

*Official History of the Canadian Army  
in the Second World War*

**Volume II**

**THE CANADIANS IN ITALY  
1943-1945**

#### **NOTE**

In the writing of this volume the author has been given full access to relevant official documents in possession of the Department of National Defence; but the inferences drawn and the opinions expressed are those of the author himself, and the Department is in no way responsible for his reading or presentation of the facts as stated.





### ORTONA

From a painting by Major C. F. Comfort

Troops of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade fight forward through a rubble-filled street towards the Church of San Tommaso, December 1943.

**OFFICIAL HISTORY, OF THE CANADIAN ARMY IN THE  
SECOND WORLD WAR**

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*Volume II*  
**THE CANADIANS IN ITALY  
1943-1945**

*By*  
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Published by Authority of the Minister of National Defence

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EDMOND CLOUTIER, C.M.G., O.A., D.S.P., OTTAWA, 1956  
QUEEN'S PRINTER AND CONTROLLER OF STATIONERY

INSERT PICTURE

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## FOREWORD

**T**HIS volume, written by Lt.-Col. G. W. L. Nicholson, Deputy Director, Historical Section, General Staff, is the second volume of the Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War. The first, written by the Director, covered the Army's organization, training and operations in Canada, Britain and the Pacific during the whole period of the war. The third, dealing with the campaign in North-West Europe in 1944-45, is in preparation.

The present volume describes in some detail the Canadian Army's part in the Italian campaign—the operations which began with the Allied invasion of Sicily in July 1943 and, developing into an arduous advance up the Italian peninsula, ended with the German capitulation in May 1945. In this campaign soldiers from Canada fought a series of hard and bloody battles over some of the most historic ground in Europe. This account of it is more exhaustive, and based upon more complete investigation, than that included in the preliminary Official Historical Summary, *The Canadian Army 1939-1945*, which was published in May 1948.

The general principles upon which this History has been planned are stated in the Preface to Volume I. It is directed primarily to the general reader, and particularly to the Canadian reader who wishes to know what the Canadian Army accomplished and why its operations took the course they did. The practice with respect to documentation, and the reasons for it, are likewise described in Volume I. Since many of the documents cited in references are still "classified", the fact that they are so cited does not necessarily imply that they are available for public examination. Officers and men are designated in the text by the ranks they held at the time of the events described. Decorations have not been appended to personal names in the text, but "final" ranks and decorations are given with the names of individuals in the Index.

In the event of readers observing errors or important omissions in this volume, they are asked to write to the Director, Historical Section, General Staff, Army Headquarters, Ottawa.

C. P. STACEY, Colonel,  
*Director Historical Section.*

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

**T**HIS is the story of the Canadian Army's share in the Allied campaign in Italy during the Second World War. It is primarily an account of field operations and the planning and preparations which preceded them. Questions of organization and administration of the Army as a whole were discussed in Volume I, and in general are only introduced here in so far as they present problems peculiar to the Italian theatre. While the activities of the Canadian forces in Italy form the main theme, these are presented at all times against the background of the whole Allied effort in the campaign. The author has attempted wherever possible to round out his story by showing the enemy side of the picture.

This History is primarily based upon the Canadian contemporary records of the campaign—the war diaries of participating formations and units, planning papers, orders, reports of operations, departmental and headquarters files and a multiplicity of other documents of various kinds. The task of assembling and organizing this voluminous material was begun by the Canadian Army's Historical Section while the war was still in progress. Valuable work in securing and recording first hand information in the theatre of operations was done by the Field Historical Sections; an Historical Officer served with each Canadian division engaged in the campaign. The author has also consulted British and Allied records extensively.

During and after the Second World War a vast quantity of German military records, written mostly within hours or days of the events, fell into Allied hands. In the preparation of the present volume full use has been made of this fortunate circumstance. While the available source material, which consists in the main of the war diaries of the enemy's army and corps headquarters, is by no means complete—the greatest shortages exist with respect to the Sicilian phase, Ortona, and the period from November 1944 to the termination of the Canadian operations in Italy—it covers well the battles for the Gustav, Hitler and Gothic defence lines. Narratives written after the war by German senior commanders have also proved useful in providing an insight into the background of enemy operations.

In the autumn of 1948 the writer spent ten weeks in Italy studying the ground over which the Canadians fought. He travelled the entire route of the Canadian forces from the Pachino beaches in south-eastern Sicily to the Senio River in Northern Italy, visiting the scene of every action in which Canadian soldiers were engaged, and taking upwards of 2000 photographs.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

With the general reader in mind the author has attempted to avoid detailed treatment of such specialized subjects as the activities of the technical arms and the services. The reader will understand that in a history of this scope considerations of space and proportion place restrictions on the amount of attention that can be devoted to operations at the unit level; for fuller treatment of these he must consult the various regimental histories.

The author wishes to acknowledge the generous assistance given by numerous organizations and individuals in making their records available and helping in other ways. He has had unrestricted access to documents in the hands of the Government of Canada, and has had the privilege of consulting the private papers of General A. G. L. McNaughton and General H. D. G. Crerar. As was the case with the preceding volume of the Official History, this book has benefited from the constant and indispensable aid accorded by the Historical Branch of the Cabinet Office in London and by the Air Historical Branch of the Air Ministry and the Historical Section of the Admiralty. Official historians in New Zealand, South Africa and India and Pakistan have given their help freely. The author would especially acknowledge his indebtedness to the Office of the Chief of Military History and to the Captured Records Section in the United States Department of the Army. In Canada grateful acknowledgement is made to the Director of War Service Records, Department of Veterans Affairs, whose office provided most of the Canadian Army statistics included in this volume. Finally the writer would express his sincere thanks to the many participants in the events described who have read the volume in draft, in whole or in part, and have given him the benefit of their comments.

Space does not allow the author to thank adequately all the personnel, past and present, of the Canadian Army's Historical Section who have contributed directly or indirectly to the production of this book. The Director, Colonel C. P. Stacey, has unsparingly given most helpful and sympathetic guidance at all stages. Lt.-Col. C. J. Lynn-Grant, Executive Officer, has assisted greatly with publication arrangements. The writer is indebted to Lt.-Col. W. E. C. Harrison (who served in Italy as Historical Officer, 1st Canadian Corps), Major D. H. Cunningham, Captain F. R. McGuire and Captain J. A. Porter (all veterans of the campaign) for the preliminary drafts of Chapters VII-X and XVI-XIX. These were subsequently revised by the writer, who drafted all the remaining chapters. He takes full responsibility for the entire volume as now presented. The expert assistance given by Mr. A. G. Steiger in his study of German documents has been invaluable. Thanks are due also to Captain J. R. Madden and Captain F. R. McGuire for their work as research assistants. The volume owes much to the maps



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

drawn by Captain C. C. J. Bond and his staff. Finally, a word of gratitude to Q.M.S. (W.O. 2) M. R. Lemay and Staff Sergeants J. W. Taylor and W. H. Woollam for their patience and efficiency in typing the many successive drafts.

G.W.L.N.

Historical Section (G.S.),  
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**THE CANADIANS IN ITALY**  
**1943-1945**

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE ALLIED DECISION TO INVADE SICILY

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#### The Invitation for Canadian Participation in the Mediterranean Theatre

IN THE late afternoon of 23 April 1943, Lieut.-General A. G. L. McNaughton, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, First Canadian Army, was called to the War Office for discussions with General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. General Brooke immediately put forward a proposal of the highest import to Canada and the Canadian Army. For two hours General McNaughton examined the various aspects of the proposition, discussing these first with Sir Alan and then in turn with various high-ranking officers of the General Staff. When he left Whitehall, it was to go to Canadian Military Headquarters, in Trafalgar Square, where he transmitted to Ottawa the terms of the following formal written request which he had received.<sup>1</sup>

Lieutenant-General A. G. L. McNaughton, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.,  
General Officer Commanding-in-Chief,  
First Canadian Army.

A decision has been reached by the War Cabinet to undertake certain operations based on Tunisia.

The Prime Minister has instructed me to enquire whether you will agree to Canadian forces participating, to the extent of one Canadian infantry division and one tank brigade together with the necessary ancillary troops.

As soon as you have obtained agreement of the Canadian Government for the employment of these forces will you please let me know. Full details of the requirement can then be worked out in consultation between your Headquarters and the War Office.

With respect to the command and control of Canadian troops participating in these operations I must make it clear that arrangements will be the same as those for the British formations which they are replacing.

A. F. BROOKE, C.I.G.S.

National Defence Headquarters acted promptly, and within forty-eight hours of receiving General Brooke's invitation General McNaughton had formally replied that he had been authorized by the Canadian Government<sup>2</sup> to undertake the operation in question. He detailed for the purpose

the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, the 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade, and certain ancillary units.

Thus was set in motion the train of events which eleven weeks later was to lead to a landing by Canadian soldiers on the beaches of Sicily in the first major operation by forces of the United Nations to open a breach in the European fortress.

### The Casablanca Conference

The Allied decision to undertake "operations based on Tunisia" had been reached at Casablanca three months earlier. When, in mid-January, the Combined Chiefs of Staff met with Mr. Churchill and President Roosevelt at Anfa Camp on the outskirts of the French Moroccan town to review the conduct of the war and determine basic strategy for the coming year, they were faced with the problem of how to employ Allied armies after the completion of the Tunisian campaign. A perceptibly brightening picture from the war fronts of the world gave evidence that the initiative was passing into Allied hands. During late October and early November in three momentous weeks the tide of Axis advances had been turned in as many sectors of the global struggle. The Russians had triumphed in the epic of Stalingrad and the Red Army was on the offensive; the British Eighth Army's brilliant victory at El Alamein had driven the German and Italian Armies into their final retreat across the African desert; in the Pacific Axis aggression had been stemmed as Australian and American forces joined hands on New Guinea, and with Marine and Army lines holding on Guadalcanal a crushing Japanese defeat in adjacent waters blasted the enemy's hopes of retaining that strategic island. On the north-west coast of Africa Allied forces had successfully carried out the greatest landing operation in history. It would appear that there were indeed good grounds for Mr. Churchill's cautious message of encouragement, "It is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."<sup>3</sup>

At Casablanca, two months after El Alamein and the North African landings, there seemed assured the successful termination of the converging operations by General Sir Harold Alexander's Middle East Forces and the formations under General Dwight D. Eisenhower's command.\* Allied troops of three nations were closing in for the kill. To the east General Sir Bernard Montgomery's Eighth Army, after a spectacular drive which in

\* General Sir H. R. L. G. Alexander succeeded General Sir Claude Auchinleck as Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces on 15 August 1942. On 14 August 1942 the Combined Chiefs of Staff appointed General Dwight D. Eisenhower Commander-in-Chief Allied Expeditionary Force, to undertake the "combined military operations . . . against Africa".<sup>4</sup>

three months had carried it 1400 miles from El Alamein, was at the gates of Tripoli. In the west, although the flow of Axis reinforcements and supplies across the Sicilian bridge from Southern Italy continued, the British First Army under Lieut.-General K. A. N. Anderson (whose command included the United States 2nd and the French 19th Corps) had entered Tunisia from Algeria and was holding a stabilized line which restricted General Juergen von Arnim's Fifth Panzer Army to the sixty-mile wide coastal corridor.<sup>5</sup> Field-Marshal Rommel was on the run across Tripolitania and, while the inevitable junction of his Afrika Korps with von Arnim's command portended no ready relinquishment of the Axis' Tunisian bridgehead, it was calculated that the end of April would see the end of enemy resistance on the African continent.<sup>6</sup>

There was not immediate agreement between the British and American Chiefs of Staff as to where and when the next blow should be struck. "It still would have been preferable", wrote General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, "to close immediately with the German enemy in Western Europe or even in Southern France had that been possible of achievement with the resources then available to General Eisenhower. It was not."<sup>7</sup> When in July 1942 the British and American Chiefs of Staff had decided in London, at the prompting of both the Prime Minister and the President, to launch an attack against French North Africa as the only operation that could be undertaken that year with fair hope of success, they virtually accepted the fact that the demands of "Torch" (as the proposed assault was called) would so interrupt the build-up programme which was then in progress for a cross-Channel assault (Operation "Roundup") as to postpone any invasion of North-West Europe until 1944 at the earliest.<sup>8</sup> The decision was a momentous one, for not only did it disappoint the hopes of the United States War Department of developing at an early date an operation in what it considered the only decisive sector of the strategic front,<sup>9</sup> but the introduction of American forces into the Mediterranean was to invite their full-scale commitment to the subsequent protracted operations in that theatre, which only ended north of the Po with the complete surrender of the German armies.

The British Chiefs of Staff, while agreeing that eventually Germany must be attacked across the Channel, pressed the argument that in view of the exceedingly doubtful prospects for a successful launching of "-Roundup" in the summer of 1943, the logical scene of action was the Mediterranean, where conditions were, propitious for immediate operations. An offensive in this theatre could not be expected, it is true, materially to relieve German pressure on Russia. But neither might this be achieved otherwise. The arguments of the previous July retained their cogency, for the Allies were still in no

position to commit to a Second Front a force large enough (as requested by Mr. Molotov) to draw off 40 divisions from the Eastern battle front.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the favourable turn of events after Stalingrad made direct aid to Russia no longer so pressing a consideration. Mr. Churchill reiterated the opinion expressed to President Roosevelt in the previous November:

The paramount task before us is first, to secure the African shores of the Mediterranean and set up there the naval and air installations which are necessary to open an effective passage through it for military traffic; and, secondly, using the bases on the African shore to strike at the under-belly of the Axis in effective strength and in the shortest time.<sup>11</sup>

In support of their case the British Chiefs of Staff pointed out that Axisdominated territory in the Mediterranean presented so many potential targets for an Allied offensive that with proper deceptive measures it should be possible to worry the enemy into a widespread dispersal of his forces to meet threats against Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, the Dodecanese Islands and the coasts of Italy and Greece. Furthermore, once Italy had been knocked out of the war-for it was the British contention that this must be the prime objective of Mediterranean operations\*-Germany would be forced to assume the defence of the Italian peninsula as well as to replace the Italian troops who were garrisoning the Balkans. Finally there was the possibility that a successful campaign in the Mediterranean might provide a strong inducement to Turkey to enter the war and so open the Black Sea supply route to Russia and provide the Allies with a base for operations against the Rumanian oilfields.

To the American Chiefs of Staff the British advocacy of an early offensive was convincing enough from a tactical standpoint, but General Marshall emphasized that such an exploitation of victory in Africa would at best be a temporary expedient, not to be considered as a change in the general strategy, previously agreed to by the Combined Chiefs, of defeating Germany by opening a Second Front in Northern France.<sup>13</sup> Having made this point the Americans bowed to the demands of expediency in maintaining the momentum of the war against Germany, and agreed to the mounting of a Mediterranean operation. They reached this decision because, in General Marshall's words, "we will have in North Africa a large number of troops available and because it will effect an economy in tonnage which is the major consideration."<sup>14</sup> He again emphasized that the American viewpoint regarding general strategy remained unchanged, declaring that "he was most anxious not to become committed to interminable operations in the Mediterranean. He

\* On 24 November 1942 Mr. Churchill had cabled the President: "Our Mediterranean operations following on 'Torch' may drive Italy out of the war. Widespread demoralisation may set in among the Germans, and we must be ready to profit by any opportunity which offers."<sup>12</sup>



wished Northern France to be the scene of the main effort against Germany -that had always been his conception."<sup>15</sup> A similar interpretation of the American attitude has been given by General Eisenhower, who sets forth two reasons for the Casablanca decision to undertake the Sicilian operation: the opening of the Mediterranean sea routes, and the fact that "because of the relatively small size of the island its occupation after capture would not absorb unforeseen amounts of Allied strength in the event that the enemy should undertake any large-scale counteraction."<sup>16</sup>

Having reached agreement as to the theatre in which operations would be launched, the Conference turned to the selection of the immediate objectives. Offensive action in the Western Mediterranean might be taken either directly against the mainland of Italy, or against one or more of the intervening islands of Sicily or Sardinia or Corsica. Decision on the invasion of Italy was deferred and the relative attractiveness of the three island targets was considered. Tentative planning of an assault against Sardinia as a sequel to Operation "Torch" had already engaged the attention of General Eisenhower's staff,<sup>17</sup> and in mid-November Mr. Churchill had directed the British Chiefs of Staff to consider the necessity or desirability of occupying the island "for the re-opening of the Mediterranean to military traffic and/or for bringing on the big air battle which is our aim."<sup>18</sup> The occupation of Sardinia and Corsica (it was considered that "the capture of Sardinia would have had a profound effect in the Mediterranean only if coupled with the immediate capture of Corsica")<sup>19</sup> would furnish an advantageous base from which to threaten the Italian peninsula along its entire western flank. On the other hand the possession of these northern islands without Sicily would not free to Allied use the Mediterranean passage, Axis control of which lengthened the convoy route to the Middle East by an enforced 12,000-mile detour around the Cape of Good Hope. (At a conference in Rome on 13 May 1943, Mussolini was to tell Admiral Dönitz that Sicily was in a greater danger of attack than Sardinia, and support his contention "by referring to the British press which had repeatedly stated that a free route through the Mediterranean would mean a gain of 2,000,000 tons of cargo space for the Allies.")<sup>20</sup>

After an exhaustive examination of the respective claims of Sicily and Sardinia a firm decision was reached. On 19 January the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed "that after Africa had been finally cleared of the enemy the island of Sicily should be assaulted and captured as a base for operations against Southern Europe and to open the Mediterranean to the shipping of the United Nations."<sup>21</sup> Four days later they furnished General Eisenhower with a directive which appointed him Supreme Commander and General Alexander his deputy. Admiral of the Fleet Cunningham was to be the

Naval Commander and Air Chief Marshal Tedder the Air Commander.\* The operation (which was code-named "Husky") was to have as its target date the period of the favourable July moon.<sup>22</sup>

Canada was not represented at the Casablanca Conference. The first official information concerning the proceedings there came to Prime Minister Mackenzie King on 30 January in a message from Mr. Churchill which enclosed "an account of the principal conclusions reached". "I earnestly hope", wrote the British Prime Minister from Cairo, "you will feel that we have acted wisely in holding this conference and that its general conclusions will commend themselves to you." Mr. Churchill did not conceal his satisfaction at the decision to continue active operations in the Mediterranean.

Without wishing to indulge in any complacency I cannot help feeling that things are quite definitely better than when I was last in Cairo, when [the] enemy was less than 70 miles away. If we should succeed in retaining the initiative on all theatres, as does not seem impossible and if we can sincerely feel we have brought every possible division of soldiers or fighting unit of our forces into closest and most continuous contact with the enemy from now on, we might well regard the world situation as by no means devoid of favourable features. Without the cohesion and unity of advance of the British Empire and Commonwealth of Nations through periods of desperate peril and forlorn outlook, the freedom and decencies of civilised mankind might well have sunk for ever into the abyss.<sup>23</sup>

Sicily was not named in either Mr. Churchill's covering note or in the accompanying summary, which was prepared by the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Clement Attlee; for it was "most important that exact targets and dates should not be known until nearer the time". The message from Mr. Attlee alluded in only very guarded terms to the decision to mount Operation "Husky":

Operations in the Mediterranean with the object of forcing Italy out of the war, and imposing greatest possible dispersal of German Forces will include

- (a) clearance of Axis forces out of North Africa at the earliest possible moment,
- (b) in due course further amphibious offensive operations on a large scale,
- (c) bomber offensive from North Africa.<sup>24</sup>

In recording Mr. Churchill's gratification that the invasion of Sicily had been agreed upon, it may be noted that some fifteen months before the Anfa meetings he had been a strong proponent of such a project. In the autumn of 1941, when there were high hopes that the impending offensive by the Eighth Army might drive Rommel back through Libya and Tripolitanin, the British Chiefs of Staff were considering a plan - they

\* Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, promoted to Admiral of the Fleet on 21 January 1943, was appointed Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean on 20 February 1943, in command of all Allied naval forces in the Western Mediterranean (including Malta). An A.F.H.Q. General Order of 17 February 1943 designated Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur W. Tedder as Air Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean; his command comprised the Middle East Air Command (R.A.F.), R.A.F. Malta Air Command, and Northwest African Air Forces (U.S.).

called it "Whipcord" - for exploiting victory in the Western Desert by an assault upon Sicily. For this purpose a force of one armoured and three field divisions was available in the United Kingdom, and in order that the defence of Great Britain might not suffer by the withdrawal of these formations, Mr. Churchill had gone so far as to request President Roosevelt "to place a United States Army Corps and Armoured Division, with all the air force possible, in the North of Ireland".<sup>25</sup> The Commanders-in-Chief, Middle East, however, setting a higher priority upon the defence of the vital area between the Nile delta and the Persian Gulf, considered an invasion of Sicily at that time neither practicable nor necessary. Accordingly, "Whipcord" had been abandoned.<sup>26</sup>

### Early Planning for Operation "Husky"

General Eisenhower lost no time in acting upon the directive from the Chiefs of Staff, and on 12 February a planning staff composed of American and British members and organized on the British staff system (since the operation was to be executed under a British commander) set to work under Major-General C. H. Gairdner (who was later succeeded by Major-General A. A. Richardson) as Chief of Staff.<sup>27</sup> As there was no accommodation available at the overcrowded Allied Force Headquarters in Algiers, the planners at their initial meeting selected the Ecole Normale in Bouzarea, just outside the Algerian capital. The number of the hotel room in which the first meeting was held gave the planning organization the name adopted as a security measure - Headquarters "Force 141".<sup>28</sup> It will be appreciated that this delegation of the control of planning operations to a special staff was made necessary by the full preoccupation of both the Supreme Commander and his deputy with the direction of the campaign that was still continuing in North Africa. Indeed, at this time General Alexander held a dual appointment, for in addition to having been designated Commander-in-Chief of the group of armies entrusted with the Sicilian operation, he was Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in North Africa and Commander of the 18th Army Group, the headquarters established by the Anfa Conference to co-ordinate the command of the British First and Eighth Armies in the Tunisia area.<sup>29</sup>

In reaching their decision at Casablanca the Combined Chiefs of Staff had considered a tentative outline plan for the invasion of Sicily which had been produced by a Joint Planning Staff in London, and later supplemented at Anfa.<sup>30</sup> This was given to the Force 141 planners as a basis on which to work, and from it there emerged, after a series of modifications which

culminated in a major recasting, the pattern on which Operation "Husky" was finally mounted.

Certain elements of the projected undertaking as set forth in the Casablanca Outline Plan were accepted as fundamental, and remained constant throughout all stages of the subsequent planning. The directive to the Supreme Commander had indicated that "Husky" would require the employment of two task forces, one British and one United States, each of army size. Early in February General Montgomery and Lieut. General George S. Patton Jr., who had led the American landings at Casablanca in November, were appointed to the respective commands of these assault forces. It was a logical assumption that the American share of the operation would be based upon the French North African ports; it followed that the British task force must be mounted mainly from the Middle East Command.

Sicily, "a jagged arrowhead with the broken point to the west", is an island admirably suited by position and terrain for defence against invasion from anywhere except Italy. Separated from the Italian peninsula by the Strait of Messina, which at its narrowest is only two miles wide, the island had long provided a natural springboard for the projection of Axis troops into Tunisia - for Cape Bon on the African mainland is but ninety miles from Sicily's western tip. In the event of an Allied assault upon the island, enemy reinforcements could be expected to pour in from the toe of Italy - by sea ferry from the Calabrian ports or by transport aircraft from the airfields of Naples and Brindisi.\* To stem the flow of this traffic and then reverse it in defeat would be no easy task, for Sicily's topography would overwhelmingly favour its defenders. Almost the whole surface of the island is covered with hills and mountains, which fall either directly to the sea or to restricted coastal plains or terraces. The only extensive flat ground is the east central plain of Catania, above which towers the massive cone of Mount Etna; more limited low-lying areas are to be found along the south-eastern seaboard and at the western extremity of the island. Once attacking forces had penetrated into the mountainous areas of the interior, their lines of advance would be restricted to the few existing roads, and their rate of progress conditioned by the enemy's well-known skill in mining and demolition.

The early stages of planning were concerned chiefly with the selection of the points at which the main assaults would be made. Messina, at the north-eastern tip of the island, was regarded as the most important objective, for this strategically situated port might be expected to furnish initially the means of entry of Axis reinforcements from the mainland and, when the progress of the campaign should reach its expected climax, to

\* For a note on the pronunciation of Italian geographical names see p. 697.

afford an escape route to the island's defenders.\* Possession of Messina would allow the Allied forces to dominate the Strait and provide them with a base for further operations into Italy. A direct assault on the port or its vicinity could not be contemplated, however, for the Strait of Messina was completely closed to Allied shipping by mines and coast defence batteries, and was beyond the effective range of Allied fighter cover based on Malta and Tunisia. It was therefore necessary to look elsewhere for invasion sites through which operations could be developed to overrun the island.

The main strategic factors to be considered may be reduced to a relatively few prime requirements. Geography must first furnish suitable beaches close enough to Allied-controlled airfields for the landings to be given fighter protection. Consideration of logistics dictated a second demand, thus defined by General Alexander:

It was still an essential element of the doctrine of amphibious warfare that sufficient major ports must be captured within a very short time of the initial landings to maintain all the forces required for the attainment of the objectives; beach maintenance could only be relied on as a very temporary measure. The experiences of Operation "Torch", the North African landing, though difficult to interpret in view of the special circumstances of that operation,† were held to confirm this view.<sup>33</sup>

Along the 600-mile coastline that forms the perimeter of the Sicilian triangle, more than ninety stretches of beach were reported by Allied Intelligence as topographically satisfying the requirements for landing operations. These ranged from less than one hundred yards to many miles in length and, although offshore gradients were in several cases unfavourably shallow and the beaches themselves of unpromising soft sand, most of them gave reasonably convenient access to the narrow coastal strip encompassing the island. Only in two sectors, however, could disembarkation be covered by land-based Allied fighter craft. These were the beaches in the southeastern corner of the island, between the Gulf of Noto and Gela, which were within range of the Malta airfields, and those in the south-west, between Sciacca and Marinella, which could be reached from airfields in Tunisia.

Neither of these areas contained any of the major ports the early possession of one or more of which was deemed essential for providing unloading facilities for the assaulting armies. These ports were, in order of size, Messina, Palermo in the north-west, and Catania on the east coast. Against an enemy garrison whose strength was expected to be eight divisions

\* It was estimated that the train ferries at Messina could move up to 40,000 men, or 7500 men and 750 vehicles, in twenty-four hours.<sup>31</sup>

† In the "Torch" landings, which were made against relatively light enemy opposition, the loss in landing craft destroyed or damaged on the different surf-swept beaches had varied from 34 to 40 per cent.<sup>32</sup>

the planners considered approximately ten divisions would be necessary to take the island. Maintenance requirements for a division, including the build-up of reserves, were calculated at 500 tons a day; thirty tons a day were needed for a squadron of the Royal Air Force.<sup>34</sup> It was estimated that the daily clearance capacity of the larger ports, when due allowance was made for damage that might be caused by our bombardment and the enemy's demolitions, would be between four and five thousand tons for Messina, about 2000 for Palermo, and 1800 for Catania. There were lesser harbours\* on the island - but an early decision was reached that the points of assault must be directly related to the location of one or more of the three major seaports.

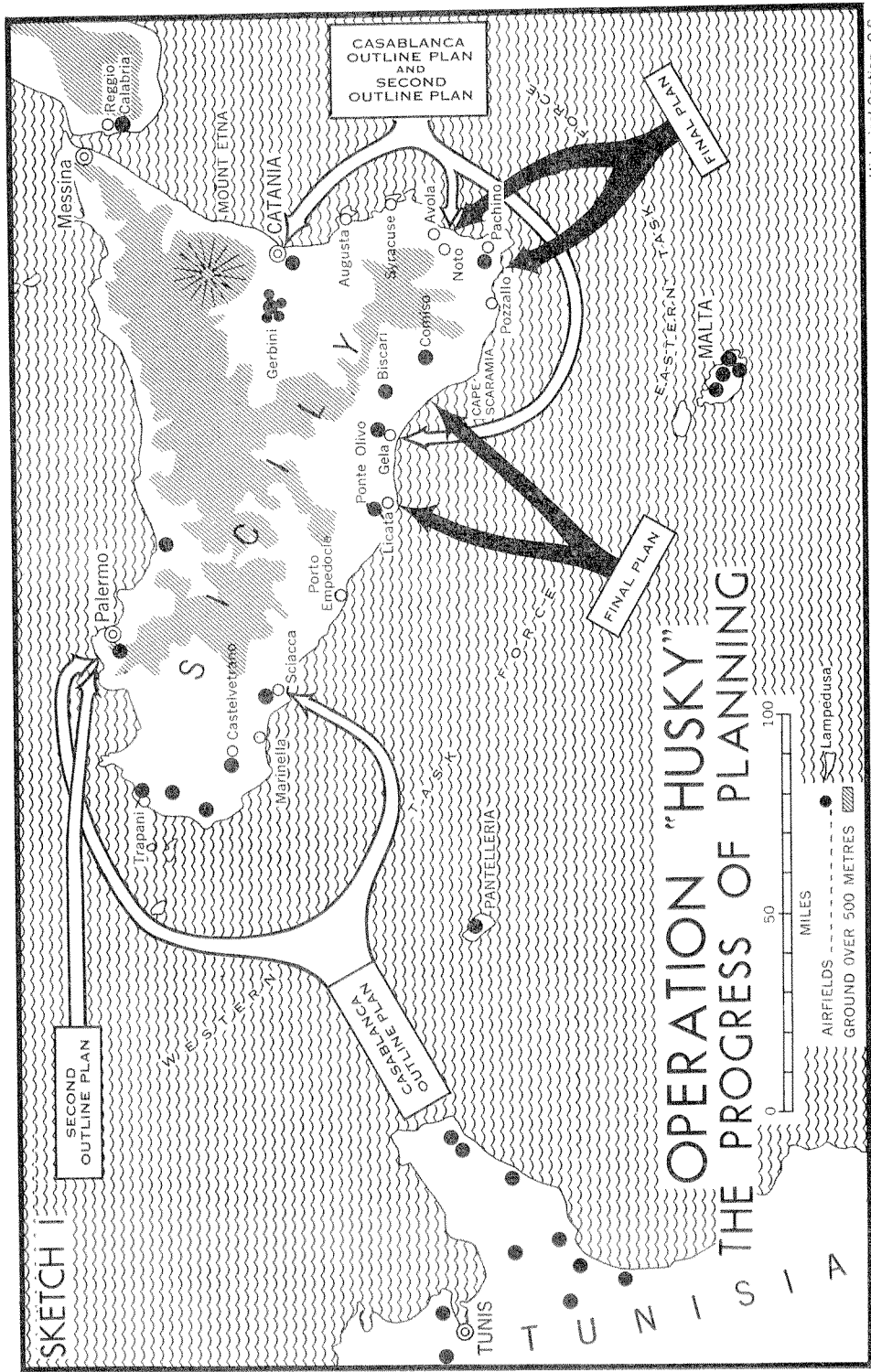
With Messina out of the question as an immediate objective, consideration was given to securing Catania and Palermo in the early stages of operations. Catania alone would not provide facilities for the maintenance of a sufficient number of Allied divisions for the reduction of the whole island; Palermo would do so - if the enemy allowed enough time for a satisfactory build-up - but an assault directed solely against that area would leave the Axis forces free to reinforce through the eastern ports. A third factor thus entered the planning - the need for early seizure of Sicilian airfields, both to deny their use to Axis aircraft and to provide the invading forces with the means of air support in their operations against the required ports.

The disposition of those airfields was governed less by tactical considerations than by the limitations which the mountainous nature of the country imposed. They were to be found in three main clusters, all within fifteen miles of the coast (see Sketch 1). Most important of these was the Catania-Gerbini group in the eastern plain, for it gave cover to the Strait of Messina. Within supporting reach of this group, on the low ground behind Gela was the south-eastern concentration, comprising the Comiso,† Biscari† and Ponte Olivo airfields. The third group lay along the narrow coastal plain at the western tip of the island, extending from Castelvetro to Trapani and affording air cover to Palermo. These last fields were beyond fighter range of either the eastern or south-eastern groups.

It thus became apparent that the immediate objective of the assault forces must be the airfields both in the south-east and the west, in order to provide the extension of air cover required for the capture of the ports of Catania and Palermo. Accordingly the original Casablanca Outline Plan proposed simultaneous landings by the Eastern and Western Task Forces. British forces would assault the south-east corner of the island with three

\* Syracuse on the east coast had an estimated capacity of 1000 tons a day, and Augusta, also on the east coast, Licata and Porto Empedocle (see p. 697) on the south, and Trapani (p. 697) on the west coast could each handle about 600 tons daily.<sup>35</sup>

† See p. 697.



and to apply the total lift to each airborne assault in turn. Accordingly, a series of staggered landings was proposed. Whereas the four British divisions of Force 545 would assault on all beaches from Avola to Gela on D Day, the American landings were to be postponed to D plus 2 for the division assaulting at Sciacca, and to D plus 5 for the two divisions assigned to the landings in the Palermo area. In addition to the division to be held at Malta, one for each of the Eastern and Western Task Forces would be available in North Africa as a later follow-up.

On 11 April the Supreme Commander notified the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington of his adoption of these changes,<sup>47</sup> and it was in this form that the outline plan for "Husky" stood when Canadian participation in the operation was invited. But it was not yet the pattern of the actual assaults which were delivered in July; that formula had still to be worked out.

On 24 April (the day following General McNaughton's visit to the War Office) General Alexander received from General Montgomery a signal expressing the latter's concern at the disposition of the British forces proposed by the existing outline plan. Always an exponent of the "principle of concentration"\* he felt the need of a greater mobilization of power in the assault area. "Planning so far", wrote Montgomery, "has been based on the assumption that opposition will be slight, and that Sicily will be captured relatively easily. Never was there a greater error. The Germans and also the Italians are fighting desperately now in Tunisia and will do so in Sicily."<sup>48</sup>

General Alexander was disinclined to agree that the enemy's powers of resistance had been underestimated. In his *Despatch* he recalls the gloomy prognostications of the British Joint Planning Staff in its original report to the Casablanca Conference—"We are doubtful of the chances of success against a garrison which includes German formations"<sup>49</sup>—and he draws attention to the fact that "actually planning had been based on the appreciation that the mobile part of the garrison of the island would be more than doubled."<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, he was only too conscious of the slimness of the margin of advantage which the assaulting forces might be expected to hold over the defenders. In actual numbers, if Intelligence estimates were accurate, the enemy garrison could outnumber the invading Allied troops. It was assumed for planning purposes that there would be in Sicily at the time of the invasion two German and six Italian mobile divisions and five Italian coastal divisions;† Force 141, as we have seen, would have just over

\*A recognized "Principle of War", that the concentration of the maximum possible force of every possible description should be brought to bear on the enemy at the decisive time and place.

†This appreciation was reasonably accurate. Enemy forces in Sicily at the time of the actual assault consisted of two German and four Italian mobile divisions and six Italian coastal divisions (see below, pp. 55-9).



divisions on D Day to secure the airfields in that area and the ports of Syracuse and Augusta. With the air protection afforded by those captured fields a fourth infantry division plus a brigade group and an airborne division would assault in the Catania area on D plus 3 to secure the port and the important eastern group of airfields. In the meantime operations by American forces would begin on D Day with a landing by one division on the south-west coast at Sciacca to secure the western airfields required for operations against Palermo. The main assaults in the Palermo area would be made on D plus 2 by two divisions charged with the task of capturing the port and linking up with the thrust from Sciacca. Each Task Force was allotted a reserve division to be landed respectively through Catania and Palermo, to provide by D plus 7 sufficient forces to deal with any opposition that the enemy might offer.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout February and early March, while the direction of operations in Tunisia, now at the critical stage, claimed the undivided attention of General Alexander and his two prospective army commanders, the planners at Bouzarea, although short-handed by reason of the continued employment of many of their key personnel at the 18th Army Group Headquarters, applied themselves to such basic planning tasks as might be undertaken before firm decisions had been reached at the higher level. "All that was possible", reports Alexander in his *Despatch*, "was to work out loading tables, training schedules and all such matters which must of necessity be taken in hand long before the date of the assault, while preserving complete flexibility of mind about the objectives which might eventually be selected for the assault."<sup>37</sup>

The tentative outline plan on which all preliminary discussions had been based came under criticism from the three commanders of the ground, air and naval forces when they held their first meeting with General Eisenhower at Headquarters Force 141 on 13 March.<sup>38</sup> General Alexander was concerned at the wide dispersion of the proposed landings, particularly those of the Eastern Task Force. He considered it vital to the success of the entire operation that the D Day assault at Avola\* in the Gulf of Noto should be strong enough to ensure the seizure of Syracuse and Augusta, and if possible Catania, very soon after landing. Only a third of the Force had been allotted to this crucial area, but additional insurance of success could be gained by transferring from the left flank the division assigned to land at Gela. Less than ten miles inland from Gela, however, was one of the most important airfields of the south-eastern group, the air base of Ponte Olivo, the capture of which for the use of the Allied air forces was deemed essential by Air Chief Marshal Tedder. This view was supported by

\* See p. 697.

Admiral Cunningham, who was unable to accept the risk of leaving the enemy's air power free to operate against the naval forces from airfields so close to the proposed landing areas.<sup>39</sup>

### The Second Outline Plan

It was clear that Force 545 (the code name given by the planners to the Eastern Task Force) required strengthening. After a discussion of plans on 18 March at Bouzarea, when both army commanders were represented,<sup>40</sup> General Montgomery requested that his Force—the military component of which was to be the Eighth Army—be allotted another division.<sup>41</sup> But it was not clear whence such additional strength would be forthcoming. Although a division might be found in North Africa or the Middle East, the limiting factor was once again that of shipping, for all sea transport and landing craft expected to be available for "Husky" had already been assigned. A redistribution of strength within the existing resources of Force 141 appeared to be the only solution.

A proposal by General Alexander that the D Day assault by Force 343 (the Western Task Force) on the south-west shore at Sciacca should be cancelled, and the American division intended for that role transferred to the Gela beaches was tentatively agreed to by the Supreme Commander on 20 March.<sup>42</sup> Like most compromise plans, however, this one had its weaknesses. It meant placing an isolated American division under the command of the British Task Force; and abandonment of the Sciacca landings would mean that the neutralization of the western airfields would have to be accomplished by long-range fighters based on the south-eastern group. Until such action had assured fighter cover for the operations against Palermo, it was not possible to fix exact dates for the American landings in that area. There thus appeared the unwelcome prospect of condemning the assaulting Seventh Army (the military element of Force 343) to stay aboard for an indeterminate period after D plus 3 somewhere between the North African ports and Western Sicily, exposed to possible attack from hostile aircraft based on the airfields behind Sciacca.<sup>43</sup>

In a letter to General Alexander on 23 March the Supreme Allied Commander expressed his uneasiness at the proposed change of plan.

The gist of the matter is that by agreeing to Montgomery's demand for an additional division, we have come to the conclusion that we need one more division than can be transported in the means available to our two governments. Realizing that there is no hope of obtaining this additional shipping, we are adopting a plan which we consider the least objectionable of any we can devise. I am not too happy about the matter, but I do agree that the conclusion expressed in the preceding sentence is a true one.<sup>44</sup>

The British Chiefs of Staff too were disturbed by the proposal to abandon the south-western assault, for they feared that its cancellation might allow the enemy the continued use of Palermo as a port of entry for reinforcements, besides leaving his air forces free to operate in Western Sicily. They made strong representations through the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington that every channel should be explored to provide the additional division without disturbing the dispositions originally made for the Western Task Force.<sup>45</sup>

### Further Revision of the Plan

Again the planners at Bouzarea examined the unfavourable shipping situation and counted British formations available in the Mediterranean area, and on 16 April General Alexander put forward a solution which tentatively restored the main outline of the original plan, and at the same time provided Force 545 with the extra strength it required in the Avola area. A new British division was introduced from North Africa to carry out the Gela landings, thereby releasing the American division for its assault on Sciacca. The specific employment of a division against Catania on D plus 3 was cancelled; instead one was to be held as an immediate reserve at Malta, on call after D plus 1. This formation would be neither assault trained nor assault loaded, and would be carried to Sicily in craft that had already been used in the D Day landings. By such a reshuffling of resources it was possible to meet the current demands of the assault plan without adding materially to the total number of landing craft required; the necessary increment was provided from British and American reserves at the expense of assault training and cross-Channel operations "on the decision to give absolute priority to 'Husky'."<sup>46</sup>

While the new plan followed essentially that produced by the British Joint Planning Staff for the Casablanca Conference, it contained important modifications in the timings of the landings. In drawing up the original schedule it had been recognized that simultaneous assaults at both ends of the island would have the desirable effect of dispersing the enemy's air and ground forces. But there was much to be said for initiating operations in southeastern Sicily, where surprise could more readily be obtained, and by so doing drawing off enemy reserves from the west-to the great benefit of a delayed assault there. The determining factor in making the change, however, lay in the decision to employ airborne troops in advance of the landings to "soften up" the defences. In order to drop the maximum number of troops in each area it would be necessary to employ all the available transport aircraft,

and to apply the total lift to each airborne assault in turn. Accordingly, a series of staggered landings was proposed. Whereas the four British divisions of Force 545 would assault on all beaches from Avola to Gela on D Day, the American landings were to be postponed to D plus 2 for the division assaulting at Sciacca, and to D plus 5 for the two divisions assigned to the landings in the Palermo area. In addition to the division to be held at Malta, one for each of the Eastern and Western Task Forces would be available in North Africa as a later follow-up.

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On 24 April (the day following General McNaughton's visit to the War Office) General Alexander received from General Montgomery a signal expressing the latter's concern at the disposition of the British forces proposed by the existing outline plan. Always an exponent of the "principle of concentration"\* he felt the need of a greater mobilization of power in the assault area. "Planning so far", wrote Montgomery, "has been based on the assumption that opposition will be slight, and that Sicily will be captured relatively easily. Never was there a greater error. The Germans and also the Italians are fighting desperately now in Tunisia and will do so in Sicily."<sup>48</sup>

General Alexander was disinclined to agree that the enemy's powers of resistance had been underestimated. In his *Despatch* he recalls the gloomy prognostications of the British Joint Planning Staff in its original report to the Casablanca Conference—"We are doubtful of the chances of success against a garrison which includes German formations"<sup>49</sup>-and he draws attention to the fact that "actually planning had been based on the appreciation that the mobile part of the garrison of the island would be more than doubled."<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, he was only too conscious of the slimness of the margin of advantage which the assaulting forces might be expected to hold over the defenders. In actual numbers, if Intelligence estimates were accurate, the enemy garrison could outnumber the invading Allied troops. It was assumed for planning purposes that there would be in Sicily at the time of the invasion two German and six Italian mobile divisions and five Italian coastal divisions;† Force 141, as we have seen, would have just over

\* A recognized "Principle of War", that the concentration of the maximum possible force of every possible description should be brought to bear on the enemy at the decisive time and place.

† This appreciation was reasonably accurate. Enemy forces in Sicily at the time of the actual assault consisted of two German and four Italian mobile divisions and six Italian coastal divisions (see below, pp. 55-9).

ten divisions, including airborne formations, and two more divisions in reserve. While it was reasonable to believe that this Allied inferiority in numbers would be more than offset by the advantages which the invaders held in their command of the sea and air, in their superiority in equipment (at least over the Italians), and in their possession of the initiative to choose the points of attack, it was apparent that these advantages would be seriously diminished by the dispersal proposed by the outline plan.

To General Montgomery examining the commitments given the Eastern Task Force at a three-day conference of Force 545 planners in Cairo, which began on 23 April, it seemed essential that his forces "be landed concentrated and prepared for hard fighting."<sup>51</sup> With only four divisions at his command he considered it necessary to restrict the frontage of his army's assault to the area of the Gulf of Noto and the Pachino peninsula. The assaulting forces would be close enough to Syracuse to ensure its early capture and the development of operations northward against Augusta and Catania. The proposal to concentrate in this manner had, however, one obvious drawback -the Comiso-Gela group of airfields was too far to the west to be included in the initial bridgehead. As may be readily imagined, the Commanders-in-Chief of the other Services, who had once already successfully upheld their claim for including in the planning the early capture of the Ponte Olivo airfield north-east of Gela, strongly objected to a proposal that would now leave the whole Ponte Olivo-Biscari-Comiso group of fields in enemy hands during the initial operations. At a conference in Algiers called by General Alexander on 29 April, Admiral Cunningham declared that "apart from his conviction on general grounds, that in amphibious operations the landings should be dispersed, he considered it essential to secure the use of the southeastern airfields in order to give protection to ships lying off the beaches."<sup>52</sup> If this were not done he feared that shipping losses might be so prohibitive as to prevent the landings in the west.<sup>53</sup> Air Chief Marshal Tedder, pointing out that the Eighth Army plan would leave thirteen landing-grounds in enemy hands, far too many for effective neutralization by air action, formally stated that unless their capture for Allied use "could be guaranteed he would be opposed to the whole operation."<sup>54</sup> Speaking for the ground forces, Lieut.-General Sir Oliver Leese,<sup>55</sup> representing General Montgomery, objected that to shift the proposed Force 545 bridgehead westward to include the Comiso-Gela group of airfields would move it too far from the ports that had to be captured on the east coast.<sup>56</sup>

It was' impossible to reconcile these conflicting views. They clearly revealed the fundamental weakness of the entire strategic plan, "which in attempting-with limited resources-to achieve too much at the same time in too many places, risked losing all everywhere."<sup>57</sup>

### The Final Plan of Attack

"On May 3rd", wrote General Eisenhower, "we stopped tinkering and completely recast our plan on the sound strategic principle of concentration of strength in the crucial area."<sup>58</sup> On that day the Supreme Commander, concurred in a decision by his deputy to cancel the American assaults in the west and the south-west and divert the entire Western Task Force to the south-eastern assault, placing it on the Eighth Army's immediate left.\* In abandoning the idea that Palermo must be captured as a means of maintenance for the Seventh Army, General Alexander chose to take this administrative risk rather than the operational one of too much dispersion. Within the new area assigned for its landings the American Task Force would have only one small port-Licata, which now became the farthest west point of assault. Acceptance of the fact that the Seventh Army would rely almost entirely on beach maintenance marked an important departure from the belief that success in large-scale amphibious warfare depended upon the early capture of major ports. The Senior Administrative Officer of Force 141, Major-General C. H. Miller, had dubiously reminded the planners that they were ignoring the experience of the North African landings, "which proved that a force must have a port for its maintenance within 48 hours of landing". He had suggested, however, that this lesson might not apply to the forthcoming operations because of the better prospects for good weather in midsummer, the greater certainty of Allied air and sea superiority, and, most important of all, the fact that DUKWs would be available to transfer supplies from ship to shore.<sup>61</sup> General Miller's advocacy of beach maintenance proved justified. The results in Sicily vindicated the decision to employ this new technique of combined operations, and led to its adoption, with outstanding success, in the invasion of Normandy in 1944.

With the approval of the new plan by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 12 May it was possible to proceed with firm and detailed planning, and on 19 May General Alexander issued his first operation instruction setting forth the tasks of the two armies and the part to be played by the supporting naval and air forces.<sup>62</sup> He stated that the intention of the Allied Commander-in-Chief to "seize and hold the island of Sicily as a base for future operations" would be accomplished in five phases: preparatory measures by naval and air forces to neutralize enemy naval efforts and to gain air supremacy; pre-dawn seaborne assaults, assisted by airborne landings with the object of seizing airfields and the ports of Syracuse and Licata; the

\* In his *Despatch* Alexander points out that as early as February he had considered concentrating the efforts of both Task Forces against the south-east of the island.<sup>59</sup> Different versions of the question of personal responsibility for the decision to make the assault as finally planned are given by Montgomery and his Chief of Staff.<sup>60</sup>

establishment of a firm base upon which to conduct operations for the capture of the ports of Augusta and Catania, and the Gerbini group of airfields; the capture of these ports and airfields; the reduction of the island.

The Eighth Army would assault with two corps, comprising a total of six infantry divisions, one infantry brigade and one airborne division, in the area between Syracuse and Pozzallo. It would be responsible for the immediate seizure of Syracuse and the Pachino airfield, and the subsequent rapid capture of Augusta and Catania and the Gerbini group of airfields. On the left the Seventh Army, with one corps headquarters, four infantry divisions, one armoured division and one airborne division, was to assault between Cape Scaramia and Licata, capture that port and the airfields at Ponte Olivo, Biscari and Comiso, and on gaining contact with the Eighth Army protect the British left flank from enemy reserves moving eastward. When the two armies were firmly established across the south-eastern corner of Sicily in a line from Catania to Licata, operations would be developed to complete the conquest of the island.<sup>63</sup>

### The Background to Canadian Participation

With the pattern of "Husky" thus finally determined it may be useful to turn to an examination of the circumstances surrounding the entry of the Canadian formations into the Sicilian enterprise. The story of the high policy that directed the employment of Canadian forces during the war will be told elsewhere in this History; it will be sufficient here to take a brief look at the background to Mr. Churchill's invitation of April 1943. Early in the course of the "Husky" planning it had been decided that because of the limited facilities of the Middle East ports it would be necessary for Force 545 to draw direct from the United Kingdom an infantry division and an army tank brigade.<sup>64</sup> Nomination of these formations lay with the War Office, which towards the end of February had selected the 3rd British Division.<sup>65</sup> Detailed administrative planning began immediately and the division embarked upon a programme of intensive training in combined operations and mountain warfare. On 24 April it was replaced in this role by the 1st Canadian Division, with what must have been to the British formation disappointing abruptness.

The considerations which brought about this substitution were not exclusively military. In Canada towards the end of 1942 public opinion, which could, of course, have no authentic knowledge of what plans might be in the moulding for the future employment of Canadian troops, was becoming increasingly vocal through the press and on the rostrum in exerting pressure upon the Government to get its forces into action as soon as possible. Canadian troops had been in the United Kingdom for three years, and except

for a single day's bloody action at Dieppe by units of the 2nd Canadian Division had seen no real fighting.

Fairly typical of editorial comment was the suggestion made at the beginning of November that it would be "a sensible thing to send a full division to some theatre of war, or next best at least -our senior officers. . . . An opportunity like Egypt to get actual fighting experience for officers and men should not be allowed to slip by complacently."<sup>66</sup> In Toronto an ex-Prime Minister of Canada, Lord Bennett, said that he could find no reason why the Canadian Army should have to spend its fourth Christmas in Britain without firing a shot.<sup>67</sup> A journalist reported to his paper from overseas that Canadian troops were feeling themselves to be "a sort of adjunct to the British Home Guard"; they were regarded as "the county constabulary in the English countryside".<sup>68</sup> Even statistics of a Canadian Army Neurological Hospital were presented under the headline, "Mental Illness in Overseas Army Laid to Inactivity and Anxiety".<sup>69</sup> In Vancouver the Canadian Corps Association heard a veteran of the First World War declare:

It strikes me as one of the supreme tragedies of this war that the United States, following one year in the struggle has already placed men in battle engagements in Africa while Canadian soldiers are sitting idle in England. This constitutes the greatest disgrace of the present war.<sup>70</sup>

The argument for giving some of the Canadian formations large-scale battle experience before committing the Army as a whole to operations was sound, and one that might well carry conviction in the military councils of the United Nations at a high level; in a somewhat different category were the more domestic and political reasons advanced, that the continued inactivity of her Army was damaging to the Dominion's self respect, and that the lack of a demonstrable contribution to victory might well weaken her influence in the post-war world.\* These aspects received increasing attention in the criticism which continued to be directed against the Government throughout the winter. As Parliament resumed after the Easter recess an opposition speaker regretted that men who had been overseas since 1939 should "have it thrown in their faces that while Australia and New Zealand are fighting gallantly on the sands of Africa personnel of the Canadian Army are not there."<sup>71</sup> Some newspapers suggested that the decision to keep the Canadians out of action had been made at Canada's request.

All other Empire troops have had battle experience in this war . . . The British have been everywhere. Only Canadians, among all the Allied combatants, have not been tried.

This, we confess, seems strange. To a great many it is disturbing.<sup>72</sup>

\* In a memorandum prepared for the Prime Minister at the end of January 1943, Mr. Hume Wrong, Assistant Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, expressed the fear that "Canada would become the object of taunts similar to that which Henri Quatre addressed to a tardy supporter who had arrived too late for the battle: 'Go hang yourself, brave Crillon, for we fought at Arques and you were not there!'"



It was charged that the blame lay with the Government's policy of wishing to maintain the Canadian Army intact. One editor pointed to the many theatres of war in which "one or two or even three Canadian divisions could play a useful role", and in urging the Government "to make at least fragmentary use of the great striking force" which had been raised and equipped by the nation, warned that "the hand which holds the poised dagger can become palsied through lack of use."<sup>73</sup> In mid-May 1943, unaware that the course which he advocated had already been taken, another wrote in similar vein:

Now that the North African campaign is finished and a new phase of the war is opening up, the honest course would be to admit frankly, even at the expense of personal pride, that the creation of a cumbersome military establishment overseas was an error of judgment and to permit the utilization of Canadian divisions in any formation where they can be effectively employed.<sup>74</sup>

These popular representations were presumably not without effect upon Government policy, and at a meeting in the United Kingdom with Mr. Churchill in October 1942 the Minister of National Defence, Colonel J. L. Ralston, requested that active employment should be found for the Canadian Army at the first opportunity. Later General McNaughton received from Lieut.-General Kenneth Stuart, Chief of the General Staff, a brief account (as told him by Colonel Ralston) of what had transpired at this meeting. 'The Minister of National Defence had emphasized to Mr. Churchill

that there were no strings on the employment of the Canadian Army, either in whole or in part: that the Government of Canada wished it to be used where it would make the greatest contribution: that the Canadian Government were ready to consider any proposals.<sup>75</sup>

On his return to Canada Colonel Ralston reported to the War Committee of the Cabinet on 21 October that it had once more been made clear to British authorities that the Canadian Army was available for service anywhere it could be most effectively employed. No condition that it must be employed as a whole was being imposed. The sole consideration was how and where the Army could serve best.

But while the Government was thus disclosing its readiness to divide the Army if such means were necessary to bring Canadian troops into action, the Army Commander himself showed less enthusiasm towards such a proposal. On learning from General Stuart of Colonel Ralston's representations to the British Prime Minister, General McNaughton reports that he then told the Chief of the General Staff that he was in

full agreement with the policy that the employment of the Canadian Army should be based on its making the maximum possible contribution; that this might be in whole or in part, according to circumstances. . . .

He went on to give his opinion, however,

that there was no reason to doubt that morale could be maintained even if we had to remain in England on guard for another year; that this was therefore no reason in itself for advocating active operations for their own sake; that anything we undertook should be strictly related to military needs and objectives.<sup>76</sup>

To forecast accurately for a year ahead the state of the morale of the Army if kept in the United Kingdom without action was not easy, but the problem had to be faced by those responsible for shaping Canadian policy. The unremitting efforts of the Canadian commanders to keep up a high standard of morale and discipline were bringing excellent results. During the closing months of 1942 and early in 1943 the fortnightly Field Censorship Reports-which provided a valuable sampling of the opinions held by the Canadian forces as revealed in their letters home-indicated with gratifying regularity that the morale of the Canadians in Britain was being fully maintained.\* This intelligence however was frequently qualified by a reference to the dissatisfaction of some of the troops at their present inactivity. During November some regret was voiced that Canadians had not been included in the landings which had been made in North Africa at the beginning of the month. There was always hope of action-Mr. Mackenzie King in his New Year's broadcast had warned the people of Canada that "all our armed forces" would be in action during 1943<sup>78</sup>-and as winter turned to spring evidence appeared that some of the troops expected this to come in the near future. A report which covered the last week in April showed that

Notwithstanding the long period of waiting, the Canadian Army appears to be in excellent condition on the whole, and ready and anxious to move. There are still a number of comments which indicate restlessness and boredom due to this inactivity, but there is much evidence of a great desire for, and anticipation of, action in the near future. The chief desire is to get on with the job, for which they came over, and then get back to their homes.<sup>79</sup>

From this and similar evidence in the reports of newspaper correspondents overseas it is clear that the major factor contributing to the morale of the Canadians in the United Kingdom during the winter of 1942-43 was their conviction that action would not be much longer delayed. That hope more than anything else encouraged them to endure with comparative cheerfulness the routine of what must otherwise have seemed merely training for training's sake. The degree to which their enthusiasm might have been sustained had 1943 brought no operational employment to Canadian arms can only be surmised; but it is not difficult to imagine the disquietude with which the Canadian Government must have contemplated at the end of 1942 the

\* In February 1943 General Sir Bernard Paget, C.-in-C. Home Forces, told Lieut.General H. D. G. Crerar, G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps, "that he was increasingly impressed by the smartness and behaviour of the Canadian troops which he daily saw in London. He said that he could recognize Canadian soldiers across the street by their excellent bearing, and that their saluting was quite first-class."<sup>77</sup>

probable effect of another year of inactivity upon the morale of its overseas troops.

Canada received no invitation for her troops to take part in the "Torch" landings in North Africa\*-indeed it was not until September that General McNaughton was informed of the decision to launch the operation and of the progress of its detailed planning.<sup>81</sup> On the last day of the year, however, the Army Commander was advised by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that an opportunity might soon arise for Canadian participation in an operation against Sardinia or Sicily.<sup>82</sup> The Chiefs of Staff Committee was contemplating for such an enterprise the employment of a British corps of three divisions, and Sir Alan Brooke warned McNaughton that a formal request might be forthcoming for Canada to supply one of these divisions. Within a week a proposal for the conquest of Sicily had been placed on the agenda of the approaching Casablanca Conference as a joint Allied task; but there was still a possibility of the occupation of Sardinia being mounted as a British operation, under the code name "Brimstone".<sup>83</sup> At the end of January, in anticipation of a favourable decision by the C.I.G.S., the 1st Canadian Division was given priority in the use of facilities to complete its training in combined operations. With the development of planning for the assault on Sicily, however, the mounting of Operation "Brimstone" was tentatively cancelled, the Army Commander and General Stuart being so informed by General Brooke on 9 February.<sup>84</sup> It looked as though Canadian troops were fated not to see the Mediterranean; and the eyes of Canadian planners returned to the contemplation of operations against a hostile shore closer to the United Kingdom.

By the middle of March, however, it had become apparent that there would be no large-scale cross-Channel operation that summer, except in the extremely unlikely event of a major German collapse. This was exceedingly disappointing news for the Canadian Government, and there was a marked degree of urgency in the telegram sent by Mr. King to Mr. Churchill on 17 March suggesting that "the strong considerations with which you are familiar in favour of employment of Canadian troops in North Africa appear to require earnest re-examination."<sup>85</sup> Additional representation was made at the military level when the Chief of the General Staff signalled General McNaughton next day that if there was little possibility

\* It may be noted that in July, when the decision was reached to mount "Torch", Mr. Churchill was contemplating the employment of the Canadian Army in an operation to seize aerodromes in Northern Norway ("Jupiter") in order to counter enemy air action against convoys to Russia. (General McNaughton's connection with this project is discussed in Volume I of this History, *Six Years of War*.) The British Chiefs of Staff opposed the scheme as impracticable, but on the 27th the Prime Minister notified President Roosevelt that he was running "Jupiter" for deception and that the Canadians would "be fitted for Arctic service".<sup>80</sup> A project, put forward in October 1942, for a Canadian force under General Crerar's command to participate in a combined operation against the Canary Islands (in the event, of a German occupation of Gibraltar) did not get beyond the stage of preliminary planning (see Volume I, Chapter 12).

of the Canadians being employed in 1943 as planned (i.e., in an operation against North-West Europe) "we should urge re-examination for one and perhaps two divisions going as early as possible to an active theatre." General Stuart pointed out that it was the War Committee's opinion that if no operations other than raids were thought possible during 1943, Canada should press for early representation in North Africa."<sup>86</sup>

The replies to both these messages were not encouraging. On 20 March McNaughton reiterated his firm belief in the overriding authority of the British Chiefs of Staff Committee in the matter of strategic planning.

My view remains (1) that Canadian Forces in whole should be used where and when they can make the best contribution to winning the war, (2) that we should continue to recognize that the strategical situation can only be brought to a focus in Chiefs of Staff Committee, (3) that proposals for use of Canadian forces should initiate with this committee, (4) that on receipt of these proposals I should examine them and report thereon to you with recommendations.

"I do not recommend", he added, "that we should press for employment merely to satisfy a desire for activity or for representation in particular theatres however much I myself and all here may desire this from our own narrow point of view."<sup>87</sup>

Mr. Churchill's answer to Mr. King, dispatched the same day, held out little hope of meeting the Canadian request. He explained that it was intended to send only one more division from the United Kingdom to North Africa; this formation was already committed and under special training, and plans were too far advanced to permit of a Canadian division being sent in its place. No further divisions were likely to be required. "I fully realize and appreciate", concluded the Prime Minister, "the anxiety of your fine troops to take an active part in operations and you may be assured that I am keeping this very much in mind."<sup>88</sup>

At the end of March the Canadian Government was able to obtain the views of Mr. Anthony Eden. The British Foreign Secretary was made fully conversant with the case for Canadian troops to be given an early opportunity for action, and it was emphasized to him that the Government and the Army Command were willing to have the Canadian Army employed, in whole or in part, at any time and in any theatre of war in which it would be most effective. He was reminded of the Government's understanding that the Canadian Army was to be held in Britain for use as a unit in European operations later that year, and was told that if there had been any change in this plan and Canadian troops were not to be used even for limited operations in 1943, it would be a serious blow to the spirit of both the Canadian Army and the Canadian people. But Mr. Eden could offer little encouragement; for although Allied plans had been based on the possibility of offensive operations in the late summer or early autumn, this did not mean

that full-scale invasion in 1943 was a probability. A great deal depended on the developments in Russia and North Africa.

Nevertheless it must be concluded that this reiteration of the Government's request bore fruit with the British authorities. Mr. Churchill, having given his assurance to keep the question of operational employment "very much in mind", was as good as his word. Whatever may have been the considerations that finally turned the scale in favour of Canada, by St. George's Day the British Prime Minister had issued to Sir Alan Brooke his directive that Canadian participation was to be arranged in the next operation.<sup>89</sup>

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff immediately sent word of the inclusion of Canadian troops in Operation "Husky" to the Allied commanders in the Mediterranean Theatre.

Personal from C.I.G.S. for General  
Eisenhower, repeated General Alexander.

1. Both political and military grounds make it essential that Canadian forces should be brought into action this year. It had been hoped to employ them in operations across the channel from U.K. but likelihood of such operations has now become extremely remote owing to recent addition to HUSKY of practically all remaining landing craft.
2. It has therefore been decided that 1 Canadian Division and a tank brigade similarly organized to 3 Division and its tank brigade will replace latter in the Eastern Task Force for the HUSKY operation subject to confirmation from the Canadian Government which we hope will be immediately forthcoming.
3. I very much regret this last minute change. We have been very carefully into its implications and consider it quite practicable. The Canadian Division is in a more advanced state of combined training than 3 Division and the Canadian planning staff have already started work with full assistance of 3 Division so no time is being lost.
4. Request that Force 141 and 545 be informed.<sup>90</sup>

When General McNaughton advised General Brooke on 25 April of the Canadian Government's provisional acceptance of the British invitation it was with an important reservation. In his capacity as Senior Combatant Officer overseas he considered it part of his responsibility to examine the general plans of the proposed operation before recommending acceptance to the Canadian Government. After three crowded days, during which he was almost constantly engaged in discussion with War Office officials - the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the Vice Chief, the Director of Military Operations and Planning, with members of his own staff at Army Headquarters, and with the Commanders of the 3rd British and 1st Canadian Division<sup>91</sup> - he was able to report to Ottawa his satisfaction that the plans represented "a practical operation of war."<sup>92</sup> On the receipt of this assurance General Stuart notified the Army Commander of the Canadian Government's final approval.<sup>93</sup>

Next day McNaughton received a message from General Montgomery: "Am delighted Canadian Division will come under me for Husky."<sup>94</sup>

## CHAPTER II

### THE 1st DIVISION GOES TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

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#### After Long Waiting

THE two Canadian formations whose future course of action had thus been plotted in such widely separated cities as Algiers, Cairo, Ottawa and London were the senior Canadian representatives of their arms of service in the United Kingdom. General McNaughton himself had brought the 1st Infantry Division to Britain in December 1939.<sup>1</sup> The 1st Army Tank Brigade, first of the Canadian armoured formations to move overseas, had arrived during the summer of 1941 under the command of Brigadier F. F. Worthington, a pioneer of armoured warfare in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

Mobilized at the outbreak of war as one of the two divisions of the Canadian Active Service Force, the 1st Division included the nation's three Permanent Force infantry regiments (The Royal Canadian Regiment, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, and the Royal 22e Regiment). Its long sojourn in the United Kingdom is described elsewhere in this History.\* After the dark days of June 1940, when it had sent a brigade group in a brief and disappointingly fruitless excursion across the Channel, the Division had settled down to what General McNaughton had "long thought was the important task, the defence of these islands."<sup>3</sup> Through the remainder of that anxious summer, in which German invasion appeared imminent, officers and men stood on guard between London and the Channel coast, training intensively to meet the expected test. But Hitler's courage failed him, and there followed two and a half years of marking time - a period broken only by the sending of a small force of the Division on the bloodless expedition to Spitsbergen.<sup>4</sup> The enforced waiting, however, was no time of idleness, for a great offensive weapon was in the forging. Throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom Briton and Canadian readied themselves to carry the war to the enemy, and the spring of 1943 found the three brigades of the Division, which was

\* Volume I, *Six Years of War*.

commanded now by Major-General H. L. N. Salmon, completing an exacting course of basic training in combined operations.

Two years of concentrated training across the Sussex Downs had brought the 1st Army Tank Brigade to a high standard of efficiency, which had been tested and proved on the fire-swept beaches of Dieppe, where one of its regiments - the 14th Army Tank Regiment (The Calgary Regiment) - had been the first unit of the Canadian Armoured Corps ever to go into action. Brigadier R. A. Wyman had succeeded Brigadier Worthington in the command in February 1942.

### The 1st Division "Takes Over"

It was the natural claim of their seniority and efficiency which led General McNaughton to select these two formations for participation in Operation "Husky".<sup>5</sup> Once the nomination had been made the Canadian Division lost no time in "taking over" its operational role from the British formation which it was replacing. Indeed, on 24 April, before a reply had been received from Ottawa, the War Office, acting on the assumption that Canadian confirmation would be forthcoming, issued a directive instructing the Commander of the 3rd Division, Major-General W. H. C. Ramsden, to establish direct contact with the Headquarters of the Canadian Division and "to place at the disposal of the Canadian Commander full details of the progress in planning and preparation that has so far been made."<sup>6</sup>

The actual "hand-over" was in the nature of an operation in itself, appropriately given the code name "Swift".<sup>7</sup> For weeks the staff officers of the British Division, with a direct channel of communication established to Headquarters of Force 545 in Cairo, and in close touch with planners at the War Office, had been busy organizing the mass of information passed to them from higher levels and working out in detail the varied and complicated administrative problems arising from participation in the coming assault. A large part of the preliminary spade-work had been completed, much of it in extremely rocky ground, for even at this late date no firm plan for the invasion had reached the United Kingdom. The sound methods which General Ramsden's officers had employed enabled them to present the Canadians with a well-established and smoothly functioning planning organization which did not suffer from interruption during the take over. On 24 April General Salmon set up his divisional planning staff at Norfolk House, in St. James's Square, and upon a branch-to-branch basis each British officer individually put his Canadian "opposite number" in the picture, passing to him and explaining the contents of the bulky files of data

which went to make up the giant blueprint so soon to be translated into execution.<sup>8</sup>

It was an unkind turn of events which thus compelled the officers of the 3rd Division to surrender to others the high hopes of action towards the realization of which they had so enthusiastically laboured. The blow was the heavier in that it was not possible at the time for General Ramsden to pass on to the troops under his command the reasons (conveyed to him by Sir Alan Brooke) for their replacement by the Canadians.<sup>9</sup> To their great credit be it said that they took their disappointment in good spirit, and the assistance which they gave their successors did much to smooth the Canadian path. For them entry into action was to be postponed for a year, but the associations formed with Canadians were to continue. When on 6 June 1944 the 3rd British Division landed on the beaches of Normandy, it was at the side of the 3rd Canadian Division.<sup>10</sup>

### Canadian Planning Begins

At Norfolk House General Salmon's staff plunged energetically into their exacting task. Time was against them. D Day for "Husky" had been set as 10 July,\* and embarkation was due to begin in mid-June.<sup>11</sup> The complex problem of mounting a force that was to be sea-borne to its point of contact with the enemy was attended by many difficulties, and had to be met by most careful planning. Every morning saw conferences conducted at successive hours under the auspices of the General Staff Branch, the "A" and "Q" Branches,† and an inter-service committee charged with coordination of the sea, ground and air aspects of the operation. The attendance at these meetings of officers of the Royal Navy, the Royal Air Force and the War Office and close liaison between the Canadian branches and services ensured harmonious progress within the whole complex organization.

As soon as Force 545 learned that the 1st Canadian Division would replace the 3rd British Division, it sent an urgent request for General Salmon and certain of his staff officers to come to Cairo forthwith.<sup>12</sup> In the vast design of operation "Husky" the Canadian formation would enter the assault on D Day as part of an army it had never seen before, and it was therefore highly desirable that the divisional commander should have some previous contact with those who were to be his superiors and his colleagues,

\* The final Anfa meeting had agreed that an intensive effort should be made to achieve the favourable June moon for the operation, but on 20 March General Eisenhower reported to the Combined Chiefs of Staff that it was impossible to meet this earlier deadline.

† The General Staff Branch is responsible for training, Intelligence, security and operations. The "A" and "Q" Branches are concerned with all phases of administration, including transportation arrangements and the provision of equipment and supplies.



and that an opportunity should be given for members of the Canadian planning staff to consult with their "opposite numbers" who were at work in Cairo. Arrangements were made for General Salmon, accompanied by his naval associates and several officers of his staff, to fly out to the Mediterranean. The Air Ministry made two aircraft available, and the flight was ordered for 29 April.

At nine o'clock that morning General Salmon and his party took off from Hendon in a Hudson. With the G.O.C. were Rear-Admiral P. J. Mack, R.N., the Naval Force Commander assigned to the Canadian section of the operation; Captain Sir T. L. Beevor, R.N., a member of his staff; Lt.-Col. G. G. H. Wilson, G.S.O. 1, 3rd British Division; and Lt.-Col. C. J. Finlay, who had just been appointed Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General, 1st Canadian Division.<sup>13</sup> The aircraft did not clear the United Kingdom; near Barnstaple, in Devonshire, it crashed and burned. All the occupants were killed. As a result, departure of the second aircraft was postponed.<sup>14</sup>

This misfortune was not permitted to halt even momentarily the course of preparations for the operation. When General McNaughton learned of the accident, he immediately gave instructions for Major-General G. G. Simonds to assume command of the 1st Division, put himself "in the picture" in regard to the forthcoming operation, and to fly to Cairo in General Salmon's place without delay.<sup>15</sup> The new commander held the distinction of being Canada's youngest general officer. A Permanent Force officer, he had come overseas in 1939 as a major on the staff of the 1st Canadian Division. He had risen rapidly, serving as G.S.O. 1 of the 2nd Canadian Division, and as Brigadier General Staff of the 1st Canadian Corps, in which appointment he had won high commendation from General Montgomery.<sup>16</sup> He had recently completed a tour of duty under the Eighth Army Commander in North Africa. On his return to England in mid-April he was promoted Major-General (at the age of 39) and given the command of the 2nd Canadian Division—an appointment which he had held for only a few days when his transfer to the 1st Division entrusted him with the direction of Canada's share in the Sicilian enterprise.

Late on the afternoon of 29 April General Simonds went to Norfolk House and immediately began to familiarize himself with the design of the operation and the progress so far made under General Salmon's direction. As noted above, the outline plan had not yet reached its final form; indeed at that very moment it was undergoing critical examination by the service Commanders-in-Chief in conference at Algiers (see above, p. 18). Thus when the new G.O.C. left London on the morning of 1 May for the flight to Cairo, he knew that a modification had been contemplated, but was not aware how the plan then stood, particularly with regard to the intended location of the Canadian assault. As a precaution in case of a future mishap

General Simonds' party had been divided into two groups for the flight. His G.S.O. 1, Lt.-Col. George Kitching, and his C.O. Divisional Signals, Lt.-Col. J. H. Eaman, were placed aboard the second aircraft, which carried also Brigadier Christopher Vokes, Commander of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade; Brigadier A. W. Beament, Deputy Adjutant General at C.M.H.Q.; and Lt.-Col. D. K. Tow, Assistant Quartermaster General, 2nd Canadian Corps.\* It was airborne early on 30 April. Travelling with Simonds in a third aircraft (replacing the crashed Hudson) were his Commander, Royal Engineers, Lt.-Col. Geoffrey Walsh; his Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General, Major A. F. B. Knight; and Rear-Admiral Sir Philip L. Vian, R.N., an officer of great distinction, who had been appointed to replace Admiral Mack.<sup>17</sup> "Vian of the *Cossack*" was no stranger to the Canadian Army, for in 1941 he had commanded the naval squadron which escorted the detachment of the 1st Canadian Division on its excursion to Spitsbergen.

At Gibraltar and again at Algiers, where sandstorms delayed the journey eastward, General Simonds found that no decision had yet been reached on a final plan for "Husky". It was not until his arrival, on the evening of 4 May, at Headquarters Force 545 in Cairo that the Canadian Commander learned that the general plan of the operation was at last "firm". In conferences with the planning staff of the 30th British Corps-the formation to which the 1st Division had been allotted for "Husky"-the General discussed the changes that had been made in the broad scheme, and decided on the manner in which he wanted to carry out the Canadian share of the task allotted to the Corps. He then saw Lieut.-General Leese, the Corps Commander, and obtained his concurrence in certain modifications in the assault plan for the Canadian sector. These concerned the fixing of interdivisional boundaries, and provision for special attention to be given to enemy coastal defences on the Canadian right and left flanks. To ensure that the most accurate information possible would be available regarding the beaches at which the Canadians were to land, Simonds asked for a submarine reconnaissance to be made. He emphasized to Leese that time was short, and that he must soon return to England.

I told him I had to put forward a firm plan, and leave Cairo with the clear understanding that whatever plan I took back with me could not change, as the loading of the ships was soon about to start, and this could not be delayed.

In the afternoon I made a further study of the map and model and put the plan down on paper and cabled it home that night. The plan was cabled to England within 24 hours of my arrival in Cairo and was never changed since.<sup>18</sup>

For four more days Simonds remained in Cairo, conferring with various officers of the Headquarters of the Eighth Army and the 30th British Corps.

\* Lt. -Col. W. P. Gilbride, who succeeded Lt. Col. Finlay as A.A. & Q.M.G., 1st Canadian Division, remained in London to carry on planning.

He had a number of meetings with Major-General D. N. Wimberley, G.O.C. 51st (Highland) Division, which was to assault on the Canadians' immediate right, "to make certain that we were properly tied in on the right flank as regards junction points."<sup>19</sup> On the morning of 9 May he left Cairo on his return journey, and after a near mishap, when faulty navigation almost brought about a landing in Eire and consequent internment for the whole party, he reached London on the afternoon of the 11th.<sup>20</sup>

### Training for the Assault

In the meantime units of the 1st Canadian Division and of the 1st Army Tank Brigade terminated their long stay in "Sussex by the Sea" and moved northward into Scotland. During the past winter, as we have seen, the three infantry brigades had completed basic training in combined operations; a final period of advanced training was now needed to fit them for what a War Office directive styled "(a) an opposed landing, (b) subsequent land operations including mountainous country."<sup>21</sup> At Inveraray on the rugged Argyllshire coast each brigade in turn underwent a rigorous eight-day "refresher" course designed to put officers and men in tip-top physical condition and to practise them in the highly specialized technique of assault landing. A strenuous programme of forced route marches, cross-country runs, hill-scaling, rope-climbing and exercise with scramble nets achieved its purpose, drawing from one brigade diarist the comment, "the men are stiff but have stamina and carry very well their hardening".<sup>22</sup>

Under the skilled direction of specialist instructors in combined training units carried out day and night assault landings along the Ayrshire coast on "hostile" beaches "defended" by troops of a Royal Marine commando acting as enemy. With the keen and critical eye of the Royal Navy upon them, prairie lads, born and raised a thousand miles from the sea, mastered the niceties of transferring themselves from the decks of transport into small landing craft pitching on the choppy waters of a Scottish loch. In addition to the week at the Combined Training Centre the Canadian battalions, stationed briefly at camps in south-western Scotland, filled their days (and much of their nights) with an intensive programme of specialized training involving work with new types of equipment. "No. 1 novelty" (so new as to be still on the secret list) was an anti-tank weapon which was destined to achieve wide repute—the PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank).

For the units of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade a special course in mountain warfare in the hills of Perthshire preceded the period at Inveraray. It was General Simonds' express desire that the Division should undergo as

much mountain training as possible in the short time available, and particularly the 3rd Brigade, whose role in "Husky" was to follow up the initial assault of the 1st and 2nd Brigades. Cliff-scaling and mock attacks up steep mountain sides played an effective part in the hardening process, to which an important contribution was made by the introduction of the troops to the "Everest carrier"--"an ingenious device with which a man can take the load of a mule, or almost!"<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile the Canadian Tank Brigade, with Headquarters temporarily established at Annan, in Dumfriesshire, was busily engaged in its particular form of preparation, having taken over training areas previously occupied by the 33rd Army Tank Brigade, the British armoured formation originally selected to go to Sicily. When Brigadier Wyman's units moved north from Sussex they said goodbye to the Canadian-made Ram tanks which had replaced their earlier British Churchills. In the Mediterranean theatre Sherman tanks had been adopted as standard equipment; accordingly on their arrival in Scotland the Canadian tank regiments inherited the Shermans which had been issued to their predecessors in the "Husky" order of battle.

