibility of the flank. Some patrols were directed down the east side of the Greve to fan out and cross Route 67 to the banks of the **Arno**. C Squadron cars, coming down the road from **San Martino** to Casellina, found the Vignone bridge blown, but got through a ford. While they were looking for this, some civilians told them that there were still two bridges intact over the Greve near Mantignano. This was reported to RHQ and B Squadron was told to guard them. This it did with the help of some partisans.

C Squadron, once it reached Casellina, turned west along Route 67 and eventually ran into opposition in the vicinity of Grioli and Granatieri. The strength and dispositions of this had been made easier to assess by information gained from two escaped prisoners who had been discovered by a flank-guard patrol sent out west of **San Martino. The forward patrols spent much of the afternoon trying to dislodge a post set up in houses on Route 67, and finally had to pull back a little and direct gunfire from 4 Field Regiment on them to clear them out.**

During the afternoon A Squadron also came forward to **Scandicci and from there fanned out west and north. One patrol relieved the B Squadron guard on the Mantignano bridges, and the other struck west to tidy up pockets of enemy that had been by-passed by C Squadron round Rinaldi.**

The enemy had been pushed over the **Arno once and for all. **Florence** was in the bag and the string was tied. The luckier troops of B Squadron had been in the city with the Maoris and 23 Battalion, and had tasted its welcome. They had done a little searching about in the old narrow streets and had met up with the South Africans.**

The one man who would have dearly liked to have been there was now long since dead, and not half a dozen of the present regiment would even have known him. In the fighting for **Florence, Div Cav had been the true modern cavalry: with dash, with spirit, vigour, speed and thrust. It had behaved as it was always meant to behave, just as had been visualised by its first commander, the late Charlie Pierce. He would have been proud of it.**

¹ **Maj P. J. C. Burns; Auckland, born Auckland, 26 Mar 1914; journalist; wounded May 1941.**

² **Lt J. J. Best; Fairhall, Blenheim; born NZ 19 Mar 1914; stock agent; wounded 27 Feb 1944.**

³ **Cpl A. D. Davie; Tuakau; born Auckland, 10 Aug 1920; exchange clerk.**

⁴ **Lt F. J. Cooke, EM; born NZ 23 Oct 1916; tractor driver.**

⁵ **Lt G. P. Gee; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 1 Apr 1914; police constable.**

⁶ **Tpr C. J. Simpkins; born New Plymouth, 28 Nov 1920; porter, NZR; died of wounds 1 Jun 1944.**

⁷ **Advanced Dressing Station.**

⁸ **Tpr T. J. Angus; born NZ 20 Jul 1920; clerk; killed in action 16 Jul 1944.**

⁹ **2 Lt R. G. Eivers, m.i.d.; Tokomaru Bay; born Gisborne, 20 Mar 1918; shepherd.**

¹⁰ **Lt J. G. Dick; born NZ 8 Jun 1912; furnishing expert; wounded 30 Jul 1944.**

¹¹ **The 'Runflat' tyres fitted to all the Staghounds had reinforcing inside the walls and were capable of anything up to 100 miles of running when punctured.**

¹² **Lt G. W. R. H. Purchase, MC; born NZ 21 May 1911; telephone mechanic; twice wounded.**

¹³ **Maj W. Hoseit; born Oamaru, 5 Dec 1911; manufacturer; killed in action 23 Jul 1944.**

¹⁴ **Maj C. M. Monckton; Ngatapa, Gisborne; born NZ 27 Jan 1916; shepherd.**

15 Sgt P. J. Flynn, MM; born NZ 15 Jan 1905; miner; wounded May 1941.

16 Lt W. J. Nicol; born Napier, 30 Apr 1916; school-teacher; killed in action 26 Jul 1944.

17 Sgt R. W. N. Lewis; born Hastings, 20 Sep 1909; shepherd; wounded 4 Aug 1944.

18 2 Lt R. C. Cotterall; Wellington; born Auckland, 6 Aug 1913; solicitor.

19 Cpl R. G. Collins; Wellington; born Wellington, 27 Nov 1921; law clerk.

20 Lt H. J. Stace; Blenheim; born Marshlands, Blenheim, 18 Nov 1920; farmer.

21 Short-range German anti-tank rocket launcher.

22 Sgt J. Copland; born Bushy Park, Waimumu, 6 Jul 1912; sheep-farmer; killed in action 30 Jul 1944.

23 Tpr I. M. Linnell; born NZ 23 Apr 1921; workshop assistant; died of wounds 30 Jul 1944.

24 Tpr A. T. Begg, EM; Wakanui, Ashburton; born Ashburton, 28 Jul 1912; water ranger; wounded 30 Jul 1944.

25 Tpr G. F. McDowell; born NZ 27 May 1921; farmer; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

26 Tpr L. H. Pengelly; born NZ 11 Apr 1918; mess orderly; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

²⁷ Tpr G. W. Washer; born NZ 9 Jul 1921; student; died of wounds 4 Aug 1944.

²⁸ Cpl G. D. B. Coleman; Darfield; born Amberley, 23 Sep 1910; farm labourer; wounded 3 Aug 1944.

²⁹ Sgt A. G. Scott; Cannington, Cave; born NZ 27 Jul 1913; farm labourer.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 22 – ACROSS THE RUBICON

CHAPTER 22

Across the Rubicon

FOR THE TIME BEING **Florence** was to be the limit of the drive on the west of the **Apennines**, and the next blow was to be delivered beside the Adriatic. The New Zealand Division was now scheduled to be taken out of the line for a short spell before travelling over to join the fighting round **Rimini**.

While the **Arno** sector was being taken over by the Americans of the Fifth Army the New Zealanders remained in positions a little east of **Empoli** to cover the changeover, B, C and A Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry being placed, in that order, under the command of 4, 5 and 6 Brigades. On the night of 10 August, C Squadron was placed in support of 23 Battalion which, together with 26 Battalion, cleared the country from the railway on the east side of **Empoli** to the **Arno**. At first light Staghounds went forward, protected by two platoons, and shot up houses which had been by-passed by the leading companies, so that once these strongpoints had been reduced, the infantry could then continue on to their final objective.

The 362nd American Regiment, which was to advance simultaneously further to the left, did not manage to get right up; but the enemy made sure of getting back over the river, so it did not prove very difficult to hold the gains with an open left flank. Presumably the Americans did not believe that the New Zealanders had got forward so easily, because they sent down shellfire containing propaganda leaflets round the village of **Isola** at the edge of the river. Early the next day No. 5 Troop, patrolling round the same area in order to make contact with the left flank, was hustled out of it by shellfire from its left rear. The troop was not slow to complain, but word came down from Division that its American friends disclaimed any such unneighbourly behaviour, even though the troop had established the direction of the fire by a positive compass bearing. It then thought it would be rather fun to send one of the Americans' own pamphlets back to them by runner, but when they tried to get one the same gunfire became uncomfortably attentive; so

discretion became the better part, in this case, of a practical joke.

B Squadron was to remain to the west of **Signa** until all the country south of the **Arno** was tidied up, and it established its headquarters round San Vito, 'a geographical expression', as **Cotterall** describes it, 'embracing a half-destroyed church with presbytery attached, and little else beside.' The squadron received its share of attention in the form of fire from mortars and *nebelwerfers* from an anxious and attentive enemy across the river. To quote **Cotterall** again:

'By night we can hear his big mortar thumping away, the odd Don-R, half-tracks, and (so No. 2 Troop avers), occasional drunken choruses from across the river. Reminds one of the lieder across the Rapido.'

A Squadron spent this period back behind the **Pesa** a few miles south of its confluence with the **Arno** at **Montelupo**. It enjoyed a quiet ten days but for occasional disturbances in the form of counter-battery shoots between the guns.

On the 16th the regiment moved back to the divisional concentration area just south of **Castellina** in the Chianti district. Full maintenance on all vehicles and equipment was put in hand immediately and there were route marches to keep the men fit. A limited number of men were allowed to go to **Rome** on six days' leave. There was leave by day into **Siena**, about 15 miles away, to stroll through the narrow stone-flagged streets or to see the wonderful frescoes of Pinturicchio in the cathedral library. Already the Roman Catholics had visited the town. They had attended High Mass in the great cathedral when **Cardinal Griffin** had preached to a tremendous congregation that included: 'Sir Oliver Leese, a charming blonde nurse, and a great collection of "askaris"—N.Z's, Aussies (Air Force), English, Scots, Irish, Canadians, Poles, Indians, South Africans, Basutos, Somalis; no Brazilians noticed.' ¹

A cryptic message in the 'Admin. Instructions' recalls a story of a visit during this period by the GOC. The entry reads: 'The Regimental

headdress is BERETS. No other form of headdress is allowed except when steel helmets are ordered.'

The regiment had adopted the current fashion of unusual headgear, as a steady number of panamas and *Borsalinos* had been 'liberated'. When the General called on Div Cav to remonstrate, he first encountered one of the RHQ NCOs in the full-dress uniform of an Italian admiral. This must have shocked him a bit, but a moment or two later he was put under even greater strain. He found next a group of Staghounds, not one of which was battle-worthy, it being impossible to traverse the turrets for the great barrels of Chianti strapped to the hulls.

C Squadron had just previously found a large quantity of the most exquisite china, some of which it sent back for the officers' mess. The discerning eye of a visitor happened to notice a young subaltern having a meal sitting on top of his Staghound, his feet dangling down inside the turret; on his lap was a plate of beautiful, delicate egg-shell china and on his face an apologetic look. His mild shame rose from the fact that the vintage Marsala he was drinking with his food was contained in a homely enamel mug instead of that more appropriate adjunct to gracious living, the goblet of cut crystal it deserved.

The last handful of the 4th Reinforcements to leave the regiment en route for furlough in New Zealand left on 22 August. Three weeks previously one man had regretfully left. Harry **Kaitaia**—by now the name 'Padre Taylor' was so little used as to induce a momentary uncomprehending stare—was sent to England to take up duties on the Prisoner of War Commission. To lose, even while completely engrossed with a battle such as the one for **Florence**, such a respected, indeed deeply loved person, sent a wave of resentment through the regiment. 'They've flogged our pet bishop. They pinched Harry Kaitaia!' It was thoroughly undeserved hostility that, in some quarters, greeted his successor, the Very Rev. A. K. Warren, ² as some men seemed to feel that nobody would be able to fill Harry's shoes. But fill them well he did, and he himself was later wounded and decorated with the MC.

The regiment had missed seeing the King when he visited **Italy** but it did see Winston Churchill. Even that was not a particularly enthusiastic occasion. After a series of timetable changes reminiscent of early recruit training days, there was a two-mile march down a dusty road during the morning and then a wait amongst heat and blasphemy until midday, when the great man drove past in an open car with the GOC. He seemed lost in thought, rather pallid and tired, but grim and resolute as he stood up and waved in response to rather restrained cheers. It takes a lot to make New Zealanders demonstrative.

There was a casualty list published about this time in which 'Clarry' Roderick was posted 'Killed in Action'. Clarry, who was in the LRDG at the time, was the regiment's first PW loss. His death exposed a sad coincidence. Somewhere near **Sora**, when escaped prisoners were very much in everybody's mind, Dan **Tomlinson**³ happened upon a great sheaf of messages held by a local priest. They had been written by some 1200 prisoners whom he had helped. This priest had sorted out one from 'a New Zealander' of recent date and this happened to have been written by Roderick, only a few weeks before, saying that he had received assistance and was on his way back to the Allied lines. He must have been killed trying to get through the German lines; it was tragic that he should come to his end so near to friends and freedom after long captivity.

The move to **Iesi**, on the Adriatic, was another security move, with all identifications taken off. The Divisional Cavalry was part of a 440-vehicle convoy which travelled in two night stages in what proved to be the most difficult and tiring move the regiment ever did. It was supposed to be done at the rate of 12 miles in the hour, but as it takes years of training to maintain a certain speed through a large convoy, by the time this one had reached **Siena** every vehicle seemed to be doing a full 50 m.p.h., 'much to the dismay of M.P's and jaywalkers'. There was a wireless silence and some operators tuned in to the **BBC**, and as they looked back along the twisting roads, now a multitude of bright headlights coming and going through the blinding dust, they could

clearly hear the acclaim of the French crowd as General Leclerc entered the Prefecture in **Paris** and the sound of distant rifle shots as it gathered round the Arc de Triomphe.

On through the night the convoy drove; round the shores of **Lake Trasimene** and east to **Perugia**, where one of the B Squadron Staghound drivers, dozing off at the wheel, scattered a pretentious pair of Italian gates in a shower of sparks and tumbling masonry before coming awake again. They drove past **Assisi**, asleep on the hill above them, and at dawn they stopped just past **Foligno** to rest during the day.

As they pulled out again in the evening of the 28th the operators heard more from the **BBC**. This time they heard the actual volley of shots fired at General de Gaulle from the gallery of Notre-Dame Cathedral as he entered for a solemn *Te Deum* to celebrate the day of freedom, and the commentator's excited voice rising as the General squared his shoulders and marched unhesitatingly up the aisle.

Climbing up into the **Apennines** beyond **Foligno**, the head of the convoy could look down 600 feet upon its own tail with its lights twinkling like some fairy procession. On they drove until they had passed Macerata, and in the freshness of the early dawn they had run through the prosperous rolling country to a destination amongst the grape vines and olive trees near **Iesi**.

For about three weeks life was very pleasant. There was football, and a sports meeting on the beach, which was close to the concentration area near **Fano** to which the regiment moved on 5 September. There was glorious swimming in the Adriatic, where the water seemed a deeper blue than ever for the silver balloons glinting in the haze above **Ancona**. But all this came to an end only too soon. On 22 September the regiment moved into the line at **Rimini**.

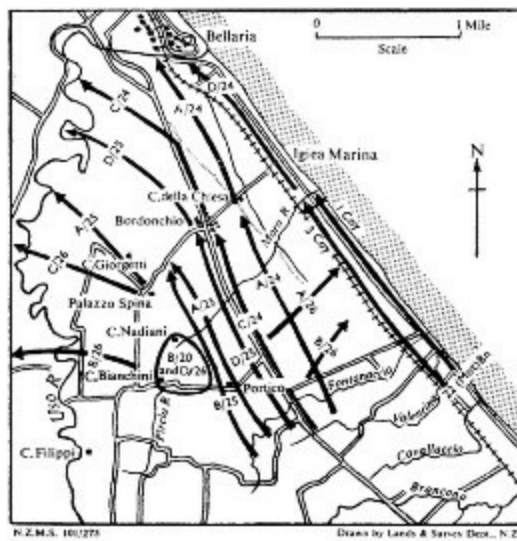
Regimental Headquarters was set up here in the town in a good sheltered position amongst some back gardens near the beach. The town had been completely evacuated of civilians for some time by the

Germans, and by now was not only deserted but also badly devastated both by bombing and by naval shelling.

The general direction of the advance was along **Route 9** across the flat plains towards **Faenza**, the New Zealand Division being allotted the extreme right flank against the coast. Its axis in the meantime was therefore **Route 16**, which together with the accompanying railway, follows close to the coast in the direction of **Ravenna**. This axis was crossed at right angles by a maze of rivers and ditches which made ideal country for an obstinate defence. As far as concerned Div Cav, the problem was attack in a conventional manner, with a squadron pushing along either side of the road. Not only did the nature of the country, so ideal for demolitions, preclude swift advance, but also the enemy appeared to be well equipped with artillery and *nebelwerfers* and only too ready to use them. A Squadron, on the left, did however manage to get about two miles forward of the city on the first day.

The following morning a further patrol, working with forward elements of the **Maori Battalion**, managed to advance another mile until held up by enemy shellfire. Even though the cars took shelter behind some houses until things quietened down, they got caught in a 'stonk' which cost one man killed, Lance- Sergeant **Davidson**,⁴ and another fatally wounded, Trooper **Lennard**.⁵ One car was destroyed and another damaged. The enemy was giving away no ground easily.

What he did lose to Div Cav though, was a technical secret much sought after by Army Headquarters, in the form of a light automatic rifle, an FG42, a sample of which was captured and



FROM THE FONTANACCIA TO THE USO, 24-26 SEPTEMBER 1944

sent back. The Divisional Cavalry seemed to be having a run of luck in this direction as only a short time previously, in the **Florence** area, it had managed to get hold of another weapon, an MP42, again a first sample and much wanted.

One factor which went far towards keeping all ranks' eyes open for such material was the listing of them in a daily bulletin published by the regimental Intelligence staff. This answered to the name of 'The Griff' and was intended to be, as the war diary puts it: '... some small incentive to those troopers of an argumentative disposition.' It contained much of topical and contemporary interest on such things as enemy morale, as well as one or two startling translations of captured documents and some revealing opinions gleaned from captured soldiers.