There was much to be done in little time. Officers and men quickly familiarized themselves with their new tanks, and on the armoured fighting vehicle range at Kirkcudbright each regiment practised the use of the 75-millimetre gun with which the Shermans were armed. In its forthcoming role in the Eighth Army (although until the end of May the secret was known to none below Brigade Headquarters, and then only to regimental commanders) the Brigade was to find itself in exalted company-the exploits of Montgomery's tank formations in the Western Desert were already legendary. The Brigade training staff was therefore fortunate in having the assistance of a small number of British officers who had served with armour in North Africa. Two of these-Brigadier G. W. Richards, the commander of the 23rd Tank Brigade, and Major E. S. Franklin, an expert in Sherman tanks-were expressly sent by General Montgomery to the United Kingdom to work with the Canadian Army Tank Brigade.<sup>24</sup> With the group from North Africa was Brigadier M. E. Dennis, Brigadier Royal Artillery, Eighth Army (and later Major-General Royal Artillery, 21st Army Group); his timely advice and encouragement to Canadian gunners, both during the training period in Scotland and later in Sicily and Italy, contributed greatly to the effectiveness of the Canadian artillery in the operations in the Mediterranean theatre.<sup>25</sup>

May passed into June, and the deadline set by the War Office for the completion of preparation found the Brigade in a satisfying state of readiness. By the middle of the month, when the time came for

embarkation; units had received their full scale of equipment, their tanks were camouflaged and waterproofed,\* and officers and men had completed five days' privilege leave.<sup>26</sup>

### Administrative Preparations

While infantry and tank units were thus putting finishing touches to their training, the Canadian planning staff in London had been equally busy. The arrival of a firm outline plan for the invasion had made it possible to push to completion planning at divisional level; with the actual landing beaches selected intelligence staff officers could finish compiling their "Intelligence Summaries"-the established sources from which the assault troops would learn about the terrain over which they were to fight and the dispositions and characteristics of the enemy formations that they might expect to encounter.

On the "A" and "Q" sides staff officers continued to fashion the administrative plan for equipping and maintaining the Canadian force. They were aided greatly by the visit to North Africa of Brigadier Beament, who, as we have seen, had flown out with the initial planning party. He attended meetings with the various planning staffs at Cairo and Algiers and brought back to the United Kingdom final decisions on many "A" and "Q" problems. Lt.-Col. Tow, who accompanied Brigadier Beament to the Mediterranean, remained in Africa to handle the numerous details of Canadian administration and to act as liaison officer with the Army Group and with Allied Force Headquarters (see below, p. 38).<sup>27</sup>

On the shoulders of the Canadian planners rested the responsibility of ensuring that when the troop convoys sailed from the United Kingdom they would carry with them every item of the great mass of equipment, vehicles and stores required for keeping the force in action during the first three weeks of the operation; thereafter maintenance would be carried out through Eighth Army channels from the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Every possible contingency had to be foreseen and measures taken to meet it. There could be no afterthought in the replacement of shortages, for no more shipping in support of the operation could be expected from the United Kingdom until 42 days after the landing. Thus, to give only one example, the possibility that a water-trailer might stall on a Sicilian sandbar caused the replacement of all water-trailers by water-trucks with four-wheel drive. Loading tables for each ship in the several convoys were worked out in the

\* In waterproofing, the tanks were prepared for "wading" ashore under their own power through a maximum depth of six feet of water. The main precautions taken were to extend the exhaust pipe above water level and seal with a special plastic material exposed joints and working parts.

minutest detail to ensure that the innumerable items of cargo would be available at the time and place they were required in Sicily. Every vehicle was stowed on board fully loaded, care being taken in the distribution to maintain a safe balance throughout the entire convoy of such important stores as ammunition, food and water. "We knew the contents of every lorry", said one of the planners afterwards, "and the drivers themselves knew what was in their lorries, where they were to go on landing and, once they arrived there, what to do".<sup>29</sup>

The task of the administrative planners was further complicated by the fact that since the Canadian force was to be supplied over the Eighth Army's lines of communication, it was necessary for the sake of standardization to adopt, in the main, British types of equipment which were in use in the Mediterranean Theatre and which could be maintained or replaced from bases in the Middle East. Accordingly the 1st Division and the Tank Brigade were re-equipped with the Thompson machine carbine, which had only recently been replaced by the new Sten. Other weapons that had been adopted for the Canadian overseas forces were issued. The former machine-gun battalion of the 1st Division, The Saskatoon Light Infantry (M.G.), now reorganized into three Brigade Support Groups, received the 4.2-inch mortar and the 20-millimetre anti-aircraft gun. The anti-tank platoons of the Canadian infantry battalions relinquished their 2-pounder guns in favour of 6-pounders, while the divisional anti-tank regiment drew 17-pounders in place of some of its 6-pounders.<sup>30</sup> It will be observed that much of this equipment was not to be found in the list of the normal requirements of an infantry division or tank brigade mobilized for action. Wherever the various articles to be issued were included in the standard mobilization tables-in military terms the "G.1098" scale their provision to the 1st Canadian Division and the Army Tank Brigade was a Canadian Army responsibility; the furnishing of everything other than G.1098 equipment, including a large number of items peculiar to the forthcoming operation, was undertaken by the War Office.<sup>31</sup>

The most important addition to the vehicles with which the Canadian formations were now to be equipped was the American-designed amphibious truck-the DUKW (so designated from its factory serial initials). This was a normal U.S. two-and-a-half-ton six-wheeled truck which had in fact a boat built around it. All six wheels were power driven, but when the vehicle entered the water the motive power was transferred to a propeller. When afloat the DUKW attained a maximum speed of six knots, and should the propeller fail, under favourable conditions it could still be driven up to two miles per hour by the wheels. Ashore its cross-country performance was similar to that of an ordinary three-ton lorry. Its primary task was the transfer of stores from ship to shore, and because of its amphibious powers it was the

only craft that had no fear of the sandbars which it was expected would be found off the beaches where the Canadian Division was to land. In case of emergency, as will later be seen, it could be used in place of the L.C.A\* to carry assault troops ashore.

The planners of "Husky", mindful of the lessons of Operation "Torch", and alive to the necessity of assuring a rapid build-up for the assault forces, adopted the DUKW to accelerate the unloading of stores and equipment. As a result of successful trials during 1942 orders had been placed in America for 2000 of the amphibians, and by the early summer of 1943 production was well advanced. Of 350 of these vehicles allotted to the Eighth Army for the Sicilian operation, one hundred were sent direct from the United States to the United Kingdom for the 1st Canadian Division.<sup>32</sup> Probably no other item of equipment for the expedition caused more anxiety than these hundred DUKWs. Until the last moment it was uncertain whether they would arrive in time for loading-a procedure which itself presented special difficulties in stowing for launching from the ships' davits at an early hour on D Day. The delay in delivery created a further problem with respect to the training of special drivers, to instruct whom driver-mechanics experienced in handling amphibious vehicles were flown from North Africa to the United Kingdom. Only two DUKWs were available at the Combined Training Centre† until the first consignment arrived from America early in June, so that there was barely time to give all drivers some practice in operating the novel vehicles before they had to be reloaded for their journey to the Mediterranean. But all difficulties were successfully overcome; as will later be shown, these amphibians in their first employment in an operation in European waters splendidly proved their worth. "Husky" wrote a new chapter in the story of beach maintenance of an assaulting force, and the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, when examining the lessons of the landings, was to underline "the profound effect that Dukws have had in amphibious warfare."<sup>34</sup>

The fact that Operation "Husky" was to take place in a climate considerably warmer than that of the United Kingdom, and would conceivably involve fighting in mountainous regions, added to the already long lists in the hands of the "Q" planners. While good Canadian battledress was adequate protection against the traditional rigours of an English summer, it was necessary now to provide all ranks with light weight "khaki drill" clothing, better suited for the torrid heat of Sicily in July. Rope-soled shoes and tinted eyeshields and spectacles were among the many items of tropical equipment provided, which included even a special camouflage paint to

\* Landing Craft, Assault.

† General McNaughton personally tested one of these, driving it "ashore on soft sand and afloat in a considerable sea." The demand for DUKWs for the Canadian landings in Sicily followed.<sup>33</sup>

conform with Middle East requirements. Mules might be acquired for carrying supplies in the Sicilian hills; and so over one hundred sets of pack saddlery were taken along and personnel experienced in animal transport were included in the first reinforcements. Nor did the providers overlook the dangers of disease lurking in the Sicilian valleys and plains. In the comprehensive cargoes that were being assembled anti-malarial sets, mosquito nets, fly swatters and spray guns found an important place, to enable every precaution to be taken against the onset of tropical maladies. In such manner was provision made for the multitudinous needs of the Canadian force; for, as General Simonds had been told at the War Office, this was "to be the best found expedition which ever left the United Kingdom."<sup>35</sup>

The use of British channels for supplying from the Middle East all the material wants of the Canadian component of the Eighth Army once operations had begun could obviously not be extended to the "A" or personnel side to include the furnishing of reinforcements. Casualties in the Canadian force had to be replaced from Canadian sources—an arrangement presenting special problems which would not arise in the case of the non-Canadian formations engaged in "Husky". In an assault landing it was to be expected that initial casualties might be heavy. But whereas British and American reinforcements for the 15th Army Group would be available at short notice from depots already operating in North Africa, no such Canadian establishments existed nearer to Sicily than the United Kingdom.

Accordingly a Canadian base reinforcement depot was planned, where reinforcements could be held in training close to the theatre of operations. For reasons of security it was not practicable to establish convenient reserves of Canadian troops in North Africa before the assault was launched. The Canadian planners therefore proposed that the headquarters and three of the battalions of the contemplated depot should be set up in North Africa on or after D Day, but that a fourth battalion of reinforcements, amounting to nearly 1500 all ranks, should be carried straight to Sicily in one of the early follow-up convoys, and thus be available within three days of the initial landings. Both the War Office and Allied Force Headquarters at first expressed doubts as to the practicability of this expedient, but they were finally convinced by the arguments which Canadian Military Headquarters presented.<sup>36</sup> In the actual event the scheme quickly found its justification on the landing beaches, where every available man was required to assist in the unloading of ammunition, rations and stores; while in the fighting that followed reinforcements for the Canadian units were immediately forthcoming. On the other hand, had all the Canadian reinforcement battalions been sent to North Africa, it would have taken at least three weeks to replace early losses—a particularly serious situation in the event of the early casualties reaching their expected proportions. So convincingly did the "Husky" landings demonstrate the value of this policy that in planning



the subsequent invasion of the Italian mainland the Eighth Army instructed each of its assault divisions to have 1000 reinforcements landed between D plus 3 and D plus 6.<sup>37</sup>

Closely paralleling the administrative problem of maintaining the reinforcement stream was that of arranging for the care and evacuation of the wounded. The process of recovering Canadian casualties from the Middle East bases to which the normal Eighth Army lines of communication would carry them might well be attended by complications, and it was early decided that they should be moved directly westward from the scene of action. It seemed expedient therefore that in addition to sending a Canadian general hospital direct to Sicily, Canadian medical installations should be established in North Africa athwart the line of evacuation to the United Kingdom. The British authorities welcomed such a proposal, and plans were made to dispatch a 1200-bed general hospital and a convalescent depot to Algeria,\* to be set up in the vicinity of No. 1 Base Reinforcement Depot.<sup>38</sup>

In the interest of avoiding confusion and unnecessary duplication it was essential that the conduct of Canadian administration should not intrude upon the British channels already existing in the Eighth Army. At an early stage of Canadian participation in the Force 141 planning it was prescribed as a basic principle that once the 15th Army Group was committed to action all matters of administration affecting Canadian troops were to be handled to the highest degree possible through the normal chain of Army and higher command.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding these arrangements the need was recognized for a Canadian "A" staff element at General Alexander's headquarters to assist in the supervision of such peculiarly Canadian administrative matters as have been referred to above, and to provide a means by which Canadian service authorities in the United Kingdom might have liaison (in all except operational matters) with the Commander-in-Chief and with the Canadian force commander in the field. To fulfil these functions foundation was early laid for a "Canadian Section, General Headquarters First Echelon", to be attached to Headquarters 15th Army Group. Lt.-Col. Tow was appointed A.A. & Q.M.G. in charge of the Section, and thus became the senior officer of the Canadian Adjutant-General's Branch at General Alexander's Headquarters. At the same time a "Canadian Section, G.H.Q. Second Echelon" was authorized. "Second Echelon" was the office at the base of the senior A.G. officer at G.H.Q., and the officer in charge of the Canadian Section represented Colonel Tow in the execution of policy regarding Canadian personnel.' His chief duties were to maintain records of service of all ranks in the Canadian force, to report strengths and casualties

\* No. 5 Canadian General Hospital (600 beds) began functioning at Syracuse on 22 July; No. 1 Canadian Convalescent Depot went to Philippeville, and No. 15 General Hospital to nearby El Arrouch.

to C.M.H.Q., to register graves, and to arrange for the supply of reinforcements to units in the field.<sup>40</sup>

By the end of May planning was over and preparation was well advanced. Although the Division had passed from under the direct control of the 1st Canadian Corps, the Corps Commander, Lieut.-General H. D. G. Crerar, had found time to visit the Canadians on several occasions during their specialized training in Scotland; and Lieut.-General Leese, in whose 30th Corps the Division was soon to serve, had sent back his Brigadier General Staff, Brigadier G. P. Walsh, by air from Africa to co-ordinate details for the assault.<sup>41</sup> On 22 May the 1st and 2nd Infantry Brigades and attached supporting arms and services, embarked in the same ships that were to take them to Sicily, carried out a great combined landing exercise on the Ayrshire coast near Troon. The rehearsal took place under the eyes of General McNaughton and the Commander of the Combined Training Centre, MajorGeneral J. S. Drew, and members of his staff, and their criticisms were of great value to the Divisional Commander in remedying certain weaknesses in technique which the exercise had revealed.<sup>42</sup>

General Montgomery visited England in the latter part of May, fresh from his victories in North Africa. There were discussions with General McNaughton and General Simonds, and on 27 May the Eighth Army Commander addressed at the War Office the senior officers of the three services who were to take part in Operation "Husky". Describing the pattern of the attack in forthright terms Montgomery "made a very fine impression, and earned the confidence of all present in his plans."<sup>43</sup> From the Commander of the Eighth Army under whom they were to serve the Canadian officers caught the spirit of the great enterprise, and a fuller realization of its vast scope. It was stimulating to the imagination to discover that while Canadian troops were rounding off their training on the Scottish coast, British formations designated to assault alongside of them on the Sicilian beaches were similarly rehearsing their landings on the distant shores of the Red Sea. There was good reason for confidence, for the health, physical condition and morale of the troops were at the peak. The provision of equipment for the force was substantially complete, and it was almost time to begin the tremendous task of loading the vehicles and stores for the expedition.

### The Convoy Programme

The transfer by sea of a completely equipped force of more than 26,000 troops\* over a distance of more than two thousand miles could at best be no light undertaking; when in addition, the destination for a major part of that

\* The total strength of Canadian units embarked from the U.K. for Operation "Husky" was 1851 officers and 24,835 other ranks.<sup>44</sup>

force was a hostile shore, with an assault landing to be co-ordinated precisely with those of similar forces converging from other distant ports, the movement became one of extraordinary complexity. To carry the Canadians and all the vast paraphernalia of their material requirements the Navy assigned shipping to make up four main convoys. The date of departure of each of these from the United Kingdom was predetermined by its rate of progress and the designated time of its arrival in Sicilian waters. It was necessary for slowmoving cargo vessels laden with vehicles and stores to leave port several days before the speedier troop transports, in order that they might make timely rendezvous with them for the assault. "Follow-up" convoys were dispatched so as to reach Sicily three days after the initial landings.

The majority of the troops, including the three infantry brigades of the 1st Division, were assigned to the "Fast Assault Convoy", due to leave the Clyde on D minus 12 (28 June), and to proceed at twelve knots. This convoy of a dozen vessels comprised the headquarters ship, H.M.S. *Hilary*, with Rear Admiral Vian aboard, great passenger liners like the *Durban Castle* and the Polish *Batory*, which had adopted with their wartime grey the classification of L.S.Is. (Landing Ships, Infantry) or L.S.Ps. (Landing Ships, Personnel), and three of the new L.S.Ts. (Landing Ships, Tank), bearing the pugnacious names of H.M.S. *Boxer*, *Bruiser* and *Thruster*. The Headquarters of the 1st Canadian Division travelled in *Hilary*. (Almost a year later this ship was to serve the 3rd Canadian Division in the same capacity for the assault on Normandy.) The remainder of the Division embarked by brigades. The 1st Brigade, commanded by Brigadier H. D. Graham, sailed in H.M.S. *Glengyle*, *Derbyshire* and the Dutch *Marnix van St. Aldegonde*; the 2nd, under Brigadier Vokes, was aboard H.M.S. *Circassia*, *Llangibby Castle* and *Durban Castle*; H.M.S. *Batory* and *Ascania* carried Brigadier M.H.S. Penhale's 3rd Brigade.<sup>45</sup> In assigning the troops to the vessels in which they were to sail due attention was paid to the order in which they would disembark at the end of their journey. Assaulting battalions had to be allotted to ships together with their full complement of beach group personnel (for organizing and maintaining traffic on the beaches), and engineer reconnaissance parties (to clear paths through minefields) .

The bulk of the transport and stores required to support the first attack, together with a small number of troops, was carried in the "Slow Assault Convoy". This convoy sailed from the United Kingdom in two groups; the first, consisting of eight L.S.Ts., setting out on D minus 21 (19 June), the other, made up chiefly of seventeen cargo vessels, leaving five days later. These two sub-convoys were timed to join forces off Algiers on D minus 5, and to proceed thenceforth at a uniform rate of eight knots.

The two follow-up convoys carried the Tank Brigade-less the 12th Army Tank Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment), which was to take part in the assault-the Canadian hospital installations and No. 1 Base Reinforcement Depot, and various other units not required for the assault itself. A slow convoy of 42 ships sailed from Scotland on 25 June, and was followed on 1 July by the ten ships of the faster group.

### Embarkation and Sailing

Early in June long motor convoys began to arrive at ports up and down the west coast of Great Britain-in the Bristol Channel, on the Mersey, and along Clydeside-bringing heavily-laden unit transport from the training areas. At the docks a vast assortment of stores gathered from ordnance depots all over the country found its way into the holds of the waiting ships. Loading was done tactically, i.e., in such a way that vehicles and cargoes could be discharged in an order of priority governed by the demands of the tactical plan and by the facilities for unloading that would be available on the beaches. Since it was essential that the vehicles, stores, supplies and ammunition necessary to maintain the assault should be landed as quickly as possible from the waiting convoys, the ships carrying the motor transport and the general cargo vessels had to be so grouped that their arrival at the "Release Position"\* would immediately follow upon the landing of the assaulting waves. As the vessels in the English ports completed loading their respective quotas of vehicles and stores, they sailed up the west coast into the Clyde and anchored in their convoy assembly areas. Here, between 13 and 16 June all the assault troops of the 1st Canadian Division embarked on the ships that were to carry them into battle.<sup>46</sup>

Two more weeks were to elapse, however, before the Canadians actually left the United Kingdom; for one final phase of training yet remained. This was designed as a dress rehearsal for "Husky", and was to take the form of a large-scale combined operations exercise on a section of the Ayrshire coast closely resembling in local topography the Sicilian beaches assigned for the Canadian landings (although the security-minded authors of the scheme represented the area as being a part of the coast of German-occupied France). On 17 June a convoy of twelve transports sailed out of the Clyde, and in the very early hours of the following day the assault by the 1st and 2nd Canadian Brigades began. But bad weather interfered. High winds and a rising sea which endangered the landing craft forced a postponement of the exercise, and the troopships returned to the Clyde. The weather continued

\* The point offshore where men and supplies are trans-shipped from the ocean-going vessels to the smaller landing craft that will carry them to the beaches.

to be unfavourable, and finally, as though to emphasize the appropriateness of the rehearsal's code name, on 22 June forced cancellation of Exercise "Stymie". For the 3rd Brigade, which had not taken part in the combined practice landings on the Ayrshire coast, and had now been prevented from rehearsing its role of following through the assault brigades, a landing exercise in the Clyde was arranged. While, in all these circumstances, the Division's test was naturally not as successful as had been hoped, even in the very incomplete form in which it took place it taught certain useful lessons which were duly noted.<sup>47</sup>

The days crawled slowly by as the force waited impatiently on board for the day of departure. Physical training, lectures, and such routine tasks as weapon-cleaning helped pass the time, and there were one or two welcome route marches ashore. On 19 June the first of the slower convoys, with its accompanying corvettes and other protective naval craft, slipped quietly out to sea;\* and thereafter at prescribed intervals other groups of ships followed. On the evening of 28 June the Fast Assault Convoy itself steamed away from Greenock. As the big transports and their naval escorts left the mouth of the Clyde, unknown to anyone on board a heart-felt God-speed came from the nearby shore. In a room in H.M.S. *Warren*, a shore naval establishment at Largs, on the Renfrewshire coast overlooking the firth, a group of senior Allied officers of all three services sat secretly in conference devising plans for new blows against the Axis. Under guise of the code name Exercise "Rattle", it was one of the important convocations of the war, for its object was to study the problems of combined operations in a cross-Channel assault on the continent, and on its conclusions was based much of the subsequent planning and preparation for the launching of Operation "Overlord". Suddenly the chairman, Lord Louis Mountbatten, halted the discussions, asking all to walk outside. They looked down across the darkening waters and saw the Canadian convoy moving majestically forward in line ahead out into the open sea. To at least one of these observers, General McNaughton, it must have been a profoundly moving experience to see the 1st Canadian Division thus setting forth on its path of high adventure.<sup>49</sup>

With the convoys outward bound there was reasonable cause for satisfaction that the great secret of the enterprise had been well kept. It was unavoidable, of course, that a very considerable number of people had to know, in varying degree, the details of the forthcoming operation; planning and preparation for so extensive and complicated a business could not have otherwise proceeded. Every possible precaution was taken, however, to

\* Escort groups for the various convoys during the voyage to the Mediterranean were as follows: for the "Fast Assault Convoy", two frigates and five sloops; for the "Slow Assault", one frigate, one sloop, one cutter and six corvettes; for the "Fast Follow-Up Convoy", three destroyers and three frigates; and for the "Slow Follow-Up", one destroyer, one frigate, one cutter and six corvettes.<sup>48</sup>

ensure that no individual knew more of the great project than was absolutely necessary to the efficient performance of his duties. Up to the time of their departure from Scotland, and indeed for some days afterwards, the troops themselves, beyond knowing that their task was an assault landing (to be made in a latitude where tropical kit might be needed), were dependent upon rumour or their own imagination for an answer to the question, "Where are we going?" As we have seen, even battalion commanders were let into the secret only at a very late date, and they, as well as any other officers who knew parts of the truth, kept their own counsel. Throughout the days of training the lesson of security was emphatically impressed upon officers and men by means of lectures and the showing of specially prepared films which illustrated convincingly the dangers of careless talk.<sup>50</sup>

A particularly difficult problem of security had arisen with the untimely death of General Salmon, coinciding as it did with the beginning of the movement of the 1st Division from Sussex. It was clearly undesirable that any publicity regarding the loss of its Commander should direct attention to the Canadian Division, and it was of the utmost importance that no inkling of the crashed aircraft's destination should reach either the troops or the general public. There was some official discussion between the War Office and the Canadian military authorities as to whether an announcement of the accident should be made. It was decided that the news should not be concealed, and accordingly a simple announcement was made in Canada and in the United Kingdom that General Salmon and Lt.-Col. Finlay had been killed in a flying accident over south-west England.<sup>51</sup>

Striking evidence of the success of the security measures that had been taken to preserve the great secret of the forthcoming operation appeared in the genuine surprise with which the majority of troops aboard the convoys received the news, when several days out from land, that their target was Sicily; more convincing proof was later to come from the enemy himself, when his reaction to the Allied landings showed how completely he had been kept in the dark about the doom that was inexorably descending upon his Mediterranean outpost.

### The Voyage to Sicily

On 1 July-Dominion Day-the last flight of transports weighed anchor in the Clyde and followed the other convoys out into the North Atlantic *en route* to the Mediterranean. There were now grouped at various intervals off the coast of Western Europe some 125 vessels, including the escorting naval craft, all forging steadily forward with their freight of Canadian troops and equipment. The allotted course took the troopships around the northern coast of Ireland and thence directly south, giving the Bay of Biscay

a wide berth. The weather was fine and warm, and as officers and men donned their tropical kit excitement ran high at the prospect of early action.

It was on Dominion Day that the troops aboard the Fast Assault Convoy, now well out to sea, learned that their destination was Axis-held Sicily, and that the expected day of their landing was to be 10 July. All ranks cheered heartily at the news that they were entering the Mediterranean theatre of war and were to become part of the famous Eighth Army. A greeting from General Montgomery, which was read on all ships, carried a warm welcome to the Canadians:

I know well the fighting men from Canada; they are magnificent soldiers, and the long and careful training they have received in England will now be put to good use-to the great benefit of the Eighth Army.<sup>52</sup>

There were messages too from the Commanders of the First Canadian Army and the 1st Canadian Corps, wishing the troops the best of luck. In a special Order of the Day Major-General Simonds called on all ranks of the 1st Canadian Division to live up to the fighting tradition which their formation had inherited from the First World War. He reminded them that with the co-operating naval and air forces the Division was a part of the best formed expedition ever to set sail to invade a hostile country.

It remains only to apply the lessons of our training under the stress of actual operations. I am not trying to tell you the task will be easy. War is not easy it is a hard and bitter struggle-the ultimate test of moral and physical courage and skill at arms.

I do tell you that you will be launched into battle on a good plan which has been carefully rehearsed and that if you coolly apply what you have been taught during three years of preparation, success will be ours.<sup>53</sup>

There was something now to occupy every officer and man. It was part of General Montgomery's policy that all should be completely briefed on the proposed operations. On each ship the sealed bag containing instructions for units was opened, and the maps, air photographs, operation orders and intelligence pamphlets which it held were immediately put to good use. A large-scale relief model that every ship carried gave officers and men a realistic picture of the terrain of the beaches and their hinterland where the Canadian assaults would be made. On these models the expected course of the coming operations was explained to all ranks, and as a result of the intensive study which they received during the following days the actual landings were made on a shore whose topographical features were in the main recognizable to all.

Every effort was made to maintain officers and men in the best physical condition. Divisional Headquarters issued a special directive for

training during the voyage, which insisted on the "maintaining of regular hours for physical training, washing, eating, fatigues, games and lectures."<sup>54</sup> These lectures placed emphasis on first aid, sanitation and the treatment of prisoners of war and civilians. The men were warned that looters would be dealt with in the "severest manner". To combat in advance the danger of infection from tropical diseases—a matter considered so important by General Montgomery that he had addressed a letter regarding it to all unit commanders—medical officers by special instruction and insistence on the taking of mepacrine tablets endeavoured to make all ranks fully "malaria-minded".<sup>55</sup>

By such means, as the convoys pursued their course towards Sicily, the members of the 1st Division groomed themselves to meet their Commander's direction—to "go ashore physically fit, with everyone knowing his job and what is required of him."<sup>56</sup>

### In Mediterranean Waters

Opposite the south coast of Spain the Fast Assault Convoy swung eastward, and in the early hours of 5 July passed through the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean. Thence it continued along the North African coast, and rounding Cape Bon sailed south-east in the direction of Tripoli. On the morning of D minus 1 (9 July) it turned northward towards the appointed rendezvous south of Malta. When each convoy was well inside the Mediterranean a flotilla of destroyers replaced the group of smaller escort craft which had conducted the transports safely through Atlantic waters.<sup>57</sup> The weather remained fair, and after their weeks of hard training amid the cold Scottish mists the troops found the cloudless skies and blue seas of the Mediterranean a welcome change.

The entire voyage of the Fast Assault Convoy was accomplished in safety, although there were some alarms which set all the ships weaving in intricate emergency turns, and the troops on board saw at least one enemy submarine blown out of the water by the depth charges of the escorting destroyers. The Slow Assault Convoy was, however, less fortunate. On the night of 4-5 July Axis submarines lurking off the North African coast between Oran and Algiers torpedoed two of its merchantmen, the *St. Essylt* and the *City of Venice*. The former vessel was abandoned in flames; and an attempt to tow the sinking *City of Venice* to Algiers failed. On the following afternoon a third ship, the *Devis*, carrying the Commodore of the convoy, was also hit. She caught fire and sank in twenty minutes.



The Officer Commanding the troops on board has given the following details of the loss of the *Devis*:

At approximately 1545 hrs. 5 Jul 43, the ship was struck by a torpedo just aft of amidships. The explosion was immediately beneath the ORs' Mess Decks, and blew the body of one man up on the bridge, and two more on the boat deck, as well as the rear end of a truck, etc. Fire broke out immediately and within 3 to 4 minutes the fore part of the ship was cut off from the aft part. Explosions of ammunition were continuous.

The men, with two exceptions, behaved extremely well. They took their boat stations in an orderly manner, and did not throw over the rafts or jump overboard until the order to abandon ship was given. In the meantime, they collected wounded and burned men, and took them overboard with them when they went.<sup>58</sup>

Of the more than 900 troops aboard these three ships 593 were Canadians. In the first two sinkings there was fortunately little loss of life; among the Canadians one officer and five other ranks were listed as missing. Casualties were heavier for the *Devis*, which carried 261 Canadian and 35 British officers and men.<sup>59</sup> A number of soldiers were killed or fatally injured in the initial explosion, and men were trapped in the hold when the companion-way burnt out; in spite of prompt rescue operations, 52 Canadian other ranks were reported as missing and subsequently presumed killed.<sup>60</sup>

The loss of the cargo carried by the three vessels was serious, but the less so because it was fortunately spread over a large number of units. More than 500 vehicles and some forty guns went to the bottom, and the resulting shortages caused considerable difficulties, especially to Divisional Headquarters, which lost almost all of its vehicles and signals equipment.<sup>61</sup>

July entered its second week, and now from many points of the compass the forces destined to the conquest of Sicily were closing in upon the island. From Alexandria and Port Said at the far end of the inland sea which the Fascist dictator had presumed to style an Italian lake, and from the ports of Tripoli and Sfax along its southern shore, great convoys of the Eastern Task Force had set out on the voyages which would bring them, each promptly upon its appointed hour, to the designated rendezvous with the Canadians. Some divisions of the American Seventh Army had already embarked on their eastward course from Oran and Algiers; in Bizerta and Tunis-wrested from the Axis only two months earlier\*-and in Sousse, other formations of the Western Task Force, held in waiting to the last because of their relative proximity to the island target, were readying for their successive departures. Steaming along their prearranged paths in the intricate maze of seaborne traffic, the ships bearing the Canadians drew in

\* Bizerta was taken by British troops on 7 May and Tunis by American forces on the same day. On 13 May General Alexander sent his historic signal to Mr. Churchill: "Sir, it is my duty to report that the Tunisian campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores."<sup>62</sup>

to the focal point of the converging convoys. In all, more than 3000 merchant vessels, naval fighting ships and assault craft of all types were preparing for the descent upon Sicily.<sup>63</sup>

During the passage through the Mediterranean the Allied convoys had kept generally close in to the southern shore, where they received adequate fighter protection from squadrons of the Allied air forces based on the North African mainland. During the first nine days of July aircraft of the Northwest African Coastal Air Force flew a total of 1426 sorties in safeguarding eastbound shipping, including a record number of 574 sorties on the 8th and 9th. Over the westbound convoys the fighter squadrons controlled by Air Headquarters, Air Defences Eastern Mediterranean, flew 1421 sorties during the same period. Naval co-operation aircraft in both sectors carried out nearly 600 sorties on anti-submarine patrols and submarine hunts. As the great armada converged on Malta during the morning of 9 July, fighters took off from the island's airfields to cover the approaching shipping with a protective umbrella of nearly 60 miles' radius.<sup>64</sup>

Effective as these measures were, there was a still more potent reason for the almost negligible opposition offered by the enemy's air and naval forces to the massing of the Allied invasion fleet. From the middle of May until the end of June his airfields, his ports and submarine bases and his lines of communication had been subjected to an intensive bombing programme. During these six weeks bombers and fighter-bombers of the Northwest African Air Forces and Middle East Command had flown 2292 sorties against airfields in Sicily, Sardinia and Southern Italy, and 2638 against other strategic targets in these areas.<sup>65</sup>

Convincing evidence of the success which attended these Allied efforts appears in enemy records which came to light after the war. At a conference in Rome on 12 May 1943 Admiral Arturo Riccardi, Chief of the Italian Naval Staff, complained to the Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, GrandAdmiral Karl Dönitz, that air attacks were causing such severe damage in the Strait of Messina that it had become difficult to maintain the garrison in Sicily. "Since railroad traffic has come to a complete standstill in Sicily", he stated, "the island has to be supplied by sea from Naples. The only way to improve transportation facilities on the island itself would be an increased use of lorries."<sup>66</sup> The conference was further told "that in Messina not even 130 heavy anti-aircraft guns, concentrated in a small area, were able to prevent the air attacks", and that "the Italian Admiral Borone\* in Sicily had reported yesterday that a month from now nothing would be left on his island unless strongest efforts for the defence against enemy air raids would be made."<sup>67</sup>

\* Probably Rear Admiral Pietro Baroni, Naval Commander Sicily.

During the week immediately preceding D Day an even greater effort was put forth against enemy airfields in Sicily. The group of landing-grounds in the Gerbini area received the severest attention, for it was here that the enemy had based the majority of his fighter planes. Between 4 and 9 July these fields felt the force of 373 heavy and 560 medium bomber sorties flown by the Northwest African Air Forces and by Cyrenaica-based Liberators of the Ninth United States Air Force. German losses were heavy. On one day, 5 July, an estimated 50 out of 54 Axis aircraft on the main Gerbini airfield were destroyed, and on the same day 35 out of a force of 100 German fighters were reported shot down while attacking a formation of 27 Fortresses.<sup>68</sup> The remaining airfields in south-eastern Sicily all received their quota of heavy bombloads, and the landing-grounds in the west of the island, while regarded as of secondary importance, came in for their share, though in more limited proportions, of Allied aerial attack.

Playing an important part in this great "softening-up" operation were three Royal Canadian Air Force night bomber squadrons of Wellingtons No. 420 (*City of London*) Squadron, No. 424 (*City of Hamilton*) Squadron, and No. 425 (*Alouette*) Squadron. These formed a Canadian wing of Major-General James H. Doolittle's Northwest African Strategic Air Force No. 331 (R.C.A.F.) Wing, commanded by Group Captain C.R. Dunlap and from 26 June to the time of the assault (and for many weeks thereafter) they took off night after night from their Tunisian base in the Sousse area to raid targets in Sicily, Sardinia and Southern Italy.<sup>69</sup>

All these blows by the Allied air forces had their desired effect. By the eve of D Day the attacks upon the Sicilian airfields had rendered many of them unserviceable, and had forced an estimated half of the enemy's aircraft formerly based there to withdraw to landing-grounds in Southern Italy. The Allied aerial offensive had fulfilled its mission in preventing the concentration of an effective air striking force, just as the control of the Mediterranean seaways by our naval and air forces had dissuaded the enemy from employing submarines on any appreciable scale against the approaching convoys.

By midday of 9 July the Canadian Fast Assault Convoy had reached a point 70 miles south of Malta, and now the precision of intricate naval schedules framed months earlier once again became apparent. During the hot, cloudless morning the eager troops looking out to starboard from their transports had watched the approach of convoys from the Middle East ports while they themselves were drawing in sight of their own Slow Assault Convoy, now only a few miles ahead. At noon the attendant naval vessels slipped away from the troopships which they had escorted through the Western Mediterranean. Their place was immediately taken by a force of four cruisers and six destroyers, assigned the task of bombarding the beaches

and providing close gun support for the assaults of the Eastern Task Force.<sup>70</sup> From the Slow Assault Convoy five vessels (but for the sinking of the *St. Essylt* and the *City of Venice* the number would have been seven) joined the faster group, which without delay continued on its path.<sup>71</sup>

The course was now drawn to the north, to pass between Malta and the setting sun, and thence to bend north-eastward in the direction of the Sicilian coast for one final rendezvous. Offshore, at a point half a dozen miles from the beaches where the 1st Canadian Division was to make its landings, a lone waiting British submarine marked the release position\* from which the actual ship-to-shore assault would be launched.<sup>72</sup>

\* 36°36'N., 14°57'E. *Unrivalled*, stationed at this point, was one of four submarines of the 10th Flotilla assigned to mark the release positions of the respective convoys and to lay navigational aids to assist landing craft flotillas in finding their beaches.

## CHAPTER III

### THE INVASION OF SICILY, 10 JULY 1943

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#### Sicily and its People

**F**ROM the earliest days of recorded history Sicily has known occupation at many hands. Twenty-five centuries have gone by since far-sailing Greek and Phoenician adventurers planted their first colonies along the island's seaboard and began gradually to crowd into serfdom the hill-dwellers, who, tradition says, had themselves come as immigrants or "Sicels" from the mainland peninsula. On more than a dozen occasions during the passing of the years the invader has landed on her shores; for Sicily's position between Europe and North Africa has made her a steppingstone between the two continents and a battleground for powers seeking control of the Mediterranean basin. Thus, many peoples have used the island as a resting place, but few as a final abode. Although throughout her chequered history Sicily has more than once enjoyed independent rule, her record is mainly one of domination, successively by Greek, Carthaginian and Roman, Vandal and Ostrogoth, Byzantine and Saracen, Norman and Angevin, Spaniard and Austrian. The last invasion before 1943 was in 1860, when the gallant expedition of Garibaldi and the Thousand opened the way for the annexation of the island into the new Kingdom of Italy.

So turbulent a history was bound to leave upon the inhabitants of the island a mark no less enduring than the influences of geology and climate. The almost continuous state of defence which Sicily has been forced to maintain has compelled the population to live in large groups, and to build their inland communities on elevated, easily defended sites. The rugged topography of the country has provided ample scope for this practice, which has been further encouraged by the ravages of the malarial mosquito, which flourishes in the lowlands but not on the cooler high ground. The Allied armies in the summer of 1943 were to fight some of their fiercest battles when ousting the enemy from these lofty hill towns of the interior.

As we have seen, Sicily's natural physical structure places the advantage overwhelmingly with the defender in any contest for possession of the

island. The mountain backbone along the northern coast is flanked by lesser ranges which cover most of the central and southern regions. Two of these formations merit note, for they were in the area of operations assigned to the Eighth Army, and more specifically along the axis of the Canadian advance. The more extensive of these is the Monti Erei, an irregular chain of flat-topped hills which branches south-eastward from the main northern spine to mark the watershed between the Ionian Sea and the Malta Channel (see Map 1). Although erosion has much fretted the sandstone of which it is composed, the range forms a continuous and fairly level barrier descending gradually from an altitude of 3000 feet at Enna-the most centrally and loftily sited town in Sicily-to 2000 feet near Caltagirone at its southern extremity. From a point a few miles north of Enna a spur runs eastward between the Salso and Dittaino Rivers to the lower slopes of Mount Etna, bearing on its heights the towns of Leonforte, Assoro,\* Agira and Regalbuto-names that were to become indelibly inscribed in the story of Canadian operations in Sicily. The soft rock of which these hills are formed makes their slopes unstable and subject to frequent landslide-a condition favourable to demolitions of which the engineers of a defending force might be expected to take full advantage. East of the Erei ridge the land declines to the Catania plain in a series of low clay and sandstone hills, which are traversed by the steep-sided, flat-floored valleys of the eastward-flowing Salso and Dittaino Rivers.<sup>1</sup>

The other hill system in the Canadian path consisted of the tableland of the Monti Iblei, which stretches north-westward from the Pachino peninsula to meet the Monti Erei at Caltagirone. This plateau, which rises to a height of 2000 feet or more, is broken by narrow valleys with precipitous sides. At its northern edge a series of terraces step down to the Catania plain; to the south it shelves more gradually to the narrow coastal strip running westward from Cape Passero.\*

As might be expected in a country where the majority of the towns and villages were perched on lofty hilltops, the roads of Sicily were rarely level and more seldom straight. Skilled engineering had eased the steepness of the gradients and the sharpness of the bends by which the main State highways mounted and descended these hills, but many of the Provincial and Communal roads (on which the Canadian Division was forced to rely) provided only a narrow and tortuous route. A standard-gauge railway ran through most of the coastal area, while the interior was served by a network of secondary lines, many of narrow gauge, and not expected to be of much value to the Allied forces in the early stages of the campaign. Because of difficulty of troop movement off the existing routes, it was apparent to the Allied planners, as Lord Montgomery has pointed out, that "the

\* See p. 697.

campaign in Sicily was going to depend largely on the domination of main road and track centres." Events were to show that these almost invariably became the main objectives of the advancing forces.<sup>2</sup>

The climate of Sicily may be summed up in its two major characteristics -high summer temperatures and absence of rain. July is described by the guidebooks as generally the driest month of the year, and certainly 1943 proved no exception. July is not included among the months recommended for tourist travel in the island, an omission which the men of the 1st Division, sweltering on the sun-baked hills and in the fiery valleys of the interior and choked by the dust which the combination of heat and drought engendered, could heartily endorse.

The general briefing which Canadian officers and men received during the voyage to the Mediterranean included a picture of the people of Sicily, their characteristics, and the attitude which they might be expected to adopt towards the Allied invaders. The troops learned that only ten per cent of the four million population lived in scattered settlements outside of the towns and villages. Agriculture had always been the principal spite of the unpromising terrain ninety per cent of the surface of the island was under cultivoccupationination. Wheat-growing was of very long-established tradition. In early days Sicily was one of the chief granaries for ancient Rome, but in modern times the thin soils of the steep mountain slopes, the low rainfall, and the traditional but not particularly efficient methods of farming under the iniquitous system of the absentee landlord accounted for a low average yield which produced little surplus wheat for export. Of livelier interest to the average Canadian soldier were those more characteristic crops which he was to encounter in the growing state for the first time-the citrus fruits, vines, almonds and olives, the intensive cultivation of which occupied a large proportion of the agricultural population.

Life for the Sicilian peasant had long been a harsh and constant struggle for existence. Under the *latifundia*, a discreditable system of land tenure which had persisted from feudal times, he toiled out his days in virtual serfdom to a landlord whom he might never see. From his humble lodging in some hilltop community he daily trudged down to wrest his meagre living from stony fields an hour's journey or more away, returning at night by a track often so steep and rough that even the sturdy Sicilian carts could not mount it. Such local isolation as this had combined with poverty and a low standard of literacy to make the mass of the population politically apathetic. In common with the rest-of Italy, Sicilians in the years before the Second World War had been relentlessly subjected to the indoctrination of the totalitarian state. Attempts by the Fascist regime to ameliorate the lot of the people in the island had met with only a measure of success, and the effectiveness of these reforms had been largely neutralized by the burdens

which Mussolini's ill-conceived foreign policy had placed upon the Italian nation. All in all it was not expected by the planners of "Husky" that the civilian inhabitants of Sicily would offer much resistance or even show marked hostility to the Allied forces. An intelligence summary issued by the 1st Canadian Division thus appraised the situation:

At the outset of invasion it is possible that national pride stimulated by Fascist propaganda may induce the civil population to lend active assistance, at least in the early stages, to the defending forces. In these circumstances, they might even help the Germans, though this is most unlikely. It is, however, very questionable whether the efforts of the widely discredited Fascist propaganda machine will rally the Sicilians in the final emergency. On the contrary, it is more likely that the civil population will take no active part in military operations, but, as at Tripoli, will greet the invading forces with sullen indifference, whether they are British, Canadian or American.<sup>3</sup>

Events were to prove the accuracy of this appreciation.\*

### The Defences of the Island

The state of the defences of Sicily had been closely studied by the Allied planners, and information now available from enemy sources has confirmed that the conclusions then reached were generally remarkably well founded. Captured documents have shown that wherever miscalculations occurred the Allied appreciations erred on the right side in overestimating rather than minimizing the enemy's strengths.

The Axis air power, as we have seen, had been seriously weakened by the merciless offensive carried out against enemy airfields by the Allied air forces. A draft intelligence report on the fighting in Sicily prepared after the campaign at the headquarters of Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring, the German Commander-in-Chief in Italy (and bearing amendments in his own handwriting),<sup>5</sup> reveals that by D Day the German 2nd Air Fleet—which included in its command Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily and Southern Italy—had been reduced to some 430 serviceable aircraft, of which 250 were fighter planes; while the Italian *Regio Aeronautica*, with some 325 effective aircraft disposed on the mainland and in the islands, could muster within range of the battle area not more than 200 fighters.<sup>6</sup> In some measure compensating for his weakness in the air the enemy had concentrated strong forces of flak artillery along the east coast and at the western tip of Sicily to provide effective anti-aircraft protection of the Strait of Messina and the important cities of Catania and Palermo. An urgent request made on 19

\* It is of interest to note that late in May Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Chief of the Intelligence Branch, Armed Forces High Command, expressed similar doubts regarding the mood of the Italian people to Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Propaganda Minister. Goebbels expressed the contrary view, that in defence of their own soil the Italians would "fight much more bravely than they did in North Africa, not to mention the Eastern Front."<sup>4</sup>



June by the Italian General Staff for 2000 additional German aircraft\* to ensure the efficient defence of the island against the vast resources of the Allied powers had remained unanswered.<sup>8</sup>

Although the enemy's naval forces were of considerable strength, it was not expected that they would offer serious resistance. At the time that "Husky" was launched Allied Intelligence believed that the Italian fleet included as effectives six battleships and seven cruisers, besides a large number of destroyers, torpedo boats and submarines.<sup>9</sup> To escape air attack these ships had been distributed to various ports, chiefly in the north, at Genoa and Spezia, and in the south at Taranto (see p. 697)-although the German intelligence report cited above states that the Italian fleet, in consequence of heavy air attacks, had only one battleship ready for commitment. German naval craft in the Western Mediterranean consisted of two small flotillas of E-boats based respectively at Cagliari in Sardinia and Porto Empedocle on the south coast of Sicily.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the Italian naval strength might be, battle experience was lacking, for in three years of war Mussolini had avoided committing the heavy units of his fleet to action, relying on the efforts of light craft, submarines and air power to oppose Allied incursions into Mediterranean waters. It is little wonder that morale was reported to be low and tactical ability poor. There was justification for the Allied view that even an assault on Sicily, "bastion of the so-called European fortress", would fail to spur the Italian fleet, widely separated as it was, into striking an effective blow against the invading armada.

It is on record that the German Admiralty was under no delusion about the probable effectiveness of the Italian Navy in preventing an Allied invasion. At the conference in Rome in May to which we have already referred, after hearing the plans of the Italian Admiralty for the operations of its naval forces in the event of an invasion of Sicily (which might be expected some time after 22 June), Admiral Dönitz declared that the Axis naval forces were "too weak to foil the enemy's plans by destroying either his embarkation points or the approaching invasion fleet."<sup>11</sup> Although he was going to send more German submarines to the Mediterranean, it was only -for their nuisance value; he was convinced that they would not be able to stop an invasion. The Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy defined a less spectacular role for the Italian fleet:

Our whole problem is a successful defence on land. Although preparations for the battle at sea are necessary they are not decisive. The battle on land alone is decisive. Therefore, the most important part of the Navy's mission is to make battle on land possible. That means safe-guarding the supply lines across the sea.<sup>12</sup>

\* The report by the German Armed Forces Operations Staff of the Feltre Conference, held on 19 July 1943, offers the following reason for non-compliance with the Italian request: "The material requirements of the Italians the Führer designated as partly unfulfillable; for instance the delivery of 2000 aircraft. Germany could neither produce them nor withdraw them from the East; neither could Italy handle them."<sup>7</sup>

So vital was the need for keeping the islands supplied that Dönitz declared that submarines and even cruisers must be used for the purpose.

For the "battle on land" which the German High Command rightly considered would be the decisive factor of the approaching test, Sicily was none too strongly garrisoned. An Allied appraisal at the time of invasion placed the number of Axis ground troops on the island at 323,500, but over eighty per cent of these were believed to be Italian troops of the notoriously indifferent Sixth Army Command.<sup>13</sup> However, the most reliable statistics derived from enemy sources after the campaign show that this estimate was excessive; there were probably no more than 40,000 German\* and 230,000 Italian troops in Sicily on 10 July 1943.<sup>16</sup> These forces were in general to be found in two types of formation corresponding to the role which they were expected to play in the defence. Since the long coastline and numerous beaches made the island vulnerable to assault at many points, the enemy relied on a screen of coast defence formations in static positions to absorb the initial shock of the landings; he held his field divisions concentrated in the interior, ready to deliver deliberate counter-attacks which would complete the destruction of the invaders.

All Italian formations in Sicily formed part of the Sixth Army, which at the time of the invasion was commanded by General Alfredo Guzzoni, with headquarters at Enna. Guzzoni had led the Italian expeditionary force against Albania in 1939, and had commanded one of the armies which invaded France in 1940. He subsequently served as Under Secretary of War and Assistant Chief of the General Staff, and in May 1943, at the age of 66, he had taken over the command in Sicily from General Mario Roatta, who became Chief of the General Staff. The Sixth Army consisted of two corps, the 12th and the 16th, comprising a total of four field and the equivalent of six coastal divisions. The 12th Corps, with two infantry-the 26th (Assietta) and the 28th (Aosta) Divisions-and three and a half coastal divisions under command, was stationed in the western half of the island, with headquarters at Corleone; the eastern sector was garrisoned by the 16th Corps, under the command of General Agostino Cinti, whose headquarters was at Piazza Armerina. This Corps included the 4th (Livorno) and the 54th (Napoli) Infantry Divisions, stationed respectively at Caltagirone and in the area between Vizzini and Syracuse, and the 206th and 213th Coastal Divisions, as well as certain independent coast defence commands. Also under Cinti were six aerodrome defence units and five mobile groups stationed at key inland points. Each stationary unit (*difesa fissa aeroporto*) in general comprised one or more infantry companies, a

\* An additional 30,000 German troops reached the island during the campaign.<sup>14</sup> On 25 July 1943 Hitler spoke of 70,000 Germans then in Sicily.<sup>15</sup> An Armed Forces Operations Staff situation report of 4 August gave the ration strength (which invariably exceeded the actual strength) in Sicily as 80,000.

platoon or company of machine-gun troops, and a battery or two of howitzers manned by Frontier Guard units transferred from Northern Italy; *a gruppia mobile* was built around approximately one armoured company, equipped with French Renault ("R.35") or Italian "Fiat 3000" tanks. A Sixth Army order of battle showed one of these aerodrome fixed defence units (No. 517) at Pachino at the end of May. The 206th Coastal Division guarded a seventy-mile stretch of the south and east coasts between the Gulf of Gela and Syracuse.\* This was the sector in which the Eighth Army's assault was to be launched.<sup>17</sup>

The Italian coastal divisions, as not infrequently happens with troops assigned to garrison duties, were not the elite of their country's fighting forces. None had seen action; and in general their training had been haphazard, their equipment and supplies were inadequate, and their morale was low. These formations were not built on any fixed establishment, and none exceeded 12,000 in strength. They were composed of second-line troops organized into a number of static infantry battalions, machine-gun units and batteries of medium and coast defence artillery. Aerial reconnaissance revealed no strong defences along the assault beaches. The defenders had to rely on short belts of wire and scattered minefields covered by machine-gun posts and occasional concrete pillboxes. Guzzoni's Chief of Staff, General Emilio Faldella, writing ten years later, states that on the 206th Coastal Division's front there were on the average 26 men, two automatic rifles and three machine-guns per kilometre, with two pieces of artillery every three kilometres. The first-line formations of the Sixth Army were believed to be of somewhat higher calibre, but only one, the Livorno Division (commanded by Major-General Domenico Chirieleison), which had been trained and organized as a special Assault Landing Division three years before, could be considered at all formidable.<sup>18</sup>

Neither the Italian nor the German High Command was ignorant of the ineffectiveness of the Italian garrison in Sicily. In March 1943 General Roatta had submitted a detailed and decidedly pessimistic report on the state of the Sixth Army,<sup>19</sup> and in May Field-Marshal Kesselring informed Admiral Dönitz that on a tour of inspection of the island he had "noticed that Italian defence preparations were very incomplete."<sup>20</sup> Kesselring "had therefore impressed this fact on" Roatta, but apparently to little avail, for during the last week in June a group of Italian staff officers inspecting the units of the Sixth Army had found the situation unimproved, and had reported that the main burden of the defence of the island would have to fall upon the shoulders of the German armoured formations.<sup>21</sup>

\* Specifically from Punta Braccetto, 23 miles south-east of Gela, to Masseria Palma, four miles south of Syracuse.

The sorry state of the Italian forces on the island is revealed in a series of documents captured during the operations in Sicily, emanating for the most part from the 16th Corps and the 206th Coastal Division. These records show an almost unbelievably low standard of morale, training and discipline. Thus the Corps Commander reports that in early March, during mild weather "very favourable for intensive training", on two separate occasions while passing "between Syracuse and Caltagirone at an hour when training should be in full swing", he had "seen everywhere . . . isolated groups of soldiers idling and yawning in the sun, their mules torpid from lack of exercise and attention." Some efforts had been made to improve matters -it was proposed, for instance, to assign to each regiment at least one regular officer as battalion commander-but even as late as June 1943 it was found necessary after a review of the coastal regiments by the Prince of Piedmont to court-martial certain regular officers because their units had displayed before His Royal Highness a -complete ignorance of the elements of military etiquette and training. Among the "deficiencies and shortcomings" of this inspection to which General Cinti considered it "necessary to draw the attention of everyone" were cases of soldiers being "on pass" during an "Alert", without arms or steel helmet; a "present arms" being "carried out with M.Gs. and L.M.Gs. This movement should be carried out exclusively with rifles and carbines"; and the "greatest indifference" which soldiers of detached units affected to the passage of automobiles, pretending not to see and failing to salute those with a pennant. "In fact, His Royal Highness was actually not saluted on several occasions, although his automobile was carrying *two* pennants."<sup>22</sup>

The Commander of the 206th Division complains of a mortar unit no members of which "had ever had any practical training"; of guard duties being very slackly performed-it was possible to penetrate to the sleeping quarters without being challenged; and of a divisional Chief of Staff whom he continually finds "glued to the telephone. Every time I send for him he takes a long time to come because he is telephoning. This afternoon alone, between 1600 and 1850 hours, he had 53 (fifty-three) telephone calls. This is absurd." The same commander is greatly concerned over his soldiers' aversion to the use of the bayonet in fighting:

I have observed that units consider the bayonet as an object to be fixed on to the rifle only for presenting arms. If I summon a soldier, if I order a unit to move a few yards, the first thing anyone does is to unfix his bayonet as if it were not possible for a soldier to address an officer with the bayonet fixed, or for a unit to do a *half-right* turn or move five yards with the bayonet fixed. I cannot understand it. It would be perfectly easy to have a few hours' battle-drill, or even ordinary drill with fixed bayonets. Soldiers are not children two or three years old, who are afraid of cutting themselves if they carry a sharp instrument in their hands.<sup>23</sup>

### The German Garrison

German troops had been introduced into the garrison of Sicily comparatively recently. Convinced that the fighting power of the Italian forces on the island could not be sufficiently strengthened merely by supplying them with arms and equipment, early in February the German High Command ordered Field-Marshal Kesselring "to keep as strong as possible battle groups in constant readiness in Sicily".<sup>24</sup> (Although nominally under the command of the Duce, and receiving his general instructions through the Italian *Comando Supremo*, Kesselring was the commander actually responsible for the conduct of German air and ground operations in Italy and the Western and Central Mediterranean; Hitler had appointed him *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* (Commander-in-Chief South) in December 1941.)<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly the C.-in-C. South created a Special Headquarters (*Einsatzstab*), to which he gave the task of organizing two German motorized divisions—one for Sicily and one for Southern Italy. Chief of this Special Staff was Colonel Bogislaw von Bonin, who had been First General Staff Officer (Operations) of the Fifth Panzer Army in North Africa.<sup>26</sup> Under von Bonin's direction there was formed in Sicily, on 11 May 1943, the *Kommando Sizilien*, comprising three *Grenadier Regimenter Sizilien*. On 29 June it was redesignated the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division (104th, 115th and 129th Panzer Grenadier Regiments), to perpetuate the original formation bearing that number, which had been lost in Africa.<sup>27</sup> At about the same time the *Einsatzstab* was organizing for the defence of Sardinia a parallel German formation, which was destined to face Canadian troops on more than one battlefield in Italy—the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division. Into these divisions went the *Rückstau Afrika*--drafts of German reinforcements who had been awaiting transfer to North Africa, and whose further progress towards that destination had been rendered unnecessary by the collapse of Axis resistance in Tunisia.

The termination of the North African campaign had left German military power in Italy in an extremely precarious state. To the very end the High Command in Berlin had refused to allow any evacuation from the Tunisian bridgehead, and even in the last weeks and days of the operations, in utter disregard of the protests of the field commanders in Africa, it had continued to send in by air from Italy entire battalions and completely useless headquarters staffs. As a result, when von Bonin reached Rome on 8 May by one of the last Axis aircraft to leave Tunis, he found that "there was not one battle-worthy formation of the German Army in Italy, including the islands."<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, early in May, alarmed at the defenceless state of his Axis ally—for, as we have seen, the German High Command placed little reliance

on the combat value of the Italian troops-Hitler offered to send Mussolini five divisions with modern equipment.<sup>29</sup> But the Duce, even after the loss of his African empire, was in no hurry to accept German aid. On a previous occasion when he had refused the offer of a German armoured division he is reported to have told Marshal Badoglio, at that time Chief of the Italian General Staff, "If they get a footing in the country we shall never be rid of them."<sup>30</sup> Now, on 13 May, he gave Hitler's personal representative, Admiral Dönitz, only a partial acceptance. The minutes of the interview reveal the Fascist Dictator in all his arrogant assurance:

*The Duce* states that he is confident about the future. The only result of British air raids on Italy will be that the people will learn to hate the British, which has not always been the case. This helps in carrying on the war. If there is one Italian who hates the British, it is he himself. He is happy that his people are now learning the meaning of the word hate as well.

He has answered the Fuehrer's offer of five divisions, by stating he wants only three of them.\* This refusal came as a surprise to the Commander-in-Chief Navy. The Duce explains that he had asked that these three divisions should include six armoured battalions with 300 tanks, two of which are detailed for Sardinia, three for Sicily and one for southern Italy.<sup>32</sup>

Several weeks were bound to elapse before any new German forces other than those which Mussolini had thus none too graciously accepted could be moved into Italy equipped and organized for action. They could come only from France, where a number of divisions were being formed to replace formations lost at Stalingrad.<sup>33</sup> In the meantime, in the face of the increasing danger of invasion, Kesselring decided to reorganize for the defence of Sicily the Hermann Göring Panzer Division. The bulk of this formation had been destroyed in Tunisia, but its custom had been to maintain large reserves in training. These were scattered over a wide area, with elements in Sicily, Naples and Northern Italy, and even in France and the Netherlands.<sup>34</sup> Concentration proceeded rapidly, and by 1 July the complete division was in Sicily, under the command of Major-General Paul Conrath, a former police officer with (according to Kesselring) "too little experience in the handling of modern, combined arms."<sup>35</sup>

From the time of their arrival on the island until 16 July, when a German corps headquarters was brought over from the mainland, the 15th Panzer Grenadier and the Hermann Göring Divisions were for political reasons placed under the tactical control of General Guzzoni. For administrative purposes, however, they were under the command of Lieut.-General Fridolin von Senger and Etterlin, head of a German liaison staff attached to the Headquarters of the Sixth Army-a convenient arrangement which would keep Kesselring in touch with the forthcoming operations. In order to have a mobile reserve for counter-attack, Guzzoni initially placed both German formations (except for one regimental group of the 15th Panzer

\* The 15th and 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions and the Hermann Göring Panzer Division.<sup>31</sup>

Grenadier Division held in western Sicily for flank protection) with the Livorno and the Napoli Divisions in the south-east corner of the island. He planned to use the two Italian field divisions in a delaying action first, and then to commit the Germans at the point where counter-attack promised greatest success. But it was the German view that an attempted landing should be repelled with concentrated fire at its weakest moment-while the assaulting troops were still in their landing craft; and that it was a mistake to station reserves far inland, where air attacks might make daylight movement to the coast impossible. The conflicting theories of a defence in depth by massed mobile reserves as opposed to a beach defence with reserves being held close to the coast produced a controversy which was to reach its crisis at the time of the Normandy landings. In Sicily neither plan could be assured of success, for the defenders did not have the troops either to hold a rigid front along the coast or to create a reserve strong enough to throw back into the sea an enemy which had completed the critical phase of landing and was established on dry ground.

A compromise was reached at a conference between Kesselring, Guzzoni and von Senger in Enna on 26 June. At the Field Marshal's insistence the Italian Army Commander ordered the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to move from the Caltanissetta-Enna region to the western end of Sicily,<sup>36</sup> where it would be ready to counter any surprise assault against Palermo.\* ("It makes no difference", Kesselring told his divisional commanders privately, "whether or not you get orders from the Italian army at Enna. You must go into immediate action against the enemy the moment you ascertain the objective of the invasion fleet.")<sup>38</sup> The transfer of the Panzer Grenadiers was unhurried, but on 5 July Kesselring was able to report to Berlin that the division had two regimental groups in the west of the island.<sup>39</sup>

The better to fulfil their role of strengthening the striking-power of the Italian field formations, the German divisions were divided into four mobile battle groups with varying specialized establishments. Thus the bulk of the Hermann Göring Panzer Division was held at Caltagirone, available for counter-attack against penetration from the south, while an armoured force from that formation, reinforced by the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division's third regiment (the 115th Panzer Grenadier Regiment), and commanded by Colonel Wilhelm Schmalz, was stationed immediately west of Catania, to meet an Allied landing on the east coast.<sup>40</sup>

By the second week in July German defence preparations in Sicily were well advanced, but by no means complete. A situation report by Kesselring on the 8th showed that there were' still gaps in the order of battle of the

\* In the opinion of General von Senger and Etterlin, Kesselring erred in his choice of divisions, and should have given the more important task of defending eastern Sicily to the stronger 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, which having been on the island for some time was familiar with local geography.<sup>37</sup>

reinforcing units, particularly the fortress regiments and battalions.<sup>41</sup> At the same time the defences of Sardinia were being steadily strengthened, for the enemy was by no means sure where the Allied landings would be made. A "top secret" appreciation drafted by Kesselring's Operations Staff on 28 June noted that American and British forces in North Africa were "sufficient for simultaneous attacks against Sardinia and Sicily. In view of the transfer of forces into the eastern Tunisian area it must not be assumed that Sardinia alone will be attacked."<sup>42</sup>

The emphasis placed upon Sardinia as a probable target for invasion owed its origin at least partly to a clever piece of Allied deception. On 9 May 1943 the "Foreign Armies West" intelligence section of the German Army High Command circulated a report: "Memorandum Concerning Documents Found on a British Courier". It told of a letter written on 23 April by the "English Chief of the General Staff to General Alexander", which had been found on the body of a British courier washed ashore in Spain,\* and which contained "Anglo-Saxon High Command Plans [for] two landing operations in the Mediterranean". These were to be directed against Greece, with a cover name "Husky", and an unspecified target in the Western Mediterranean (cover name, "Brimstone"). A feint attack on Sicily also was mentioned. The Berlin report admitted that the brevity of the captured document made it impossible to say whether the information was genuine or an attempt at deception.' It declared, however, that "in consideration of the surrounding circumstances and the situation in the Mediterranean *the genuineness of the communication is deemed possible.*" It was quite conceivable that Sardinia with its weaker defences would be selected by the Allies for attack in order to gain new bases for action against Italy and Sicily. The report therefore directed special attention to Sardinia and south-western Greek ports.<sup>43</sup>

The suggestion that Greece might be an Allied target came on top of reports of an increase in sabotage operations in that country by Greek guerrillas and British agents. These activities, which were carried out as part of the general Allied cover plan for "Husky", seem to have produced the desired results. The record of Hitler's naval conferences discloses that on 14 May 1943 the Führer voiced his belief "that the discovered Anglo-Saxon order confirms the assumption that the planned attacks will be directed mainly against Sardinia and the Peloponnesus."<sup>44</sup> Already the High Command had

\* Although the Germans were deceived into thinking that the "courier" had been killed in the crash of an aircraft at sea, actually the body, that of a civilian who had died of pneumonia, was "planted" from the British submarine *Seraph* a mile off the Spanish coast. The spurious "Personal and Most Secret" letter in his dispatch case had been written at the promptings of the Intelligence planners by Lieut.-Gen. Sir Archibald Nye, Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff. A detailed account of the whole undertaking (which bore the code name "Operation Mincemeat") will be found in Ewen Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was* (London, 1953).



instructed the Operations Section of the Army General Staff to strengthen as much as possible the defences in areas in the Mediterranean particularly endangered by the threat of Anglo-American operations. The order concluded: "The measures to be taken in Sardinia and the Peloponnesus have priority over any others."<sup>45</sup> Remnants of formations broken at Stalingrad were diverted to the Balkans for reorganization, and before the end of May the 1st Panzer Division (in spite of bitter protests by Col.-General Heinz Guderian, Inspector General of Armoured Troops, who rated it as "our strongest reserve") was on its way to Greece to guard against possible Allied landings there.<sup>46</sup>

### The Allied Pattern of Assault

The general plan decided upon early in May for the invasion of Sicily had undergone little change by D Day. As we have seen, the original object of Operation "Husky" had been "to seize and hold the island of Sicily", and it was in these terms that Force 343 (which on D Day became the United States Seventh Army) and the Twelfth Army (the temporary designation of the British Eighth Army) issued their order for the assault. The forces with which General Patton was to carry out the task assigned to his Seventh Army were the 2nd U.S. Corps (1st and 45th Infantry Divisions), which would land before dawn on D Day in the Gulf of Gela, to take Gela town and the Comiso group of airfields; and the 3rd Infantry Division (reinforced by part of the 2nd Armoured Division), which was to assault farther west and capture the port of Licata and its airfield. To assist the landing of the 1st Division, parachute troops of the 82nd Airborne Division would be dropped on the previous night four miles inland from Gela near the Ponte Olivo airfield. On the advance inland the right flanking formation of the Seventh Army would be the 45th Division, which it was planned would eventually gain touch with the Eighth Army's left in the neighbourhood of Ragusa.<sup>47</sup>

General Montgomery's forces were to make five simultaneous pre-dawn assaults on the two coasts which contained the south-eastern tip of the island. The right-hand sector was assigned to the 13th Corps, under the command of Lieut.-General Miles C. Dempsey, who in 1940 had been General McNaughton's Brigadier General Staff at the 7th Corps Headquarters in the United Kingdom. The Corps would assault in the northern half of the Gulf of Noto, with the 5th Division directed to capture Cassibile and advance north on Syracuse, and the 50th (Northumbrian) Division to take Avola and protect the Corps' left flank. The main assault was to be preceded by the drop of a glider-borne brigade group of the 1st Airborne Division west of Syracuse late on 9 July, and a sea landing four hours later just south of the port by Commando troops. To these formations fell the tasks of securing road

communications into Syracuse and capturing coastal batteries defending the port. On the completion of the assault phase of the operations, the 13th Corps was to advance northward across the River Simeto to capture Catania.<sup>48</sup>

General Leese's 30th Corps, which was to carry out the landings in the Eighth Army's left sector, consisted of the 1st Canadian Division, the 51st (Highland) Division and the independent 231st Infantry Brigade (the Malta Brigade).<sup>\*</sup> The 51st Division was to assault astride the tip of the Pachino peninsula on beaches bearing the code name "Bark South" and occupy the town of Pachino. A few miles to the north, landings by the Malta Brigade on the "Bark East" beaches were designed to provide right flank protection for the 30th Corps bridgehead and to establish contact with the 13th Corps. The Canadian Division was to assault on the left flank of the Highland Division through "Bark West" beach and capture the Pachino airfield. Placed under General Simonds' command for the operation was a Special Service Brigade, composed of Nos. 40 and 41 Royal Marine Commandos, and commanded by Brigadier R. E. Laycock (later Major-General and Chief of Combined Operations).<sup>49</sup>

The naval role in the general plan of "Husky" was threefold: to ensure the safe and timely arrival of the assault forces at their beaches; to cover their disembarkation; and to support and maintain them after landing and throughout the subsequent operations. For these duties Admiral Cunningham allotted his available naval forces to the Eastern and Western Task Forces, and planned additionally to employ two strong covering forces of battleships to operate to the east and west of the area of invasion. To disguise the direction of the Allied attack, concentration of ships in the Central Mediterranean was postponed as long as possible. As we have already indicated, the Allied troopships followed the routes of normal Mediterranean convoys, and their movements were so timed that they would not reach Sicilian waters until late on the eve of D Day. As a further deceptive measure, on the day before invasion the main covering force, designated Force "H", which consisted of four battleships, four cruisers, two aircraft carriers and eighteen destroyers, would concentrate in the Ionian Sea, as though to threaten the west coast of Greece. A smaller Force "Z" would be held in reserve in the Western Mediterranean, to replace possible casualties, or to reinforce Force "H".<sup>50</sup>

The naval component of the Western Task Force, commanded by Vice-Admiral H. K. Hewitt, United States Navy, consisted mainly of American elements organized into a Control Force and three Task Forces corresponding to the three areas of the Seventh Army's assault. The Eastern Task Force, under the naval command of Admiral Sir Bertram H. Ramsay, was similarly

<sup>\*</sup> The 1st (Malta) Infantry Brigade garrisoned Malta from before the outbreak of war until March 1943. When it left the island it was redesignated the 231st Infantry Brigade.

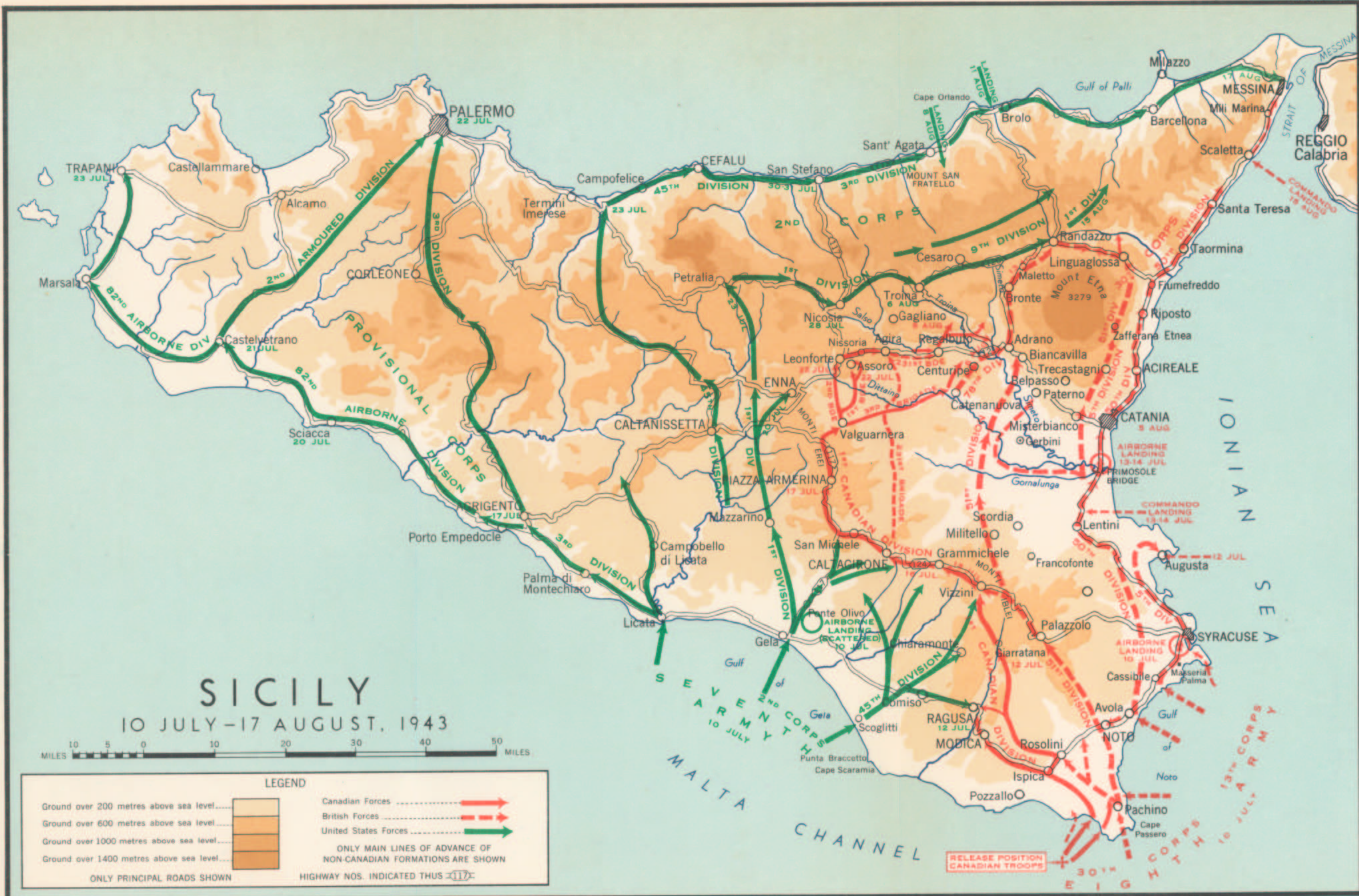
divided. Force "A" was to carry the 13th Corps and the 231st Brigade from the Middle East; Force "B" was to bring the 51st Division from Tunisia; while Force "V", commanded by Rear-Admiral Vian, was responsible, as we have seen, for transporting the 1st Canadian Division from the United Kingdom. A fourth component was Force "K", the four cruisers and six destroyers already referred to (above, p. 48), whose task was to provide the initial close gun support for the assault forces.<sup>51</sup>

The work of the Allied air forces in furnishing protection for the "Husky" convoys and in attacking the enemy's airfields, bases and lines of communication has been described above. By D Day air superiority over the landing beaches had been assured; there remained for the Mediterranean Air Command the tasks of providing direct support for the assaulting armies and the transportation of airborne troops and supplies. It was planned that fighter cover for the Eastern Task Force would be provided by Royal Air Force squadrons from Malta initially, and subsequently from captured airfields as the advance progressed. To support the Western Task Force British squadrons would be supplemented by twin-engined fighters of the Twelfth U.S. Air Support Command based first in Tunisia and then on Sicily itself.<sup>52</sup> The reduction of Pantelleria,\* which lies in the Sicilian Straits 100 miles west of Licata, furnished an additional base for a Royal Air Force Wing to provide convoy protection, and for American fighters to support the landings of the Seventh Army. Under the threat of an assault landing by the British 1st Infantry Division the Italian-held island surrendered on 11 June after having been subjected to six days and nights of relentless aerial bombardment† which achieved concentrations described by General Eisenhower as "greater than any we had previously attempted."<sup>55</sup> Two days later the Italian garrison of Lampedusa—a smaller island 100 miles to the south—capitulated under Allied bombing. The loss of these two outposts virtually deprived the enemy of any chance of early warning of the approach of the assault on Sicily.<sup>56</sup>

For these and all other air operations connected with the invasion of Sicily there were available to the Mediterranean Air Command 113 British and 146 American squadrons, employing more than 4300 aircraft, and in addition a force of 500 American gliders.<sup>57</sup> If we measure against these figures the meagre strength of the Axis air forces in the Central Mediterranean at this time, it is obvious that Allied air superiority in the battle of Sicily was never in question.

\* Late in 1940 the British Chiefs of Staff had approved a plan to capture Pantelleria by a force of Commandos led by Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, Director of Combined Operations. The undertaking was, however, twice postponed, and finally abandoned in January 1941.<sup>53</sup>

† A close study of the effects of mass bombing upon the concrete shelters and gun emplacements on Pantelleria provided information of great value in planning future operations against similar heavily fortified positions—notably those of the Normandy coast.<sup>54</sup>



### The Role of the 1st Canadian Division

From a point two miles to the west of the extreme tip of the Pachino peninsula the coast sweeps north-westward for nearly five miles in a wide curving bay with a sandy shore, called on Italian maps *Costa dell' Ambra* (the Amber Coast) (see Map 2). The bay is defined by two sharp headlands, *Punta delle Formiche* (Cape of Ants) to the south, and *Punta Castellazzo* (Castle Point) to the north. Midway along the shoreline a small rocky limestone point, *le Grotticelle* (the Caves), divides the long beach into two sectors. This was "Bark West", the stretch of coast assigned to the Canadian landings; the right and left sectors were given the respective code names "Roger" beach and "Sugar" beach.

There was no formidable land obstacle behind these beaches. One hundred feet above the high-tide mark the sandy shore-strip merged into a low ridge of limestone not more than ten feet high, almost entirely covered by drifting dunes, across which were several easy means of exit for motor transport. Inland the ground rose gradually across miserably poor fields that were at first little more than pure sand and then small patches of soil crowded in between rocky outcroppings. At the left end of "Bark West", behind "Sugar" beach, a group of sloughs or salt marshes, the largest of which was the *Pantano Longarini*, blocked the passage of vehicles in that area, but elsewhere the only hindrance to traffic was expected to be the "dry stone" walls which encircled the small fields. Half a mile inland from *le Grotticelle* a very rough cart track wound in a north-easterly direction to join the provincial road running westward from Pachino to *Ispica\** and *Ragusa*. At the junction was the airfield, the only landing-ground in the peninsula, which might in emergency accommodate from sixty to eighty fighter craft. The town of Pachino itself, with a population of 22,000, lay a mile to the east of the landing-strip, and some three miles north-east of "Roger" beach.<sup>58</sup>

Causing considerable concern to the Canadian planners were two false beaches or sandbars which lay submerged along *Costa dell' Ambra* some distance offshore. They were apprehensive that the assault craft might ground on these, and the troops on disembarking find themselves in water too deep for them to wade or to drive their vehicles ashore. A submarine reconnaissance made on the night of 25-26 June confirmed this fear by revealing the presence of a sandbar eighty yards off "Roger" beach 600 yards long and twenty yards wide, covered by only eighteen inches of water. Inside the bar there was a sharp drop of as much as nine feet in some places. A similar underwater obstacle lay off "Sugar" beach, although shoreward the intervening water was not more than five feet deep.<sup>59</sup> As we have noted

\* See p. 697.

earlier, General Simonds had prepared to meet such a contingency by using amphibious craft. On receiving this confirmation-which came to him aboard *Hilary* on 7 July-he issued orders that three of the assault companies of the 1st Canadian Brigade should land in L.C.Ts. (Landing Craft, Tank) carrying DUKWs, which could swim ashore should the landing craft run aground on the sandbars.<sup>60</sup>

We have already observed that the enemy's prepared defences along the Sicilian coast were not very formidable. Air photography indicated about fifteen pillboxes and a score of machine-gun posts in the "Bark West" sector; there was some barbed wire along the beaches, and anti-tank mines might also be expected. There were several similarly defended positions inland, particularly in the vicinity of the airfield. The major possible sources of trouble were two coast defence batteries, one near some farm buildings which on the map bore the name Maucini,\* about one and a half miles north-east of "Roger" beach, and the other, less dangerous to the Canadian attack, two miles farther east in the 51st Division's sector. A third battery (found when captured to comprise four six-inch howitzers) sited on the northern outskirts of Pachino to cover the approaches to the airfield was also in range of "Bark West". It was reasonable to suppose therefore that the worst the Canadians might have to contend with during the landings would be artillery fire from up to a dozen guns, followed by machine-gun fire as the assault craft approached the beaches; a forced disembarkation because of the sandbars before the troops reached shore; possible submerged mines in the intervening water passage; and on the beaches wire entanglements, mines and perhaps booby traps, all of which would have to be negotiated under fire from machine-gun posts and pillboxes.