Progress was slow—and expensive, too. By 26 September C Squadron, working away up a road close to the shore, had penetrated five or six miles to the near side of the mouth of the Uso River (the **Rubicon**) and by last light was still well in contact with the enemy. But A Squadron's patrols were not blessed with such success. Troops under Lieutenants **Spiers** ⁶ and Stace had been held up by demolitions and mines a mile short of this, near the Uso. Stace had been in the lead when he discovered the mines. Spiers, who had recently done a mines course, came forward to clear the way for him. One of Stace's cars, in trying to

by-pass them, had got two wheels in a ditch and bellied, and was getting a pull from one of the others. Orders were coming down from RHQ to push on so, in the meantime, Spiers cleared the mines and then took his troop ahead to within a few hundred yards of the river. He and Sergeant **McDonald**⁷ went forward on foot to reconnoitre it, but they made an elementary mistake. They conferred in the open with a group of people from other units. One shell killed eight men, including Spiers. McDonald was lucky to be amongst those who were only wounded.

In this country of unlimited opportunity for demolitions much use was made by the enemy of all sorts of obsolete bombs and shells. As well as this, he was making a practice of covering them with small infantry rearguards, which laid low until our troops got down to lift mines or remove fuses, and then brought down sudden fire upon them. The boot was now on the other foot, as Div Cav, now at the winning end of the war, was suffering from just the very same ruse at which it had become so expert in **Greece**.

The **Uso**, at present a muddy little stream contained by the usual stopbanks, was much more than a match for the Stag-hounds. What had promised to be ideal country for tanks and armoured cars was now threatening to become, with the autumn rains, just a quagmire. Where there were vines they were still in leaf, and with visibility thus limited, it was ideal country for snipers. Land that was used for cropping was as flat as a billiard table and with about as much cover; so movement was impossible. Forward patrols could get only occasional shots at fleeting targets, and C Squadron's cars on the banks of the **Uso** had run into wire and mines and dragon's teeth, with the enemy covering all this from pillboxes. These were engaged with the 37-mm. guns but without effect. Life had become frustrating. That 'last month in **Italy**' was going to turn into another and yet another. Then after some days of poor visibility, down came the rain in earnest.

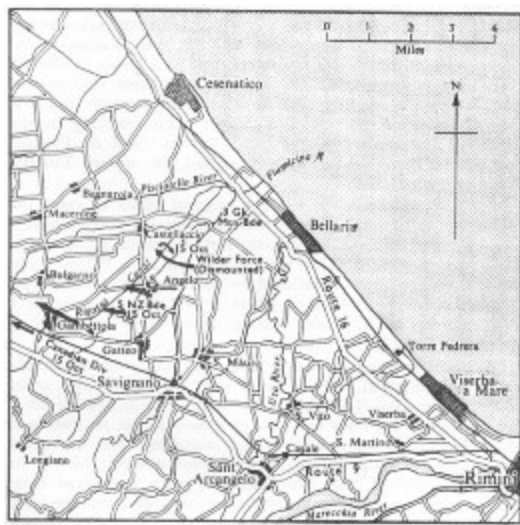
B Squadron patrols had been trying hard to get up abreast and left of C Squadron. Until the 29th they had been working in conjunction with infantry of 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, which was under command of the

Division, but during that morning the heavy rain and the poor visibility necessitated the recall of all armoured cars.

There was, however, one job to be finished off. The previous day, movement had been noticed in a house on the near side of the river close to **Route 16** and a 'stonk' called down upon it. Sergeant **Kidd**⁸ went forward with a small party of Greeks to see how successful this had been. In the house were two machine-gun posts knocked out, and several dead lying around. There was yet a third post, but the enemy there had no fight left in them and were only too glad to give themselves up. There were six of them, of *162 Turcoman Division*. They had long since had enough.

Now that the cars were recalled, the Divisional Cavalry once again became infantry. Sooner or later it would stay that way, for the writing was on the wall. The plains ahead were just a sea of mud. All the previous visions of racing across them at 50 m.p.h. in the Staghounds, shooting to right and left as they went, were gone: gone with the memories of the plains beyond **Wadi Akarit**. The men left their cars in a muddy field, forlorn under a weeping grey sky, and marched off on foot on the dreary wet flats of the **Romagna**. On 3 October orders were received for the formation of another Wilder Force, a dismounted one, to come under command of 6 Brigade which was relieving the 5th. The Divisional Cavalry was ordered to take over a sector of the line from 22 Battalion, so B and C Squadrons, together with a fourth squadron formed from 33 Battery, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, were given the job. Placed also under command for the occasion was No. 11 Platoon, **27 MG Battalion**.

They took over from the 22nd in daylight on 5 October, with the Anti-Tank and C Squadrons forward, near the **Fiumicino** River, and B Squadron in reserve. A Squadron remained with its cars.



WILDER FORCE CROSSES THE FIUMICINO RIVER, 15 - 16 OCTOBER 1944

WILDER FORCE CROSSES THE FIUMICINO RIVER, 15-16 OCTOBER 1944

During the first half of October, owing to the use of various other arms as improvised infantry, the question of identifying them gave rise to the practice of naming them after their commanders. Wilder Force, for example, consisting of cavalrymen and artillerymen and under immediate command of the Canadians, was a part of Cumberland Force and, for a time, of Landell Force, itself part of the composite brigade commanded by Brigadier I. H. Cumberland.

There was an attack planned for the night of 6-7 October and, in order to gauge the enemy's gun strength, a dummy barrage was put down in the early hours of the 6th. It was effective only in so far as it drew small-arms and mortar fire on the forward lines. C Squadron suffered five men wounded through this, and later Corporal McLeod⁹ of B Squadron was killed. In the evening there was attention from *nebelwerfers* but things quietened down after dark. It was obvious to the enemy that an attack was imminent, and as a result he showed every sign of uneasiness. On the 7th he treated the forward areas to general shelling and mortaring all through the day. One C Squadron post received a direct hit resulting in the deaths of Corporals Holland¹⁰ and Bruhns¹¹ and of Trooper Brayfield.¹² Four others were wounded, of whom Trooper Waddick¹³ died later.

The bad weather thwarted the original plans to cross the Fiumicino

in the coastal area, and after several postponements it was decided to make the crossing further inland, along Route 9, directed at **Cesena**. This became the task of 5 Brigade, and the 6th, on the left, was relieved by part of **1 Canadian Corps**. **Cumberland Force** remained where it was on the right in a holding role, Wilder Force coming under direct command of the **Royal Canadian Dragoons**.

While the crossing was being made and the bridgehead established and enlarged, Wilder Force enjoyed a reasonably quiet two or three days. That, of course, is by comparison, for until the 21st, when fog reduced visibility almost to nil, its front was still subjected to some shelling and mortaring. The headquarters of the Anti-Tank Squadron collected a direct hit on its *casa* which buried four men, but they were uncovered little the worse for wear. Night patrols went out and sometimes were greeted with mortar fire. On the 11th C Squadron was relieved by B and on the 13th the Anti-Tank Squadron by A. The same day some Canadian MIOS ¹⁴ came forward to demolish houses used as enemy strongpoints.

The bridgehead was well and truly established now and was beginning to spread sideways so, during the night, Second- Lieutenant **Studholme** ¹⁵ lead a patrol down to the near stopbank with a view to forcing a crossing at dawn. It was difficult having to cross line after line of vines strung on wires, but eventually the patrol established themselves under the bank, well within hearing of the Germans on the other side, who did their best to get at them with rifle grenades. However, the banks were steep enough to provide plenty of cover, though the intended crossing was thoroughly discouraged.

Early in the afternoon of the 14th, however, another B Squadron patrol managed to take advantage of poor visibility to sneak across. They were not able to establish themselves permanently, but on looking into a dugout they discovered, and spirited away, a hungry German paratroop corporal who was cooking a rabbit for his sleeping men over a green wood fire.

Prisoners taken on this front were completely unaware of the Allied

advance to the Rhine. The Turcoman prisoners were a particularly ignorant and surly bunch. They had originally been captured from the Russians and released to fight for their captors. Though they had German paybooks—with one page entered in Russian—these were not of much real interest to them, for many of them were illiterate. It was not impossible that they even thought they were still fighting for **Russia**. Though the prisoners were ignorant of events on the Second Front, German newspapers lying about did not try to hide the gravity of the situation. Rather did they urge the troops to play for time—for the spring—when all sorts of secret weapons would be there to knock the Allies out once and for all.

It was not just hungry prisoners who suffered, nor our own troops struggling in the sodden plains. So, too, did the civilians. About this time a complete clean-out of them was ordered. In the Wilder Force area some twenty-eight of them were bundled back over the Uso River on the 14th, following upon definite proof of interference with army telephone lines. Some of these had been found with long pins piercing the wire and the whole taped so as to appear as a join.

In the cold of the approaching winter, and with the hunger that comes with the disorganisation caused by battle, civilians become desperate. The war diary for the 15th reads: 'We cannot cope with all the civilians who swarm everywhere. No sooner do we put ten out than twice the number return by divers routes.'

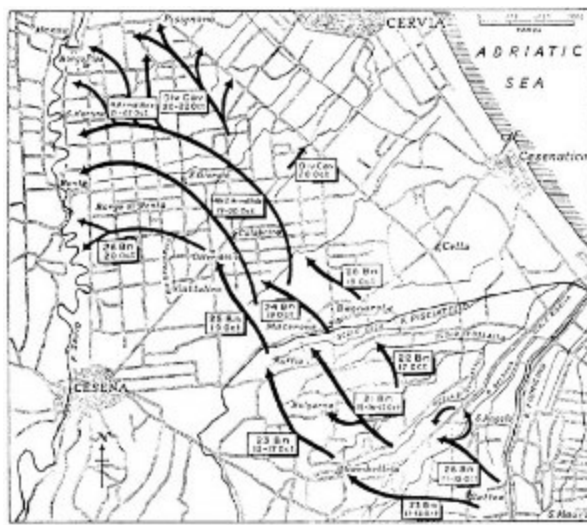
It was hard to drive these people from their homes, if homes they could now be called: *casas* yes, but not really homes. Under a thin military veneer there lies in the minds of New Zealand soldiers a strong sense of sympathy, and they were deeply conscious of the state of these peasants, a state best expressed in its own tongue, *disgratzia*. Imagine a simple peasant's plot of a few acres, a summer gone and now nearly an autumn. His wheat and his maize have been pounded into the ground by machines of war; his tomatoes and potatoes, his pigs and his poultry, his draught cattle, all steadily stolen by soldiers of two armies; his carefully cached preserved eggs were discovered in minutes by expert finders; his

house, long since looted, is now seriously damaged as well. The last of the previous year's wheat is piled in the upper windows for sandbags; his olives are rotten on the ground, and his overripe grapes are still on the vines. This is misery, ruin, and despair, as well as disgrace. He suffered some *disgratzia* under the hated *Facisti*. Now, as an ex-enemy, he suffers disgrace for being of their nationality. And he keeps on suffering, as now everybody is driven away from the battle area with nowhere to go for shelter and nothing to eat. Everybody has to suffer because one man was spying; and he was probably a German in civilian clothes.

The right flank was kept fully prepared to speed the departure of the enemy but was with orders not to mount any major attack. Some Wilder Force patrols were able to remain forward under the stopbanks by day, watching for an opportunity to slip across the river and establish themselves permanently. The first of these succeeded in doing so on the 15th. The following day, with the village of **Gambettola** now well secured and the Maoris applying pressure from the east, word came down that the enemy was pulling out opposite **Cumberland Force**. Immediately more patrols were ordered forward over the **Fiumicino**.

Studholme's troop got across and pressed on over the Baldona Stream and the **Rigossa Canal**, and was studying the open country towards the village of **Castellaccio**, when it was ordered to get back over the Rigossa. A counter-attack of about company strength was being launched on its right against a similar A Squadron patrol led by Second-Lieutenant Purchase. One of his troop, A. D. Davie, writes:

‘Everything was going sweet till I received a message from Bert ¹⁶—“We are being strongly fired on.” He left his set on Send for a few seconds and I could hear the rattle of MG's etc. That was the last thing I heard from Bert....’



THE ADVANCE TO THE SAVIO, OCTOBER 1944

THE ADVANCE TO THE SAVIO, OCTOBER 1944

Purchase had taken cover by a house which was soon knocked down by bazookas. They then withdrew to a ditch a short way back and, since the wireless was now out of action, a runner had to be sent asking for artillery support. Until this came over Purchase, by now severely wounded, kept his men fighting back and they managed to contain the counter-attack at an early stage until the gunfire broke it up. Three of the patrol were made prisoner with two of them wounded, whilst three others were also wounded. Purchase himself, a casualty now for the second time in three weeks but still with enough stamina to walk out, was awarded an immediate MC.

Away to the west, the town of **Cesena** was due to fall into our hands and 6 Brigade was shaping up to cross the **Pisciatiello** River near **Bagnarola**. So at dawn on the 17th A and B Squadrons were again ordered to push patrols ahead, their objective being the same river. Each squadron had the support of a troop of tanks from C Squadron, British Columbia Dragoons; but the enemy was fighting back doggedly and the objective was not reached. Individually the defenders—except perhaps those who had been on the Russian front—could not have imagined a worse place to be in, for as Davie writes:

‘This afternoon we moved to another position across the river and more to the left. This was the worst possie we have ever had to spend the

night in. There were 3 dead bullocks just outside the door and Murray ¹⁷ and Co had to actually remove the crawling remains of a pig from outside the house so we could establish a strongpoint there.'

Of B Squadron, Pinney writes:

'... we had only sleep and cold to fight against and the battle continued all night long. To keep warm we searched for clothes and even rags. Lofty Magan looked sinister in a black peasant's cloak with a fur collar.'

But this was not to last for much longer. The Divisional Cavalry was due back on wheels any time. B Squadron joined C in reserve, being replaced by the Anti-Tank Squadron, it by A Squadron, and A by the 27th Lancers.

Fighting went on. After a heavy fog during the night one patrol managed to establish a strongpoint in a house half a mile short of the **Pisciatello**, but a counter-attack soon came in, and the walls were blown down by bazookas and the patrol had to retire under cover of smoke. Another patrol, from the Anti-Tank Squadron, under Second-Lieutenant Hugh **Hodson** ¹⁸ fought its way into a house in **Castellaccio**, killing three and wounding another. It also was counter-attacked and driven out, taking with it one prisoner.

So ended the infantry job. The weather kindly treated the place to a fog on the 19th, allowing **27 Lancers** to relieve the forward squadrons. They trudged back, the tension now relaxed, over the **Fiumicino**, and were taken by lorry to the Staghounds north of **Viserba**.

The advance continued. The 6th Brigade was now in a position to attack across the **Pisciatello** and 4 Armoured Brigade was to spring from there and clear the country right to the **Savio**. During this brigade's build-up across the **Pisciatello**, the village of **Bagnarola** would need to be held in strength against possible counter-attack, and Div Cav was given a day to rest and clean up before moving up there. C Squadron, however,

was detailed to go forward sooner and come under command of 6 Brigade for its attack. The squadron moved on the 19th and next day was used to extend 4 Brigade's line to the right, against the **Cumberland Force** boundary. The instructions were just to make, and keep, contact with the enemy.

Three troops went forward on the flank of 18 Armoured Regiment, and when the tanks' advance swung westwards to face up to the **Savio**, established themselves at two crossroads, both marked by big demolitions, on the **Pisignano** road, the brigade boundary. The more northerly of these troops had a brush with the enemy and claimed some of them killed.

The B Squadron cars on their left found the going not only far more difficult but also disillusioning. Pinney writes:

'It was our day in country we had dreamed of as ideal for armoured cars. How different proved the reality. We hacked down trees to fill ditches. Axle deep, we just got up the very slight inclines beyond, and ahead was another ditch to cross. It was ironical not to have any longer the bridges we had carried in the early summer.... Later in the afternoon the lanes became unpleasantly narrow. Our tanks shot up the whole countryside and infantry filed forward between the roads. We too took no chances and machinegunned suspicious places. The lanes were very muddy and with a wheel touching a ditch on either side it was a strenuous day.'

The 4th Brigade's advance to the **Savio** had bitten off a large tract of country between there and **Pisignano**, and along the divisional boundary there was still a triangle not yet cleaned out.

Accordingly on the 21st, C Squadron of 18 Armoured Regiment, together with a platoon of 22 Battalion and with B and C Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry, set off to clean it up as close to **Pisignano** as possible. For quite a while there was no opposition, but the going was very soft and there were big craters blown in the roads. But eventually

some minor shelling and mortaring was encountered. A party of men on foot was sighted crossing B Squadron's front and was shot up. This was most unfortunate as it turned out to be of the 27th Lancers, who had strayed some 2000 yards west of its boundary line. By the end of the day both B and C Squadrons had managed to penetrate well within a mile of **Pisignano**, the town being discovered, as was expected, to be strongly held. So strongpoints were established until the 22 Battalion men came forward to occupy the area.

This was the regiment's last day in action as cavalry.

What a pity to fade out of the picture struggling with glutinous mud and narrow lanes instead of roaring up to **Trieste**, triumphant, victorious!

¹ A Brazilian division had been reported to be with the Fifth Army.

² Rt. Rev. A. K. Warren, MC; Bishop of **Christchurch**; born **Wellington**, 23 Sep 1900; Anglican minister; wounded 29 Apr 1945.

³ Tpr **D. J. Tomlinson**; Baton, **Motueka**; born **Motueka**, 29 Jun 1920; farm labourer and musterer.