From these various sources heavy casualties were to be expected should the enemy offer determined resistance-indeed a somewhat gloomy prognostication by the inter-service planners of the operation provided for the action that should be taken "if a whole Brigade were destroyed before the beaches were reached."<sup>62</sup> But the Commander of the Canadian force was more optimistic. In a conversation with General McNaughton on 30 May he commented on the lack of battle experience of the Italian coastal divisions, and declared "that in view of the great superiority of force, the sound plans and the careful preparations he had not the slightest doubt of the successful outcome of the operation."<sup>63</sup>

On 7 June General Simonds issued his orders for the 1st Canadian Division's participation in Operation "Husky". The assault at "Bark West"

\* A trace captured by the 231st Brigade on D Day showed that the Maucini position contained four 147/35 guns (i.e., having a calibre of 147 millimetres and a barrel length of 35 times this calibre), or approximately 6-inch howitzers. Post-war Italian sources give the total armament of the 206th Coastal Division as 215 sub-machine-guns, 474 machine-guns, 46 "isolated" guns, and 65 guns in batteries.<sup>61</sup>

was to be made on a two-brigade front, supported on the left by a simultaneous attack by the Special Service Brigade. In the first phase of the operation the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade would land on "Roger" beach, to the east of le Grotticelle, and would destroy the enemy coastal battery reported near Maucini, capture the Pachino airfield, and establish contact with the other formations of the 30th Corps in the neighbourhood of Pachino town. West of le Grotticelle the 2nd Brigade, landing on "Sugar" beach, was to advance west and destroy beach defences, meet and assist the Special Service Brigade in its operation, and subsequently take up positions north of the Pantano Longarini marsh and patrol towards the north-west. The Special Service Brigade would land immediately to the west of Punta Castellazzo, and hence on the extreme left of the Eighth Army's front, and having overcome enemy resistance in the area, reorganize on the high ground to the north-west of the salt marshes. The landings of the two infantry brigades were to be made at H Hour, which was set at 2:45 a.m.; the Commandos were to touch down ten minutes earlier.<sup>64</sup>

The main Naval support fire for the "Bark West" assault would be provided by the monitor *Roberts*, the anti-aircraft cruiser *Delhi*, and three destroyers, all under the direct control of Admiral Vian in *Hilary*. In addition one destroyer and four smaller naval craft were to escort each brigade shorewards and give close support fire. To preserve the element of surprise the assault was to be a silent one, and the covering bombardment would begin only if and when the enemy opened fire.<sup>65</sup>

During the second phase of the operation the divisional reserve, which included the 3rd Infantry Brigade, the 12th Army Tank Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment), and certain artillery and medical units, would proceed ashore, while the assaulting brigades captured high ground astride the PachinoSpica road and the whole Division reorganized for the third phase-an advance to the north-west in conformity with the Highland Division.<sup>66</sup>

### The Canadian Landings and the Capture of the First Objectives

D Day was forty-eight minutes old when the 1st Canadian Division headquarters ship, H.M.S. *Hilary*, dropped anchor seven miles off the coast of Sicily.<sup>67</sup> For the past hour and a half medium bombers had been "softening up" the defences of Pachino airfield, and the flares and flak put up by the defenders were clearly visible from the ships as they arrived at the release position. By the time the big transports carrying the assault brigades had slowed to a stop, the landing craft aboard were loaded with troops and ready to be lowered.

This called for the exercise of considerable skill. Early on the previous afternoon, as the various assault convoys of the Eastern and Western Task Forces were completing the last few miles of their voyage, a sharp gale had suddenly blown up, so roughening the sea as for a time to threaten postponement of the landings. But the risks of attempting to defer the precisely timed and closely co-ordinated operation until more favourable conditions were considered greater than the hazards of proceeding with the invasion as planned, even in the heavy weather.<sup>68</sup> Fortunately by sunset the wind had slackened, so that the beaching of the assault craft promised to be less dangerous than had been feared; but the storm had left in its wake a heavy swell which made the launching of the small craft from the heaving transports a tricky undertaking. At ten minutes past one the L.C.As.\* carrying the first flight of Commando troops of the Special Service Brigade made the forty-foot descent into the sea. Twenty-four minutes later the two assault battalions of the 2nd Canadian Brigade-Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, commanded by Lt.-Col. R. A. Lindsay, and The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, commanded by Lt.-Col. B. M. Hoffmeister-were on their way to "Sugar" beach. As the flat-bottomed craft headed shorewards, the troops which they carried heard the reassuring thunder of salvo after salvo from the 15-inch guns of H.M.S. *Roberts*, bombarding the Pachino airfield and its defences.<sup>70</sup>

The 2nd Brigade was due to land with the Seaforth Highlanders on the left and the Princess Patricia's on the right. Because of faulty navigation, however, the craft carrying the Seaforth ran some distance off their course and actually landed the battalion to the right of the Patricia's. In one respect at least the heavy swell aided the invaders, for the high-running surf carried the landing craft right over the false beach which had been the cause of so much concern.<sup>71</sup> Both units met with practically negligible opposition. As the craft approached the shore they came under desultory small-arms fire, which ceased as the assaulting troops reached the beach. Once ashore, they easily cut through or blew up the few wire obstacles in their path, quickly disposing of a few machine-gun posts manned by a handful of bewildered Italian soldiers. At about three o'clock the headquarters and the remaining companies of each battalion followed the assault companies ashore. An hour later Brigadier Vokes, who was still afloat with his headquarters, had received success signals from both his assaulting units. Thereafter the two battalions proceeded inland towards their first phase objectives.<sup>72</sup>

Meanwhile, on the left, the Special Service Brigade had landed rather farther to the west of Punta Castellazzo than intended. Otherwise this assault went according to plan, for the Italians left their beach defences as soon as

\* Landing Craft, Assault, a 40-foot ramped craft, affording protection against rifle and machine-gun fire, with a carrying capacity of 40 men (including a crew of four).<sup>69</sup>



they were seriously threatened. At the cost of a few casualties the two Commandos quickly destroyed the defences in their sector and moving inland made contact at 6:40 a.m. with the Seaforth Highlanders near the south-west corner of the Pantano Longarini.<sup>73</sup>

The 1st Canadian Brigade, scheduled to attack "Roger" beach in the right sector of the divisional front, experienced considerable delay in leaving its transports. It will be recalled that because of the false beach which barred direct passage to the shore, General Simonds had decided to use tank landing craft and DUKWs. Three L.C.Ts. with 21 empty DUKWs on board had been requisitioned for this purpose from Malta, and it was intended that they should land a company of The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, and two companies of The Royal Canadian Regiment. (These battalions were commanded respectively by Lt.-Col. B. A. Sutcliffe and Lt.-Col. R. M. Crowe, two fine officers who were destined to give their lives in the battle for Sicily.) As a precautionary measure, when confirming this change of plan on 7 July, the G.O.C. had signalled *Glengyle* that if the L.C.Ts. did not arrive in time (they were due at 12:15 a.m.), the original arrangement for sending all the assault units of the 1st Brigade ashore in L.C.As. would stand.<sup>74</sup>

Brigadier Graham was thus faced with the unpleasant necessity of having to be ready with two different landing plans, with no means of knowing in advance which would be required. He could not communicate with the headquarters ship because of wireless silence (only lifted once surprise was lost). The Senior Naval Officer aboard *Glengyle* warned him that the L.C.Ts. might have difficulty in finding their respective troopships in the dark, and the rough weather added to the probability of delay. It was 1:40 a.m. when the first craft reached the Brigade transport area. By that time the Brigadier had ordered the assault companies to begin embarkation into L.C.As. This necessitated reorganization of the troops, and it was 2:26 before the craft carrying the first flight of the Hastings and Prince Edwards were ready for lowering from *Glengyle*. In the meantime the assault companies of The Royal Canadian Regiment, which were to land on the right sector of "Roger" beach, had begun to load into two L.C.Ts. which had been brought alongside *Marnix van St. Aldegonde*. The heavy swell so prolonged this transfer that Brigadier Graham decided to send in his first Bight without the right hand assaulting companies. This decision anticipated a message from General Simonds delivered to him personally at 3:35 by the Division's A.A. & Q.M.G., whom the G.O.C. had dispatched in the Admiral's barge: "You must get your assaults away in either L.C.Ts. or L.C.As."<sup>75</sup> The delay in beginning the landings on "Roger" beach had caused much concern on *Hilary*, for it will be remembered that it was to the 1st Brigade that the important tasks of capturing the Pachino airfield and the battery behind

Maucini had been assigned. At 3:15 Admiral Vian signalled his Senior Naval Officer Landing on *Glengyle*: "Will your assault ever start?"<sup>76</sup>

One minute later the two leading companies of the Hastings and Prince Edward headed for shore in their L.C.As. It was four o'clock before The Royal Canadian Regiment's first flight left *Marnix van St. Aldegonde-two* and a half hours late. During the approach to the shore there was occasional shelling from the Maucini battery, but this was silenced by naval fire. Each L.C.T. carried seven DUKWs, and as the large craft grounded on the sandbar the amphibians swam off to the beach laden with troops.<sup>77</sup> The assault companies of both regiments made their landings approximately where planned, but one of the Hastings' reserve companies, which had been carried aboard H.M.S. *Derbyshire*, came ashore 5000 yards too far to the west, in the Commandos' sector.<sup>78</sup> Fortunately this wide dispersal of the Hastings had no serious consequences; before long the battalion had reunited, having suffered casualties of two killed and three wounded by machine-gun fire. But this incident and the earlier confusion which marked the launching of the assault flights serve to emphasize the difficulties attending large-scale amphibious operations carried out in the darkness. Had there been heavier opposition to the landings these departures from plan could have led to extremely serious results.

The 1st Brigade encountered no opposition on "Roger" beach, for by the time the first flights touched down-the Hastings at 4:45 and The Royal Canadian Regiment at 5:30-the weight of the naval bombardment and the success of the earlier landings farther west had induced what few Italian troops were present to withdraw from the beach defences. At 6:45 General Simonds was able to report to the 30th Corps Headquarters that the Canadian Division had captured all its first objectives.<sup>79</sup>

The reserve battalions of the assault brigades now began to land, The Edmonton Regiment coming in at "Sugar" beach and the 48th Highlanders of Canada going ashore on "Roger" with pipes playing. Shortly afterwards orders were given to the supporting arms and the divisional reserve to follow. From their huge L.S.Ts. Sherman tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment splashed ashore through six feet of water, and by 10:15 a complete squadron was on "Roger" beach ready for action. The 3rd Infantry Brigade began landing at eleven o'clock. The 142nd Field Regiment (Royal Devon Yeomanry), a British self-propelled artillery unit placed under General Simonds' command, disembarked at about the same time, and could thus claim to be one of the first field regiments to invade Europe.<sup>80</sup>

In the meantime the assault units were rapidly completing their part in the opening phase of the divisional plan. After their delayed landing the battalions of the 1st Brigade wasted little time. The Royal Canadian Regiment quickly reached and cleared the Maucini buildings, taking a dozen

prisoners. The battalion then advanced against the battery, where a single warning shot fired by a sergeant was sufficient to bring the entire garrison of three officers and 35 other ranks trooping from a dug-out in surrender. By nine o'clock the R.C.R. had reached the airfield, to find it ploughed up, and apparently deserted. (It is to the credit of the Engineers that the British 15th Airfield Construction Group, under command of the Canadian Division, had completed a landing-strip on the damaged field ready for emergency use by a little after midday.)<sup>81</sup> "C" Company, crossing to the north-east corner, made contact with tanks of the 51st Division, which was now moving inland through Pachino. It took little time for "A" Company, aided by the Hastings, who had followed in from the left, to clear some barrack buildings to the north of the field. This same company then pushed forward towards the battery north of the town, which had directed some troublesome but fortunately ineffective fire at the R.C.R. while they were engaged at the airfield. This had been promptly silenced by the Navy, but as the advancing company approached the battery position it came under considerable machine-gun fire. Two Canadians were killed and two wounded before the garrison of 130 Italians surrendered with their four 6-inch guns. The determination and courage displayed by two members of a section of "A" Company in leading the final assault on the battery brought the R.C.R. the first awards for gallantry won by Canadians in Sicily. Private J. Grigas received the Distinguished Conduct Medal and Private J. W. Gardner the Military Medal.<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile "C" Company had seized the high ground north-east of the airfield and had captured 100 more prisoners. By six in the evening the battalion had consolidated north and west of the field. Officers and men fell to work on their rations, for their first meal since leaving the ship fourteen hours before. On their left the Hastings, who had taken their objectives against even less opposition than met the R.C.R., dug in among the low grapevines in a defensive position covering the airfield.<sup>83</sup>

Farther west resistance had been almost totally lacking in the sector where the units of the 2nd Brigade were exploiting. During the day all three battalions had reached their assigned positions north and west of the Pantano Longarini, and their patrols had brought in many unresisting prisoners. Only on the Canadian Division's extreme left flank had the enemy displayed any offensive spirit. Here, late in the afternoon, a Blackshirt unit held up the advance of the Commandos with heavy mortar and anti-tank fire, and threatened to penetrate between the Special Service Brigade and the positions held by the Seaforth Highlanders. The Commandos, lacking heavy supporting weapons, were unable to reply effectively to the enemy's fire. Fortunately a Canadian heavy mortar detachment (of the Saskatoon Light Infantry) was in the vicinity, and on request from a Commando officer it quickly went into action, firing 160 rounds and "engaging the target with

devastating accuracy", as Brigadier Laycock afterwards wrote.<sup>84</sup> The Commandos then closed in and the Blackshirts hurriedly withdrew, abandoning their horsedrawn guns and large quantities of ammunition. Thus ended abruptly the only counter-attack attempted on the 1st Canadian Division's front that day.<sup>85</sup>

The second phase of operations was completed that first night. Under cover of darkness units of the 2nd Brigade moved forward some three or four miles to the north-west of the Pantano Longarini in the direction of Ispica, patrols increasing their harvest of prisoners along the way. On their right the 3rd Brigade, which upon landing had temporarily halted at Burgio, a large winery on the highway three miles west of Pachino, made a parallel advance of three miles, in the course of which The West Nova Scotia Regiment encountered its first opposition, and captured 25 Italians without sustaining any casualties. The Special Service Brigade completed its covering role on the left flank, and was withdrawn next day into army reserve. General Simonds' rear headquarters was now ashore and initially established, according to its war diary, "in a civilian hovel, 12 by 16, inhabited by an old woman, 11 guinea pigs, 4 dogs, a goat and 4 gallons of wine, all of which were quickly cleared out."<sup>86</sup> Late that night an enemy air raid struck at the beaches and the crowded shipping in the bay. It met a heavy barrage of anti-aircraft fire from ship and shore, and caused little damage; but troops in the beach area, many under fire for the first time, hastened to deepen their slit-trenches, the digging of which had hitherto seemed one of the less profitable drudgeries of soldiering.<sup>87</sup>

The first day of the campaign had thus been highly satisfactory. Casualties had been surprisingly light. Final statistics show that the Canadian losses on 10 July were seven other ranks killed, and three officers and 22 other ranks wounded; the Special Service Brigade reported six killed and 19 wounded.<sup>88</sup> Enemy losses were much higher. At 6:45 p.m. the Canadian divisional headquarters notified the 30th Corps that 650 prisoners had been taken (including a score of German Air Force personnel), and this figure grew before the day was over. The total number of enemy killed and wounded in the 1st Division's sector was estimated at close to 100.<sup>89</sup> Late that evening General Simonds dispatched to General McNaughton, then at Headquarters 15th Army Group in North Africa, a signal which told the gratifying story of the day's achievements:

Landings effected with very little opposition and by 1200 hrs today all objectives for phase one were in my hands. Ineffective counter attacks in afternoon were repulsed. Casualties very light and first reports indicate do not exceed total of seventy-five killed and wounded including 40 and 41 Marine Commandos. We took over 700 prisoners and some material. Morale high and troops very confident of themselves. Details will follow. Success mainly due to excellent co-operation Royal Navy and RAF.<sup>90</sup>

### How Canada Learned the News

Because of the strong pressure which had for many months been brought to bear upon the Canadian Government to get troops into action, the means by which the initial announcement of Canadian participation in the invasion should be made was a matter of some concern in Ottawa. It was felt that the news of Canadian troops being in action should be released from the Dominion capital before, or at the latest simultaneously with, publication in Washington or London.<sup>91</sup> On 28 June it was learned from C.M.H.Q. that General Eisenhower would make the original announcement of the landings.<sup>92</sup> The reply from the C.G.S. urged that Canada should be accorded equal treatment with all other interested countries in the release of the Supreme Commander's official communique.

It would be expected that Prime Minister or Minister [of National Defence] would be in a position immediately to follow publication of communique with statement, probably by radio, amplifying as much as possible and giving particularly some idea of number of Canadians involved and name of Commander. As you can understand, this will be regarded by Canada as most important information and hesitancy about giving it is likely to be misunderstood. Realize that consideration of security must govern, but hope may be able to go just as far as possible in these respects. What we must avoid is that Canadian statement is in any way less complete on essential points than statements by any other governments and that it is no later than that of any other governments.<sup>93</sup>

It was planned that three announcements concerning the invasion should come from General Eisenhower's headquarters: the initial communique to the world; an *Avis* to the French people telling them that the invasion of Sicily was but the first stage in the liberation of Europe and warning them to remain inactive for the time being; and a proclamation to the Italian people. A signal from Eisenhower to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 5 July gave the text of these messages; none contained any reference to Canadian troops. The terms employed were "Allied forces" and "Anglo-American forces".<sup>94</sup>

When a copy of this signal reached Ottawa late on 7 July, immediate efforts were taken to have Canadians named in these first announcements. On the evening of the 8th Mr. Mackenzie King telephoned the White House and expressed his opinion that "it was an extraordinary thing that a communication should go from General Eisenhower without any mention of the participation of Canadian troops."<sup>95</sup> Mr. L. B. Pearson, the Canadian Minister to Washington, saw President Roosevelt and his special adviser, Mr. Harry Hopkins, the same evening. The President "recognized the force and reasonableness" of Canada's representations. Hopkins in turn took up the matter with the British Prime Minister, who promised definite mention of the Canadians in the Churchill-Roosevelt proclamation which it had been decided should replace Eisenhower's proclamation to the Italian people.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time the Canadian High Commissioner in London, Mr. Vincent Massey, approached Mr. Attlee and Lieut.-General Sir Hastings L. Ismay, Chief of Staff to the Minister of Defence, both of whom "took a sympathetic attitude to Canada's contention that she should be properly associated with the proclamation to the Italian people and the *Avis* to the French."<sup>97</sup> This was followed by a telegram from the War Office to General Eisenhower. It advised him of the British Chiefs of Staff's decision to mention Canadian forces in the Churchill-Roosevelt proclamation, and assumed that Canada would be referred to by name in the Supreme Commander's *Avis* to the French people.<sup>98</sup> On the same day Washington informed Eisenhower that the Combined Chiefs of Staff approved mention of the Canadians in the *Avis*.<sup>99</sup>

General Eisenhower remained firm however.\* At an early hour on the morning of 10 July he signalled the British Chiefs of Staff that "security requirements" and the need for being consistent with the terms of the communique made it undesirable that Canadians should be referred to in the *Avis*.<sup>101</sup> On the previous day he had authorized the Canadian Prime Minister to issue a special communique twenty-four hours after the first landing, which would confine itself to the statement: "A Canadian force forms part of the Allied forces which are undertaking landing operations on Sicily."<sup>102</sup>

Having thus arranged that Canada should be the first to announce her participation in the invasion Eisenhower saw no reason for taking any action which would lead to her being "scooped" by the world press.<sup>103</sup> His initial communique, issued in Algiers at 6:24 a.m. on D Day (12:24 a.m. Ottawa time), stated: "This morning Allied Forces under command of General Eisenhower began landing operations in Sicily Canadians were not named in either this or the immediately following *Avis*, which referred only to "Anglo-American forces". Less than ten minutes after the Algiers release, however, the United States War Department most unexpectedly announced that "British, American and Canadian troops" had begun landing operations in Sicily.<sup>104</sup>

The release from Washington took the Canadian Prime Minister by surprise. He had received word that the Combined Chiefs of Staff had approved mention of the Canadians in the *Avis* to the French people, but, lacking confirmation that General Eisenhower would include them in his communique, he was prepared to wait until 11 July to make his own announcement. When the news broke from Washington, Mr. King felt himself free to act. "When I heard the announcement made", he told Parliament later, "I felt there was no obligation on my part which would bind me

\* It will be noted that Mr. King was in error when in addressing the House of Commons later he attributed to "the military authorities in Great Britain" the decision "that no reference should be made to Canadians participating in the assault upon Sicily."<sup>100</sup>

further not to make an announcement to the Canadian people."<sup>105</sup> Accordingly he immediately issued a statement to the press and at eight o'clock in the morning (10 July) delivered the following message over the radio:

Armed forces of Britain, the United States and Canada are now in the forefront of an attack which has as its ultimate objective the unconditional surrender of Italy and Germany. All Canada will be justifiably proud to know that units of the Canadian Army are a part of the Allied force engaged in this attack....<sup>106</sup>

### Early Allied Successes

The success which attended the Canadian landings had been matched along the whole of the invasion front. Assaults made by the other formations of the Eighth Army had met very little opposition. Elsewhere on the 30th Corps' front the 51st Highland Division and the 231st Brigade had captured the town of Pachino and occupied the eastern half of the peninsula with little difficulty. On the east coast the two divisions of the 13th Corps had captured their initial objectives of Avola and Cassibile by ten in the morning, and the 5th Division had then moved north on Syracuse. It entered that important port the same evening at nine o'clock to take it undamaged.<sup>107</sup>

The United States Seventh Army had landed against little initial opposition -although in rougher surf conditions on the more exposed western beaches -and had speedily taken all its D Day objectives. The 3rd Division encountered some resistance east of Licata before it captured the port and the adjoining airfield, and during the day Axis air forces threw against the beaches and transport areas scattered bombing and strafing attacks which later turned out to have been the major enemy air effort of the campaign. By nightfall the Americans held two firm beachheads from two to four miles deep, one extending from Scoglitti to Gela, and the other reaching six miles on each side of Licata.<sup>109</sup>

The airborne attacks in the sectors of both the Eastern and Western Task Forces had not achieved the success that crowned the seaborne assaults. At dusk on 9 July some 5000 troops in transport aircraft and gliders took off from Tunisian airfields in the largest night operation of its kind ever attempted up to that time. Unfortunately, faulty navigation by inexperienced pilots, due in part to the high wind which had threatened to cancel the beach landings, and to heavy enemy anti-aircraft fire over the Sicilian coast, resulted in a wide

\* The most costly enemy air raid in the Canadian sector occurred on 12 July two miles east of Ispica, when six fighters attacked a column carrying Headquarters, Royal Canadian Artillery. One gunner was killed and the Brigade Major and five others wounded.<sup>108</sup>

dispersion of the airborne formations.\* Of the 134 gliders carrying the British 1st Airlanding Brigade, fifty came down in the sea, and only twelve landed in the intended dropping zone. In the Seventh Army's sector, paratroops of the 82nd Airborne Division made widely scattered landings over an area of fifty miles extending from Licata to Noto, inside the Eighth Army's boundary. Nevertheless, disappointing as this misfortune was, small parties of airborne troops in both sectors reached some of their objectives and carried out the role assigned to them, while others attacked strongpoints wherever they found them.<sup>111</sup> An enemy authority, General Kurt Student, commander of the German airborne attack on Crete and Commander-in-Chief of all German paratroops from 1943 until the end of the war, in October 1945 gave an interrogator his opinion that "the Allied airborne operation in Sicily was decisive.... If it had not been for the Allied airborne forces blocking the Hermann Göring Armoured Division from reaching the beachhead, that division would have driven the initial seaborne forces back into the sea."<sup>112</sup> In weighing this tribute due allowance must be made for the general's natural enthusiasm about troops (though hostile) of his own special arm. There is little doubt, however, that the activities of these first arrivals in Sicily and the confusion which the widespread droppings caused in the enemy's coastal defence organization contributed materially to the ease and rapidity with which the initial beaches were won.

A large share of the credit for the satisfactory results achieved during this opening phase of operations must go to the naval and air support given the Allied Armies. Skilful planning and effective co-ordination of all the fighting services had brought to a hostile shore the greatest seaborne force ever embarked, and the culminating assault was a model for future combined operations. The value of naval bombardment in a landing operation was proved beyond doubt by the effective manner in which coastal batteries were neutralized.<sup>113</sup> According to General von Senger and Etterlin the realization that troops manning defences near the shore would be "exposed to an annihilating fire from naval artillery" had been an important factor in the decision to place the main reserve well inland.<sup>114</sup>

As the ground forces made good their landings, the air attacks which had crippled the Axis air power in Sicily continued; 1092 sorties were flown on

\* In two subsequent airborne operations, by American paratroops on the night of 10-11 July, and by British glider-borne and parachute troops on 13-14 July, serious losses were caused by anti-aircraft fire from Allied naval and merchant vessels. The precipitancy with which both operations were mounted had left insufficient time to clear in advance with naval forces a safety corridor for the troop-carrying aircraft. The unfortunate effects of what Eisenhower termed "inadequate coordination between the services" led to his appointment of an investigating board of officers, whose widely circulated recommendations had much to do with ensuring the success of subsequent airborne operations during the invasions of Italy and Normandy.<sup>110</sup>



D Day and 17 of the few enemy aircraft encountered\* were shot down.<sup>116</sup> Some of the sorties were carried out by Spitfires of No. 417 (*City of Windsor*) Squadron R.C.A.F., which from their base at Malta patrolled high above the "Bark West" beaches as the Canadians came ashore, and later escorted a medium bomber attack on Caltagirone. The Squadron was engaged in a heavy schedule of similar sweeps during the days that followed, and on 15 July it landed in Sicily, taking over the Pachino airfield as a base for subsequent operations in support of the Eighth Army's advance.<sup>117</sup>

Proof of the effectiveness of the cover provided by the Northwest African Air Forces appears in the small number of naval ships destroyed by enemy air action. For D minus 1 and D Day losses of up to 300 craft had been expected; the actual toll was only six vessels.<sup>118</sup> To this great achievement by the Allied air forces Admiral Cunningham paid striking tribute in his official report on Operation "Husky":

To one who had fought through the Mediterranean campaign from the beginning it appeared almost magical that great fleets could remain anchored on the enemy's coast, within 40 miles of his main aerodromes...

The navies (and consequently the armies) owed a great debt to the air for the effectiveness of the protection offered them throughout the operation.<sup>119</sup>

We have referred to the part played by R.C.A.F. squadrons in the general Allied air offensive; the Royal Canadian Navy too made its contribution to the conquest of Sicily. In the convoy which brought the 231st Infantry Brigade from the Middle East to assault the beaches on the 30th Corps' right flank two of the three flotillas of assault landing craft carried aboard the transports were Canadian—the 55th and the 61st Flotillas. For twelve hours these landing craft ferried the assault and reinforcing troops ashore on the "Bark East" beaches, and when early in the afternoon of D Day their convoy withdrew, they had put two thirds of the Malta Brigade safely ashore.<sup>120</sup> In addition to these L.C.As., two Canadian flotillas of the heavier Landing Craft, Mechanized† were engaged in the operation. Commencing early on D Day, the 80th and 81st Flotillas, whose job was the transfer of vehicle's and stores from ship to shore, served for 26 days along the Sicilian coast between Avola and Syracuse until maintenance of the Eighth Army over the beaches came to an end on 5 August. A total of 400 Canadians manned these four flotillas, while an additional 250 served during the operation in various other support craft of the Royal Navy.<sup>121</sup>

Enemy testimony has shown that the complete tactical surprise which the Allied landings had achieved in all sectors was due in no small measure to the gale of the previous day. The daily situation reports submitted to Berlin

\* Enemy aircraft flew an estimated 150-200 sorties on D Day. On succeeding days this effort declined sharply; by July it had fallen to an average of 50 sorties a day, and had ceased to provide effective opposition<sup>115</sup>

† See footnote to p. 202 below.

by the German Commander-in-Chief South reveal that from 1 July the enemy was aware from Allied shipping movements and the repeated attacks on Sicilian airfields that the hour of invasion was approaching, although he still considered Sardinia a possible objective.<sup>122</sup> Finally, at 4:30 p.m. on 9 July his aerial reconnaissance discovered convoys steering towards Sicily, and he concluded that the Allies had started their offensive and would "move first of all against the southern and eastern coasts of Sicily."<sup>123</sup> By 6:10 p.m. the German Command had received further details of the approaching task forces, and half an hour later "all troops in Sicily had been alerted."<sup>124</sup> Later, however, the captured Commander of the 206th Italian Coastal Division informed interrogators that this warning did not reach him until 10:20 p.m., and that his naval adviser then declared that the weather was much too rough for a landing to be effected. This must have been a welcome assurance, for the coastal garrisons had been wearied by false alarms and invasion rumours for weeks past, and were glad to relax their vigil when the storm offered seeming security from Allied invasion. But although the Italian defence formations might thus blame the weather for the manner of their surprise, their subsequent lack of resistance, as we have seen, amply bore out the pre-invasion Allied estimates of their low morale and poor fighting qualities.

With the German defenders of Sicily, whose role, as noted above, was to be one of counter-attack, the Allied troops had so far made no contact. The fruitless dispatch of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to the Palermo area had thinned out the German forces under General Guzzoni's command. The German component of the island's garrison was thus caught off balance on D Day; but not for long. Early in the afternoon of the 10th Guzzoni issued orders for the Panzer Grenadier Division and a mobile group of the Assietta Division to return to the centre of the island.<sup>125</sup> At 3:40 a.m. on 11 July Kesselring sent the following report to the High Command in Berlin:

O.B.S. has given the following order to the Chief of the German liaison staff at H.Q. Sixth Italian Army:

Mass of Hermann Göring Division ordered to destroy the enemy who has advanced to Caltagirone. Battle Group Schmalz (now at Lentini) will retake port of Syracuse in immediate counter-attack.<sup>126</sup>

### The Advance Inland

On 11 July the 1st Canadian Division resumed its advance into the interior of the island. In its role on, the Eighth Army's left flank the 30th Corps' immediate post-assault objectives were, first, the road which cut across the corner of the island from Noto to Pozzallo, and then the high ground of the Iblei Hills which commanded the roads converging on Palazzolo and Ragusa. General Leese ordered both of his formations to carry out this

advance simultaneously, the Highland Division (to whose command the 231st Brigade had passed on the afternoon of D Day) on the right and the Canadians on the left. Initially the interdivisional boundary was the Pachino-Rosolini road.<sup>127</sup> In his sector General Simonds decided to move the 1st Brigade on the right and the 2nd on the left, leaving the 3rd Brigade still in reserve.

Shortly after midday the 2nd Brigade pushed off towards Ispica, led by The Edmonton Regiment under the command of Lt.-Col. J. C. Jefferson. As the marching troops set off along the hot and dusty highway they could see their first objective half a dozen miles away, for Ispica stands on the eastern edge of a 150-foot cliff overlooking the coastal plain. Such a site offered natural opportunities for a prolonged defence, but Allied naval shelling and aerial bombing the previous night and again that morning along the line of the Corps' first objective had effectively reduced all opposition in the town. An ultimatum from the Edmonton C.O. followed by a warning salvo brought capitulation, and when the battalion entered in mid-afternoon it encountered only the "enthusiastic greetings of the civil population and the frantic endeavours of the military population to surrender".<sup>128</sup>

The naval fire which supported the Canadian advance came from the ships which had covered the "Bark West" *landings-Roberts* and *Delhi* and the destroyers *Brecon*, *Brissenden* and *Blankney*-<sup>129</sup> and from the cruiser *Orion*, which formed part of a bombardment group from Force "K".<sup>130</sup> The skill of the naval gunners caused Kesselring a few days after the invasion to warn the Germans that "in view of the complete naval supremacy of the British the effect of the *naval artillery* against land targets is of particular importance..."<sup>131</sup> As a subsequent survey by Combined Operations Headquarters pointed out, Allied bombardment in the Central Mediterranean was carried out in almost ideal circumstances. "Main enemy supply lines [which] ran along exposed coastal roads, a weak enemy submarine effort, little interference from the air, together with good weather, produced a set of conditions unlikely to be so favourable anywhere else in the world."<sup>132</sup> The long-range bombardment of inland towns by the monitor *Roberts* was co-ordinated by the 1st Division's Commander Royal Artillery, Brigadier A. B. Matthews, who went aboard on D plus 1. Fire from the cruisers and destroyers was directed by forward observation officers (of the Royal Canadian Artillery), whose detachments moved with-or ahead of-the leading infantry battalions, and kept in communication with the guns afloat by means of Lucas lamp or wireless.<sup>133</sup> The nature of his tasks meant that a naval "F.O.O." was generally well in the lead of the advance, and was thus often among the first to make contact with enemy positions.

Such a case was that of Captain G. D. Mitchell, R.C.A., of No. 1 Naval Bombardment Unit. On D plus 1, having successfully directed H.M.S. *Delhi*'s fire on to Ispica, he was driving westward in a P.P.C.L.I. carrier, in order to

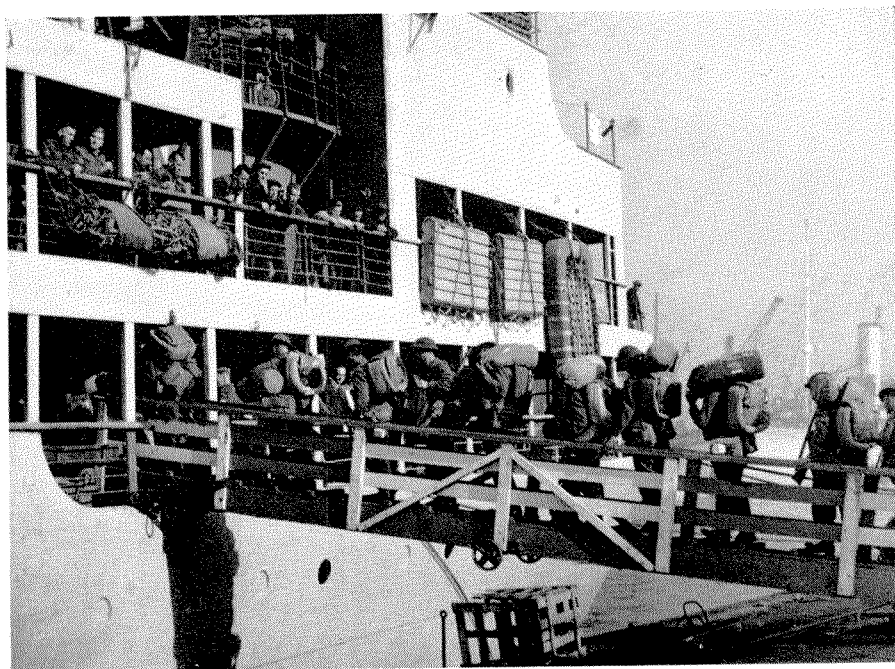
do the same for Modica,\* the next town in the Canadian path. Half way on his journey his party of six came upon a road-block, where wire and mines, covered by two anti-tank guns, barred the way. Dismounting, and backed by the authority of two Bren guns, Mitchell forced the detachment of about twenty Italians to surrender and to dismantle the obstacle. This exploit, and the efficient manner in which "he never ceased his efforts to maintain communications with his bombarding ship and support the Army ashore by every means" brought Captain Mitchell the Military Cross, and the added distinction of being the first Canadian to win this award in Sicily.<sup>134</sup>

The Corps' progress had been equally satisfactory on the right, where the 51st Division had entered the town of Rosolini unopposed shortly before noon. The enemy was clearly on the run; accordingly orders were issued for the advance to continue to the next objectives without delay. In the Canadian centre the Patricias now took up the chase. Passing through the Edmontons at 5:15 p.m., the battalion moved off westward along the State highway which encircled the island. They marched all night without meeting opposition and by early morning were in position on the high ground which overlooks the town of Modica from the south-east.

While the main body of the Seaforth also moved up to the Modica area, one company was detached to the 2nd Brigade's left flank, to take over the small coastal town of Pozzallo, which had surrendered earlier to naval landing parties from H.M.S. *Blankney* and *Brissenden* after a warning bombardment of 160 rounds had bracketed the town. When the Highlanders arrived on the afternoon of the 11th, they collected 260 prisoners, along with much equipment. Here they met and solved their first problems of ministering to the needs of the civilian population. The machinery of local government had broken down, and deserted by their Fascist Mayor and corporation the people of Pozzallo were desperately short of food. With the help of the local priest and postmaster, the Canadians broke open a granary and organized the distribution of grain, bread and macaroni.<sup>135</sup>

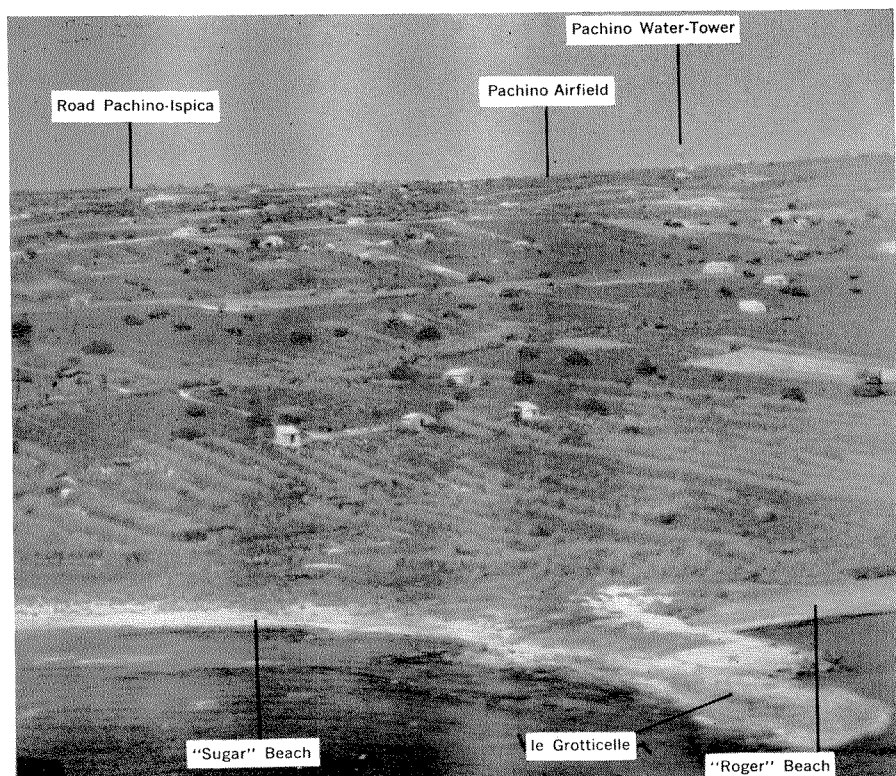
In the northern sector the 1st Brigade, moving off from Burgio on the afternoon of the 11th, followed the 51st Division into Rosolini, where a detachment of the 12th Canadian Tank Regiment had earlier relieved British troops. While the 48th Highlanders, commanded by Lt.-Col. I. S. Johnston, spent an uncomfortable night in the town-which they found half on fire from the naval shelling and pervaded by a horrible stench<sup>136</sup>-the R.C.R. assumed the lead and pushed forward towards Ragusa. It was necessary for the battalion to press into use a variety of motor transport from the rest of the brigade, as well as tanks of the Three Rivers and captured enemy vehicles; for it will be recalled that the loss of the three

\* See p. 697.



#### OFF TO SICILY

Men of the Saskatoon Light Infantry, support battalion of the 1st Canadian Division, board their transport at Glasgow, June 1943.



#### THE PACHINO BEACHES

From an aerial reconnaissance photograph taken before the landings.



*Photograph courtesy Larry Henderson, 1950*

#### THE APPROACH TO LEONFORTE

This is the route by which a company of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, supported by tanks and anti-tank guns, swept into the town on the morning of 22 July 1943. The bridge shown here replaces a temporary structure built by the 3rd Field Company R.C.E. during the night before the attack.



#### CANADIAN ARTILLERY IN SICILY

Gunners of the 7th Battery, 2nd Field Regiment R.C.A., firing in support of the 2nd Infantry Brigade's operations at Nissoria. This photograph was taken on 28 July, the day on which the town fell.

ships in the Slow Assault Convoy had cut heavily into the vehicle establishment of the majority of the Canadian units. For some time after the landings the shortage of transport continued to be keenly felt. It was partly relieved by pooling all available equipment and requisitioning mules and carts, and by the decision to suspend the practice of making "first line maintenance" the responsibility of the driver-a system which had meant that each driver serviced his own vehicle, and it did not move without him. Now, with an excess of drivers on hand because of the sinkings, it was possible to keep each vehicle continuously in operation by using relief drivers and having an enlarged workshop section carry out maintenance at the end of each shift.<sup>137</sup>

By early morning on the 12th the R.C.R. had deployed four miles east of Ragusa, a large centre of 40,000 inhabitants. A battery of the Royal Devon Yeomanry-the British field regiment was providing artillery support for both the leading Canadian brigades-fired several rounds into the town, and an R.C.R carrier patrol was sent in to secure its surrender.<sup>138</sup> The patrol discovered that Ragusa was in the possession of the Seventh Army, a company of the 45th U.S. Division having entered the town from the west late on the previous evening. This, the first meeting of Canadian and United States troops in Sicily, established the contact between the two Armies that had been forecast in the general plan of assault.<sup>139</sup>

The pattern for the entry of Canadian troops into Modica that morning at first closely resembled that at Ragusa. Unlike the hill town Ispica, Modica lies in a deep gully, and from their position of vantage on the surrounding heights it appeared unlikely to the Patricias that the reduction of the place would present much difficulty. Late on the 11th the naval F.O.O., Captain Mitchell, after his exploit with the road-block had reached the outskirts of the town to find it occupied by Italians only. His report that there were no Germans in the Modica area was relayed by the 2nd Brigade to Divisional Headquarters shortly after midnight, and was followed by another message that Modica was seeking to surrender. An immediate reply, dispatched at 1:25 a.m., ordered the Patricias to accept the town's submission.<sup>140</sup> Accordingly, on the morning of the 12th, after a 15-minute bombardment by the 142nd Field Regiment, a fighting patrol from the battalion went down into the town and took a considerable number of prisoners.<sup>141</sup>

Reports appearing in the official war diaries and accounts given later by participants are at some variance as to what followed. It appears that Modica was left without any occupying forces, and that some enemy elements who showed more spirit than usual had either re-entered the town or emerged from the cellars to which the artillery bombardment had driven them. About mid-morning two small detachments, one consisting of two

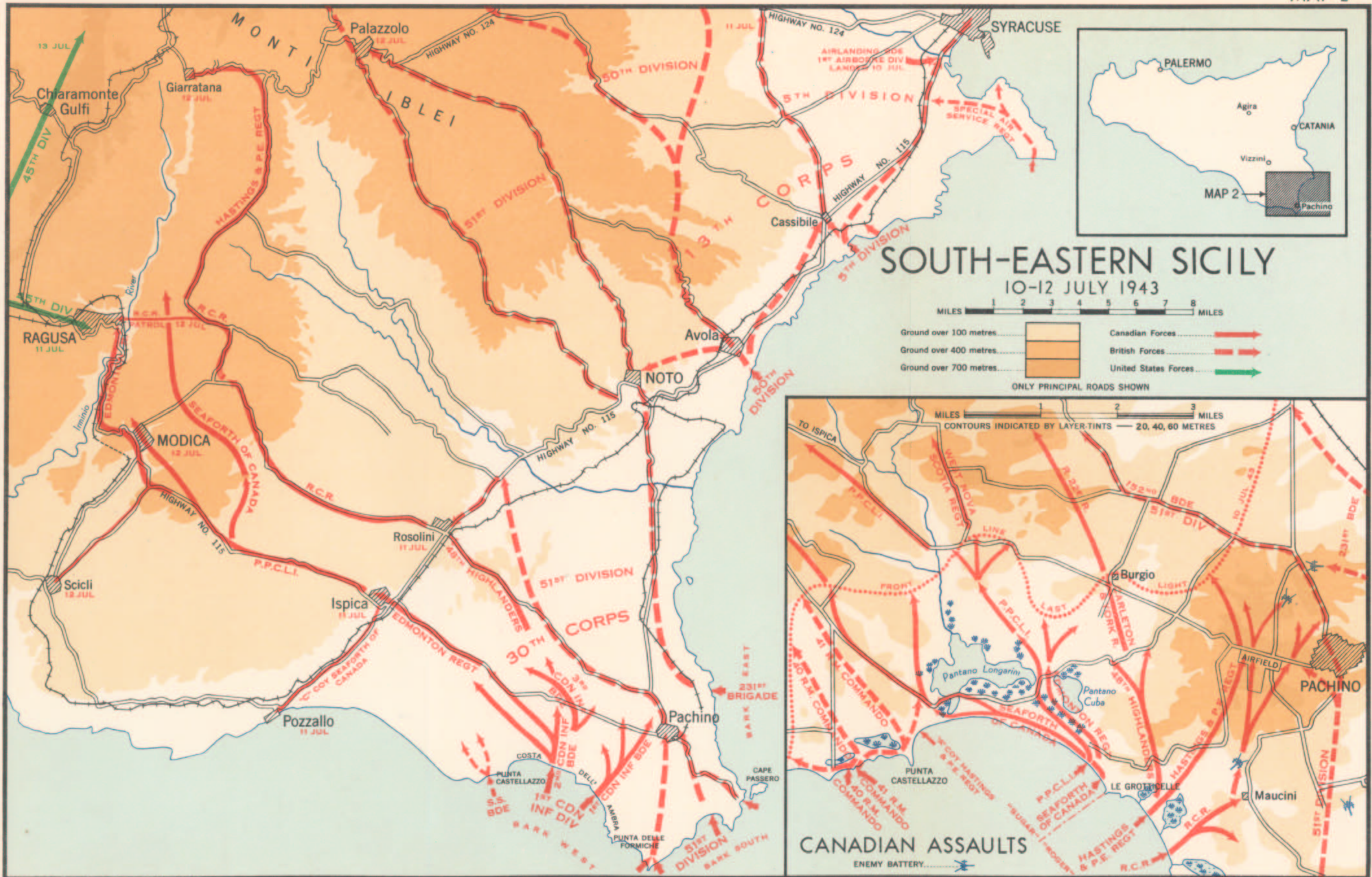
Seaforth lorries, bringing forward rations and ammunition, and one from the R.C.R.'s anti-tank platoon, both seeking their respective units, entered Modica under the impression that it was safely in Canadian hands. As the former approached the central square, however, it was ambushed; it suffered some casualties and lost one of its vehicles. The R.C.R. and Seaforth parties, joining forces, advanced under cover of fire from a mortar whose crew had become attached to the anti-tank group. Not until further artillery fire had been called down from the Royal Devon Yeomanry did resistance cease and the little band of fifteen reach the main *piazza*. There they captured seven field and five medium guns and one anti-tank gun, which were sited to cover all converging roads. From all parts of the town several hundred Italian soldiers now came flocking to surrender.<sup>142</sup> They were turned over to The Edmonton Regiment-the fourth infantry battalion to claim a share in the occupation of Modica.<sup>143</sup>

A possible reason for the brief flare-up of resistance was the presence in Modica of the headquarters of the 206th Italian Coastal Division, the formation, it will be recalled, responsible for the defence of the coastline between Licata and Augusta. The Commander, Major-General Achille d'Havet, who had been decorated by the Duke of Connaught with the Military Cross in the First World War, was concerned that his capitulation should be made to an officer of appropriate rank--a sensitiveness which caused the General rather a frustrating morning, and produced a number of separate claims for credit for his initial capture. From the mass of conflicting evidence it would appear that the first Canadian to make contact with the Italian commander was a sergeant of the P.P.C.L.I. fighting patrol, who discovered d'Havet in a building in Modica.<sup>144</sup> The General's request for a captor of more exalted rank 'was referred to the 2nd Brigade Headquarters-apparently on more than one occasion and by more than one agency.\* Eventually he formally placed himself in the hands of the Brigade Major, Major R.S. Malone, who conducted him to General Simonds' Headquarters. Here the G.O.C. had the pleasure of accepting the submission of the first general officer to be captured by Canadian troops in the Second World War.<sup>146</sup>

From the Corps Commander came an order to move on beyond Modica without delay.<sup>147</sup> The presence of American troops in the Ragusa area had obviated the need for further westerly advance by the Canadians, and the two leading brigades now turned northward. Before leaving Modica,

\* It is reported that these included a Seaforth signals corporal who having entered Modica by mistake was prevailed on to bring back to his battalion, riding on the pillion of his motorcycle, a delegate who sought to surrender the town; and a liaison officer with Brigade H.Q. who for two hours held d'Havet's car at a crossroad near Modica while unsuccessfully trying to reach the Headquarters staff by wireless. The war diary of the Three Rivers Regiment relates that during this period the C.O., Lt.-Col. E. L. Booth, encountered d'Havet's naval and military chiefs of staff and accompanied them into the town, to receive there the Italian General's unconditional surrender.<sup>145</sup>





however, the 2nd Brigade, methodically cleaning up remaining enemy pockets on its flanks, dispatched a platoon of the Edmontons with a troop of tanks to Scicli, a small town midway between Modica and the coast. It was a routine job. The unit diary reported tersely: "The tanks fired three shots over the town and 1100 prisoners emerged from the hills and gave themselves up." That night found the three battalions of the brigade in the hills about Ragusa, where there were still large numbers of Italian soldiers waiting to be rounded up.

North of Ragusa the country becomes increasingly rugged as the sprawling ridges of the Iblei Hills climb towards their junction with the Erei Mountains. The secondary road leading northward from Modica now became the axis of advance for Brigadier Graham's 1st Brigade. Throughout the morning of 12 July the 48th Highlanders and the Hastings and Prince Edwards had marched through oppressive heat and dust from Rosolini to join The Royal Canadian Regiment at Ragusa. That evening the advance was resumed, and by the following morning the three battalions were grouped about the hill village of Giarratana, which the Hastings had occupied without trouble.<sup>148</sup>

The 1st Brigade, which was thus holding the Canadian Division's most forward positions, was now roughly 30 miles as the crow flies from its point of landing, and more than 50 by march route over mountain roads. The Division had stretched its supply lines to the maximum for the vehicles available, and the troops themselves were badly in need of a rest. Although they had engaged in no strenuous fighting the circumstances of their introduction to Sicily had been difficult enough. The contrast with the period of inactivity aboard the transports was severe, for there had been no time for leisurely acclimatization. Glaring heat and clouds of fine white dust were the normal conditions under which officers and men marched, and the long hours which the shortage of motor transport compelled them to travel on foot deprived them of opportunity for rest. The P.P.C.L.I. war diary said of the men during the battalion's march to Modica, "every time they stopped they fell asleep"; and on 13 July the R.C.R. diary recorded that its personnel had had an average of about eight hours' sleep since landing.

The Canadian Division was the only one of the Eighth Army formations unaccustomed to the semi-tropical conditions of the Mediterranean area, and on 13 July General Montgomery called a halt on his extreme left flank, directing that the Canadians should rest in the Giarratana area for a day and a half.<sup>149</sup> Here the 3rd Brigade caught up with its fellow formations, while Divisional Headquarters moved from Ispica to the Modica area. During this pause the arrival in the beach area of the follow-up convoy and the herculean efforts of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps units in

bringing up vehicles considerably eased the transport situation for the forward troops.\* On the 14th, General Montgomery visited every unit and was given an enthusiastic reception. Calling the men around his car, he welcomed them to the Eighth Army, praised their performance up to that time, and expressed his confidence that they would stand up to the tests ahead.<sup>152</sup>

In the brief respite at Giarratana, to those who had time or inclination for retrospection, there was cause for satisfaction that the introduction of the Canadian Division to the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations had been accomplished in so relatively easy a manner. Across the narrow sands of "Balk West" beach Canadian soldiers had made their entry into Hitler's European fortress with almost negligible losses. Yet we have shown that for the majority of the troops the first few days in Sicily were by no means a picnic. Had the men of the 1st Division been less well trained or in poorer physical condition they would have found the assignment harder still. As it was, the process of their "breaking in" was swift and rigorous, effectively fitting them for the future tasks to which Montgomery had pointed.

These were not far distant. In the hills north of Giarratana the Canadians were soon to meet the German defenders of Sicily, and much hard fighting was to ensue.

\* 23,400 tons of stores and 3700 vehicles required by the 1st Division were discharged across the beaches in just over twelve days.<sup>150</sup> Battalions solved the problem in supply which the lack of transport had created by leaving rear parties to form dumps from which stores could be leapfrogged forward at times when the advanced troops were stationary.<sup>151</sup>

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FIRST FIGHTING IN THE SICILIAN HILLS, 14-22 JULY 1943

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#### Plans for Further Action

**B**Y THE evening of 13 July the third phase of operations forecast in General Alexander's instructions of 19 May had been completed.<sup>1</sup> The Allied Armies had established a firm base from which to proceed to the capture of Catania and the Gerbini group of airfields, and the subsequent reduction of the island (see above, p. 20).

The limit of the Eighth Army's advance ran in a south-westerly direction from Augusta (which had been captured early that morning by the 5th Division, heading the 13th Corps' drive northward) to Vizzini, where the 23rd Armoured Brigade, under command of the 30th Corps, was meeting fairly strong resistance from elements of the Napoli Division reinforced with Hermann Göring tanks. (The Italian division as a whole was in a bad way; one infantry regiment had become encircled between Syracuse and Palazzolo, and the G.O.C., Major-General Gotti-Porcinari, and his headquarters staff had been captured.)<sup>2</sup> On the Allied left, General Patton's forces had a firm grip on a continuous bridgehead which stretched westward to within five miles of Porto Empedocle. The Seventh Army was putting the captured airfields of Ponte Olivo, Comiso and Biscari into use, and was preparing to extend its holding far enough inland to place these fields beyond the reach of the enemy's long-range artillery, and so fulfil its role of protecting the Eighth Army's left flank.\* So far the Americans had borne the brunt of German counter-attacks. The most critical of these had been a series of armoured blows directed against the 1st Division's beachhead at Gela on 11 and 12 July by a battle group of the Hermann Göring Division moving down from the Caltagirone region.<sup>3</sup> In three separate attempts to throw

\* Field Order No. 1, issued by Force 343, named this objective "Yellow Line", and defined it as an arc extending westward from the inter-army boundary at Vizzini to meet the seacoast at Palma di Montechiaro, fifteen miles west of Licata. The line contained the towns of Campobello di Licata and Mazzarino on the Seventh Army's left flank, and on its right included the section of the Syracuse-Enna highway (Highway No. 124) passing through Grammichele, Caltagirone and San Michele di Ganzeria (see Map 1).

the invaders back into the sea the enemy launched 60 Mark IV tanks against the narrow American foothold; on each occasion the combined power of tanks, artillery, rocket guns and naval gunfire drove him back, destroying in all 43 of his tanks.<sup>4</sup>

Although, as we have seen, specific instructions covering the assault phase of Operation "Husky" had been issued several weeks before D Day, it was obviously not practicable to prescribe in advance a detailed course of action for the Allied Armies once their initial objectives had been secured. The directive of 19 May did not go beyond defining the Eighth Army's task of capturing Catania and the Gerbini airfields, and the Seventh Army's supporting role of preventing "enemy reserves moving eastwards against the left flank of Eighth Army". General Alexander has related however how he visualized the development of operations after the firm base--"on a line from Catania to Licata"--had been established.

The next thing to do was to split the island in half, and the first stage would be to seize and hold the irregular rectangle of roads in the centre round Caltanissetta and Enna. This would by itself seriously hamper all enemy east-west communications. From there I should be able to press on to Nicosia, which would leave only the north coast road open to the enemy, and then to the coast near San Stefano.\* I could probably only maintain a small force at San Stefano but if it could hold firm the interruption of communications would be complete.<sup>5</sup>

A glance at the map of Sicily will show the strategic position of Enna as the hub of the highway system of the island. From this point roads lead in every direction. The main east-west highway from Catania to Palermo, and the north-south route from San Stefano to Gela intersect here. Other roads radiate to the south-west through Caltanissetta to Agrigento, to the south-east through Caltagirone and Vizzini to Syracuse, and north-eastward through Leonforte, Nicosia and Troina to Randazzo and the coast highways leading to Messina. Thus the axis of German withdrawal from the south-west of the island had to pass through Enna; while the converging roads from the south and south-east provided the Allied forces with direct routes to this focal point. The enemy was keenly alive to the importance of retaining his hold on such a vital centre of communications, and his task was to be the easier because of the rugged country over which all the approaches to Enna were laid.

It will be recalled that the original intention of "Husky" as expressed in the Operation Instruction of 19 May was "to seize and hold the island of Sicily as a base for future operations". Since then, however, the measures proposed at Casablanca had been extended, and the Allied strategists had reached a decision to knock Italy" out of the war as quickly as possible (see below, Chapter VII). This would conceivably alter the pattern of operations of the invading armies. We have the evidence of General Leese

\* See p. 697.

(who told General Simonds of the proceedings of a meeting held at Montgomery's headquarters on 9 June) that the Eighth Army's object was "to dominate the Messina Straits as soon as possible and to get a footing in the south of the mainland of Italy."<sup>6</sup> The Commander of the 30th Corps defined the role of the Eighth Army after the capture of Catania as General Montgomery saw it at this time.

The Allied Plan after landing, therefore, is for the Americans to form a firm base on the West covering the aerodromes, and for 13 Corps to drive on relentlessly in order to seize Syracuse, Augusta and Catania with the least possible delay. From these bases the Eighth Army will strike with its right in order to secure crossings over the Straits. The general conception is thus to hold on the left and strike on the right. By this means we should cut off and isolate the enemy still holding out around Palermo and in the West of the island.<sup>7</sup>

The task of the 30th Corps was primarily to assist the 13th Corps' advance. If the Army met strong resistance, it might be necessary to concentrate the whole effort of the 30th Corps on its right flank, where it would be prepared to take over the high ground north of Avola, and subsequently Syracuse, in order to release General Dempsey's formations for their northward drive along the coast.

The proposal to assault Calabria directly after the capture of Messina was quickly discarded by the Allied planners in favour of other schemes, but the early capture of the port remained a high priority for the Eighth Army. The 13th Corps, however, did not initially meet the resistance that had been expected, and the Eighth Army found it possible to develop an axis of attack for each of its two corps. Orders for 12 July were for the 13th Corps to continue its drive along the coast towards Catania and for the 30th Corps to advance on Caltagirone, Enna and Leonforte.<sup>8</sup> This was the programme which by D plus 3 had brought the Eighth Army's leading formations into Augusta and to the outskirts of Vizzini.

The decision to direct the 30th Corps north-westward towards Enna entailed a redefinition of the boundary between the Seventh and Eighth Armies.\* The route which the Corps must use as its axis was the main highway which runs from Syracuse through Vizzini to the centre of the island (see Map 3). The portion of this road between Vizzini and San Michele di Ganzeria, ten miles west of Caltagirone, had been included in the area assigned to the Seventh Army for its "firm base";<sup>10</sup> indeed, a movement by formations of the Eighth Army along this route would be directly across the face of the 45th Division on the American right flank. Accordingly on 13 July General Alexander issued a directive

\* Evidence that Montgomery requested a change in the inter-army boundary appears in the following message sent from H.Q. 30th Corps on 13 July:

45 U.S. Div now on general line Chiamonte-Biscari. Information received they intend to send one brigade Vizzini, two brigades Caltagirone to-morrow 14 July. Army Comd rapidly attempting to direct them more to west to avoid clash with you, but in case NOT retire from accordingly. Warn all concerned.<sup>9</sup>

which confirmed the Eighth Army's advance on two axes-to Catania with its adjacent airfields, and to the network of roads within the area of Enna and Leonforte. General Montgomery was given exclusive use of the road (Highway Nos. 124 and 117) from Vizzini through Caltagirone and Piazza Armerina to Enna. The American axis of advance was turned sharply westward. The Seventh Army was to pivot on its left and advance to a general line running south-west from Caltanissetta, gaining contact with the Eighth Army at the road junction south of Enna.<sup>11</sup>

In ordering the capture of Enna and Caltanissetta the Army Group Commander was putting into effect his original intention "to split the island in half. He has revealed that it was his purpose, although "for the moment tentative and liable to change", that the 30th Corps, having captured Leonforte and Enna, should advance to San Stefano on the north coast.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent events, as we shall see, forced a change in this programme.

General Leese had planned for 13 July that the 23rd Armoured Brigade should lead the general advance of the 30th Corps to the north-west; he had ordered the brigade to capture Vizzini that day, take Caltagirone on the succeeding night, and advance towards Enna on the 14th. He directed the 51st Highland Division to clean up resistance in Vizzini and the area to the east, while advancing the Corps' right flank by a brigade thrust northward towards Scordia.<sup>13</sup> The 1st Canadian Division remained in its positions between Ragusa and Vizzini. As we have seen, Vizzini did not fall on 13 July; indeed it was not until the following evening that the mixed German and Italian garrison withdrew towards Caltagirone, and elements of the Highland Division entered the town. The plan to send the armoured brigade on to Caltagirone was cancelled, and General Simonds was ordered to take the Canadians through the 51st Division at Vizzini, and advance to Enna.<sup>14</sup>

### The First Encounter with the Germans-Grammichele, 15 July

At midnight on 14-15 July a long column of motor transport carrying the 1st Brigade, led by The Royal Canadian Regiment, set off along the very secondary road twisting northward from Giarratana. Three hours later the R.C.R. deployed in Vizzini, and the Hastings and Prince Edwards moved into the lead. At 6:00 a.m. the brigade resumed its advance, travelling now along the paved State Highway, No. 124, which followed the narrow-gauge railway line connecting Enna with the south-east. As the column rolled forward, the infantry riding in lorries and carriers or mounted on tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment, the troops found themselves passing through a more prosperous-looking area. than they had yet seen in Sicily.

Much of the way the road ran through a wide upland valley, with gentle slopes rising to the high ground on either side. Fields were large, and free from trees and rock. As usual there were no houses to be seen along the route; the peasant workers followed their custom of centuries of congregating in the hilltop towns.

Such a centre was Grammichele, a community of 13,000 ten miles distant by road from Vizzini. It was built in 1683, after an earthquake, and was constructed on the unique plan of a spider web, with six roads radiating from the central *piazza*. The completely hexagonal town was perched on a long ridge some 250 feet above the level of the surrounding country, and thus had a commanding view of the road from the east. It was a good spot for a delaying action.

At about 9:00 the leading Canadian troops rounded a bend in the road and saw Grammichele on the sky-line two miles to the west. There was no sign of the enemy as the reconnaissance group of the Three Rivers approached the town, with the infantry battalion closely following. But a strong rearguard of artillery and tank detachments of the Hermann Göring Division was lying in wait, and as the first vehicles reached the outermost buildings they came under a sudden burst of fire from tank guns and anti-tank weapons of calibres reported as ranging from 20 to 88 millimetres.\* The fire quickly shifted to the main body of troops; a Canadian tank and three carriers were knocked out and several vehicles destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

The infantry immediately began closing in on the town, while selfpropelled guns of the Devon Yeomanry rapidly deployed from the road into the neighbouring fields to give prompt and effective support. Guided by tracer bullets fired from one of the forward carriers to indicate the enemy's positions, the Three Rivers squadrons destroyed three German tanks and a number of flak guns. In wide, sweeping movements three companies of the Hastings converged upon the town from as many directions, while the remaining company gave covering fire. As the first Canadians gained an entry within the perimeter the enemy began to evacuate. By noon Grammichele had been cleared, and the Hermann Görings, leaving behind them a quantity of equipment and stores, were retiring westward along the

\* At the time of the Sicilian campaign the Herman Göring Division was equipped mainly with the medium Mark IV tank, weighing 23 tons, which mounted the long-barrelled 75-mm. gun. It still had some of the older Mark III tanks (at one time the main armament of the German panzer regiment), mounting a long 50-mm. gun (or in a few cases the short 75 of low muzzle-velocity). The Hermann Görings also used a small number of the heavy (56-ton) Mark VI ("Tiger") tanks, equipped with 88-mm. guns-on 23 July the Division reported 23 tanks ready for action "including 3 Tigers". The 45-ton Mark V "Panther" (with long 75), which eventually replaced the Mark IV as the enemy's main fighting tank, did not appear in Sicily.

The anti-tank weapons used against the Canadians at Grammichele included the 20-mm. *Flakvierling*, a self-propelled four-barrelled gun, which could be employed against either aircraft or tanks; the 88s appear to have been mobile flak guns in a ground role.<sup>15</sup>



highway, harassed by our artillery.<sup>17</sup> This first encounter with the Germans had cost 25 Canadian casualties.

Early in the afternoon the 48th Highlanders, with tank support, took up the chase as a motorized column, the 1st Brigade Support Group (of the Saskatoon Light Infantry) providing carriers to replace those which the Highlanders had lost at sea. Mines along the road delayed progress, and it was midnight before the battalion reached the outskirts of Caltagirone, having covered some of the distance by cross-country march. The town of 30,000, which had housed the headquarters of the Hermann Göring Panzer Division, had been heavily hit by Allied bombers, and when the 48th Highlanders and the Three Rivers tanks entered unopposed early on the 16th they found the place a veritable shambles, with the streets badly blocked by rubble and many fires burning. In the very inadequate local hospital the Highlanders' medical section did what it could for the civilian casualties, and the 4th Field Ambulance gave assistance when it arrived. Despite all their troubles the nuns insisted on serving the Canadians coffee-made of crushed acorns.<sup>18</sup>

While Brigadier Graham's battalions were thus leading the Canadian thrust towards Enna, the 2nd Brigade, leaving Ragusa late on 14 July, had moved up to Highway No. 124 by a winding road through Chiaramonte Gulfi and Licodia, west of the route taken by the 1st Brigade, from Giarratana to Vizzini. There had been only enough transport for the Edmontons and Brigade Headquarters, and the other two battalions had found the march of more than thirty miles, much of it in extreme heat, very fatiguing. The brigade encountered no enemy en route, but the Edmonton suffered some casualties from sniping as they left Ragusa, an incident which led the 30th Corps Headquarters to issue an order that in future hostages were to be taken in each town after its surrender.<sup>19</sup>

The German detachments which the 1st Brigade had driven out of Grammichele were providing flank protection for the Hermann Göring Division, now slowly falling back for the defence of Catania. By 14 July the pattern of the enemy's plan of campaign was clear. It had not taken Kesselring long after the Allied landings to realize-if indeed any confirmation of his earlier suspicions were needed-that the German garrison would be forced to fight the battle of Sicily practically alone. On 12 July, after visiting Generals Guzzoni and von Senger in Enna, he reported to Berlin:

The Italian forces in the area under attack are almost a total loss. The German forces at the moment are not sufficiently large to carry out a decisive attack against any one of the enemy bridgeheads.<sup>20</sup>

The battle groups formed to strike powerful blows against an invader who should have been already staggered by the resistance of the perimeter coastal defences, had managed to launch, as we have seen, only one serious

counter-attack, and that unsuccessful. Now, as effective opposition by their Italian partners virtually ceased, and the danger grew that Allied thrusts might isolate and envelop each group in turn, their only hope appeared to be in forming a stable and continuous defensive line.

It was not difficult for the German commanders to divine the Allied intention of striking up the east Sicilian coast in order to seize the ferry crossings and thus cut off the defenders and open the way to the mainland. Nor could they fail to recognize the threat which the Allied left was directing against the line of communication with the west of the island. In the draft report already referred to (above, p. 53) Kesselring has shown that he was fully alive to these contingencies.

The important thing now was to prevent the enemy from thrusting forward to Catania from the Syracuse or the Gela areas, and then with united forces pushing through to the Straits of Messina. At the same time, the strong enemy force that was advancing from Licata towards the north must be prevented from breaking through in the direction of Palermo, thereby making it impossible to bring up those of our troops still in the western part of the island and to evacuate important supplies.<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly the enemy shifted his weight towards his left flank and proceeded to concentrate his greatest strength in the Catania plain, where he was determined to deny to the Eighth Army the port of Catania and the vital Gerbini airfields. In face of threatened encirclement the main body of the Hermann Göring Division was withdrawn from the Vizzini-Caltagirone area and ordered eastward to the aid of Battle Group Schmalz at Lentini. Here it was joined by the remnants of the luckless Napoli Division, which during the first four days of the invasion had suffered most heavily of all the Italian field divisions. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, which had been hurriedly recalled on D Day from its futile excursion to Western Sicily, was committed in the hills south and south-west of Caltanissetta, to oppose any northward thrusts by General Patton's forces. Its left made rather uncertain contact with the Hermann Göring right, with units of General Chirieleison's Livorno Division helping to fill the gap—a situation that was improved by subsequent withdrawals towards the natural bulwark of Mount Etna.<sup>22</sup>

On 14 July Kesselring's daily report to the German High Command admitted that "the western flank is exposed to envelopment and preparations are being made to retreat to the Etna position."<sup>23</sup> This "position" was no strong system of fortifications such as the Allied Armies were later to encounter in central Italy; indeed the only preparation appears to have been the selection of a suitable site. The line to which the Hermann Göring Division fell back in the next six days was in general that of the Catenanuova-Catania railway, which followed the north bank of the River Dittaino. It marked the limit of withdrawal if Catania and Gerbini were to be held. The reason for German

sensitiveness along the route which the Canadians were following was thus apparent. The hilltop towns of Caltagirone, Piazza Armerina, Valguarnera, Enna and Leonforte all commanded lateral roads which led eastward into the Catania plain. It became the task of the German rearguards in these places, each of which because of its lofty location was readily convertible into a strongpoint, to contest our advance with increasing determination, in order both to counter the threat of encirclement of the main body of the Hermann Göring Division in the plain and to keep open a route for the passage of the Panzer Grenadiers from the west.

To General Montgomery on 15 July it was imperative that as far as possible the Germans should reap no profit from delaying tactics on the Eighth Army's left flank. The attack of the 13th Corps along the coast was meeting strong opposition. Two nights earlier troops of No. 3 Commando, landing in the Gulf of Catania, had secured a road bridge on the main Syracuse-Catania highway, north of Lentini; while the 1st Parachute Brigade, dropping at the mouth of the Simeto River, had seized the important Primosole Bridge six miles south of Catania. Relieving troops of the 50th Division had met fierce enemy reaction, however, and by the evening of the 15th the Simeto crossing was still in dispute.<sup>24</sup> That night the Army Commander wrote to General Leese:

So operations are a bit slow and sticky on the right, and all indications are that enemy troops are moving eastwards from the Caltagirone-Enna area and across to the plain of Catania. He is trying desperately to hold us off from getting to the airfields about Catania.

As we are held temporarily on the right, it is now all the more important to swing hard with our left; so push on with all speed to Caltagirone, and then to Valguarnera-Enna-Leonforte. Drive the Canadians on hard.<sup>25</sup>

Acting on this injunction General Leese ordered the 1st Canadian Division to "continue the advance vigorously directed on Enna."<sup>26</sup> In a letter sent to General Simonds earlier in the day the Corps Commander had suggested the pursuit tactics that the situation invited.

If opportunity occurs push a mobile mechanized force with tanks quickly through towards Enna. . . . All our experience in this island has been that if you are held up, put in a well supported attack in strength.<sup>27</sup>

Simonds now ordered the 2nd Brigade into the lead, and placed under its command the 12th Canadian Tank Regiment, the Royal Devon Yeomanry and the 3rd Field Regiment R.C.A. The situation with regard to transport had improved, and the divisional "Q" staff was able to round up enough 3-ton lorries to lift the whole brigade tactically. While this mobile force pressed on to secure its objectives in the Enna area, the 1st and 3rd Brigades were to be ready to follow at short notice and secure the communications in the respective areas of Valguarnera and Leonforte.<sup>28</sup>

## Piazza Armerina, 16 July

Early on 16 July the 2nd Brigade Group pushed up Highway No. 124 from Caltagirone, the Edmontons with one squadron of the Three Rivers tanks forming the vanguard. They passed through the village of San Michele di Ganzeria without opposition, and turned north along the Gela-Enna highway (No. 117). By noon they were three miles south of Piazza Armerina, another typical "rural town" of 22,000 population. Its altitude of 2366 feet exceeded that of any Sicilian community yet encountered by the Canadians. At a sharp bend where the road swept down from a long level ridge to skirt a steep, narrow gully, the leading troops ran into fire from machine-guns, mortars and artillery. The enemy was well concealed on the heights commanding the southern approach to the town. The two leading Edmonton companies rapidly worked their way forward and seized high ground on either side of the road; but these positions, and indeed the whole of the road up to Piazza Armerina, came under heavy cross-fire from enemy mortars on two prominent hills about a mile to the north and north-east. Lt.-Col. Jefferson, with only three companies at his disposal ("D" Company was still in Ragusa), directed "A" and "B" Companies respectively against these heights, holding "C" in reserve to reinforce success. Advancing under the heavy hostile fire "A" Company secured its objective, and was quickly joined by "C" Company. It was essentially an infantry action, for the Three Rivers tanks were unable to raise their guns sufficiently to engage the Germans' lofty positions. The only supporting fire came from the battalion's 3-inch mortars until, later in the day, enemy targets were engaged by the self-propelled guns of the Royal Devon Yeomanry and the 5.5s of the 7th Medium Regiment.\*

The attack on the right proved considerably more difficult. "B" Company "took a terrific battering" as it fought its way uphill, and much of the afternoon suffered from being out of communication with the rest of the battalion. Enemy fire cut off part of the Company, pinning them down in an orchard, but eventually one platoon managed to reach the summit and drive the Germans off. The two hills so gamely captured by the Edmontons gave them vantage points overlooking Piazza Armerina; but the enemy (later identified as the 2nd Battalion, 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division<sup>30</sup>) retained for a time his grip on the town. He continued to shell the Canadian positions with his 75s, until these were silenced by the fire of the British "mediums". During the night the Germans withdrew, and by 6:00 next morning the 2nd Brigade was in firm possession of the town. In their first action the Edmontons had acquitted

\* The 7th Medium Regiment R.A. was under General Simonds' command from 15 July until 8 August. Previously the Canadians had been supported by a battery of the 70th Medium Regiment R.A.<sup>29</sup>

themselves well, but they had suffered 27 casualties. Piazza Armerina, formerly the home of the headquarters of the Italian 16th Corps, yielded the Canadians large stocks of signal equipment and a considerable quantity of petrol; while civilian refugees hurrying home as the Germans moved out lost no time in enriching their household possessions with abandoned furniture and equipment from the deserted barrack buildings.<sup>31</sup>

The enemy's obstructive tactics along Highway No. 117 were paying him good dividends. Piazza Armerina had held up the Canadian Division for twenty-four hours; not until noon on the 17th did the 3rd Brigade, going into the lead for the first time in the campaign, resume the advance towards Enna. Yet it was important that the Eighth Army's left wing should make rapid progress, for on the right determined German resistance was repelling all attempts by the 13th Corps to extend its bridgehead over the Simeto River. On 16 July General Alexander had issued a second directive, which laid down three axes of advance for the Eighth Army into the Messina peninsula—"northwards from Catania; from Leonforte to Adrano to sever communications this side of Etna; and via Nicosia-Troina-Randazzo to sweep round the northern slopes of Etna." The Army Group Commander hoped that the "Eighth Army would be able to mount a rapid attack on this formidable position before the Germans could assume a good position of defence," and he envisaged the Canadian Division, as General Montgomery's left flank formation, driving in behind Mount Etna from the west. The Seventh Army's task was "to protect the rear of this attack by seizing the central rectangle of roads around Enna and cutting the east-west road at Petralia."<sup>32</sup> Enna itself thus came into the American sector of operations; but the Eighth Army was to retain unrestricted use of the road from Piazza Armerina to Leonforte and Nicosia which passed just east of that hub town. In the west General Patton was directed to capture Agrigento and Porto Empedocle, if this could be done "without involving heavy casualties."<sup>33</sup>

It will be observed that the directive based future operations for the Eighth Army upon the capture of Catania. Enemy resistance before the port, however, showed little sign of diminishing; a costly attack by the 50th Division on the night of 17-18 July to enlarge the Simeto bridgehead achieved little.<sup>34</sup> This stalemate in the east heightened the importance of the Eighth Army's other axes of advance, and caused a modification of Montgomery's plans for the proposed northern sweep by the 30th Corps on the left flank. In a signal to Alexander on the 17th he reported that the 51st Highland Division was moving north from Scordia to "capture Paterno\* to-morrow with luck", and declared his intention of sending the Canadians--whom he expected to reach Enna that night--eastward from Leonforte to

\* See p. 697.

Adrano, rather than along the wider arc through Nicosia and Troina. "I will then operate with 30 Corps round the west and north of Etna and will cut off any enemy who stay east of Etna and about Catania." He further suggested that the Americans after capturing Petralia should drive to the coast road and "make faces eastwards" along the coast, thereby completing the bisection of the island and hemming the enemy within the Messina peninsula.<sup>35</sup> For the Canadian Division this programme in the main was to remain unchanged.

The distance from Piazza Armerina to Enna by road is only 22 miles, but the 3rd Brigade's hopes of reaching its goal on 17 July soon faded. Eight miles north of Piazza Armerina a side road to Valguarnera branched to the right from Highway No. 117. This was an important junction to the Germans. By holding it they could halt the Canadians' further progress in two directions: north-westward to Enna, and north-eastward to Valguarnera, which from its commanding height overlooked the Dittaino valley and the western Catania plain.