⁴ L-Sgt **A. K. Davidson**; born **New Plymouth**, 8 Jul 1917; sharemilker; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

⁵ Tpr **A. S. Lennard**; born NZ 4 Jul 1919; farmer; died of wounds 25 Sep 1944.

⁶ Lt **G. B. Spiers**; born England, 28 Aug 1918; shepherd; killed in action 26 Sep 1944.

⁷ Sgt **P. H. A. McDonald**; **Wellington**; born **Blenheim**, 22 Oct

1915; barman; wounded 26 Sep 1944.

⁸ Sgt C. Kidd; born NZ 18 Oct 1914; salesman.

⁹ Cpl D. C. McLeod; born NZ 21 Sep 1918; labourer; killed in action 6 Oct 1944.

¹⁰ Cpl W. H. Holland; born Broadwood, 26 Mar 1920; exchange clerk; killed in action 7 Oct 1944.

¹¹ Cpl A. C. Bruhns; born Hyde, 24 Jun 1914; labourer; killed in action 7 Oct 1944.

¹² Tpr F. Brayfield; born Ireland, 10 Oct 1912; oil storeman; killed in action 7 Oct 1944.

¹³ Tpr T. E. Waddick; born NZ 10 Apr 1919; butcher; died of wounds 7 Oct 1944.

¹⁴ Self-propelled anti-tank guns.

¹⁵ Maj D. L. Studholme; Eketahuna; born Waimate, 5 Mar 1920; farmer.

¹⁶ Tpr H. J. Jenkins; Whangarei; born Paparoa, 5 Oct 1921; grocer's assistant; wounded and p.w. 16 Oct 1944.

¹⁷ Sgt M. D. Richardson; Ruakituri Valley, Wairoa; born NZ 16 Mar 1919; shepherd.

¹⁸ Lt J. E. H. Hodson, m.i.d.; Runciman, Auckland; born Wellington, 1 Dec 1910; farmer; wounded 7 Dec 1944.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 23 – FROM AMATEUR INTO PROFESSIONAL INFANTRY

CHAPTER 23

From Amateur into Professional Infantry

THE DIVISION was now being employed as an infantry rather than a motorised division and was therefore badly in need of a third infantry brigade. There was no gainsaying the fact that, as the war progressed, some arms which in their time had been absolute necessities were now hardly needed. From the nature of the fighting the Division had ceased temporarily to be a fast-moving formation. Its personnel must then be employed to greatest effect. Strong, spirited infantry was the requirement for the winter battles of the last months of 1944.

Without room to move great distances nor the necessity to do so, the Division's light armour had become not only a luxury but also, much of the time, a hindrance on the narrow and often bad roads. The same reasoning applied to the retaining of a light anti-aircraft unit. The Allies had full protection from the air: units and formations no longer needed to employ their own.

The Divisional Cavalry was told of its fate as soon as it came out of the line. Some, mainly the newer hands, took it quite casually, but on the whole the regiment, from top to bottom, took the news badly:

‘[The Major] summoned us together and made a speech. He was very drunk. We were not to grouse but to be proud.... We had “done a great job but in future it was to be our privilege to fight to the finish with the bayonet.” Loud cheers inspired by the sight of him rather than by the prospects he conjured up for us.’

A forlorn regiment moved back: no; it meandered back: back to billets in the village of Cesolo, near **San Severino**, some 60 miles behind the line. It was a pretty little village as yet untouched by the war, colourful in the late autumn with the poplars golden and the elms now a dark brown; but Div Cav cared for none of this. The men were bitterly disappointed and for a few days their behaviour reflected this. Immediately and without shame they held a huge clearing sale and the

peasants came from miles around, drawn as if by a magnet. They sold personal gear, looted gear, army gear, anything—before the Staghounds were taken away for good to the Ordnance depot at **Senigallia**. Trucks were detailed to take leave parties into **San Severino** but the men just wandered around feeling homeless and unloved; and most of them got very, very drunk. At the end of the first day the trucks were gathering them up to go home when the fountain in the main square blew up. Someone had borrowed gelignite from the Engineers. It would be a bad mood that could lead them into such aimless mischief.

The General must have sensed acutely the bitterness of their disappointment when he addressed them in the **San Severino** town hall. No doubt he read their faces and, in them, saw their thoughts, for the words he chose were soothing words, though they were only able to salve the pain. One man commented:

‘Sure, the 14th Light Ack-Ack had cause to be proud of their record in the **Kaponga Box** days, scooping Stukas out of the sky. Why, the whole Division was proud of them. Sure, the Div Cav's patrols through the desert campaigns were praiseworthy; but why: why could they not have been given armoured cars then? Sure, the Staghound was a “magnificent weapon but unsuitable for Italian conditions.” That was just the point.’

As one trooper wrote, and naturally he wishes to remain anonymous:

‘No one was impertinent enough to stand up and ask if any Staff Officers had thought after **Tunisia** of organising for the next, instead of the last campaign.’

But good food, clean clothes, dry billets and rest soon prevailed over these few days' depression and in next to no time everybody had settled down again, determined to become rifle-men as good as any. After all, there were none in the Division they admired more than the infantry, and they were quite capable of noticing that the best of the Division's NCOs had been detailed to teach them. They had just found it hard

losing their personality. That was all.

There was a lot to learn: new weapons, new techniques and applications. There was a lot they already knew, for they had the old soldier's shrewdness and knowledge of battle, so in learning, since they had all just been acting as infantry, they had none of the difficulty attendant upon applying their lessons to sets of imaginary conditions and circumstances. Within a month, though they modestly considered themselves reasonable recruit-camp soldiers, inwardly they were confident that they could acquit themselves well in battle. All they had to do was to think in terms of the new battalion establishment.

Though they accepted the title of 'Battalion', the Divisional Cavalry companies remained as squadrons, and the platoons— well, everyone obstinately termed them troops. Sections, yes; they accepted that word. And their official head-dress remained the black berets. Looking back on that month of November, the change of character took place amazingly quickly and easily after the short two or three days of disapproval. Those who were the most depressed at first were the keenest pupils of all when they shook down into their new 32-man troops.

From elementary instruction in the infantry weapons, and such lectures as 'What the Infanter Carries into the Line', to demonstrations of the Piat and the 2-inch mortar and the flame-thrower took a mere week.

Wet canteens opened for the squadrons; football matches were played; route marches with the full scale of ammunition— and nobody even dreamt of dodging taking the full weight; competitions in patrolling by day and by night: all these were taken on with the enthusiasm of schoolboys. The people of the village took them to their hearts for no New Zealander, whatever his mood and whatever the circumstances, can avoid making friends.

In many ways they were a curious mixture to the Italian peasants, in whose eyes, though strangely domestic, they were soldiers and nothing

else. They were certainly not expected, for example, to understand farming. One day a trooper paused to watch—and somewhat critically—two men in a farmyard grading oats on an antiquated riddling machine. He took a handful from the bag of ‘firsts’ to examine the quality of the grain, and the farmer began to explain that they were *avena*, oats, and that they were to be sown in the fields. Noting that they were russet oats and therefore probably ‘Algerians’, the soldier made a wild guess and replied: ‘Si, si. Capisco. Er ... Africana?’

That a foreign soldier could not only recognise the grain but name the particular type, rendered two members of a most loquacious race quite speechless—for a moment; and when that was passed there was nothing that would make them accept the halting explanation that: ‘Molti soldati Neo-zealandi son’ agricoli.’¹ No. They were all soldiers and that was that.

By the end of a fortnight the battalion had progressed to troop-scale manoeuvres and the field firing of all weapons, and in another week, to squadron exercises and to troop exercises in attacking houses and consolidating strongpoints. After battalion parade on 24 November Colonel Wilder gave a talk on the battalion's future role. Manoeuvres took up the rest of the morning and the afternoon was spent in packing up. ‘Considerable regret,’ according to the war diary, ‘at our imminent departure shown by the Italians and several cases of Signorinas in tears were reported. Our stay here has been very pleasant.’

Let that speak for itself. A lot can happen in a month.

¹ ‘Many New Zealand soldiers are farmers.’

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 24 – OVER THE RIVERS

CHAPTER 24

Over the Rivers

WHILE THE DIVISION had been resting, the Adriatic front had moved steadily forward. **Forli** was now in our hands. The Canadian Corps was facing up to **Ravenna**, **5 Corps** to **Faenza**, and the **Polish Corps**, in the foothills, to the **Lamone River**.

The Division was ordered to come forward under command of **5 Corps** for the crossing of the **Lamone** and the seizing of **Faenza**. The Divisional Cavalry was now part of **6 Brigade**, whose responsibility was the country facing the **Lamone** opposite **Faenza** and north of **Route 9**. The **26th Battalion** took up the whole of the brigade's narrow front, so the **24th**, the **25th** and **Div Cav** were in reserve, with the last due to take over next. Until then the battalion remained in billets at **Forli**, some five miles back. This town was packed with troops and transport. It had a huge **Naafi** and several cinemas were operating. There was a large gymnasium where indoor basketball could be played; but on the whole the inhabitants were not particularly friendly. The town was naturally treated to visits by the *Luftwaffe*, but these, of necessity, were rare and fleeting, though enough to entail rigid blackout precautions. On the second day there, **B Squadron** was dismayed to find, in one wing of its quarters, an unexploded bomb.

The furlough scheme had by now embraced most of the more senior officers, so at the beginning of December the major appointments were as follows:

Commanding Officer	Lt-Col N. P. Wilder, DSO
Second-in-Command	Maj F. H. Poolman, MC
Adjutant	Lt W. C. Sutherland
Medical Officer	Capt J. N. Armour, NZMC
Padre	Very Rev. A. K. Warren, CF
OC A Squadron	Maj A. R. W. Ormond, MC and bar
Second-in-Command	Capt R. H. Kerr
OC B Squadron	Maj C. L. Wood
Second-in-Command	Capt D. L. Studholme

OC C Squadron **Maj D. MacIntyre**
Second-in-Command **Capt C. M. Monckton**
OC D Squadron **Maj S. W. Askew**
Second-in-Command **Capt A. E. Clutterbuck**
OC Support Group **Capt C. W. Mack, DCM**

Major J. R. Williams, DSO, ¹ had been posted from 26 Battalion and was shortly to replace Major Poolman.

The Divisional Cavalry took over the forward lines on 2 December, about twenty-four hours before 46 British Division forced its crossing of the **Lamone** further to the south-west. The New Zealand Division took little part in this action except to mount a simulated attack on its section of the river north of **Route 9**. The artillery laid a genuine creeping barrage on the enemy's side of the river; tanks, anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns all opened fire, whilst the forward battalions created as much noise as possible with their small arms, and even went so far as to heave heavy stones into the river and generally create sufficient splashing to give the impression of troops launching assault boats.

All this proved a most successful deception carried out at little cost: in Div Cav two men were wounded, one of these from our own small-arms fire. Shells and mortar bombs naturally came down from a thoroughly alarmed enemy, but the main embarrassment they caused was to chop about the telephone wires on the ground, disrupting for a while the communications down to squadrons. So successful a deception was it that **Berlin** Radio announced that the part of the attack immediately opposite and just north of **Faenza** had been contained and beaten back. In Div Cav, RHQ and D Squadron were awakened on the morning of the 4th by a bracket of *nebelwerfer* bombs at dawn, an effective if somewhat sudden reveille.

After the mortars had silenced a Spandau which was annoying No. 12 Troop, the day was particularly undisturbed for Div Cav as the enemy was made to lie low by our close air support. This had been put in with

such intensity that not even a half-hour barrage in the afternoon drew so much as a shot in reply.

When 5 Brigade went forward south of **Faenza** to take over positions from 46 British Division, 6 NZ Brigade was able to sidestep to the left and Div Cav, with D and C Squadrons astride **Route 9**, was immediately opposite **Faenza** in the centre of a big loop made by the **Lamone** and **Marzeno** rivers, which join just outside the town.

A and B Squadrons were relieved by 4 British Reconnaissance Regiment; A Squadron was in a reserve position about 1000 yards in rear of D, and B Squadron went back three or four miles to the rear.

Constant patrolling went on for several days, and there was much provoking of the enemy FDLs opposite. Light rain or fog sometimes reduced visibility, and at other times the sun was pleasantly warm, although the nights were bitterly cold. In either case, nobody at all had need to be without the shelter of a *casa* when not on duty.

All this activity was not without its expense in casualties, for during the fortnight from the time the battalion took over until it moved into **Faenza**, it suffered one officer and eleven other ranks wounded.

Without doubt the German troops in the line were getting their tails down properly as quite a regular little stream, one at a time, of prisoners and deserters was being sent back. Some were in uniform, some in stolen civilian clothes, the majority being only too ready to talk.

Now that the **Lamone** had been crossed there was every chance that a further advance, to the **Senio River**, could now be made; this would constitute such a threat beyond **Faenza** on **Route 9** that the enemy would have to abandon the town. So preparations for a Corps advance were put in hand. The 5th New Zealand Brigade was now poised on the flank west of the town. On the 13th, C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry had the job of laying smoke across its front to hide the movement of 4 Brigade's tanks, which came forward to cross the **Lamone** into 5 Brigade's territory.

The Division's preparations for **5 Corps'** advance being now complete, at 11 p.m. on the 14th the attack started. By dawn the Maoris and 23 Battalion were on their objectives, threatening **Route 9** several miles beyond the town. **Faenza** was not being given away for nothing, however, for on the 15th, while B Squadron, which had come forward again to relieve D, was standing to and ready to cross over, the enemy was still definitely there, though he refused to reply to C Squadron's provocation on the left.

That night the positions on 5 Brigade's front were further improved, thus increasing the need for **Faenza** to be cleared of the enemy, but in the morning it was still not known whether he had withdrawn. Sergeant Flynn of C Squadron had already developed quite a reputation for skill in patrolling and on the morning of the 16th he went out on his own to find out for certain whether the enemy was still there. He crossed the **Lamone** on an improvised footbridge, got right into the town, and came back with a prisoner from whom valuable information was collected. The enemy was still there but was thinning out. Flynn then led a fighting patrol back into the town to capture several snipers left behind.

The whole of B Squadron had by now advanced to the stopbanks and had seen civilians waving white flags to them. The time had come to enter the city. In the early afternoon Major **Wood**² sent No. 12 Troop forward; it crossed the debris of the main bridge without opposition. The whole of C and then B Squadron followed and began simultaneously to clear the town of the snipers that were still there. Then A Squadron took over from B in the centre of the town, and finally, by nightfall, D Squadron had come forward to form protection for the Engineers who had already begun to lay a new bridge over the **Lamone**.

It took until the evening of the 17th before the battalion had cleaned out the whole town. **Gurkhas** of 43 Lorried Infantry Brigade had passed through to tidy up beyond the town, and Div Cav settled into billets until after Christmas. Some men had to be sent back to be disinfested of lice, which they had most likely picked up whilst living in

buildings previously occupied by civilians or enemy or both, and they arrived back resplendent in complete new kits of clothes, the envy of everybody.

Two days before Christmas some of those not on duty were suddenly aroused by their mates with urgency in their voices. They were told to 'Hurry up, and bring a jerrican.' They joined a stream of men striding through the streets to a building in which a hole had been pick-axed through the wall. The cellar here was as dark as any other but not quite as dusty—not the floor. Instead, it was ankle deep in liquid which was flowing from holes in the many barrels that were there. At each one there was a man catching the most beautiful vermouth in a bucket and filling all containers held out to him. It was not long before the majority of the unit was in high good humour, and not much longer before they were even happier still. By Christmas Eve, according to one diarist, the offer of a drink of vermouth almost constituted an insult. He goes on to remark that, on the whole, however, this was a good thing because, for once, everybody was sober enough to appreciate the many hours of good work put in by the cooks on the Christmas dinner.

Having been given a day to digest this, Div Cav relieved 26 Battalion on 27 December on the **Senio** front. The warm relations which had existed between these two particular units ever since the early days in **Greece** when the regiment had helped the South Islanders as they struggled back, exhausted, from the **Servia Pass**, never died. Now the veteran infantry took particular, almost fraternal, care to help in every way possible what were virtually novices. Section leaders, platoon and company commanders, all went out of their way to give more assistance and to pass on more information than could normally have been expected.

The allotted area was a short distance from the near stopbank of the **Senio**, downstream from the railway and **Route 9**. A, B and C Squadrons took up the forward positions, with D Squadron in reserve. The **26th Battalion** had been making much use of forward listening posts by night

and had set many trip flares to give warning of enemy patrols. For all its help though, when handing over, it was not able to prevent part of No. 13 Troop from getting shot up by its own men whilst coming in from a standing patrol and suffering five men wounded. By night, active patrolling and harassing of enemy working parties went on, and by day both sides were more inclined to lie low. The daytime belonged more to the artillery and mortars, and to strafing by the Air Force if conditions were right. This flat country gave little chance for observation from the ground for any distance. By rural standards it was heavily populated, and though it was mid-winter and the trees were bare, these were all planted close together, being mainly pollard willows and elms. The enemy had left much of the ground covered with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines.