As so frequently in Sicily, topography was in the enemy's favour. Immediately before it reached the fork, Highway No. 117 climbed through a narrow gap in a long ridge which broke from the backbone of the Erei Mountains to bend around to the north-east and cover Valguarnera from the south and east sides. In the hills on either side of this pass—which was called the Portello Grottaacalda—the 2nd Battalion, 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (the unit which the 2nd Brigade had fought at Piazza Armerina), strengthened, it seems probable, by the 1st Battalion of the same regiment withdrawing from the American front, had taken up a stand awaiting the Canadian Division. Their best vantage point was Monte della Forma, a square-topped hill, 2700 feet high, on the west side of the pass; and it subsequently transpired that they had sited several mortars on its reverse, or northern, slope. In the action that followed the enemy demonstrated that two determined battalions by exploiting naturally strong positions could effectively hold up two brigades for more than twenty-four hours.

A blown bridge brought the 3rd Brigade to its first halt four miles north of Piazza Armerina. While sappers of the 4th Field Company R.C.E. constructed a diversion, reconnaissance reported the presence of the enemy at the road junction ahead. This was confirmed when the advance was resumed at 4:30, as The Carleton and York Regiment at the head of the column came under mortar and machine-gun fire. The infantry dismounted, and from hull-down positions on the crest of a hill about one and a half miles south of Monte della Forma tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment successfully engaged the enemy outposts, forcing a withdrawal to the main line of defence. The Carletons' C.O., Lt.-Col. F. D. Tweedie, then moved his battalion up to within a mile of the Grottaacalda pass.<sup>36</sup>

## The Fighting at Grottacalda and Valguarnera, 17-18 July

The situation seemed to require "a well supported attack in strength". Calling a conference of his brigade commanders, General Simonds issued orders committing to battle two of his infantry brigades supported by tanks and all the divisional artillery. The 3rd Brigade was to press on along the axis of the Enna highway; the 1st Brigade, which had been waiting at Piazza Armerina, was to strike north-eastward across country to Valguarnera. His remaining formation was to be ready to follow the 3rd Brigade at two hours' notices.<sup>37</sup>

At eight that evening Brigadier Penhale sent the Royal 22e Regiment, commanded by Lt.-Col. J. P. E. Bernatchez, forward through the Carleton and Yorks in troop-carrying vehicles. They were soon halted, this time by a large mine crater which the methodical enemy rearguard had blown in a stretch of the road that could not be by-passed. By the time that unit pioneers had repaired this breach night had fallen, and the advance continued in moonlight. A few hundred yards short of the pass, as the narrow road began its ascent around the base of Monte della Forma, the column was stopped by a heavy volley of machine-gun fire from the hills ahead. Quickly dismounting, the Royal 22e retaliated with their Bren guns, and in the skirmish that followed routed with heavy casualties a party of Germans seeking to cut off the battalion from the rest of the column. Then they dug in, and there was no further movement for the Canadians that night.<sup>38</sup>

After an early morning reconnaissance on the 18th Brigadier Penhale decided to attack with the Carleton and Yorks on the right, while the Vingt-deuxieme kept contact with the enemy in the centre. This plan was extended when the G.O.C. directed that The West Nova Scotia Regiment, which was now immediately to the rear of the Royal 22e, should make a wide left flanking attack to sever Highway No. 117 at a point some two miles west of the road junction and so cut off the enemy's retreat towards Enna. The main fire plan provided for concentrations of 68 rounds per gun by four artillery regiments.\* These were fired early in the afternoon on four selected targets about the pass, with results extremely encouraging to the attacking infantry.<sup>39</sup>

About mid-morning Lt.-Col. M. P. Bogert withdrew his West Novas a mile or so down the highway and then turned west across country, screened from the enemy's view by the hill from which the Canadian tanks had fired on the previous evening. It was heavy going under the blazing sun, and to

\* The 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A., the 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments R.C.A. and the 7th Medium Regiment R.A. The 142nd Field Regiment (S.P.) R.A. was supporting the 1st Brigade. Two troops of the 2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Battery (2nd L.A.A. Regt.) R.C.A. in the infantry column carried out effective anti-personnel firing with their 40-millimetre Bofors guns during the day.

make matters worse a deep ravine halted the battalion's carriers, and so forced the perspiring troops to carry the heavy 3-inch mortars. While the artillery pounded the face of Monte della Forma and Lt.-Col. Tweedie's troops launched their attack on the right, the West Novas, turning northward, forced their way through the tall thickets of cane that marked the course of the dry river bed. By four in the afternoon they had occupied a hill dominating the Enna highway west of the pass. They met little enemy resistance, for at Grottacalda the Carleton attack had already driven the Germans from their posts north-east of the road forks,\* and a parallel withdrawal from Monte della Forma had brought to an end the fourteenhour frontal fight of the Royal 22e under continuous mortaring. The junction was securely in Canadian hands by five o'clock.<sup>41</sup>

On the Division's right flank the 1st Brigade had undergone a hard day's fighting. Called forward during the evening of 17th July, the Hastings and Prince Edwards left the highway some two miles north of Piazza Armerina, and struck off in a north-easterly direction across the rugged countryside. Deep ravines and dried-up watercourses hindered their progress, soon separating them from their mortars and carriers. Their only roads were the goat paths that twisted around the steep hillsides. The tank carrying the artillery F.O.O. and his wireless set was unable to negotiate the difficult terrain, and the attacking companies were without fire support throughout the following day.<sup>42</sup>

Dawn found Battalion Headquarters and "B" and "D" Companies on the heights less than a mile south of Valguarnera, looking over the ravine through which the road winds steeply up into the town; the remaining companies had lost contact during the night. On their right front a circular knoll, terraced with olive trees, rose 300 feet above the floor of the valley, dominating the road which bent around its northern base, although itself overlooked by the superior height of the town and the surrounding hills. From a nearby hill a solitary enemy machine-gun post checked further movement by the Hastings. On his own initiative a platoon sergeant of "D" Company, Sergeant W.J.R. McKnight (who was later awarded the D.C.M. for his bravery), accompanied by another non-commissioned officer, crawled across the intervening valley and assaulted the position with grenade, rifle and bayonet, killing its ten defenders.<sup>43</sup> Lt.-Col. Sutcliffe now directed the building of a road-block, from behind which one company successfully engaged a number of enemy vehicles coming up the winding route from Grottacalda. The prize hit was that scored by a PIAT bomb on an ammunition truck which was carrying several enemy troops. It killed

\* The success of the Carleton and York attack owed much to the gallantry and initiative of Private M. Brisson, surviving member of a party of three advancing on an enemy machine-gun post. He carried on the assault alone and took the position, shooting two of the occupants and killing the third with his rifle-butt. This action brought him the battalion's first D.C.M.<sup>40</sup>



all the occupants and immobilized an 88-millimetre gun which the vehicle had in tow. This may well have been the initial Canadian success for the new infantry anti-tank weapon. An attempt by the battalion commander to lead a platoon up into the town failed, and about noon a German detachment of lorried infantry attacked the road-block and forced the Canadian companies to withdraw into the encircling hills.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, scarcely a mile to the east, but completely out of touch with the rest of the battalion, "A" and "C" Companies were engaged in a separate action of their own. Early that morning, guided by an unwilling farmer whom the battalion Intelligence Officer pressed into service, they had reached the knoll commanding the approaches to the town, and had dug in within 600 yards of the enemy's forward guns. From this point of vantage they ambushed at close range a column of mechanized infantry on the road, inflicting heavy losses with their intense fire; the commander of "A" Company is reported himself to have accounted for eighteen Germans in a truck, catching them point blank with a Bren gun fired from the hip. Enemy reinforcements, believed to be the previously uncommitted balance of a battalion, now stormed the exposed Canadian position. In the first sharp engagement the Hastings repulsed the attackers, but the threat of artillery action compelled a decision to fall back across the road to the main line of hills. The retirement was made with one company covering the other's withdrawal, and during the evening the scattered battalion reorganized at its starting point on the highway. In the day's fighting it had lost 20 other ranks killed or wounded and seven taken prisoner; it was later confirmed that the Hastings had killed between 80 and 90 Germans, and wounded as many more.<sup>45</sup>

On the 1st Brigade's left the attempt of The Royal Canadian Regiment to capture Valguarnera also failed, and from the same series of causes arising from the uncompromising terrain—the immobilization of the unit carriers with their 3-inch mortars and wireless sets, the consequent breakdown of communications with the rest of the brigade, and the resultant loss of artillery support and absence of co-ordination with the flanking infantry battalion.

It was 5:30 on the morning of the 18th before the R.C.R. left Highway No. 117 a mile south-east of the Portello Grottaalda to strike across country towards Valguarnera; and when they reached the ridge of hills bordering the road into the town, enemy sniping and mortar and machine-gun fire pinned them to ground until noon. Shortly thereafter they pushed forward another mile, to gain positions directly south of Valguarnera on what must have earlier been the immediate left flank of the Hastings' "A" and "C" Companies; indeed, a number of stragglers of that battalion, who had been pinned down by enemy fire when the main body withdrew, were

rescued from their predicament by a party led by the R.C.R.'s Second-in-Command, Major J.H.W.T. Pope.<sup>46</sup>

Lt.-Col. Crowe then directed a two-company attack against the enemy on the knoll ahead. As his men advanced well deployed down the open hillside in the face of brisk fire from mortar and machine-guns, the battalion commander himself walked at their head, "eager to keep the action rolling." There was some spirited fighting before the enemy, who had apparently relied on advantage of position to compensate for his inferiority of numbers, withdrew, leaving the Canadians in positions from which they could overlook the entrance to Valguarnera half a mile to the north.

Three German tanks guarding these approaches now opened fire, and Major Pope went forward with six men to engage them. By extreme misfortune three bombs fired from a PIAT failed to explode.\* A hail of bullets from the tanks' machine-guns forced the patrol to retire; Major Pope was killed. Shortly afterwards the tanks withdrew into Valguarnera, and a long mechanized column was observed leaving the town by its northern exits. Expecting a counter-attack, however, Lt.-Col. Crowe ordered his men to dig in. At two o'clock he addressed a situation report to the Brigade Commander, explaining his intention of patrolling into the town, but not "before dark as I have no support weapons or armour of any kind." This message was carried back to Battalion Headquarters by the regimental padre alone and on foot, and under rifle fire much of the way. Before last light a patrol from the R.C.R.'s Support Company reached the rifle companies with rations.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile Brigadier Graham had ordered forward his reserve battalion, the 48th Highlanders, to occupy a ridge two miles south of Valguarnera. In taking this objective the leading company claimed 35 Germans killed and a score of prisoners. One Highlander, Cpl. W.F. Kay, won the D.C.M. for his part in the action; his section of five men captured a machine-gun position manned by seventeen Germans, he himself personally accounting for eight of the enemy. After clearing out nests of snipers who were still operating in the rear of the R.C.R. and the Hastings, the battalion marched around to the right, to enter Valguarnera in the dead of night and find it clear of enemy.<sup>49</sup>

The fighting on that Sunday had been the most extensive in which the Division had yet participated; there were 145 Canadian casualties, 40 of them fatal. Against this must be set the figures of 250 German and 30 Italian prisoners captured, and claims of from 180 to 240 Germans killed

\* Reports of other instances of the failure of the PIAT bomb to detonate unless striking the target squarely were fairly common. The adoption, early in 1944, of a "graze" fuse (which was actuated by the deceleration produced when the bomb struck an object, even obliquely) increased the proportion of detonations, thereby considerably improving the weapon's performance against tanks.<sup>47</sup>

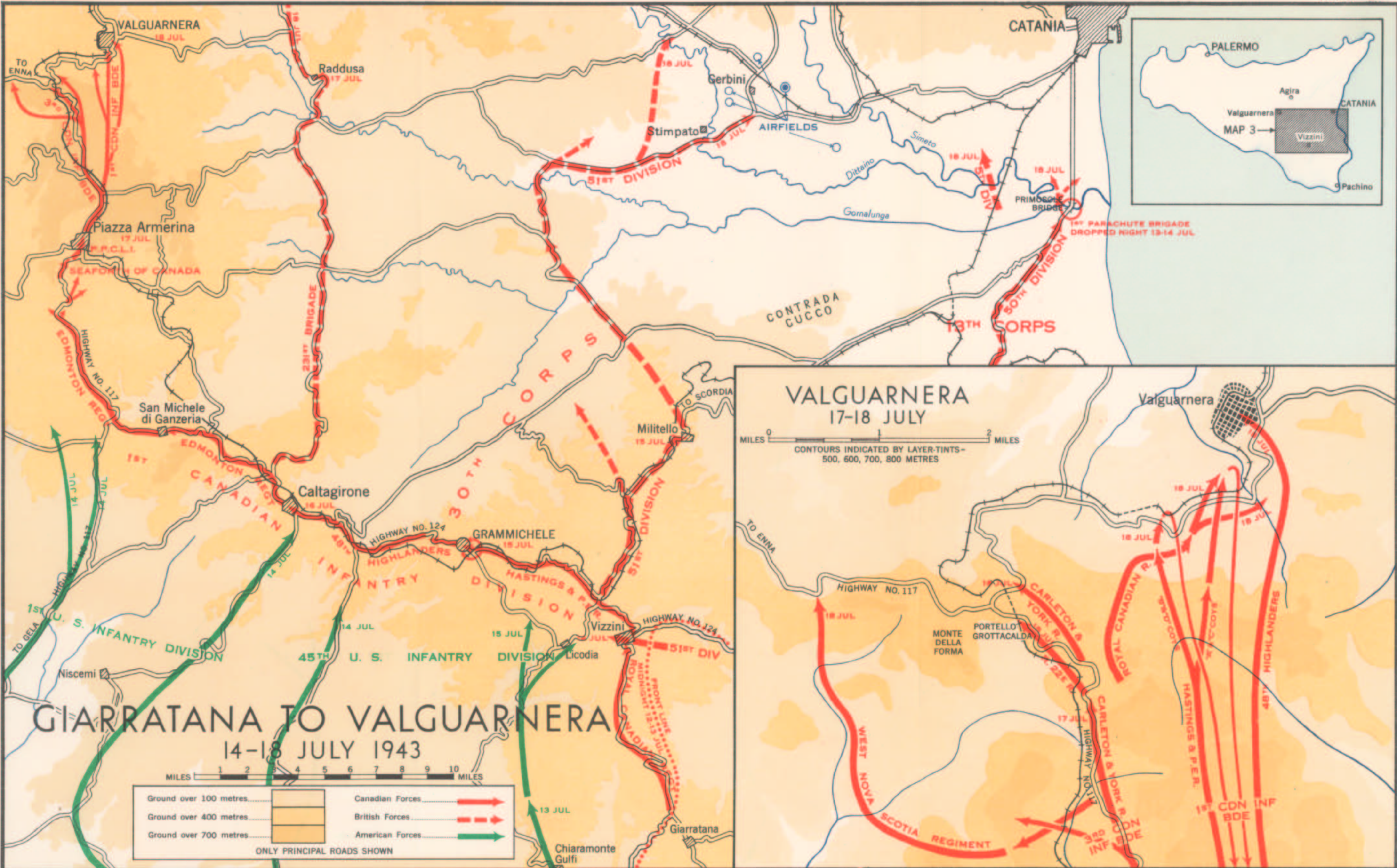
or wounded.<sup>50</sup> As we have shown, the actual gains of ground during the day were relatively small, so effectively had the enemy, although heavily outnumbered, capitalized on the advantages of his naturally strong positions. On the other hand the Canadians had acquired some much-needed battle experience, which was to serve them well in subsequent encounters with the Germans.

Two days later Kesselring's daily report to Berlin carried a measure of unconscious tribute to the 1st Brigade: "Near Valguarnera troops trained for fighting in the mountains have been mentioned. They are called 'Mountain Boys' and probably belong to the 1st Canadian Division."<sup>51</sup>

### The By-Passing of Enna

During the afternoon of 18 July, while the battle among the hills was still in progress, General Simonds held an orders group and directed his 2nd Brigade to continue the advance northward towards Leonforte. It was 4:30 next morning when the Seaforth Highlanders passed through Valguarnera, followed by the Patricias. The enemy's peculiarly effective knack of denying road passage to vehicles by mine crater and demolished bridge compelled both battalions to go on foot, and hence without supporting arms. On the other hand the retreating Panzer Grenadiers took full advantage of having their artillery with them, and from a hill which overlooked an important intersection of roads, railway and river five miles north of Valguarnera their rearguard halted Canadian progress with shelling, mortaring and machine-gun *fire*. Not until the afternoon, when the good work of the Canadian sappers in repairing demolitions enabled the guns to be brought forward, and the enemy felt the weight of a number of divisional concentrations on his positions, did he withdraw in the face of an attack by the Patricias. The end of the day found the two forward battalions holding the disputed crossroads.<sup>52</sup>

That morning, as they came out of the hills about Valguarnera into the rolling upland plains which *fill* the angle between the main backbone of the Erei Mountains and the spur stretching eastward to Etna, the marching troops had caught their first glimpse of the majestic snow-topped volcano, forty miles to the north-east. Over to their left, a bare half dozen miles away, the square crag of Enna, reaching 3300 feet above sea-level, dominated the western sky-line. The horizon between these two landmarks was filled with the chain of heights which marked the path of the main Palermo-Catania road, Highway No. 121: Along this winding route through the rugged hills the Canadian Division was to do battle during seventeen days of bitter fighting, wresting one by one from the enemy the towns and villages which crowned the highest summits (see Map 5).



One of these mountain strongholds was clearly visible to the 2nd Brigade as they headed north along the road from Valguarnera--the lofty peak of Assoro projecting like a sharp tooth in the jagged sky-line eight miles ahead. This height formed a southern projection to the main ridge, which here flattened out as a high plateau extending from Leonforte, two miles north-west of Assoro, to Agira, six miles to the north-east. At Regalbuto, nine miles east of Agira's 2700-foot cone, Highway No. 121, which had thus far climbed tortuously into every town and village along the main ridge, temporarily forsook the hills, dropping down by relatively easy gradients to cross the valley of the Simeto west of Adrano. It thus left Centuripe\*--most easterly of this group of communities in the sky--to be reached by a very indifferent trail which clambered by steep zig-zags up to the 2400-foot peak on which the town was sited.

The rugged country which the Canadians were now entering; is pierced by a number of tributaries of the River Simeto, which empties into the sea south of Catania, draining the greater part of the eastern Sicilian plain. Two of these, rising in the mountains north of Enna, have courses that parallel on either side the Leonforte-Centuripe hill barrier--the Salso to the north, and the Dittaino to the south. The main branch of the Simeto itself has its source in the high watershed north-west of Etna, and flows almost due south along the volcano's western flank, meeting the Salso midway between Centuripe and Adrano before breaking through a gap in the hills into the Catania plain. One more river that the 1st Division was to meet, the Troina, which shares its name with a lofty town lying near, its point of origin between the headwaters of the Salso and the Simeto, has carved a rocky south-easterly course through the mountains to join the former stream five miles to the west of its junction with the parent river.

More than a year later in Northern Italy Canadians were to know the hardships of campaigning across raging torrents swollen by the autumn rains; but here in the drought of summer these Sicilian streams had dwindled to mere trickles connecting the shallow pools which were scattered along their wide, boulder-strewn beds. These dried courses were no obstacle to infantry on foot; but the passage of tracked or wheeled vehicles presented a challenge that the Engineers were quick to take up. Although the valleys, which average a mile or more in width, form broad corridors through the wild terrain, they could not be used as avenues of advance for the Canadians while the Germans still held the commanding heights above them.

At a conference on the afternoon of 19 July, General Simonds outlined his plans for the 1st Division's future operations. He had decided to advance that night on a two-brigade front, with the 2nd Brigade proceeding towards its objective of Leonforte, and the 1st branching out to the right to take

\* See p. 697.

Assoro, and thence pushing northward to cut the highway east of Leonforte. While the 3rd Canadian Brigade temporarily remained in reserve, the 231st (Malta) Brigade was to come under the G.O.C.'s command on the Division's right flank. Since 17 July the Malta Brigade had been moving forward in an independent role between the Canadians and the 51st Highland Division. It had captured Raddusa, eight miles east of Valguarnera, on the 18th, and was now in position astride the Dittaino River, six miles east of the crossroads which the 2nd Canadian Brigade was holding. A continued advance along its present axis would bring it to Agira, but it was Simonds' intention that no attempt would be made to reduce this stronghold until the capture of Leonforte and Assoro should enable the Canadian Division to attack simultaneously from the west.<sup>53</sup>

The inclusion of Agira within the sector of Canadian operations and an announcement by the G.O.C. that the main divisional axis was to be eastward along Highway No. 121 confirmed the change in the earlier plans of higher command for a Canadian "left hook" around the north of Mount Etna. That same morning of the 19th, General Montgomery had reported to General Alexander that because of the strong enemy resistance near the coast he had decided not to, persist with the thrust of his 50th Division in that sector but instead to increase the pressure farther west. To this end he ordered attacks to be made at the centre of the Eighth Army's front, the 5th Division (of the 13th Corps) towards Misterbianco and the 51st Division against Paterno, two towns on Highway No. 121 between Adrano and Catania.<sup>54</sup> In accordance with the intentions which he had expressed to the Army Group Commander on 17 July the Army's left flank would conform with this convergence upon the enemy's hold on the southern base of Etna. "It was now clear", writes Alexander, commenting on this modification of the plans set forth in his directive of 16 July, "that Eighth Army would not have the strength to encircle Etna on both sides against the stout resistance of the Germans. The Canadians were therefore ordered to advance to Leonforte and then turn east to Adrano, the centre of the three original thrusts, abandoning the proposed encirclement through Randazzo."<sup>55</sup>

The tasks given to the two Canadian brigades were not easy. To reach their mountain objectives--Leonforte at an altitude of more than 2000 feet, and Assoro nearly 1000 feet higher--the attackers had to cross the Dittaino valley many hundreds of feet below, exposed to continual fire which the Germans were able to direct with great accuracy from their observation posts along the dominating ridge between the two towns. The advance began a little before midnight of 19-20 July. By morning the Edmonton had secured a bridgehead over the dry bed of the Dittaino just east of Highway No. 121, and about five miles from Leonforte. During

the day the Patricias occupied without opposition an isolated hill, Mount Desira Rossi, two miles behind the Edmonton crossing, and high enough to command the brigade's further advance.

Five miles downstream the 48th Highlanders crossed near Dittaino Station, whence The Royal Canadian Regiment went into the lead for the 1st Brigade. Supported by "C" Squadron of the Three Rivers Regiment, they took two hills, one on either side of the Dittaino, but not before nine Canadian tanks had been immobilized by mines and the crews held pinned inside for five hours by the enemy's continual artillery fire. A narrow, steep-sided valley led directly north-westward to the towering height of Assoro four miles away, but was under observation for its entire length from the enemy positions. Further advance by daylight being impossible, Brigadier Graham gave orders for the Hastings and Prince Edwards to attack that night.<sup>56</sup>

The final incident in the friendly rivalry between Canadians and Americans to be the first to enter Enna may here be told. With Valguarnera in Canadian hands and the enemy's line of retreat through Leonforte threatened his position in Enna was obviously untenable; during the night of 18-19 July a terrific explosion in the town gave notice that the Germans were withdrawing. Early on the 20th the 1st United States Division had announced that it would make a reconnaissance of Enna that day and attack on the following night.<sup>57</sup> When news of the German evacuation reached General Simonds' headquarters, where the main attention was now focussed on Leonforte and Assoro, "A" Squadron of the Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment (the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards) received orders (according to the General Staff war diary) "to send a patrol to take the town before the Americans reached there."

The troop entrusted with the mission set out from Valguarnera in four carriers, but five miles from their goal they were stopped by a badly cratered road which prevented further use of their vehicles. One sergeant, two corporals and a trooper went forward on foot. After more than a mile's uphill plodding under the blazing Sicilian sun they commandeered a donkey and rode it in turn. Near the top of the long zig-zag climb they saw entering the town two truckloads of troops, which to their relief turned out to be Americans, not Germans. The long-suffering donkey was abandoned in favour of a lift in a jeep, and in this manner the Canadian patrol arrived in the main *piazza* of Enna simultaneously with the American vanguard.<sup>58</sup>

### The 1st Brigade Takes Assoro, 20-22 July

Early on that same afternoon (20 July) the Hastings' C.O., Lt.-Col. Sutcliffe, went forward with his Intelligence Officer into the R.C.R. area

north of the Dittaino River, to reconnoitre the ground over which his battalion was to make the assault on Assoro. While he was engaged in this task, a German 88-millimetre shell exploded near their shallow weapon-pit, killing Colonel Sutcliffe and mortally wounding his 1.0. Major The Lord Tweedsmuir, son of a former Governor-General of Canada, assumed command of the unit, and took his company commanders forward to complete the survey which had been so tragically interrupted.<sup>59</sup>

In the failing light the enormous silhouette of their objective stood out starkly against the northern sky, dwarfing by comparison the massive barrier which stretched on either side to Leonforte and Agira. The direct approach was by the road winding up an exposed spur on the left side of the valley; but . this route would obviously be well registered by enemy artillery, and to attack along it would be suicidal. The village itself\* clung to the western (the least precipitous) slope of the Assoro mountain. Its steep, narrow streets climbed to within a few hundred feet of the summit, which was crowned by the fragmentary ruins of a castle built in the twelfth century by Roger II. The Norman king had chosen his site well, planting his stronghold in what must have seemed a well-nigh impregnable position on the edge of the eastern cliff, which towered a thousand feet above the valley.

Conceiving that the Germans would regard an attack from this direction a physical impossibility, Tweedsmuir determined on a march to the right across country and an assault up the steep eastern face of the mountain. Preparations to put this bold plan into effect began immediately. To encourage the enemy's probable belief that the Canadian attack would come from the south-west, just as night fell three Bren gun carriers of the 48th Highlanders went racing up the winding road. They got half way to the village before the Germans opened fire, whereupon they withdrew as previously ordered. At nine o'clock the divisional artillery began a four-hour programme of intermittent harassing fire on Highway No. 121 east of Leonforte, paying special attention to the junction where a side road branched off to Assoro.<sup>60</sup>

Half an hour later the Hastings moved off in single file on their daring venture. At the head of the column Tweedsmuir placed a specially formed "assault company" composed of twenty of the fittest and most active men from each of the rifle companies, armed with rifles and a few Bren guns and carrying nothing else except their ammunition. About a mile from Dittaino Station they struck north-east into the hills. Bright moonlight helped them pick their way across the wild terrain, now following a twisting goat path, now tracing the narrow course of a rocky stream bed, and now mounting steadily along a well beaten mule track. Daylight was not an hour away when the mile-long column halted on a rocky ridge east of the objective.

\* The ancient Assorus, one of the principal towns founded by the Sicels about 1000 B.C.



In the paling darkness the big mountain loomed vaster than ever, and a deep ravine that girdled its base like a natural moat looked formidable indeed to the desperately tired Hastings.<sup>61</sup>

The new C.O. now divided his battalion, sending one company and the picked assault group to scale the left shoulder of the mountain, while he led the rest in search of an approach from the north-east. A providential goat track took them down the almost sheer wall of the ravine and at the bottom they scrambled over huge boulders to the other side. Let Lord Tweedsmuir's own words describe what followed:

Then began a climb which no one who took part will ever forget. The mountain was terraced and always above was a tantalizing false crest, which unfolded to another crest when one approached it. It was forty sweating, tearing minutes before we stood on the top beside the shell of the great Norman castle and realized that we had achieved complete surprise. A German O.P.\* party had fallen to the left hand group and we had control of a vantage point from which we could see for fifty miles.<sup>62</sup>

The Hastings had taken their objective without losing a man, and it was some time before the enemy recovered from his surprise. Opening fire from their superior position the Canadians forced a German withdrawal from the village and knocked out eight vehicles in a convoy which they saw approaching along the roadway beyond. One of Tweedsmuir's companies entered Assoro; but the enemy counter-attacked, and the confused fighting that followed brought no decisive results. Soon the guns from a German battery that had been firing on Leonforte swung around and began dropping shells with unpleasant accuracy into the restricted Hastings area, inflicting several casualties. It was now that good wireless communication, which was so sadly lacking at Valguarnera and later at Leonforte, proved its value. An urgent request by radio for artillery support brought the 7th Medium Regiment into action, and at 10:30 the enemy battery was reported silenced.<sup>63</sup> For several hours thereafter the Hastings, clinging to their exposed position on the mountain top, the rocky nature of which prevented the digging of effective slit-trenches, were subjected to intermittent mortar and artillery fire. Enemy snipers still in Assoro were also a constant hazard; nevertheless, casualties were surprisingly light.

The day wore on, and the Canadians, worn out from their exertions of the night before, found it difficult to keep on the alert. Their only food was the emergency chocolate ration that each man carried, and they were running short of ammunition. Late in the afternoon the enemy launched a sudden counter-attack from Assoro, advancing almost to the top of the hill. Quickly a call went through to Brigade \*Headquarters, and with gratifying promptness artillery concentrations began to crash down on the near edge of the village and the tightly packed houses beyond. The enemy's

\* Observation Post.

effort was broken up; and the battalion stood to for the remainder of a long night which was interrupted only by an occasional exchange of salvoes between the German artillery and the guns of the medium regiment.<sup>64</sup>

Early morning of the 22nd brought much-needed food and ammunition. On the previous day an officer of the Hastings and the Regimental Sergeant Major had made the arduous journey to Brigade Headquarters in order to explain the situation and to guide a carrying party forward. At midnight one hundred volunteers of The Royal Canadian Regiment, stripped of their own equipment, and bearing a full day's rations and ammunition in Everest packs and bandoliers, set off across country, escorted by another R.C.R. company as precaution against enemy intervention. Led by the two intrepid messengers they reached the mountain top without detection by the enemy and returned to their unit without incident. In and about the ruins of the ancient castle the Hastings ate their first meal in thirty-six hours.<sup>65</sup>

Meanwhile vigorous efforts were being made to open the road up the valley into Assoro, and so bring to Tweedsmuir the additional strength he needed to decide the issue. An attempt by his support weapons to reach the village on the previous afternoon had failed under heavy enemy fire, and at sunset he had seen some of their carriers and trucks burning on the road far below.<sup>66</sup> Brigadier Graham then ordered the 48th Highlanders forward. In the darkness they laboriously climbed to positions west of Assoro, the men pulling each other up the almost vertical sides of mountain terraces 30 or more feet high. At dawn they drove the enemy from the heights covering the south-western approach to the village, and opened the way for engineers of the 1st Field Company (with the enforced aid of a hundred prisoners of war) to fill a road crater which had barred the passage of vehicles. Throughout the morning the battalion methodically cleared the rocky high ground west of Assoro, receiving valuable support from the 75-millimetre guns of a Three Rivers squadron, whose drivers showed amazing skill in negotiating the steep and narrow winding trail. By midday of the 22nd a Highland company had joined the Hastings, and Assoro was firmly in Canadian hands.<sup>67</sup>

Some six weeks later, in preparing his "experience report" of the campaign in Sicily, the commander of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division wrote that the Allied infantrymen were "good soldier material" who exhibited "in general fair ways of fighting". He added a tribute which may well have been prompted by his recollection of the Canadian tactics in the assault on Assoro:

In fieldcraft [*Indianerkrieg*] superior to our own troops. Very mobile at night, surprise break-ins, clever infiltrations at night with small groups between our strongpoints.<sup>68</sup>

The seizure of the Assoro pinnacle by The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment was as significant to the Canadian Division's advance as it was dramatic, for it upset the whole German plan of defence on that front, and thus hastened the fall of Leonforte. Assoro and Leonforte were two phases of the same battle; for the enemy had to hold the whole ridge, or withdraw from it altogether. We have seen how his grasp on the eastern end was pried loose by the 1st Brigade; let us turn now to the scene on the Canadian left, and follow the fortunes of the 2nd Brigade in its assault on the more westerly town.

### The Capture of Leonforte by the 2nd Brigade, 21-22 July

From its bridge over the Dittaino River, Highway No. 121 climbed steadily in a series of sweeping curves to the Leonforte escarpment, with only one break in the otherwise continuous ascent. Two miles from the town the road swung abruptly eastward, dropping downhill to cross a deep ravine; thence it turned sharply to the north-west in a long gradient that led up into Leonforte's southern outskirts. The town, with a population of 20,000, was both larger and more modern than the neighbouring Assoro. It was spread over the western shoulder of the mountain ridge, and its long central thoroughfare reached almost to the summit.

Early on the morning of 21 July, the Seaforth Highlanders, now leading the 2nd Brigade's advance, reached the road bend in front of Leonforte and found that the bridge over the ravine had been demolished and that its approaches were being swept with fire from the town and the surrounding heights. In spite of the enemy's advantageous position, the Seaforth prepared to launch a daylight attack that afternoon. By ill-fortune, however, part of the preliminary artillery concentration fell upon the battalion's headquarters, causing thirty casualties and not a little disorganization. Brigadier Vokes postponed action, and ordered the Edmontons to take over from the Seaforth. Two rifle companies would cross the ravine and force an entry into the town while sappers bridged the road gap to permit the passage of supporting arms.<sup>69</sup>

Shortly before nine that evening another bombardment, reported to have been the heaviest that the divisional artillery had yet fired, provided the overture for the infantry assault.<sup>70</sup> Mortars and machine-guns of the Saskatoon Light Infantry rang up the curtain, and as "A" and "D" Companies of The Edmonton Regiment moved off down the road they received covering fire from the Seaforth.

At first the attack went well. The bombardment had sent the enemy to ground, and the assault companies clambered down into the steep ravine,

scaled the far side and entered the town with little difficulty. The balance of the battalion followed, Lt.-Col. Jefferson's headquarters moving with "C" Company. Meanwhile a platoon of the 3rd Field Company R.C.E. went to work at the blown bridge. Before long the enemy launched a powerful counter-attack, supported by tanks and by machine-gun fire from the rooftops. A bitter struggle developed in the darkened streets. The failure of wireless communication with Brigade Headquarters prevented the hard-pressed battalion from calling for anti-tank guns to deal with the enemy armour, even had it been possible for these weapons to cross the intervening ravine.<sup>71</sup>

The action deteriorated into house-to-house combat as the unit became split up; in the fog of battle small groups of platoon or section strength fought on independently, each believing itself to be the sole survivor of the larger body. "B" Company, which had followed "D" Company's assault, skirted the western edge of the town and seized some high ground to the north; then, unable to find the rest of the battalion, they decided to fight their way back to their starting point. "A" Company forced a way out through the eastern outskirts. In the centre of the town the Edmonton C.O., with his battalion headquarters strengthened by two and a half platoons from "C" Company and some stragglers from "D", took up a firm position in a number of buildings from which the enemy had been cleared. There the small band of about 100 officers and men held until morning.<sup>72</sup> Attempts by unit signals personnel to open wireless communication with Brigade Headquarters from high rooftops failed, but during the night Jefferson entrusted to the hand of an Italian boy a written appeal for help addressed to "any British or Canadian officer." The message reached Brigadier Vokes, creating in him a "great ray of hope" at a time when he thought he had lost "a very able battalion commander and most of his battalion."<sup>73</sup>

While the Edmontons were battling through the night in Leonforte, outside the town the Engineers had been working vigorously but methodically to bridge the 50-foot gap. They were under constant mortar and machinegun fire which they later nonchalantly described as being "slightly high".<sup>74</sup> While the job was still in progress, their company commander, Major K.J. Southern, moved up the road with a few of the Edmontons to the outskirts of Leonforte, where they were confronted by a machine-gun covering the only approach to the town, and close beside it two enemy tanks and a small force of infantry. Here was a potential threat to the sappers toiling in the ravine below that might well have halted their efforts and spelled disaster for the isolated Edmontons awaiting reinforcement in the town. Catching the Germans by surprise, Major Southern's little party discharged their small arms and made such a display of force that the more formidable enemy group was deterred from advancing. Shortly afterwards the commander of the 90th Canadian Anti-Tank Battery, Major G.A.

Welsh, who had come forward with the engineer party, recrossed the ravine under heavy fire to bring two of his six-pounders into action. The machine-gun post and one of the tanks were destroyed, and Welsh kept up the good work\* by once more approaching the town and with the help of two engineers taking twenty German prisoners.<sup>75</sup>

Shortly after two o'clock the bridge was reported open for traffic, although the crossing and the road on either side were still being swept by enemy fire. Through the remaining hours of darkness vague and conflicting scraps of intelligence concerning the fighting filtered back with Edmonton stragglers until Brigadier Vokes received the written message from Jefferson. He at once decided upon a daring plan. This was to rush a "flying column" across the bridge in broad daylight to the aid of the hard-pressed Edmontons. He detailed "C" Company of the Patricias, a troop of four tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment and a troop of the 90th Battery's anti-tank guns. He placed in command the P.P.C.L.I. company commander, Captain R. C. Coleman, whose "leadership and skill" that morning were to bring him the Military Cross.<sup>76</sup>

The bold venture was launched at nine o'clock. The Shermans, followed by the anti-tank troop, thundered down the road to the ravine, the infantrymen riding on the tanks and in the tractors and clinging to the guns, some even astride the barrels themselves. At breakneck speed the column swept across the bridge and raced up the long hill into Leonforte. Such was the speed of its assault that it sustained only one casualty as it passed through the enemy fire. It fell like a whirlwind upon the German posts at the entrance to the town and won their immediate surrender.

The Patricias quickly became involved in house-to-house fighting, the anti-tank guns giving effective support by knocking out at close range troublesome machine-gun and mortar positions. By ten o'clock they had reached the lost band of Edmontons in the heart of Leonforte. As the P.P.C.L.I. reinforcing companies moved in to exploit the initial success, their "C" Company battled up the mile-long main street, to seize the railway station on the northern outskirts. There was heated action in the centre of the town. Tank met tank at point-blank range, and anti-tank weapons on both sides took their toll of opposing armour in the narrow streets. The Germans knocked out a Sherman, and lost at least three of their own tanks. By the afternoon Leonforte itself was clear; but the enemy had still to be driven from two commanding heights east and west of the town. The task was assigned to two of the P.P.C.L.I. Companies, "A" to the left, and "B" to the right. By 5:30 both had gained their objectives, but only after much hard fighting and at a high cost in casualties.<sup>77</sup>

\* Both Southern and Welsh received the D.S.O. for their parts in this operation. The former was killed in Italy in 1944 while commanding the R.C.E. of the 1st Division.

Among the many deeds of bravery performed that day in and about the hard-won town (altogether twenty-one awards were made for the Leonforte engagement) none was more spectacular than that of Private S. J. Cousins, a member of "A" Company of the Patricias. During the company's assault on the height referred to above, the two leading platoons were halted by the intensity of fire coming from two enemy machine-gun posts on the objective. While they were reorganizing, Cousins, accompanied by an N.C.O., on his own initiative advanced against the German positions. One hundred and fifty yards from the crest, Cousins' companion fell under the hail of bullets which swept the slope. "Despite the fact that further progress appeared to be utter suicide to the men of his company who were watching this gallant soldier, he then, with complete disregard for his own life, rose to his feet in full view of the enemy, and carrying his Bren gun boldly charged the enemy posts."<sup>78</sup> This resolute action so demoralized the enemy that he was able to close within less than fifty yards of their positions. Then firing from the hip he killed or wounded the German machine-gunners, silencing both posts. "A" Company took and successfully held the ridge; but unfortunately Private Cousins was killed later in the afternoon by a direct hit. He was subsequently Mentioned in Dispatches.\*

The three days of fighting for Assoro and Leonforte had cost the 1st Canadian Division more than 275 casualties. Most heavily hit were the units of the 2nd Brigade. The Seaforth lost 76 officers and men, including 28 killed; the Patricias lost 21 killed and 40 wounded; the Edmontons 7 killed and 17 wounded, and one taken prisoner. The price paid by the 1st Brigade for Assoro fell just short of 100 all ranks.

As the two Canadian brigades drove the last of the German garrisons from Assoro and Leonforte, Allied Kittyhawks found satisfying targets in the numerous groups of vehicles withdrawing to the north and east. For the past week attacks by the Tactical Air Force on enemy road movement had been increasing in intensity and had taken a heavy toll. One of the most important centres of communication in the whole area under interdiction was Randazzo, situated at the intersection of roads which linked Axis positions on the east and north coasts with the battlefronts south and west of Mount Etna. The town and the roads and bridges in its vicinity became the object of consistent aerial effort. The 22nd saw a particularly successful attack in support of the Canadian Division. On that morning a long reinforcement column of 300 enemy vehicles and guns travelling west from Randazzo through Troina was bombed and strafed continuously by American and British squadrons based at Pachino. By evening these had flown 156 sorties; they had scored 65 "flamers" and claimed at least as many more vehicles damaged.<sup>79</sup>

\* Neither the Distinguished Conduct Medal nor the Military Medal can be awarded posthumously.

An unfortunate event marred the day's achievement, when R.A.F. pilots attacked some Canadian vehicles on the road south of Leonforte, having apparently mistaken the town for Troina, which was similarly situated with respect to roads and rivers. Three members of the divisional Defence and Employment Platoon were killed-ironically while they were delivering new ground recognition strips. Gunners of the 54th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, assuming that the attack was being made by "friendly planes in hostile hands", shot down one in flames.<sup>80</sup> "This regrettable incident", wrote the diarist of the 1st Division, "must be considered one of the fortunes of war, since it is not always entirely possible for aircraft in the forward areas not to mistake our own vehicles for those of the enemy." It was a fair observation. Direct co-operation with ground troops was the most difficult of air operations, and there were to be other instances of faulty co-ordination when our aircraft undershot the bomb line and bombed or strafed friendly troops; or ground forces, insufficiently trained in aircraft identification, fired upon Allied aeroplanes.<sup>81</sup>

The Northwest African Tactical Air Force, which was charged with providing air support for the 15th Army Group, formed part of the Northwest African Air Forces,\* commanded by Major-General Carl Spaatz under the general direction of the Air Officer Commanding Mediterranean and Levant, Air Chief Marshal Tedder. The N.A.T.A.F. was established at Carthage, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, and it comprised the Desert Air Force (Air Vice-Marshal Harry Broadhurst), assigned to support the operations of the Eighth Army, the Twelfth U.S. Air Support Command (with the Seventh Army) and the Tactical Bomber Force. Its total strength at the time of the invasion of Sicily was about 890 aircraft.<sup>82</sup> The 21 medium and light bomber squadrons of the Tactical Bomber Force operated from Tunisia, Malta and, after 10 August, bases in Sicily. During the air campaign against the island, from 2 July to 17 August, they flew 5988 sorties against enemy-held towns and communications, and dropped more than 4600 tons of bombs. Fighters and fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force and Twelfth Air Support Command began moving to Sicily immediately after D Day, and by 21 July more than 27 squadrons were using captured airfields on the island.<sup>83</sup>

Liaison between the Desert Air Force and the formations of the Eighth Army which its squadrons were supporting was furnished by No. 2/5 Army Air Support Control (a combination of the two units indicated by its designation). By means of a number of mobile wireless links ("tentacles") this organization provided communications through which headquarters of brigades and higher formations could make requests for air support direct to Army

\* Other components of the N.A.A.F. were the Northwest African Strategic Air Force, the Northwest African Coastal Air Force, the Northwest African Photographic Reconnaissance Wing and the Northwest African Troop Carrier and Training Commands.

Headquarters for transmission to the R.A.F., and keep the air arm fully informed on the battle situation and the positions of our forward troops. The Army Air Support Control was also responsible for "broadcasting" to ground and air formations the results of air reconnaissance carried out by the Desert Air Force's Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron or by fighter-bomber squadrons on "armed reconnaissance" in search of their own targets. By this means the information gained about the enemy's movements or the "score" obtained in attacks by our aircraft would normally become known to the forward troops within an hour of the sortie's landing.<sup>84</sup>

Such a message reaching General Simonds' headquarters on the afternoon of the 22nd brought encouraging news of successful attacks on enemy traffic on the roads in front of the Canadians:

Fighters 1420 hrs bombed and strafed 50 MET [enemy mechanical transport] Troina-Nicosia. 9 flamers including 1 tank and some damaged.<sup>85</sup>

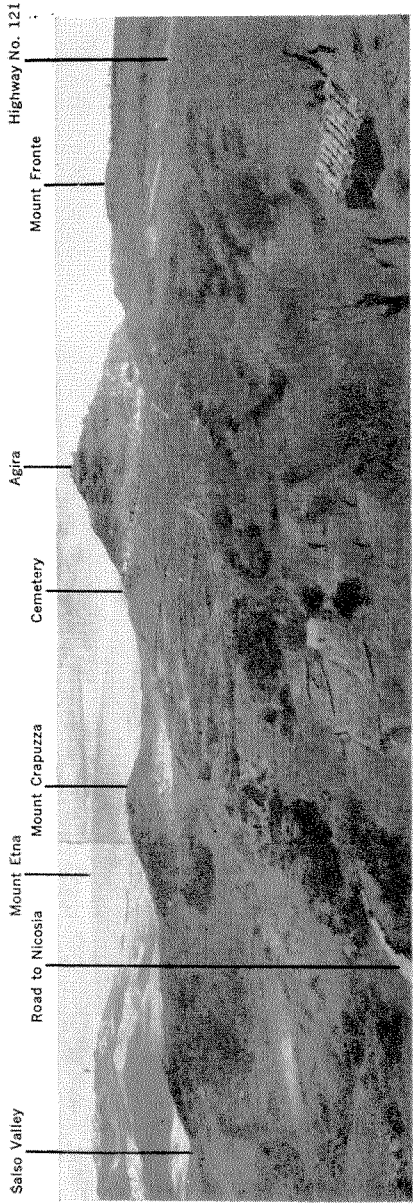
Kesselring's early morning report to Berlin on 23 July laconically admitted, "Leonforte fell into the hands of the enemy."<sup>86</sup> This unadorned statement failed to disclose that a key position in the German line of defence had been lost. A subsequent message from the C.-in-C. South, however, amplified the earlier news: "After extremely hard and fluctuating fighting and many casualties, Leonforte and Assoro were lost in the afternoon in renewed attacks by the enemy."<sup>87</sup> To Canadian Intelligence it was clear that the enemy's relinquishment of the two hill towns was not of the same pattern as his withdrawals from Grammichele, or Piazza Armerina or Valguarnera. This was no small-scale rearguard delaying action. He had fought strenuously with all available resources to maintain his hold on the vital Leonforte-Assoro ridge, for the first time employing all three battalions of the 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment as one tactical formation. It was learned from prisoners that when Assoro fell, the companies (probably of the 3rd Battalion) fighting there were hurried across to join the other two battalions in the defence of Leonforte; at first light on the 22nd the garrison in the western town was reported to have been reinforced by five tanks and about 75 infantrymen.<sup>88</sup>

A divisional intelligence summary commented on the significance of the changed enemy tactics.

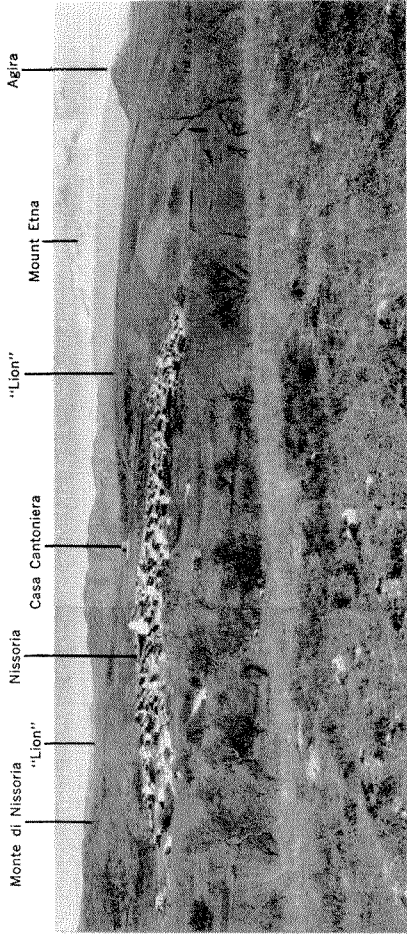
This resolute defence is something new. Hitherto the German rearguard has pulled stakes cleanly and retired some 8 or 10 miles to a new position. The fact that they are not voluntarily retiring from their latest strongpoint but are fighting for every yard of ground indicates that we are nearing something like a serious defence zone. Beyond doubt they would have held Leonforte had they not been driven out of it.<sup>89</sup>

During their slow and difficult progress across the mountains during the next two weeks the Canadians were to become bitterly familiar with "this resolute defence" by German panzer grenadiers and paratroopers.





AGIRA FROM THE WEST



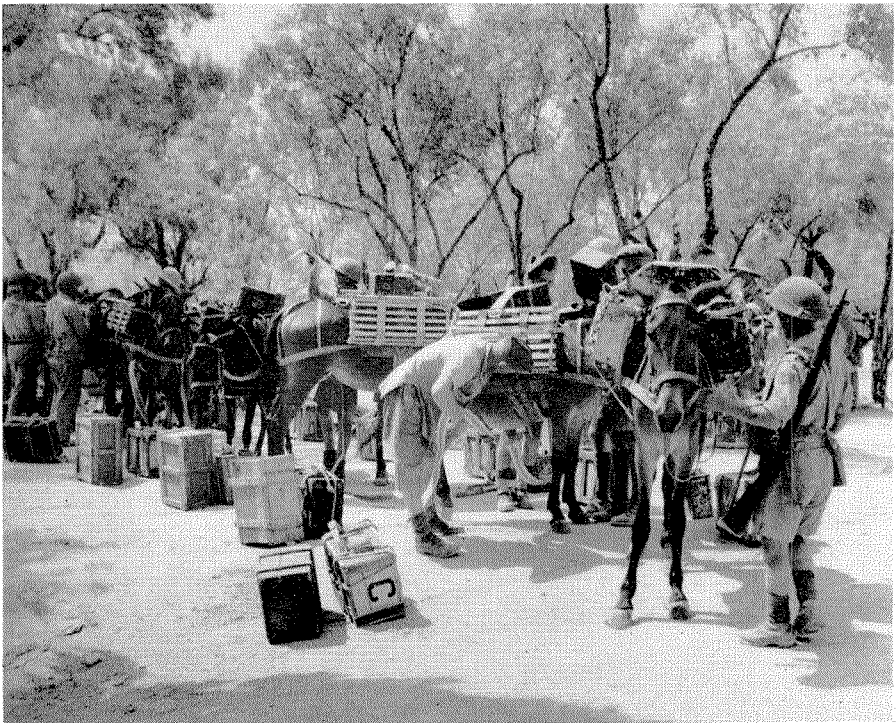
NISSORIA FROM THE SOUTH-WEST

These photographs, taken in 1948, illustrate the hilly terrain over which the 1st Canadian Division fought during the last week of July 1943.



#### THE RUINS OF REGALBUTO

Tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment, in support of the 1st Canadian Division, rumble through the devastated town shortly after its capture on 2 August 1943.



#### A MULE TRAIN IN SICILY

The Edmonton Regiment prepares for a cross-country move through the mountains towards Point 736, captured on 5 August 1943.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BEGINNING OF THE EASTWARD DRIVE, 23-31 JULY 1943

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#### The Conquest of Western Sicily

THE five days of bitter fighting during which the Canadians had dislodged the enemy from the Valguarnera heights and then forced him out of his Assoro and Leonforte strongholds had seen little progress elsewhere on the Eighth Army's front. Between 18 and 21 July the 13th Corps had fought two major actions in a fruitless attempt to break through to Misterbianco, on the high ground west of Catania; while the 51st (Highland) Division (of the 30th Corps), trying to reach Paterno, had been halted after taking Sferro village and Gerbini in two bitterly contested engagements. Then the Hermann Görings, determined at all costs to deny Allied use of the main Gerbini airfield, had counter-attacked and driven the 51st back to the line of the Dittaino River.<sup>1</sup> It was apparent to Army Headquarters that the bulk of the German forces had now concentrated in the north-east corner of the island, specifically in the Catania plain and the hills that bounded it to the north, and that any further attack by the 13th Corps and the 51st Division would inevitably lead to high casualties.<sup>2</sup>

Western Sicily, however, presented a very different picture. At the end of the first week of the campaign there remained here two intact Italian divisions—the 202nd and 208th Coastal Divisions—and elements of the 26th Assietta and 28th Aosta Divisions which were covering the general withdrawal to the east. In order to make the Allied left flank secure, these had to be liquidated; moreover the excellent port of Palermo was urgently needed as a supply base for the Seventh Army. The defensive role to which his troops had been relegated on 16 July (see above, p. 94) while the Eighth Army carried the main offensive irked General Patton. "To have adhered to this order", he wrote later, "would have been disloyal to the American Army." He flew to Algiers on the 17th and presented General Alexander with a

draft plan<sup>3</sup> for an enveloping attack on Palermo.\* Next day the Army Group Commander issued orders for the Seventh Army to cut the coast road north of Petralia and then from a firm base along the line Campofelice-Agrigento to "advance westwards to mop up the western half of Sicily."<sup>5</sup> "The rapid and wide-sweeping manoeuvres envisaged in this directive were very welcome to General Patton", writes Lord Alexander, "and he immediately set on foot the measures necessary to carry them out with that dash and drive which were characteristic of his conduct of operations."<sup>6</sup>

While the 2nd U.S. Corps, commanded by Lieut.-General Omar N. Bradley, drove northward to form the firm base and split the island in two, Patton sent Major-General Geoffrey Keyes' Provisional Corps (which had been created on 15 July from the 3rd Infantry, 82nd Airborne and 2nd Armoured Divisions) racing north-westward towards Palermo.<sup>7</sup> By 20 July the 2nd Corps had taken Enna, and the Provisional Corps was at Sciacca, the port on the south coast which, it will be recalled, had been chosen for an American D Day landing in the original Casablanca Outline Plan for Operation "Husky". That evening, encouraged by the rapid American progress, General Alexander directed Patton "to turn eastwards on reaching the north coast and develop a threat along the coast road" and the parallel inland road (Highway No. 120), which runs south of the mountain barrier through Petralia, Nicosia and Troina to Randazzo.<sup>8</sup> The directive concluded with a forecast of the pattern for the final stages of the campaign. "Future operation is to make Palermo the main axis of supply for 7th Army and to develop a combined offensive against the Germans by bringing American forces into line with 8th Army with a view to breaking through to Messina."<sup>9</sup>

The terms of this order had been largely anticipated in the discussions of 17 July, and General Patton was able to maintain the momentum of his advance without slackening. Late on 22 July his Provisional Corps swept into Palermo, and on the 23rd the 2nd Corps took Petralia and reached the coast midway between Termini Imerese† and Campofelice.<sup>10</sup> That same day General Keyes occupied the seaports of Trapani, Marsala and Castellammare; and early on the 25th Kesselring admitted to Berlin, "The occupation of Western Sicily by the enemy can now be considered as completed."<sup>11</sup> There remained only the elimination of a few isolated pockets of resistance and the disarming of the many disorganized Italian units. The capture of 11,540 prisoners by the Americans that day was their biggest bag of the campaign

\* The Seventh Army *Report of Operations* contains a marked map of Sicily illustrating a proposed change in the Army Group Directive of 16 July. Having indicated the Eighth Army's three main axes of advance into the Messina peninsula (above, p. 94), the plan provided that "the 7th Army will drive rapidly to the northwest and north, capture Palermo, and split the enemy's forces." This plan, the *Report* states, "was agreed to 17 July 1943 at a conference between CG 15th Army Group and CG 7th Army accompanied by Brig.-General Wedemeyer, U.S.A."<sup>4</sup>

† See p. 697.

and brought to more than 50,000 the total taken by the Seventh Army since D Day. Patton now transferred the bulk of his artillery to General Bradley's 2nd Corps, which without loss of time had turned eastward for its drive into the Messina peninsula.<sup>12</sup>

### Reinforcing the German Garrison

Up to the time of the capture of Enna, while the Allied field of operations was still restricted to the southern half of Sicily, the enemy's main concern, as we have seen, was to establish and maintain a continuous defensive line running westward across the island from Catania. It was apparent, however (no less to the German than to the Allied Command), that a collapse of Italian resistance in the west would leave this line with an exposed right flank and provide the Allies with an open avenue of approach into the Messina peninsula. To see how the enemy met this threat to his rear it is necessary to turn back several days and survey the changes that had taken place in German troop dispositions in Sicily.

It will be recalled that by 14 July the Hermann Göring Division was preparing to concentrate its forces in the Catania plain, while on the German right, west of the central portion of the line (which was held by elements of the Italian 4th Livorno Division), the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division had assumed responsibility for the Caltanissetta-Enna region. As Italian resistance dwindled, it became clear to Kesselring that the defence of the island could not be successfully sustained by two German divisions in the face of two well-equipped Allied armies. It was moreover obviously unsatisfactory that the German forces in Sicily should remain under the tactical control of General Guzzoni's Sixth Army Headquarters, tenuous though that control might be. Accordingly on or about 14 July the Headquarters of the 14th Panzer Corps, which had been carrying on the tasks begun by the Einsatzstab, was ordered to cross the Messina Strait and assume command of all German formations on the island. The Commander of the Corps (which had been reconstituted after destruction at Stalingrad) was General of Panzer Troops Hans Hube, a one-armed veteran of the First World War, who had distinguished himself by his brilliant leadership on the Russian front in 1941 and 1942. General Hube and his staff moved to Sicily on 16 and 17 July, and established tactical headquarters on the northern slope of Mount Etna, east of Randazzo.<sup>13</sup> His task, as set forth in verbal orders brought to him by von Bonin, his new Chief of Staff, from General Alfred Jodl, Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Staff, was "to fight a delaying action and gain further time for stabilizing the situation on the mainland".<sup>14</sup> Officially the German Corps Headquarters was under command of H.Q. Italian Sixth Army,

but in actual practice the relationship was reversed, and in the remaining weeks of the campaign orders were channelled directly from the Commander-in-Chief South to the 14th Panzer Corps, and carried out without question by General Guzzoni.<sup>15</sup>

It was no mere chance that brought about this assumption of control over the Italian armed forces in Sicily. The move had been carefully engineered in Berlin; and three days before Hube set foot on the island a staff officer was dispatched by air to advise Kesselring of Hitler's plan for the 14th Panzer Corps Commander to usurp the Italian command. The gist of this is revealed in a situation report of the Armed Forces Operations Staff for 13 July:

In a further written communication *O.K.W.*\* informs *O.B.* South that the Fuehrer had caused a *special directive* to be issued for *Headquarters 14 Pz Corps*, which is to be kept secret from the Italians, and the [distribution] of which is to be limited to the smallest possible circle, even in German quarters. Hereafter it will be the task of Corps Headquarters, in close co-operation with the head of the German Liaison Staff attached to Italian Sixth Army, to take over the overall leadership in the bridgehead of Sicily itself, while unobtrusively excluding the Italian headquarters. The remaining Italian formations are to be divided up and placed under the command of the various German headquarters.<sup>16</sup>

The flow of reinforcements to the island proceeded apace. Already, in the first days after the Allied landings, two regiments of the 1st Parachute Division (before 1 June designated the 7th Flieger Division) had been hurriedly flown from France to reinforce the Hermann Görings in the defence of Catania (the 3rd Parachute Regiment jumped near Lentini on 12 July; the 4th Regiment descended near Acireale, about ten miles north-east of Catania).<sup>17</sup> The balance of the Division (except for its anti-tank units, which reached Sicily on 22 July) remained on the Italian mainland. The units on the island were placed under the Hermann Göring Panzer Division, "a wasteful use" of his troops which considerably annoyed the commander of the Parachute Division, Lieut.-General Richard Heidrich.<sup>18</sup> The remaining major German formation to be committed in strength was the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, an advance group of which (the reinforced 1st Battalion, 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment†) was reported by Kesselring on 16 July to be in action north of Catania.<sup>20</sup> At the time of the Allied landings the Division, commanded by Major-General Walter Fries, had been on the Italian mainland in the Foggia-Lucera area, whence it had immediately been rushed to the Tyrrhenian coast in the vicinity of Palmi, less than twenty miles north of Messina Strait. Completion of the transfer to Sicily was held up by Hitler, who was concerned that German supplies on the island might be insufficient for another formation--"a finickiness" said Kesselring later, "which was to be

\* *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (High Command of the Armed Forces).

† This battalion came under command of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division near Regalbuto, and only rejoined its parent formation on 14 or, 15 August. It defended Agira against the 1st Canadian Division.<sup>19</sup>

paid for in the subsequent battles."<sup>21</sup> The bulk of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment crossed on 18 July. Four days later Kesselring ordered the remainder of the Division to follow (although an amendment to this order kept Fries' Armoured Reconnaissance Battalion and Tank Battalion on the mainland as coastal protection).<sup>22</sup>

In planning his course of action Hube's primary concern was that the Strait of Messina should be kept open—first for the passage of vital supplies to his forces, and subsequently as a means of evacuation from the island. Jodi's orders (as reported by Hube's Chief of Staff) were most explicit on this point: "The vital factor ... is under no circumstances to suffer the loss of our three German divisions. At the very minimum, our valuable human material must be saved."<sup>23</sup> Accordingly the Commander of the 14th Panzer Corps took immediate measures to meet as far as possible the three-fold danger that continually menaced his life-line to the mainland: that of air attack, blockade of the Strait by an Allied fleet, or an Allied seaborne landing. He appointed as Commandant of the Strait of Messina a capable and energetic officer, Colonel Ernst Gunther Baade, whose contribution to the successful German evacuation from Sicily was later to win for him the command of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division. It was Baade's task to organize and co-ordinate all available means of protecting the narrow water passage and maintaining the flow of traffic across it, and for this purpose he was given unconditional control over all artillery and anti-aircraft units and other forces in the Messina region and the mainland area about Villa San Giovanni and Reggio Calabria.<sup>24</sup> The only two batteries of heavy artillery on the island (17-cm. guns with a maximum range of 17 miles) were brought from the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to the Strait to protect the ferry route against naval attack. All non-combatant installations that could be dispensed with (workshops, camps of all sorts and medical establishments) were ordered back to Calabria, where a specific area was allotted each division to serve as a supply base, and eventually as a concentration area when the final evacuation from Sicily should take place. Command of these bases was given to General Heidrich, who was, as we have seen, without other duties at this time.<sup>25</sup>

Simultaneously with these measures for the protection of his escape route, Hube took action to meet the American threat to his western flank. After the loss of the central region about Enna the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, commanded by Major-General Eberhard Rodt, had lengthened its right wing with weak elements towards the northern coast (Kesselring's subsequent claim of having held "a solid defence front on the general line Cefalu\*—Leonforte"<sup>26</sup> is somewhat exaggerated). On 23. July, however, as the United States 45th Infantry Division began to push eastward along the coastal road, the reinforced 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (29th Division), under

\* See p. 697.

the command of Colonel Max Ulich, was sent forward to the Cefalu area to fill the gap between General Rodt's division and the sea.<sup>27</sup> During the next day or two Ulich's group was joined by the 71st Panzer Grenadier Regiment, and by the divisional headquarters of General Fries, who assumed command of the northern sector on a front of a dozen miles. From his Mount Etna headquarters, General Hube could now contemplate with satisfaction a continuous line of resistance\* reaching across the peninsula from Catania on the east coast to San Stefano on the north.<sup>28</sup>

### The Eighth Army's Change of Plan

On 21 July General Montgomery finally decided that Catania could not be taken by frontal attack without incurring heavy casualties which he "could not afford". He planned instead to break through the Etna position from the west using the 30th Corps, reinforced by the 78th Infantry Division, which he had ordered the previous day to be brought across from Sousse, in Tunisia. Accordingly he issued instructions for all formations of the Eighth Army except the 1st Canadian Division to assume a defensive role along the line of the Dittaino River. The Canadian operations were "to continue without restraint directed on Adrano".<sup>29</sup> He thus explained his intentions in a message to General Alexander on the 21st:

We are making new airfields on the South edge of Catania Plain, but they will be in range of artillery from Misterbianco area. Heat in the Plain is very great and my troops are getting very tired. During the past ten days we have driven enemy into North East comer of the island. He is determined to hold fast on his left flank about Catania and further attacks here by me will mean heavy losses. I am therefore going to hold on my right and will continue operations on my left against Adrano. Will give 78 Division to 30 Corps so that 30 Corps can have greater strength in its operations North towards Bronte. Two things are now very important-(1) American thrust eastwards along North coast towards Messina. (2) The full weight of all air power that can be made available from North Africa must be turned on the enemy army now hemmed in to the North East corner of Sicily.<sup>30</sup>

Montgomery had good grounds for his change of plan. The 13th Corps, which had been the first to strike the main line of resistance of the enemy's resistance which was subsequently strengthened by reinforcing German paratroops and the concentration of the Hermann Göring Division in the east-had been fought to a standstill. The 51st Division of the 30th Corps, although initially facing lighter opposition, had advanced across 150 miles of difficult country in the wide flanking sweep which had brought it to the

\* The central portion of this line ran south-east from Nicosia to a point about three miles west of Agira, thence eastward along the highway to midway between Agira and Regalbuto, where it turned south-eastward towards Catenanuova.



Dittaino River in line with General Dempsey's forces; any further attempt to reach Paterno would leave its left flank dangerously exposed to counter-attack from Catenanuova. A shortage of artillery ammunition had developed, to meet which temporary limitations were imposed upon the daily allotment to all guns except those supporting the Canadian Division (thirty rounds per gun for 25-pounders, and twenty for self-propelled guns). The 78th Division, which General Montgomery intended to commit in the centre of the 30th Corps front in "a blitz attack supported by all possible air power" on the thrust line Adrano-Bronte-Randazzo, was not expected to be ready to attack before 1 August. Time was also required to enable the American Seventh Army to develop its eastward thrust in the north of the island and for the Canadian Division to move up in the centre of the Allied front.<sup>31</sup> It thus became the role of the Eighth Army's right flank to hold a firm base on which the remainder of the Army Group could pivot.

Meanwhile the Allied air forces continued to exploit fully the advantages of complete air superiority over Sicily. After 21 July there was no more enemy air activity from Sicilian fields,<sup>32</sup> which were strewn with the broken remains of Axis aircraft. By the end of the campaign Allied Intelligence, delving through the aeroplane "graveyard" which lay beside every airfield, had counted the remnants of 564 German and 546 Italian aircraft (including those captured intact). The discrepancy between these totals and enemy-reported air strengths in Sicily on D Day may be partly attributed to the inclusion in the Allied figures of many craft destroyed during the pre-invasion bombing, or which had crashed long before during training flights. The exact losses in the air are impossible to establish. The Allies reported 740 hostile craft shot down, with their own losses less than half that number. Enemy statistics admitted only 320 aircraft (225 German, 95 Italian) lost on war missions from 1 July to 5 September, while claiming a total of 640 Allied brought down during the same period, either in aerial combat or by ground flak.<sup>33</sup>

Allied fighters now patrolled all sectors of the battlefield without encountering hostile aeroplanes. As the Eighth Army began regrouping for the next, and it was hoped, final offensive, the plan of air support aimed at the isolation of the main Catania positions by systematically bombing and strafing every line of reinforcement and supply. From the night of 19-20 July to the end of the month medium and light bombers and fighter-bombers constantly attacked the ring of towns which encircled Mount Etna, and on the connecting roads no enemy transport was safe. During the last twelve days of July, including attacks on Catania itself, aircraft under the control of the Northwest African Tactical Air Force flew a total of 1959 sorties against these targets.<sup>34</sup>

## The Opening of the Struggle for Agira, 23 July

The fall of Assoro and Leonforte brought no respite to the Canadian troops, who, as we have seen, were under orders to push on with all speed. On 21 July, while the 1st and 2nd Brigades were engaged in reducing these two strongly held hill towns, Brigadier Penhale's 3rd Brigade had moved eastward from Valguarnera to the road running north to Agira, up which the 231st Brigade had moved two days before. On the 22nd The Carleton and York Regiment crossed the Dittaino at Raddusa-Agira Station, relieving a battalion of the Malta Brigade, whose forward troops had been in contact with the enemy for two days in the hills south of Agira. The better to co-ordinate operations on the 30th Corps' left flank, the Malta Brigade, which was commanded by Brigadier R.E. Urquhart, had been placed under General Simonds' command on the 20th.<sup>35</sup>

On the afternoon of 22 July the Canadian G.O.C. gave his four brigades detailed instructions for the capture of Agira and the subsequent reorganization for the "move east to secure Aderno\* in conformity with the Corps plan."<sup>36</sup> The attack on Agira was to be made by a battalion of the 1st Canadian Brigade approaching by night along Highway No. 121, and supported in the actual assault, which would be launched early on the 23rd, by the full weight of the divisional artillery. Protection on the Division's left flank would be ensured by placing a second battalion across the road (Highway No. 117) which led north to Nicosia; while the 2nd Brigade was to form "a firm base" about Assoro and Leonforte. On the right it was the 231st Brigade's task to threaten Agira from the south. Supported by the 142nd Field Regiment, the brigade was to capture hill positions three miles south of the town on either side of the road from Raddusa, and exploit northward to a line, about half a mile south-east of Agira, which marked the limit of Canadian artillery targets. Simonds ordered his remaining formation, the 3rd Canadian Brigade, to remain in the vicinity of Raddusa-Agira Station (which was twelve miles by road from the town of Agira itself). At his conference on 19 July he had announced his intention that after the capture of Agira the advance eastward would be led by these two latter brigades-the 231st on the left and the 3rd Canadian on the right.<sup>37</sup>

It was little more than eight miles by road from Leonforte to the medieval town of Agira, perched high upon its mountain cone overlooking the Salso and Dittaino valleys. In this sector of its course the main Palermo-Catania highway followed what was for Sicily a comparatively direct route along the rugged plateau which separated the two river systems. The road was generally free from very steep gradients, but at least four times between Leonforte and Agira it curved over low hill barriers which crossed the plateau

\* Renamed Adrano by Mussolini to perpetuate the ancient Adranum on which site it stood.

from north to south. Four miles west of Agira, in the relatively flat ground between two of these ridges, lay the village of Nissoria, a small community of less than a thousand inhabitants. Because it was overlooked from the high ground to west and east, Nissoria itself was not expected to present a serious obstacle to the 1st Brigade's advance.

On receiving instructions to attack Agira Brigadier Graham ordered the 48th Highlanders, who were in Assoro, to occupy the junction of Highways No. 117 and No. 121, a mile east of Leonforte, in order that The Royal Canadian Regiment might then pass through. Heavy artillery shelling caught the Highlanders in their forming-up area, inflicting several casualties, and their first attempt to reach the objective was driven back by machine-gun and mortar fire. When day broke the enemy withdrew over a line of hills, and the 48th established themselves just east of the crossroads. But the 2nd Brigade had not yet formed its firm base, and shortly after noon Divisional Headquarters signalled the 231st Brigade that the attack on Agira was postponed twenty-four hours. The R.C.R. deployed to the south of the road junction, and during the day the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards reconnoitred to the north and east. One troop encountered enemy positions on the Nicosia highway; the other reached the western limits of Nissoria, where it was turned back by enemy mortar fire.<sup>38</sup>

Next morning (the 24th) the G.O.C. held another conference and gave detailed orders for the capture of Agira by nightfall. The advance of the 1st Brigade was to be closely coordinated with a timed programme of artillery concentrations on successive targets along the route; a creeping smoke barrage would provide a screen 2000 yards long 1000 yards ahead of the forward troops; in front of this curtain Kittyhawk fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force would bomb and strafe targets along the road, and six squadrons of medium bombers would attack Agira and its immediate vicinity. The 2nd Canadian Brigade was to take over Assoro from the Hastings and Prince Edwards and the Nicosia road junction from the 48th Highlanders, in order to free Brigadier Graham's battalions for exploitation beyond Agira.<sup>39</sup> This elaborate programme, which would give the Canadians their first experience of heavy air co-operation, obviously impressed the R.C.R. diarist, who wrote on the 24th, somewhat irreverently:

The feature [Agira] is deemed so important to gain that the Bn, which is leading the Bde, will be supported by the complete Div Arty, plus ninety bombers, plus more than a hundred fighter-bombers in close support. It is a set piece attack, with a timed arty programme, report lines, bells, train whistles and all the trimmings.

At three in the afternoon the artillery barrage from five field and two medium regiments\* began to fall, as the leading R.C.R. companies, supported

\* The 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A., the 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments R.C.A., the 142nd, (S.P.) and 165th Field Regiments R.A., and the 7th and 64th Medium Regiments, R.A.<sup>40</sup>

by "A" Squadron of the Three Rivers, set off along the highway towards Nissoria. From the excellent vantage point of the castle ruins above Assoro General Simonds with officers of the 30th Corps and members of his staff watched their progress. Eastward above the geometrically sharp lines of the escarpment which walls the broad Dittaino valley they could see the dominant Agira mountain six miles away standing out boldly against the background bulk of Etna. Lower to the left lay the flat white cluster of the buildings of Nissoria. The heavy concentrations of high explosive landed with great accuracy on their targets. All efforts to build up a satisfactory smoke-screen however were nullified by a strong breeze which blew across the field of action, even though in a rapid succession of signals to his Commander Royal Artillery General Simonds increased the intensity of fire of smoke shells from one to three rounds per gun per minute.<sup>41</sup> It was remarked later by one of the divisional intelligence staff that in this attack the infantry had a tendency to advance too late after the artillery shelling had ceased, with the result that the Germans were then ready for them with mortar and medium machine-gun fire.\* He said "that German prisoners had told him that we Canadians are very much like the British in that we are slow in following up any advantage we may have gained by an artillery barrage."<sup>42</sup> This failure to follow the fire support closely enough was afterwards cited by General Simonds as the fundamental cause of the reverses suffered by units of the 1st Brigade in their attacks at Nissoria.<sup>43</sup>

After some delay the Kittyhawks arrived and one by one dived down to drop their bombs along the road, but due to a break in R.A.F. communications the scheduled attack by medium bombers did not take place.<sup>44</sup> As events were to show, however, this failure to bomb Agira on the 24th probably did not materially affect the progress of the ground operations that day, for strong enemy opposition was to engage the Canadians in four more days of bitter fighting before they reached their hilltown objective.

### The Reverse at Nissoria, 24-25 July

Led personally by Lt.-Col. Crowe, the R.C.R. covered the three miles to Nissoria without incident and successfully cleared the village, reporting it secure at 4:15 p.m.<sup>45</sup> Almost immediately the battalion ran into difficulties. From the eastern outskirts of Nissoria the highway curved south of a wide gully to climb easily through a gap between two low hills which formed a mile-long edge 1000 yards beyond the village (see Map 4). The rocky high ground on either side of this saddle concealed

\* The Divisional Artillery Task Table shows that the concentrations on the high ground half a mile east of Nissoria were to be fired from 3:30 to 4:00 p.m. It was 4:30 however before the infantry reached the eastern edge of the village.

a force of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, identified later as the 2nd Battalion, 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, with stragglers from the 1st and 3rd Battalions, and a number of artillery sub-units.<sup>46</sup> The shelling did not achieve the desired effect upon these particular positions, either because the concentrations in general seem to have been confined to the road and its immediate vicinity, or more probably because the enemy, who were well dug in, had been allowed time to recover before the Canadians arrived. The appearance of the R.C.R. at the edge of Nissoria was greeted by a hail of machine-gun bullets accompanied by heavy mortar fire. Crowe ordered his two forward companies to clear the ridge, sending "C" Company around to the right of the highway to take the southern knoll, and "D" directly across the gully to the left. The latter's objective was a solitary square red building at the highest point of the road where it crossed the ridge. This landmark was the Casa Cantoniera--the dwelling of the local highway foreman--but by the Canadians who fought around it on that and subsequent days it will always be remembered as the "red school-house".<sup>47</sup>

"D" Company, attacking across the open gully, made little headway against the enemy fire. Its platoons became separated, and wireless contact with Battalion Headquarters in Nissoria failed. The breakdown in communications within the battalion became general, and subsequent attempts to relay messages by runner from one company to another were unsuccessful. In the resultant fog of uncertainty the sound of brisk fighting on the right flank led Crowe to believe that "C" Company had gained its objective; accordingly he dispatched his two remaining rifle companies with orders to push on through "C's" position. An earlier attempt by "A" Company to attack the right end of the southern hill in support of "C" Company had been abruptly called back because of an additional artillery concentration on this objective which had been ordered for 5:15. In the confusion of withdrawal it lost one of its platoons, which became involved in "D" Company's effort.

About six o'clock the battalion commander, judging from the noise of considerable firing coming from the enemy's right rear that his companies had cleared the ridge, and anxious to re-establish wireless communication with them, moved forward from Nissoria on foot, accompanied by a small party of engineers and signallers. At the foot of the south hill they came under enemy fire. Calling out, "R.C.R.", Crowe pressed on, hoping to reach his troops. He was struck by a machine-gun bullet; but seizing a signaller's rifle he engaged the enemy, until a second bullet killed him. His wireless operators fell by his side, and with the loss of their sets went hope of restoring contact with the missing companies. The Second-in-Command, Major T.M. Powers, took over the regiment.<sup>48</sup>

The virtual blackout on information which now descended on Battalion Headquarters, as reflected in the brigade message log, and the indefinite

and often conflicting reports given by companies after the action make it impossible to chart with certainty the subsequent action on the right. It appears that when "A" and "B" Companies received the battalion commander's instructions to advance, they followed a small valley well out on the right flank, which took them south of the hill against which "C" Company had been directed. Ultimately they came upon their missing comrades, considerably behind the enemy position-to find that they too had by-passed the objective. They were now well on their way to Agira--some reports suggest within two miles of the town-but with the enemy in their rear, between them and Nissoria. The three company commanders, realizing that the battalion was out of control, held a council-of-war and decided to consolidate their forces for the night. Dawn found them under enemy observation, and brought casualties from mortar and machine-gun fire.<sup>49</sup>

In the meantime the curving mile of road east of Nissoria had been the scene of an independent and bitter action between the Three Rivers tanks and the strongly entrenched enemy on the hill south of the "red school-house". During the approach to the village "A" Squadron had destroyed an enemy Mark III tank, and at the eastern end of the narrow main street had silenced a troublesome 88-millimetre anti-tank gun. Taking over the lead from the infantry the Shermans advanced towards the high ground, the unfavourable terrain compelling them to travel singly along the highway. Heavy fire across the valley from the hill on their left--which is named on large-scale maps Monte di Nissoria--knocked out one of the leading tanks, effectually blocking the road to those following. In the fighting that ensued the Canadian armour claimed successful hits on four German 88s. Two tanks of the leading troop patrolled through enemy territory supporting the few of the R.C.R. who had got forward, until all their ammunition was exhausted. But the technique of successful infantrycum-tank co-operation which brought satisfying results later in the campaign in Italy had not yet been perfected. The failure of the infantry to reach and clear the enemy positions cost the squadron dear; ten Shermans were knocked out, four of them beyond recovery.<sup>50</sup> Casualties to Three Rivers personnel numbered fifteen, including four men killed; among the wounded were the commander of "A" Squadron and his second-in-command.

When late on the 24th it became obvious that the R.C.R. had failed to dislodge the enemy, General Simonds ordered the 1st Brigade to renew the attack that night. Agira was the objective, and Regalbuto the limit of exploitation.<sup>51</sup> Brigadier Graham, who had been close to the scene of action riding in one of the headquarters tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment, assigned the task to the Hastings and Prince Edwards. The C.O., Lord Tweedsmuir, had not seen the ground by daylight. "The only thing", he

wrote later, "was to get as far as possible in the darkness and hope for the best."<sup>52</sup> After consultation with Major Powers he decided to outflank the troublesome enemy positions by advancing south of the highway and then swinging left to cut it about a mile west of Agira.

Shortly after midnight the Hastings marched into Nissoria from the west, and in the early hours of the 25th, guided by an R.C.R. patrol, moved to the attack. The battalion advanced in its accustomed single file, with one company patrolling ahead. But the plan to reach the enemy's rear failed. At the southern end of the ridge beyond the village "B" Company, in the lead, stumbled upon a machine-gun position. When the enemy opened fire, pinning down the leading Hastings, the remaining companies deployed and pressed on up the slopes. The German post was outflanked and overrun; but now came the deadly rattle of machine-guns from the alerted defenders all along the ridge. Lt.-Col. Tweedsmuir\*, who was fighting his last action in Sicily (he was wounded and evacuated that morning), thus describes the situation:

The Battalion formed a rough square on the hilltop. The light came up and there were plenty of targets to shoot at as the Germans moved about the slopes. Then the mortar fire started. Their object was to fill in the gaps in the geometrical patterns made by the machine-gun fire, and with extraordinary accuracy they did it. The number of wounded began to mount up. . . . A wounded man was repeating over and over again "Give 'em Hell, Tweedsmuir, give 'em Hell", as we called the artillery on the radio.<sup>53</sup>

But the withering fire which pinned the Canadians to ground-the enemy mortars and medium machine-guns were being supported by three well dug-in Mark III tanks-made it impossible to pick good artillery targets or to find a suitable position from which to observe. The Hastings were in a serious predicament. The steady rate of fire which they were maintaining had left their stock of ammunition dangerously low; to attempt further advance, or even to remain in such exposed positions, might well have meant the loss of most of the battalion. A withdrawal was ordered, and under rearguard protection given by "D" Company, they fell back behind Nissoria. Tweedsmuir, who had suffered a severe leg wound from a mortar bomb, turned over command of the regiment to Major A.A. Kennedy.<sup>54</sup>

During the morning two R.C.R. carriers had reached their battalion's forward companies in the hills east of Nissoria and recalled them to a concentration area near Assoro. Here the regiment reorganized from its dislocation of the previous day. The brigade's second attempt to dislodge the Panzer Grenadiers had failed, and the casualties were mounting. The cost to The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment had been five officers and 75 other ranks killed, wounded and missing-the heaviest losses suffered in

\* Promoted to this acting rank on 22 July.

a single day by any Canadian unit during the entire campaign in Sicily. In their two days' fighting the R.C.R. had lost in addition to their Commanding Officer, three officers and 43 men, of whom sixteen had been killed.

That evening Graham sent his remaining battalion, the 48th Highlanders, against the stubborn enemy. To avoid the dispersion which had dissipated the R.C.R.'s effort, he directed that the left flank should be tested by a single company attack, and if this succeeded the remaining companies would follow through in succession and wheel out into the enemy's positions along the ridge. Lt.-Col. Johnston launched his attack at six in the evening, directing "B" Company against Monte di Nissoria at the northern end of the long feature, after medium machine-guns of the Saskatoon Light Infantry had searched the rocky hillside with their fire.<sup>55</sup> At first there was little opposition, and the Highlanders quickly reported themselves on their objective. "D" Company now entered the attack, climbing the steep terraced position to the right of "B" Company. Soon word came back of strong resistance, for "B" Company had reached only a false crest, and the Germans above them were holding the summit and the reverse slopes of the escarpment, where they had been comparatively safe from the Canadian machine-gun fire and artillery concentrations. Harassed by enemy fire both Highlander companies were forced to find what shelter they might on the narrow ledges below the German positions. Johnston attempted to call new supporting fire, but once again wireless sets, their range considerably reduced by the screening of intervening hills, proved ineffectual. The two forward companies now found themselves out of communication with Battalion Headquarters, and after nightfall they withdrew from their untenable positions. In the meantime "C" Company, sent forward on the right of "D", halted when overtaken by darkness, and about midnight assaulted its objective, the Casa Cantoniera, north of the road. Enemy tanks and machine-guns held off the Highlanders, and on Johnston's orders the attempt was abandoned. The battalion withdrew west of Nissoria, having suffered 44 casualties, including thirteen killed.<sup>56</sup>

The 48th Highlanders' difficulties in maintaining wireless communication were of a pattern with those frequently experienced by other Canadian units during the fighting in Sicily. After the campaign General Simonds reported to the 15th Army Group that whereas wireless communications behind brigade headquarters were excellent throughout the Eighth Army, those from brigade headquarters forward had fallen behind requirements. It was his view that the No. 18 set-the portable man pack wireless set in use down to headquarters of infantry companies-"did not meet the range demanded to control an infantry brigade when dispersed over a wide front and/or in great depth."<sup>57</sup>

The mountainous terrain through which the Canadians were operating produced freak conditions which seriously restricted wireless reception,



particularly at night -a problem not encountered by the other formations fighting in the Catania plain. Much of the trouble appears to have been caused by faulty batteries; the extreme heat was blamed for deterioration of the chemicals. On 28 July the war diary of the 1st Canadian Divisional Signals recorded "difficulty in 18-set battery supply. Batteries coming up are duds or very weak." And at the end of August Headquarters 15th Army Group noted that "large quantities of the old unreliable pattern batteries for wireless sets No. 18 continue to arrive in this theatre. Of these, between 60% and 70% are completely exhausted when received."<sup>58</sup> It will be recalled that the 1st Division had lost a considerable amount of signal equipment in the convoy sinkings. The resultant shortage had imposed a severe strain in maintenance; with the lack of spares sets broke down faster than they could be repaired.<sup>59</sup>

As reports of the ineffectiveness of the No. 18 set in the fighting before Agira multiplied, the Canadian G.O.C. gave orders for the more powerful No. 22 set to be made available to forward units on a scale of six to a brigade. These heavy sets had been used during the landings, where they were transported on special handcarts. The carts had not proved very satisfactory, for the narrow-tired wire wheels dug deeply into the sand of the beaches, and were too lightly constructed to withstand the rough passage over the stony tracks farther inland. The sets would now be carried by sturdy and sure-footed pack mules.<sup>60</sup>

### The Winning of "Lion" and "Tiger" Ridges, 26 July

It was now the turn of the 2nd Canadian Brigade to enter the battle; but before proceeding with the story of its participation, we may glance briefly at what was happening on the right in the 231st Brigade's field of operation. It will be recalled that on 22 July, when he issued the first orders for the capture of Agira, General Simonds had assigned the Malta Brigade the role of threatening the town from the south, while the main attack went in from the west. On the night of the 22nd the brigade, which was astride the Raddusa-Agira road, seized two strongly defended hills 4000 yards south of Agira, the 2nd Battalion, The Devonshire Regiment, taking the left position, Point 533\*, and the 1st Battalion, The Dorsetshire Regiment, Point 482,\* east of the road. At midday on the 23rd Brigadier Urquhart received word of the postponement of the 1st Canadian Brigade's attack; and that night he moved forward his third battalion, the 1st Hampshires, in readiness for a co-ordinated effort with the Canadians on the 24th.

\* Designated by the altitude in metres.

About a mile to the east of Agira Highway No. 121 was commanded by two prominent hills which were dominated only by the Agira mountain itself. To the north of the road was Mount Campanelli, 569 metres high; to the south, in the angle between the highway and the road to Raddusa, was a somewhat higher feature closer to the town and under complete observation from the Agira heights. It was named on large-scale maps Mount Gianguzzo, but was always referred to by the Malta Brigade as Point 583. On the night of 24-25 July, while the R.C.R. were making their fruitless attempt east of Nissoria, the Hampshires gained positions astride the highway, prepared to intercept Germans retreating from Agira when the town should fall. An early morning report that the Canadian attack had failed brought a change in plan, and two companies of the Hampshires were ordered forward to Mount Campanelli, with instructions to lie low throughout the day. Partially screened from view by rows of vines and cactus hedges they spent the morning of the 25th watching enemy traffic on the highway and on the secondary road running north from Agira to Troina. The Germans were using these two escape routes freely, and many tantalizing targets were presented to the Hampshires, who dared not, however, disclose their presence on Campanelli. Yet the enemy's suspicions were evidently aroused, for at mid-afternoon he counter-attacked the hill, and compelled the Englishmen, who were without mortars or artillery support, to withdraw south of the highway.<sup>61</sup>

That night, as the 48th Highlanders unsuccessfully tried to force the German defences east of Nissoria, the 231st Brigade again co-operated. Two Hampshire companies worked their way in the darkness on to Mount Campanelli, with orders to withdraw at first light if the Canadian effort failed. The Dorsets got patrols on Point 583. But the Highlanders did not break through, and the troops from both battalions of the Malta Brigade fell back at daybreak as planned.<sup>62</sup>

Preparations were now made for a fresh effort from the west. Early on 26 July General Simonds ordered the 2nd Brigade to relieve the 1st and to launch an attack against Agira that evening. The G.O.C. directed that the operation should take place in two stages: an advance by one battalion under a heavy barrage to seize and consolidate a firm base 2300 yards in depth east of Nissoria, and a subsequent exploitation by a second battalion to the high ground which overlooked the western entry to Agira. In his detailed plan Brigadier Vokes selected Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry to carry out the first phase of the attack. The unit's objectives were the ridge east of Nissoria which, had cost the 1st Brigade so much bloodshed, and a second feature of equal height a thousand yards nearer Agira; these were given the code names of "Lion" and "Tiger" respectively. From an assembly area within an hour's march of "Tiger" the Seaforth



Highlanders would be prepared, on thirty minutes' notice, to move forward and seize the final objective, "Grizzly", a stretch of high ground within half a mile of Agira rising at either end to a well defined crest--Mount Crapuzza north of the highway, and Mount Fronte to the south.<sup>63</sup>

At 8:00 p.m. the crash of high explosive shells on a mile-long front across the highway immediately east of Nissoria signalled the commencement of the heaviest barrage yet fired by the artillery of the 1st Canadian Division.\* For seventeen minutes eighty guns of the three Canadian field regiments and the 165th Field Regiment R.A. concentrated their fire on the opening line; then the barrage lifted and moved eastward along the highway in twenty-eight successive steps, advancing one hundred yards in every three minutes.<sup>65</sup> The effect upon the enemy was paralyzing. Supported by guns of the 90th Anti-Tank Battery and by the tanks of the Three Rivers' "C" Squadron, "C" and "D" Companies of the Patricias, following closely upon the barrage, swept rapidly on to their objectives, respectively the right and left crests of "Lion". They took these without difficulty, for the Germans were shaken and demoralized by the intensity of our attack. One dazed prisoner who had fought in Poland, France, Russia and North Africa, declared that he had never before experienced such devastating fire;<sup>66</sup> a captured officer is said to have asked to see the "automatic field gun" which was capable of producing such an incredible rate of fire!<sup>67</sup> The Patricias took more than seventy prisoners, and it was later reported that of those defenders of the ridge who were not killed or captured few escaped unwounded.

Now the barrage paused for twenty minutes, to allow the P.P.C.L.I. reserves to move up for their attack on "Tiger". Unfortunately these companies, "A" and "B", probing forward in the darkness over the rugged, unfamiliar ground, lost their way and with it the advantage of the barrage when it began again. The brief respite in the shelling allowed the Germans to get their heads up, and a bitter fight ensued. Neither P.P.C.L.I. company reached its objective.<sup>68</sup> Although wireless communication appears to have been maintained unusually well, uncertainty of companies about their own positions, coupled with the inevitable "fog of battle" which cloaked the battalion's movements, left Brigade Headquarters with a confused picture of the situation. It was not clear whether "Tiger" had yet been taken. At midnight, therefore, Vokes decided to commit the Seaforth Highlanders, in the hope that aggressive action would bring a clear-cut decision in our favour.

The Seaforth, deploying on either side of the road outside Nissoria, mounted the "Lion" objective, where they were held up by fire from a

\* The fire plan provided for 139 rounds per gun. In the series of concentrations fired in support of the attack on 24 July the demands upon each battery averaged not quite sixty rounds per gun.<sup>64</sup>

number of well-concealed medium machine-guns and tanks. While "A" Company engaged and knocked out the machine-gun posts, a troop of Shermans, assisted by anti-tank guns of the supporting battery, effectively quelled the opposition of the German armour, destroying at least two enemy tanks. The company now pushed ahead, and at 4:25 a.m. sent back the report, "Forward elements on 'Tiger'." With grim tenacity the enemy clung to his hold on the high ground, meeting the Seaforth assault with fire from flanking machine-gun nests and tanks in hull-down positions on the reverse slope of the crest. Once the infantry had secured a footing however, anti-tank guns were rushed forward, followed closely by the Seaforth's "B" Company. There was more bitter fighting, in which "A" and "B" Companies of the Patricias played an important part, and by 11 o'clock "Tiger" ridge was firmly in Canadian hands.<sup>69</sup>

From their hard-won vantage point the Canadian artillery, tanks and infantry had an excellent field of fire over the stony fields to the high ground of "Grizzly" two miles to the east, and to the north, where the land fell steeply away across the Agira-Nicosia road into the broad valley of the Salso River. During the morning several German tanks and machinegun posts were spotted and destroyed, and a number of retreating vehicles and infantry paid the penalty of being caught in the open by our guns.<sup>70</sup>

The enemy's use of the road to Nicosia had already been interrupted by Canadian troops. Nicosia, fifteen miles to the north-west, was under attack by the American 1st Division, and there was much shuttling of Axis traffic forward and back between the two threatened towns. It was too good an opportunity to miss, and on the night of 26-27 July The Edmonton Regiment was ordered to send a fighting patrol well out on the northern flank to cut the road. "D" Company carried out a difficult six-mile cross-country march, routed an enemy post with a sudden bayonet charge in the darkness, and before rejoining the battalion successfully established a platoon astride the road three miles from its junction with Highway No. 121. By means of well placed "Hawkins" grenades\* and some remarkably cool-headed and effective handling of the PIAT, this platoon accounted for no less than three enemy tanks, a large tank-transporter and three lorries. On the afternoon of the 27th the position was strengthened by the arrival of "C" Company. Next day the Edmonton force drove off three counter-attacks of varying strength, as enemy pressure came alternately from the north and the south. While continuing to block the road the company also contrived to blow up an enemy ammunition dump, and to capture a truckload of hospital brandy. Late on the 28th an Edmonton carrier brought orders to rejoin the battalion. The episode was an example of the effective employment of a small detached

\* The No. 75 ("Hawkins") grenade, of weight 2¼ lbs., could be lightly buried like an anti-tank mine, or thrown directly in the path of a moving vehicle. It was also used as a portable demolition charge.

force, and was matched on the following night by the work of another strong fighting patrol sent by the Edmontons to investigate enemy positions north of Agira. Commanded by a sergeant of the Support Company the patrol, about two platoons in strength, surprised an estimated 200 Germans in the hills north of the Salso and routed them with mortar and machine-gun fire. They counted 24 enemy dead and took nine prisoners.<sup>71</sup>

Kesselring reported on the operations of 27 July: "A strong attack of 1 Canadian Inf Div has been repelled up to now"; and later, "In the afternoon renewed attacks of strong forces on Agira."<sup>72</sup> But a captured operation order of the Hermann Göring Panzer Division, dated 27 July, admitted that the Germans had been forced to give ground.

15 P.G. Div, under strong enemy pressure, is taking up positions adjoining H.G. Armd Div back on the general line Regalbuto-Gagliano-east of Nicosia, leaving a standing patrol in area Agira... Contact will be established and maintained between Regalbuto and the left flank of 15 P.G. Div and any enemy elements infiltrating between the flanks of the two divisions will be spotted and wiped out.<sup>73</sup>

The "standing patrol" whose fate it was to fill the gap between the two major formations proved to be the entire 1st Battalion, 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment,\* of the 29th Division-fresh troops who had been hastily moved into defence positions along "Grizzly" to replace the decimated battalions of the 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment.<sup>74</sup>

### The Capture of "Grizzly" and the Entry into Agira, 27-28 July

The renewed attacks to which the C.-in-C. South had referred started at midday, as Allied medium bombers struck Agira and Kittyhawks strafed and bombed enemy positions west of the town. At two o'clock Brigadier Vokes sent the Seaforth against the "Grizzly" objective, supporting them with artillery, medium machine-guns, anti-tank guns and two troops of Shermans. To the right of the highway "A" Company, commanded by Major H. P. Bell-Irving, advanced upon Mount Fronte, a square-topped hill with a precipitous southern flank. One enemy company was firmly installed upon this commanding height, and it poured such a volume of machine-gun and mortar fire down the forward slope as to make a frontal attack on the feature impossible.

Accordingly Major Bell-Irving decided on a right-flanking movement, and an assault up the face of the cliff, next to impossible though the feat might seem. The operation was brilliantly successful. While one platoon

\* As noted earlier (p. 116) this battalion was operating independently of its parent regiment, which was opposing the United States 1st Division's advance in the Nicosia area.

energetically held the enemy's attention by their fire and infiltration from the west, the remainder of "A" Company, making skilful use of the cover afforded by terraced orchard and vineyard, reached the southern base of the mountain and scaled the 300-foot cliff. Completely taken by surprise the enemy nevertheless fought back strongly; but the Seaforth hung grimly on, and by employing admirable tactics of fire and movement executed with great determination, secured a commanding position, which they held throughout the night against counter-attacks. Early in the morning, as reinforcing companies arrived on the scene, Bell-Irving launched a final attack with rifle and grenade. So vigorously was the assault pressed forward that the enemy fled in complete disorder "literally and actually screaming in terror". By six the whole of Mount Fronte was in Canadian hands.<sup>75</sup>

On the north side of the highway the attack by "D" Company during the afternoon of the 27th had been halted by the vehemence of the German fire. The immediate objective was a sprawling hill at the left centre of the "Grizzly" ridge, of about equal height with Mount Crapuzza half a mile to the north, and bearing on its summit a walled cemetery characteristically bordered by tall, sombre cypress trees. The south-eastern slopes of "Cemetery Hill" ran down to the outlying buildings of the town itself, which was spread over the western slopes of the towering cone of the Agira mountain. Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister, realizing that one company could not successfully dispute the enemy's possession of the hill, withdrew "D" Company into reserve, in order that he might concentrate his forces against Mount Fronte. The wisdom of this decision was vindicated, as we have seen, by the Seaforth success on the right. For their outstanding part in directing and carrying out the Seaforth operation against "Grizzly" both the battalion C.O. and his gallant company commander, Major Bell-Irving, were awarded the D.S.O.<sup>76</sup>

Late that afternoon Brigadier Vokes, realizing the need for a more powerful effort against the northern end of "Grizzly", ordered The Edmonton Regiment into action. The battalion set off at eight o'clock, swinging wide to the left through country broken by hills and ravines, intending to attack Mount Crapuzza and Cemetery Hill from the north. But the route was difficult beyond expectation, and the maps which the Edmontons carried proved unreliable. By the time they reached the point from which the final assault was to be launched, an artillery concentration, intended to support their attack, had been completed several hours before.<sup>77</sup>

It was shortly before three in the morning when the attack finally went in, with "A" Company directed against Mount Crapuzza and "B" and "D" against Cemetery Hill. "B" Company found itself faced by an almost precipitous slope on which the alerted enemy was dropping heavy concentrations of mortar fire while his forward troops lobbed down "potato masher" grenades from the heights above. While "B" was thus pinned to ground

with quickly mounting casualties, "D" Company, farther south, managed to work a section of men around to the right of the hill. This daring little party created so effective a distraction in the enemy's rear that the remainder of the company, rallied by the second-in-command when the commander was killed, assaulted the cliffs, and with 2-inch mortars, hand grenades and Bren guns carried Cemetery Hill against opposition estimated at four times their numerical strength. The enemy broke into disorganized retreat, many suffering further casualties as they came under fire from the Edmontons' "A" Company, which had in the meantime established itself upon Mount Crapuzza without opposition.<sup>78</sup> The night's work had cost the Edmontons three killed and 31 wounded; but at 8:55 a.m. Brigadier Vokes was able to send Divisional Headquarters the satisfying message:

Whole of Grizzly in our hands. Nearly all enemy killed. Survivors retreating northwards. We have lost contact. All approaches safe.<sup>79</sup>

On the two preceding nights the 231st Brigade had played their now familiar role for the third and fourth times, on each occasion putting small parties astride the road east of Agira in anticipation of the capture of the town by the Canadians. The coming of daylight on the 27th compelled the accustomed withdrawal of their patrols from Mount Campanelli and Point 583; but on the following morning the 2nd Canadian Brigade's success enabled Brigadier Urquhart's forward troops to retain their footing on these important positions. During the day Devons and Dorsets put in spirited attacks to consolidate their hold, and by nightfall the Malta Brigade was firmly astride the main highway, and ready to lead the divisional attack eastward against Regalbuto. In these operations the support of "A" Squadron of the Three Rivers Regiment, which came under Brigadier Urquhart's command on the 27th, was very welcome, for the brigade had parted from tanks of the 23rd Armoured Brigade at Vizzini, and from that time forward had been thrusting deep into enemy country with "soft skin" vehicles only.<sup>80</sup>

The final scene in the prolonged battle for Agira was enacted on the 28th. Determined to take no half measures, the Commander of the 2nd Canadian Brigade ordered a bombardment of the town with all available artillery and mortars to commence at 3:45 p.m. Immediately afterwards Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry would go into the town. But the population were spared the destruction of their homes by Canadian shells, for about noon an officer of the 1st Canadian Field Regiment, whose eagerness to select a good vantage point for his task of observing fire for the Patricias had carried him right into Agira, found no sign of enemy activity, but streets crowded with people who gave him an enthusiastic welcome. The bombardment was cancelled, and at 2:30 two P.P.C.L.I. companies entered the town. They received an ovation from the populace on the outskirts; but as they climbed the steep streets into the heart of Agira they met a different kind of welcome



from enemy pockets of resistance. It required two hours of fairly stiff house-to-house fighting and the employment of a third rifle company, as well as assistance from a squadron of tanks, to clear the town.<sup>81</sup>

So Agira fell, after five days of hard fighting in which practically the whole of the Canadian Division, with the exception of the 3rd Brigade (whose place was in effect taken by the 231st Brigade) had been engaged. It was the Division's biggest battle of the Sicilian campaign and it cost 438 Canadian casualties. (This includes neither the losses of the 3rd Brigade, which was engaged in a separate action, nor those of the 231st Brigade, which suffered approximately 300 casualties during the fighting for Agira.) \* In its early stages the battle provided the enemy with an opportunity of strikingly demonstrating the principle of economy of effort. Because the extremely rugged nature of the country prevented deployment on a large scale, the six battalions of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Brigades had been committed one by one against the stubborn defenders of the Nissoria-Agira road. Thus in the early stages of the action the Canadians attacked on a single- or twocompany front, a procedure which enabled the enemy, although numerically inferior to the total force opposing him, to concentrate the fire of his well-sited weapons upon the relatively small threatened area. It was not until the last two days of the battle, when the 2nd Brigade used more than one battalion at critical moments-the Seaforth to turn the tide of the Patricias' assault on "Tiger", and the Edmontons to assist the Seaforth against "Grizzly"-that the desired momentum was achieved and the issue was at last decided.

The enemy had been hit heavily. The 1st Division's intelligence staff estimated that 200 of the 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment had been killed, and 125 of the reinforced 1st Battalion, 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, which relieved it. We took 430 German prisoners, and 260 Italian remnants from the 33rd and 34th Infantry Regiments of the Livorno Division, and from the 6th Regiment of the Aosta Division, which had been brought down from Nicosia without supplies or supporting arms to bolster the German defences of Agira.<sup>83</sup>

These battered battalions of Panzer Grenadiers did not again oppose the 1st Division in Sicily, and there is good reason to suppose that they desired no return engagement.† They had met Canadian troops at close quarters and had painfully experienced the impact of what one prisoner called "their tenacious fighting spirit in the face of concentrated fire". From interrogations

\* Exact casualty figures for the 231st Brigade for this period are not available. An indication of the losses suffered is shown in a report in the 1st Hampshire's war diary of 26 casualties sustained by the unit on 26 July and 83 on the 27th. The total of 300 is taken from the published story of the brigade's operations in Sicily.<sup>82</sup>

† On 1 August the 2nd U.S. Corps identified the 1st Battalion, 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, at Gagliano, midway between Agira and Troina; what was left of the 104th Regiment showed up next day north of Troina.<sup>84</sup>

conducted after the capture of Agira the C.O. of the Patricias reported a German dislike of hand-to-hand and night fighting:

They consider that our troops are not only too persistent in their manner of fighting, but also extremely unorthodox-that is to say, they do not manoeuvre in the manner the enemy expects them to.<sup>85</sup>

On the Canadian left flank Nicosia fell to the American 1st Division on the same day as Agira. A score of miles farther north on the 2nd U.S. Corps' coastal flank the 45th Division pushed to within four miles of San Stefano, which the strongly resisting 29th Panzer Grenadier Division did not relinquish until the 31st.<sup>86</sup> The relief of the 1st Canadian Brigade in Leonforte on 27 and 28 July by advanced troops of the 9th Infantry Division heralded the regrouping which was taking place preparatory to the major American drive eastward. Palermo harbour was opened to shipping on the 27th, and the bulk of the Division disembarked there from North Africa on 1 August.<sup>87</sup>

For the 1st and 2nd Canadian Brigades there was a brief period of recuperation, during which much-needed reinforcements were brought forward from the beach areas, where they had been waiting since their landing on 13 July.<sup>88</sup> It is not to be wondered that the war diary of almost every unit should make special note of a five-hour rain storm which swept over the hills on 28 July, for it was the first precipitation that the Canadians had encountered in their hot and dusty journey through Sicily. The 48th Highlanders reported that "all ranks including the C.O. took advantage of it and held impromptu shower baths out in the rain". On the evening of the 30th the Seaforth pipes played "Retreat" in the town square of Agira, to the huge gratification of the assembled townspeople. The unit diarist reported, with understandable pride, that "it was heard in London and broadcast over the B.B.C."

The people of Agira, and indeed of every Fascist-ridden city, town and village in Italy, felt that they had good cause for rejoicing in those last days of July 1943. Late on the evening of the 25th a dramatic announcement by the Rome radio struck the country like a thunderbolt:

His Majesty the King and Emperor has accepted the resignation of the head of the Government, the Chancellor and State Secretary, tendered by His Excellency Cavalier Benito Mussolini.<sup>89</sup>

The wheel was come full circle, and the irresponsible dictator, who in May 1940, on the eve of his treacherous attack on France, had declared, "I need a few thousand dead so as to be able to attend the peace conference as a belligerent",<sup>90</sup> now found himself toppled from his pedestal by the turning fortunes of the struggle into which he had so blithely plunged his unhappy country.

"It is defeat in war that brings about the fall of a regime", wrote Mussolini during the following winter, in a series of articles, *History of a Year*, published by a Milan newspaper.<sup>91</sup> The political crisis which precipitated his downfall he attributed, and with good reason, to the military crisis which had arisen in Sicily. The Italian people had come to realize that the loss of the island was imminent. Already disillusioned by the North African disaster, and faced with the prospect of aerial bombardment of their towns and cities and an impending invasion of the Italian mainland, their resentment was strong against the man who had plunged them into war. The picture drawn by Marshal Badoglio is probably not exaggerated:

Conscious of our complete helplessness, the morale of the people rapidly deteriorated; in trains, in trams, in the streets, wherever they were, they openly demanded peace and cursed Mussolini. Anger with the Fascist regime was widespread, and everywhere one heard: "It does not matter if we lose the war because it will mean the end of Fascism."<sup>92</sup>

Events in the coup d'état moved rapidly. On 19 July the Duce met Hitler at Feltre, where, in spite of earlier assurances to his Chief of Staff that he would impress upon the Führer the impossibility of Italy's remaining in the war, he appears to have said nothing to interrupt the usual harangue of his Axis partner.<sup>93</sup> He returned to Rome next day, to find that during his absence in the north the city had suffered its first air raid. The attack had been directed with great accuracy against the city's marshalling yards and the nearby Ciampino airfield by 560 bombers of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force. These dropped more than 1000 tons of bombs, inflicting severe damage upon railway installations and rolling stock and nearby industrial plants.<sup>94</sup> The raid on their capital struck a heavy blow at the already sagging morale of the Italian people, and the clamour for a cessation of hostilities became louder than ever. But there could be no withdrawal from the war as long as the dictator remained in power. Leading Fascists insisted that he summon the Grand Fascist Council, which had last met in 1939. On the night of the 24th, in a session which lasted for ten hours, he bowed to the Council's demands for his resignation. Next morning he was taken into "protective custody", and King Victor Emmanuel called on the 71-year old Marshal Pietro Badoglio to become head of the Government.<sup>95</sup>

The new Cabinet's first action was to announce the dissolution of the Fascist Party. The war would go on, said Badoglio; but Hitler was under no delusion regarding the new regime's intentions. As we shall note in a later chapter, the German High Command had foreseen a possible Italian defection from the Axis, and as early as May 1943 had planned measures to be taken in such an eventuality.<sup>96</sup> Within 48 hours of Mussolini's deposition German infantry and armoured formations were massing along the northern frontier. On 30 July Rommel (see below, p. 196) gave the

signal for a special task force to occupy the Brenner and the other passes, and a continuous stream of German troops began pouring down into Italy.<sup>97</sup>

### The 3rd Brigade in the Dittaino Valley

For the past week, while the fighting along Highway No. 121 was in progress, the 3rd Canadian Brigade had been following a parallel axis down the Dittaino valley towards Catenanuova, an unpretentious and dirty village on the river flats about fifteen miles east of Raddusa-Agira station (see Map 5). Its role, as set forth in a divisional operation instruction of 24 July, was restricted to active patrolling eastward until a decision should have been reached in the battle for Agira. By the night of the 24th Brigadier Penhale's three battalions were holding positions about the tiny hamlet of Libertinia and Libertinia Station, roughly four miles east of the Raddusa-Agira road. The West Nova Scotia Regiment, on the brigade's right flank, was in touch with a unit of the 51st Highland Division (the 2nd/4th Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment) on Mount Judica, a 2500-foot peak four miles south of the river. On 26 July orders came for the 3rd Brigade to advance as quickly as possible and take Catenanuova, for its capture was a necessary preliminary to the offensive which the 78th Division was to launch at the end of the month.<sup>98</sup>

Topographically speaking the western approach to Catenanuova was relatively easy, for road and railway were laid along the flat floor of the Dittaino valley, through which the river meandered from side to side in sweeping loops that sometimes reached a mile in width. From either edge of the river plain, however, the land rose sharply in a confused scramble of hills and ridges, affording excellent defence positions from which to oppose the eastward advance of a military force. An indifferently matched pair of these heights dominated the valley a short distance from Catenanuova. Mount Santa Maria, a bald, rounded hill 800 feet high, on the north side of the river, about a mile west of the village; and to the south, Mount Scalpello, a much more massive feature whose rocky ridge towered in a long razor-back nearly 3000 feet above the road.

The securing of both of these hills was a prerequisite to an assault on Catenanuova itself. This task the Brigade Commander entrusted to the Royal 22e Regiment, intending that The West Nova Scotia Regiment would then pass to the south of Scalpello and launch an attack upon Catenanuova across the dry bed of the Dittaino. In order that there might be complete co-ordination on the brigade's right flank the Hampshire battalion was temporarily placed under Brigadier Penhale's command,<sup>99</sup> and arrangements were made for artillery support to be given by the Highland Division.\*

\* The 57th and 126th Army Field Regiments R.A. and the 64th Medium Regiment R.A.<sup>100</sup>

On the evening of the 26th Lt.-Col. Bernatchez directed his "A" Company against Mount Santa Maria and ordered "B" Company to push forward to the Scalpello ridge, the crest of which had already been reached by the Hampshires, although there were still Germans on some of the outlying spurs. Advancing from Libertinia Station along the rough river bed, the banks of which were cut deeply enough to provide appreciable cover, the company on the left came within striking distance of its objective, and after a short but heavy artillery bombardment charged the Santa Maria hill with fixed bayonets. The enemy responded sharply with the usual machine-gun and mortar fire, and in the opening phase of the action the company commander was killed. It took many hours of determined effort and some skilful tactical manoeuvring over the ploughed fields and stubble by the Royal 22e platoons before the Germans, who were estimated at company strength, were finally driven from Santa Maria.<sup>101</sup>

On the right "B" Company worked their way along the northern slope of Mount Scalpello under cover of darkness, being considerably aided therein by information obtained from a friendly French-speaking peasant woman. At dawn they surprised a party of Germans on the eastern end of the milelong ridge, and, failing to procure an artillery concentration, attacked with the support of only their own mortars. The enemy replied in kind, and with the added advantage of 88-millimetre guns which threatened to turn the tide against the Canadians. A vigorous rally by "B" Company saved the day, however, and by late afternoon, when "C" Company had come up on the immediate left, the whole mountain with some ground immediately to the east was free of enemy. The situation of the Royal 22e was unenviable, however, for their forward troops were fatigued and hungry-some had been without food or sleep for 36 hours-and the large number of mines with which the Germans had sown the valley made it impossible to bring up supplies immediately. The company on Santa Maria was particularly hard pressed, for at 6:00 p.m. the enemy began a counter-attack under cover of a barrage of mortar and artillery fire. It had already been decided to withdraw the forward troops after dark, and this was accomplished by about 9:30, the companies taking positions at the north-eastern base of Mount Scalpello.<sup>102</sup>

Their second action of the campaign had so far cost the Royal 22e Regiment 74 casualties, including one officer and seventeen other ranks killed. But even though the Santa Maria hill was again in German hands, the effort of the battalion had not been in vain. The enemy had suffered heavy losses, and, as subsequent patrolling revealed, he had abandoned his positions south of the Dittaino River. Furthermore, during the afternoon of 27 July, on the 3rd Brigade's right flank The West Nova Scotia Regiment, profiting by the enemy's preoccupation with the fighting on Scalpello, had

been able to make an apparently unobserved advance south of the ridge to an area about two miles south-west of Catenanuova.<sup>103</sup>

During the 28th the West Novas lay in concealment, ignored by the German artillery, which continued to harass the more exposed positions of the Royal 22e, who suffered another score of casualties. Platoons of the 4th Field Company R.C.E. worked busily clearing the river road of mines, reconnoitring routes across the Dittaino (for all the bridges had been blown) and developing a mule path south of the Scalpello ridge into a track along which the brigade's fighting vehicles could move forward without being under observed fire.<sup>104</sup> Catenanuova was still 'to be taken, but further action by the 3rd Brigade was temporarily postponed. The capture of this objective now became part of a much larger operation, and the pattern of Canadian activities had to be carefully woven into the wider design.

#### Preliminaries to Operation "Hardgate"— The Catenanuova Bridgehead, 29-30 July

At a meeting between General Alexander and his two Army Commanders at Cassibile on 25 July arrangements were completed for the dual offensive which was timed to begin on 1 August.<sup>105</sup> The Seventh Army's role, as set forth in a directive issued by General Patton on 31 July, was to advance eastward from the San Stefano-Nicosia road on two axes, the coastal Highway No. 113, and the parallel inland route, Highway No. 120, from Nicosia to Randazzo. The thrust would be made by the 2nd Corps, strongly reinforced, which was enjoined to maintain "a sustained relentless drive until the enemy is decisively defeated."<sup>106</sup>

On 27 July General Leese issued his written orders for Operation "Hardgate", the Eighth Army's part of the Army Group effort. The 30th Corps was charged with the main attack, which was directed at breaking the "Etna Line" by the capture of Adrano; but on the Army's right flank the 13th Corps was to perpetrate a deception measure designed to mislead the enemy into expecting a major blow in the Catania sector. On the successful completion of the action on the left the 13th Corps would be prepared to follow up the probable enemy withdrawal from the Catania plain. Two divisions were to make the assault on Adrano—the 78th along the thrust line Catenanuova-Centuripe-Adrano, and on the left the 1st Canadian Division, through Regalbuto and down the Salso valley. On the Corps right the 51st Highland Division was to assist by occupying the high ground east of the main axis, in order to secure deployment areas for artillery within range of Centuripe and Adrano.<sup>107</sup>

A tentative time-table for the projected operations set the night of 30-31 July for the Canadian attack against Regalbuto, and the night of 1-2 August for the 78th Division's assault on Centuripe. As a preliminary to these actions, the opening phase of the "Hardgate" operation would be the capture of a bridgehead at Catenanuova by the 3rd Canadian Brigade on the night of 29-30 July, for which task it would come under the command of the 78th Division. The newly arrived division would then take over this bridgehead as a base from which to launch its attack northward. The air forces would give support by "full-scale bombing" of Paterno throughout 31 July, Centuripe from noon on 1 August, and Adrano and its surrounding villages "at any time from now onwards".<sup>108</sup>

From the Eighth Army Commander a message came on 29 July to be read to all troops. In the characteristic Montgomery manner he congratulated his soldiers on what they had already accomplished and paid warm tribute to the support of the Royal Navy and the Allied air forces and the achievements of the U.S. Seventh Army. He concluded with the exhortation:

And now let us get on with the job. Together with our American allies we have knocked Mussolini off his perch. We will now drive the Germans out of Sicily.  
Into battle with stout hearts. Good luck to you all.<sup>109</sup>

At eight o'clock on the morning of 29 July the 3rd Canadian Brigade came under the command of Major-General Vyvyan Eveleigh, G.O.C. 78th Division, who had already discussed with Brigadier Penhale the plan for the brigade operation. The attack against Catenanuova, originally intended for the night of the 28th-29th, was postponed twenty-four hours in order to conform with "Hardgate". All three battalions of the brigade were to be engaged—the Royal 22e on the left, to retake Mount Santa Maria and a second height, Hill 204, about 1000 yards to the north-east; the West Novas, to attack through the town itself and establish a bridgehead on the high ground immediately beyond; and the Carleton and Yorks, which were to send a company to patrol the two roads leading from Catenanuova to Regalbuto and Centuripe.<sup>110</sup>

Twenty-four minutes before midnight of 29-30 July Operation "Hardgate" opened with the crash of the artillery barrage supporting the 3rd Brigade. Under the co-ordination of the 5th Army Group Royal Artillery five field and two medium regiments and a light battery of howitzers\* dropped a curtain of fire 1200 yards wide along the Dittaino River, after zero hour advancing it one hundred yards every minute to a line 1000 yards north of Catenanuova. Thereafter concentrations from medium guns blasted eight targets about Santa Maria and the northern exits from the town.<sup>111</sup>

\* The 57th, 126th and 132nd Field Regiments, the 142nd (S.P.) Field Regiment, the 11th Royal Horse Artillery (S.P.), the 64th and 70th Medium Regiments, and the 457th Light Howitzer Battery—all Royal Artillery units.

Promptly at midnight the West Novas swept forward across the river. "A" and "B" Companies in the lead kept so closely behind the barrage that at the outskirts of the town they had to wait for it to lift before they could press on to their final objectives farther north. These they reached about three in the morning, while the follow-up companies, assisted by "C" Company of the Carleton and Yorks temporarily placed under Lt.-Col. Bogert's command, cleared the badly battered Catenanuova itself. Wireless communications to Brigade Headquarters were maintained without difficulty, the battalion using a 22 wireless set, which, like the sets of the artillery forward observation officers, was carried on a mule. "This was probably the first time", reported the C.O. later, "that Canadian troops made official use of the mules and donkeys which had been picked up throughout the countryside during our advance from the Pachino peninsula."<sup>112</sup>

Catenanuova had been taken with surprising ease; for once the German defenders had failed to offer their customary strong resistance. An explanation was later forthcoming in a captured enemy war diary which revealed an unusual case of German cowardice. The 923rd Fortress Battalion, charged with the defence of the town, had bolted before the West Nova attack. The Tenth Panzer Army's report of the incident to Kesselring declared:

The battalion fled in the direction of Centuripe in a shameful manner without enemy pressure. The immediate dissolution of the battalion has been ordered.

General Field-Marshal Keitel has initiated Court Martial proceedings against the Officer Commanding and the guilty officers.<sup>113</sup>

The attack on the left by the Royal 22e Régiment did not begin until 3:00 a.m., when the artillery switched their fire on the selected targets in the area of Santa Maria. This second assault of the round, sprawling hill brought success. "C" Company, commanded by Captain Paul Triquet (who was later to win the V.C. in Italy), advanced from the dried up river bed, and reported that "they met nothing in the way of enemy except a few corpses."<sup>114</sup>

"D" Company, following through to capture the smaller Hill 204, ran into more opposition. From the river the route lay up a small gully along the eastern base of Santa Maria. The enemy had this avenue of approach covered by riflemen stationed on the objective itself, and by a medium machine-gun which poured enfilading fire from the company's left flank. It was well past daylight by the time the machine-gun had been silenced; and now from the right came the fire of an 88. While one platoon was detailed to protect the right flank, the other two pressed forward and drove the enemy from Hill 204. With coolness and initiative the commander of the covering platoon organized his sections in a mutually supported manoeuvre against the 88. From a distance of fifteen yards the assaulting section, led by the platoon sergeant, rushed and seized the gun position, killing the occupants



with hand grenades. Not content with this achievement the intrepid sergeant, accompanied by a junior non-commissioned officer, then attempted to knock out a 105-millimetre gun about one hundred yards beyond, only to be driven back by our own artillery fire, which was blanketing the area. Subsequently the Germans manning this gun were put to flight by three of the plucky little band.<sup>115</sup> Sergeant L. R. Drapeau, whose personal bravery with that of other members of his platoon had thus contributed so greatly to his company's capture of Hill 204, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.\*

Although the 923rd Fortress Battalion had fallen back from Catenanuova without a struggle, some of its members or elements of another unit rallied and stubbornly refused to concede the high ground north of the town. During the morning of the 30th there were determined thrusts against the West Novas by small bands of less than company strength. On one occasion two platoons shouted out as they advanced that they were "Vingt-deux". The ruse was discovered, and the counter-attack smashed in a spirited bayonet charge by "C" Company. The enemy's commanding position gave him excellent artillery observation over the river valley, and all day the West Novas and the Carleton and Yorks suffered from heavy shelling. They were without their supporting arms, for the enemy had managed to retain a strong post on a spur of high ground south-west of the town, from which he effectively prevented the passage of any traffic across the Dittaino until late afternoon.<sup>116</sup>

For the ultimate arrival of this much-needed aid the West Novas had to thank a platoon of the 4th Field Company R.C.E., who throughout the day toiled heroically under mortar and shrapnel fire to level a track across the rough bed and grade the deeply cut banks of the Dittaino. Under these harassing conditions the sappers were inspired to their best efforts by the gallant leadership of the platoon commander, Lieutenant G.E. Atkinson, who even when both arms had been mutilated by shrapnel continued to direct the operations of his men until their task was completed and all other casualties had been evacuated.<sup>117</sup> The Military Cross awarded to Atkinson was one of eleven decorations given in recognition of the plucky work in Sicily of the officers and men of the Royal Canadian Engineers.

During one of the German counter-attacks upon the West Nova Scotia positions an incident occurred which serves to illustrate the initiative so frequently displayed by junior officers. Early in the action the O.C. "A" Company had become a casualty when one of our own shells fell short. His place had been taken by his senior subaltern, Lieutenant G.R. Guy, who successfully led the company to its objective. At first light a counterattack by an enemy force estimated at half a company in strength, supported

\* Nine months later sergeant Drapeau won a bar to his D.C.M. during the battle for the Hitler Line.

by medium machine-guns and a self-propelled gun firing at point-blank range, compelled the West Novas to give ground. Lieutenant Guy reorganized his platoons and from the dubious cover of a small cactus grove and the more substantial protection of a low stone wall they replied with their small arms, pinning down the German infantry in the weapon-slits which the Canadians had vacated. Although Guy was in wireless communication with his battalion headquarters, he was without a forward observation officer to direct the fire of a troop of Royal Artillery S.P. guns which were in position to shoot. Like most junior officers in these early stages of the campaign, he had had little or no opportunity of practising the observer's role, and he was keenly conscious of the very close proximity of the Germans to his own men, and of casualties suffered by the battalion already that day from Allied rounds.<sup>118</sup>

After a few quick instructions from Lt.-Col. Bogert, Guy began giving the artillery targets well away from his positions and correcting these as he observed the fall of the shells. "By some good fortune", he reported later, "fire was brought down on the enemy and forced them to retreat." As the Germans broke from their cover the West Novas shot them down; according to the recommendation which brought Lieutenant Guy a well-deserved M.C., 54 enemy dead were counted in the area where "A" Company had fought.<sup>119</sup>

The 3rd Canadian Brigade had done what was required of it. A secure bridgehead had been formed for the 78th Division's development of "Hardgate". Despite the marked stiffening of the German resistance to the Canadian attack and the continuous volume of fire which the enemy poured across the Dittaino flats throughout the greater part of 30 July, the brigade's casualties had been agreeably light. The Royal 22e had lost five killed and eight wounded, the West Nova Scotias eight wounded, and the Carleton and Yorks six wounded. By contrast the wounding of one officer and seven other ranks of the 4th Field Company was the highest loss suffered in one day by any of the three R.C.E. companies during the whole of the Sicilian campaign.

That night, in preparation for its assault on Centuripe the 78th Division moved two battalions of its 11th Brigade through the West Novas' positions. The introduction of this second brigade into the bridgehead permitted a two-pronged expansion-on the right towards Centuripe by these two battalions, and on the left towards Regalbuto by the 11th Brigade's third battalion (the 5th Northhamptons), operating with the Carleton and Yorks under Brigadier Penhale's command.<sup>120</sup> Both brigades made unopposed night advances to their objectives, high points of ground about two miles from Catenanuova. For three more days the 3rd Canadian Brigade remained

under General Eveleigh's command, clearing the left flank during the operation against Centuripe. Its progress was perforce unhurried, for the steadily ascending road to Regalbuto wound its way among a profusion of outlying hills of the main east-west ridge, and the infantry had to advance over this difficult country by rough tracks designed only for the passage of goat or mule.

The West Novas occupied Mount Peloso, a rocky eminence half way to Regalbuto, on the 31st, and the next day were ordered to march three miles to the north-east and seize Mount Criscina, a massive 2000-foot crag midway between Centuripe and Regalbuto. A change in orders held the bulk of the battalion for 24 hours in positions just east of the Regalbuto road, near the tiny hamlet of Rosamarina, on a small ridge to which they gave the name "Whistling Hill". The Carleton and Yorks were brought up on the right, and both battalions sent patrols to probe forward to the forbidding Mount Criscina. On the left flank the Royal 22e prepared to move north from Mount Peloso, for the 3rd Brigade now had the dual role of covering the 78th Division's left and at the same time establishing contact with the 231st Brigade and the units of the 1st Canadian Division fighting for possession of Regalbuto.<sup>121</sup>

When, early on 2 August, word was brought back to the West Novas that the Criscina objective was free of enemy, preparations were made to resume the advance. But the intelligence proved faulty. While "A" and "D" Companies were crossing the low ground north-west of Whistling Hill, heavy rifle and machine-gun fire, burst from the lower slopes of Mount Criscina. The hill was being held as one of the outposts of the Centuripe defences by crack troops of the 3rd Parachute Regiment, well equipped with automatic weapons, and backed by mortars and artillery. All through the afternoon the two companies made repeated and valiant efforts to close with the enemy, but always the burst of mortar shells and the hail of bullets across the open ground drove them back. Wireless failure deprived them of artillery support; but towards sundown a section of Vickers machine-guns reached Whistling Hill, and under their fire the West Nova companies were able to disengage and bring back their wounded. It was the regiment's bloodiest day in Sicily; one officer and 18 other ranks were killed, and one officer and 26 other ranks wounded. Plans for a resumption of the attack after dark were cancelled by Brigadier Penhale, for the capture of the enemy's adjoining strongholds of Regalbuto and Centuripe deprived Mount Criscina of its importance; indeed, early morning patrols on 3 August confirmed with certainty that the enemy had abandoned the hill.<sup>122</sup>

The mountain fortress of Centuripe, stubbornly defended to the last by German paratroops, fell in the early hours of the 3rd to a well planned

and vigorously executed attack by the 38th (Irish) Brigade.<sup>123</sup> Eight miles to the west Regalbuto had been taken on the previous evening, after five days of bitter fighting by the 1st Canadian Division and the 231st Brigade under its command. For the story of that struggle we must leave the 3rd Brigade and return to the main divisional axis, to pick up the thread from the capture of Agira.

## CHAPTER VI

### FINAL STAGES OF THE SICILIAN CAMPAIGN, 31 JULY - 17 AUGUST 1943

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#### The Capture of Regalbuto, 31 July - 2 August

THE Hermann Göring Division's operation order of 27 July, already cited (above, p. 131), contained explicit instructions for holding Regalbuto, which with Centuripe formed the main outposts of defence in front of Adrano, key position in the Etna line. Regalbuto marked the western extremity of the Division's responsibilities (which extended inland from the coast near Acireale); and the G.O.C., Major-General Paul Conrath, regarded this right flank as the critical point of his whole line. This he might well do, for Major-General Simonds' eastward thrust made Regalbuto an obvious Canadian objective; while the junction with the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division's left wing was by no means firm, both formations lacking the necessary troops to secure it.

To strengthen his flank Conrath ordered the Hermann Göring Armoured Engineer Battalion to take over the defence of Regalbuto and to retain or take under command a squadron of tanks and certain sub-units of artillery. The Engineer Battalion, which had previously formed part of one of the Division's battle groups,\* now came directly under Conrath's command. For the first time since their encounter at Grammichele the Canadians were to meet the Hermann Görings again.

An order issued by the Engineer Battalion on 27 July urged the necessity of retaining the Regalbuto position.<sup>2</sup> Proudly the author of the document reminded the battalion that enemy action had "hitherto not forced a withdrawal to a new line". Although preparations had been made for the Hermann Göring Division in due time to fall back to the "bridgehead position (previously the Etna position)", the only circumstances which could force such a withdrawal would be "the movement of 15 Pz Gren Div"!

\* Battle Group von Carnap, which had been holding the Regalbuto area.<sup>1</sup>

Having given instructions for the removal of transport to the rear areas, the order concluded emphatically:

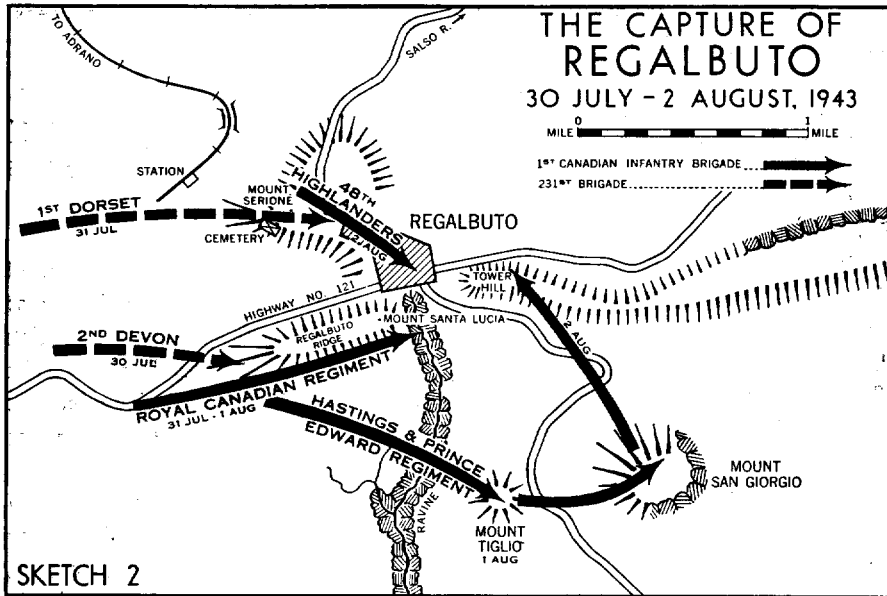
In all orders concerning the bridgehead position it must be made absolutely clear that the present position must be held at all costs. Any instructions for withdrawal are preparatory. There must be no doubt about this point. The abandonment of the present position and a fighting withdrawal to the bridgehead position will only be carried out on express orders from division.<sup>3</sup>

Hitler himself could not have been more definite.

It will be recalled that in his order for the capture of Agira General Simonds had assigned the 231st Brigade the task of leading the subsequent advance eastward through Regalbuto and seizing the bridge by which Highway No. 121 crossed the River Salso west of Adrano.<sup>4</sup> Early on the 29th the brigade moved two battalions forward from their positions immediately east and south of Agira. Like the Canadians the troops of the Malta Brigade found that the country traversed by Highway No. 121 offered every advantage to the defender. There was the same succession of rocky ridges crossing the road at right angles, each one a potential site for a strong German rearguard action. In this broken and mountainous terrain, much of it covered by thick olive and almond groves, it was practically impossible for reconnaissance to detect the enemy's whereabouts, and frequently an advancing body of company strength or less might suddenly find itself committed against a defensive force too firmly entrenched to be successfully engaged by anything less than a battalion with supporting arms.

Such a situation the Hampshires encountered on the night of 29 July. With the Dorsets they had led the brigade's eastward advance for about six miles, cautiously probing every suspicious rise in the ground, without meeting serious opposition. As night fell they received orders to launch an attack against a long ridge which stretched south of the highway within a mile of Regalbuto (see Sketch 2). Unlike most of the other ridges in the area, this one ran parallel to the road, which it commanded along its entire length. On this rocky rise the Hermann Göring Engineers had decided to make their stand to prevent or delay the capture of Regalbuto, a fact of which the Hampshires became unpleasantly aware when a wicked burst of *nebelwerfer* fire met them as they formed up on their start line. One platoon was practically wiped out. In spite of this inauspicious beginning the battalion pressed on bravely, only to be caught in the deadly cross-fire of machine-guns. In the face of rapidly mounting casualties and a realization of the enemy's numbers, the attack was called off.<sup>5</sup>

Daylight revealed the natural strength of the defence position. From the 2000-foot peak of Mount Santa Lucia, which marked the summit of Regalbuto Ridge, the Germans could completely dominate the eastern and southern approaches to the town. Regalbuto, built 1600 feet above sea level, lay at the convergence of three prominent hill features. South-west ran the



mile-long Regalbuto Ridge; to the north-west a somewhat lower spur bearing the name Mount Serione projected about the same distance into the Salso valley; and to the east, separated from Santa Lucia by a deep ravine which admitted the road from Catenanuova, rose almost precipitously "Tower Hill", the western extremity of the great barrier of heights reaching over to Centuripe.

Entry into Regalbuto by Highway No. 121 was impossible as long as the enemy held the Santa Lucia and Serione heights, and on 30 July Brigadier Urquhart ordered the 2nd Battalion, The Devonshire Regiment, to take the ridge to the south. That night, in a well-planned flanking attack carried out with great courage and skill, the British battalion stormed and seized Regalbuto Ridge. During their attack the Devons had the support of an artillery barrage fired by 144 guns from four field and three medium regiments.\* But with daylight they were exposed to a desperate counterattack launched by the Hermann Görings, who were strengthened by troops of the 3rd Parachute Regiment. The Devons doggedly held their ground and drove off the enemy, though suffering casualties of eight officers and 101 other ranks.<sup>7</sup>

The action earned the praise of The Red Patch, a daily news-sheet which the Canadian Divisional Headquarters had just begun to publish. It acclaimed

\* The 1st. Field Regiment R.C.H.A., the 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments R.C.A., the 165th Field Regiment R.A., and the 7th, 64th and 70th Medium Regiments R.A.<sup>6</sup>

the 231st Brigade's fight for Regalbuto Ridge and the achievement of the Devons in repelling the German paratroopers and the Hermann Görings, and concluded:

In Tunisia forty engineers of the Hermann Göring Division alone once counter-attacked a battalion position with such good effect that the battalion was routed. It is greatly to the credit of the Devons that they successfully beat off such a strong attack.

Well done the Devons.<sup>8</sup>

The Malta Brigade's possession of Regalbuto Ridge made an assault on the parallel height north of the highway the next logical step, and in the late forenoon of the 31st the Dorsets attacked the long spur of Mount Serione. One company captured the uncompleted railway station, terminus of a line winding up from the Salso valley, construction on which had been halted in 1940. On the high ground above the station another company fought and won a bloody engagement with a group of Germans who were defending a walled cemetery. By mid-afternoon the Dorsets held the length of the Serione ridge as far as the outskirts of Regalbuto, and thus dominated the two roads leading north-west and north from the town. Before dusk they were relieved by the 48th Highlanders of Canada, who were temporarily placed under command of the Malta Brigade.<sup>9</sup>

The stage was thus set for a direct attack upon Regalbuto itself, and at 4:30 in the afternoon General Simonds outlined to his brigade commanders the form that the operation should take. He explained that two of the three main heights which dominated the town were now in our hands, but that an attempt by the Devons to occupy Tower Hill—so named from an old stone look-out on its summit—had been stopped by the cross-fire of tanks sited in the valley to the south. The 231st Brigade was endeavouring to bring up anti-tank guns to deal with this armour, and would make what would amount to a "reconnaissance in force" against the vital position that night. The R.C.R. (of the 1st Brigade) was to be in readiness to exploit success or, if necessary, to launch an assault supported by the divisional artillery. In anticipation of the fall of the town the 2nd Brigade was directed to send patrols about five miles to the north-east, to explore the mountainous country between the Salso and its tributary, the Troina.<sup>10</sup>

From their concentration area among the hills east of Agira the R.C.R. made an approach march of half a dozen miles on the evening of the 31st. Leaving the highway they followed a rough track which took them around the southern side of Regalbuto Ridge right into the outlying fringe of houses that formed a horseshoe around the deep gorge below the town. Across the gully from them rose the almost vertical slopes of the Tower Hill objective, with the road from Catenanuova encircling its base. Lt.-Col. Powers (promoted from Major on 30 July) now learned that the Malta



Brigade's reconnaissance, carried out by a company of the Dorsets, had not succeeded in making contact with the enemy and drawing his fire to cause him to reveal his positions. There being no specific targets to engage, artillery support was cancelled, and at 2:00 a.m. the R.C.R. put in their attack. Leaving one company to cover their advance the other three began the difficult descent down the crumbling shale of the west side of the ravine. The obstacle proved unexpectedly deep. Only the centre company managed to climb part of the way up the eastern slope before the approach of daylight brought fire from enemy machine-guns and tanks hidden among the buildings in the town's southern and south-western outskirts. The battalion's anti-tank guns had not yet come forward, and tank-hunting patrols sent out with PIATs to either flank met with little success. One such platoon having penetrated into Regalbuto in an attempt to surprise the German positions from the left became cut off from its company by enemy fire. It spent the day working its way through the western part of the town and eventually reached the 48th Highlanders on Mount Serione.<sup>11</sup>

In the early light of 1 August the three R.C.R. companies found what cover they could on the eroded western slope of the ravine. There they spent a most disagreeable day subjected continuously to enemy sniping, shelling and mortaring, and suffering from hunger and thirst aggravated by the burning heat of the sun and the stench that came from the town and from the unburied bodies around them. Once during the afternoon the anti-tank platoon dragged one of its six-pounders into place in the southwestern outskirts of the town to bear upon the German positions across the gully. But the enemy was very much on the alert. As the gun was about to fire one of his tanks darted from behind a building and got away three quick rounds. One of these scored a direct hit, knocking out the six-pounder and killing one of the crew and wounding the remainder. As night fell orders came from Brigade Headquarters for the battalion to withdraw under cover of darkness.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile the 48th Highlanders had remained in close contact with the defenders of the north-western corner of Regalbuto. Action on both sides was confined to sniping and the exchange of light machine-gun fire, although the Highlanders suffered some casualties from enemy shelling. The rifle companies, like those of The Royal Canadian Regiment, were without their supporting arms, for as yet there was no way of bringing these across the two miles or more of broken country from Highway No. 121. It was not until early on 2 August, after sappers of the 1st Field Company R.C.E. had worked under shellfire all the previous day developing an emergency track from the main road to Mount Serione, that supporting weapons, together with much-needed rations, reached the Highlanders.<sup>13</sup>

As a result of the stalemate which had met the 1st Brigade's efforts, the divisional commander issued fresh orders during the afternoon of 1

August. It was his appreciation that the enemy on the heights east of Regalbuto would not withdraw "unless ordered to do so by his' own higher command. He is well sited and possesses about eight tanks. It is probable that he will fight hard to hold his present position.<sup>14</sup> But what a frontal attack could not accomplish, a pincers movement might well achieve. Simonds proposed to employ the 1st Brigade in a right flanking movement designed to take the troublesome Tower Hill from the rear, i.e., from the east. On the left the 2nd Brigade was to follow up the work of its patrols by occupying the high ground between the Salso and the Troina. The Malta Brigade's task was to provide a firm base for these operations and eventually to secure Regalbuto itself, assisted by the 48th Highlanders, who were still under Brigadier Urquhart's command.<sup>15</sup>

It fell to the Hastings and Prince Edwards to carry out the 1st Brigade's part of the plan. About a mile south-east of Regalbuto the road to Catenanuova climbed over a saddle between two hills - conical Mount Tiglio to the west and the more massive Mount San Giorgio to the east. The Tiglio feature became the initial Canadian objective, and the stretch of road between the, two heights was designated the start line for the subsequent thrust northward against the main ridge east of, Tower Hill. The Hastings set off about 10:00 p.m. on 1 August, and by dawn next morning had scaled and occupied Mount Tiglio, finding it abandoned by the enemy. Several hours were to elapse before preparations for the final assault were completed. The men were glad of the rest, for as so frequently happened in Sicily their route had been across country over which no vehicles could follow, and all food, water, ammunition, wireless sets, mortars and other necessary equipment had to be man-packed over a mule track which the Brigade Major later reported as going "twice as far up and down as it went along."<sup>16</sup>

But as the infantry waited, their supporting arms were not idle. While it was still dark, guns of the 7th Medium Regiment were pounding the highway east of Regalbuto, and when daylight came the 1st Canadian Field Regiment laid down a smoke line in the same area as a target for 25 Kittyhawks to bomb and strafe. A divisional task table was prepared for an artillery barrage to be fired ahead of the 1st Brigade's attack by the three Canadian field regiments.<sup>17</sup> All available air support was directed against the east-bound traffic which was expected to fill the road between Regalbuto and Adrano when the infantry assault developed.

Trouble with wireless sets and the difficulty of maintaining other means of communication over such extremely rugged ground delayed the preparations for the final attack. But before zero hour, which had been postponed to 4:00 p.m. on 2 August, word came that a patrol of the 48th Highlanders had entered Regalbuto that morning and found it empty. Accordingly the barrage was cancelled at the last minute, and Major

Kennedy was ordered to take the Hastings and Prince Edwards forward to the final objective.<sup>18</sup>

The Hastings crossed the Catenanuova road, finding square Mount San Giorgio free of the enemy, and then swung northward across the valley which separated them from the great escarpment towering 2500 feet into the sky. But although the Germans had evacuated the town, they would not relinquish their hold on the Regalbuto area without one final effort. A rearguard of paratroopers, estimated at two companies, still held the important ridge, and these met the advance of the Hastings and Prince Edwards with savage bursts of machine-gun and mortar fire. The heavy 3-inch mortars which the Canadians had manhandled across the difficult country now went quickly and effectively to work. One company climbed Mount San Giorgio, and under cover of its small-arms fire the remaining three pressed on the assault. Wireless communications redeemed themselves, and the 2nd Field Regiment's F.O.O. was able to call down very accurate concentrations on the enemy positions. Thus aided, the infantry stormed the ridge and put the German paratroopers to flight. By eight o'clock in the evening the battalion was in firm possession of the ridge. The last enemy stronghold on the road to Adrano had fallen.<sup>19</sup>

The enemy's enforced withdrawal from Regalbuto had given Allied aircraft the opportunity foreseen by General Simonds. During 2 August the air forces reported hitting forty motor vehicles caught on the open road between Regalbuto and Adrano, while eight light bomber attacks on Adrano itself started a large fire in the town. To the north the parallel Highway No. 120 offered equally good targets, for Troina was now under attack from the 1st United States Division, and in the stream of German traffic seeking escape eastward, fifty vehicles were claimed destroyed at Cesaro.<sup>20</sup>

When the Canadians entered Regalbuto on the heels of the occupying troops of the Malta Brigade, they came upon a scene of destruction far more extensive than any they had previously encountered in Sicily. The town had received a full share of shelling and aerial bombardment, and hardly a building remained intact. Rubble completely blocked the main thoroughfare, and a route was only opened when engineers with bulldozers forced a one-way passage along a narrow side-street. For once there was no welcome by cheering crowds, with the usual shouted requests for cigarettes, chocolate or biscuits. The place was all but deserted; most of the inhabitants had fled to the surrounding hills or the railway tunnels. They were only now beginning to straggle back, dirty, ragged and apparently half-fed, to search pitifully for miserable gleanings among the debris of their shattered homes.<sup>21</sup>

## The Fighting North of the Salso-Hill 736, 2-5 August

The axis of the Canadian advance now swung north of Highway No. 121, as the Division entered upon the last phase of its role in Operation "Hardgate". This, it will be recalled, was to be a drive for Adrano on the 30th Corps' left flank, to parallel the 78th Division's assault from Centuripe along the axis of Highway No. 121. As we have seen, during their advance from the Pachino beaches the Canadians had from time to time fought their way across territory so rugged that the passage of a body of troops seemed a virtual impossibility; the terrain over which the 2nd Brigade was now to operate was unsurpassed in difficulty by any that had gone before.

A mile or so east of Regalbuto the River Salso, which thus far in its descent from the heights about Nicosia has cut for itself a deep, narrow gorge, flows into a more open, flat valley. This widens below the entry of the tributary Troina, so that by the time it reaches the junction with the Simeto it has become a fertile plain two miles across. From the north side of the valley the land rises steadily towards the great mountain barrier which forms the backbone of the whole island. Highway No. 120 (from Nicosia to Randazzo) clung surprisingly to the southern shoulder of the height of land; but between this and the Salso the tangle of peaks and ridges extending eastward to the base of Etna was virtually trackless. In all this wild terrain the only route passable to vehicles was one narrow dirt road, connecting the mountain town of Troina with Adrano, which hugged the left bank of the Troina River until it reached the Salso valley, thence turning eastward into Highway No. 121. But the course of this rough track was almost at right angles to the direction that the Canadian advance must take; there were no east and west communications across the rocky spurs which reach down to the Salso on either side of its tributary from the north.

Three heights were to play an important part in the forthcoming operations. Five miles north-east of Regalbuto was a prominent feature, the most easterly of the mountain peaks in the angle formed by the Salso and the west bank of the Troina. It bore no name other than that given by its height in metres-Hill 736. On the other side of the road from Troina, respectively two and a half and five miles directly east of Hill 736, two more peaks of only slightly less altitude-Mount Revisotto, rising from the east bank of the Troina River, and Mount Seggio on the west bank of the Simeto - towered more than a thousand feet above the level of the Salso valley. These three hills dominated the entire valley eastward from Regalbuto, and there could be no assurance of safe passage for Allied troops along the river flats until they were denied to the enemy.

The defence of the sector north of Highway No. 121 was, as we have seen, the responsibility of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division. At the time of the fall of Regalbuto and Centuripe the main part of this formation's fighting strength was committed against the 2nd U.S. Corps in the desperate battle for Troina. Subsequent identifications revealed that the role of guarding the Division's left flank-between Highway No. 120 and the River Salso-had been given to the 382nd Panzer Grenadier Regiment, an independent formation whose two battalions had been raised\* from troops that had served on the Russian front and from veterans of the 164th Light Africa Division.<sup>24</sup> Behind them were the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 3rd Parachute Regiment, which had fallen back from its Regalbuto position to defend the Simeto River and the approach to Adrano. This formation had strengthened its depleted ranks by absorbing officers and men of the disgraced 923rd Fortress Battalion.<sup>25</sup>

It will be recalled that on 31 July, while operations against Regalbuto were still proceeding, General Simonds had directed the 2nd Canadian Brigade to send exploratory patrols north of the Salso, and that on the following day he had ordered occupation of the high ground west of the Troina River, that is, Hill 736 and its outlying spurs. Brigadier Vokes gave the job to The Edmonton Regiment. One of its patrols reached the foot of Hill 736 during the night of 31 July without meeting any enemy, fired several bursts from a Bren gun towards the summit without arousing any reply, and returned on the following morning with a tale of laborious progress over rugged terrain where "the trails were dried-up stream beds filled with 'rocks, and going would be difficult even for personnel on mules".<sup>26</sup>

On the afternoon of 1 August the Edmonton rifle companies assembled at the point midway between Agira and Regalbuto where the River Salso came closest to the highway. There they awaited the arrival of a mule train which was to bring forward rations and ammunition, the battalion's 3-inch mortars, and the medium machine-guns of a platoon of the Brigade Support Group. The use of mules wrote a new page in the history of the Saskatoon Light Infantry, whose diarist recorded that "Brigade was busy all day getting a supply in for this operation". These improvisations caused a delay in departure (a message from the brigade to Divisional Headquarters reported that harness fitting was slow work).<sup>27</sup> and at midnight the supply convoy had not yet arrived at the rendezvous. Lt.-Col. Jefferson therefore decided to take his rifle companies forward alone.

\* The original 382nd Panzer Grenadier Regiment, part of the 164th Light Africa Division, had been virtually destroyed in Tunisia. The new formation had been organized in Sicily prior to the Allied landings.<sup>22</sup> (Prisoners from the regiment who told interrogators that they had been flown in from the Rome area on 15 July were presumably part of a late draft reaching Sicily.) At the end of August the regiment was dissolved and its personnel used to bolster various units of the 14th Panzer Corps.<sup>23</sup>

The Edmontons followed the winding course of the Salso for nearly four miles, and then struck north-eastward into the hills. The rocky ground slowed their progress to one mile an hour, and they were further delayed when enemy aircraft dropped flares which forced them to deploy in order to avoid observation. Daylight found the forward companies still more than a mile west of their objective, and brought upon them fire from enemy selfpropelled artillery on the Regalbuto side of the Salso. It quickly became apparent that the Germans had reoccupied Hill 736 and its approaches in considerable force, for their medium machine-guns and mortars opened up from the Canadian front and left, and the leading troops, unable to advance or to consolidate under the heavy fire, were forced to seek what shelter they might behind rocks and under the lee of overhanging cliffs. Prevented by the rocky nature of the ground from digging slit-trenches, the forward Edmontons held their precarious positions under fire all day. In the late afternoon they withdrew to the south and reorganized on the low ground at the river's edge.<sup>28</sup>

Disappointing though this unsuccessful attempt to gain Hill 736 was, it was illumined by the great bravery displayed by a member of one of the Edmontons' reserve companies. When "B" Company, leading the attack, suffered a number of casualties and stopped to reorganize, Pte. John Low and a fellow-member of "D" Company were among those volunteering in answer to the call for stretcher bearers. The two began crawling from boulder to boulder up the fire-swept slope, but after advancing 150 yards 'Low's companion was wounded. In full view of the enemy the plucky Edmonton dressed his comrade's wounds, and then dragged him behind a small rock that provided some cover.

To his comrades, the further advance of this soldier could only end in death, but to their amazement he continued on towards the wounded men. German fire appeared to centre around him. Bullets were seen kicking up the dust along the line of his path, but Pte. Low, showing intense devotion to duty and conspicuous bravery, successfully crawled the remaining 300 yards and reached the wounded men. In the open, and under what seemed to his platoon murderous fire, he dressed the wounds of each of the three in turn, found cover for them, and carried and aided them to it.<sup>29</sup>

Then, his task completed, Pte. Low made his way back to his company and resumed his first-aid work. He was awarded a well-merited D.C.M.

After its late start the Edmonton mule train, slowly following the infantry, ran into more trouble once it had crossed the river. Its leading section, consisting of 28 animals laden with the Support Group's machine-guns, was badly scattered by artillery and mortar fire, and three of the guns were lost. The remainder of the convoy had a hard time finding the Edmontons, who were out of touch with Brigade Headquarters all day; not until the evening of the 3rd did it catch up with the infantry companies, bringing

them their 3-inch mortars and heavy wireless set, as well as much-needed water and rations.<sup>30</sup>

By the afternoon of 3 August Regalbuto had fallen, and now the Canadian Division's efforts were to be concentrated on its left flank. At his daily conference General Simonds discussed his plan for the operations which would take the 2nd Brigade to the Simeto River. The Edmonton Regiment was to launch another attack that night towards Hill 736, to capture an intermediate spur, Point 344, about a mile south of the original objective. The rest of the brigade would advance down the Salso valley in three stages to secure on successive nights the line of the Troina, an equal bound along the eastern flank of Mount Revisotto, and finally the Simeto itself. During the operation Brigadier Vokes was to have the support of one squadron of the Three Rivers Regiment, a 3.7-inch howitzer battery, and the Division's four\* field regiments.<sup>31</sup>

An hour before midnight the Edmontons' "C" Company attacked Point 344, and in spite of stiff opposition won the peak in five hours. The rest of that day was spent in patrolling towards Hill 736 and the Troina River. The remaining companies of the battalion had taken no part in this action, for they were preparing for a subsequent phase of the brigade operation—the capture of Mount Revisotto.<sup>32</sup>

For the main advance of the 2nd Brigade Vokes put the Seaforth Highlanders in the lead, with orders to clear the right bank of the Troina River within the divisional sector. The battalion left its rest area near Agira at eight in the evening of 3 August, carried in motor transport. The route followed a very rough road which led north-eastward from Regalbuto to the point where the railway bridged the Salso. The Seaforth crossed the river on foot, and immediately afterwards engineers of the 3rd Field Company went to work. In four hours they had graded approaches to either end of the railway bridge and opened it to the passage of tracked vehicles. A few yards downstream they attacked the dry, boulder-strewn river bed with their bulldozers and levelled a roadway on which wheeled transport could travel. This alternative crossing was completed by the afternoon of the 4th; but already a platoon of sappers had moved ahead, to begin building under fire a road across the four miles of uneven country to the Troina River.<sup>33</sup>

Under cover of darkness Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister led his marching companies eastward along the north side of the Salso valley, bearing steadily towards the left into the high ground that edged the widening river flats. All vehicles had perforce been left behind on the south bank, but by considerable exertion on the part of a platoon detailed from the reserve rifle company a heavy 22

\* The 165th Field Regiment R.A. was still under command of the 1st Canadian Division.

† A graphic record of the work of the Engineers at the Salso crossing and the Edmontons' mule train is preserved in pictures by Captain W. A. Ogilvie, Canadian War Artist, who served with the 1st Division in Sicily.

wireless set was dragged forward on a handcart, in order that communications might be maintained with Brigade Headquarters. An hour before daylight the troops in the lead made contact with the Edmonton company in time to help in the clearing of Point 344; and as dawn broke they found themselves at the foot of their own objective, midway between Hill 736 and the Troina - "a high rugged hill topped on the left by a rocky crag jutting straight up to the clouds".<sup>34</sup> Hoffmeister ordered "A" Company to storm the position; and Major Bell-Irving decided to make a right flanking attack, mindful, no doubt, of the success which had attended a similar manoeuvre by his company outside Agira (see above, p. 131). The plan worked, and before the sun was high "A" Company, after a stiff fight with the defending Panzer Grenadier African veterans, had gained a footing on the southern tip of the objective.<sup>35</sup> This success was exploited by "D" Company, supported by the Saskatoon Light Infantry's machine-guns, most of the scattered mules having by now been rounded up. German snipers and machine-gun posts on the high crags at the north end of the ridge came under accurate 75-millimetre fire from two troops of Three Rivers tanks which had crossed on the railway bridge and made their way forward to the battalion area. By mid-morning the whole objective was in Seaforth hands.<sup>36</sup>

Like the river into which it emptied, the Troina in midsummer was a dry course thickly strewn with the boulders that winter torrents had tumbled down from its higher reaches. About a mile above its junction with the Salso, the river bed was less than two hundred yards wide, with sharply cut verges rising to the stony grainfields that spread across the adjoining flats. At a point where a break in the 20-foot left bank provided an exit from a rough fording place, a narrow mule track wound across the rising ground to join the Troina-Adrano road a little more than a mile to the east. Brigadier Vokes chose this site for a crossing, and ordered the Patricias to secure a bridgehead that night and cut the road beyond. The battalion crossed the Troina at half-past seven in the evening and encountered no opposition; for in the late afternoon a company of the Seaforth, supported by tanks firing from hull-down positions, had already successfully clashed with the enemy and driven him from the long spur which marked the P.P.C.L.I. objective. Before dark the road was firmly held, and the first phase of the brigade's operation against Adrano had been completed.<sup>37</sup>

### The Thrust Eastward from the Troina, 5 August

The divisional conference held on 3 August had prescribed the capture of Mount Revisotto as the next stage in the 2nd Brigade's advance, but by the afternoon of the 4th unexpectedly rapid developments in the wider field



of operations brought a modification of plan. The loss of Agira, Regalbuto, Catenanuova and Centuripe had forced the enemy to fall back from the Catania plain to his final defence line, and all across the 13th Corps' front extensive demolitions and the blowing of ammunition dumps marked his hurried withdrawal northward. At a conference on the 4th General Montgomery issued instructions for "30 Corps on left to do the punching",<sup>38</sup> and that same afternoon General Leese discussed with his divisional commanders the course that this accelerated action should take. The Corps' intention was to capture Adrano as quickly as possible, and then exploit northward towards Bronte. The 78th Division was to secure a bridgehead over the Salso north of Centuripe that night (4-5 August) and on the following night a crossing over the Simeto River north of its junction with the Salso. The 1st Canadian Division was to secure Mount Seggio on the night of 5-6 August and also push a bridgehead across the Simeto. The final assault on Adrano was to be made on the third night by the 78th Division, and should this venture fail, an attack would be delivered jointly with the Canadian Division 24 hours later. Throughout these operations the 51st Highland Division would continue to guard the Corps' right flank and would match the final assault on Adrano by a drive on the neighbouring town of Biancavilla.<sup>39</sup>

A few hours before the 30th Corps conference the G.O.C. 1st Canadian Division had ascended the steep Centuripe hill with General Leese, General Eveleigh and his own Commander Royal Artillery, Brigadier A. B. Matthews.<sup>40</sup> From this commanding height General Simonds had studied the whole area over which the forthcoming operations were to take place. The wide, closely cultivated plain formed by the junction of the Salso and Simeto valleys lay below him like a miniature model on a sand table. On his right, half a dozen miles to the north-east, the bleached tiled roofs of Adrano, the Corps objective, stood out clearly in the morning sun against the vast background of Mount Etna. In front of him the ground swept upward from the far bank of the Salso in rolling foothills to the peaks of Hill 736, Revisotto and Seggio, outposts of the great rampart of heights which filled the northern horizon. Below and to his left, a widening of the rocky bed of the Salso marked the entry of the Troina from its ravine-like valley west of Mount Revisotto. Along the floor of the valley at his feet the dry course of the Salso meandered eastward in wide loops to meet the fastflowing Simeto River, which made its appearance from the north. behind a long, outlying spur of Mount Seggio. Near the point where this spur flattened into the level plain the tiny hamlet of Carcaci stood on a slight mound among irrigated plantations of lemon and orange trees. Once a thriving community of more than a thousand inhabitants, Carcaci "had been reduced by successive epidemics of malaria to a population of less than one

hundred living in a mere handful of houses. Through these ran the road from Troina, to join Highway No. 121 a mile to the south-east, just before the latter crossed the Simeto and began its long zig-zag climb to Adrano.