On 30 December D Squadron came forward to relieve C, but just before this relief took place, C Squadron picked up a leaflet fired over by one of the enemy guns. The leaflet, which was sent back to Brigade Headquarters, was a highly indignant document accusing the brigade of atrocities to newly captured prisoners. One man, it alleged, had been hanged in a window frame, and another had been slashed about the face after death by a big curved knife. It seemed that the enemy still had a wrong concept of New Zealanders—there were, so it happened, none in that particular area at the time—but the general reaction seemed to be to let him keep thinking that. To enlighten him might raise his morale!

The last days of December were spent in restlessness, both sides glaring at each other. Perhaps it was the enemy in this sector who greeted the New Year with the greater enthusiasm. A Squadron could hear a riotous party gradually developing towards midnight, after which, having allowed the season's convention to be observed, the artillery put down a regimental shoot to remind the revellers to go to bed, this shoot being followed by one from the machine-gunners. However, the party seemed to have reached a hilarious stage and the only reaction was a display of Very lights, parachute flares, and small-arms tracer fired in all directions.

In one place the Division could afford to be a little closer to the **Senio** and, to bring this about, a small action was planned on 6 Brigade's right front. With this tidied up, 5 Brigade was detailed to side-step to its right. Accordingly, on the night of 1–2 January 1945, 28 (Maori) Battalion relieved Div Cav, who marched out to **Faenza**, where it was picked up by lorries and taken to **Forli** for a spell of about ten days.

Daily route marches and showers, a complete change of clothes, and good warm billets freshened up the battalion. One or two men were allowed leave to **Rome**. Other ranks were still not allowed to stay in the city overnight but, reports have it, this rule was rather honoured in the breach. Some changes in the major commands took place during the spell. Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder became due for furlough and handed over command to Lieutenant-Colonel Williams. The latter was replaced by Major **Askew**³ from D Squadron, and he by Major Monckton, who was given Captain **Bunny**⁴ as his second-in-command. By 6 January the battalion was ready to move forward again to relieve 26 Battalion, which was at the time organising **Faenza** for defence.

In the second half of December the German armies had really shaken the Allies, in the very flush of their success in northern **Europe**, by their counter-offensive in the Ardennes. This had the effect of sobering the British armies everywhere, making them realise that the initiative still could be snatched from them, particularly during the winter when seasonal conditions slowed, and even halted, advances. As Field Marshal Alexander had decided to wait for early spring for his advance to the Po, he directed that his front should be organised properly in depth for defence against a possible counter-offensive. Thus it was that, within the New Zealand Division, the Divisional Cavalry came to be preparing defensive positions even after, on 10 January, taking over the forward positions of 25 Battalion.

The Divisional Cavalry Battalion's position this time was further to the right than previously, but in similar country, with the enemy still jealously guarding both banks of the **Senio**. Snow had been threatening

since before New Year and had fallen a few days previously. It had thawed and then frozen again to a crispness that defied silent patrolling. White over-garments had been issued for movement in the open. One man records:

‘Snow was lying everywhere and we had ghost suits for the ration parties, long surplices with white hoods and white leggings, to which we added our own white covers for our guns [sic]. They were stifflingly hot to walk in.’

At night it was so cold that there were instances of weapons failing to fire. One man who spotted a German on patrol, drew a bead on a certain spot and waited fully half an hour for him to pass it. When he did, at a mere twenty yards' range, the Bren misfired and the German escaped.

During this period Div Cav was suddenly the poorer for a much loved, strong, and very picturesque character. On 13 January Trooper **Williams**⁵ was killed. He was arriving back at his troop *casa* after returning the ration containers—rations were always ‘cunning munga’ in his parlance—when a mortar bomb landed nearby. His companion was wounded, but Arnold took the last two or three paces inside and fell down dead, with shrapnel through his head. He was a particularly kind and gentle man inside, and outside, rough and rugged. One of a large and closely-knit family, he and his Air Force brother, who had died in a German hospital in **Yugoslavia** some four months earlier, had often proved capable of overcoming not only time but also great distance to see each other. Arnold was irregular in dress and, despite all contrary orders over head-dress, retained for use, whenever possible, his old felt hat, which he wore caved in, and with a leather strap woven through some knife-cuts in place of a puggaree. In Italy it was typical of him that he was never satisfied to sleep where others did and was particularly fond of making his bed in the big bread ovens in the walls of the houses. Stories of him—‘Arnold stories’ to Div Cav—went the rounds of the Division. He once, when banking on having no squadron inspection and realising he was caught, took a smart pace back from the rear rank,

extracted the pull-through from his rifle-butt, cleaned the bore, and stepped back into line with nobody in authority any the wiser. On another occasion the inspecting officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Carruth, noticing the bagginess of his pants, stopped and said: 'No braces, Trooper?', to be floored by the quasi-friendly reply: 'No buttons at the back, eh!' In **Tunisia** he drove the carrier for the 'I' Corporal, 'Banjo' **Pattison**.⁶ He got steadily more and more annoyed at a stiff steering wheel and wrenched it harder and harder at each bend, until it finally came off in his hands. Whereupon he solemnly handed it up to the crew commander with the remark: 'Here y'are, Banjo. Drive the bastard yourself!' But his most famous exploit of all was whilst on a train-guard in the **Nile Delta** when everybody was at loss for hot water for a brew of tea. Down the main line came roaring the **Cairo- Alexandria** express, which was met by A.K.B. standing between the rails, his arm held up imperiously. When it screeched to a panting halt he walked round to the driver, handed up one issue cigarette in exchange for a jet of steam from the boiler-pump exhaust into his billy, stood back and waved the train on its way.

Arnold passes out of this story mourned by all of Div Cav, buried in the **Romagna** in a grave dug under the snow. Even the sky wept that day.

This period in the line was most definitely static winter warfare, both sides being handicapped by snow and the limitations that went with it. Nevertheless the tension did not relax one bit. B Squadron was embarrassed for several nights by a tank which used to come forward to the far stopbank, fire off about ten rounds at the houses and then retire. The battalion sent regular night patrols to the near stopbank, whilst enemy patrols kept everybody in the home team alert. In the *casas* a roaring fire was kept going whenever possible and it was normal practice to take a hot stone out to the post when going on picket.

The enemy patrols showed a decided tendency towards sending small groups out tank hunting. One such patrol, of two men, carrying a

faustpatrone, was ambushed on the night of the 18th by a D Squadron patrol. One man, identified as coming from *9 Jaeger Company, 15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, was wounded and taken prisoner, but later died. Two nights afterwards a similar patrol was challenged in the C Squadron area. These two ran off a short way before turning and firing their *faustpatrone* at the house from which they had been challenged. For this they were fired on by small arms and at least one of them was claimed as wounded, but they both escaped.

Two weapons, the *faustpatrone* and the *ofenrohr*, have both appeared in latter chapters. The former name, translated, suggests the punch it carried—a ‘fist cartridge’. It is a recoilless anti-tank grenade launcher, which consists of a steel tube containing a percussion-fired propellant charge. The latter word translates in a more homely manner—‘a stovepipe’. This is a rocket launcher rather like the American bazooka, and is a steel tube which fires a rocket projectile (and, in so doing, sometimes has the playful habit of burning a great hole in its operator's jacket!). Though designed as anti-tank weapons, they were found most useful for such jobs as blowing a hole in a wall, for they were capable of being carried by infantry. One tactical disadvantage though, particularly of the *ofenrohr*, was that, being an expendable weapon, there was a tendency for infantry in retirement to discard it, and thus, as it was simple to operate, it could be picked up and used against its rightful owners during that most critical of times, the counter-attack.

Pinney seems to have realised this, as his diary comments that he carried one for a while, though he declares: ‘... it was really only for swank’ and ‘the boys were always telling me to “put it somewhere else!”’

Spells in the line were arranged for intervals of about ten days and on 21 January Div Cav found itself relieved by 25 Battalion. Once again it went back to **Forli** for its turn of rest and general tidying up. This time some of B Squadron found a new sport, which became very popular in later months. Squadron Headquarters had picked up some skis in **Faenza**, and these were put to good use by the lucky few who could get permission to drive up the **Forli– Florence** road for a day in the hills.

Colonel Williams produced happy news for the 5th Reinforcements on 2 February. He read to them a special order from the GOC which gave the order of priority of those eligible for replacement; so the 5th were definitely off home within the next week or so. That night they 'started off on serious training for the hectic nights to come.' The following day all squadrons packed up, and on the 4th the battalion was carried back to the little village of **Cerreto d'Esi**, in the **Apennines**, near **Fabriano**. It was greeted here with warmth by the villagers, and that evening was accommodated in billets with such comforts even as electric light, a luxury not seen since leaving San Severino.

Life became very pleasant. The Tongariro draft ⁷ was away on 8 February and the next day some 180 new men marched in, the bulk of the replacements who were to bring the battalion up to strength. The Divisional Cavalry Battalion, like the rest of the Division, settled down to a feast of football and hockey, training, and general freshening up for what was to be the last big assault that would break the German armies in **Italy** once and for all. The weather was pleasant, even early in February, with frosts at night and mainly warm days, rather like the early spring back at home. Most of the men were eagerly adopted by the Italian families, who took a pride, and even competed, in turning out the smartest soldiers. They could be seen watching the squadron parades to make sure that their own soldiers looked the best. The squadrons held dances which were very successful, and one night the village children even turned on a concert for the *soldati*. In keeping with these days the Roman Catholics attended the parish church, and it is recorded that they were not slow to demonstrate the advantages of this on an occasion when the Padre held his church parade in the open. During the middle of this, the 'Doolans' were all seen strolling smugly past from Mass, each one acting the country gentleman with, on his arm, a pretty signorina in her Sunday best.

Under the command of Brigadier Gentry, 9 Infantry Brigade was in existence by 10 February, the three battalions being Div Cav, 22, and 27

Battalions. From now until the end of March these reorganised battalions set about perfecting their infantry training and forming themselves into a well-knit team. In Divisional Cavalry there were exercises in street fighting, much appreciated by the villagers—until the men's issue of smoke grenades sent them scuttling inside in alarm, and also 'accidentally' put an end to the odd fowl. A range was put to constant use for mortars and snipers and all small arms; there were exercises for the signals troop and courses for the NCOs, the 'I' Section, the machine-gunners, everybody. So by the middle of March, battalion schemes had been held, and there was a two-day brigade exercise, followed later by a night advance under a live barrage; and by the end of the month there had been instruction in kapok bridging, tank hunting, and the use of the Vickers gun by night; in defensive wiring and the use of the Bangalore torpedo to cut it. There had been practice in throwing grenades, tank and infantry co-operation, in firing mortars, and in firing a Piat mortar at an old Sherman tank, and there had been a demonstration of flame-throwers and of various types of artillery concentrations. Leave parties had been to **Rome and **Florence**, and some of the luckier ones managed to get to a ski rest-camp at Sarnano. This was especially popular, and those who got there came back after a week vowing that it was the best leave they had ever spent overseas. And at the end of the month the battalion had a 15-mile route march in battle order. The old 'Cavalry-length' march was now a thing of the past. Nevertheless the war diary's comment reads:**

'Some very tired escarri [sic] seen crawling about the village at night—like a dog with a broken back.'

The Brigade Commander had called on the battalion during the training periods and signified his satisfaction, and on 10 March there was a parade by the whole brigade for the GOC. After the main parade and inspection there was a presentation of awards, a march past in columns of nines, and an advance in review order. Three Div Cav officers were decorated: Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Williams with the DSO for gallantry at **Cassino, Second-Lieutenant G. W. R. H. Purchase with**

the MC for gallantry at the **Rubicon**, and Second-Lieutenant P. J. Kane ⁸ with the MM won for gallantry at **Orsogna** as a sergeant in 24 Battalion. The afternoon was a free one for the troops, whilst the battalion officers entertained the award winners and the officers, sisters and nurses from 9 Brigade and 1 NZ General Hospital, who had witnessed the parade.

By the end of March the Division had a third infantry brigade fully trained. The Motorised Battalion, the Machine-Gun Battalion, and the Cavalry Regiment had mourned their loss of identity, had regrouped their ranks, rolled up their sleeves, and turned themselves into hard-hitting infantry. They were now trained, confident, and ready to march into line beside the other brigades. The Divisional Cavalry had made some changes in the senior commands. Second-in-command of the battalion was now Major **Tanner** ⁹; Major **Kerr** ¹⁰ was OG of A Squadron, Major Studholme of B, Major **MacIntyre** ¹¹ of C, and Major Marshall ¹² of D Squadron. Headquarters Squadron was commanded by Captain Bunny, and the Support Group by Captain **McHardy**. ¹³ Lieutenant **McKay** ¹⁴ had become Adjutant, whilst Captain **Gordon** ¹⁵ had replaced Captain **Armour** ¹⁶ as Medical Officer.

New Zealanders must have their football and during February and March they got plenty. But there is one other sport they insist on when possible, and that is racing. So 9 Brigade organised some—a Donkey Derby meeting—on 31 March, complete with bars, totalisator and all. Some of the rules—and most of the running—might not have satisfied the Racing Conference, but it was a race meeting and it was fun. It has been summarised in these succinct words:

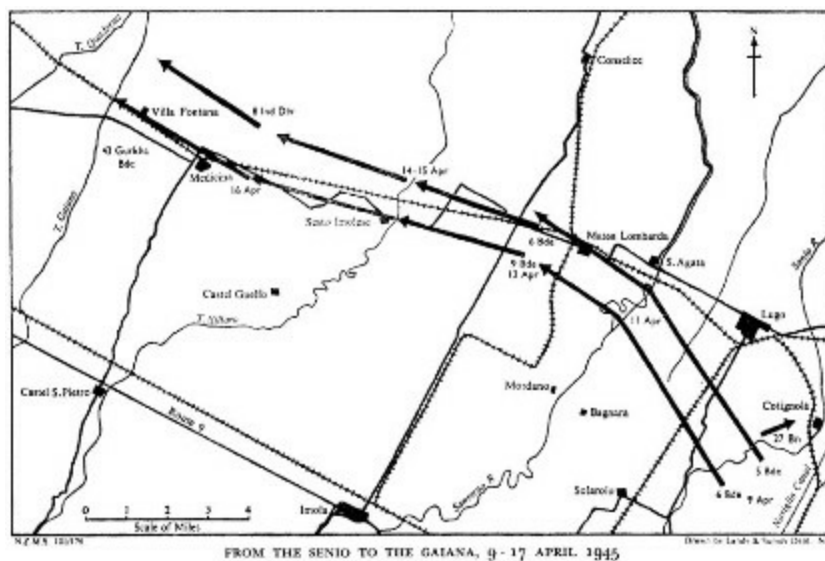
‘What a sight, what a day, what a lot of tired and drunken askaris to be seen, what about another one!’

Final touches were put to the training after the battalion moved forward. On its arrival in an area a mile north of **Forli** on 3 April, there were regular route marches for exercise, and practice runs in Kangaroos belonging to **4 Hussars**. Kangaroos were Sherman tanks with the turrets removed so that they could carry, even though rather uncomfortably, a

section of infantry forward right into the battle line under protection and at speed. As well as trial runs in these, there were practices in assault river crossings, using small boats and footbridges made of kapok, both by day and in the dark.

Field Marshal Alexander's final Italian offensive was designed to start in one tremendous punch and have a follow-through right to the finish. It had to. There was not much of the war left in **Europe**: that was obvious to everybody. The Allies were well across the Rhine and the Russians were knocking at the eastern gates of **Germany**. The Italian offensive provided only for a possible pause at the River Po, so this was regarded as the immediate objective for Operation BUCKLAND, as it was named. The Eighth Army (General McCreery) therefore had for its immediate goal the area of **Bologna**, **Ferrara** and **Argenta**, within which **5 Corps**, with 8 Indian Division on the right and 2 NZ Division on the left, was assigned an advance along the general line of **Lugo**, **Massa Lombarda**, and **Medicina**, which entailed crossing initially, apart from the many smaller water obstacles, the **Senio**, the **Santerno**, and the **Sillaro** rivers. For the opening of the offensive, 6 Brigade was placed on the left, next to **2 Polish Corps**, and 5 Brigade on the right, beside 78 British Division, which was not to advance until later. The **9th Brigade**, as divisional reserve, was to cross the **Senio** behind the assaulting brigades with the object of protecting the left flank, should they outstrip the Poles (who, unlike the New Zealanders, had not yet reached the near stopbank of the **Senio**), and of capturing the village of **Cotignola**, south of **Lugo**. The Divisional Cavalry was detailed to supply close protection for the Engineers (7 and 8 Field Companies) while they bridged the **Senio**, and, once the bridges had served their purpose, to supply labour next morning to collect and load the assault bridging and boats, which were to go forward for the next job. The Mortar Troop was placed under command of 28 (Maori) Battalion for the first few hours; a section of Wasps under 24 Battalion was to go forward with the Crocodiles for the initial flaming of the stopbank, and other Wasps were under 26 Battalion, the 6 Brigade reserve. ¹⁷

Considering the D-day, 9 April, this was indeed a spring offensive for it was a day of cloudless sky. The willows and the poplars and the mulberry trees were all clad in their new green cloaks and a pear tree boasted some delicate blossom. The ground, too, was green and, more important, was firm underfoot. By a soldier's standards it was a quiet, peaceful day—or part of it was. But a little before 2 p.m. all this changed.