On his return to his own headquarters General Simonds went forward to the 2nd Brigade's command post for a discussion with Brigadier Vokes. His plan was for an infantry-cum-tank attack through the Troina bridgehead to be launched the following morning to link up with the 78th Division's Salso crossing, which would be made at the site of the demolished highway bridge, some three miles below the Troina-Salzo junction. For this purpose the G.O.C. placed under Vokes' command the Three Rivers and "A" Squadron of the 4th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment.<sup>41</sup>

That evening (4 August), in a letter to Vokes, Simonds amplified his plan. He said that the 78th Division had crossed the Salso that afternoon, and was intending to push its reconnaissance force towards Mount Seggio in order to relieve pressure on the Canadian front.

I consider that once the feature Pt 332\* in 6498 is in your hands and crossings across the River Troina are available, that a quick blow can be struck in the undulating country north of the river which will carry you right up to the western bank of River Simeto.

He went on to direct the organization of a striking force under Lt.-Col. E. L. Booth, the Commanding Officer of the tank regiment, which would comprise in addition to the armour and the reconnaissance squadron an infantry battalion, a self-propelled battery of artillery, and one or two troops of anti-tank guns. Such a move would startle the enemy and would "probably result in a good mix up in the open country", where the tanks would really be able to manoeuvre. The G.O.C. foresaw the previously planned operations against Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio as a follow-up to the mobile force's effort. He concluded his letter:

You must be the final judge as to whether or not the local situation presents an opportunity for the blow I envisage, but indications today are that enemy resistance is crumbling, and I think we can afford to take bigger chances than we have been able to in the last few days.<sup>42</sup>

The original of General Simonds' letter is attached to the 2nd Brigade's war diary. A pencilled note in Brigadier Vokes' handwriting has been added.

This letter arrived after 2300 hrs 4 Aug 43. Almost identical orders had already been issued by me and arrangements were already under way. No alteration was necessary. The attack was successful.  
5 Aug 43 C. Vokes Brig.<sup>43</sup>

The Brigade Commander selected the Seaforth Highlanders as the infantry component of the mobile force. Soon after midnight Hoffmeister met Booth. They drew up their plans and issued orders "in a deserted farm

\* The hill occupied by the P.P.C.L.I. that evening.

house at 0200 hours under sporadic mortar fire and flares."<sup>44</sup> Tanks and supporting arms were to cross the Salso by the railway bridge and ford north-east of Regalbuto, and to join the Seaforth at the Troina crossing before first light. From this start line the whole force was to strike eastward at 6:00 a.m. through the vineyards and orchards between the Salso River and the Troina road. It would swing north of Carcaci and occupy the spur of high ground on the west bank of the Simeto. The column would be led by the Princess Louise squadron, followed in order by an engineer section, the Three Rivers' "B" Squadron carrying the Seaforth's "C" Company, a troop of the 90th Anti-Tank Battery, and "A" Squadron's tanks, bearing "A" Company of the Seaforth. The remainder of the force was to follow in reserve. For artillery support Lt.-Col. Booth could call on a self-propelled battery of the 11th Royal Horse Artillery, the 165th and the 3rd Canadian Field Regiments, and the 7th Medium Regiment (the rest of the divisional artillery was changing positions for the final assault on Adrano).<sup>45</sup>

It was eight o'clock before "Booth Force" pushed off, for the reconnaissance squadron had had difficulty in crossing the Salso railway bridge. Thanks to the efficiency of the engineers in clearing mines from the bed of the Troina, tanks, carriers and armoured cars reached the east bank without mishap. Thenceforward the advance proceeded as planned. With the Princess Louise in the lead, and the men of the Seaforth clinging to the following Shermans, the little force rolled briskly down the road towards Carcaci.

In rocky nests scattered over the objective troops of the 3rd Parachute Regiment with machine-guns and mortars awaited the oncoming Canadians. They held their fire until the leading carriers were about 500 yards short of the spur, in order (as revealed later by a German prisoner) to let the infantry come within effective range. But the two Seaforth companies had already dismounted farther to the rear, and now the Shermans of "B" Squadron "moved forward at best tank speed to the objective", followed by the Seaforth's "C" Company supported by the second tank squadron.<sup>46</sup>

It was about 10:30 when the Germans opened fire, and brisk fighting ensued. There was general agreement afterwards among participants and observers-including General Simonds, who with the Army Commander watched from the hilltop of Centuripe-that it was a model infantry-cum-tank action. Each arm gave the other excellent support. Although the enemy had the advantage of position, he was without anti-tank guns, having little expected an armoured attack from that quarter. According to the Three Rivers war diary "it was found that the best way to deal with them was to have the tanks scout around the terrain and clean out all suspicious looking places with 75 mm. H.E. and with blasts of machine-gun fire." In some instances the tanks were able to burn the enemy out of his positions by igniting the tinder-dry grass and brush with tracer ammunition; then, as the

Germans broke from cover, small arms picked them off. Once during the morning the enemy attempted a counter-attack, trying to break through between the Canadians and the 2nd Battalion London Irish Rifles (of the 78th Division), who had occupied Carcaci. The effort failed. Subsequently Booth Force used to good advantage the services of a British F.O.O. who was able to direct artillery fire from his point of vantage in the village.<sup>47</sup>

By noon "C" Company had gained a foothold on the southern tip of the objective and there were signs of enemy withdrawal to the north-east, although fire continued to come from his rearguard dispersed about the rocky spur. Hoffmeister (who rode in Booth's tank during the action and was thus able to maintain control) sent "A" Company forward to exploit this first success by an assault from the extreme right flank. One by one the paratroop positions were methodically mopped up, the dogged defenders holding on, according to one observer, "to the last man and the last round".<sup>48</sup> Not more than a dozen prisoners were taken, and a signal received at Brigadier Vokes' command post in mid-afternoon reported "many dead Germans found in area".<sup>49</sup> By comparison, Canadian casualties were light; 'the reconnaissance squadron came through unharmed, while the tank regiment lost two men killed. The toll was heaviest on the Seaforth; their losses of eleven killed and 32 wounded were their severest since the opening day of the battle for Leonforte.

The operation by Booth Force had been completely successful. A late afternoon reconnaissance of the west bank of the Simeto, east of the newlywon high ground, disclosed that the enemy "had retired up the valley in sizable numbers and apparently in some disorder."<sup>50</sup> For the "dash and determination" with which he had carried out his task Lt.-Col. Booth was awarded the D.S.O. (He was later killed in France while commanding the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade north of Falaise.) The outflanking of Adrano had been achieved, however, by the co-operation of all arms and services, a point which General Simonds made clear in a subsequent radio interview.

This plain afforded the first bit of ground on which it was possible to employ tanks with maximum effect-and it was due very largely to the operations of the Twelfth Canadian Tank Regiment that we were able-so quickly-to gain the west. bank of the Simeto after crossing the Troina. In turn-it was the fine work of the sappers in building a crossing and tracks from the Salso to the Troina that enabled the tanks to get forward-and this crossing was constructed in spite of the fact that at times the men were under heavy artillery fire. Again the sappers could not start the crossing until the infantry, supported by guns, had gained a bridgehead and the operation as a whole could not have been undertaken unless the services and supply from behind had provided the means. What I want to emphasize is that all these operations have been successful because each arm and service has gone full out to do its share-and though the spectacular actions sometimes fall to individual units, and the infantry carry the brunt of the fighting, the ultimate success has resulted because of the contributions made by all.<sup>51</sup>

## Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio, 5-6 August

Of the tasks assigned to the Canadian Division west of the Simeto there remained by nightfall of 5 August the capture of Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio. During the afternoon Hill 736 had fallen to The Edmonton Regiment. Earlier in the day "C" Company had captured an intermediate high point half a mile short of the main peak, which was held by an enemy force later estimated at 100 in strength. As the men of "C" Company were near exhaustion after four days of being under continuous fire, exposed to a blazing sun and with practically no sleep, two platoons of "D" Company were brought up to assist in the final assault. They attacked at 4:30 p.m., supported by the guns of the 3rd Field Regiment, a detachment of mortars, and two medium machine-guns which had been rescued from the scattered mule train. In spite of difficulties of communication between infantry and artillery-the passage of fire orders necessitated the improvisation of an elaborate chain of shouted commands and No. 18 wireless sets-the field regiment did what was wanted. Major A. S. Donald, the commander of "C" Company, who won the D.S.O. for his part in the action, led his small force "up, across and around the bullet-swept feature into a position from which the height was assaulted and captured."<sup>52</sup> One of the encouraging features of the action, according to an Edmonton officer, was "that while one officer was killed and another badly wounded and both platoon sergeants were killed, the junior N.C.Os. carried the attack through to success."<sup>53</sup>

The wounded officer was Lieut. J. A. Dougan, who had shown such resourcefulness in directing his platoon at the road block on the Agira-Nicosia road on the night of 26 July (above, p. 130). His gallantry on Hill 736 brought him the Military Cross (he won a bar to it at San Fortunato Ridge in September 1944). While leading the forward platoon in the final assault he was wounded by machine-gun bullets in both arms and both hands. Eye witnesses recorded that "he could hold his revolver only by gripping it in both hands. Under intense pain he led the platoon across the 300-yard stretch of open ground under continuous observed fire, led the charge on the objective, and captured it."<sup>54</sup>

Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio were not occupied until the morning of 6 August. Heavy opposition encountered on Revisotto by the Edmontons' "A" and "B" Companies during the 5th resulted in a decision to postpone the final attack until artillery support could be arranged."<sup>55</sup> Late that same day the Patricias, to whom Brigadier Vokes had entrusted the capture of Mount Seggio, sent two companies forward from the Troina River to attack from the positions won by Booth Force. Shortly before midnight these reached the Seaforth headquarters, which had been established in an old

room at the back of a farmhouse. Here the P.P.C.L.I. company commanders found Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister "sitting on a dilapidated straw chair munching at some hardtack spread with jam and looking very tired." They learned from him the situation on Mount Seggio as it was then known, and discussed their plan of attack."

The P.P.C.L.I. force moved up to the area held by the forward Seaforth company, although their advance was somewhat delayed when they were given a lift by a relieving squadron of tanks which promptly lost its way in the darkness. Since Seggio was believed to be still held in strength by the enemy, the Patricias decided to postpone their assault until daylight, when they would have the benefit of artillery and heavy mortar support. But the Germans did not linger. When the Canadian attacks went in on the morning of the 6th, Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio were taken without resistance.\* The 30th Corps' left flank along the line of the Salso was now secure.<sup>58</sup>

The fighting in the Salso valley was the Canadian Division's last major operation in Sicily. It had cost the 2nd Brigade in the five days from 2 to 6 August more than 150 casualties. Hardest hit were the Edmontons. In the fighting for Hill 736 and Mount Revisotto they had lost 93, of whom 26 had been killed.

Kesselring's report to Berlin on 6 August, concerned as usual to break bad news gently, forecast as a forthcoming possibility what was already an accomplished fact: "If correction of the situation in the sector of 15 Panzer Grenadier Division is not possible, Corps Commander will withdraw division to shortened 'Hube' position."<sup>59</sup> This division had been charged with no light task. Its sector of defence between the Hermann Görings and the 29th Panzer Grenadiers faced the Canadians on its left front, and on its right stretched north across the inter-army boundary to cover the important Highway No. 120, control of which was vital to the withdrawal of all the German forces west of Mount Etna. This road was the central axis of the advance of the U.S. 1st Division, and on it—just as the Hermann Göring Division planned to stop the Canadians at Regalbuto—the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division chose the mountain fastness of Troina for a supreme effort to halt the progress of the Americans.

The struggle for Troina has been described as "the Seventh Army's most bitterly contested battle of the Sicilian Campaign".<sup>60</sup> For five days the town was under relentless attack by American infantry, backed by the fire of eight and a half artillery battalions and continuous aerial support from fighter-bombers and medium Mitchells and Baltimores. During that time the enemy, in a determined effort to keep open his life-line along Highway

\* The Brigade Commander afterwards gave his opinion that had the Patricias attacked Mount Seggio in battalion strength on the night of 5-6 August they might have carried their objective with disastrous results to the enemy withdrawal.<sup>57</sup>

No. 120, launched no fewer than twenty-five counter-attacks. By nightfall on 5 August, however, the Americans had a commanding hold of the high ground about Troina, and the town itself was taken next morning.<sup>61</sup> Allied reconnaissance aircraft returning from patrols on the afternoon of 5 August reported very heavy enemy traffic pouring eastward towards Cesaro, and on the 6th it was apparent that the bulk of the German forces had pulled out from the Troina sector, leaving behind small groups to engage in stubborn rearguard action along the heavily mined highway.<sup>62</sup> In the Canadian sector a hint of the disorganized nature of the general German withdrawal came from three German paratroops captured on the 6th, who declared that the enemy had broken up into groups of two or three, with instructions to make their way back as best they could to rejoin the main body of troops on the Adrano-Bronte road.<sup>63</sup>

### The Halt at the Simeto

The telling blows delivered against the enemy's western positions had produced the desired results on the Allied right flank. The best news on the Eighth Army front on 5 August came from the 13th Corps, which reported an unopposed occupation of Catania that morning by the 50th Division.<sup>64</sup> Farther inland British troops surged forward against the line of foothill towns along Etna's southern flank. At 4:55 p.m. Montgomery signalled the good news to Alexander:

Have captured Catania, Misterbianco and Paterno\* . . . on left leading troops 30 Corps now within 2000 yards of Biancavilla and within 1000 yards of Adrano. Am keeping up the tempo of operations and once Adrano is secured will strike rapidly towards Bronte and Randazzo.<sup>65</sup>

As the Eighth Army's front narrowed, the convergence of the various divisional axes of advance necessitated a reduction in the number of formations engaged. With the fall of Adrano imminent the end of "Hardgate" was in sight; thereafter the 30th Corps' zone of action to the west and north of Mount Etna would be restricted to a one-division front, that of the 78th. The 1st Canadian Division's active participation in the Sicilian campaign was rapidly drawing to a close.

Its final operation was a bloodless crossing of the Simeto River by the 3rd Brigade on the night of 5-6 August. From their concentration area at Regalbuto the Royal 22e Regiment went forward by motor transport across the Salso and Troina Rivers, travelling the Canadian-built track which

\* The announcement appears to have, been premature as far as Paterno was concerned. Although an Eighth Army Sitrep issued at 4:00 p.m. 5 August reported the town's capture an hour before by the 13th Brigade (5th Division), the brigade's war diary gives the time of its entry into Paterno as 10:15 a.m. on the 6th.

# VALGUARNERA TO THE SIMETO

19 JULY - 7 AUGUST 1943

MILES 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 MILES

Ground over 100 metres	Canadian Forces	→
Ground over 400 metres	British Forces	→
Ground over 700 metres	American Forces	→
Ground over 1000 metres		

ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN





during the past few days had so effectively justified its construction. Near Carcaci the troops left their vehicles, and by seven in the morning they had secured a bridgehead across the Simeto without difficulty. They found the enemy's machine-gun posts empty, and everywhere there was evidence of a hasty departure.<sup>66</sup> Lt. Col. Bernatchez quickly sent patrols northward and eastward, in a race with the 78th Division to reach Adrano. One 22e party reached the western outskirts of the town, but at 10:30 the Corps Commander intervened with orders that the 78th Division was to be given unrestricted entry. The Canadian battalion was withdrawn to the Simeto, and in the early hours of 7 August units from the 11th and 36th Brigades took possession of the devastated town.<sup>67</sup> The Royal 22e was joined by the remaining units of the 3rd Brigade, while the advance battalions of the 1st Brigade, originally assigned a role of exploitation through the Simeto bridgehead (during the forenoon of the 6th the 48th Highlanders had followed early-morning patrols across the river), settled down temporarily in the area about Carcaci. The 2nd Brigade units were disposed on the Division's left-the Seaforth moved back to the east bank of the Troina, while the Edmontons and the Patricias, remaining respectively on Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio, continued during the 6th and 7th to patrol into the hills to the north and east.<sup>68</sup>

Relieved of operational responsibilities, the Canadian Division moved during 11-13 August to a concentration area at the southern edge of the Catania plain.\* The 1st and 2nd Brigades found themselves on the high ground about Militello, not more than ten miles from Grammichele, where four weeks previously the Hastings and Prince Edwards had had the first Canadian encounter with the Germans. Divisional Headquarters and the 3rd Brigade settled about Francofonte, half a dozen miles to the east. It was a well-earned rest to which the Canadians came. In their month-long march through the interior of Sicily they had travelled 120 miles, much of it over rough and mountainous terrain, exposed to very trying conditions of dust and great heat, and opposed by a resourceful and determined enemy. Although lack of shade in their new surroundings meant little respite for the troops from the Dower of the sun, and there were complaints about the scourge of flies, the prevailing wind brought some relief from the heat, and the altitude helped provide safeguard against the malarial mosquito (see below, p. 176).

At midday on 10 August the Division came under command of General Dempsey's 13th Corps, which three days later handed over all its operational responsibilities to the 30th Corps.<sup>70</sup> Dempsey's headquarters was withdrawn to prepare for the invasion of the mainland. Into reserve at the same

\* The Division passed into army reserve on 6 August, but remained under the command of the 30th Corps Headquarters until 10 August, when it became part of the 13th Corps.<sup>69</sup>

time came the 5th Division, which had been selected with the Canadian Division to take part in the forthcoming operation.

### The Army Tank Brigade's Part in "Husky"

The story of Canadian operations in Sicily would not be complete without a brief account of the activities of the 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade. We have followed the fortunes of one unit of this formation—the Three Rivers Regiment, which played so vigorous a part in the advance of the 1st Canadian Division from the Pachino beaches to the Simeto River. The remainder of the brigade (consisting of Brigadier Wyman's headquarters, The Ontario Regiment, The Calgary Regiment, and certain appropriate Medical, Ordnance and Army Service Corps sub-units) had sailed to Sicily, it will be recalled, in the follow-up convoys. On the evening of 13 July L.S.Ts. of the slow convoy disembarked their tanks at Syracuse, and these moved to a harbour area near Cassibile, nine miles south-west of the port. The personnel ship *Cameronia* of the fast convoy docked four days later, and the troops marched into camp that same evening.<sup>71</sup>

The brigade (less the Three Rivers), now part of the Eighth Army Reserve, was placed under the command of the 7th Armoured Division, whose commander, Major-General G.W.E.J. Erskine, had arrived from Tripoli on 14 July with a small tactical headquarters to advise the Eighth Army on the employment of its armoured forces.<sup>72</sup> For a week the Canadian formation remained in the Cassibile area, becoming acclimatized and adjusting itself to its forthcoming role. Nightly enemy air raids on Syracuse brought a "stand to" every morning at five, when all units went on the alert "with kits completely stowed, vehicle engines running and everything in readiness for instant movement or action should such occur."<sup>73</sup>

Early on the morning of 21 July, the brigade began to move forward to positions four miles north-east of Scordia, in the Contrada\* Cucco, a district lying along the southern escarpment of the Catania plain, south of the Gornalunga River (see Map 1). Its role here was to cover a ten-mile gap between the two corps of the Eighth Army, which were then holding a defensive line along the Dittaino River. On the 23rd units deployed into their new positions ready (as confirmed in a brigade operation order dated 27 July) to "destroy all enemy attempting an attack between the left flank of 13 Corps and the right flank of 30 Corps." Ahead of the Canadian armour the 5th Division's reconnaissance regiment was patrolling the area between the Gornalunga and the Simeto Rivers, and on its right a strong anti-tank screen was being maintained by the guns of the same division's anti-tank

\* Region.

regiment (105th). The Canadian task was to support these two units, and "to be prepared to fight an armoured battle" should occasion arise. But no German attack developed, and the end of the month brought further dispersal of the brigade's units for the final phase of the campaign.

On 31 July, as the 30th Corps began the preliminary operations to "Hardgate", The Ontario Regiment, commanded by Lt.-Col. M. P. Johnston, was placed in support of the 5th Division's 13th Brigade, which had been given the task of defending two crossings of the Dittaino at Stimpato and Sferro, on the extreme western flank of the 13th Corps. The Canadian Tank Brigade had come under the command of this Corps on 28 July, when the Tactical Headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division returned to Tripoli after its brief stay in Sicily.<sup>74</sup> The brigade, less the 11th and 12th Regiments, retained its defensive role near Scordia, taking temporarily under its command the 98th Army Field Regiment (S.P.) R.A., a squadron of the 1st Scorpion\* Regiment, and a troop of a British light anti-aircraft battery. As the 51st Highland Division pushed the 30th Corps' right flank forward across the Dittaino River, squadrons of The Ontario Regiment supported units of the 13th Brigade in a parallel advance towards the northeast.<sup>75</sup> The Gerbini aerodrome was taken on 4 August, and on the sixth the 13th Brigade entered Paterno without opposition (above, p. 164).

The general enemy withdrawal continued, and the 5th Division, as the left flank formation of the 13th Corps, found itself operating in the difficult terrain of the foothills south-east of Etna and on the lower slopes of the volcano itself. The steep gradients, rocky terraces and rough, hummocky fields of black lava made it impossible in places to deploy off the roads, and the Division was forced to advance on a single brigade front. Demolished bridges hampered the progress of the armour, which was chiefly used to beat off small-scale but vigorous counter-attacks launched against the infantry by persistent German rearguards.<sup>76</sup> On 7 August Belpasso was taken, and Nicolosi, high up on the magnificent *autostrada* which swept half way to the summit of Etna. On the 9th General Montgomery decided to adopt a more aggressive role for the 13th Corps, whose task until now had been to follow up and keep contact with the enemy without becoming involved in a major operation and sustaining heavy casualties. He ordered the Corps to drive forward on a two-divisional front along the narrow defile between Mount Etna and the sea, in order to cut the lateral road running north of the volcano from Fiumefreddo to Randazzo.<sup>77</sup>

On the left the 13th Brigade led the 5th Division's advance northward along the mountain road which clung to the eastern slopes of Etna, 2000 feet above sea level. An Ontario squadron supported the 2nd Cameronians

\* "Scorpions" were modified General Grant tanks with special whiplike attachments for clearing paths through minefields.

near the village of Trecastagni on 9 August, and next day its tanks assisted the infantry in seizing a bridgehead north of Zafferana Etnea and beating off an enemy counter-attack.<sup>78</sup> This action ended the Sicilian operations of the Canadian Tank Brigade, and indeed of all Canadian troops in Sicily, for Montgomery now decided to disengage the 5th Division in preparation for the forthcoming operations on the Italian mainland, and, as we have seen, the 1st Division had been withdrawn into reserve on 6 August. At midnight on 10-11 August The Ontario Regiment reverted to the command of the Army Tank Brigade, and moved southward to join its parent formation near Scordia, in the area that The Calgary Regiment had continued to occupy since the end of July.<sup>79</sup> The Three Rivers Regiment had already arrived from its tour of service with the 1st Division, and for the first time since leaving Scotland all the Canadian armoured units were concentrated together. The casualty lists for the three tank regiments reflect the different operational roles which each had been called upon to undertake. The Calgaries had only eight wounded in Sicily; the Ontarios one killed and 13 wounded; while the Three Rivers Regiment, which was in almost continual action throughout the campaign, lost 21 killed and 62 wounded.

The brigade now came directly under the 1st Division, as it was desirable (said the brigade war diary) "to centralize the Canadian command so that there will be uniformity of policy on all Canadian matters".<sup>80</sup> There was opportunity now for appraisal of past performances and a critical examination of the many special administrative problems arising from the fact that individual tank regiments, or the brigade itself, might be detached and placed under the command of other formations. Such situations were bound to recur in the future; at a conference between General Simonds and Brigadier Wyman on 12 August it was announced that the brigade "would be maintained as a separate formation . . . ready to move under command of any other formation and able to stand on its own feet."<sup>81</sup> The story of the brigade's subsequent operations in Italy shows how accurately this forecast its future role.

### The German Retreat from Sicily

When the 1st Canadian Division halted at the Simeto, the fighting in Sicily was almost over, for with the breaking of the enemy's main defensive line began the final stages of his retreat to the mainland. According to von Bonin, on 8 or 9 August the Commander of the 14th Panzer Corps, influenced by the rate at which his divisions were daily losing ground, and by the critical shortage of supplies, established 10 August as "X Day"-the date on which the general retirement was to commence. On the 10th

Kesselring told Berlin: "The evacuation of Sicily has started according to plan."<sup>82</sup>

This plan of withdrawal had been prepared at the 14th Panzer Corps Headquarters with characteristic German thoroughness. On the day after Mussolini's deposition Hitler, bowing to the inevitable, had issued orders to O.B. South "to make preparations for the evacuation of German troops from Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica",<sup>83</sup> and, as we have seen, General Hube had taken prompt measures to secure an escape route across the Messina Strait. From his Chief of Staff we learn that the plan for the final evacuation was based on an appreciation that six nights\* would be required to transport with the boats available the approximately 60,000† German troops who were on the island. Hube designated five lines of resistance converging on Messina, to be occupied on successive nights and held for one day each. The first of these lines was to the rear of the "bridgehead position," and ran from the north coast just east of Sant' Agata (see page 697), through Bronte and around the southern slopes of Mount Etna to Acireale. The last was just outside Messina. It was planned that on each withdrawal a total of eight to ten thousand men would be released from the three divisions, and moved on foot towards Messina. The Hermann Göring Division would go first, to be followed in order by the 15th and the 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions. From the fifth line of resistance the last remaining troops would march direct to the boats on the final night of evacuation. Late in July operations officers of the German divisions in Sicily were flown to Kesselring's headquarters in Rome to discuss the plan of evacuation (Operation "*Lehrgang la*"), which would go into effect at a time to be decided by the Commander of the 14th Panzer Corps.<sup>85</sup>

This action by O.B. South came while the German High Command, in spite of its warning order of 26 July, was still debating whether to continue the defence of the Sicilian bridgehead. The record of Hitler's naval conferences shows that as late as the evening of 11 August (when the evacuation plan had actually been in operation for 24 hours) Admiral Dönitz and Field-Marshal Rommel were arguing that to abandon Sicily would release strong Allied forces for thrusts into Southern Italy; while holding the opposite view was General Jodl, who pressed the need for abandoning the island in order to concentrate German formations against an assault landing near Naples. Hitler himself made "no definite decision" but asked "to have the various solutions considered as possible choices."<sup>86</sup> Kesselring got no thanks for presenting the High Command with a

\* On 29 July Kesselring reported to Hitler that it would be possible to evacuate Sicily in three nights.<sup>84</sup> Hube's decision to take six nights reflects the thoroughness of his planning and suggests his intention of withdrawing as much equipment as possible.

† This is the figure given by the Armed Forces Operations Staff on 18 August. Von Bonin, relying on memory, put the total at 50,000.

*fait accompli*. "I was for a long time *persona ingrata*", he writes in his *Memoirs*, "because I took the decision to evacuate Sicily on my own initiative."<sup>87</sup>

Although details of the German scheme for withdrawal were not, of course, known at the time to the Allied armies, it was correctly appreciated that the enemy would attempt a slow retreat to Messina, fighting for time in which to extricate the maximum number of his forces from Sicily. In this he was once again favoured by the topography of the island. The tapering conformation of the Messina peninsula admirably suited his scheme of thinning out his forces on shortening lines of resistance, while the mountainous terrain restricted the pursuing formations to the use of the few existing roads, progress on which could easily be blocked by demolitions and the action of light, mobile rearguards. As a result the Allies were unable to upset Hube's time-table; indeed, by holding one of his intermediate defence lines longer than originally planned, he contrived to gain an extra night and day\* for the evacuation of his divisions.<sup>88</sup>

The story of the Allied pursuit can be quickly told. After the capture of Adrano, the Eighth Army's 78th Division pressed northward in the 30th Corps' narrow field of operations west of Mount Etna. The axis of advance lay between the high, trackless slope of the volcano and the deep gorge of the upper Simeto, along a route which gave the enemy full scope for his delaying tactics. Bronte fell on 8 August, but thereafter General Evelegh's troops met strong German resistance, so that they did not take Maletto, only four miles farther north, until the 12th. Next day they reached Highway No. 120, and assisted the U.S. 9th Division, moving eastward from Troina, to capture badly battered Randazzo, long a major target of the Allied air forces.<sup>89</sup>

On the Eighth Army's right flank progress was equally slow, for in the narrow defile of the coastal strip the Hermann Göring engineers had blocked the roads with every conceivable obstacle. It took the 50th Division a week to advance sixteen miles from Catania along the main coastal highway to Riposto, which was entered on 11 August. On the 13th Corps' inner flank the 5th Division kept abreast, supported until 10 August by Canadian tanks. It was relieved by the 51st Highland Division on the 12th when, as we have seen, General Leese's 30th Corps took over control of the operations of the three divisions remaining in action. By 14 August the enemy had broken contact all along the front, and the rate of pursuit was now governed entirely by the speed with which the Engineers could reopen the blocked routes. On the 15th the 50th Division reached Taormina, whose famous Greek ruins had happily survived their latest war unharmed, and

\* The Germans occupied the first line of resistance on the night of 10-11 August; the fifth, outside Messina, on 15-16 August.

on the same day the 51st and 78th Divisions completed the circuit of Etna and joined forces near Linguaglossa.<sup>90</sup>

Meanwhile, on the Army Group's northern flank, General Patton's forces had been driving into the Messina peninsula and meeting the same delaying resistance. The 9th Division, forming the 2nd Corps' right wing, had relieved the battle-worn 1st Division after the struggle for Troina, and had pushed forward along Highway No. 120 on the heels of the retreating enemy. The Americans entered Cesaro on 8 August, and five days later, as we have seen, captured Randazzo. This was the last strong German position on the Seventh Army's southern axis, and its fall marked the end of the 9th Division's advance.

The U.S. 3rd Division led the drive along the northern coast road. During the first week in August it encountered "numerous demolitions, mines, and sporadic artillery fire", and at times "stiff, determined opposition".<sup>91</sup> Early on 8 August it carried out a successful amphibious operation against the enemy rear, when a party comprising an infantry battalion, a tank platoon and two batteries of artillery, landed east of Sant' Agata and broke resistance on the strongly held Mount San Fratello. Three nights later the same force repeated its success in a landing two miles east of Cape Orlando, near Brolo, thereby outflanking and ending the German hold on the important junction of the coastal highway with the lateral road from Randazzo. By 15 August, as in the other sectors, contact with the enemy had virtually ceased. Indeed the tempo of the pursuit had so quickened that a third amphibious operation, which had been planned to take place early on the 16th east of Milazzo, was diverted to beaches north-west of Barcellona in the Gulf of Palli when its intended point of landing was outdistanced by the troops advancing overland.<sup>92</sup>

Messina fell on 17 August-38 days after the first Allied landings in Sicily. American infantry of the 3rd Division, cutting across the tip of the peninsula, pushed into the city shortly after 6:00 a.m. (some patrols had reached the outskirts on the previous evening), and four hours later British tanks of the 4th Armoured Brigade and men of No. 2 Commando, who had landed ten miles down the coast near Scaletta on the night of the 15th-16th, arrived from the south.<sup>93</sup> During the morning General Patton himself entered Messina, to mark the successful conclusion of an advance which General Eisenhower later described as "a triumph of engineering, seamanship, and gallant infantry action."<sup>94</sup> The first United States field army to fight as a unit in the Second World War had worthily accomplished the mission assigned to it.

The Allies found Messina empty of German troops; early that morning General Hube had crossed the Strait with the rearguard of his island garrison. The naval officer in charge of the crossings, Commander Baron von Liebenstein, won high praise from Hube for not having "given up a

single German soldier or weapon or vehicle to the enemy." Von Liebenstein employed a variety of craft for the job, shuttling the bulk of the troops and equipment across the Strait in seven *Marinefährrähme* (80-ton ramped barges, each capable of carrying three tanks or five trucks), ten "L"-boats (army engineer pontoon "landing-boats" that could take two trucks), and eleven *Siebel* ferries. These last were double-ended motor rafts built to carry ten trucks or 60 tons of supplies. Originally designed for the invasion of Britain in 1940, several of these craft had been dismantled and transported across France to the Mediterranean in the early summer of 1943. Most of the crossings were carried out by daylight because of the greater fear of night attacks by Allied bombers using flares.<sup>95</sup>

Considerable credit for the successful evacuation must go to the resourceful Colonel Baade, whose job it was to defend the escape route across the narrow channel against Allied sea and air attack. As early as 3 August General Alexander had warned Admiral Cunningham and Air Marshal Tedder of the possibility of the Germans beginning to withdraw to the mainland before the collapse of their front in Sicily. "We must be in a position to take immediate advantage of such a situation by using full weight of navy and air power," the C.-in-C. signalled.<sup>96</sup> However, although light coastal patrols of the Royal Navy operated in the Strait every night, the restricted waters, covered by some 150 German 88-mm. and Italian 90-mm. mobile guns supplementing the fixed coastal batteries, prevented successful daylight intervention by Allied naval forces;<sup>97</sup> and intensive efforts by heavy, medium and fighter-bombers to disrupt the flow of men and materials to the mainland were frustrated by the protective canopy of fire put up by Hube's well-sited flak and coastal guns. From 8 to 17 August inclusive 1170 sorties were flown against the enemy's evacuation shipping in transit and off the beaches, but the estimated casualties inflicted were not high. In the opinion of some R.A.F. pilots<sup>98</sup> the anti-aircraft defences of the Messina Strait exceeded in density those of the Ruhr. Some critics have asserted that Allied naval and air forces might have been used more effectively to impede the German evacuation. The U.S. Naval Historian thinks that "the Strait looked too much like the Dardanelles to British commanders who had been there, and to Americans who had studied the Gallipoli campaign in their war colleges"; and in Kesselring's view,

The enemy failure to exploit the last chance of hindering the German forces crossing the Straits of Messina, by continuous and strongly co-ordinated attacks from the sea and the air, was almost a greater boon to the German Command than their failure immediately to push their pursuit across the Straits on 17 August<sup>99</sup>

Three days before he left Sicily Hube sent Kesselring some "suggestions for the final communique after the conclusion of the evacuation". The "main idea" would be "to describe battles in Sicily as a big success." This would



"raise morale and confidence at home and create pride in the Sicilian formations." Recalling that "the catastrophe of material at Dunkirk was presented to the British public as a great success", he proceeded to demonstrate that with a favourable conclusion of the evacuation

. . . the end of the Sicilian campaign is actually a full success. After the initial fiasco, the fighting, as well as the preparation and execution of the evacuation, with all serviceable material and men (including the wounded) went according to plan.<sup>100</sup>

Hube lauded the work of his anti-aircraft units, but recorded sharp objection "to any possibly intended mention of the Air Force as giving immediate assistance to the troops on the ground", who "had practically to rely entirely upon themselves in their battles against the enemy on land and in the air." He submitted that praise for Italian troops could "only be justified in the case of the artillery", and concluded with this pointed observation:

I consider it as especially harmful when, as happens time and again, one encounters communiques that do not correspond in any manner with the actual situation ... and that appear ridiculous to those who were there.

Kesselring took his cue correctly, and his report on the campaign contrasted the British evacuation at Dunkirk, when "even though most of the personnel was taken across successfully, the army lost its entire armament", with the retreat from Sicily, when "all serviceable material of value was taken, as well as the complete German formations, which are now again ready for immediate service on the Italian mainland."<sup>101</sup> According to the figures prepared by O.B. South for submission to Berlin, 39,569 German troops (including 4444 wounded) were ferried back from Sicily during the first fifteen days of August, and they took with them 9605 vehicles, 47 tanks and 94 guns, besides more than 17,000 tons of ammunition, fuel and equipment.<sup>102</sup>

These statistics are difficult to challenge;\* but figures adopted by the German High Command are less convincing. Kesselring's total of nearly 40,000 troops would be enlarged by the number of wounded (upwards of 13,500) and others who were sent back to Italy during July, and the relatively small rear parties that crossed during the final day and night of the evacuation; but even with such additions it would appear that the Armed Forces Operations Staff in Berlin was using quite round numbers when its situation report on 18 August referred to "the successful withdrawal of approximately 60,000 German troops with all weapons and vehicles."<sup>104</sup> Allied records show 6663 Germans captured in Sicily (3163 of these by the Eighth Army),

\* These figures are confirmed in a report by Vice-Admiral Friedrich Ruge, Commander of the German Navy in Italy. An entry in the war diary of the 76th Panzer Corps has the following data for the nights 10-11 and 11-12 August:

615 officers, 19,924 N.C.Os. and O.Rs.; 2185 vehicles, 34 tanks, 44 self-propelled assault guns, 15 heavy anti-tank guns, 21 guns, 11 anti-aircraft guns.<sup>103</sup>

and an estimated 5000 killed.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, in spite of his orderly evacuation, Hube had been forced to abandon a large amount of materiel and supplies; with these losses the cost of the Sicilian campaign in German heavy equipment rose to 78 tanks and armoured cars, 287 guns of various types and 3500 vehicles.<sup>106</sup> Hitler's High Command may well have considered it expedient to conceal such unpalatable statistics. Perhaps the most striking commentary on Kesselring's claim of "complete German formations ... ready for immediate service" appears in the condition reports submitted by two of the divisions of the 14th Panzer Corps at the end of August. The Hermann Görings gave their degree of mobility as fifty per cent.<sup>107</sup> The 29th Panzer Grenadier Division told as sorry a story:

Losses of the last two months were high: in the case of 71 Pz Regt they amounted to 35% . . . Division is fit for employment according to its strength. Fighting power is 50% of normal.<sup>108</sup>

Evacuation of Italian troops from Sicily was carried out independently by the Italians themselves, for it had been no part of Hube's plan to provide ferry service for the remnants of an army which, it was now being generally proclaimed in German military circles, had by its failure on 10 July made the loss of Sicily inevitable. According to von Bonin, Hube had urged General Guzzoni to move his troops out of Sicily before the German withdrawal. The Italians did not take the hint; accordingly, in the general evacuation they were restricted to the use of the large steam train ferry, *Villa*, two small steamboats and four motor rafts manned by the Italian Navy. By these means 59,000 troops and 3000 sailors were carried to the mainland between 3 and 16 August.<sup>109</sup> A small number of those Italians who had continued to fight in north-east Sicily fell into Allied hands during the last days of the campaign, and brought the total of prisoners yielded by the Sixth Army to approximately 137,000.\* It was estimated that 2000 Italians had been killed and 5000 wounded.<sup>111</sup>

Measured against the Axis losses Allied casualties were not unduly severe, although heavy enough to emphasize that the campaign had been waged against a skilful and stubborn foe. Of the 15th Army Group's total of more than 19,000 killed, wounded and missing, the Seventh Army lost 7402, the Eighth Army 11,843.<sup>112</sup> Of this cost the 1st Canadian Division bore its due share. The full count of Canadian casualties for the whole campaign was 2310. Forty officers and 522 other ranks were killed or died

\* The figure of 137,488 Italian prisoners given in the British source previously cited includes 96,500 captured by the Seventh Army. American sources, however, put the Seventh Army's claim at 118,868.<sup>110</sup>

(including those lost at sea); 124 officers and 1540 men were wounded;\* and eight officers and 76 other ranks were taken prisoner.<sup>113</sup>

But the balance sheet of "Husky" is much more than a comparison of the casualties suffered by the opposing armies. The losses to both sides must be viewed in the light of what the expenditure had accomplished. Seven months earlier the Allied leaders at Casablanca had decided to undertake the occupation of Sicily as a means of making the Mediterranean line of communications more secure, diverting German strength from the Russian front, and intensifying the pressure on Italy.<sup>114</sup> All these objectives and more had now been achieved; for Operation "Husky" had rendered Germany's position in Sardinia untenable and in Corsica insecure, had forced Hitler to strengthen his garrisons in Southern France and the Balkans, and had signed the death warrant of the Rome-Berlin axis. Not all the propagandist claims of a glorious Sicilian Dunkirk could disguise the fact that in the loss of the island the enemy had suffered a major military and political defeat.

Nevertheless, the story of the battle for Sicily would be incomplete if it did not include a tribute to the German military performance throughout the campaign. Although caught off balance by the invasion and the failure of their Italian allies to offer effective resistance, Kesselring's troops had acquitted themselves well. With somewhat less than four divisions, little air strength and practically no naval support, the Germans had for five and a half weeks opposed an Allied force of more than twelve divisions enjoying absolute superiority in the air and on the sea. The enemy's withdrawal from the island, with much of his heavy equipment, had been made in his own time, and had been so skilfully conducted that neither the Allies' pursuing armies had been able to hasten its progress nor their air forces seriously interrupt its execution. From every aspect the German evacuation of Sicily must be numbered among the successful retreats in the history of warfare.

The Allied conquest of Sicily in 38 days had been achieved by an amphibious assault planned and executed on an unprecedented scale, and a subsequent advance of the ground forces over extremely difficult country against a clever and stubborn foe who took full advantage of the defensive possibilities afforded by the rugged topography. The landing operations were a model of co-operation between army, naval and air forces; and powerful air support had continued to aid the Allied troops during the fighting in the interior. Artillery, armour, Engineers and the various services all played an important part in contributing to the advance of the infantry, to whose resolution, endurance and fine fighting qualities the main credit for the victory must go.

\* These figures include twelve nursing sisters and three other ranks (hospital orderlies) who were wounded when an anti-aircraft shell fell on No. 5 Canadian General Hospital during an air raid on Catania on 2 September.

In their concentration area about Lentini Canadian troops spent the last half of August recuperating from the gruelling campaign just ended and preparing for participation in the next. There was recreation in sports meets organized at unit and brigade levels (a 17-lb. shot from anti-tank ammunition was a useful improvisation in the weight events), and once the beaches had been cleared of mines there were highly popular swimming parades in the Mediterranean. Other entertainment was limited, for all towns and villages were out of bounds (even had these Sicilian communities had much to offer), and no "ENSA" or other Army show made its appearance. The 13th Corps, however, arranged for the band of the Royal Tank Regiment to entertain various Canadian units in a series of concerts, and a symphony orchestra from Lentini played on a number of occasions for Divisional Headquarters and the 3rd Infantry Brigade. Auxiliary Services supervisors organized a few civilian orchestras; these quickly picked up the current popular tunes, and having given an evening performance, would stay in camp until the following noon to cut hair, sew on patches and buttons and do other clothing repairs for the Canadian troops.<sup>115</sup> No. 1 Company Canadian Dental Corps arrived from North Africa, and its mobile clinics were soon supplying dental treatment to all Canadian units in Sicily. All arms and services resumed training, and if the return to a routine of instruction and exercises seemed strange to troops who had had their first taste of actual fighting, everyone had something to learn from the lessons which the fighting had produced. There was a tightening of discipline in dress, saluting and other such matters which tend to become of secondary importance in battle.

Precautionary measures against malaria were more rigidly enforced than at any time in the campaign, for though camp sites had as far as possible been placed on rising ground, the surrounding area was highly malarial. Accordingly all ranks swallowed their mepacrine tablets, applied their antimosquito cream and kept their sleeves down more assiduously than ever before. Nevertheless, during these two weeks the number of cases of malaria in the Division rose to epidemic proportions;\* the mosquitoes of the Dittaino and Salso valleys, to whose attentions officers and men had been exposed in late July and early August, were now taking their toll. Commanding officers were invited by the Division's Assistant Director of Medical Services to "cast their minds back to those days, and reflect on the state of discipline as it had to do with anti-malaria precautions." At the end of the month it became

\* The daily admission of cases of malaria, actual or suspected, to divisional medical units was at the rate of 3.9 per 1000. For the whole period 10 July to 31 August there were approximately 1200 Canadian cases.<sup>116</sup> For details of malarial control in Sicily see W. R. Feasby, *Official History of the Canadian Medical Services 1939-1945, Volume Two, Clinical Subjects* (Ottawa, 1953), 139-142.

necessary to "blanket" the disease by giving every officer and man in the Division a quinine treatment.<sup>117</sup>

For The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada the highlight of this respite from battle was undoubtedly on 25 August, when they held a "reunion" with three Seaforth units from the United Kingdom—the 2nd, 5th and 6th Battalions, Seaforth Highlanders. It was an occasion unique in the Second World War, a similar gathering on a smaller scale having taken place in France in 1918. Ceremonies opened with the massed pipes and drums of the four battalions marching to the Catania Stadium for the sounding of Retreat. It was, according to a regimental account, "a never to be forgotten sight, that kilted phalanx walking through Catania with local populace agape with wonder and admiration." Afterwards there was a great exchange of "handshakes and invitations", and strong deputations from each battalion adjourned to a villa at nearby Misterbianco which housed the officers' and sergeants' messes of the 6th Battalion. It is recorded that in the "formalities" which followed the C.O. of the Canadian unit toasted the three battalions of the Home Country, making "a most fitting and appealing speech, such as to reach the hearts of all Seaforths present."<sup>118</sup>

The Canadians received two distinguished visitors during this period. The first was General Montgomery, who, making a formal call on 20 August, spent the afternoon informally talking to the troops, having gathered them in his customary manner around his car. He praised their achievements in the campaign—"When I say you did magnificently, I mean magnificently" and concluded by paying them the high compliment, "I now consider you one of my veteran divisions."<sup>119</sup>

On the following day the G.O.C.-in-C. First Canadian Army arrived at General Simonds' headquarters. During July General McNaughton had spent two weeks (from the 6th to the 20th) in the North African theatre, which he had visited "with two objects in mind":—

- (a) to witness a combined operation in order that the lessons learned could be used to benefit the training of the Canadian Army in the U.K., and
- (b) to be available to ensure that the Canadian contribution to the operation was completely in accordance with the requirements of the G.O.C.-in-C. 15 Army Group, under whose operational direction the Canadian formations were serving.<sup>120</sup>

The purpose of the Army Commander's mission on that occasion had been only partly achieved. He had conferred with General Eisenhower and General Alexander, and had received from them good reports of the Canadian Division's performance; and accompanied by members of his party\* he had

\* With McNaughton on his visit to North Africa were Lieut.-Gen. K. Stuart (who had been brought from Canada for the purpose), Brigadier C. Foulkes, B.G.S., First Canadian Army, Brigadier J. E. Genet, Chief Signal Officer, First Canadian Army, and Lt.-Col. D. C. Spry and Maj. T. Martin, Personal Assistants to McNaughton and Stuart respectively.<sup>121</sup>

discussed with Major-General H. M. Gale, Chief Administrative Officer, A.F.H.Q., and his principal staff officers problems affecting the welfare of Canadian troops and their contribution towards the success of "Husky". On D Day, in the War Room of the 15th Army Group's Headquarters near Tunis, and four days later at the Tactical Headquarters in Malta, McNaughton had followed the general progress of operations by means of incoming situation reports. That was as close as he had come to visiting the Canadian formations in Sicily.

General Eisenhower had agreed to the request from the War Office that he should see the two Canadian generals at A.F.H.Q. (to discuss the "organization and preparation of Canadian forces in Canada for later use in war against Japan" was the reason given in the British message),<sup>122</sup> but no authority appears to have been obtained beforehand for any visit to subordinate formations in the Mediterranean. On 17 July McNaughton learned from General Alexander that Montgomery felt himself unable, "owing to the shortage of transport", to allow any visitors\* on the island while "Husky" was still in an active phase.<sup>124</sup> Accordingly he had been forced to restrict his contact with Canadian troops to visiting the base installations in North Africa. Shortly after his return to the United Kingdom he was given an opportunity of acquainting the Chief of the Imperial General Staff with his concern regarding "the maintenance of the principle that representatives of Canada could visit Canadian troops at their discretion."<sup>125</sup>

In response to a cabled invitation from General Alexander,<sup>126</sup> General McNaughton returned to the Mediterranean a month later, reaching Algiers on 20 August. He spent a busy afternoon and evening visiting Canadian installations-No. 1 Base Reinforcement Depot and No. 1 Canadian Convalescent Depot at Philippeville, and No. 15 General Hospital at nearby El Arrouch-and next morning flew across to Sicily, landing at Alexander's headquarters at Cassibile.<sup>127</sup>

During six crowded days in Sicily McNaughton visited every unit of the 1st Division and officially opened the Tank Brigade's Sports Meet; he made a quick tour of the Canadian battlefields and gained first hand information about the actions in which the Division had fought; and he attended a number of conferences at General Simonds' headquarters, at which administrative problems arising from the recent operations were thoroughly examined and decisions were made concerning future policy. Before he left the island he was the guest of General Montgomery at his headquarters in Taormina.<sup>128</sup>

\* Maj.-Gen. Sir Francis de Guingand, Montgomery's Chief of Staff, has pointed out that from the time of his taking command of the Eighth Army the G.O.C.-in-C. followed a rigid practice of refusing to see visitors to his headquarters unless he had personally invited them. De Guingand suggests that in denying McNaughton entry to Sicily, Montgomery wished to relieve General Simonds of any extra strain that such a visit in the midst of operations might impose.<sup>123</sup>

From London, on his return, General McNaughton reported to National Defence Headquarters what he had observed in Sicily:

Everywhere morale is excellent-the troops are in fine condition and full of confidence. Their performance in the campaign just concluded, as you know, has earned the highest commendation from Corps, Army and Army Group Commanders, all of whom expressed to me their praise in generous terms.<sup>129</sup>

One of these messages of commendation may be reproduced as an appropriate conclusion to this account of the Canadian Division's first campaign of the war. It came as a personal letter from the G.O.C. 30th Corps to General Simonds, written on the day that the Canadians ceased active operations under General Leese's command, and in kindly terms it summarized the story of the Canadian accomplishments.

Now that you are shortly to leave 30 Corps I would like to write and congratulate you and the Division on your magnificent fighting since you landed in Sicily.

The landing operations went extremely smoothly and reflect the greatest credit on your planning and training before you sailed. The Division then marched many miles inland to the Ragusa area, fighting its way forward in great heat, to which your men were unaccustomed. This reflected particular credit on the infantry, who had only just finished a long sea voyage. You then took up the forefront of the Corps battle from Vizzini. For three weeks, with the Malta Bde under your command, you have fought continuously against a stubborn German resistance, both by day and night.

Your battle training has stood up extraordinarily well to the high tests demanded in the constant advances and attacks. The gunners have supported their infantry closely and well and the Divisional concentrations have proved the adequacy of your training. The sappers have worked with great devotion to duty, to establish tactical routes and to maintain your supplies. Finally, you forced your way from Regalbuto to the River Salso and joined up under the most difficult physical conditions with the 78th Division in time for the attack tonight. I cannot thank and congratulate you enough on all these performances.

I would like to add one personal word of thanks to you for your unfailing help during these operations; and to congratulate you on the manner in which you handled your Division.

My whole Staff tell me how extraordinarily well their opposite numbers in your Division have done and how much they have enjoyed working with them. It has made the whole difference to us to have had this very close and helpful co-operation with you. We are all very sad that you are leaving the Corps.

We hope you will soon come back to us, and in the meantime we wish you a great success and the very best of luck in your next venture.<sup>130</sup>

## CHAPTER VII

### THE INVASION OF THE ITALIAN MAINLAND, 3 SEPTEMBER 1943

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#### Early Proposals for Post-Sicilian Operations

**E**ARLY on the morning of 3 September 1943 British and Canadian troops crossed the Messina Strait and began going ashore near Reggio Calabria. The landings were unopposed, and by the close of the day a firm lodgement had been secured.

To the general public, as well as to the majority of those taking part in the assault, the invasion of Italy must have seemed a logical sequel to "Husky".\* But an examination of the pattern of the grand strategy of the war reveals that the two operations in fact belonged to distinct and separate phases. Viscount Alexander has pointed out that the conquest of Sicily marked the end of what may be called the North African chapter of strategy, which began in Cyrenaica with Mussolini's declaration of war in June 1940. The invasion of Italy opened a European chapter which was to include within its pages the campaign in the west and the complete destruction of the German armies. In this new phase "the Mediterranean theatre would no longer receive the first priority of resources and its operations would become preparatory and subsidiary to the great invasion based on the United Kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

The Casablanca Conference had not concerned itself with the question of operations which might be launched in the Mediterranean theatre after "Husky"; nor is it likely that agreement could have been reached at that time on such a contentious matter. The decision made at Anfa Camp represented a compromise between the divergent views of the London and Washington planners. In the words of General Eisenhower, it "avoided a commitment to indefinite strategic offensives in the area."<sup>3</sup> This was a most necessary safeguard in the opinion of the American Chiefs of Staff, who, while strongly pressing the claims of Northern France as "the scene of the main effort

\* On 27 August 1943 the United Kingdom's High Commissioner in Ottawa reported in a Ministry of Information Press Commentary: "All [Canadian] papers consider that attack upon Italian mainland is imminent".<sup>1</sup>



against Germany", had heard Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal declare that "it was impossible to say exactly where we should stop in the Mediterranean, since we hoped to knock Italy out altogether."<sup>4</sup>

This single-minded adherence to the thesis that victory in Europe could only come by the direct defeat of Germany, and that strategical ventures in any other than the North-West European theatre must be regarded as regrettable if unavoidable diversions from this primary object, emphasizes what one Canadian observer\* has described as "the greatest point of difference between the British and American military minds. The former hold that war is an art subject to broad principles rather than a science constrained by hard and fast rule. The United States High Command on the other hand appear always to be loath to vary a programme or scheme of things laid down and agreed on a previous occasion."<sup>5</sup> Yet as events turned out, the Americans, by accepting further commitments in the Mediterranean, were to prove more flexible than this characterization suggests; while the subsequent opposition of the British Chiefs to the invasion of Southern France exposes them in turn to the charge of inflexibility.

The argument was renewed at the "Trident" discussions in May 1943, when the largest conference of high-ranking Allied officials and officers that had yet taken place assembled in Washington.<sup>6</sup> Since Casablanca the conviction had grown that there could be no landings on the shores of Western Europe in 1943; and at the first plenary session, held in the White House on 12 May, President Roosevelt put the most urgent question of the conference, "Where do we go from 'Husky'?"<sup>7</sup> The strong British delegation, which was headed by the Prime Minister himself, saw only one answer—further immediate blows must be launched against the Axis in the Mediterranean.

Specifically the British Chiefs of Staff regarded the elimination of Italy as "the main task which lies before us this year in the European Theatre";<sup>8</sup> as Mr. Churchill put it, "the collapse of Italy would cause a chill of loneliness over the German people, and might be the beginning of their doom."<sup>9</sup> They supported their case with compelling arguments. The defeat of Italy would oblige Germany to replace some 35 Italian divisions occupying Greece, Yugoslavia and Southern France, or let go one or more of these countries; elimination of the Italian Navy would release Allied naval forces from the Mediterranean; Corsica and Sardinia would become bases from which to mount an Allied threat against Southern France in the following spring in aid of Operation "Roundup"; and an Italian collapse would be a further inducement to Turkey to make common cause with the Allies. Above all, it seemed "unthinkable that we should be inactive during these critical months when

\* Major-General M. A. Pope, from 1942 to 1944 Chairman of the Canadian Joint Staff in Washington, was well placed to assess trends in British and American military thinking.

Russia is engaging about 185 divisions (not including 14 G.A.F. divisions\* on the Eastern front)".<sup>10</sup>

These arguments did not at once convince the Americans, who had come to the Conference prepared to obtain a firm decision for a full-scale assault across the Channel in the spring of 1944, an immediate vigorous air offensive against Germany's war potential, and the preliminary build-up in the United Kingdom of forces requisite to both these projects.<sup>11</sup> With their eyes set on North-West Europe, they did not believe that any offensive in the Mediterranean in 1943 could be on a large enough scale to draw off an appreciable number of German forces from the Russian front; and they feared that such a campaign would so dissipate Allied resources as to prevent the concentration in the United Kingdom which was to aid Stalin by compelling the withdrawal of German troops into Western Europe.<sup>12</sup> They therefore proposed that after the completion of "Husky" only "limited offensive operations" should be conducted in the Mediterranean area. These would be designed "to destroy Italian War potential by continuing air attacks from Mediterranean bases; to continue support to Russia by the diversion of Axis forces in order to facilitate a cross-Channel operation; and to maintain the security of our positions and communications in the Mediterranean area." The strength of the forces employed was to be so restricted as not to prejudice the success of an invasion of North-West Europe in 1944, and the American planners left no doubt as to their position regarding a crossing of the Messina Strait when they specified that "United States ground and naval forces will not be employed in the Mediterranean east of Sicily."<sup>13</sup>

A possible basis for reconciling these differing views appeared in the attitude of each party towards an offensive in North-West Europe. The Americans opposed Mediterranean operations not in themselves, but only in so far as they might interfere with a cross-Channel assault. The British, on the other hand, agreed that such an assault should ultimately be launched, but they were concerned lest a narrow concentration on their main goal might cause the loss of an immediate opportunity for striking a damaging blow at the enemy. On one aspect of the problem both sides were of one mind: some employment would have to be found for the Mediterranean forces for the period from the end of "Husky" to the beginning of "Roundup". Mr. Churchill expressed the British view:

Supposing that "Husky" were completed by the end of August, what should these troops do between that time and the date, 7 or 8 months later, when the cross-Channel operation might first be mounted? They could not possibly stand idle, and he could not contemplate so long a period of apparent inaction. It would have a serious effect on relations with Russia, who was bearing such a disproportionate weight.<sup>14</sup>

\* German Air Force Field Divisions (*Luftwaffen-Felddivisionen*) were originally formed in 1942 from surplus Luftwaffe personnel and mainly employed as "stop-gap" formations on the Eastern front.

Eventually a compromise was reached. On the one hand the British agreed on the target date and the size of the forces required for a crossChannel invasion (soon to be given the code name "Overlord"). On their part the United States Joint Chiefs withdrew their opposition to further operations in the Mediterranean, provided that these were strictly limited in scope. The final report to the President and the Prime Minister contained the resolution by the Combined Chiefs of Staff "that the Allied Commander-in-Chief, North Africa, will be instructed, as a matter of urgency, to plan such operations in exploitation of 'Husky' as are best calculated to eliminate Italy from the War and to contain the maximum number of German forces."<sup>15</sup>

The list of limitations followed. The decision as to which specific operations should be mounted was a matter reserved to the Combined Chiefs. General Eisenhower would be given no additional forces in his theatre; indeed, four American and three British divisions under his command would be held in readiness after 1 November for transfer to the United Kingdom. He would lose the additional air forces which had been provided on a temporary basis for "Husky"; and his requirements in naval vessels would be submitted to the Combined Chiefs of Staff for approval. These reductions would leave him with an estimated 27 divisions available for garrisons and post "Husky" operations; for his striking power in the air he might count on 3648 aircraft of various types.<sup>16</sup>

On the conclusion of the Washington Conference Mr. Churchill, General Brooke and General Marshall flew to North Africa for discussions with Eisenhower at his villa in Algiers. The Prime Minister "was at his eloquent best in painting a rosy picture of the opportunities that he foresaw opening up" to the Allies with the capture of Sicily.<sup>17</sup> No attempt was made to draw up a formal post "Husky" plan-this was to be left in Eisenhower's hands.<sup>18</sup> There was, however, general agreement that the exploitation of the Sicilian operation should lead into Southern Italy, and emphasis was placed on the value of the great Foggia airfields, and the necessity of securing a major port -Naples was named.<sup>19</sup> The British representatives put forward no suggestion that operations might be extended into Northern Italy; for the American opposition to any undertaking that might weaken prospects of success in "Overlord" was well known, and Eisenhower and Marshall resolutely refused to commit Allied troops "to an all-out campaign for winning the war through the Italian approach."<sup>20</sup> At the closing meeting, however, Churchill did suggest that "the capture of Rome, with or without the elimination of Italy from the war, would be a very great achievement for our Mediterranean forces."<sup>21</sup>

From 26 May, the date on which the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington instructed Eisenhower to prepare for post-"Husky" operations, planning proceeded apace. General Alexander's staff (then known as Head-

quarters Force 141) was fully engaged with the forthcoming invasion of Sicily; accordingly the Allied Commander-in-Chief charged Allied Force Headquarters with the responsibility of examining all the possible courses of action which the long and vulnerable Italian coastline invited. Since a definite decision as to which would be adopted would depend upon the progress and outcome of the Sicilian campaign, preliminary planning had to be flexible; and the possibility of an early conclusion to that operation placed upon the planners the additional demand of urgency. They began by seeking suitable points of assault in Italy, for though the directive from Washington had not specified that operations should be launched against the Italian mainland, and the presence of Mussolini's troops along the entire northern Mediterranean coast from Thrace to the Pyrenees and in the many off-lying islands offered a wide choice of targets, it was clear that an invasion of the home peninsula was the course most likely to knock the southern Axis partner out of the war.<sup>22</sup>

One cardinal principle was immediately laid down: that no opposed landing could be contemplated outside the limit of fighter cover.<sup>23</sup> Allowing for their 180-mile radius of action, Spitfires (with long-range tanks) based on airfields in north-eastern Sicily were able to undertake operations within a circle which contained the whole of the Calabrian peninsula (the Italian "toe"), and cut the Tyrrhenian coast just north of Salerno and the shores of the Gulf of Taranto about fifteen miles short of Taranto itself (see Map 8). Thus the port and city of Naples and the naval base of Taranto lay out of reach, while within the accessible area the mountainous and unproductive regions of Calabria and Lucania contained no objective the loss of which would cause the Italians to sue for terms. From this situation two possible courses emerged: to make the short jump into the toe of the boot, and then begin a northward advance which the enemy, favoured by the ground, might block with minimum forces; or to stage the landings as far north as air cover would allow, where vital objectives were within easier reach. For the time being (this was at the end of May) consideration of the bolder of these concepts was postponed, for "Husky" had not yet tested Allied amphibious technique, nor assessed the worth of Italian troops fighting in defence of their native soil.<sup>24</sup>

A memorandum issued by A.F.H.Q. on 3 June set the pattern which detailed planning was to follow. It called for an assault on Reggio Calabria and the seizure (either by an advance overland or a seaborne attack) of the airfields and port of Crotona, a hundred miles up the east coast. These operations could be undertaken either by the formations engaged in "Husky" or by forces still in North Africa; though the Eighth Army's commitments in Sicily made it advisable to proceed on the latter basis.<sup>25</sup> Two spare corps headquarters were available in North Africa; and on 5 June these were put

under command of Force 141 and directed to prepare plans for the invasions of the mainland.\* Alexander designated the 10th British Corps for the assault on Reggio (given the code name Operation `Buttress"), and the 5th British Corps for an amphibious attack on Crotona (Operation "Goblet"). The provisional target date for "Buttress" was 1 September. "Goblet" would go in on 1 October, for it was intended to assist the overland advance from Reggio, and there were no illusions that this might not be difficult and slow.<sup>26</sup>

One more contingency was provided for. The A.F.H.Q. planners had considered what might be done if after the conquest of Sicily the enemy were found to be so strongly posted on the mainland as to make an invasion impracticable. They were also compelled to contemplate the unpleasant possibility of six Allied divisions (the maximum number which could be maintained in Calabria), having carried out the landings, being locked up for the winter in the toe of Italy by a superior enemy force massed on a strong defensive line. Accordingly the concept of the capture of Sardinia (Operation "Brimstone"), which, it will be recalled, had been considered and rejected at Casablanca, was now revived, and the Commanding General of the American Fifth Army was directed to prepare plans for such a venture. About the same time (15 June) General Henri H. Giraud (the Commander-in-Chief of the French Forces in North Africa and Joint President of the French Committee of National Liberation) was asked to nominate a commander and staff to plan the liberation of Corsica (Operation "Firebrand").<sup>27</sup> In reporting these various alternative plans to the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the end of June, Eisenhower advised them that he could not give a firm recommendation as to the course to be followed "until the probable result of `Husky' becomes apparent."<sup>28</sup>

By mid-July the satisfactory progress of the Sicilian campaign encouraged the Allied planners to look for an early end to enemy resistance on the island and to contemplate bolder strokes than they had previously considered. On the 17th General Eisenhower held a conference at Carthage, attended by Alexander, Cunningham and Tedder. It was now appreciated that "Husky" would be finished by 15 August; accordingly thereafter quick action by the Allies would be needed to minimize German efforts to reinforce Southern Italy. To this end all commanders agreed to prepare themselves for several possible operations against the Italian mainland. To the full-scale assaults against Reggio ("Buttress") and Crotona ("Goblet") already contemplated other proposals were added: a modified "Buttress", to take the form of a quick exploitation across the Strait by Eighth Army formations in Sicily, assisted by one or more divisions from North Africa; repeated outflanking operations up the coast of Calabria by small amphibious forces; the

\* An "Analysis of Availability of Headquarters and Units", issued with the A.F.H.Q. Memorandum of 3 June, shows the 1st Canadian Division with "Husky", but lists the 1st Canadian Tank Brigade as available for operations against the Italian mainland.

introduction of a reinforcing force into Naples after the port had been captured from overland; and a large amphibious operation against Taranto (bearing the code name "Musket"),\* to be carried out by the American Fifth Army, which would turn over to General Giraud the responsibility of planning the attack on Sardinia.<sup>30</sup>

Such was the situation when on 25 July the fall of Mussolini introduced a new and unexpected factor into calculations. Although the planners had correctly estimated that the general Italian public was too apathetic to rise against the Fascist authorities, they had not foreseen that a small clique of military schemers would decide that the moment was opportune to pave the way to the capitulation of Italy by staging a "palace revolution". These changed circumstances convinced the Allied Commanders-in-Chief, meeting at Carthage on the 26th, that greater risks might legitimately be taken. As early as 17 July the Combined Chiefs had signalled General Eisenhower that they were interested in "the possibilities of a direct amphibious landing operation against Naples in lieu of an attack on Sardinia"; they now cabled him to begin planning such an operation immediately.<sup>31</sup> Next day A.F.H.Q. instructed General Mark W. Clark, commander of the Fifth Army, to make plans for seizing the port and the airfields nearby, "with a view to preparing a firm base for further offensive operations." Target date for the operation (code-named "Avalanche") was to be 7 September, and the site of the initial landing Salerno Bay. The forces available to Clark would be the U.S. 6th Corps, previously allotted to the Sardinian assault, and the British 10th Corps, which was at the time assigned to Operation "Buttress".<sup>32</sup>

### The Decision to Mount Operation "Baytown"

During late July, while its chances of success were still being carefully assessed, the Salerno landing was regarded only as an alternative to a direct assault into the toe, which held top priority. The proposed operations against southern Calabria had now largely become the responsibility of the Eighth Army, whose commander had declared his intention to "carry the war into Italy on a front of two Corps; 13 Corps on the right about Reggio, 10 Corps on the left about Gioia†, and [the latter] being mounted from Africa, the whole being a normal Eighth Army operation."<sup>33</sup> The assault by the 13th Corps was to be carried out in daylight, supported by all available air power and artillery fire. It was labelled Operation "Baytown", to distinguish it from the 10th Corps operation, which retained the name "Buttress".<sup>34</sup>

\* Operation "Musket" had been considered earlier, but was rejected on 30 June by Eisenhower, on the grounds of probably unsuitable weather at the time of mounting (1 November), non-availability of sufficient landing craft, and doubts that Allied fighter cover would be adequate if the enemy air force were operating in strength from the heel of Italy.<sup>29</sup>

† Gioia Tauro, 35 miles up the coast from Reggio.

Resources in shipping and landing craft would not permit three separate assaults, however, and as the prospects for a successful "Avalanche" strengthened, support for "Buttress" declined. On 7 August Eisenhower emphasized to Alexander "the great desirability of attempting 'Avalanche' ", pointing out that this depended upon "an ability to throw troops from Sicily into the Toe without using Ten Corps nor consuming too many of our scanty number of landing craft." The Supreme Commander expressed his conviction that if it became necessary to undertake both "Baytown" and "Buttress", it would be impossible to mount "Avalanche" in 1943, "and I would dislike very much to report such a conclusion to the Combined Chiefs of Staff and to the Prime Minister and the President."<sup>35</sup> Montgomery was urging the 15th Army Group Commander that his "demands on Ten Corps have priority",<sup>36</sup> but a meeting of the Commanders-in-Chief on 13 August reached general agreement "that every effort must be made to mount 'Avalanche' and with Tenth Corps so equipped with landing craft that it can be used either on that operation or on 'Buttress', if latter proves necessary."<sup>37</sup>

The final choice was made at a Commanders-in-Chief conference held at Carthage on 16 August. The fighting in Sicily was all but over; indeed, next morning at dawn General Hube was to board the last enemy craft leaving the island. It was known that the survivors of the campaign were being heavily reinforced by new German troops pouring into Italy; yet despite this accelerated build-up and the uncertain Italian position, it was decided "to proceed at the earliest possible moment to a full-scale invasion on the lines of the boldest plan which had been considered."<sup>38</sup> At as early a date as possible (probably between 1 and 4 September, subject to General Alexander's decision) the 13th Corps would land in Calabria. Then, on 9 September, the main assault would be launched at Salerno by the Fifth Army, employing the 10th Corps, commanded by Lieut.-General Sir Richard L. McCreery, and the U.S. 6th Corps, under Major-General Ernest J. Dawley. Operations "Buttress" and "Musket" were cancelled, and the plan for the Crotona landing ("Goblet") was left to be completed as far as practicable by the 5th Corps. (It was never undertaken.) Sardinia and Corsica passed out of the strategic picture; the need for General Giraud's planning did not materialize, for in the event the Germans withdrew from both islands with a precipitancy which they probably later regretted. On 17 August the Fifth Army came under the command of the 15th Army Group, and Alexander's headquarters assumed the responsibility for both Operations "Avalanche" and "Baytown".<sup>39</sup>

Two not unconnected incidents which took place on the day before the Allied Commanders decided on the Salerno and Reggio assaults may be recorded here. A document found among Mussolini's private papers reveals that on 15 August a group of Axis political and military representatives.

headed by General Jodl, Chief of the German Armed Forces Operations Staff, and the Chief of the Italian Army General Staff, Roatta, met outside Bologna to discuss certain aspects of the defence of the peninsula jointly by German and Italian troops. They debated where the next Allied blow might be expected, and Jodl gave the German High Command's appreciation:

Two courses seem open to the enemy and we cannot decide which is the more probable: to operate towards Calabria-Puglia with the Balkans as a later objective; or towards Sardinia-Corsica, with France as a later object. The O.K.W. does not believe that the enemy plans to invade Italy bit by bit, beginning with Calabria and advancing along the ground<sup>40</sup>

On the same day in Madrid, Roatta's assistant, one Brigadier-General Giuseppe Castellano, called upon the British Ambassador with credentials proving that he came with full authority from Marshal Badoglio to say-as later reported by Mr. Churchill in the British House of Commons-"that when the Allies landed in Italy the Italian Government were prepared to join them against Germany; and when could they come?"<sup>41</sup>

The chain of political developments which Castellano's visit set in motion, and which culminated in the signing of an armistice with Italy, will be described in a subsequent chapter. In general they did not affect the main Allied purpose of landing in strength upon the Italian mainland, preparations and planning for which went busily ahead.

As we have seen, the 1st Canadian Division had already been tentatively selected for participation in the Eighth Army's assault. Formal approval by the Canadian Government was given on 16 August, when in reply to a query from General McNaughton, General Stuart signalled from Ottawa:

Shortly after receipt your message intimation was received from highest level to highest level here that exploitation may be immediate and enquired if it was in order to use Canadians in extension of operations to Italy. Reply is being made that this will be in order.<sup>42</sup>

Canada had not been represented at the "Trident" Conference, and the summary of the Washington discussions which Mr. Mackenzie King received from London on 5 June used only general terms in describing the operations which the Combined Chiefs of Staff had "agreed on in execution of the overall strategic conceptions". These included the resolution "to make available in the Mediterranean substantial forces for such operations as are best calculated to eliminate Fascist Italy from the war and to contain the maximum of Germans."<sup>43</sup> At a meeting with the British Chiefs of Staff Committee in Quebec on the opening day of the "Quadrant" Conference, however, the Canadian Chiefs of Staff\* were given an outline of plans for future Allied strategy. The necessity of continuing operations against Italy was impressed upon them, and they were told of the three possible

\* Vice-Admiral P. W. Nelles, Lieut.-General Kenneth Stuart and Air Marshal L. S. Breadner.



alternatives ("Baytown", "Buttress" and "Avalanche") which were then under consideration to exploit the conquest of Sicily.<sup>44</sup> Mr. Churchill met Mr. Mackenzie King at the Conference; presumably this was the occasion of the exchange between the two "highest levels".

### Planning for "Baytown"

The task given to General Montgomery for Operation "Baytown" was "to secure a bridgehead on the 'toe' of Italy to enable our Naval forces to operate through the Straits of Messina" and to follow up an enemy withdrawal "with such force as you can make available, bearing in mind that the greater the extent to which you can engage enemy forces in the southern 'toe' of Italy, the more assistance you will be giving to 'Avalanche'."<sup>45</sup> The Eighth Army Commander decided to use initially the 13th Corps only, assaulting on a two-division front north of Reggio--the Canadian Division on the right, and the British 5th Division on the left--heavily supported by air attack and naval bombardment and by artillery fire from the 30th Corps on the Messina side of the Strait. Preliminary Planning Instructions issued by General Dempsey's headquarters on 14 August conveyed these assignments to the formations concerned, and provided the basis for detailed preparations at lower levels. The 5th Division would assault with two brigades; the Canadians would land on a single brigade front. When the beaches and the overlooking high ground had been secured, the divisions would seize the initial Corps objectives--the 5th the town of Villa San Giovanni, and the Canadians the town of Reggio and its airfield<sup>46</sup> (see Map 6).

General Simonds' outline plan, naming the 3rd Brigade to lead the Canadian assault, appeared on 17 August, and next day personnel of the Royal Navy pitched their tents at Divisional Headquarters and at Brigadier Penhale's headquarters, and remained with them to complete the details of combined planning. The amenities of Norfolk House were entirely lacking. The sinkings in July had caused a shortage of tents, office equipment and telephones; and work was exceedingly burdensome in the intense heat, under the torment of innumerable flies. At night the temperature inside "blacked out" office tents rose to over 100 degrees. Nevertheless good progress was made, and when General McNaughton visited Sicily he was able on 24 August to attend an elaborate briefing of all officers of the Division down to commanders of battalions and equivalent units.<sup>47</sup>

The Calabrian peninsula, so soon to be the point of entry for the Allied Armies into the European continent, forms the instep and toe of the Italian foot. From the Castrovillari isthmus, marked by the western curve of the

Gulf of Taranto, the peninsula extends 130 miles to Cape Spartivento at its southern tip. The narrow Catanzaro isthmus, a comparatively low-lying neck of land between the Gulf of Sant' Eufemia and the Gulf of Squillace, less than twenty miles from sea to sea, connects the mountainous region of the toe with the large massif known as the Sila, which fills the instep. Three great plateaux dominate the peninsula - the Sila in the north, the Serre in the centre, and the Aspromonte in the south. These granite formations are of impressive height, with steep, terraced sides; the huge hump of the Aspromonte covers a rough square, twenty-five miles on a side, and rises in the Montalto peak to 6400 feet above sea-level. Between the sea and the series of platforms which serve as foothills there is little room for coastal plains. The most extensive of these are the arable flats which face the gulfs on either seaboard; while on the Ionian flank, where the fall of the land is less precipitous, a long, narrow strip skirts the coast from Cape Spartivento to the Catanzaro isthmus.

The entire coastline from the shores of the Gulf of Taranto to eastern Sicily was once studded with the flourishing colonies of Magna Graecia; and the modern names of Reggio, Locri and Croton recall the early glories of the city states of Rhegium, Locrium and Croton. By the middle ages the seaborne depredations of Vandal and Saracen had driven most of the coastal inhabitants to seek security in the interior. Some of their village strongholds they built a few miles inland, overlooking the sea from commanding sites along the lower mountain terraces; others they planted more remotely on almost inaccessible hilltops in the wilds of the Aspromonte and the Sila. With the coming of the relative security of modern times many of these "terrace towns" developed small hamlets or villages in the narrow coastal strip-some as agricultural or fishing settlements, others as beach resorts for the parent community, whose name each such "Marina" bears.

As might be expected, the topography of Calabria presented difficulties in the building of communications rarely surpassed elsewhere in the country. The State highway which encircled the peninsula-for the most part squeezed tightly against the railroad which hugged the entire shoreline-provided two main avenues of approach to the north. Two major lateral roads snaked their way over the great obstacle of the Aspromonte and the high saddle which joined it to the Serre formation, their gradients stiffer and their turnings more frequent than in any part of Italy outside the Alps. The southerly of these, Highway No. 112, crossed from Bagnara on the west coast to Bovalino Marina on the east;- and although these two places were but 26 miles apart, the traveller by road journeyed 63 miles. Farther north the somewhat less tortuous Highway No. 111 joined Gioia Tauro with Locri. Supplementing these masterpieces of engineering a few minor roads served the interior of the peninsula; the most important was one which

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climbed from Melito\* at the extreme southern tip to traverse the Aspromonte midway between the east and west coasts, and from which a connecting road wound down 3500 feet into Reggio.<sup>48</sup>

The Catanzaro neck was to be General Montgomery's first main objective, and he intended that the 13th Corps' main thrust would be made by the 5th Division along the western coastal road, while the Canadian Division struck eastward from Reggio into the mountains, and then advanced northward along the inland axis. There were not sufficient bridging resources to develop operations along the eastern coastal highway, where numerous river crossings, road tunnels and overhanging rock ledges would give enemy demolition parties unlimited scope; to secure his right flank against enemy interference the Army Commander therefore planned on a commando landing to destroy the road near Melito. (Reconnaissance patrols from No. 3 Commando were put ashore on three successive nights, but when owing to the failure of their wireless sets no messages came back from them the raid was cancelled on 30 August.)<sup>49</sup>

The selection of beaches in the area to be assaulted presented no great difficulty, for choice was limited. That part of the Calabrian coast washed by the Strait of Messina had virtually no coastal plain, for the Aspromonte spilled its foothills into the sea, and only a narrow shelf permitted the passage of road and railway. The steep mountain slopes were drained by numerous torrents known as *fumare*, whose wide beds of sand and gravel, dry through most of the year, could be clearly seen from the Sicilian shore as white seams in the dark, densely wooded hillside. To avoid flooding during the rainy season, the Italians had protected their cultivated holdings on the fertile slopes by confining the lower reaches of these watercourses within concrete retaining walls—a practice which effectively precluded their possible use as exits for vehicles from the adjacent beaches.

From Villa San Giovanni—the eastern terminus of the Messina ferry and point of trans-shipment of trains for Sicily—Highway No. 18 followed the coastline to Reggio, seven miles to the south, crossing the dry, shallow mouths of two wide mountain streams—the Fiumara di Catona and the Fiumara di Gallico—and a number of smaller watercourses. South of the Gallico the coastline curved in two small well-defined bays separated by the walled Torrente Torbido, a *fiumara* which entered the sea about a mile north of the outskirts of Reggio. The sector chosen for the main 13th Corps landings extended approximately 6000 yards north from the city and embraced the two bays. The northern was assigned to the two assaulting brigades of the 5th Division (the 17th on the left, the 13th on the right); the 3rd Canadian Brigade would land in the southern bay, between the mouth of the Torbido and Santa Caterina, a suburb of Reggio.<sup>50</sup>

\* See p. 697.

The Canadian sector bore the code name "Fox", and was subdivided into "Amber" beach (north) and "Green" beach (south). Although narrow, these beaches fulfilled the main requirements of an assault landing. A stretch of firm sand of gentle gradient, 25 to 50 yards wide, extended southward about 750 yards from the mouth of the Torbido. Its suitability for landing craft was attested by air photographs which showed enemy lighters unloading there during the evacuation from Sicily. A stretch of low cultivated ground behind the sand-strip, wider in the "Amber" sector, where the shoreline curved outward to form the northern arm of the bay, provided space for the many and varied beach installations for which room must be found in the Divisional Maintenance Area. On the landward side this space was backed by the railway, which here ran along an embankment 20 feet high, with the highway beyond. Beach-exits, however, were not lacking, for a number of underpasses below the railway gave access to the highway. Indeed, here again the enemy answered the questions of the Canadian planners, for aerial reconnaissance revealed vehicle tracks leading to these exits from the water's edge.<sup>51</sup>

According to the corps and divisional intelligence staffs, enemy defences between Villa San Giovanni and Reggio were not formidable, and were confined chiefly to pillboxes mounting machine-guns, with an occasional Italian 47-mm. anti-tank gun. Little wire was apparent on the 5th Division's beaches, and none on "Fox". Inland, the coast defence emplacements were reported to be either unoccupied or incapable of depressing their gun barrels sufficiently to bring fire to bear on the beaches themselves, for they had been designed for an anti-ship role and could only fire seaward. After the end of hostilities in Sicily these coastal batteries engaged in sporadic shelling of the coast road between Messina and Scaletta, but by 28 August the 30th Corps' artillery had moved into positions near the Strait, and its counter-battery programme appreciably diminished the activity of the Italian gunners. The hub of the defence system in the immediate neighbourhood of Reggio--which was of principal concern to the Canadian Division--was to be found in two forts in the foothills, about a mile north-east of the town and immediately behind "Fox" beach. One of these was known to be unoccupied, but the more northerly, situated on a conical hill 305 metres high, subsequently proved to be equipped with Italian 280-mm. howitzers having a range of 8000 yards.<sup>52</sup>

### Enemy Dispositions in Italy

Allied intelligence staffs had established the Italian order of battle in Calabria with an accuracy later verified by captured enemy documents. It was accepted that the Italians relied mainly, as in Sicily, upon a system of

static coastal defences manned by garrison troops,\* whose morale and fighting capacity could, in the light of experience, be judged weak.

The Italian forces in Southern Italy consisted of three Corps, the 9th disposed at Bari for the defence of Apulia, the 19th at Naples, and the 31st at Catanzaro, all under the command of the Seventh Army, with headquarters in Potenza. For the defence of Calabria the 31st Corps commanded four coastal divisions, the 211th, 212th, 214th and 227th, and a field division, the 104th (Mantova), which was stationed north of the Catanzaro isthmus in the Cosenza area, presumably in a counter-attack role. The doubtful honour of holding the front line in the Calabrian peninsula was given to the 211th Coastal Division, which had its headquarters at Cittanova, on the lateral road from Gioia to Locri. Its coastal battalions, interspersed with some dismounted cavalry groups (second-line troops formed into units about 500 strong), were spread thinly around the toe from the Gulf of Gioia to the Gulf of Squillace. Behind them a battalion of Blackshirt militia and a battalion of paratroops of the 184th (Nembo) Division† were stationed in the Aspromonte to provide some necessary stiffening. All in all these defence forces could not be regarded as formidable; the estimated strength at the "Fox" beaches was no more than two platoons of infantry, possibly supported by a machine-gun section.<sup>55</sup>

There were two questions to which the Allied planners sought answers. Would the Germans offer any determined resistance to a landing in southern Calabria? If so, would they repeat the mistake made in Sicily of allowing Italian coastal troops full responsibility for the beaches, while maintaining a German mobile reserve intact in the background? During the early stages of planning an affirmative answer appeared likely to the first question; for the second, it was generally appreciated that German units would be sandwiched together with Italian forces along the coast to stiffen the latter's resistance and put a stop to the widespread desertions into the hills that were reported to be taking place. As D Day drew near, however, the reports of refugee civilians indicated a growing confusion in the ranks of the Italians, and less likelihood of a determined stand on the beaches by either Italians or Germans. An intelligence summary issued by H.Q. 1st Canadian Division on 31 August forecast a "German defence of the ground behind the beaches in the triangle Reggio--S. Stefano--Gallico" (see p. 697) by not more than two infantry battalions.<sup>56</sup> The estimate was not far wrong. A "Tactical Report" submitted by the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division at the end of

\* According to Roatta there was only one coastal battalion for every 29 kilometres of coast from the French frontier to Bari.<sup>53</sup>

† This division, formed late in 1942 from remnants of the 185th (Folgore) Parachute Division, which was destroyed in North Africa, was in effect an infantry formation.<sup>54</sup> The Nembo Division's tactical sign, appropriate to its designation, was a rain cloud breaking in sudden shower, just as that of the Folgore had been a thunderbolt.

October showed that at the time of the 13th Corps landings the only German forces in the Aspromonte region were the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, which were deployed south of Bagnara, covering the main traffic arteries.<sup>57</sup>

In turning to the larger picture of the German dispositions throughout Italy at the beginning of September it is necessary to examine briefly the developments which had taken place during recent months in the enemy's political and military strategy in the Mediterranean. German military commitments in Italy began on a very small scale late in 1940, when Hitler ordered air units amounting approximately to one wing to be assigned "for a limited time only" to operate against the British fleet from airfields in Southern Italy.<sup>58</sup> When Rommel's Afrika Korps went to Libya the following spring, Italy's usefulness as a base for reinforcing operations in North Africa became apparent. At the end of 1941 the German High Command sent an air corps and anti-aircraft units to Southern Italy and North Africa, in order, as Hitler's directive of 2 December declared, "to lay a foundation for the protection and expansion of our position in the Mediterranean theatre and to establish a concentration of the forces of the Axis powers in the central part of the Mediterranean." The transfer of these German forces was made the occasion for the appointment of Field Marshal Kesselring as C.-in-C. South.<sup>59</sup> By the spring of 1943 Axis disasters in Africa and the probability of Allied operations against Southern Europe had compelled the German High Command to strengthen its garrisons along the Mediterranean coasts. The Balkans received priority in reinforcements--as the framers of Allied deception plans had hoped they would--and by the end of May German forces there had risen from seven to thirteen divisions. In Italy, as we have seen, the German effort had been confined during the last stages of the fighting in Tunisia to the organization of the three formations (the 15th and 90th Panzer Grenadier and the Hermann Goring Panzer Divisions) to bolster the defences of Sicily, Sardinia and the mainland. At the same time preparations were well advanced, in spite of Mussolini's objections, to move additional panzer and panzer grenadier divisions into the country, "to provide a backbone for the Italian troops."<sup>60</sup>

This support was more than mere disinterested aid to a partner fallen into need (though Hitler's loyalty to his old ally Mussolini was undoubtedly a contributing factor); there were impelling reasons for the continued inclusion of the Italian peninsula in the German scheme of defence. To abandon Italy would be to lose large numbers of useful auxiliary troops garrisoning the Balkans and Southern France; make available to the Allies a base for an offensive into the Balkans; give them airfields from which to extend the strategic air campaign against Germany; and deprive the Reich of the substantial Italian industrial production. That Italy might come to separate war terms with the Allies and drop out of the war was a contingency

not unforeseen by Berlin, although, as a retrospective appreciation by the High Command in July 'put it, "the adherence of Italy to the Alliance--and consequently some degree of readiness to watch and protect the coasts of the homeland--were assured as long as the Duce guided the fortunes of Italy."<sup>61</sup> In May the German Armed Forces Operations Staff had framed measures to meet the situation that would arise in the event of an Italian collapse, and when word of Mussolini's downfall reached Berlin it appeared that the time for putting these into effect was not far distant. The High Command's situation report for 25 July declared that

The Führer was firmly determined, should the need arise, to take over and hold the Italian positions with German Forces. The determining factor here above all was the conviction that the war must be kept as far as possible from the heart of Europe, and thereby from the borders of Germany.<sup>62</sup>

It was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that Hitler's reluctance to yield ground without a fight had asserted itself.

The German reinforcement of Italy proceeded along lines suggested by this policy, and by 25 July the forces originally allocated for that purpose had been increased by five divisions and two corps headquarters.\* Mussolini's deposition accelerated the southward flow of German troops, and ten days later the total German strength, either in Italy or en route, had risen to fifteen divisions.<sup>64</sup>

On 8 August, acting upon orders from Berlin, Kesselring began organizing a subordinate Army Headquarters, "*Armeeoberkommando 10*", to relieve himself of the increasing detail of tactical command and to tighten control of the German forces strung out in Southern Italy. The new Tenth Army embraced the 14th Panzer Corps, still in Sicily, and the 76th Panzer Corps (commanded by General of Panzer Troops Traugott Herr), on the southern mainland. On 22 August General of Panzer Troops Heinrich von Vietinghoff (after 1 September Col.-General) assumed tactical command, establishing his headquarters at Polla, forty miles south-east of Salerno.<sup>65</sup> His allotted tasks were outlined in orders issued by the Führer on 18 August.

1. Sooner or later the capitulation of Italy before enemy pressure is to be expected.
2. In preparation for this, Tenth Army must keep the line of retreat open. Central Italy, especially the Rome area, is to be held until then by OBS.
3. In the coastal area from Naples to Salerno, which at first is the most threatened, a strong group consisting of at least three mobile formations from Tenth Army is to be assembled. All no longer mobile elements of the Army are to be moved to this area. At first fully mobile elements may remain between Catanzaro and Castrovillari to take part in mobile operations. Elements of 1 Para Div may be employed for the protection of Foggia. In the case of an enemy landing the area Naples-Salerno must be held. South of the defile of Castrovillari there is only to be delaying action ...<sup>66</sup>

\* H.Q. 14th and 76th Panzer Corps, the 16th and 26th Panzer Divisions, the 3rd and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions, and the 1st Parachute Division.<sup>63</sup>



As General Hube's forces made good their escape from Sicily, H.Q. 14th Panzer Corps and its two hardest-hit formations—the Hermann Görings and the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division—moved into the Naples-Salerno area (which Hitler had personally told von Vietinghoff to regard as "the centre of gravity").<sup>67</sup> Here they were joined by the 16th Panzer Division, brought over from Apulia (as its movement order stated) "to prevent an enemy landing in the Gulf of Salerno".<sup>68</sup> The 29th Panzer Grenadier Division and the 1st Parachute Division, neither of which, it will be recalled, had been fully committed in Sicily, were concentrated farther down the peninsula as part of the 76th Panzer Corps: the former as the southernmost German formation in Calabria, to fight a delaying action and protect the northward move of the 26th Panzer Division; the latter in Apulia to give security to the Foggia airfields.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, at the time of the "Baytown" landings, the following were the German dispositions in Italy. As just noted, there were six divisions south of Rome. In the neighbourhood of the capital itself, but not under the Tenth Army, Kesselring held two formations in reserve—the 3rd Panzer Grenadier and the 2nd Parachute Divisions, ostensibly to reinforce the forces in the south, in reality to be in readiness to seize control of Rome and keep open the line of retreat in the event of Italian treachery;<sup>70</sup> also under his command were the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division in Sardinia, and an independent brigade in Corsica. North of the Apennines a concentration of eight divisions was grouped into three corps\* under Army Group "B", which had appeared in the order of battle during the second week of August. In command was Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, who since the end of the campaign in North Africa had been serving at Hitler's headquarters as "military adviser."<sup>71</sup> His present responsibilities were Northern Italy, Slovenia and Croatia, but it was Hitler's intention that "at a time yet to be decided" (in other words, when the expected Italian defection took place) Army Group "B" should assume control of all German forces in Italy.<sup>72</sup>

The introduction of these forces into Italy and the manner of their disposition had been the subject of considerable argument and not a little wrangling between the German and Italian military chiefs, for the Axis ties were by this time wearing pretty thin. A memorandum prepared on 6 August by General Vittorio Ambrosio, Chief of the Supreme General Staff, reveals the distrust which existed between the two nominal allies. Claiming the right of the Italian Comando Supremo to determine where the German divisions should be placed, Ambrosio pointed out the fixed Italian purpose to defend Southern Italy to the utmost. The German High Command had formally declared its intention of defending only the north, and yet had

\* The 87th, the 2nd S.S. Panzer and the 51st Mountain Corps.

made troop dispositions which were obviously directed to take over control of Central Italy, should that become necessary. Against this dual policy, both aspects of which were unwelcome to the Italians, Ambrosio protested "frankly, as is meet among Allies and soldiers."<sup>73</sup> (It must be admitted that such "frankness" would make less demands on our credulity could we be assured that he was ignorant of the treachery which Badoglio was at that moment planning towards the German ally.)

The two conflicting plans for the defence of Italy were propounded at the Bologna conference on 15 August to which we have already referred. The minutes of the meeting bring out strongly the atmosphere of mutual suspicion which prevailed; and the tension was not noticeably lessened by Jodl's declaration that "it is the duty of the High Commands to have a sense of distrust, which is, after all, merely a measure of precaution—not only towards their Allies but also towards their own troops."<sup>74</sup> The Italians proposed that of the twelve German divisions in Italy (this number excludes the four engaged in Sicily) nine should be in Southern and Central Italy, one in Corsica and only two in Northern Italy and Liguria. The German plan, on the other hand, called for a strong group of eight divisions in the north, from which movements to the south might take place as enemy intentions became clearly established; meanwhile there would be German mobile reserves of two divisions in Central Italy, and of six divisions, including the four brought back from Sicily, in the south.<sup>75</sup>

It is clear that the Germans had no intention of allowing the bulk of their forces to be drawn so far down the peninsula that at the moment of Italian treachery these would be a dangerous distance from their bases and dispersed in small groups.<sup>76</sup> Nor did Hitler favour the idea of exposing his own divisions to the impact of an Allied attack in order to save Italian soldiers. The German High Command makes this clear in a long ultimatum subsequently prepared for presentation to the Comando Supremo (although the Italian capitulation came the day before the note was to have been delivered). It demanded the

Creation of a strong Italian front in Southern Italy, behind which the German Tenth Army must be assured of the necessary freedom of movement against landed enemy.

Creation of a strong system of coast protection between Rome and the French boundary by the Italian formations to be moved in from Northern Italy and the Alps; behind these formations as operational reserves to be Army Group "B" and the two German divisions near Rome.<sup>77</sup>

The conference ended without reaching agreement on the security measures to be adopted for Italy. By telephone Jodl reported to FieldMarshal Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the Armed Forces High Command, "The previous causes of mistrust remain in full force ...."<sup>78</sup>

One extract from the minutes of the Bologna meeting is of more than passing interest. The two leading protagonists were considering a map which showed the German dispositions in Italy.

*Roatta:* That line on the map bounding the southern border of the bivouac area of this concentration, and which runs south of Viareggio, Florence, Arezzo, and Rimini\*--is it an imaginary line or has it operational significance?

*Jodl:* Actually it is a holding line which must be reconnoitred on [the ground] and then fortified.<sup>79</sup>

Within a year the "operational significance" of this "holding line" was to be fully recognized by all the armies in Italy; for reconnoitred and fortified it was, and in breaking through the defences of this Gothic Line the Allied forces were to fight some of their hardest battles of the Italian campaign.

As might be expected, the failure to secure Italian acquiescence in the proposals it had put forward at Bologna in no way deterred the German High Command from pursuing its intended course. On 16 August Hitler ordered Rommel to move the Headquarters of Army Group "B" from Munich into Northern Italy,<sup>80</sup> next day he received von Vietinghoff and instructed him, as we have already noted, in the conduct of the campaign in Southern Italy, including the direction that preparations "be made permitting the transfer of all troops to Central Italy in case of a special order to do so."<sup>81</sup>

### Prelude to Invasion

During the last two weeks of August, on the edge of the hot Catania plain the men of the 1st Canadian Division readied themselves for the forthcoming operation. The fact that the 3rd Brigade had not previously engaged in an assault landing made it imperative that its units should be given some practice in their role; but the acute overall shortage of landing craft (the arduous work of supplying over the beaches the armies in Sicily had caused a steady deterioration in the serviceability of the craft employed) meant that none was available for any lengthy period of training. From such improvisations as "embarking" in an imaginary "landing craft", represented by a rectangular perimeter of stones on a Sicilian hillside, the troops progressed to a one day's rehearsal with the actual craft and crews assigned to them for the operation. On 29 August, on a beach two miles south of Augusta, where assembly of the landing craft assigned for "Baytown" had been completed two days before, the West Nova Scotia and the Carleton and York Regiments, the two battalions selected to assault "Fox" beach, practised loading into and disembarking from L.C.As., while

\* See p. 697.

the Royal 22e, which, as reserve battalion, was scheduled to follow from Catania, used the larger L.C.I. (L)s.\* From this brief joint exercise with the Navy, which was carried on under General Simonds' observation (not to mention that of some enemy aircraft making a surprise raid on Augusta harbour), the 3rd Brigade picked up several useful pointers, not the least enlightening of which was the discovery, as later disclosed by the Brigade Major, that in designating the assault beaches "the Naval staff were considering 'Right' and 'Left' in the reverse order that we were considering the terms."<sup>82</sup>

The re-equipping of the Canadian Division proceeded smoothly in all matters but one. The non-arrival in time of some ships of a convoy bringing Canadian transport from the United Kingdom left several shortages in the scale of vehicles prescribed by the Eighth Army for Operation "Baytown". Already a number of vehicles had been withdrawn from the 2nd Brigade and certain units of low priority in the invasion, in order that the 3rd Brigade might have these in time to waterproof them for the assault. At the last moment it was found necessary to ask the Eighth Army to make up these deficiencies, and this was done by drawing from the 30th Corps. Most of the vehicles thus supplied had only two-wheel drive and had seen lengthy service in Africa; they did not rate highly in the eyes of the troops, who had learned to rely on Canadian-built vehicles. Accordingly, in expressing his appreciation for this timely assistance, the senior "A" and "Q" officer of the Division made it clear to his "opposite number" in the Eighth Army that the loan should be regarded as only temporary, and that the Division hoped to receive its own vehicles when the delayed shipment arrived.<sup>83</sup>

On 31 August, just seventeen days after starting its planning, the Canadian Division was ready for its part in Operation "Baytown". The beaches at Mili Marina, on the Messina Strait exactly opposite Reggio, had been selected as the point of embarkation for the assault battalions of the 13th Corps; the follow-up brigades would be ferried across from Santa Teresa, ten miles up the coast from Taormina<sup>84</sup> (see Map 1). In the afternoon of 1 September the West Nova Scotias and the Carleton and Yorks moved in T.C.Vs.† from Francofonte to Catania. As night fell they put to sea in L.C.Is. and headed up the coast to Mili Marina. It was still dark when they disembarked next morning and sought shelter for the day in dry gullies that scored the bare hillsides. The Royal 22e moved in turn to Catania on 2 September, and there embarked in readiness to join the assault convoy on the morning of D Day. Units of the 1st Brigade, the follow-up brigade for the Canadian assault, went by road past the towering

\* Landing Craft Infantry (Large), a sea-going craft, equipped with bow ramps for beach landings, capable of carrying 200 men.

† Troop-carrying vehicles.

mass of Mount Etna to their assembly areas between Taormina and Santa Teresa; the 2nd Brigade, following the same route from Militello, staged at Riposto, preparatory to taking its turn at embarkation on the Santa Teresa beaches. These various movements were executed under the most rigid traffic control to prevent any tell-tale congestion of vehicles on the coastal road, which was under continuous observation from Italy.<sup>85</sup>

Although the termination of hostilities in Sicily had brought to General Alexander's armies a brief respite from fighting, there had been no abatement in the operations of the Allied naval and air forces. The Naval Force Commander for "Baytown" was Rear-Admiral R.R. McGrigor, who had commanded Force "B" in the "Husky" landings (see above, p. 64); he had subsequently been appointed Flag Officer, Sicily, responsible for the organization of the ports captured in Eastern Sicily.<sup>86</sup> While his staff busied itself with the detailed planning, units of the Royal Navy bombarded key points in the Italian toe. On four occasions between 19 and 31 August cruisers and destroyers of Force "K" (above, p. 64) engaged batteries from Reggio south to Point Pellarò\*; on the 31st coast defences around Reggio were shelled by the great guns of H.M.S. *Rodney* and *Nelson*; and two days later *Warspite* and *Valiant* blasted targets in the vicinity of Capo dell'Armi. Under cover of darkness destroyers fired on shore batteries from Reggio to Cape Spartivento during this period, as part of the design to distract the enemy's attention from the actual landing-places. Adding weight to this deception were the pre-D Day landings of the commando patrols at the southern extremity of the peninsula (above, p. 191), suggesting beach reconnaissances which would herald an Allied assault in that sector.<sup>87</sup>

On the Allied air forces, however, fell the chief burden of active preparation for the forthcoming landings. Their main tasks, prior to the launching of "Baytown" and "Avalanche", were to upset the enemy's logistics by disrupting his lines of communication, and diminish his air effort by damaging his airfields and destroying his aircraft. During the last half of August heavy bombers of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force--aided by the Ninth U.S. Air Force and two R.A.F. squadrons based in Cyrenaica--struck vigorously at the overburdened Italian railway system. Apart from a few minor by-pass lines all rail traffic to Southern Italy was channelled through one of three bottlenecks--Rome, Naples and Foggia. It followed that attacks upon the marshalling yards in these areas and at a few other specified points would pay the greatest dividends. While the Sicilian campaign was still in progress the main yards at Rome and Naples had received their share of attention; now on 19 August Foggia, the principal rail centre for south-eastern Italy, felt the weight of 646 tons of Allied bombs. A co-ordinated attack by 162 Strategic Air Force Fortresses and

\* See p. 697.

71 Liberators of the Ninth U.S. Air Force cut the lines leading east, west and south from the city, inflicting considerable damage on the railway yards, repair shops and rolling stock, and nearby factories and warehouses. It was a crippling blow, and was followed later in the month by other heavy and medium bomber sorties, designed to hamper attempts at repairing the damage. Far up the peninsula the west coast system of railways received the second-heaviest attack of the period, when 152 Fortresses bombed Pisa on 31 August. There were 972 sorties by heavy bombers between 18 August and 2 September. They were supplemented by more than 2000 medium sorties made in the same period by aircraft of both the Strategic and Tactical Air Forces following up the work of the heavies on targets in the Naples, Salerno, Foggia and Taranto areas. In the Calabrian peninsula itself light bombers made a series of attacks on Castrovillari and Catanzaro and on other rail and road junctions and bridges throughout the toe. By night, meanwhile, a few Malta-based Mosquitoes prowled over Italy, successfully bombing and strafing trains, road traffic and railway stations.<sup>88</sup>

The heavy blows struck at the enemy's Italian airfields before and during Operation "Husky" had so reduced Axis air resistance that it was not necessary to launch any general offensive against landing-grounds such as had preceded the invasion of Sicily. The most notable single attack on airfields was directed against the important Foggia group, where the main concentration of enemy aircraft in Southern Italy was based. On the morning of 25 August a combined raid by 140 Lightnings and 136 Fortresses dealt installations and aircraft on four of these fields a crippling blow. Photographs showed that in addition to the havoc wrought by the Fortresses' 500-lb. bombs on hangars and runways, the strafing Lightnings had reaped a rich harvest on grounded enemy bombers and fighters, destroying at least 47 and damaging thirteen more.<sup>89</sup> Closer to the scene and nearer to the time of the forthcoming invasion enemy positions in southern Calabria became targets for attacks by light bombers of the Tactical Air Force. In the week before D Day Bostons and Baltimores of the South African Air Force, R.A.F. Baltimores and U.S. Mitchells struck at gun positions in and near Reggio and Villa San Giovanni and enemy troops concentrated south of the Catanzaro isthmus. On D minus 1 the tempo of the offensive quickened. Eighty-two medium and light bombers concentrated on suspected enemy headquarters in the toe; another 81 bombed gun positions east of Reggio; 24 Bostons attacked troops at Bova, near the south coast.<sup>90</sup>

To all this activity the enemy made remarkably little reply. It was evident, in the last few days before "Baytown", that he had concentrated his fighter strength, his best pilots and his heaviest anti-aircraft defences in the Naples sector, leaving in Calabria only a few fighters and a mere

handful of anti-aircraft guns.<sup>91</sup> In the two weeks that followed the evacuation of Sicily the decimated Luftwaffe managed to maintain regular reconnaissance of Allied ports, and there were a few hit-and-run raids on these; but strength was lacking for any effective blows on the harbours in which the invasion forces were assembling. By the evening of 2 September the air forces' pre-invasion task was finished. Southern Italy, completely dependent on the north for its supplies, was virtually isolated\*, its tenuous network of railways shattered beyond immediate repair, its airfields pitted by innumerable craters, and the majority of its coastal batteries beaten into silence. A more energetic and phlegmatic people than the Italians might well have quailed at such a prelude to the onset of the Allied armies. In Italy as it was then, disappointed, disorganized and disillusioned, the game was nearly up.

### The Assault Across the Strait, 3 September

As darkness fell on the evening of 2 September the assaulting battalions of the 13th Corps came down from the hills behind Mili Marina, and formed up in their appointed groups along the beaches. The weather, in contrast to the rude welcome it had given the Allied invaders of Sicily, was ideal. The sea was dead calm, and the faint moonlight gave just enough visibility to disclose general outlines. Shortly before midnight the L.C.As. arrived from their concentration harbours and began touching down in a continuous line along the shore. The men, who had been resting on the sand, started packing themselves and their equipment into the tiny craft. By 2:30 a.m. the force was embarked--the battalions of the 3rd Canadian Brigade on the right, the 13th Brigade in the centre and the 17th Brigade on the left. Now the craft slid away from the beaches and began to form up for the seven-mile journey to the Italian mainland. In the meantime, at midnight the L.C.Is. bearing the Royal 22e Regiment had slipped out of harbour at Catania and headed up the coast to keep their rendezvous with the rest of the Canadian brigade.<sup>93</sup>

When the sixteen L.C.As. assigned to carry the Canadian assault companies drew in to the Mili Marina beach, four L.C.Ms.† came with them, to embark the follow-up companies who were scheduled to land on "Fox" beach five minutes after the leading troops. To the soldiers

\* On 15 August Roatta told Jodl that 35 trains daily were needed to supply German and Italian troops and the civilian population south "of Rome. He estimated that "to replace the railways to any extent we should need 5000 trucks", and declared that these were not available from Italian or German sources.<sup>92</sup>

† Landing Craft Mechanized. The "Mark III" type (L.C.M. (3)) used by the Canadians in "Baytown" was a 50-foot ramped craft, built to carry 24 tons, - and capable of landing a vehicle or stores in shallow water.

climbing aboard these larger craft the voices of the crews had a familiar ring-for they were Canadian sailors. The 80th L.C.M. Flotilla, commanded by Lieutenant J. E. Koyl, R.C.N.V.R., had been detailed to provide part of the transport ferry for the 3rd Brigade-an all too rare example of operational partnership between the two Canadian services. The flotilla's remaining six craft were assigned to the second wave. Lieutenant Koyl's vessels and their crews performed their part in the D Day assault well, and for 32 days thereafter participated in the arduous work of the ferry service between Sicily and the Italian mainland. It will be recalled that a second Canadian L.C.M. flotilla, the 81st, had been engaged with the 80th in ferrying operations during "Husky" (above, p. 77) ; but its craft were of an earlier design and less powerful than those of its sister flotilla (which used L.C.M. (3)s of American manufacture, powered by diesel engines), and accordingly at a late stage in the planning it was left out of "Baytown"<sup>94</sup>

The miniature fleet bound for "Fox" beach moved in four parallel columns headed by its guiding launch. To the Canadians crouching in their box-like boats the Strait to the north seemed filled with the dark shapes of the craft ferrying the British troops, and the throbbing of so many motors alarmingly broke the stillness of the night. At 3:30 these sounds were drowned in the thunder of a mighty barrage which burst from the Sicilian shore and from warships lying in the Strait to the south of the main crossings. The fire came from 410 field and 120 medium guns under the command of the 30th Corps, including the 6th Army Group Royal Artillery (normally allotted to the 13th Corps) and some heavy guns of the U.S. Seventh Army.<sup>95</sup> Because the channel opposite "Fox" beach was wider than farther north, fire tasks in support of the Canadian assault were given to four medium regiments;\* the field regiments with their shorter-range 25-pounders supported the 5th Division. One hundred and twenty naval guns added their weight to the bombardment, their calibres ranging from the great 15-inch pieces of three monitors (H.M.S. *Roberts* was allotted to the Canadian Division) down to the two-pounders mounted by the support landing craft of various types which travelled on the flanks or in the rear of the assault brigade flotillas. As the leading L.C.As. reached a position about 1000 yards short of their destination, a devastating salvo of 792 five-inch rockets went hurtling towards the beach from the rocket craft (L.C.T. (R)) behind each assault group.<sup>97</sup> Overhead, Spitfires of the Desert Air Force patrolled at squadron strength.<sup>98</sup> All in all the Allied cannonade was a remarkable display of power against defences which Intelligence had shown to be decidedly weak.

The objectives were now obscured by dense clouds of dust and smoke, which the early morning off-shore breezes carried out into the path of

\* The 7th, 64th, 70th and 75th Medium Regiments R.A.<sup>96</sup>



the approaching craft. (The C.-in-C. Mediterranean Station protested later that "over 500 smoke shells had been included in the barrage without myself or any member of my staff being consulted.")<sup>99</sup> The resulting lack, of visibility and the presence of sharp tidal currents running south through the Messina Strait made navigation difficult, so that in spite of the aid of the fixed transit lights and searchlights installed on the Sicilian shore, and guiding lines of red tracer shells fired from 25-pounders and anti-aircraft batteries to mark the axes of advance, there was some confusion as - the assault craft deployed for the final run into shore; and in the Canadian, as in other sectors, landings generally were not made at the prearranged places.<sup>100</sup>

As to where and when each component of the assaulting Canadian companies went ashore there is conflicting evidence from participants, understandable in the excitement of the rapid onrush of events. Reports agree, however, that of the two units the West Nova Scotias suffered the greater dispersion. Although "A" Company reached "Fox Amber" without difficulty, two of the battalion's eight L.C.As. went astray to the left and landed half of "B" Company on the 17th Brigade's beach, nearly two miles north of "Fox", while the unit's war diary records that the rest of the company was carried to the right, and came ashore at Reggio.<sup>101</sup> Fortunately these deviations from plan had no serious consequences, for the enemy offered no opposition, and the Canadians landed on empty beaches from which even the expected mines and wire were missing. Scattered sub-units quickly joined their parent headquarters, and the two battalions prepared to move against their objectives farther inland. It was 4:50 a.m. when the Principal Beach Master with the Canadian flotilla had deployed his L.C.As. and given the order, "Go", for the short run in to the beaches;<sup>102</sup> a little more than an hour later a signal reached General Simonds' Headquarters, "Success at Fox Green Amber at 0526 hrs".<sup>103</sup>

As reports came back of the absence of resistance on the beaches, Brigadier Penhale decided to land his third infantry battalion and the rest of his brigade reserve at once. With his headquarters he went in on "Fox Amber" beach at 6:30 a.m., having crossed the Strait in Lieutenant Koyle's own L.C.M.<sup>104</sup> Half an hour later the Royal 22e began disembarking on "Fox Green".<sup>105</sup>

The brigade tasks were already well on the way to fulfilment. The West Novas, with "D" Company in the lead, quickly mounted a steep, zig-zag track which led up to Point 305, and shortly after seven o'clock leading sections burst into the two forts, to find them undefended. The massive walls, in places twelve feet thick, had easily withstood the weight of the Allied bombardment, but the garrisons, with the exception of two Italian sergeants who were found in the north fort, had fled into the hills, abandoning their four 280-mm. howitzers and six smaller pieces, besides large supplies of

ammunition.<sup>106</sup> On the brigade's right flank the Carleton and Yorks made their way south through the suburb of Santa Caterina and crossed the Fiumara dell'Annunziata into Reggio itself. They met no resistance; at 8:10 their C.O.--Lt.-Col. J. E. C. Pangman, who had succeeded Lt.-Col. Tweedie in mid-August--reported that he had established his headquarters in the main square, and that two companies were on their way to Reggio airfield, south of the town.<sup>107</sup> North-east of Reggio the Royal 22e companies struck inland, crossed the ravine of the Fiumara dell'Annunziata, and began climbing the steep slopes to two hill objectives overlooking the Reggio-San Stefano road. They too met no resistance.<sup>108</sup>

Brigadier Penhale's position was now so favourable that General Simonds ordered him to extend his operations to include the prearranged objectives of Brigadier Graham's follow-up brigade. By 8:10 the Carletons' "A" Company had taken possession of the Reggio airport. Three miles inland the hill village of Gallina was secured shortly before midday by "B" Company, after a laborious ascent from the coast. The 3rd Brigade Headquarters moved into the Zoological Gardens at Reggio, where "the stiffest resistance of the day" came from an escaped puma which was "seemingly taking a fancy to the Brigade Commander."<sup>109</sup> The brigade's vehicles were now catching up with them, and before the day ended, a flying patrol, consisting of two Carleton and York platoons, strengthened by a platoon of the Saskatoon Light Infantry's Vickers machine-guns, had driven south along the coastal highway as far as Melito, accepting on its way the surrender of 1000 Italian soldiers in the vicinity of Point Pellaro.<sup>110</sup>

It had been Simonds' plan that after the 1st Brigade had enlarged and secured the 3rd Brigade's early holdings exploitation inland would be carried out by the 2nd Brigade. The lack of resistance, however, which had allowed Penhale rapidly to complete the 1st Brigade's tasks as well as his own, resulted in the G.O.C. ordering Graham about noon to assume the role previously given to Brigadier Vokes.<sup>111</sup> Units of the 1st Brigade had already begun crossing the Strait; first to land were the 48th Highlanders, who came ashore at Reggio to the skirl of their pipes. They took the lead in the arduous advance up the winding road which climbed steeply up the Aspromonte from Reggio to San Stefano. In the early evening they passed through the Royal 22e positions at Terreti, thence pushing on half the night--now moving high up on the wooded slope of a deep ravine, now skirting the base of an oak-clad hill whose upper slopes disappeared into the darkness, but always steadily ascending. At 2:00 in the morning they halted near Straorini, a village five miles inland (although twice that distance from Reggio by road); on their right the Hastings and Prince Edwards bivouacked on the top of Mount Callea, 3300 feet above sea-level. So far the Canadians had encountered no resistance, and there had been no sign of any Germans. In accordance with Hitler's instructions the Headquarters of the 14th Panzer Corps had

ordered its troops to withdraw inland;<sup>112</sup> friendly civilians volunteered the information that a battalion of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division had moved eastward from the Reggio area two days before.<sup>113</sup>

The same story of satisfactory achievement had been repeated all along the Allied front during the first twenty-four hours of the landings. By the morning of D Day plus 1 General Dempsey's forces were solidly established along the coastal strip from Point Pellaro to the southern outskirts of Scilla, and five miles farther up the coast Bagnara had been captured by a raiding squadron of the 1st Special Air Service Regiment.<sup>114</sup> This main holding, although nowhere more than five miles deep, was strongly anchored to the high ground overlooking the Strait and included the ports of Villa San Giovanni and Reggio. An Eighth Army Port Construction Group was ready to repair the latter port, and Villa San Giovanni if required,<sup>115</sup> but although Reggio had suffered superficial damage from bombardment and more serious havoc from German demolitions and Italian looting, its harbour facilities remained substantially unimpaired, and it was clear that the period of beach maintenance would not be prolonged for more than 48 hours. Equally gratifying was the speed with which Reggio airfield became available. A detachment of an Airfield Construction Group landed on D Day, and by nightfall the field was in good condition for fighters.<sup>116</sup> All these Corps successes had been gained against only the most scattered or perfunctory enemy opposition. Rough figures showed 3000 Italians and three German prisoners of war taken over the whole front.<sup>117</sup> Canadian casualties numbered two officers and seven men wounded (none of them from the assaulting infantry).

#### Over the Aspromonte, 4-8 September

Canadian operations now developed substantially along the lines of an outline plan communicated by General Simonds to his brigade commanders on 1 September.<sup>118</sup> It will be recalled that General Montgomery had decided against using the eastern coastal axis, relying on domination of the high ground of the interior to deny to the enemy the communications along the Ionian coast. This end could be attained by securing control of the high ridge running north-eastward from Montalto in the Aspromonte to Mount Crocco in the Serre; accordingly, while the 5th Division worked its way along the west coast road, this inland rocky spine became the centre line for the Canadian Division's advance. At roughly equal stages along this uncompromising path Dempsey had assigned as successive objectives for the Canadians the junctions where lateral roads met or crossed the central route from Melito. These were, in order, the areas about Gambarie, where the inland

road was joined by the Reggio-San Stefano road; Delianuova, at the intersection with Highway No. 112 from Bagnara; the central Radicena-Cittanova portion of Highway No. 111 (see Map 7) ; and Cinquefrondi, five miles north of Cittanova. However desirous the Canadian G.O.C. may have been for a speedy exploitation to these objectives, the absence of alternative routes compelled him to advance on a single road and to use only one brigade at a time."<sup>119</sup>

By the evening of 4 September the 1st Brigade had made good the line of the Melito-Gambarie road, after the 48th Highlanders had engaged in a brief skirmish with Italian and German rearguards outside San Stefano and had seized the Gambarie junction from the headquarters of a Blackshirt Legion.<sup>120</sup> Added impetus to the enemy's rate of withdrawal was given by 24 Baltimores which came in on call to bomb a reported strongpoint in the hills near San Stefano.<sup>121</sup> The Hastings reached the north and south road by a rough track over the broad plateau of the Campi di Reggio, and that night, high on the slopes of Monte di Reggio overlooking their captured objectives, their forward companies shivered in the groundsheets and gascapes which formed their only protection from the chill mists of the Aspromonte. During the day the 1st Brigade's operations had received effective assistance from The Carleton and York Regiment's flying patrol. Moving north from Melito, this enterprising detachment ran into unexpectedly spirited groups of Italian paratroops of the Nembo Division, who strongly contested the tangle of ravines and barren peaks about the villages of San Lorenzo and Bagaladi before withdrawing eastward into the mountains.<sup>122</sup> Brigadier Graham's advance was now temporarily halted, for enemy demolitions near Straorini prevented any transport from moving forward from Reggio, and in the exacting terrain of the Calabrian hinterland there was a definite limit to what troops on foot might accomplish. Sappers of the 1st Field Company were hard at work constructing a one-hundred foot Bailey bridge at one of these gaps, and bulldozing a by-pass about a second, which their diary described as "a dandy-a series of switchbacks up the face of a cliff had a 70-foot section blown completely out."<sup>123</sup>

Late in the evening of the 4th General Simonds issued his next day's plan. As soon as the Engineers had restored communications, the Division's reconnaissance squadron would move up to Gambarie and on to Delianuova. Marching troops of the 2nd Brigade (which had crossed the Strait that morning) were already on their way to relieve the 1st Brigade, and when their "F" echelon transport could reach them, they would follow the Princess Louise squadron. Once a firm base had been established covering the nexus of roads which traverse the northern slopes of the Aspromonte about Delianuova, Simonds hoped to develop the Division's advance on two axes, putting in the 3rd Brigade on the left to strike north from Delianuova against

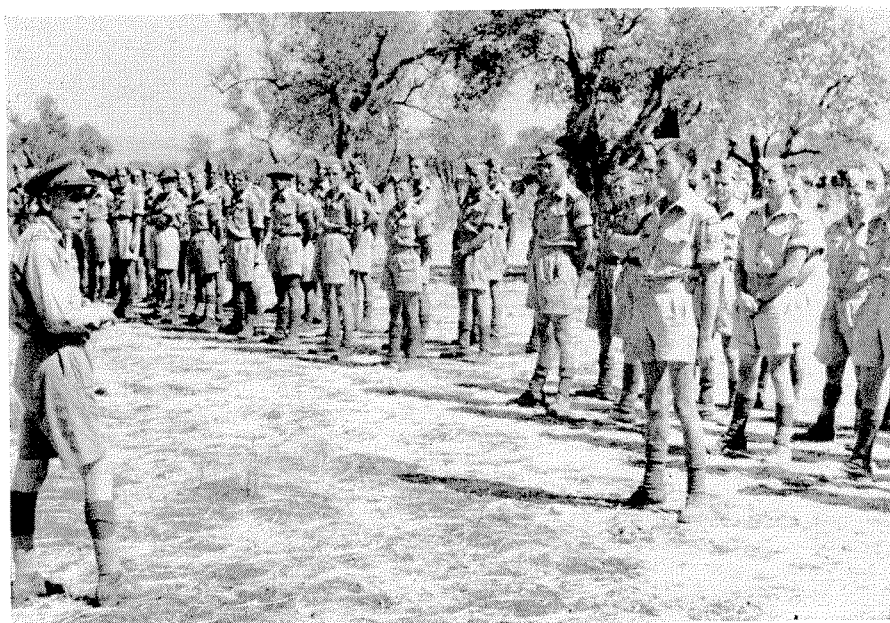
Radicena, and sending the 2nd Brigade on the right along a very dubious track which the map revealed following the extreme height of land to link Highways No. 112 and 111.<sup>124</sup>

In the early hours of 5 September the battalions of the 2nd Brigade, weary from a twenty-mile uphill march from the beaches, reached the MelitoGambarie road in the vicinity of Monte di Reggio. There was little time for rest, and at eight o'clock the Patricias (who were now commanded by Lt.-Col. C. B. Ware) pushed forward towards Delianuova, sixteen miles to the north. They were still on foot, for although the brigade's transport had now begun to come forward along the track which the Engineers had developed across the Campi di Reggio, all vehicles were stopped by an extensive demolition on the main road two miles south of Gambarie.<sup>125</sup>

The need for establishing contact with the enemy and determining his strength was pressing. Since the reconnaissance squadron could not get its armoured cars past the demolition, "B" Company of the 48th Highlanders, postponing its relief by 2nd Brigade troops, pushed forward mounted on folding bicycles which had been found in an Italian Quartermaster Stores at Gambarie. Along the route, which skirted the eastern edge of the broad Piani di Aspromonte, this vanguard encountered many strongpoints of rock and concrete which the enemy had prepared against this very occasion, and then abandoned in the day of necessity. After laboriously getting their bicycles across two more deep ravines, in the bottom of which lay the remains of demolished bridges, the Highlanders pedalled into Delianuova in midafternoon, to receive a rapturous welcome from the inhabitants. Close on their heels came marching troops of the Patricias to take over the town.<sup>126</sup> "Compo pack" rations\* were brought forward by dispatch-riders, who displayed remarkable skill in traversing the gaps at the blown bridges with their motorcycles—sometimes lowering them with ropes at difficult diversions. Motorcycle patrols explored far out on either flank, rapidly building up the divisional intelligence picture.<sup>127</sup>

To the men of the 1st Division, who had endured the blistering heat of sun-scorched Sicilian hills and valleys and the oppressive sultriness of the coastal plains, the bracing, rain-drenched air of the Calabrian mountains came in sharp contrast, bringing to many nostalgic memories of eastern Canada in late autumn. They found their shirts and shorts of khaki drill inadequate protection, and several units were quick to take advantage of a store of black shirts, obtained from the same source as the 48th Highlanders' bicycles. But these discomforts the men bore well. "What a strange animal the Canadian soldier is", wrote one diarist on 6 September. "We all wake up thoroughly soaked, and yet the men are just bubbling over with song."<sup>128</sup> Many of the

\* A box of composite rations, ranging in content from canned meat to matches, was designed to feed 14 men for 24 hours. Cooking, while normally desirable, was not essential.



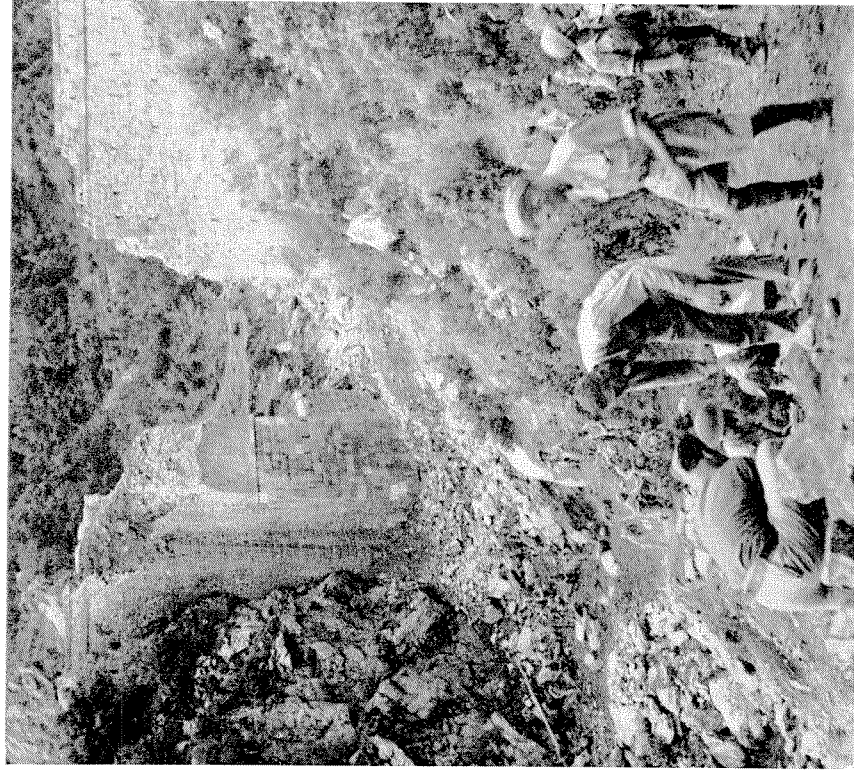
#### THE CANADIAN ARMY COMMANDER IN SICILY

Lieut.-General A. G. L. McNaughton, visiting Sicily after its fall, congratulates The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment on its achievements in the campaign.

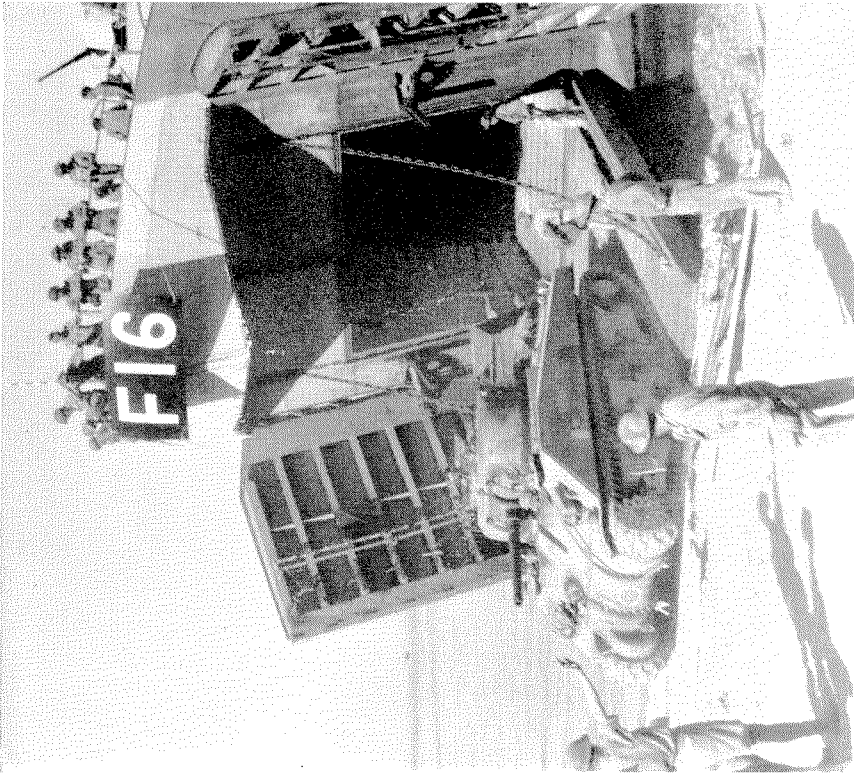


#### EMBARKATION FOR OPERATION "BAYTOWN"

At beaches near Santa Teresa, Sicily, landing craft load troops and vehicles of the 1st Canadian Division for the crossing to the Italian mainland, 3 September 1943.



CANADIAN SAPPERS ASSIST THE ADVANCE  
Enemy demolitions such as this formed the main obstacle to the Canadian advance through Southern Italy. Engineers of the 1st Division construct a diversion near Cittanova.



CANADIAN ARMOUR LANDS IN ITALY  
A tank of The Calgary Regiment is unloaded from an L.S.T. at Reggio Calabria on D plus one (4 September 1943).

troops while passing through the Gambarie area found temporary accommodation in a deserted ski-resort, patronized in the season by lovers of winter sport living in Reggio Calabria. Here amid the pleasant, though chilly, environment of the magnificent chestnut and beechwood forests clothing the mountain slopes, officers and men briefly enjoyed the unaccustomed amenities of the larger houses and chalets.<sup>129</sup>

After the main central road through the Calabrian peninsula joined Highway No. 112 between Cosoleto and Delianuova, it followed the extremely tortuous but generally easterly course of the lateral route for a dozen miles. Beyond the small village of Santa Cristina, at a point where the highway began to climb around the northern edge of the high Mastrogiovanni Plateau, the road broke away again to the north, pursuing a zig-zag course through Oppido to meet Highway No. 111 at Radicena. From their base at Delianuova the Patricias patrolled rapidly and boldly towards Oppido, Santa Cristina and Cosoleto, while the rest of the 2nd Brigade moved up from Gambarie. The only sign of the enemy came in the increasing number of road and bridge demolitions, which "were going off practically in our faces."<sup>130</sup> On the afternoon and evening of 6 September successive orders reached Brigadier Vokes from Divisional Headquarters to occupy the Mastrogiovanni Plateau and to push on as fast as possible to Cittanova, one of the larger inland towns, situated on Highway No. 111 four miles east of Radicena.<sup>131</sup> Two available routes opened the possibility of simultaneous parallel advances by two units. Yokes ordered the P.P.C.L.I. to explore the inevitably demolished road through Oppido to Radicena; the Edmontons he sent eastward to secure the Mastrogiovanni Plateau, and then tackle the doubtful track which led northeastward along the knife-edge of the divide to Cittanova.<sup>132</sup> As the two battalions turned to these exacting tasks, however, decisions at Army level diverted the Canadian advance on to a new axis.

A variety of factors contributed to the change in Montgomery's plan. In the first place, the speed of the German withdrawal had greatly exceeded expectation, and it was of vital importance for the Eighth Army to maintain contact in view of the impending blows at Salerno and Taranto and the prearranged surrender of Italy.\* Secondly, all attempts to find routes from Reggio into the interior alternative to the much-demolished and traffic-congested road to Delianuova had been unsuccessful. Simonds' forward units were without armoured support. The Calgary Regiment had been assigned to support the 1st Division in "Baytown" (The Ontario Regiment was with the 5th Division on the left flank), but although a Calgary squadron had landed with the assault brigade on D Day and assisted in the capture of early objectives, no tanks had been able to get farther forward than Terreti.<sup>133</sup> By contrast, the coast road from Reggio around the southern tip of the peninsula looked

\* See Chapter VIII, below.



inviting; a reconnaissance patrol from The Calgary Regiment had travelled it to beyond Cape Spartivento on the 5th, and reported no Germans south of Bruzzano. Finally, enemy resistance to the 5th Division in the Bagnara area, on which the German withdrawal had pivoted, had crumbled; by 6 September the 15th Brigade had established itself north of Gioia Tauro. Allied forces had complete command of the sea\* and air, and the Aspromonte fortress was clearly lost to the enemy.<sup>134</sup> Accordingly, late on the 6th the Canadian Division was directed to swing down from the mountains to Locri, and thenceforward make the coast road its axis. At the same time the 154th (Highland) Brigade and the tactical headquarters of the 51st Division, which had begun to cross the Strait to take over the Reggio area from the Canadians in order to free them for the exploitation inland, were ordered back to Sicily.<sup>135</sup>

There were certain precautions to take, however, before abandoning the high ground and adopting the new axis. The decision to clear the interior as far as Highway No. 111 was adhered to; and General Simonds gave orders for a strong mobile force to drive up the east coast road and capture Locri. Under Lt.-Col. C.H. Neroutsos, the Commanding Officer of the Calgarys, a group consisting of three troops of the Calgary tanks, two lorry-borne companies of the Carleton and Yorks, and supporting 4.2-inch mortars, machine-guns and anti-tank guns, headed south from Reggio on the afternoon of 6 September. The column harboured that night at Melito, where it was joined by the armoured cars of the Princess Louise reconnaissance squadron, extricated with difficulty from the mountains. This completed the composition of "X" Force, as it was called, and next morning it pushed rapidly forward again along the edge of the Mediterranean. Occasionally small enemy rearguards were seen in the distance withdrawing through the hills, but the column met no active resistance. At 4:30 it rolled into Bovalino Marina, and before darkness fell two troops of tanks had reached the battered town of Locri, 64 miles from Reggio.<sup>136</sup>

In the meantime the 2nd Brigade had begun its arduous march towards Cittanova. The infantry was now out of reach of sapper assistance, and the frequent and extensive demolitions left by the retreating Germans had to be overcome by the ingenuity of the battalion pioneers, aided by the marching troops.<sup>137</sup> On the twisting stretch of Highway No. 112 between the Oppido road junction and the Mastrogiovanni Plateau the Edmontons negotiated "an absolute maze of craters".<sup>138</sup> At one particularly well executed bridge demolition they constructed a diversion which dropped 200 feet into a chasm, and climbed out the far side. In a remarkably short time this masterpiece of battalion engineering was carrying the jeeps and motorcycles

\* On 6 September the Strait of Messina was open to Allied shipping for the first time since Italy's declaration of war in June 1940.



on which the Edmontons' ration supply depended. An all-night march brought three of Jefferson's companies out on to the level plateau, where they snatched a few hours of much-needed rest.<sup>139</sup>

A gruelling journey over the rudimentary track which ran along the top of the great central ridge of the peninsula brought the Edmontons close to Cittanova by three next morning. The only enlivening incident en route was a brush with a group of Italian paratroopers which they had bumped into in the mountains, and from whom they had taken several prisoners before the remainder escaped in the darkness.<sup>140</sup> At about the same hour the Patricias approached Cittanova from the north-west. Demolitions had forced them to cut across country to join the Oppido-Radicena road at Varapodio, thence following it downhill the remaining six miles to the junction with the lateral highway.<sup>141</sup> Meanwhile, the Seaforth Highlanders had come up behind the Edmontons along the ridge route, and by last light on 8 September the three battalions of the 2nd Brigade were grouped around the town of Cittanova, with patrols pushed out to west, north and east.<sup>142</sup> Here they rested, while the 3rd Brigade took over the lead.

During the 7th T.C.Vs. had carried Brigadier Penhale's battalions forward from Gambarie to Delianuova, which was as far as road repairs had been completed. Accordingly at 5:30 that evening the West Nova Scotias set out on the laborious march up the badly broken highway, followed in order by the Royal 22e and what "X" Force had left of the Carleton and Yorks. Early next morning, as Lt.-Col. Bogert's leading platoons were snatching a brief sleep by the side of the road which skirted the Mastrogiovanni Plateau, they were attacked by a determined band of about 100 Italian paratroopers-apparently the same group encountered by the Edmontons a few hours earlier.<sup>143</sup> These were later identified as members of the 185th Regiment of the Nembo Division. It transpired that their battalion commander, unwilling to surrender with the Italian coastal troops, had withdrawn his unit from Melito to join a rear party of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division in defence of the Gambarie crossroads. Then the swift retreat of the Germans had left them to fight alone in the hills about Delianuova.<sup>144</sup> A fierce little skirmish developed in the half light; when it ended the Canadians had killed six and taken 57 prisoners. The remainder had scattered, hurried on their way by a platoon of the Edmontons working on a road diversion nearby. The West Nova Scotias lost a company sergeant-major and a sergeant killed, and two officers and several other ranks wounded. The action marked the last Canadian encounter with the Italian Army. That evening the Rome Radio and the B.B.C. announced the capitulation of Italy, and through the hills of Calabria the whole night was illumined by the rude pyrotechnics set off by the rejoicing villagers.<sup>145</sup>

In Locri the news was the signal for an unrestrained celebration among the inhabitants, and Italian troops seized the opportunity to embark on extensive looting. The explosions and flares with which the townspeople emphasized their joy were heard and seen by the battalions of the 3rd Brigade, which by this time, using a ferry system of jeeps-twelve or thirteen men made a good load for these adaptable vehicles-had reached the vicinity of Gerace, a "terrace town" four miles from the coast. Restoration and maintenance of order was more than the few advance elements of "X" Force in Locri could handle. They rushed all their available vehicles up the hill to Gerace, and soon the two Carleton and York companies there had been shuttled down to check the mafficking Locrians.<sup>146</sup>

The news of the Italian surrender was followed within a few hours by that of Allied landings in the Gulf of Salerno. Thus, between sundown on 8 September and sunrise of the 9th two heavy blows, none the less damaging because not altogether unexpected, had fallen upon the Germans in Italy. These and their effect upon the subsequent march of events are matters for consideration in our next chapter.

## CHAPTER VIII

### FROM CALABRIA TO THE FOGGIA PLAIN, SEPTEMBER 1943

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#### The Capitulation of Italy

WHEN Marshal Pietro Badoglio, succeeding the deposed Mussolini as head of the Italian Government, declared that Italy would remain in the war on the side of Germany, he was speaking with his tongue in his cheek, for his country had neither the resources nor the will to continue the struggle. The quantities of men and material which the Italians had poured into Libya, the Balkans and Russia had all but disappeared. Their air force had been destroyed in North Africa; their navy was crippled; and the greater part of their mercantile marine had been sunk or captured. Nothing could show more clearly the apathy of the people than the ease with which the Fascist Party, once the very core of the Italian war spirit, had been cast down.<sup>1</sup>

It was this military weakness that prevented the new administration from immediately taking open steps to get out of the war; for the Marshal was well aware that his government existed only on the sufferance of the German Command, which had at its disposal strong and continually growing forces in both northern and peninsular Italy. Any overt peace move would result in replacing the present administration by one in accord with German wishes. Important as it was, however, for the new regime to persuade the Germans of its good intentions, it was scarcely less vital that the Allies be similarly convinced, for Badoglio and his circle had now no doubt as to which side would gain the final victory.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly towards the end of July Badoglio's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Raffaello Guariglia, approached the British and American diplomatic representatives at the Vatican to see if they were in a position to communicate secretly with their respective governments. But neither was able to assist—the Englishman claiming that his code was too old, the American that he had none.<sup>3</sup> The next move came on 6 August with an approach to the British diplomatic representative in Tangier; and on 15 August, as we have already seen, Castellano arrived in Madrid and informed

the British Ambassador that he was the bearer of a message from Badoglio to the effect that when the Allies invaded Italy the Italian Government was prepared to order the immediate cessation of hostilities against them, and to join at once with all its forces in the fight against the Germans.<sup>4</sup> The time was well chosen. Mr. Churchill and Mr. Roosevelt and their staffs were then on their way to the Quebec Conference. On receipt of the news from Madrid they at once instructed General Eisenhower to send representatives to meet Castellano and discuss the terms of an Italian surrender.<sup>5</sup>

Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, Major-General Walter Bedell Smith, accompanied by a British officer, Brigadier K.W.D. Strong, Chief of A.F.H.Q. Intelligence, met Castellano in Lisbon on the 19th, and handed him a document detailing the military terms of an unconditional surrender. Political, economic and financial requirements were to be communicated later. On the authority of the Prime Minister and the President he gave an assurance that the final terms would be modified in proportion to the active aid which Italy might render the United Nations.<sup>6</sup> edell Smith refused to discuss the Italian offer to "switch sides", or to satisfy Castellano's request for details of the Allied plans for landings on the Italian mainland; and he insisted that the announcement of the signing of the armistice would be made simultaneously by both parties at a time to be set by Allied Force Headquarters.<sup>7</sup> It was Eisenhower's intention to proclaim the cessation of hostilities five or six hours before the main landings.<sup>8</sup>

A second meeting took place on 31 August at Alexander's headquarters at Cassibile. In attendance with Bedell Smith to receive the Italian capitulation were General Alexander, General Mark Clark, Admiral Cunningham and Air Marshal Tedder.<sup>9</sup> But Castellano had come to parley, not to sign. He declared that the German strength in Italy had so rapidly and considerably increased that his government would not dare to announce an armistice unless the Allies first landed at least fifteen divisions north of Rome to guarantee the security of the capital. The Allied representatives refused to consider these conditions and impressed upon the Italian spokesman that his country must either accept unreservedly the terms offered or refuse the armistice.<sup>10</sup>

The Italians were in a difficult position. Refusal would mean losing the opportunity to participate in the overthrow of the Germans—the only way in which they might hope for modification of the peace terms. Yet their dread of German reprisals surpassed even their fear of Allied bombing or the threat of invasion. Realizing this dilemma, the Allied leaders acceded to Castellano's request that before the main landings an airborne division should be dropped at Rome on airfields to be seized and held by the Italian Army. His plea for an armoured division was countered by an offer to furnish 100 anti-tank guns at the mouth of the Tiber. The Italian

Government's acceptance of these terms had to be transmitted to Eisenhower by secret radio on 2 September.<sup>11</sup>

At Rome early on the following morning Castellano reported to Badoglio and some of the Marshal's chief advisers his failure to achieve postponement of the armistice until after the main Anglo-American landing had taken place. The disconcerted Italians agreed that their only course was to accept the Allied terms.<sup>12</sup> Castellano returned to Cassibile on the 2nd, and late on the afternoon of the following day signed the military terms of armistice on behalf of his government.\* By that time the first Allied landing on the mainland of Italy was well under way at Reggio.<sup>14</sup>

For the airborne enterprise at Rome it was decided to divert from the Salerno operation the United States 82nd Airborne Division, commanded by Brigadier-General Maxwell D. Taylor. By 8 September preparations were complete and the aircraft of the first lift were ready to take off. Plans were made for L.C.Ts. to sail into the Tiber with the promised ammunition and artillery. Taylor was sent secretly by sea to Rome to check the arrangements at the Italian end.<sup>15</sup> He saw Badoglio late on the 7th, and to his amazement learned that the Italian Government wanted the armistice postponed until 12 September and the Rome operation cancelled. The Marshal declared that the situation had changed, and that Castellano had not been in full possession of the facts. He asserted that the Germans had 12,000 troops in the Tiber Valley, and had expanded the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division in the Rome area to a strength of 24,000. All supplies of gasoline and ammunition to Italian divisions had been cut off. Thus virtually immobilized, Italian troops could neither defend the capital against the German occupation which announcement of the armistice was certain to provoke, nor provide the logistical aid promised to the Allied airborne troops.<sup>16</sup> It was apparent that the Italians had now deduced that the main landings would take place in the Naples-Salerno area, too far south to protect Rome, and rather than risk open hostilities against their Axis partners they preferred to wait until the Allies should rescue them. In the face of this vacillating attitude General Taylor had to advise A.F.H.Q. to call off the airborne operation. At the same time he secured from Badoglio a signed message revoking all his earlier commitments.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly after midday on the 8th Eisenhower received word of the Italian change of attitude. He at once sent a strongly-worded message to Badoglio, informing him that the Allied Command would announce the armistice as originally planned. "I do not accept your message of this morning postponing the Armistice", he signalled. "Your accredited representative has signed an agreement with me and the sole hope of Italy is bound up in your

\* The complete Instrument was signed on board H.M.S. *Nelson* at Malta on 29 September by Eisenhower, Alexander and Badoglio. On 13 October Italy declared war against Germany.<sup>13</sup>

adherence to this agreement."<sup>18</sup> No reply came from Rome, and when at 6:30 p.m., a few hours before the landings were to begin at Salerno, Eisenhower's announcement was broadcast as arranged, Badoglio remained silent. But last-minute discussions with King Victor Emmanuel and his advisers brought a decision to agree to the Allied terms, and at 7:45 Badoglio announced over the Rome Radio that Italy had capitulated. He directed that all hostilities by Italian armed forces against the Allies were to cease.<sup>19</sup> He named no new enemy, but instructed Italian troops to "repel attacks from whatever quarter they may come."<sup>20</sup> That night the Marshal, the King, and a few members of the Government fled to Brindisi.<sup>21</sup>

Although the news came as a shock to the Germans, it found them well prepared to deal with the situation. On the 9th, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, was to write in his diary,

The Fuehrer, thank God, can rightly claim that he suffered no disappointment on the human side regarding Badoglio. Ever since Mussolini's exit we have anticipated and expected this development. We therefore won't have to make essential changes in our measures. We can now set in motion what the Fuehrer really wanted to do immediately after Mussolini's fall.<sup>22</sup>

Such action had begun in Italy at eight o'clock on the previous evening with the notification of the codeword "Achse" (Axis) to all German forces in the country.<sup>23</sup> This was the prearranged signal to announce the surrender of the Italians and to put into effect the measures prescribed in a secret order which had been drawn up by Keitel shortly after the deposition of Mussolini and subsequently revised in pace with the changing situation. It enumerated the steps to be taken by the German commanders in Italy, the Balkans and Southern France to ensure the speedy disarmament of the Italian armed forces and the maintenance of essential civilian services.<sup>24</sup>

Within a few days the Army of Italy practically ceased to exist. Italian commanders, in the main taken by surprise by the turn of events, and having no clear direction as to the course of action to be followed, merely laid down their arms when ordered to do so by the Germans. In Rome, whither the Allied Command had so nearly dispatched an airborne division to the aid of the garrison, the Germans had long been prepared to take control by force. In strategic positions nearby they had placed two over-strength divisions, the 2nd Parachute and the 3rd Panzer Grenadier. On receipt of the "Achse" signal these two formations marched on the capital, and by the 10th had disarmed the five Italian divisions responsible for its defence and assumed complete control of the city.<sup>25</sup> With minor exceptions (there was some spirited resistance for a few days in the northern cities of Milan and Cremona) this was the pattern for all Italy.\* Only in the north-east did the

\* By prearranged plan the Germans abandoned Sardinia, transferring the garrisoning 90th Panzer Grenadier Division to Corsica.<sup>26</sup> On 12 September Hitler ordered Corsica to be evacuated. Italian and French forces on the island harassed the withdrawal, which was completed on 4 October.<sup>27</sup>



Germans experience any real difficulty. There the Slovenes, taking advantage of the loosened grip on the Irredentist coast, and lavishly equipped with the hastily abandoned arms of the Italians, menaced for a time Trieste and Fiume. The Germans eventually established control over the main lines of communication and the chief towns in the area, but the Partisans, rallying under the banner of Josip Broz--later known to the world as Marshal Tito--and increasingly aided by British and American supplies, maintained their guerrilla operations until the end of the war.<sup>28</sup>

### The Battle of Salerno, 9-16 September

By nightfall on 8 September the "Avalanche" convoys bearing the assaulting divisions of General Mark Clark's Fifth Army had deployed and were approaching the anchorages in Salerno Bay. On board the transports the troops had heard the news of Italy's surrender, and although officers made every effort to warn them against complacency, there were many who felt that a bargain had been struck and that the force would simply "walk in".<sup>29</sup> Yet the fighting on the beaches of Salerno was to be among the fiercest of the whole Italian campaign.<sup>30</sup> The moon went down shortly after midnight, and under cover of the ensuing darkness the troopships reached the release positions. By 3:30 a.m. the first assault waves were on their way to the beaches<sup>31</sup> (see Map 8).

The main blow was delivered on the left by two divisions of the British 10th Corps, commanded by Lieut.-General Sir Richard L. McCreery; a dozen miles to the south Major-General Ernest J. Dawley's United States 6th Corps assaulted with one division.<sup>32</sup> At almost all points the enemy offered immediate resistance, using tanks to engage the troops as they advanced inland from the beaches.<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, von Vietinghoff had been warned by Hitler of the threat to the Naples-Salerno area, and he had been on the alert since early on the 8th, when word came of an Allied invasion fleet at sea, its destination unknown. At that time the defending forces had consisted of the 16th Panzer and the 222nd Italian Coastal Divisions, but on receipt of the "Achse" signal the Germans had disarmed their former allies and had taken over all their positions.<sup>34</sup>

During the first three days of "Avalanche" the Fifth Army made steady progress. The chief gains were on the right, where the 6th Corps, having broken through the beach defences at Paestum, by the evening of D plus 2 held a bridgehead extending ten miles inland across the southern tip of the Salerno plain. The 10th Corps, meeting considerably stronger resistance, secured the town of Salerno on the 10th, and on the next day the airfield five miles to the east. Around Battipaglia, a crucial road junction at the eastern

edge of the widest part of the plain, a fierce but indecisive struggle was being waged. By the night of the 11th this part of the beachhead, at the junction of the British and American sectors, was still insecure.<sup>35</sup> From early on D Day Sicily-based fighters and fighter-bombers of the 12th Air- Support Command (the component of the Northwest African Tactical Air Force assigned to support the Fifth Army) had provided continuous daylight air cover over the invasion area.<sup>36</sup> They were augmented by Seafires from a force of five British escort aircraft carriers (Force V, commanded by RearAdmiral Sir Philip Vian), which was itself covered by seaborne fighters of the fleet carriers *Illustrious* and *Formidable*.<sup>37</sup> The Luftwaffe's reaction was unexpectedly weak and was confined in general to small hit-and-run raids; 108 sorties on D Day are listed in captured enemy documents, as against 700 sorties by Allied land-based fighters and 250 by the Seafires.<sup>38</sup> The most effective German air effort came on the 11th, when the United States cruisers *Philadelphia* and *Savannah* were damaged by radio-controlled bombs.<sup>39</sup>

The enemy had used these three days to rush the bulk of his forces into the Salerno area. He almost stripped his southern sector\*, and brought in as well the greater part of the divisions which were disposed about Naples and Gaeta.<sup>41</sup> Counting on the difficult terrain and the problem of supply to prevent the intervention of the Eighth Army in time, he sought to inflict a decisive defeat on General Clark's forces before the necessary build-up could be completed. Alert to this danger General Alexander signalled to General Montgomery on the 10th:

If the Germans have dealt successfully with the Italians in the Naples-Rome area I am anxious about their possible rate of concentration against Fifth Army. It is of the utmost importance that you maintain pressure upon the Germans so that they cannot remove forces from your front and concentrate them against 'Avalanche'.<sup>42</sup>

But Montgomery appears to have taken little notice of this order, and his reaction to a more urgent summons two days later was very deliberate (see pp. 220 and 223 below). While the Eighth Army was still nearly 200 miles to the south, and before a stepped-up Allied reinforcement programme could take effect, German large-scale counter-attacks placed the Fifth Army in a precarious position.

The first of these was launched on the 12th; it wrested from the 6th Corps a key height overlooking the bridgehead and pushed the 10th Corps out of Battipaglia with heavy losses. During the same day, however, Allied light forces which had landed on D Day in the Sorrento peninsula held their ground against German reaction. On the 13th the main German blow fell on the 6th Corps in an apparent effort to break through to the beaches. Under cover of a violent dust storm the enemy launched vicious tank and infantry

\* The 29th Panzer Grenadier Division reached the Salerno perimeter late on 10 September; the bulk of the 26th Panzer Division from Calabria followed four days later.<sup>40</sup>

attacks down the valley of the Sele near the Allied inter-corps boundary. They smashed through the front line of infantry and were only halted by the defence's commitment of every reserve and the determined fire of all available tank and anti-tank guns, light howitzers and anti-aircraft guns in the area. By nightfall the Americans had been compressed into a bridgehead about five miles deep. On the left General McCreery's forces, aided by accurate gunfire from heavy naval units and close-support bombing by low-flying aircraft, managed to hold their ground against strong counter-attacks which struck them south of Battipaglia.<sup>43</sup>

For another three days land, sea and air forces put forth their strongest combined efforts to save the bridgehead. The ground troops, although heavily hit by casualties and exhausted by nearly a week of uninterrupted struggle, doggedly hung on to their positions. The heavy bombardment of enemy troop concentrations and gun positions by Allied cruisers and destroyers played an important part in breaking up German counter-thrusts before they could be mounted.<sup>44</sup> On the 15th the battleships *Warspite*\* and *Valiant* arrived from Malta to bring their 15-inch guns into action, although by now the most critical stage was over.<sup>45</sup> In the skies Allied aircraft kept up their devastating bombing. The full resources of the Northwest African Air Forces had been thrown into the battle. In three missions on the nights of the 13th-14th and 14th-15th Troop Carrier Command dropped 3800 paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division to reinforce the 6th Corps, some of them parachuting down behind the enemy lines to disrupt the movement of German troops through the Avellino area.<sup>46</sup> The Strategic Air Force became temporarily a tactical force as its heavies and mediums directly supported the ground forces with concentrated attacks on targets immediately behind the battle front. On 14 September their 1200 sorties brought the day's total for Allied aircraft of all types to more than 2000. From the 12th to the 15th an average weight of 760 tons of bombs per square mile fell in the target areas. "Never before", reported Headquarters of the Mediterranean Air Command, "have bombs been employed on a battlefield in such quantities or with such telling effect."<sup>47</sup> Battipaglia and neighbouring villages were all but obliterated, and every road leading into the battle area was heavily cratered and strewn with the debris of destroyed enemy transport.