FROM THE SENIO TO THE GAIANA, 9-17 APRIL 1945

The Division's last fight had begun. Heavy and medium bombers were the first to disturb the air, so in terms of sound, the attack started pianissimo with the distant vibration of their motors, and continued in violent crescendo with their bombing of the enemy's rear areas. The full force of sound came an hour later when the guns opened up and this, augmented—if it could be—by the bombs of the close-support aircraft, went on for four hours, eating up the best part of a quarter of a million shells. At 7.20, to the very second, the guns stopped and the flame-throwers rolled forward with the leading infantry close behind. If ever machines could spit burning hate these could. From ramps behind the near bank they squirted great spits of fire at the opposite side, parabolas of orange-red flame below and black greasy smoke above. Five minutes later the infantry, with their boats and their kapok bridges, were across and were mixing it with the enemy where the grass had been torn by the

shells or burnt black and still smouldering. The Div Cav Wasps set off back to the battalion.

By now the Engineers were coming forward with their bridging materials, and each troop of A Squadron had joined one team to provide its close cover while two of the D Squadron troops were doing the same for sappers clearing the routes forward. B and C Squadrons both moved up behind 5 and 6 Brigades ready to load the assault bridging to go forward again once the supporting weapons were up. By the morning of the 10th the Division had six bridges built, but it was not done without enemy shells and mortars and mines claiming their toll. In A Squadron alone six men had been wounded, and three in D Squadron.

Until **3 Carpathian Division** got across and breasted up to the Canale di **Lugo** at the left of 6 Brigade there was an open flank. A Squadron was ordered to cover this flank and went forward to dig in near the hamlet of **Barbiano**. This it did just after midday, losing on the way one man, Trooper **Taylor**, ¹⁸ who was mortally wounded by a stray shell. By evening the whole battalion was in that area except for one troop which was still supplying protection for 8 Field Company, NZE. Even the Div Cav, a reserve battalion, was sending back its quota of prisoners, but not without suffering casualties. Apart from Taylor, it had lost a further twelve men wounded. ¹⁹

The second phase of the advance, which was the seizing of the crossings over the **Santerno**, had started about midday. By dark both brigades were up to the river and by the morning of the 11th had gatecrashed the positions there. The whole advance was obviously gaining momentum and, to keep this up, the village of **Massa Lombarda** had to be seized and consolidated so that the Division could roll forward to the Sillaro River.

The 5th and 6th Brigades were up to this village on the 12th and by now the former, which had done perhaps the heavier fighting, was replaced by 9 Brigade. Tanks from B Squadron of 19 Armoured Regiment were placed under command of Div Cav and Kangaroos of **4 Hussars**

came forward to lift the battalion. The **22nd Battalion** was ordered to come forward on the right and Div Cav on the left, and by 7.30 a.m. on the 13th, A and C Squadrons had boarded the Kangaroos and started forward, level with two companies of the 22nd. They started gathering in prisoners quite soon. By the time A Squadron had gone three miles, it alone had sent back thirty. Then Tiger tanks defending the **Fosso Squazzaloca**, about a mile and a half short of the Sillaro, forced the men to dismount. Three of the Kangaroos, in their hurry to get clear of this fire, got ditched but they were recovered during the night. Once A and C Squadrons had been halted, B and D Squadrons came forward and dug in. After the small advances of the previous few months a three-mile gain seemed substantial, but it was by no means unhampered and the enemy had responded with heavy shellfire and *nebelwerfer* 'stonks' which cost one man killed and fourteen wounded. But the cost was well evened on the day. Reports had gone back pin-pointing two tanks on C Squadron's immediate front and these were knocked out by the guns of 5 Medium Regiment, RA. A Squadron had also reported tanks on its front and one of these was destroyed and the others driven off by cabrank planes, which were called down. A further ten prisoners were captured by C Squadron.

Better positions were needed as a jumping-off place for the attack on the Sillaro so, after dark, 22 Battalion, under a barrage, moved forward to the Squazzaloca. Once it was there, A and C Squadrons followed suit in a silent attack.

The main attack went in almost straight away with, in Div Cav, B and D Squadrons passing through to take the lead. They kept well up under the barrage and got forward without encountering serious opposition, so that by 5 a.m. they had reached the river, had crossed it, and were digging in near **Sesto Imolese**, with C Squadron doing the same thing a few hundred yards short of the near stopbank. But once daylight came, things became considerably more difficult, as only half of either forward squadron was across, and to the right 22 Battalion, which had found its advance more troublesome, had only reached the near bank.

There were no bridges yet so there were no tanks across. Enemy defensive fire was coming down and casualties were mounting.

It was not just those across the river who found themselves in trouble at first light. Some of the B Squadron sections on the near side discovered that they were dominated by positions in **Sesto Imolese, and it fell to Corporal **Rawson**²⁰ to neutralise these. In the face of heavy machine-gun and grenade fire he led his section over the river and silenced three or four posts, he himself accounting for five enemy killed.**

Counter-attacks started coming in from 8.30 onwards, but though the positions were rather precarious, they were held, as defensive fire tasks could be called down and the tanks also were able to give help from the near stopbank. Throughout the day, both B and D Squadrons had to accept mortar and shell-fire which steadily whittled down their numbers. Snipers, too, were claiming their quota. D Squadron alone lost four killed, three of these to snipers, before tank fire blew up the building from which they were shooting. One man lucky not to collect a sniper's bullet was Sergeant **Bremner²¹ who, despite the chance of this or of a shrapnel wound, made it his job during two counter-attacks to keep ammunition up to his men.**

The whole of B Squadron was under continuous fire all day but the two forward troops managed to hold on. Major Studholme tried to get his reserve troop forward at least to the river during the evening, but despite the help of fire from the supporting tanks he had to give up.

This was Div Cav's first real action as genuine infantry and it can be seen that the battalion was grimly determined to honour the lessons it had been taught by the 6 Brigade instructors back at Cesolo. They had captured a bridgehead and, come what may, every man was going to make sure it was held. Hold it they did, though the cost was great: the casualty list for 14 April alone shows 12 killed or died of wounds and 40 wounded, and they were to lose half as many again before the position was held for certain.

During the 15th C Squadron managed to establish a troop over the river too, but in the afternoon it was counter-attacked and, after a vigorous exchange of grenades, was forced back over the river. But, like the rest of the battalion, C Squadron was not going to be pushed around, even if it was on an open flank of the Division. With the help of the tanks the other two troops regained the position. At one stage Major MacIntyre and Second-Lieutenant **Corskie**²² had urgent need to dive into what they thought was an unoccupied slit trench and, when that immediate necessity was past, they climbed out again in company with two very surprised Germans. These were rather breathless, but nobody can say whether this was merely from their fright!

The 27th Battalion had been ordered by Brigadier Gentry to pass through and advance towards the **Gaiana River**. This gave Div Cav a spell for a day or so whilst it took over the responsibility of the left flank, and also put it in a position to complete the mopping up of **Sesto Imolese** which had been taken by **27 Battalion**. D Squadron was ordered to do this tidying up as well as to supply close cover for bridge-builders working on the Sillaro. A and B Squadrons were given the flank protection job.

The battle for the Gaiana crossing brought about a carnage of the enemy immediately opposite the Division such as men had only conjured up in their imaginations before the war. It was not surprising. Facing the New Zealanders, command of whom had been transferred, on 14 April, to **13 Corps** (which came into the line between **5 Corps** and the **Polish Corps**) was **4 Parachute Division**, which had been squeezed on to the New Zealand Division's front by the Poles' advance towards **Bologna**. These Germans were the fanatical paratroops whom the New Zealanders had met in **Greece** and **Crete**, at **Cassino** and **Florence**; who, to a man, seemed willing, indeed anxious, to die; who were still believing to the letter, **Hitler's** fatalistic words of despair, now a month old, that 'Those who will remain after the battle are those who are inferior, for the good will have fallen.' Now, with the Russians over the Oder and the Neisse and the American Ninth Army over the Elbe, both within 50 miles of

Berlin, they still stood firm, though their immediate rear at **Bologna** was threatened by General Clark's advance out of the **Apennines**. They simply had—it was their wish—to be slaughtered, and facing the sector that was to be allotted to Div Cav was their *corps d'élite*, such as it was, *12 Sturm Regiment*.

In the meantime though, Div Cav was the reserve battalion, and during the 16th and 17th, as the forward move went on, it was given the responsibility of the other flank, the right, behind 22 Battalion. This was done by moving A and C Squadrons across the axis of advance of **27 Battalion**. From here they were in a position to come up beside the 27th that night, giving the 22nd a spell.

Information concerning the river—it was really a canal—was needed immediately because the attack was due to go in just as soon as a barrage could be prepared. It was even necessary to establish for certain whether any enemy were still there. Second-Lieutenants Murchison ²³ and Hodson of A Squadron did this the quick way by calmly marching up on to the stopbank in broad daylight and firing off their Tommy guns. The enemy were there all right! The two officers were lucky they did not stay there for good! Patrols went forward from both A and C Squadrons to find out what the conditions would be for crossing. They found that the banks were about fifty yards apart and that the water could be forded on foot. The A Squadron patrol found that the far bank was not particularly heavily manned, but that there were plenty of automatic weapons there, and this was borne out by the response to a covering fire plan which the rest of the squadron put down to cover the patrol. A wounded paratrooper was also brought back: one of *3 Company, Sturm Regiment*. The C Squadron patrol ran into trouble from automatic weapons dug in on the same bank and were driven back over the water after suffering a man wounded, whom they were forced to leave behind. But the squadron commander, Major MacIntyre, was not accepting that. He immediately organised another patrol, himself in command, which rushed back over the river, silenced the weapons in question, and chopped their crews about properly while the wounded man was being

carried back to safety.

Both squadrons were subjected to *nebelwerfer* and machine-gun fire on the 18th, and during the afternoon an enemy infiltration succeeded in getting amongst C Squadron. This attack was contained, but not before MacIntyre again had



THE DIVISION'S ROUTE FROM THE SENIO TO THE ADIGE,
9-27 APRIL 1945

THE DIVISION'S ROUTE FROM THE SENIO TO THE ADIGE, 9-27 APRIL 1945

occasion to strike a blow. This time he climbed into a knocked-out Sherman tank and brought its machine gun to bear on the enemy, inflicting casualties, and pinning them down until fire from the supporting tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment could drive the enemy off.

That night the Division's last set-piece attack of the war started. The assault was entrusted to 9 Brigade and to 43 Gurkha Brigade, which the Division had under command. The artillery fire plan involved 192 field guns, and that on an estimated 1000 men. They could surely not live through it; not that as well as fire from all the flame-throwers in the Division. Some did: but not all—not by a long way. The enemy had committed the very last of his reserves and this was the occasion to beat them into the ground.

The Divisional Cavalry, on the right, had under command B Squadron of 19 Armoured Regiment, the Kangaroos of half C Squadron,

4 Hussars, and half of A Squadron, 51 Royal Tank Regiment, together with the Wasps from 23 and 28 Battalions.

After dark all infantry in the forward positions pulled back to make room for the barrage to come down on its opening line, the stopbanks. This barrage opened at 9.30 p.m. and went on for half an hour: a rain of screaming metal, a continuous thunder of crashing shells which drowned out the howling of millions of murderous shards: all this on a thousand men who knew they were doomed. And if this were not enough, they were then subjected to half an hour of scorching flame. Any that survived it and still resisted did so only to die by bayonet or bullet.

Two minutes after the barrage had lifted from the start line the flame-throwers were in action, one to every fifty yards, hosing the far bank with their terrible fire; and, on the signal that this was done, the infantry started off. Needless to say, they crossed the Gaiana virtually unopposed and covered the next 3000 yards without stopping. But, as soon as they reached the limit of the barrage area, the enemy was there again fighting back stubbornly.

The advance still continued, steadily and without remorse, though after midnight a ground mist began to develop which, combined with dust and smoke, so reduced visibility that direction could be maintained only by using compasses. Despite the cover this mist now provided for the attackers, the paratroopers fought back fanatically to deny every yard of ground and, in particular, the crossing of the immediate objective, the **Quaderna Canal. But the attackers too, flushed with the success of their advance, were to be denied nothing. When they reached the canal, Trooper **Craw**²⁴ was one of the first. He went straight across at the head of his section, firing his Bren from the hip, and this laid the pattern of behaviour for the others. In doing it, Craw suffered a bad wound in the thigh, but he led his men on until they had cleared two posts and caused the occupants of others to surrender. By the time this was done, though he was weak from loss of blood, he insisted on remaining forward until the section was dug in. Finally he had to be ordered back.**

B and D Squadrons, following on and mopping up, also found the poor visibility an embarrassment almost as unpleasant as the continued fighting spirit of those paratroopers who had been by-passed. Some of these pinned the D Squadron headquarters down completely with Spandau fire but, with visions of getting too far behind the leading troops by the time they reached the final objective, Lance-Sergeant Chaney,²⁵ upon whom the command of a troop had now fallen, immediately rushed head-on at the position in the face of point-blank fire and killed its occupants with his Tommy gun.

By 1.30 a.m. on the 19th A and C Squadrons had both made the far side of the Quaderna and had cleared out this next bridgehead (Sergeant Bremner's MM citation mentions him here as well as at the Sillaro) and were digging in round a group of houses just north of the Medicina-Budrio railway. The tanks were getting up to lend support but had not reached the forward line by daylight, so, when the first counter-attack threatened at 6.45 a.m., this was beaten off by defensive fire called down on it from the guns behind. Throughout the earlier part of the day, most of A Squadron was in a decidedly delicate position. Enemy troops that had been overrun had manned their positions again on the banks of the Quaderna behind them; twice the squadron came close to being shelled by the 25-pounders, while they had also to suffer the enemy's 75-mm. fire. The cabrank planes also gave them several frights, so, until the arrival of B Squadron as reinforcement enabled the position to be held until the tanks did get up, A Squadron's predicament was not to be envied. Then D Squadron also came through and, together with the tanks, managed to push further forward to deepen the position.

Daylight had revealed a grisly sight from the Gaiana to the Quaderna. Nobody in the Division had yet seen so many 'mort Teds' nor the dead so gruesome in their attitudes. Even the prisoners, of whom the battalion had taken forty, gave the same impression. Shuddering and shocked, or sprawled on the ground in exhaustion most of them, their faces looked like living death.

This was not all brought about without casualties within the squadrons. Eleven were killed or died of wounds and forty-seven others wounded before the objective was definitely secured. Nor were the wounded without their troubles: but it was in this battle that Padre Warren proved his great humanity and earned for all time from Div Cav the respect and admiration that fighting men award spontaneously to the brave. The wounded were scattered about over a wide area, all of it subjected to enemy defensive fire. The Padre organised a column of RAP carriers and led them up to the forward lines, where he set about arranging the immediate evacuation of these wounded. Many of them owe their lives to this prompt act of his, and many others that day owed him their sanity, for he was not unmindful of those who escaped injury. In his search he passed from one forward post to another, his great towering body seeming to cry out for a bullet. But he was spared, and this alone put heart into men now tired and battle-weary.

¹ **Lt-Col J. R. Williams**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 27 Jul 1911; solicitor; CO Div Cav Bn 6 Jan-29 Apr 1945; three times wounded.

² **Maj C. L. Wood**, m.i.d.; Mangahoe, Hunterville; born England, 31 Aug 1912; farmer.

³ **Maj S. W. Askew**; born NZ 10 May 1908; farmer; died 24 May 1960.

⁴ **Capt W. I. Bunny**; Te Roto, **Masterton**; born **Masterton**, 5 Apr 1909; farm manager.

⁵ **Tpr A. K. B. Williams**; born NZ 4 Nov 1913; shepherd; killed in action 13 Jan 1945.

⁶ **Lt C. E. B. Pattison**, m.i.d.; Waiwhero, **Waipukurau**; born NZ 27 Jul 1915; farmer.

⁷ The various furlough drafts were given such codenames as Ruapehu, Wakatipu, Tongariro, Taupo.

⁸ Lt P. J. Kane, MM; **Hamilton**; born Westport, 16 Mar 1913; school-teacher; twice wounded.

⁹ Lt-Col V. J. Tanner, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Wellington**, 6 Jan 1916; sales manager; CO Div Cav Bn 29 Apr-7 Aug 1945; three times wounded.

¹⁰ Lt-Col R. H. Kerr, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 23 Dec 1914; compositor; CO Div Cav (**J Force**) 30 Apr-21 Jun 1946.

¹¹ Brig D. MacIntyre, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Hastings; born Hastings, 10 Nov 1915; sheep-station manager; MP 1960–; CO Div Cav 7 Aug 1945-28 Jun 1946 (**J Force**); commanded in turn 1 Bn Hawke's Bay Regt; 1 Armd Car Regt, RNZAC; 2 Inf Bde and 4 Armd Bde in period 1948–60; Associate Member of Army Board, 1960.

¹² Maj the Hon. J. R. Marshall; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 5 Mar 1912; barrister and solicitor; served with 3 NZ Div, 1942–44; Div Cav Bn 1945; MP 1946–; Deputy Prime Minister 1960–.

¹³ Capt D. G. McHardy; Waipawa; born NZ 3 Jun 1910; farmer.

¹⁴ Maj E. A. McKay; born Wales, 18 Aug 1912; supervisor, Native Department.

¹⁵ Maj D. A. Gordon; **Auckland**; born NZ 24 May 1917; medical practitioner.

¹⁶ Maj J. N. Armour; **Palmerston North**; born **Invercargill**, 3 Nov 1912; medical practitioner.

17 Crocodiles were tanks, usually Churchills, towing trailers full of semi-jellied inflammable liquid. They could project this up to 100 yards, either 'wet' or ignited. Wasps were smaller counterparts on issue at battalion levels, mounting the jet and carrying their fuel on Bren carriers.

18 **Tpr H. T. Taylor**; born NZ 22 Jul 1923; apprentice compositor; died of wounds 10 Apr 1945.

19 Until this stage the historian has aimed at mentioning by name all those who were killed or who died of wounds. In the actions from the **Santerno River** to the **Gaiana Canal**, the numbers of these became so numerous as to render this impracticable. Their names will therefore appear only in the Roll of Honour.

20 **Cpl F. C. Rawson**, MM; **Whakatane**; born Taneatua, 4 Nov 1921; grocer; wounded 14 Apr 1945.

21 **WO I J. Bremner**, MM, ED; **Auckland**; born NZ 13 Oct 1921; farmhand; wounded 12 Dec 1944.

22 **2 Lt O. Corskie**, m.i.d.; **Blenheim**; born NZ 24 Jul 1920; printer; wounded 19 Apr 1945.

23 **Capt N. S. Murchison**, ED; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 22 Jan 1923; law student; wounded 20 Dec 1944.

24 **Tpr D. E. Craw**, MM; **Palmerston North**; born **Palmerston North**, 24 Apr 1917; sharemilker; wounded 19 Apr 1945.

25 **L- Sgt M. F. Chaney**, MM; **Otaki**; born NZ 22 Oct 1921; deer culler; wounded 19 Apr 1945.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 25 – THE LAST DAYS

CHAPTER 25

The Last Days

THE 9th and 43rd Brigades had had enough for a while and 5 and 6 Brigades came through to relieve them of what threatened to be yet one more enemy stand, on the Idice River. The Divisional Cavalry was relieved by 23 Battalion and was taken back to **Medicina. It felt that it had earned a rest, and indeed it had. It had fought incessantly and hard for the last six days. It had suffered 28 killed and 131 wounded: more than a quarter of its total for the whole war. Those that had seen the full distance, by the time the Gaiana was secured, had found themselves exhausted. One water barrier after another had sorely tried their physical strength. The timing of a creeping barrage cannot be slowed down just because the men behind it are finding the ground features slowing their advance and demanding the utmost of their endurance to keep up. Natural obstacles have to be overcome by expending extra effort. These men had crossed one water barrier after another. When their boots were filled with water they had to carry the extra weight. When their trouser legs were clogged with clinging mud, they just had to use more effort each time one foot was dragged past the other. If a man found himself floundering in deep mud in a canal, his mates simply had to drag him along: anything to keep up with the barrage.**

These men were extremely fit and it was not going to need much to renew their strength. Two days of rest and two nights of undisturbed sleep worked wonders, and at mid-morning on 22 April the Divisional Cavalry was rolling forward again with the rest of the brigade following up the Division's advance. The other brigades had gatecrashed the Idice River, overrunning its defenders before they had any warning of visitors—that is to say, visitors in khaki—and **Bologna had fallen to the Polish Corps. The enemy was now in full retreat to the Po.**

The Divisional Cavalry spent the first night about seven miles north of **Bologna, a night enlivened by a visit from an enemy plane which dropped butterfly bombs, wounding four men; it then moved on again on**

the 23rd to near the bank of the **Reno River**, taking care this time to disperse more widely. This was becoming increasingly possible as the country of the **Romagna**, so intensely planted with its pollarded trees and its thousands of rows of grape vines, gradually gave way to open fields and the stately poplars of **Lombardy**.

The further the advance went the more evident were the signs of urgent retreat by the enemy, the route being marked increasingly by his discarded equipment. At one crossroads there was a Tiger tank, genuinely knocked out. All along the way there were burnt-out cars, burnt-out lorries, guns rolled in the ditches and blown up, and the hated *nebelwerfers* destroyed for ever by their owners. There were carts and wagons up-ended in the fields and their horses let loose to roam. For a happy hour or two near the village of **Bondeno**, beyond the **Reno River**, the men of Div Cav, if only in their imagination, became genuine cavalry again. Everybody found himself a horse to ride about in the cool of the evening after a hot dusty day.

While this was going on, the forward brigades, the 5th and 6th, had reached the Po and were preparing to force a crossing. It was 24 April. By dawn on Anzac Day a crossing had been made and, as the reserve brigade lazed gratefully in the warm sun, the bridgehead was enlarged and a pontoon bridge was built behind it. The **9th Brigade** began to cross on the 26th, Div Cav being the last to go. At midday the whole battalion packed up and marched across country to the river, where it came upon an impressive sight, two hundred yards of water with its long row of pontoons to the far bank. By the late afternoon every squadron was across and everybody had been found billets for the night with the willing and friendly villagers on the north bank. The whole division was well past the goal which had tantalised every man since the day the New Zealanders landed at **Taranto**.

The New Zealand Division's last Italian offensive fully demonstrated the tremendous weight and the smashing hammer blows that this efficient fighting team could deliver. Four brigades (including the **Gurkhas**) of veteran infantry and a brigade of their own heavy tanks; a

divisional artillery trained to a degree of superb accuracy and capable of bringing down, and sustaining, a rain of deadly high explosive; all these went to make up what Churchill had termed 'this ball of fire'. With it, and in matching efficiency, went the best that could be trained in administration, Intelligence, medical and signal services, and an Army Service Corps, all of which worked as dedicated men. But in this last offensive those of the Division's men who stood head and shoulders above them all were the Engineers, the men who, with their bulldozers and their bridging trains, came forward with each first wave of infantry to carve away the approaches and build the bridges to let the full weight of the support come on. And when that was done, they rolled forward with the advance, like men possessed, to do it again and again. The advance across the rivers was triumph and victory to the Engineers.

It was now time for 9 and 43 Brigades to take their spell in the lead. Was this going to be the last change-over? The 5th and 6th Brigades had got across the next river, the [Adige](#), and yet another bridge was being built with feverish haste. As soon as this was completed, 9 Brigade was to relieve the 6th, and 43 Brigade was to take over from the 5th.

Divisional Cavalry and 27 Battalions were away by midday on the 27th, and by 5 p.m. were across. With A and B Squadrons in the lead, Div Cav pushed ahead unopposed in the dark until it was halted by the Fratta Canal. The Division's cavalry, 12 Lancers, had not been idle, however, and had been probing energetically here and there throughout the whole advance. As a result, a route forward had been found further west, and accordingly, early on the 28th the Div Cav, mounted on RMT lorries, with C Squadron now in the lead, supported by part of B Squadron, 20 Armoured Regiment, made a non-stop run from Castelbaldo to [Casale di Scodosia](#), and then eastwards to [Ospedaletto](#).

The pressure of the previous week was beginning to show results in the speed of the advance. The previous evening had been miserable. Everybody in the leading squadrons had got wet to the skin clambering through one canal after another, and now, with the rain coming down,

had to dig in and suffer a wet night. The enemy had been pulling out just ahead all the time and could not be brought to grips. Now the advance was going forward at lorry pace. At every hamlet and crossroads the people were out laughing and cheering and throwing flowers. At one place even a brass band had turned out to play them on the way. The immediate objective was **Este**, where the Lancers had found a vital bridge intact. **General Freyberg** was back in the mood of his old desert days and was up to his old desert tricks too. He was right up at the front 'cracking the whip'. Indeed, Duncan MacIntyre was finding life a little harassing with a General offering a good deal of advice on how he should handle his squadron at every mile or so, whenever they bumped another group of retreating paratroopers. But each time, the same paratroopers eased the situation for him with a good burst of spandau to put everybody to ground, thus giving him a chance to get on with his own plans. They were just the same, but a mere major is not really in a position to say: 'Yes Sir. That's what I'm trying to do if only you'll leave me alone!'

Major Studholme relates how, when B Squadron was further back down the column at this time, the GOC 6 Armoured Division (Major-General H. Murray) sought him out to ask if he knew where **General Freyberg** was, and on being told that he was most probably leading the advance, said: 'Oh yes. I thought he would be.'

At **Ospedaletto** both A and C Squadrons had to dismount and fight quite a little battle, for the enemy there had taken to using *faustpatronen* against the tanks as well as machine guns. Before the squadrons moved on again they had added another fifty to the tally of prisoners. Once this rearguard was tidied up, more pace could be put on as the axis of the advance was now along the main roads. **Este** was rushed and the charges removed from the vital bridge before they could be blown, and the column rolled on through the next village, **Monselice**. A hurried conference was held at nightfall and it was decided to keep up full pressure regardless of the fact that the New Zealand Division had leaped out far ahead of the general line of advance.

A quick, powerful thrust was now demanded by the General. He had the enemy completely disorganised and rattled and was determined to exploit this to the full. All day the Division had been 'bumping' scattered resistance, which was being merely brushed aside into the hills to the west. And for all anybody in the Division cared they could walk across the Alps to Berchtesgaden or be swallowed up by the mountains and perish on the way. Even now the axis of advance was tactically in a very bad condition. Its immediate left flank was wide open to counter-attack from the hills of Colli Euganei, and the enemy was most certainly there. But judging by the number of coloured Very flares he was putting up, his was obviously a demoralised and scattered army. **Padua** was the night's goal, non-stop. And even on the way there the enemy was found to be so disorganised that an extraordinary situation developed. The Divisional Cavalry column overtook and ran right through a complete supply column of horse-drawn transport belonging to *4 Parachute Division*, without its marching troops even appearing to be aware that they were not being overtaken by their own retreating tanks and lorries. Not a shot was fired. They were just passed, ignored, and left behind.

The 20th Armoured Regiment had put tanks in front to replace the armoured cars of **12 Lancers** during the hours of darkness. Immediately behind these came B Squadron, Div Cav, with its troopers riding facing outwards, their rifles and Tommy guns and Brens at the ready. Thus they arrived in **Padua**. Major Studholme records:

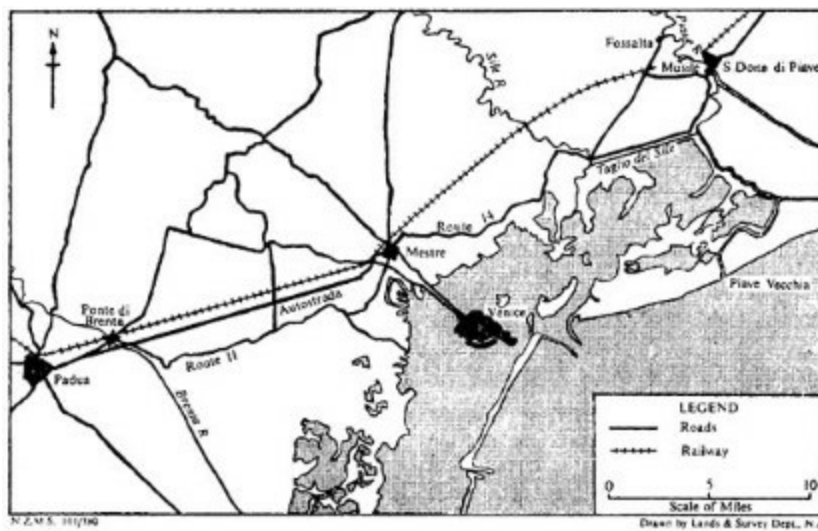
'We arrived in **Padua** about midnight or early in the morning. The place was quite dead but somewhere high up a shutter opened and a voice called "Who is there?" in Italian. Our chaps replied, and within minutes the city was in an uproar. Lights went on and people poured out into the streets with bottles of wine, cognac, etc., and all were wanting to know why we hadn't come before, which didn't please those of us who had been tripping through vineyards and plodding through mud and canals for the last year or two!';

Padua had been liberated by the Italian *partigiani* some days before

and it had been a big worry to them to know when the *Inglési* were coming to consolidate its capture. In the meantime much opportunity had been taken to make retribution on the Fascists, and to settle old scores with personal enemies. Studholme relates how a South African, an escaped PW who had been with the partisans, begged from him his pistol and just three rounds. He volunteered the promise that he would return with the revolver by dawn. He did. There were no rounds with it though, and the South African merely remarked that he was well satisfied to have had the chance to pay three long-standing debts. Studholme also tells of some Italians who one morning sought to borrow for a few minutes from the squadron cooks the rope they were using to secure gear to their lorry. They wanted to haul a *Faciste* up by the neck on a post over the street. But they had to go elsewhere. B Squadron might have lost its breakfast.

The ebullience of the Italians rises to great heights, and rises quickly. But it also calms down quickly. April the 29th was a Sunday and, after the fury of excitement at midnight, it seemed so strange to see people calmly going off to Mass in the morning. Certainly they were still delighted with their *liberatori*, and certainly the partisans were busy rounding up Germans. Some of C Squadron, in fact, had thrown down their bedrolls on the floor of a house, in the company of some German soldiers very keen to avoid falling into Italian hands. But on the whole the city wanted as soon as possible to continue its normal daily routine, even though fighting was still going on for bridges in the northern outlet.

Once these were secured and further plans for the advance laid, there was a further delay when reports were received that German troops were advancing on the city from the south. Guns of 4 Field Regiment went into action against these, and while they were fighting, Div Cav suffered casualties from a single shell which burst in the square where Battalion
Head-



FROM PADUA TO THE PIAVE

FROM PADUA TO THE PIAVE

quarters

was waiting word to get started. The shell wounded the Colonel, the Padre, and the provost sergeant, Douglas Waddell, ¹ who died the next day. It killed outright the 'I' sergeant, Bob Warrington. ² This was a particularly sad loss as Warrington was one of the original draft that marched into Ngaruawahia in 1939. He was the last man killed in action: so near—so very near—the finish.

Major Tanner took command of the battalion and at midday the pressure was on again, with 12 Lancers, 20 Armoured Regiment, and 27 and Div Cav Battalions in the van. The Divisional Cavalry was allotted Route 11 in the direction of Venice, but it still had to fight, before getting there, its last engagement of any consequence during the war. At the village of Mira one more group of Germans was encountered which was foolish enough to open fire. No. 12 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Blair ³) was debussed and sent off to clear the way. Blair managed to work his troop on to the flank of the position so that his Brens enfiladed the Germans in the ditches where they had taken up positions, and cut them to ribbons. About 140 prisoners were taken in this sharp little engagement and a good twenty or thirty killed or wounded. The Divisional Intelligence Officer, Major Cox, ⁴ wrote a graphic description (in *The Road to Trieste*) of the damage done as he saw it a short while

later, after the Divisional Cavalry was back on its lorries and away, though he fell into the error of attributing the action to Bren carriers with Browning guns.

Thirty miles an hour along a main road was now quite a common occurrence. At the Gaiana, 3000 yards had seemed a long way, but since then daily distances had stretched: 10 miles, 17 miles, and now 54 miles had been notched up for a single day's advance. The whole thing was developing into one triumphal race. After leaving Mira the column raced on, through **Mestre** ('We're not going to **Venice**: not yet. Tiny's sending the 22nd down to grab the flashiest pub in **Italy** for us'), and bowled along **Route 14** headed for **Trieste**. All the way the people rushed out overjoyed, frantically waving, throwing kisses, throwing flowers. Every bell in **Italy** seemed to be ringing, clanging furiously on every tower, on every church. Whenever the column stopped the troops were mobbed. They were embraced by men, kissed by the girls, given bread rolls, wine, fruit, flowers, flags, and kissed by more girls. And this went on all the way to the Piave River.

The Piave bridge had been destroyed by the **RAF** some months before and only a ferry service had been operating. But there was to be no halting the advance. One company of 22 Battalion had crossed straight over immediately on arrival. The 12th Lancers and **27 Battalion** were now due to take over the lead, so Div Cav was able to take a spell until mid-afternoon on the 30th, when its turn came to be ferried across. Collapsible boats had been brought into use here, so the whole operation was done in plenty of time to set about arranging billets for the night with the villagers in **San Dona di Piave**.

By eight o'clock on 1 May the brigade was ready to begin the last run of all. The Lancers were away; the Divisional conference was completed; 22 Battalion and 20 Armoured Regiment tanks were rolling up **Route 14** at full speed. The Divisional Cavalry swung into the column, with **27 Battalion** behind it.

By now there was little doubt in anybody's mind that there was any

fighting left. This was to be only a drive, through villages filled with happy excited people, to **Trieste**. The column rolled forward at a good pace, over the Livenza River to San Giorgio. But suddenly, during the early part of the afternoon, the tone of the whole advance changed. Whereas at one village the people were cheering and waving, at the next, the one across the **Isonzo**, they were glum and almost disinterested. True, they waved back, but not with the gay happiness of the past week. This was done with the grim, closed-fist salute of the Yugoslav partisans. The Italian flags were flying still but now they all carried in the middle the red star of the Yugoslav Communists. As if in keeping with the spirit of the day, even the clouds began to frown grey, and by the time **Monfalcone** had been reached, it was raining hard. The **22nd Battalion**, out ahead, had yet another brush with enemy troops and the Divisional Cavalry had to deploy out to the left of the town, but the partisans had already done all the tidying up needed. So the battalion sought out billets in **Monfalcone** for the night.

First thing on 2 May, **12 Lancers** took the lead, followed by tanks from 20 Armoured Regiment, then 22 Battalion, more tanks, and then Div Cav. Progress was slowed a little by mines, until the column reached the crossroads at **Sistiana**. Here 22 Battalion continued along the coast road with some of the tanks, while Div Cav with the others took the more tortuous inland road that led round to the rear of **Trieste**. The very last rearguard of all was encountered at **Prosecco** and produced some mortaring and some shots from one of the battalion's own six-pounders which, complete with *portée* and crew, had fallen into enemy hands only the night before.

One man later described how the *portée* had needed to pull into a side road to attend to the motor and, in following on after dark, had missed the New Zealand fernleaf sign. They had stopped and asked a soldier at the side of the road the inevitable question of the day, 'Dove Trieste?', only to realise too late that it was a German who replied in English: '**Trieste** is there; and for you the war is over.' That was not quite so. They all escaped the very next day. Two of them seized the first

chance, during a dive-bombing raid, and so, in a very short space of time indeed, were able to give valuable information to the leading cars of **12 Lancers** which picked them up as they came along. The rest hid up in a house until things had quietened down the next day.

This resistance was soon overcome by the tanks which blasted enemy-held houses, while A Squadron dismounted to deal with the infantry. The enemy broke and disappeared, Div Cav collecting only a few of them. Once the column was in sight of **Trieste**, it was found that both civilians and partisans began to mob the vehicles once again, and these Italians were responsible for preventing a last demolition which was on the road from the hills down to the city. They found and removed the fuses, so that, by seven in the evening, the Divisional Cavalry was at the end of its Italian saga.

The **22nd Battalion** had entered the city over an hour before and had begun negotiations for its surrender. The streets were full of Italians frantically welcoming the New Zealanders, and of Yugoslavs parading round trying to appear as possessive as they could. The **22nd Battalion** was attending to the German troops who wanted to avoid surrendering to the Yugoslavs, and 20 Armoured Regiment attended to a group of fanatics in the city Law Courts who refused to surrender to anybody at all, so Div Cav moved on through the city to the southern approaches at Servola. Here the partisans had almost completed the job of mopping up, and all Div Cav really had to do that night was to find itself some billets.

The surrender of the German garrison in the castle in the middle of the city had been negotiated late in the day but, owing to the hostile attitude of the Yugoslavs outside, 22 Battalion found it impossible to evacuate these Germans until the next morning. Once this was done Div Cav was detailed to take over the occupation of the castle. As well as this, the unit had orders to hold the port, which the Yugoslavs seemed most reluctant to hand over to Fifteenth Army Group.

For three days the situation was electric, everybody standing ready in battle order until Tito's men had digested the fact that the New

Zealanders were strong, resolute people who were going to be neither bluffed nor easily defeated if it came to open fighting. By the 6th the tension had eased just a little and the Divisional Cavalry was relieved by a battalion of 363 Regiment, 91 US Division, and moved into billets at **Barcola Here the beautiful Riviera coastline and the many sports facilities were very soon put to proper use by all ranks. Leave was granted by the day to **Trieste** and, once the bay had been swept for mines, swimming was allowed on the beaches. Summer dress was issued and, of course, immediately taken by everybody to the tailors to be altered into shapes most likely to catch the feminine eye. All the while the political situation remained grave. The local Yugoslav commander was refusing to withdraw to the **Morgan Line** east of the city, as previously arranged at a conference between Marshal Tito and Field Marshal Alexander. As a result, all ranks had to carry arms and ammunition outside their billets.**

All its life the Divisional Cavalry had never looked for, nor especially wanted, the honour of being the first to arrive at the goal of any particular campaign, except perhaps the very last one of all. But when the unconditional surrender of all enemy troops in **Italy was accepted on 2 May, some of the men did feel that it would have been a fitting gesture if a few of the older hands—just a token number—had been put back into some Staghounds to be in the van of the last victorious rush from the **Po River**, when the end had obviously come. But that gesture had not even been considered and the battalion had to be content to be one unit in the leading brigade. What Div Cav did resent, and they were not alone in this, was that instead of the European war ending in a climax of cheering and joy, as they had always visualised, it should have to simmer down into an atmosphere of mutual mistrust with a suspicious band of people from amongst their allies. To the average trooper it was unnecessary and unpleasant to have to wander about, after peace had been declared, cluttered up with his arms, especially as he wanted nothing more at the moment than to establish at least cordial terms with the many attractive and obviously not unresponsive daughters of the town.**

Come what may, the port of **Trieste** had to be opened up as soon as possible since it was a vital link in the line of communication into **Austria**. The Divisional Cavalry marched back into the city on 20 May to relieve a battalion of the Scots Guards of its guard duties on the waterfront.

Though such comforts as a Battalion Headquarters quartered in the **Albergo Savoia** were a great help to the men, stern guarding of the port had to be done until there were sufficient numbers of the Navy to take full control. The troops in the meantime were not going to be denied all worldly pleasures, not with a city of such warm and friendly people all around them. All the squadrons held dances, and most cordial and successful functions they were. The highlight of one of these parties still bears describing. It centres round a practical joke played on one man. He must remain anonymous but, to appreciate the joke, we must first know the victim's character.

He is brave and honest, and very clean-living, as can be expected of one reared in a stern belief. His tongue was a stranger to even the mildest blasphemy; he neither smoked nor drank, though his beer and tobacco ration were always drawn and consumed gratefully by his mates. That he was gentle and kind and much liked in the battalion still did not, however, preserve him from the mischief of his friends, who had taken special delight in the reports of his misery when, early in the Italian campaign, he had been wounded in the rump. His agony had come, not so much from his wound, stoically endured, as from the light-hearted comments of the New Zealand sisters as they gazed upon his manly rear, never before so exposed.

In **Trieste** his mates had lured him to the squadron dance, as of course a mere spectator of the vinous revels, and then cunningly trapping him in a corner, had launched against him a sloe-eyed fire-ship of eminent desirability. Their victim, be it noted, is blue of eye, fair of hair, of ruddy open and cheerful countenance—just the answer to a Latin maiden's prayer. He had been, moreover, deceitfully represented as

a timid seeker of feminine attention, and possessed of vast hoards of chocolate, milk, bully beef, and scented soap. Who then can blame this beautiful but frail creature, armed now, so she was assured, with the one English password that would gain for her all these, with perhaps a handsome prince as well, if she gently seized his arm and softly murmured: 'Sleep. Slee-eep?'

Our hero's eye took on the look of a frightened fawn while, from his necktie to his eartips, he flushed scarlet with shame, then immediately went pale with fear. He adopted a Cumberland-style stance to keep his tormentress at bay, while his true tormentors rolled round the floor in a paroxysm of mirth. And the dire shock to his system may be gauged in his words, as a ribald 'protector' led him away, when he murmured faintly: 'I nearly hit her. I nearly hit her.' He went to no more dances.

Even by the end of May, when the Divisional Cavalry was relieved by 24 Battalion, the political situation had still not settled down. June, however, was a more pleasant month, though there was an increasing restlessness to be rid of all this political mistrust, so that everyone could go home or get on with the job of defeating **Japan**. Within the Divisional Cavalry the 6th Reinforcements had left for home, as also had Colonel Williams, who had come back from hospital to say goodbye.

In the meantime the men of the battalion, now in a pleasant camp near **Prosecco**, were enjoying day trips into **Austria**, and some were managing leave into **Venice**. They gladly competed in athletic sports meetings and in sailing; and the battalion rowing team succeeded in winning the divisional rowing regatta. They were strange days; a mixture of happy relaxation; of eating strawberries and cherries, and going to the Opera, and yet of firm vigilance all the time. Nor had fate ceased to deliver cruel blows. In the middle of June, just as Div Cav was moving out to occupy positions on a line which the Yugoslavs had consented to respect, the A Squadron quartermaster's truck collided with a railcar on a level crossing. Sam **Cornish**⁵ and Jim **Trundle**⁶ were both killed. And to make matters doubly sad, Cornish, like Warrington, was one of the unit's 'originals'.

The original intention was to send New Zealand troops to fight under the **South-East Asia Command**, and at higher levels much discussion and correspondence was going on. The Division began to move south to near **Lake Trasimene**, the Divisional Cavalry leaving on 21 July for its area just east of **Perugia**.

It was midsummer, a hot, dry, simmering, dusty summer. The Divisional Cavalry fared quite well under such conditions, being given a fairly shady area only about fifty yards from the banks of the Tiber; and as soon as they arrived there many men went straight to the river to bathe or to wash a few clothes. But within hours the river had been put out of bounds. It was discovered to have a mild typhoid contamination.

Everything seemed to be combining to make life frustrating. Despite liberal allowances of leave to **Rome**, **Florence** and **Venice**, and even overland trips to England, despite the good proportion of men being allowed to go to a rest camp on the Adriatic coast near **Senigallia**, life soon became one of boredom and impatience. New Zealand was the place everyone wanted to see, unless they went to **India** to get ready to fight the Japanese. Though shipping was scarce, a steady stream of men was being marched out of all units, according to length of service, to be sent back home.

Japan accepted unconditional surrender in the middle of August. The war was now completely over and the plans for **J Force** now came in for some changes. It was decided to send about four thousand New Zealanders to join the occupation forces. These were not going to be taken from random volunteers within the Division, but 9 Brigade was to remain in existence for the job. It would consist almost entirely of men of the 13th, 14th and 15th Reinforcements and would remain in **Japan** for six months before being steadily replaced by volunteers from New Zealand. The Divisional Cavalry, now under command of Lieutenant-Colonel MacIntyre, was to retain its identity and was even to reassume the title of 'Regiment'. The black beret was to be kept as the official head-dress and the green identity patches were also to remain.

In the meantime the men were chafing badly against boredom and inertia. Reaction was setting in after the fighting, and idleness was hard to accept. The wiser men turned to the Education and Rehabilitation Service for study as a first step back into civilian life, but everyone fretted at the delay. The General had been pressing hard for ships, but that alone could not produce them if they were not available. Towards the end of September he published an explanation of the delay to all ranks. A few days later the 9th Reinforcements had gone and, as the autumn drew on, the brigade moved to winter quarters under canvas near **Florence**.

J Force came into existence on 15 October under Brigadier Gentry, who was to retain command for a month until he handed over to Brigadier Stewart. Once it was a definite body, some effort could be made to settle down to serious training. All those who were not going to **Japan** were marched out to camps to wait their return home, and in Div Cav they were replaced by a brand-new D Squadron, entirely of Maoris. This was a delight to the regiment because nobody could really come up to the Maoris in plain parade-ground drill. Before the Japanese the New Zealanders had to appear as good as their fighting reputation. By 15 November, when the force paraded for **General Freyberg** during his last round of farewells, it drilled to a standard which drew praise even from him, and every man knew that his were never hollow words.

All units were steadily handing in their equipment as part of their disbandment and enormous dumps were springing up which needed guarding. **J Force** was called upon to supply these, so life was not just one of dull routine. December was a remarkably mild month for the time of the year, there being little rain, no snow, and a reasonable amount of sunshine. All these things combined to make conditions for camp life and training more pleasant than was expected. There was plenty of football to be played and plenty of leave to **Florence**. Christmas and New Year came and went with traditional celebrations, D Squadron serving and eating their Christmas dinner after the manner of their own people.

A fortnight later the first stage of the move to **Japan** took place when all the heavy equipment left for **Bari** to be shipped, and a week later an advanced party left for **Naples**, sailing from there on 25 January 1946 on the MV *Georgic*. From then on uncertainty and rumour began steadily to be replaced with action and movement. On 6 February there was a regimental parade for Brigadier Stewart, who addressed the men on their new duties in **Japan**. The following day they left **Florence** for the last time.

The actual move to **Japan** needs little description at this point of the story. One troop movement is much the same as another. There was a bout of influenza while waiting in a transit camp near **Naples**, but most of the men had recovered by the time for embarkation. The troopship, SS *Strathmore*, left **Naples** on 21 February, and though she called at **Port Said**, **Port Tewfik**, **Colombo**, **Singapore** and **Hong Kong**, there was no shore leave, even though she drew into the inner harbour at **Singapore** to disembark some hospital cases from an epidemic of measles which had broken out during the trip. **Kure**, the port of destination, was reached on 19 March, and for the Divisional Cavalry there was not much more travelling. The regiment was to take over from 67 Australian Battalion on the large island of Eta-Jima about four miles away.

The regiment did not disembark until the 23rd and that afternoon the men found themselves settling down in a large concrete building, lately a Japanese naval academy. These billets, in a setting of cherry trees, were walled off from the villages. The large parade ground was flanked with pine trees and a backdrop of mountains. Here the regiment took over from the Australians on a full ceremonial parade.

Once the island had been fully patrolled and all information concerning dumps and installations collected, however, the Divisional Cavalry was instructed to hand over the garrison duties to 2 Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers, while the regiment was sent to billets at Hirao. April was spent on various tasks. One squadron spent some time at Otake supervising the repatriation of Japanese prisoners of war. Parties

were detailed to supervise the Japanese elections and were most impressed by the manner in which they were received. The Japanese took the elections most seriously indeed. One corporal even found himself unexpectedly confronted with an invitation to deliver a lecture on Democracy to the women of a village who were about to have their first vote.

There were many forms of impromptu recreation to be discovered, rowing being perhaps the most popular; and pheasant shooting, though this often entailed tramping many fruitless miles over the hills. Picnics were arranged on Sundays with the sisters and nurses of 6 NZ General Hospital, who found it most pleasant to be quartered near so many willing cavaliers when they were not allowed to move about outside the hospital without male escort. Anzac Day was commemorated by a most impressive parade of some 2800 men of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force, and was witnessed by several thousands, including a large number of civilians.

By May the regiment had settled in, with its permanent headquarters in the naval barracks at Mizuba. This was a very busy month indeed, entailing much movement of personnel. While C Squadron continued with its repatriation tasks, A Squadron was at **Kure** unloading supplies, and B Squadron moved to the densely populated area round the Hiraki arsenal, where it was occupied with patrol and garrison duties. Three of the squadrons in turn were detailed for guard duties on the Japanese repatriation trains on Kyushu Island. Over and above all this, time was found, with a month of fine weather, for much sport. There was swimming and yachting in whaleboats with improvised sails. There was much interest in the inter-squadron cricket, in baseball, basketball, and in athletics, whilst in the evenings an Australian cinema unit kept up a regular supply of films.

Colonel MacIntyre had been evacuated to hospital with appendicitis and Major Kerr, promoted lieutenant-colonel, took command during his absence. During this time, too, there was an undercurrent of excitement right through the regiment. Some of the men had been detailed as part

of a **Tokyo** battalion, but they were suddenly disappointed to have this cancelled on the very eve of departure. But the disappointment was not long-lived. A draft of reinforcements was due to arrive from New Zealand under the command of a new CO, Lieutenant- Colonel **Worsnop**.⁷

¹ **Sgt D. C. Waddell**; born NZ 4 Oct 1921; shop assistant; died of wounds 30 Apr 1945.

² **Sgt C. R. Warrington**; born NZ 29 Feb 1916; farmhand; killed in action 29 Apr 1945.

³ **2 Lt A. G. Blair, m.i.d.; Palmerston North**; born NZ 21 Dec 1916; shop assistant; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

⁴ **Maj G. S. Cox, MBE, m.i.d.; London**; born **Palmerston North**, 7 Apr 1910; journalist.

⁵ **S-Sgt A. E. Cornish, m.i.d.**; born NZ 4 Jul 1914; hairdresser; died on active service 15 Jun 1945.

⁶ **Tpr J. H. Trundle**; born NZ 14 May 1916; sharemilker; died on active service 15 Jun 1945.

⁷ **Lt-Col J. A. Worsnop, MBE**; born Makotuku, 31 Jan 1909; Regular soldier; **23 Bn** 1941 and 1944; **1 Army Tank Bn (NZ)** 1942–43; C O Div Cav (**J Force**) 28 Jun 1946–3 May 1947; wounded 22 Jul 1944; died **Christchurch**, 25 Jul 1957.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

CHAPTER 26 – THE SPIRIT OF THE REGIMENT

CHAPTER 26

The Spirit of the Regiment

THE STORY of the Divisional Cavalry is a difficult one to close, and we shall end it with the regiment in the hands of Colonel Worsnop when he took over command on 28 June 1946. Under him, and later under Ralph McQueen, the regiment remained as a unit of the Occupation Force for another year.

There was certainly a last regimental parade, on 5 August 1947, when Last Post was sounded as the regimental flag was lowered for all time. And it was most fitting that this parade should be under the command of one of the original subalterns, now Lieutenant-Colonel R. B. McQueen. It was fitting, too, that almost the regiment's last official visitor should have been 'Harry Kaitaia', now Senior Chaplain to the Forces, Lieutenant-Colonel H. G. Taylor, DSO.

Officially the regiment was disbanded on 1 September 1947, but that is only an entry on a piece of paper. The last lowering of the flag was merely a formality. In effect it still flies very high, held there by the Spirit of the Regiment.

What is this spirit? It is something which was planted by the first Commanding Officer, and was tended for him by his successors and flourished in the fertile ground of their command. And why did it grow so strongly? As the strength of a nation lies in the strength of the family ties within it, so in the Divisional Cavalry was there a great comradeship welling from many small ones; one to each crew, each troop, each squadron. What was the nature of it? It was the dread in every man of being unable to contribute to that precious comradeship. For much of its life the regiment's vehicle casualties were most difficult to replace, so there developed shrewdness and teamwork in handling them, care in their maintenance, and ingenuity in their repair. When replacements did become readily available—in **Italy a new car could always be had the very next day—then, replaced by a bubbling gayness,**

this dread was gone. By now this spirit had become indelibly an integral characteristic of each man. The days from **Cassino to **Florence** marked the peak of their cavalry career.**

But again: what was this spirit? It was something which will endure in the coming years so long as the last survivor shall draw breath; it will survive him, indeed us all, because we have passed it on already to new units. There it now lies, as dormant in peace as it was animated in war. It was inherited from the blood of our forbears. May it thrive for ever in the seed of our progeny.

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

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**NEXT REUNION: CHRISTCHURCH, QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY
WEEKEND, 1963**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

ROLL OF HONOUR

Roll of Honour

* While serving with **Long Range Desert Group.**

* While serving with **Long Range Desert Group.**

* While serving with **LRDG.**

‡ ‡ Taken prisoner while serving with **LRDG. Killed while an escaper in Italy.**

* While serving with **LRDG.**

KILLED IN ACTION

Capt J. G. Wynyard	2 November 1942
Lt J. W. Fisher	16 December 1942
Lt W. J. Nicol	26 July 1944
Lt J. W. Reeves, MC	16 December 1942
Lt G. B. Spiers	26 September 1944
Lt M. P. Studholme	20 May 1941
Lt W. J. Thwaites	22 July 1942
2 Lt G. R. Murray	14 April 1945
2 Lt I. Rutherford	28 November 1941
Sgt J. Copland	30 July 1944
Sgt P. T. Cullen	1 September 1942
Sgt R. G. Edwards	26 May 1941
Sgt K. D. Jones, m.i.d.	15 January 1943
Sgt I. H. McInnes, MM	24 October 1942
Sgt A. J. Riddell, MM	22 July 1942
Sgt J. F. Van Asch	20 May 1941

Sgt C. R. Warrington	29 April 1945
L-Sgt A. K. Davidson	23 September 1944
L-Sgt J. C. Donald	14 April 1945
L-Sgt P. L. Titchener	24 October 1942
Cpl E. A. Anderson	29 December 1943
Cpl F. D. Baucke	14 April 1945
Cpl F. R. Beech, m.i.d.	31 January 1941 *
Cpl A. C. Bruhns	7 October 1944
Cpl H. McA. Crossan	28 November 1941
Cpl L. F. Denz	9 August 1942
Cpl P. H. Fullerton-Smith	2 November 1942
Cpl M. R. Hardy	16 December 1942
Cpl C. D. Hewson	11 January 1941 *
Cpl W. H. Holland	7 October 1944
Cpl P. Howe	18 April 1945
Cpl W. Johnston	27 November 1941
Cpl H. C. McDowall	22 May 1941
Cpl J. B. McKenna	18 April 1945
Cpl D. C. McLeod	6 October 1944
Cpl H. R. Marshall	22 May 1941
Cpl E. C. Read	29 November 1941
Cpl N. Roberts	18 April 1945
Cpl G. W. Smith	26 May 1941
Cpl W. C. Sturm	15 January 1943
Cpl F. V. Woodward	24 April 1941
L-Cpl J. A. Ballantyne	12 November 1942
L-Cpl L. H. Chapman	26 March 1943
L-Cpl H. G. Dunn	25 February 1944
L-Cpl I. A. Littin	30 March 1943
L-Cpl J. T. A. Nevill	16 December 1942
L-Cpl N. O'Malley	18 November 1942 *
L-Cpl L. Roderick	6 April 1944 †
L-Cpl F. L. Taylor	16 December 1942
Tpr T. J. Angus	16 July 1944
Tpr A. G. Arnott	18 April 1945
Tpr F. R. Bentley	18 April 1945
Tpr J. T. Bowler	24 October 1943 *

Tpr F. Brayfield	7 October 1944
Tpr L. W. Budd	28 November 1941
Tpr C. J. Carr	24 October 1942
Tpr C. M. Coventry	26 October 1942
Tpr V. Cunningham	19 April 1945
Tpr C. T. Davies	24 October 1942
Tpr R. E. Diederich	14 April 1945
Tpr R. A. Dix	7 March 1943
Tpr F. Doak	20 December 1942
Tpr E. J. Evans	17 January 1943
Tpr J. E. Falloon	29 November 1941
Tpr I. C. Glendinning	14 April 1945
Tpr P. S. Grattan	23 April 1941
Tpr H. D. Hocking	April 1941
Tpr J. A. Jensen	24 October 1942
Tpr D. F. Jermyn	22 November 1941
Tpr D. H. Johnson	20 March 1944
Tpr D. T. Kelly	5 July 1942
Tpr F. A. Lawrence	27 March 1944
Tpr A. G. F. Loe	2 November 1942
Tpr J. E. McCartney	27 March 1943
Tpr L. M. McCurran	13 April 1945
Tpr G. F. McDowell	3 August 1944
Tpr R. McDowell	14 April 1945
Tpr A. H. McKay	18 April 1945
Tpr R. A. McKenzie	2 June 1941
Tpr L. Mahony	14 April 1945
Tpr S. G. Manson	24 October 1942
Pte J. R. Moss (NZMC attached)	23 March 1943
Tpr J. F. Murphy	19 April 1945
Tpr W. B. Nicolson	21 May 1941
Tpr L. H. Pengelly	3 August 1944
Tpr H. C. R. Reeve	19 April 1941
Tpr A. T. Risk	14 April 1941
Tpr E. Robertson	14 April 1945
Tpr J. D. W. Smith	14 April 1945
Tpr J. A. Stanley	5 December 1941 †

Tpr N. A. Thomson	18 April 1945
Tpr D. V. Weight	28 May 1941
Tpr R. F. Wildash	20 May 1941
Tpr A. K. B. Williams	13 January 1945
Tpr C. St.E. Williams	12 April 1943
Tpr G. E. Woodhead	12 April 1943

† **Drowned off Tobruk in sinking of *Chakdina*.**

DIED OF WOUNDS

Lt H. A. McAulay	26 January 1943
Lt R. O. McFarlane	21 April 1943
Lt D. M. H. Tripp	6 March 1944
Lt H. C. Wynyard	19 April 1945
2 Lt F. H. C. Batchelor	28 February 1944
S-Sgt D. S. McPherson	16 April 1945
Sgt W. R. Brown, MM	21 December 1943
Sgt D. A. H. Dunbar	26 October 1942
Sgt D. A. McGlashan	12 November 1942
Sgt G. M. South	18 March 1944
Sgt D. C. Waddell	30 April 1945
Cpl O. R. Ferens	16 July 1942
Cpl J. J. W. King, MM	17 April 1941
Cpl B. W. Wachter	19 January 1943
Cpl C. Wood	30 November 1941
L-Cpl G. T. Eddie	24 April 1943
L-Cpl L. P. Eves	2 November 1942
L-Cpl I. A. Latham	4 November 1942
Tpr E. D. Bright	19 April 1945
Tpr B. S. Cochrane	20 April 1945
Tpr T. D. Cochrane	7 April 1944
Tpr D. Crozier	26 October 1942
Tpr T. N. Douglas	14 April 1945
Tpr W. A. Hallgarth	30 November 1941
Tpr C. H. Hardyment	24 October 1942
Tpr M. Hayes	19 April 1945

Tpr R. L. Hicks	21 April 1945
Tpr H. T. Jones	24 October 1942
Tpr A. S. Lennard	25 September 1944
Tpr I. M. Linnell	30 July 1944
Tpr A. A. Lowe	14 April 1945
Tpr R. A. J. McCallum	25 October 1942
Tpr G. A. McLeod	28 December 1944
Tpr H. L. Mallett	24 October 1943 *
Tpr R. O. Murray	16 April 1945
Tpr A. J. Ramsay	17 March 1944
Tpr J. R. Reed	27 March 1944
Tpr A. S. Scragg	24 October 1942
Tpr C. J. Simpkins	1 June 1944
Tpr H. T. Taylor	10 April 1945
Tpr S. G. Thorn	31 December 1943
Tpr T. E. Waddick	7 October 1944
Tpr G. W. Washer	4 August 1944
Tpr H. A. Youngman	14 April 1945

DIED WHILE PRISONER OF WAR

Lt H. M. Laing	4 July 1942
Sgt E. J. Dobson	6 April 1945 *
Cpl O. Wares	17 August 1942
L-Cpl A. E. Keith	26 June 1941
Tpr J. C. Graham	20 June 1941
Tpr R. J. Harrison	7 September 1941
Tpr L. A. McIver	16 February 1945 *
Tpr G. A. T. Seaton	30 May 1941

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

S-Sgt A. E. Cornish	15 June 1945
S-Sgt S. V. S. Johnston	16 February 1942
Cpl G. Laing	9 July 1945
Tpr W. J. C. Andrews	21 May 1942
Tpr J. Lamont	14 March 1942 *
Tpr R. W. Lawson	25 October 1941
Tpr K. J. Milne	2 November 1945
Tpr J. E. Oliver	23 January 1942
Tpr A. Parker	14 June 1945

Tpr T. F. Sheasby	3 March 1945
Tpr V. W. Thompson	19 June 1940
Tpr J. H. Trundle	15 June 1945
Tpr W. Winsor	18 October 1940

* **Taken prisoner while serving with LRDG.**

* **Taken prisoner while serving with LRDG.**

* **Taken prisoner while serving with LRDG.**

* **While serving with LRDG.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Summary of Casualties

	Killed or Died of Wounds		Wounded		Wounded and PW		Prisoners of War *		Died on Active Service		TOTAL
	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>Offrs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	<i>ORs</i>	
Greece	—	7	2	10	1	1	1	42	—	64	
Crete	1	9	4	36	—	9	—	7	—	66	
Libya, 1941	1	8	3	27	—	1	—	5	—	45	
Egypt, 1942	3	24	4	26	4	31	—	6	—	98	
Tripolitania and Tunisia	4	15	10	40	—	—	—	—	—	69	
Italy	6	56	17	251	—	2	—	1	11	344	
	15	119	40	390	5	44	1	61	11	686	

Divisional Cavalry men who became casualties while serving in the LRDG are not included in this summary.

*** Five other ranks died while prisoners of war.**

DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Honours and Awards

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER

Maj E. R. Harford

Maj D. MacIntyre

Maj J. T. Russell

Capt N. P. Wilder *

Rev. H. G. Taylor (Chaplain attached)

BAR TO MILITARY CROSS

Lt A. R. W. Ormond

MILITARY CROSS

Maj D. A. Cole

Capt W. G. Handley

Capt F. H. Poolman

Lt J. W. Reeves

Lt H. A. Robinson

Lt J. H. Sutherland *

2 Lt C. S. Morris *

2 Lt I. L. Murchison

2 Lt A. R. W. Ormond

2 Lt G. W. R. H. Purchase

Very Rev. A. K. Warren (Chaplain attached)

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Capt D. Barrett *

Lt R. L. Ball

Lt J. H. H. Pierce (LAD attached)

ORDER OF THE PHOENIX SILVER CROSS (GREEK)

Maj G. H. Stace

DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL

WO II F. G. Conway

WO II G. T. Seccombe

Sgt C. W. Mack

Cpl W. T. Weir

Tpr R. J. Moore *

BAR TO MILITARY MEDAL

Cpl A. Sperry

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

Sgt J. Bremner

Sgt W. R. Brown

Sgt P. J. Flynn

Sgt A. J. Riddell

L-Sgt M. F. Chancy

L-Sgt F. A. Marks

Cpl A. Bayliss

Cpl G. C. Garven *

Cpl J. J. W. King

Cpl J. M. Murphy

Cpl F. C. Rawson

Cpl K. E. Tippett *

L-Cpl L. H. Lovegrove

L-Cpl C. Waetford *

Tpr J. W. Barnard

Tpr F. H. Bear

Tpr D. E. Craw

Tpr T. B. Dobson *

Tpr E. Ellis *

Tpr I. H. McInnes *

Tpr E. Priddle

Tpr A. Sperry

Tpr L. A. Willcox *

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

Sgt J. E. Harding

Commanding Officers

Lt-Col C. J. Pierce	29 Sep 1939 - 22 Feb 1941
Lt-Col H. G. Carruth	22 Feb 1941 - 26 Jul 1941
Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll	26 Jul 1941 - 5 Oct 1942
Lt-Col J. H. Suther	5 Oct 1942 - 28 Jan 1943
Lt-Col I. L. Bonifan	28 Jan 1943 - 18 Apr 1944 *
Lt-Col N. P. Wilder	18 Apr 1944 - 6 Jan 1945
Lt-Col J. R. William	6 Jan 1945 - 29 Apr 1945
Lt-Col V. J. Tanner	29 Apr 1945 - 7 Aug 1945
Lt-Col D. MacIntyre	7 Aug 1945 - 28 Jun 1946 †
Lt-Col J. A. Worsnop	28 Jun 1946 - 3 May 1947
Lt-Col R. B. McQueen	3 May 1947 - 1 Sep 1947

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** While serving with LRDG.**

*** Lt-Col G. H. Stace commanded the regiment from 4 to 27 March 1944 while Colonel Bonifant (as temporary Brigadier) commanded 6 Brigade.**

† Lt-Col R. H. Kerr commanded the regiment from 30 April to 21 June 1946 during Colonel MacIntyre's absence in hospital.

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DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

[BACKMATTER]

*This volume was produced and published by the War History Branch
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Editor-in-Chief

Sub-Editor

Archives Officer

THE AUTHOR, **R. J. M. Loughnan**, MBE, EM and bar, was born in **Taihape** in 1916. In the eight years following, before his parents moved to **Christchurch**, he 'made such a lasting mark on that town,' according to him, 'that, walking down the street for the first time exactly twenty years later, proudly bearing a uniform and a beret, a moustache, an Africa Star and on one arm a wound-stripe, and on the other a bride, I was embarrassed by the endless succession of people who recognised me instantly and insisted on relating to my wife a series of youthful peccadillos ranging from joining a circus for the night to a successful hold-up of the Daylight Limited Express.'

On leaving Christ's College in 1932, he joined the Machine Gun Troop of the CYC and served with it until the outbreak of war. He went overseas with the Divisional Cavalry in the **First Echelon** and, except for a break in hospital and on the Composite Depot training cadre, remained with it until he returned home on furlough after the **Sangro River** crossing and was discharged as medically unfit. After the war he took part in the forming of the 3rd Armoured Regiment, acting as a Squadron Sergeant-Major until 1953. For some years he was a lamb buyer for the Canterbury Frozen Meat Company and has recently been appointed Public Relations Officer to that firm.

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DIVISIONAL CAVALRY

N.Z. DIVISIONAL CAVALRY ASSOCIATION

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Patron: LT.-COL. J. H. SUTHERLAND, M.C., E.D.

This leaflet is inserted with the permission of the Department of Internal Affairs and the generous co-operation of Messrs. Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., distributors of the History.

Ever since the end of World War II various districts have held Div. Cav. reunions; a National Reunion is also held every two years. A few years ago the idea of a New Zealand Association was mooted, and at successive national reunions representatives from various districts have met and gradually formulated the following pattern:

- 1. That National Reunions be held at two-yearly intervals, if possible in rotation between the three main districts, Northern, Southern and Central.**
- 2. That the districts be centred as under:**
 - Northern: Headquarters, [Auckland](#).**
 - Central: Headquarters, [Palmerston North](#).**
 - Southern: Headquarters, [Christchurch](#).**
 - Co-ordinating Centre: [Wellington](#).**
- 3. That at each reunion the Association's Executive should meet and decide date and place for the next reunion two years hence.**
- 4. That the Executive of the current reunion and the Executive of the next reunion be the executive to cover the two years between reunions.**

All members are encouraged to put forward their ideas and ask questions for discussion at the next Executive meeting.

This can be done by contacting your District Secretary.

The issue of this History gives us our first chance to do three important things:

- (a) To tell you of the formation of the Association.**
- (b) To get a full list of names and addresses through the **War History Branch**.**
- (c) To tell you where your nearest District Secretary lives.**

You will hear more fully from us when we have the lists complete and we will endeavour to tell you what district you come under.

NEXT REUNION: CHRISTCHURCH, QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY WEEKEND, 1963

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NORTHERN

Jim Clements

13 Tampin Road

Manurewa

Auckland

CENTRAL

Terry Lynn

5 Ngarimu Street

Palmerston North

SOUTHERN

D. G. Dodson

58 Torrens Road

Hillmorton

Christchurch, 2

CO-ORDINATING CENTRE

W. H. (Bill) Wilson

21 Zetland Street

Kelburn

Wellington

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[SECTION]

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