Although the battle still raged furiously on the 14th, the Fifth Army had by then stabilized its front and the crisis had passed. The enemy had spent his strength and had no new reserves for further onslaughts, and the Allied build-up was beginning to take effect. The British 7th Armoured Division was unloading, bringing needed strength to cope with enemy armour. Next day forward elements of the Eighth Army, leading what Kesselring termed

\* On the afternoon of the 16th H.M.S. *Warspite* was attacked by a number of German aircraft and disabled by a radio-controlled glider-bomb,

"Montgomery's very cautious advance",<sup>48</sup> reached Sapri, only forty miles south of the battle area.<sup>49</sup>

On the evening of 16 September von Vietinghoff's war diary recorded that the failure of the counter-attacks "as well as the slow but steady approach of the Eighth Army, caused the Army Commander to withdraw from the battle in order to occupy good positions before the intervention of the Eighth Army with fresh troops."<sup>50</sup> On that same evening patrols of the two Allied Armies met on the American right flank.<sup>51</sup> By the 19th Canadian troops were at Potenza, 50 miles east of Salerno, the whole of the 'Salerno plain was in the Fifth Army's hands, and the battle for the bridgehead was over.<sup>52</sup>

### The Canadian Advance up the East Coast

When Operation "Avalanche" began, the Eighth Army was still only about half way to the Catanzaro neck-its first main objective. This narrow isthmus formed a comparatively low-lying trough between the Sila and Serre massifs, which flanked it to the north and south respectively. Catanzaro itself, a city of 20,000, lay on the southern slopes of the Sila mountains, five miles from the east coast. About fifteen miles to the west was the town of Nicastro; Montgomery intended to halt for a few days in the Catanzaro-Nicastro area, in order to "pull up the tail" of the Eighth Army.<sup>53</sup>

On 9 September General Dempsey ordered his two divisions to establish themselves as soon as possible astride the isthmus and thence send reconnaissance parties forward to locate enemy troops and demolitions and assess the amount of work required to restore communications.<sup>54</sup> The 5th Division had been making good headway, and its leading brigade had already reached the south-western corner of the depression. The pursuit up the west coast had been speeded by a landing of the 231st Brigade and commando troops near Pizzo in the Gulf of Sant' Eufemia, on the 8th.<sup>55</sup> The seaborne force encountered the enemy rearguard, and there was sharp fighting before the Malta Brigade linked up with the main body of the 5th Division moving up from the south. Only demolition and very light opposition hampered further advance, and late on the 10th leading elements reached Nicastro.<sup>56</sup>

In the meantime, on the other side of the peninsula, General Simonds had ordered the mobile "X" Force to secure Catanzaro.<sup>57</sup> Already it had reached Marina di Badolato, a coastal village 35 miles north of Locri, having suffered some delay from demolitions and from the unexpected opposition of an Italian artillery battery. Fortunately no casualties resulted from this somewhat belated display of Italian fighting spirit, which was quickly dissipated upon the deployment of the Carleton and York company under

Lt.-Col. Neroutsos' command.<sup>58</sup> At 7:30 a.m. on the 10th armoured cars of the Princess Louise squadron led the force forward, with 1st Brigade units following in T.C.Vs. The only opposition was from the numerous demolitions, which prolonged the 20-mile journey until late afternoon, when the reconnaissance troops, closely followed by the R.C.R., reached Catanzaro.<sup>59</sup>

In order to relieve some of the congestion along the 60-mile stretch of road between Locri and Catanzaro, units of the 3rd Brigade were lifted forward to Marina di Catanzaro in three large landing craft.<sup>60</sup> Throughout the journey they saw evidence of the thoroughness with which the Northwest African Air Forces had bombed installations along the coastal railway during the preceding three days, putting it completely out of commission.<sup>61</sup> The marshalling yards at Marina di Catanzaro were in a state of utter ruin. When the R.C.R. arrived there, the stock-piles of coal were still burning, and the men were able to cook their meals on what was to all intents and purposes a vast outdoor stove.<sup>62</sup>

While these moves were in progress, a patrol of the Edmontons, comprising a rifle platoon and a section of pioneers, with 6-pounder support, had struck out on 9 September from Cittanova to reconnoitre an inland route to Catanzaro. For 100 miles the party followed the tortuous secondary roads running northward through the Serre Mountains, until on the 13th it reached the coast about ten miles south of Catanzaro. It was fortunate that the Division was not dependent on this inland axis for its advance; for a German demolition party had left it a succession of blocked turns, cratered roadbeds and blown bridges.<sup>63</sup>

For four days the 1st Division remained concentrated in the open country between Catanzaro and its Marina, and on the edge of the wooded slopes to the north. The broad sandy beaches of the Gulf of Squillace and the clear streams which flowed from the neighbouring hills gave all ranks a welcome opportunity for bathing and washing. There was the added treat of a distribution of mail—the first in Italy.<sup>64</sup> On the 13th General Montgomery visited Divisional Headquarters and presented decorations to a number of officers and men for their actions in the Sicilian campaign. Among those honoured was General Simonds, who received the Distinguished Service Order.<sup>65</sup>

The halt provided a breathing-space for the hard-used supply and maintenance services. The rapid advance to Catanzaro had imposed on the Canadian administrative staffs and units many complex problems, which had been solved only by considerable improvisation. The Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, with only half its transport available on the mainland, had successfully maintained the Division over supply lines three to four times as long as those considered normal for a full complement of vehicles. By the expedient of temporarily dumping reserve ammunition at Reggio the Service Corps was able out of its own resources to troop-lift up to two of the infantry

brigades at a time. At Locri the situation was eased somewhat by the addition of 35 Italian T.C.Vs. and the arrival of the three landing craft (which were later increased to six). Besides their usefulness as troop transports, these craft were to prove valuable for conveying supplies up the coast, at first from Reggio and later from Crotone.<sup>66</sup>

While the main bodies paused at Catanzaro, strong patrols explored northward. On the morning of 11 September the Princess Louise squadron, strengthened by a company of the Hastings and Prince Edwards in troop carriers, drove forty miles up the coast to Crotona. The ancient Croton, once the home of Pythagoras, had prospered as the chief seaport between Tarentum and Rhegium. Its busy modern counterpart had been carefully dealt with by Allied bombers; the town's big electro-chemical plant had suffered heavily, but the port itself was undamaged. It was quickly put into operation, and for a short time supplied the Eighth Army's needs to the extent of 2000 tons a day.<sup>67</sup>

In the meantime a bold stroke had placed Allied troops well up the east coast. On the evening of 9 September, while the Fifth Army was still pouring ashore at Salerno Bay and Montgomery's lines of communication were being steadily extended up the long Calabrian peninsula, the 15th Army Group struck its third blow at the enemy on the Italian mainland with the unopposed landing of elements of the 1st British Airborne Division at Taranto. Although the original proposal for a major amphibious operation ("Musket") in the area of the great naval base had been dropped in favour of "Avalanche", interest in the project was revived with the Italian acceptance of the terms of surrender; for of all the places garrisoned chiefly by Italian troops which might be expected to fall easily into the hands of the first claimant, Taranto seemed best suited to accelerate the Eighth Army's build-up. The landing represented no diversion of force. Indeed, the Airborne Division was available only because there were insufficient transport aircraft in the theatre to employ it in its normal role elsewhere. In the absence of assault landing craft the Division was carried direct from North Africa to Taranto harbour in a minelayer and six cruisers, of the Mediterranean fleet.<sup>68</sup>

Exploitation was rapid. By the 11th the whole of the heel of Italy was clear of the enemy, and by the 13th the Airborne Division (which was under direct command of H.Q. 15th Army Group) held a perimeter twenty miles west and north-west of Taranto, the inner defences of which were manned by the former Italian garrison. It was not a strong line, but there was little likelihood that the 1st Parachute Division, the only German force in Apulia, would attack.\* The port rapidly assumed an important role in the maintenance of the Eighth Army. On 18 September Lieut.-General

\* On the morning of 9 September Heidrich had received orders to concentrate the Parachute Division at Foggia as protection for the Tenth Army's deep eastern flank.<sup>69</sup> On his way north he found time to destroy 20,000 tons of merchant shipping in Bari harbour.<sup>70</sup>

C. W. Allfrey's 5th Corps Headquarters (available as a result of the cancellation of the Crotone operation) assumed command in the area in readiness to bring in reinforcing formations from Sicily and the Middle East.<sup>71</sup>

Montgomery's main problem now was how to come within striking distance of the German Tenth Army. The greater urgency lay on his left flank; on 12 September he was ordered by General Alexander (who sent his Chief of Staff, Major-General A. A. Richardson, to emphasize the critical nature of the situation) to push forward with all speed in order to ease the pressure on General Clark's forces at Salerno.<sup>72</sup> The stay at Catanzaro, however, had been scarcely long enough to achieve any considerable improvement in the Eighth Army's administrative position, and there was the risk that an accelerated advance might cause a complete breakdown in the system of maintenance. Nevertheless, the issues at stake were of the utmost importance, and there was no other course than to accept the risks.<sup>73</sup> On 13 September the Army Commander ordered General Dempsey, while keeping light forces operating as far forward as possible, to concentrate the 5th Division in the Castrovillari neck at the northern end of the Calabrian peninsula by 15 September, and to bring the Canadian Division into the same area by the 17th.<sup>74</sup>

During the next few days the 5th Division moved rapidly up the west coast. From the seaside town of Belvedere, in the Castrovillari isthmus, one brigade leaped forward to Sapri, and by the evening of the 16th, as we have seen, patrols had linked up with the United States 6th Corps south of the Salerno bridgehead.<sup>75</sup>

The Canadian advance began on the 15th, when the Division's reconnaissance squadron, with a company of the Carleton and Yorks and a troop of anti-tank guns under command, pushed up the coast road from Marina di Catanzaro.<sup>76</sup> As other formations followed, a shuttle service by landing craft again supplemented the 1st Division's limited transport. Road convoys ran into traffic congestion about Crotone, where General Montgomery was utilizing the newly-acquired port to bring in the Desert Air Force.<sup>77</sup> Castrovillari, the old Norman town in the mountainous centre of the isthmus, controlled all northward passage from the Calabrian peninsula, but its tactical value to the Germans had passed with the Allied landings to the rear. News from Salerno had sent General Herr's 76th Panzer Corps Headquarters hurrying away to the north-west a week before the Canadians reached the area.<sup>78</sup> Nightfall on the 17th found Simonds' forces concentrated in the malarious plain in the eastern half of the isthmus, where a few days before the 26th Panzer Division had paused briefly on its retreat northward. Brigadier Graham's troops were at Spezzano, on the southern edge of the plain; the 2nd Brigade was at Cassano, ten miles east of Castrovillari; while farther north at Villapiana, near the coast, was Brigadier Penhale's 3rd Brigade,<sup>79</sup>

While these moves were being completed, the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards were patrolling deep into the country north of Castrovillari, and on the 16th they encountered a patrol of the 1st Airborne Division, forty miles south-west of Taranto.<sup>80</sup> The meeting of British and American troops near Vallo on the west coast took place a few hours later.<sup>81</sup> In only thirteen days from the first landings in the toe the Allied Armies were thus linked across the Italian foot from coast to coast.

### The Drive to Potenza, 17-20 September

The Eighth Army was now presenting a serious threat to the German rear at Salerno. General von Vietinghoff had begun loosening the cordon around the bridgehead, and a quick stride forward by Montgomery's forces would undoubtedly hasten the process. A key point in the enemy's line of withdrawal was the road and rail centre at Potenza, midway between Salerno and Taranto; and in a directive issued on 17 September General Alexander named it as the Eighth Army's principal objective in the next phase of the Allied advance. At the same time he ordered the Fifth Army to seize the high ground south-east of the Gulf of Naples and pivot thereon to bring its right wing forward to a line running inland through Avellino to the headwaters of the Ofanto River. Once it had gained these objectives the 15th Army Group would pause in order to build up its strength, particularly in the Taranto area, before proceeding to the capture of Naples and Foggia.<sup>82</sup>

In the enemy camp von Vietinghoff, taking steps to meet the expected Allied advance, issued orders on the 18th for the immediate withdrawal of the Tenth Army's left wing into new battle positions. The 14th Panzer Corps would remain generally where it was in order to hold an Allied attack to the north or north-west, and guard against landings in the Gulf of Naples. On the German left, however, the 76th Panzer Corps was to wheel back from the Salerno front, fighting a delaying action and carrying out extensive demolitions as it went. All roads and traffic lines were "to be lastingly destroyed and mined in great depth"; and the order that all non-removable equipment and supplies of military importance be rendered useless specifically cited the destruction of the extensive aqueduct system of Apulia. It was the German intention that by the night of 21-22 September the Corps should have reached a line extending from Salerno through Potenza to Altamura, a communications centre about fifty miles north-west of Taranto. The left wing would then continue to swing back until Herr was holding a defence line passing to the south of Foggia and reaching the Adriatic at Manfredonia, just below the Gargano peninsula. These positions were to be retained until 30 September.<sup>83</sup> Could the Eighth Army accelerate this programme?



Anticipating Alexander's directions, Dempsey had already given the Canadian Division the task of seizing Potenza. With part of his force still making its way up the coast from Catanzaro, the Canadian G.O.C. had now to consider a further advance of 125 miles by road, possibly against enemy opposition. The route prescribed by the 13th Corps Headquarters followed the coast road northward from Villapiana for 25 miles, turning inland through Rotondella along a highway (No. 92) which wound north-westward across the mountainous and river-strewn terrain of Lucania to Potenza, in the heart of the southern Apennines. Simonds had already given some thought to the problem of an advance along this axis, and early on the 17th he notified Dempsey of his intentions. He could not use the divisional reconnaissance regiment to provide the necessary speed and power, for its single available squadron\* was in very bad shape mechanically, and only fit for flanking patrols.<sup>85</sup>

Simonds therefore proposed to develop a quick thrust by a heavily armed motorized battalion group from the 3rd Brigade-which would be in effect an advanced guard to the brigade. This mobile force would advance from Villapiana on the 17th, followed early next morning by the balance of Brigadier Penhale's units. On the same day the 1st Brigade, with supporting artillery and armour, would take up a firm stand inland from Scanzano, a town on the coast road about ten miles north of the Rotondella lateral. Brigadier Graham's role was to guard the Canadian right flank, for although the 1st Airborne Division was now holding the Italian heel as far north as Bari, enemy estimated at divisional strength were believed to be in the Altamura area.<sup>86</sup> The 2nd Brigade, which was due to reach Cassano on the 17th, would remain there temporarily in reserve, prepared to follow to Potenza.<sup>87</sup>

Penhale assigned the task of leading the advance on Potenza to Lt.-Col. M.P. Bogert, the West Nova Scotia C.O., giving him for striking power, in addition to his own battalion, a squadron of the Calgarys, a battery from the 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A., one troop each of anti-tank and light anti-aircraft artillery, and a platoon of medium machine-guns from the Saskatoon Light Infantry. An engineer platoon from the 1st Field Company and a company of the 9th Field Ambulance R.C.A.M.C. completed the force.<sup>88</sup> Shortly after midday on the 17th "Boforce", as it was named from its commander, was on its way.<sup>89</sup> During the remaining hours of daylight the column rolled rapidly up the coast road to Nova Siri Station-the railway station for Rotondella. There it turned its back on the Gulf of Taranto, passed through Rotondella,<sup>90</sup> and halted for the night ten miles south-east

\* Concentration of the regiment, *which* was commanded by Lt.-Col. F. D. Adams, had been delayed by the non-arrival in Sicily of the bulk of its vehicles in the D plus 42 convoy. A composite squadron joined "A" Squadron on 18 September, but the balance of the regiment did not reach Adams' headquarters until the end of the month.<sup>84</sup>

of Sant' Arcangelo\*, the Reconnaissance Squadron having explored as far as that place earlier in the day.<sup>91</sup>

Next morning Boforce drove by the old grey town overlooking the River Agri without incident, but about midday it was halted at Corleto, first by a blown bridge, around which the engineers quickly constructed a diversion, and then by rubble-choked streets in the town itself, which had been heavily bombed by the R.A.F. While one company of West Novas worked to clear a passage for vehicles through the debris, a second company pressed forward on foot towards Laurenzana, ten miles along the highway. As the leading patrol neared this village, a German demolition party blew up a bridge in their faces. It was now dark, and Bogert called a halt for the night while the hard-working sappers prepared a way around this latest obstacle.<sup>92</sup> About the same time the main body of the 3rd Brigade pulled off the road to bivouac at a point a few miles south of Corleto.<sup>93</sup>

Early on the 19th jeeps and motorcycles could pass the blown bridge, and two companies of West Novas moved forward on foot. Beyond Laurenzana they had a brisk exchange of mortar and small-arms fire with the German demolition squad, which had just dealt with a bridge across the all but dry bed of the Camastra--a tributary of the Basento River. The enemy hastily withdrew, leaving one of his lorries burning beside the broken bridge. About midday the West Novas entered Anzi, a village five miles farther north, and seventeen from Potenza.<sup>94</sup>

Early in the afternoon, thanks to the combined efforts of engineers and infantry at the various obstacles, the advance was resumed, with the troops once more riding and the tanks leading the column. From Anzi the road was "studded with Tellermines", † but by half-past seven the vanguard had reached the high ground overlooking the broad valley of the Basento, across which Potenza lay spread out on the hillside.<sup>96</sup> It was too dark for Bogert to study the ground from his vantage point opposite the town, and he had to form his plan of attack from maps. Potenza's chief defensive advantage was its commanding position above the wide river flats, which afforded an excellent field of fire. The Basento itself, running along the north side of the valley, like all other mountain rivers at that time of the year was practically dry, and presented no obstacle to infantry. More serious for the attacker was a steep embankment which carried the railway between the river and the town. Reports of enemy strength in Potenza were contradictory. On the 18th some Italian civilian and military sources indicated that the Germans were holding the town strongly with infantry and artillery, while

\* See p. 697.

†The *Tellermine*--one of forty different types of German anti-tank mines--had a flat, cylindrical metal body with a pressure cover to set off the main igniter, and could be equipped with anti-lifting igniters on the side and bottom. Various kinds contained from ten to twelve pounds of explosive.<sup>95</sup>

others declared that it had been evacuated on the previous night.<sup>97</sup> Bogert proceeded on the first assumption, deciding to wait until after the moon rose at 11 o'clock before attacking with two companies of The West Nova Scotia Regiment.<sup>98</sup>

From the high ground south of Potenza Highway No. 92 spiralled in a westerly direction down into the valley, crossing the Basento and two of its tributaries by three bridges before it reached the built-up area and climbed into the centre of the town. Reconnaissance patrols discovered that the enemy had already demolished the first of these bridges (which was hidden from observation from Potenza by an intervening ridge) and had mined the river bed in the vicinity. Accordingly before the attack started the sappers, protected by "D" Company of the West Novas, went forward to clear a crossing-place. About 2:00 a.m. on the 20th the remaining infantry companies dismounted from their vehicles at the blown bridge, suffering seven casualties from an exploding mine. An hour later a patrol from "A" Company drove off a party of German engineers who were preparing to demolish the second bridge. "C" and "D" Companies now came up and crossed the river and the railway embankment beyond before they ran into resistance. Daybreak found them in the area of the railway yards, engaged in a bitter fire-fight with enemy paratroopers, who seemed to have an unusually large number of automatic weapons.<sup>99</sup>

Although Bogert had available a substantial concentration of artillery\* and medium machine-guns, these could do little more than engage targets of opportunity because of the danger of hitting their own troops. The armour was still held up by mines and demolitions, while the enemy's small-arms fire kept the remaining West Nova companies from advancing across the open valley. Accordingly Brigadier Penhale, who had brought the Royal 22e Regiment and the Carleton and Yorks forward during the night, decided to deploy the former battalion in a wide enveloping movement to cross the river east of Potenza and seize the high ground behind the town. The artillery would be able to support this flanking attack without endangering the West Novas in the southern part of the town.<sup>101</sup>

Shortly after midday, while the Royal 22e was sweeping around the right flank, a troop of the Calgaries passed the last of the obstacles on the main road and entered Potenza. At once resistance collapsed. The West Novas, some riding on the tanks, quickly pushed up the long hill through the town. Apart from a few snipers they met no opposition, but instead a wild ovation from those inhabitants bold enough to venture into the streets. The Carleton and Yorks followed through promptly and secured an important road junction two miles to the north.<sup>102</sup> Patrols pushed out at once to the west and late that evening established contact with elements of

\* On the afternoon of the 19th Brigadier Penhale had placed the whole of the 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A. at the disposal of Boforce.<sup>100</sup>

the 5th British Division near Brienza.<sup>103</sup> Early on the afternoon of the 21st the 2nd Canadian Brigade, ordered forward from Cassano, rode through Potenza and took up positions covering the approaches to the town from the north-west.<sup>104</sup> Thus was successfully concluded the special assignment given to the 3rd Canadian Brigade and Boforce--the most extensive operation that the Canadian Division had yet carried out on the Italian mainland. Canadian casualties had been light, the West Novas losing six killed and 21 wounded. Congratulating the Division, the G.O.C. 13th Corps wrote to General Simonds, "I hope you realize what a great achievement the capture of Potenza in sixteen days has been and what a very big effect\* it has had on Avalanche."<sup>106</sup>

The sixteen prisoners taken at Potenza belonged to a battalion of the 3rd Parachute Regiment of the 1st Parachute Division.<sup>107</sup> This unit, 100 strong, had been hurried over from Battipaglia on the eastern edge of the Salerno perimeter, and had reached Potenza on the afternoon of 19 September, in time to do no more than postpone the fall of the town for a few hours.<sup>108</sup> Its late arrival without supporting tanks or artillery is striking evidence of the manner in which the rapid advance of Boforce had caught the enemy unawares.

Potenza, with its population of 30,000, was the second modern city encountered by the Canadians in Italy; most of its buildings were less than 90 years old, for, like Reggio Calabria, the town had been rebuilt after almost total destruction by an earthquake. But its importance as the main inland communications centre south of Foggia had made it a target of high priority for air attack, and it had been roughly handled by medium and light bombers on the nights of 8 and 12 September.<sup>109</sup> In these raids a large number of inhabitants had been killed--estimates went as high as 2000<sup>110</sup>—and many rotting corpses were still unburied when Boforce arrived.<sup>111</sup> For the Canadians Potenza's fine modern buildings and pleasant environment of wooded hills provided a welcome change from the strenuous days in the enervating atmosphere of the coastal plain. One of the most appreciated of the city's facilities was its up-to-date sports stadium, in which the 1st Division found time to conduct a keenly contested track meet before it moved on northward to new assignments.<sup>112</sup>

While the 3rd Brigade was pushing inland to Potenza, the 1st Brigade moved up the coast to the scrub-covered Scanzano plain at the mouth of the River Agri. Brigadier Graham's forces had been expanded to include the 2nd Field Regiment, the 51st Anti-Tank Battery and the 5th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery R.C.A., the 4th Field Ambulance, the 14th Canadian Army Tank (Calgary) Regiment (less the squadron with the 3rd

\* Cf. Tenth Army war diary for 16 September (see above, p. 220). It should be noted, however, as Montgomery's Chief of Staff has pointed out, that the situation at Salerno was well in hand before the Eighth Army was able to exert any pressure in that neighbourhood.<sup>105</sup>

Brigade) and the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards (now with two squadrons).<sup>113</sup> With this strength he was in a position to protect the 1st Division's administrative area, which had been established at Nova Sin Station, and to meet any counter-attack against the Canadian right flank or an enemy thrust towards Taranto. During the remainder of the month the rest of the Division saw little of this group. Distance and unfavourable terrain made wireless communications unreliable, and direct liaison over the hundred-odd miles of mountain road separating the respective headquarters was extremely difficult. From "firm base" positions on the high ground between the Agri and Basento Rivers patrols ranged inland over a wide area. The only clash with the enemy worthy of note occurred on the 19th at Miglionico,\* a village overlooking the Basento from the north, midway between Taranto and Potenza. Here a patrol of the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards surprised a superior force by attacking through a railway tunnel which led to the German bivouac area. Before the enemy could recover, the Canadians had inflicted a number of casualties and withdrawn the way they came.<sup>114</sup> The Princess Louise themselves lost nine killed and seven wounded.

After 20 September there was no further contact with the enemy by any of Graham's units. His patrols were in touch with those of the 1st Airborne Division, which was holding a wide front from the mouth of the Basento to the Adriatic coast at Bari. The main body of the Canadian Division had moved forward to Potenza, where it was flanked by the British 5th Division, which had reached Auletta, about twenty miles farther to the west. On the Eighth Army's left flank General Clark's forces were regrouping for a new offensive. Thus, by 21 September the two Allied Armies were firmly linked in a continuous front from Bari to Salerno.<sup>115</sup>

### Patrols to the Ofanto

General Alexander now issued instructions to his two Army Commanders for future operations. In general terms he suggested a pattern for the campaign and indicated successive bounds for the advance. He defined the object of the forthcoming operations to be

the seizing of certain vital areas which contain groups of all-weather airfields, ports and centres of road communications. On these firm bases the Armies can be regrouped, reorganized and balanced, and from them strong offensive operations can be developed to destroy the German forces in the field. Light mobile forces and patrols will be operating ahead of these bases against the enemy continuously. This advance screen harasses the hostile rearguards, obtains information of all natures, and aids us to keep the initiative.<sup>116</sup>

\* See p. 697.

The C.-in-C. indicated four phases into which the operations could be divided. The first, the consolidation of the present holdings on the line Bari-Salerno, was already practically completed; the second would include the capture of Naples and the important Foggia airfields; the third aimed at the seizure of Rome and its airfields and the important road and rail centre of Terni. For the final phase Alexander indicated as objectives the port of Leghorn and the communications centres of Florence and Arezzo; this last goal was well in the future, however, and its realization would depend largely on the enemy's plans, the extent of the build-up of the Allied forces, and the rate at which our ports and lines of communication could be developed. Throughout the advance the Army Group Commander planned to take full advantage of Allied control of the sea and air to put "small but hard-hitting mobile forces behind the enemy so as to cut him off."<sup>117</sup> In the event he was unable, for reasons which will appear later, to mount more than two amphibious operations—one on each coast.

Any immediate major advance by the Eighth Army was out of the question. By the 21st maintenance problems had become so serious that it was apparent to General Montgomery that he would be unable to operate any main forces north of the line Bari-Potenza before 1 October.<sup>118</sup> This situation had resulted from the unforeseen manner in which the operations in the Italian toe had developed. As we have noted, administrative planning had been based on the assumption that the Army would halt at Catanzaro, after being supplied that far from Sicily.<sup>119</sup> Maintenance in the early stages had been carried out successfully through the small ports of Reggio and Porto San Venere, and over certain suitable beaches. But the advance had not stopped at Catanzaro; the rapid drive forward over inferior roads to that point and beyond had placed a considerable strain upon the administrative machine.<sup>120</sup> and subsequent operations had brought it to the verge of complete breakdown.<sup>121</sup>

Every effort was made to overcome the crisis. The Army's supply axis was switched from the Italian toe to the heel, in order to take advantage of the commodious ports of Taranto and Brindisi and the resulting shorter lines of communication, better roads, and even railways capable of operation. While the changeover was being effected, the 5th Division and the 13th Corps on the west coast were maintained by coastal vessels unloading at Sapri, the 1st Canadian Division drawing partly from dumps at Crotona and partly from Taranto.<sup>122</sup> With great enterprise Royal Canadian Army Service Corps troops pressed into service some undamaged Italian rollingstock which they found in the railway yards at Villapiana. After using their train to transport supplies along the coast, they drove it to Taranto, and from there on the 20th ventured forth towards Potenza with a load of petrol and ammunition. Unfortunately, about half way to its destination the train was derailed by a mine.<sup>123</sup>

It was Montgomery's intention, before undertaking the advance on Foggia, to regroup his 5th and 13th Corps along the line Barletta-Melfi, which followed the right bank of the Ofanto River, about 25 miles north of his present forward positions. Accordingly, on 20 September he ordered General Dempsey to clear up any remaining enemy on the 13th Corps' right flank and to dispatch light forces to Melfi, and to Spinazzola, 20 miles farther east. At the same time the 5th Corps would conduct similar operations in the coastal sector.<sup>124</sup>

General Simonds needed to make no substantial changes in dispositions to carry out the tasks which Dempsey passed to him. From its base at Scanzano the 1st Brigade continued to clear the right flank; from Potenza the 3rd Brigade directed its long-range patrols along the secondary road which wound north-east to Spinazzola; while the 2nd Brigade prepared to open Highway No. 93, running north to Melfi.<sup>125</sup>

To oppose these thrusts the enemy had in Apulia only the 1st Parachute Division, with a fighting strength (according to the 76th Panzer Corps' Chief of Staff) of about 1300.<sup>126</sup> On the 22nd, as Canadian patrols began ranging northward from Potenza, Heidrich's forward positions extended eastward through the hills from Atella (a village on the Potenza road about ten miles south of Melfi) to Spinazzola, and thence north to Barletta at the mouth of the Ofanto River. He was charged with delaying the arrival of the Eighth Army in the Foggia plain until 27 or 28 September.<sup>127</sup>

The Canadians encountered the paratroopers' defence line at two places on the 22nd. North-east of Potenza a patrol of the Royal 22e Regiment attempting to enter Spinazzola was turned back by artillery and small-arms fire, while a party of Patricia's reconnoitring the road to Melfi found their way barred by a strong enemy post at Atella.<sup>128</sup> Near Atella on the same day the Germans breached the great Apulian Aqueduct, thereby cutting off the chief source of water for the whole arid area from Foggia to the Italian heel.\* By this action the enemy served notice that he intended making no real stand before reaching the mountains behind the Foggia plain.<sup>129</sup>

After the rebuff of their patrol on the 22nd the Patricia's set up an advanced base at Castello di Lagopesole, a village about five miles south of Atella. From the battlements of the great square 13th century castle they had a clear view of Atella across the intervening plain and of the impressive and isolated peak of Mount Vulture†, beyond. A battery of field artillery came forward on the 23rd and began shelling Atella. That night the paratroopers withdrew northward, but for two more days held on to Rionero on the eastern slope of Mount Vulture. When Patricia's patrols

\* The 150-mile main Aqueduct is supplied from the headwaters of the Sele (which flows into the Gulf of Salerno), and crosses the Apennines by a tunnel, emerging west of Atella.

† See p. 697.

entered this village on the 26th, they found the inhabitants angrily lamenting the mass execution of 17 male civilians by the retreating Germans.<sup>130</sup>

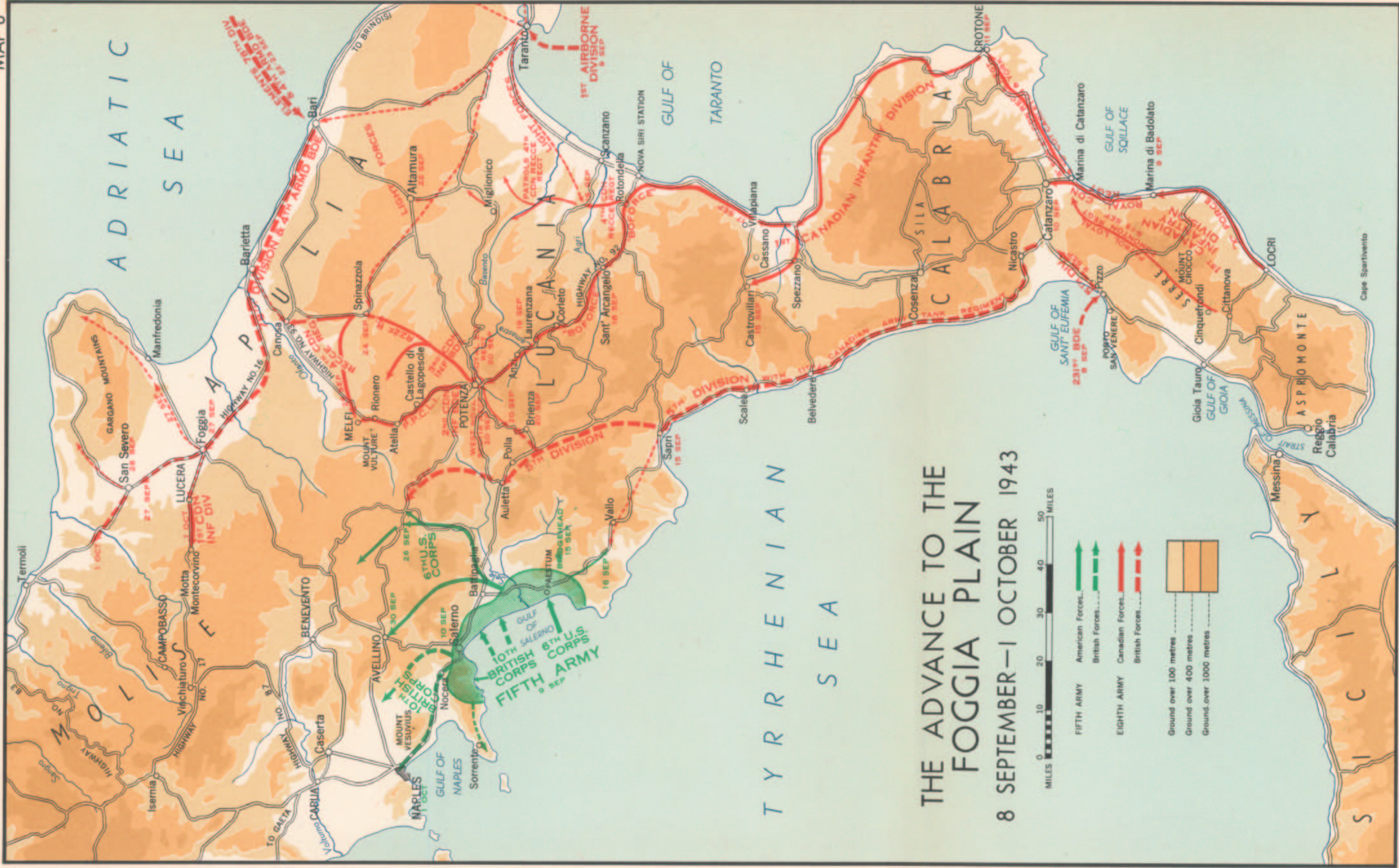
By now the enemy had been pushed back along the Eighth Army's right front to the line of the Ofanto River. The Royal 22e Regiment found Spinazzola clear on the 24th,<sup>131</sup> and next day two squadrons of the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards arrived there from the 1st Brigade's area. One squadron drove north to Canosa, which was already in the hands of the 5th Corps. The other worked west, and after being held up by enemy rearguards and then delayed by mines and demolitions, reached Melfi on the 27th, just as P.P.C.L.I. patrols entered the town from the south.<sup>132</sup>

Canadian patrolling did not extend across the Ofanto, for light British forces were already striking across the broad Foggia plain. Elements of the 78th Division and the 4th Armoured Brigade, pushing up the coast from Bari, had crossed the river on 26 September and advanced unchecked to within fifteen miles of Foggia. Next day the enemy abandoned the heavily bombed city, and the 78th passed through it to the northern edge of the plain.<sup>133</sup> The capture of the much-needed Foggia airfields completed the Eighth Army's task in the second phase of the operations prescribed by General Alexander on 21 September. The Fifth Army's objective was attained four days later as the 7th Armoured Division, of General McCreery's 10th Corps, entered Naples on the morning of 1 October.<sup>134</sup>

General Montgomery, now regrouped his forces. In the 13th Corps the newly arrived 78th Division replaced the 5th Division, which joined the 1st Airborne Division under the command of the 5th Corps. It was the Army Commander's intention to resume his advance with the 13th Corps, leaving the 5th temporarily in reserve in the Taranto area.<sup>135</sup> By 30 September Dempsey's formations were concentrated on the rising ground south-east of the Foggia plain. Along the coast between Barletta and Bari were the 78th Division, the 4th Armoured Brigade and a Special Service Brigade<sup>136</sup> Inland the 1st Canadian Division had moved up from Potenza to the Canosa-Spinazzola road, where it had been joined by the 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade.

The Canadian armoured regiments had been widely dispersed during September. While the Calgarys were taking part in the 1st Division's operations up the east coast, the Ontarios had supported the advance of the 5th British Division.<sup>137</sup> Because of bad roads and unsuitable terrain they played a very minor role: in their fifteen days with the 5th Division they did not fire a single shot.<sup>138</sup> The Three Rivers took no part in "Baytown", and remained in Sicily until 24 September.<sup>139</sup> Both these latter units were now without their tanks; The Ontario Regiment's were at Scalea on the west coast, waiting for shipment by water to the Adriatic sector; while those of the Three Rivers were en route from Sicily to Manfredonia, nearest seaport to Foggia.<sup>140</sup>





THE ADVANCE TO THE  
FOGGIA PLAIN  
8 SEPTEMBER—1 OCTOBER 1943

The absence of any heavy fighting by Canadians during their first month of operations on the mainland was reflected in the relatively light casualties 32 killed, 146 wounded and three prisoners of war. More surprising, in view of the malarious and unhygienic state of the country and the strain imposed by long moves and resulting lack of sleep, was the fact that the incidence of sickness remained slightly below normal.<sup>141</sup> Of all the temporary losses through illness the most serious was that of Major-General Simonds. On 22 September he was confined to his quarters suffering from jaundice, and remained there with brief intervals of activity until the 29th, when he was evacuated to a British Casualty Clearing Station at Bari.<sup>142</sup> Brigadier Vokes was summoned from the Sports Stadium at Potenza, where he was attending the finals of the Divisional Sports Competition, and placed in temporary command of the Division. Lt.-Col. B. M. Hoffmeister, Commanding Officer of the Seaforth Highlanders, was ordered to take over the 2nd Brigade. Vokes then returned to Potenza Stadium and watched the team from his 2nd Brigade capture the "Sicily Cup" by a comfortable margin.<sup>143</sup>

## CHAPTER IX

### THE FORTORE AND BIFERNO RIVERS, OCTOBER 1943

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#### The Canadians Move Westward from Foggia

THE 1st Division's association with the broad Foggia plains, to the western regiments reminiscent of the Canadian prairies, was only fleeting. Since their arrival in the Mediterranean theatre it had been the lot of the wearers of the red patch to do most of their campaigning in mountainous terrain. After their fight along the sunbaked ridges of Sicily their path had taken them over the steep Calabrian plateaux and across the rugged tableland of Lucania. Now their orders sent them into the hills again-towards the tangled mass of heights which forms the main watershed of Central Italy.

The Allied Armies had reached the third phase of operations forecast by the Commander-in-Chief ten days earlier. The objective was Rome, which was to be taken in the pincers of an Eighth Army thrust southwestward across the peninsula from Pescara and a frontal attack from the south by the Fifth Army driving up the Tyrrhenian coast from Naples.<sup>1</sup> The Allied commanders entertained high hopes (which the troops magnified into unjustified assurance) that the fall of Rome would not be long delayed. At the end of September it was believed that the Germans intended to withdraw by gradual stages to the Pisa-Rimini line,<sup>2</sup> and Montgomery's chief concern was that his administration would not be able to keep up with his pursuit of the enemy. On 4 October he cabled Mr. Churchill:

When I have got the lateral Termoli\*-Campobasso I will have to halt my main bodies for a short period and operate in advance of that lateral only with light forces while I get my administration on a sound basis during the period of the halt. But light forces directed on a sensitive area can be very effective and by this means I will retain the initiative and gain ground. After the halt I will advance with my whole strength on Pescara and Ancona. I shall look forward to meeting you in Rome.<sup>3</sup>

The prescribed forward limit for the operations of these "light<sup>4</sup> forces" was the general line Pescara-Popoli\*; but Pescara was not less than 130 miles

\* See p. 697.

from Foggia by road, and Popoli (on the east-west highway from Pescara to Rome) was separated by a formidable mountain barrier from the most advanced elements of the Eighth Army.

The Termoli lateral which was Montgomery's immediate objective was Highway No. 87, linking the Adriatic port with Naples. It crossed the Eighth Army's axis of advance about 45 miles west of Foggia, passing through the upland city of Campobasso 35 miles inland. The Army Commander ordered General Dempsey to advance to this line on a front of two divisions—the 78th along the axis of the main coast road, and on the mountainous left flank the 1st Canadian Division, directed on Vinchiaturio, a road junction six miles south-west of Campobasso, at the foot of the great wall of the Matese Mountains.<sup>5</sup>

The axis allotted to the Canadian Division was singularly devoid of alternative routes. The main road from Foggia to Vinchiaturio (Highway No. 17) ran westward in the most serpentine fashion into the heart of the Sannio Mountains—sturdy bastions of the main Matese group (see Map 9). Climbing out of the plain twelve miles west of Lucera, the highway twisted and turned up the rugged escarpment, following a sinuous course which doubled and sometimes more than trebled the airline distances between the hilltop towns along its route. This mountainous terrain, in which almost all vehicle movement was confined to the roads, naturally favoured the defender; and he was further aided by the barrier of the upper Fortore River and its tributaries, which flowed north-eastward across the Canadians' path.

On 29 September, at his last conference before going to hospital, General Simonds announced his plan for the 1st Division's advance. He named five bounds between Lucera and Campobasso to which the main body of the 1st Brigade would move as each was reported clear by an advanced guard, whose task would be to deal with light enemy rearguards. This mobile force was commanded by The Calgary Regiment's C.O., Lt.-Col. Neroutsos, and included the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards, the Calgary tanks, The Royal Canadian Regiment (carried in lorries) and the 27th Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A., with the 2nd Field Regiment R.C.A. and the 66th Medium Regiment R.A. in support. While the main advance would be made along Highway No. 17, with the 3rd Brigade in reserve, the 2nd Brigade would strike through the bleak hill country to the south, thus protecting the left flank of the Division, and indeed of the entire Eighth Army.<sup>6</sup>

The divisional start line was at Lucera, which has stood from Roman times on an isolated rocky fragment of the Apennines rising 500 feet above the surrounding plain. From the western edge of this natural stronghold one of Frederick II's great castles still faced the hills, and as the leading Canadian troops descended the highway past the massive walls early on the morning of 1 October, they could see, stretching across their path a dozen miles ahead, the abrupt rise of the outlying ridges of the Daunia Mountains.<sup>7</sup>

A strong vanguard moved well in advance of Neroutsos' force. It was led by Lt.-Col. F. D. Adams, and consisted of his Reconnaissance Regiment, a squadron of the Calgarys and a company of the R.C.R.<sup>8</sup> Shortly before 8:00 a.m. the Princess Louise "A" Squadron came under machine-gun fire as it reached the lower spirals by which Highway No. 17 climbed out of the level plain. It quickly became apparent that the enemy was prepared to dispute possession of the village of Motta Montecorvino, which sat like a thimble on a pointed hill atop the first main ridge. Reconnaissance elements fanning out to either flank reported that for four or five miles on each side of the highway the ridge was defended by machine-gun posts and 88-millimetre guns. It was clear that an attack in force upon Motta would be necessary to dislodge the enemy from his advantageous position.

Meanwhile on the immediate left flank the Princess Louise "B" Squadron had moved rapidly south-west from Lucera to Alberona--a hill village six miles south of Motta. The commander, Major M. A. G. Stroud, had learned about the enemy's dispositions from Major Vladimir Peniakoff\*, the founder of "Popski's Private Army". The two pooled their resources, and the combined armoured-car and jeep force, making its way with difficulty up a narrow and tortuous track into the hills, assaulted Alberona from the rear. Without suffering a single casualty the attackers drove the Germans from the town, killing at least fifteen.<sup>10</sup> It was the first of many instances of active co-operation between "P.P.A." and Canadian troops.<sup>11</sup> The dead Germans were clothed in the familiar Luftwaffe blue with yellow pipings; for the line of the Motta ridge was being held by elements of the 3rd Regiment of Heidrich's 1st Parachute Division.<sup>12</sup>

Operations in front of Motta now developed into an action by the advanced guard. What was intended to be a combined infantry and tank attack started at 4:00 p.m. Little artillery support was available; for with the exception of the 10th Field Battery the two regiments allotted to the force had been delayed in a bad traffic congestion between Foggia and Lucera. "A" and "B" Squadrons of the Calgarys advanced with great dash up the ridge in the face of steady 88-millimetre fire and fought their way through the town. But now infantry-tank co-operation broke down. Machine-gun fire sweeping the exposed slopes was evidence that the enemy still held the town and the flanking hills, and it was apparent that heavy casualties would accompany any attempt by the R.C.R. to follow the armour into Motta by daylight. As darkness fell Neroutsos ordered his tanks to withdraw to a less hazardous position, and the R.C.R. commander, Lt.-Col. D. C. Spry, reorganized his troops for a night assault.<sup>13</sup>

\* The small special scout force of the Eighth Army which this almost legendary RussoBelgian officer commanded was originally more formally designated No. 1 Long Range Demolition Squadron.<sup>9</sup> Its main armament at this time consisted of jeep-mounted .50-inch Browning machine-guns.

By 9:00 p.m. "C" and "D" Companies of the R.C.R. had secured an intervening platform north of the highway, about half way up the main ridge. A patrol from "A" Company reported the edge of the town free of the enemy, but as the rest of the company pushed forward they met heavy machine-gun fire, and a brisk skirmish ensued. In view of the strength of the defences, Spry decided to withdraw his troops down the slope and to shell the town before attacking again in force. By this time the remainder of the 2nd Field Regiment had caught up, and a few minutes before 3:00 a.m. it fired a brief but heavy concentration into the town. Immediately afterwards "A" and "B" Companies assaulted through a violent thunderstorm, pressing forward in the face of scattered enemy fire. The German garrison had already begun to withdraw westward up Highway No. 17, and by first light the R.C.R. were securely established on the far edge of Motta.<sup>14</sup>

The action ended the operations of the advanced guard: at 7:30 a.m. on the 2nd Brigadier Vokes, the acting G.O.C., directed Brigadier Graham to take over with the 1st Brigade. Shortly afterwards "C" Company of the R.C.R., supported by the Calgarys' "C" Squadron, advanced on the next objective. This was the road junction 2000 yards west of Motta, where from Highway No. 17 the secondary road to Castelnuovo della Daunia branched north along the dominating ridge of Mount Sambuco. It was an unprofitable move. In the exposed saddle between the Motta hill and the objective infantry and armour were caught by heavy fire. German 88s knocked out six Canadian tanks in short order; and mortar and machine-gun fire pinned the R.C.R. company to ground 600 yards from the ridge.<sup>15</sup>

The fighting at Motta Montecorvino was the first major engagement of Canadian troops on the mainland of Italy, and was as intense as any that followed during the month. In striking their first blow against the protecting screen of the 1st Parachute Division, the Canadians encountered a new pattern of enemy behaviour-determined and fierce resistance up to an unpredictable moment, then rapid withdrawal to another dominant feature. These effective tactics were being employed by the enemy in accordance with a Tenth Army order issued late in September for a slow withdrawal to defence positions south of Rome (see below, p. 267). Two of its paragraphs suggest that the order might have been written expressly for the battle group of paratroopers who opposed the Canadians at Motta Montecorvino.

Within the limits of the delaying action, every opportunity is to be taken of destroying enemy forces that have pushed ahead incautiously, and of inflicting heavy losses through action of combined arms. Withdrawal to the individual defence lines and the delaying action between them are dependent on the enemy advance.

Withdrawal movements must only take place as a result of overwhelming enemy pressure or of heavy losses caused by intense artillery fire. The practice is to be followed of intensifying our own artillery fire shortly before withdrawal, and posting rearguards well supplied with ammunition to screen the withdrawal movement ....<sup>16</sup>

This systematic opposition to our advance was to continue as the 1st Division pushed deeper into the rocky uplands of the Molise. Allied staffs were soon to realize that an unexpected development had taken place in the German plan of campaign. On 30 September, as we shall see later, Hitler had ordered the Tenth Army to stabilize and hold a winter line across the narrowest part of the peninsula. On the German left flank this position was to be at the River Sangro, which flowed across the 76th Corps' sector 50 miles north-west of Motta. Herr was notified that his withdrawal across these 50 miles should not be completed before 1 November.<sup>17</sup>

#### The 1st Brigade's Advance from Motta to the Fortore, 2-6 October

From the high, wooded ridge behind Motta the enemy commanded both the Castelnuovo road, which ran along its western slope, and Highway No. 17, which bent around its southern extremity. In order to free the main axis Brigadier Graham ordered The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment to make a right-flanking attack on the ridge, and the 48th Highlanders to break out from a firm base in the Motta area and seize the important road junction.<sup>18</sup> The two battalions had reached the foothills early on the 2nd, just in time to come under an ineffective attack from three Messerschmitts which swept out of the mountains to strafe and bomb the Canadian positions in and about Motta.<sup>19</sup>

About midday the Hastings, with Lt.-Col. The Lord Tweedsmuir again in command (see above, p. 125), struck across country towards their objective, a point on the Castelnuovo road about a mile north of Highway No. 17, where a rough track branched off towards a number of scattered mountain villages to the north-west. Machine-gun fire held them in the oak woods at the foot of Mount Sambuco, but after dark they scaled the steep slopes, and drove off enemy rearguards.<sup>20</sup> When the arrival of the 48th Highlanders in Motta was delayed by traffic congestion on the main axis and mortar fire which was still falling on the town during the afternoon of the 2nd,<sup>21</sup> and because daylight would soon be fading, Brigadier Graham sent the R.C.R. against the left-hand objective. Advancing across the muddy pastures west of the town they occupied the crossroads without difficulty, and as night fell successfully assaulted the overlooking German positions. There was bitter hand-to-hand fighting in the darkness and the rain, but by daylight on the 3rd the whole ridge was in our hands.<sup>22</sup> The two nights' fighting had cost the R.C.R. and the Calgaries 65 casualties between them and the Hastings thirteen.

The next objective was Volturara, a typical Apennine mountain town two miles west of the Sambuco ridge-although thrice that distance by road. From

its rocky pinnacle it commanded two of the eastern approaches to the Fortore River—the narrow valley of the Torrente la Catola through which Highway No. 17 continued westward, and the lateral road to Benevento, which zigzagged up a long ridge south of the Catola to cross the right-hand fork of the Fortore near San Bartolommeo in Galdo. The 48th Highlanders secured Volturara virtually without opposition on the morning of the 3rd, but heavy machine-gun and mortar fire from both sides of the Catola valley halted further advance along the main axis. "A" Company forded the river (the bridge on the Benevento road had been blown) and in a sharp scrap cleared the south bank; but the main fire continued to come from the direction of San Marco, a village on a dominant ridge three miles north-west of Volturara and half that distance north of the highway, with which it was unconnected by direct road.<sup>23</sup>

Brigadier Graham therefore ordered the R.C.R. to attack San Marco, at the same time sending a company of the 48th Highlanders against a road junction two miles north of the village. He allotted in support the bulk of the divisional field artillery and the 66th Medium Regiment R.A., and directed Lt.-Col. Johnston to create a diversion on the left by again putting a Highlander company across the Catola.<sup>24</sup>

"C" Company of the 48th, supported by a troop of Calgary tanks, put in their attack at 3:00 p.m. on the 4th, capturing the crossroads in a stiff fight which cost the Canadians seven killed and three wounded against an estimated 60 enemy casualties.<sup>25</sup> On the same afternoon the R.C.R. assaulted the San Marco ridge after an exhausting march across country. Faulty co-ordination resulted in the infantry attacking without the planned artillery support, and the leading companies ran into heavy enfilading fire. There was little progress until Lt.-Col. Spry brought his dismounted carrier platoon forward with all its Bren guns, thereby breaking the deadlock. Darkness found the enemy still holding the ridge, with the attackers in close contact. Taking a calculated risk in employing artillery support in such circumstances, Spry ordered a concentration by the 2nd Field Regiment. This bold move worked. Convinced that a fresh attack was impending the enemy withdrew, enabling the R.C.R. to occupy San Marco without further trouble. In the early morning they descended to Highway No. 17 and marched unhindered westward to the high ground overlooking the Fortore crossing.<sup>26</sup>

In the meantime the Hastings and Prince Edwards had been pushing into the inhospitable hills farther to the north with a view to turning from the right flank the enemy's positions east of the river. Late on the 3rd they set out from Mount Sambuco under orders to seize Mount Miano, three miles north of San Marco. The move entailed about fifteen miles of marching, much of it in rain and darkness, across unfamiliar mountainous country which concealed unlocated German outpost positions. By daylight on the 4th, after a sharp early morning skirmish, the Hastings had gained positions on Mount



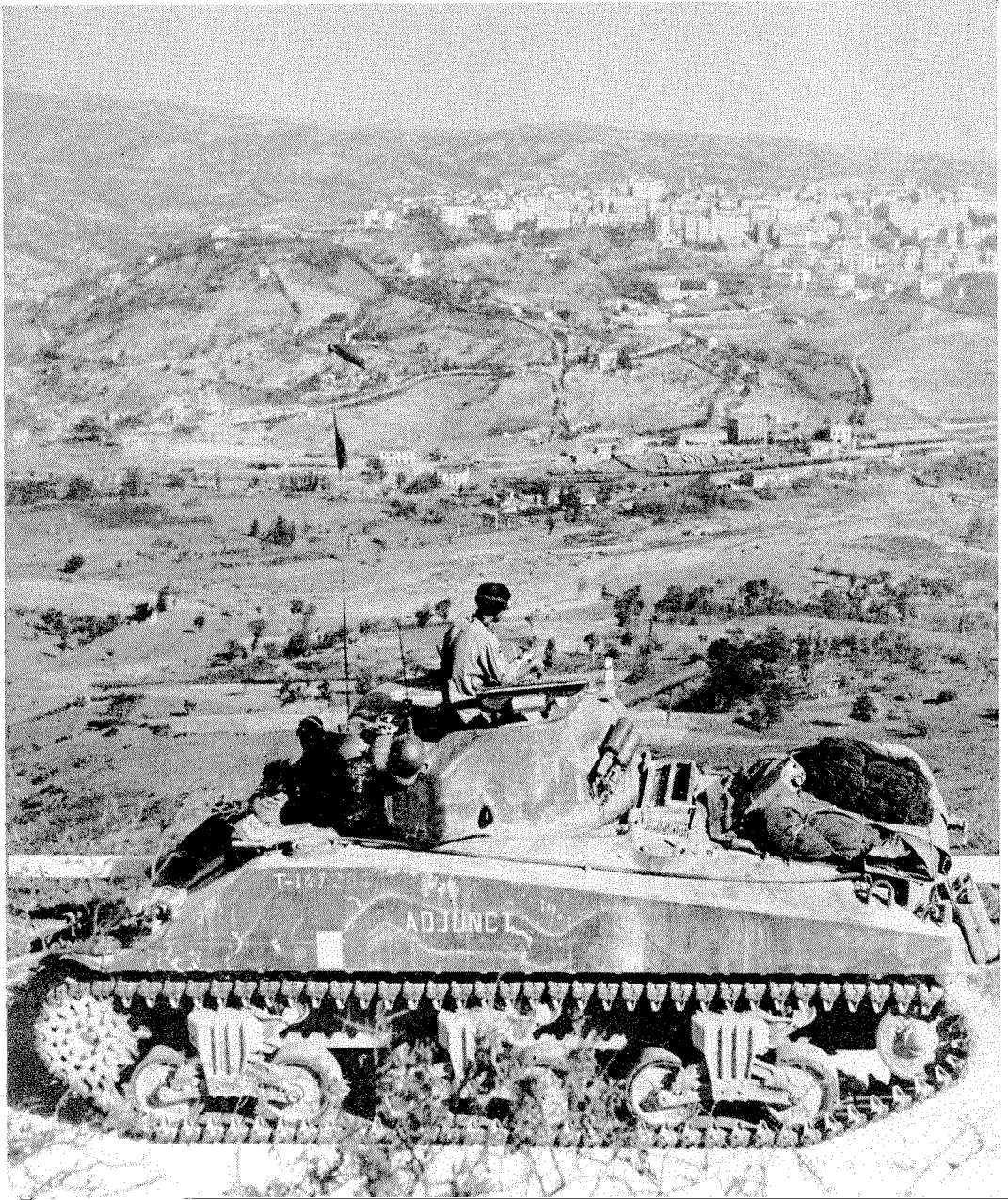
Ingotto, about half way to their objective; but it was midday on the 6th before they reached Mount Miano, to find it abandoned by the paratroopers. In the meantime a patrol of drivers and other headquarters personnel had taken Carlantino, four miles to the north-west, after a brief exchange of shots; Celenza Val Fortore, between Mount Miano and the river, was found empty of Germans.<sup>27</sup>

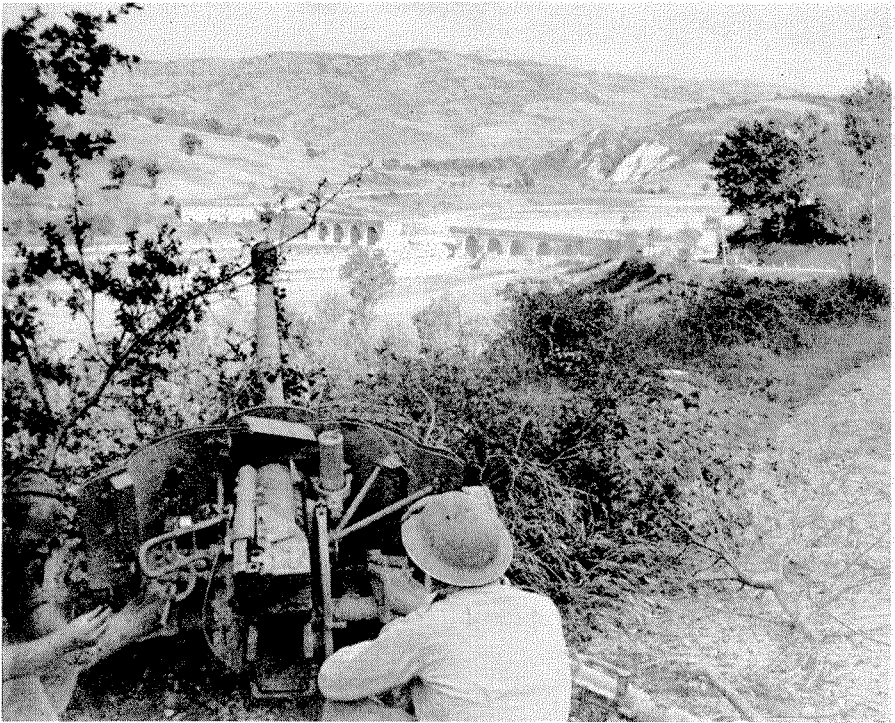
Four days of persistent effort by the 1st Brigade had driven the enemy's rearguards back west of the Fortore, and thus enabled the Canadian Division to draw up to his first major natural line of resistance. By the morning of the 6th the 3rd Infantry Brigade had come forward to relieve Graham's tired units on the main axis.<sup>28</sup> Three days earlier on the right flank "C" Squadron of the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards, covering the Division's northern boundary along the Castelnuovo road, had reached the Fortore opposite the town of Colletorto, which patrols reported held by a battalion of the 67th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (of the 26th Panzer Division).<sup>29</sup> On the left, the 2nd Brigade, which had been waiting at the ancient Roman town of Troia, 15 miles south of Lucera, was ordered forward to the Fortore on the 4th. By nightfall the Edmontonians and the Patricias were in the San Bartolommeo area, overlooking the Fortore. The Seaforth Highlanders, who, like the Edmontonians, had followed a southern route through Castelfranco and Montefalcone, had troops across the eastern branch of the river in Foiano di Val Fortore.<sup>30</sup>

Prisoners taken by the Edmontonians on 5 October in a raid on Baselice (see p. 697), a village facing San Bartolommeo across the Fortore valley, belonged to the 71st Regiment of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division.<sup>31</sup> This identification, together with that made earlier in the Colletorto region, helped to illumine a picture which had been by no means clear to the intelligence staffs.

At the end of September interrogation of prisoners and reports from Popski's patrols had indicated that the 1st Parachute Division was holding a line from San Bartolommeo to the coast at Termoli.<sup>32</sup> Heidrich was conducting his defence along this wide front with independent task groups; the force opposing the 1st Canadian Brigade from Motta westward was part of Battle Group Heilmann,\* under the commander of the 3rd Parachute Regiment, Colonel Ludwig Heilmann. It now became apparent that behind this screen of paratroopers the two remaining formations of the 76th Panzer Corps--the 26th Panzer Division and the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division--were withdrawing northward before the steady pressure of the Fifth Army. This movement across the Canadian axis inevitably brought the attacking

\* A captured strength return of 26 September revealed that Battle Group Heilmann comprised, besides Heilmann's own regiment, a battalion of the 1st Parachute Regiment, two troops of parachute artillery, four anti-tank platoons, a machine-gun battalion and anti-aircraft and engineer troops--an estimated total of 1350 excluding the machine-gun battalion (of undetermined strength).<sup>33</sup>





#### OVERLOOKING THE FORTORE VALLEY

On a hill outside Gambatesa, captured on 8 October 1943, two soldiers of The Carleton and York Regiment examine an abandoned German anti-tank gun sited to cover the demolished *Ponte dei 13 Archi*.



#### THE APPROACH TO CAMPOBASSO

Members of the Royal 22e Régiment move towards Mount Gildone on the night of 11-12 October 1943. The 1st Brigade was to come forward next night to carry on the 1st Canadian Division's advance to Campobasso.

force against a succession of fresh troops. By the time the Canadians reached the Fortore crossing on Highway No. 17 the 1st Parachute Division had passed on northward; they were now to fight their way forward against General Walter Fries' 29th Panzer Grenadier Division.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile the quality of the German defence opposing his left flank had induced General Montgomery to seek assistance from the Fifth Army. On 5 October he signalled General Alexander:

Canadian threat against Campobasso and Vinchiaturò meeting stiff opposition. Suggest American division at Benevento be ordered to operate energetically northwards to Vinchiaturò as such a thrust would force the enemy to give ground in front of Canadians.<sup>35</sup>

The request, however, produced patrol action only, for General Clark was fully occupied with preparations for a major attack across the Volturno, which was to start in a week's time.<sup>36</sup>

#### The Capture of Gambatesa by the 3rd Brigade, 7-8 October

An attempt on the night of 5-6 October by a company of the Royal 22e Regiment to establish a foothold across the Fortore above the demolished 13-span highway bridge was driven back by heavy and persistent fire. The enemy—a battalion of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment<sup>37</sup>—was in too good a position to yield the crossing except under greater pressure; accordingly Brigadier Penhale gave orders for a two-battalion attack to be made on the morning of the 7th.<sup>38</sup>

The valley of the upper Fortore separated the Daunia hill range from the next and more massive group to the west—the Sannio Mountains. The valley was less than 500 yards wide at its crossing by Highway No. 17, which climbed for four twisting miles from the long *Ponte dei 13 Archi* to Gambatesa, a town of 4000 inhabitants mounted on an easterly spur of the Sannios. From this ridge the enemy's range of vision and field of fire were considerably extended by the junction with the Fortore of two major water-courses—the Torrente Tappino, flowing eastward from the hills about Campobasso to enter the main stream half a mile north of the highway, and the Torrente la Catola, which came in just south of the bridge. Penhale therefore ordered the attack to be made on an axis still farther to the south, with the Carleton and Yorks on the right directed against Gambatesa, and the West Novas on the left attacking the Toppo Fornelli, a wooded ridge about a mile south of the town.<sup>39</sup>

At half-past seven on the morning of the 7th, after divisional artillery and the 66th Medium Regiment had fired a series of concentrations along the opposite bank and on the brigade objectives,<sup>40</sup> the assault companies of both battalions pressed forward resolutely across the gravel bed of the river.

Some of the enemy's positions had apparently escaped the preliminary shelling, for the Carleton and Yorks were caught on the river line by heavy machine-gun fire. Smoke laid by platoon 2-inch mortars assisted the crossing, and the two leading companies pushed up the long slope across ploughed fields, which driving rain was rapidly turning into heavy mud.<sup>41</sup> Progress to within half a mile of the objective was considerably aided by the constant artillery support provided through the efforts of the attached forward observation officer, Capt. N. B. Buchanan of the 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A.\* At this point, however, the attackers were held up by fire from two self-propelled guns, whose exact position could not be determined. It was now late afternoon, and for the rest of the day and the following night the Carletons remained in their chilly, rainswept positions on the muddy slopes, pinned down by harassing shellfire, while patrols sought the troublesome guns in vain. But the enemy was not disposed to argue further. Two companies sent forward in the early morning by Lt.-Col. Pangman found the town abandoned.<sup>43</sup> The 24 hours' fighting had cost the Carleton and Yorks twelve killed and 16 wounded.

The West Novas, meanwhile had made better progress. Their crossing met only scattered small-arms fire, which was effectively discouraged by "the welcome chatter of the Sask. L.I. machine-guns".<sup>44</sup> The assault companies gained the far bank without a casualty, and plodded steadily uphill. Grenadiers holding a group of farms midway between the river and the Toppo Fornelli with 20-millimetre cannon and machine-guns were flushed from their positions. Throughout the afternoon the attack moved slowly forward, and as daylight waned the unit's 3-inch mortars successfully engaged German machine-gun posts on top of the ridge. Two platoons of "B" Company made the final assault, and by nightfall consolidation by the battalion had secured the brigade's left flank.<sup>45</sup>

The enemy's relinquishment of Gambatesa was matched by a similar withdrawal all along the left bank of the Fortore. On 8 October the Princess Louise entered Colletorto unopposed.<sup>46</sup> On the same day, on the 3rd Brigade's immediate right, the 48th Highlanders crossed the river below its junction with the Tappino and met no resistance; their patrols found the isolated villages of Macchia and Pietracatella free of Germans.<sup>47</sup> South of Highway No. 17 the 2nd Brigade, as we shall see later, had pushed the enemy out of the bleak moorlands in which the headwaters of the Fortore originated and had gained control of the last of his lateral communications east of Vinchiaturò. Now that Herr had been compelled to yield a promising defensive position divisional Intelligence held out hopes that his withdrawal might be accelerated, particularly as by this time on the Eighth Army's right

\* In this action Capt. Buchanan earned a bar to the Military Cross which he had won early in 1943 while serving with the British First Army in North Africa. He later took part in the Normandy landings, where he earned a second bar to his M.C.<sup>42</sup>

flank the British 78th Division had secured Termoli and was holding the Campobasso lateral as far inland as Larino.<sup>48</sup> But as the Termoli-Campobasso road lost its value to the enemy, Highway No. 17 westward from Vinchiaturò, with its southern flank completely secured by the great wall of the Matese, assumed greater importance. The Canadians were still sixteen miles from Vinchiaturò (or 30 by the undulating and twisting highway), and the rugged nature of the intervening country gave the Germans ample opportunity to prevent Brigadier Vokes' left flank from reaching the Campobasso-Vinchiaturò line before the road to the west had been adequately protected.

Although the Germans had successfully broken contact after their loss of Gambatesa, they were still shelling the highway and the Fortore crossing. These tactics, which they continued to employ throughout the withdrawal, were a source of considerable embarrassment to the Canadians, whose own artillery was sometimes kept out of retaliatory range by road demolitions and by the mining of river crossings and potential gun deployment areas. As the advance progressed, these difficulties in getting the artillery forward were largely overcome through the co-operation of the movements staff and the divisional Engineers, and it was not long before the gunners themselves could deal with most of the mines found in their gun areas. The problem was further eased by employing the jeep-towed 75-millimetre guns of the 1st Airlanding Light Regiment R.A., which on 5 October temporarily left the 1st Airborne Division to gain battle experience with the Canadians.<sup>49</sup>

Because of the hostile fire Brigadier Penhale, ordered by the acting G.O.C. to resume the advance on the 9th, decided that before the main road could be safely used he would have to push the Germans back from the flanking high ground which afforded excellent positions for their self-propelled guns.<sup>50</sup> The brigade objective lay 20 miles along the highway-the fork just west of Gildone, where a secondary road branched off to Campobasso. While the Royal 22e advanced astride the main axis towards Jelsi, a lofty town roughly midway between Gambatesa and Gildone, the Carleton and Yorks occupied Mount Verdone, a dominant oak-covered hill on the right flank.<sup>51</sup> By the night of 9-10 October Lt.-Col. Bernatchez had a company at the junction of the lateral road leading south through Riccia. The West Novas now moved through the 22e's positions and advanced south of the highway; about midday on the 11th they reached a small tributary of the Tappino, the Fiumara Carapello, which crossed the main road immediately west of Jelsi.

The enemy had chosen this watercourse for his next delaying line behind the Fortore. That he was under no delusion that it could long be held is revealed in telephone conversations between the Chiefs of Staff of the 76th Corps and the Tenth Army (Colonels Henning Werner Runkel and Fritz Wentzell, both members of the German General Staff Corps). "Casualties are considerable", Runkel informed Wentzell shortly after lunch on the 11th. "I

believe that at Jelsi we shall again be in difficulties." For this reason, Wentzell pointed out, Kesselring had granted approval for a further withdrawal. "That is again only for one day", the Corps Chief of Staff rejoined. "When he breaks through at Campobasso a great mess will result.... I am worried stiff that 29 Panzer Grenadier Division will suffer heavy casualties."<sup>52</sup>

About the time that these gloomy prognostications were being expressed, the West Nova Scotias, moving through the vineyards south of Jelsi, began to attack across the narrow gully of the Carapello. As "C" Company reached the river bed, the Grenadiers on the ridge opened up with machine-guns and brought down heavy defensive fire. One West Nova officer was killed and two wounded; casualties for the whole day's action numbered 23 all ranks. Communications with Brigade Headquarters were destroyed. Nearly all the mules carrying the 3-inch mortars were killed, yet the crews set up their weapons and vigorously returned the enemy's fire.\* Late in the afternoon a flanking attack on the right by "A" and "B" Companies forced the enemy to give ground; but only after an anxious and uncomfortable night was Lt.-Col. Bogert able to report occupation of the ridge.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile the Royal 22e Regiment, coming up on the left, had occupied Mount Gildone, south of the highway; a patrol into Gildone had found the town abandoned.<sup>55</sup> Kesselring's report that night noted that three Canadian attacks "in battalion strength near Jelsi were repulsed after hard fighting in which the enemy suffered heavy casualties"; and added, "In the area of Jelsi the enemy is bringing up reinforcements."<sup>56</sup> The latter phrase was a standard way of admitting the loss of a position: already the Tenth Army had authorized a withdrawal to a line only five miles east of Campobasso.<sup>57</sup>

### The 2nd Brigade's Fighting on the Left Flank, 6-12 October

It is time now to examine the fortunes of the 2nd Brigade, which we left halted in the hills about San Bartolommeo and Foiano, where the rapidly rising Fortore prevented further advance until suitable diversions to take heavy traffic had been constructed at the demolished bridges.<sup>58</sup> In its isolated role on the left flank the brigade's operations could not draw support from the main body of the Division. It had therefore been allotted the 165th Field Regiment R.A., the 90th Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A., and "B" Squadron of the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards.<sup>59</sup> In command, in the absence of Brigadier Vokes as G.O.C., was Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister of the Seaforth Highlanders. While engineers and unit pioneers put forth prodigious efforts to restore lines of communication, small infantry parties probed forward west

\* One of these mortarmen, Pte. H. S. Waye, was awarded the Military Medal for his gallantry in the action.<sup>53</sup>

of the river, and on 6 October a Princess Louise patrol, scouting 20 miles down the Benevento road from Foiano, established contact With the U.S. 45th Division.<sup>60</sup>

The enemy had good reason for holding the lofty tableland about the Fortore forks as long as possible. Ten miles west of San Bartolommeo a lateral road running northward from Benevento to join Highway No. 17 near Jelsi provided him with an important avenue of withdrawal; on the 3rd Popski had reported a heavy flow of tanks and vehicles—apparently of the 26th Panzer Division—moving along this route towards Riccia.<sup>61</sup> A 76th Corps situation map of 3 October, captured at the end of the war, shows a resistance line (*Widerstandslinie*) drawn along the east side of this road.<sup>62</sup>

At 8:00 a.m. on the 6th Hoffmeister received an order from the G.O.C., "You will take and hold the crossroads at 729118."<sup>63</sup> This was a road junction at Decorata, where a trail through the hills from Foiano met the Riccia lateral. Hoffmeister assigned the task to the Seaforth Highlanders, supporting them with a battery of the 165th, and a mortar platoon and a machine-gun platoon of the Saskatoon Light Infantry.<sup>64</sup> From Foiano the road to Decorata (which consisted only of a church and half a dozen scattered houses) climbed in succession over the northern shoulder of two sprawling, windswept hills—Mount San Marco, whose bald top reached 3300 feet above sea-level, and the slightly lower Toppo Felici beyond. The Seaforth plan provided for a leapfrog advance by three companies to take these two heights and exploit to the crossroads. Any doubts as to the enemy's defensive intentions were quickly cleared up. Before the infantry attack started, two troops of the Princess Louise reconnoitring along the road to Decorata drew heavy machine-gun and mortar fire from Mount San Marco; one officer and seven other ranks were killed and four armoured cars and a carrier were knocked out.<sup>65</sup> A prisoner captured at ten that morning said that a company from the 3rd Battalion of the 71st Panzer Grenadier Regiment was holding the hill to cover the regiment's withdrawal.<sup>66</sup>

At 3:00 p.m. the Seaforth "D" Company led the advance on Mount San Marco. The first bound was completed with little difficulty, but "C" Company, following up, met a storm of fire "such as had never before been experienced by this battalion."<sup>67</sup> The commander, Major S. W. Thomson (who was awarded the M.C. for his part in the action)\*, called down all available support, and thus aided his men pressed up the long slope and took the hill by early evening, at a cost of some 30 casualties. Here "C" Company was joined by "B" and "D", and shortly after nightfall all three pushed on towards the Toppo Felici. The leading troops dealt effectively with various enemy machine-gun posts, but they were still a mile from their objective

\* Major Thomson was then holding only acting rank, which accounts for his receiving a decoration not normally given to other than junior officers. Later, while commanding the battalion at Ortona, he won the D.S.O.<sup>68</sup>



when they encountered the more serious opposition of German armour; fire from a German armoured car inflicted several casualties on "D" Company, killing the company commander and a sergeant.<sup>69</sup>

The Highlanders were without anti-tank weapons (although somewhere to the rear bulldozers and oxen were collaborating in strange partnership to get the 17-pounders forward). Faced with the probability of a strong armoured counter-attack across the open moorland at first light, the acting battalion commander, Major J.D. Forin, withdrew his three companies under cover of fog to Mount San Marco.<sup>70</sup> Early morning patrols reported no contact with the enemy; and it seemed likely that the commanding observation which the Seaforth now enjoyed would compel a German withdrawal to the north-west. Before advancing, however, the 2nd Brigade waited for its supporting arms. A squadron of The Calgary Regiment arrived from Volturara on the same day, and careful plans were laid for the Patricias, supported by tanks, to attack the Decorata crossroads on the 8th. A shortage of petrol caused postponement, however; and late on the 8th a Seaforth patrol reported the crossroads clear of enemy.<sup>71</sup>

West of Decorata the 2nd Brigade's axis of advance over the Sannio watershed veered to the south side of the height of land. The Canadians' path was cut across by a number of small tributaries of the Torrente Tammarecchia and the Tammaro, flowing southward to join the Calore River above Benevento. Within this belt of sparsely-wooded and unproductive country, which continued westward a dozen miles to the main Vinchiatiuro-Benevento lateral, four isolated villages gave the enemy potential positions at which to make a stand--Castelpagano and San Croce del Sannio on the Canadian brigade's left flank, and Cercemaggiore and Cercepicola (see p. 697) on the right, both the latter within three miles of Highway No. 17.

The 71st Panzer Grenadier Regiment, co-ordinating its withdrawal with that of Fries' left wing farther north, resisted the Canadian advance only with occasional shelling; the 2nd Brigade's casualties during the period 9-12 October were virtually negligible. In an effort to maintain pressure on the retreating enemy the brigade employed air support liberally; Kittyhawks of the Desert Air Force bombed Cercepicola and Cercemaggiore on successive days.<sup>72</sup> The Edmontons marched unopposed into Castelpagano on the 9th,<sup>73</sup> the Seaforth Highlanders securing San Croce early on the 12th.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile on the brigade's right flank P.P.C.L.I. patrols joined hands with the Royal 22e Regiment after Riccia had been abandoned. On the afternoon of the 12th a wide sweep northward from Castelpagano by The Loyal Edmonton Regiment\* precipitated a German

\* During the second week of October the unit, which was allied to The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire), received notification of royal authority to assume the title, "The Loyal Edmonton Regiment".<sup>75</sup>

withdrawal from Mount Saraceno, a prominent height overlooking Cercemaggiore from the east, and the Patricias entered the village that night.<sup>76</sup>

By this time Hoffmeister's units had drawn level again with the 3rd Brigade on the main axis, although attempts to renew contact with the Royal 22e west of Gildone were frustrated by a strong German patrol covering the highway.<sup>77</sup> The accompanying skirmish yielded two prisoners to the Patricias, however, whereby intelligence staffs learned that the Canadian left flank had worked its way through the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, and was now opposed by Lieut.-General Smilo Baron von Luttwitz's 26th Panzer Division.<sup>78</sup> Just before midnight on 12-13 October, Brigadier Vokes ordered the 2nd Brigade to proceed at once with the capture of Vinchiatturo.<sup>79</sup>

### The Occupation of Campobasso, 13-14 October

The skill and persistence with which the 1st Canadian Division had harried the enemy through the difficult Apennine country west of the Foggia plain and kept him continuously in retreat were now to be rewarded by the relative ease with which the final objectives of this phase of operations fell into our hands. German testimony to the Canadians' rate of progress appears in an entry in the 26th Panzer Division's war diary: "Opposite the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division the First Canadian Infantry Division had appeared again, which explains the rapid advance of the enemy."<sup>80</sup> It is apparent from contemporary German records that heavy casualties had taught the enemy a deep respect for our artillery, and, as we have seen, Hen constantly found himself in the dilemma of having to decide between a further withdrawal or exposure to losses that his depleted formations could ill afford.<sup>81</sup>

The 76th Corps was now facing two Allied corps; on 11 October, in order to maintain offensive strength and ensure efficient administration on his widening front, Montgomery turned the Adriatic sector over to the 5th Corps and strengthened the 13th Corps by inserting the 5th British Division on the Canadian right.<sup>82</sup> By 12 October the 78th Division had extended its hold along Highway No. 87 to a point eight miles south of Larino, and units of the 15th Brigade, passing through the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards at Colletorto, had reached Bonefro, within five miles of the lateral road.<sup>83</sup> "The road via [Gildone-Campobasso] is the only road back for the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division", Runkel told Wentzell on the afternoon of the 11th,<sup>84</sup> and the two agreed that "when it is decisive one has to accept heavy casualties." But as they spoke Canadian shells had already fallen

on Campobasso, presaging heavier fire to follow as the expected Canadian attack developed. Should the town be held? "My hair is turning grey", lamented the 76th Corps' Chief of Staff.<sup>85</sup>

Brigadier Vokes' first sight of his objective may have come when he was still east of Jelsi; for the highway near Mount Verdona afforded a distant view of the 13th-century citadel which rose 350 feet above Campobasso, to look eastward down the Tappino valley and westward across the headwaters of the Biferno. Campobasso, a provincial capital of 17,000 people, consisted of an old town clustering about the rock on which the citadel stood, and a modern section, whose wide streets were flanked by imposing municipal and provincial administrative buildings, banks and schools—all built during the Fascist era. About two miles to the south the village of Ferrazzano crowned a spike of rock 600 feet above the plain. Ferrazzano had the unreal appearance of a fairy castle; but a determined force might well make it a formidable defensive position dominating the approaches to the town beyond.

On 11 October the Divisional Commander had assigned the capture of Campobasso to the 1st Brigade, which marched forward to the Jelsi road fork during the night of the 12th-13th. Brigadier Graham planned his attack in two phases. At 6:30 a.m. on the 13th the 48th Highlanders began to advance astride the Campobasso road; by mid-morning, without sighting the enemy, they had secured a line two miles south-east of the city. One company went up into Ferrazzano and occupied it after a brief skirmish with a handful of defenders. A small-scale counter-attack on the Highlanders' main positions\* was beaten off without much trouble,<sup>87</sup> but news of this German reaction, together with heavy shellfire which now began to fall along the road, delayed the arrival of the other two battalions of the brigade.<sup>88</sup> It was dark when the R.C.R. reached the 48th, and Lt.-Col. Spry obtained the Brigadier's permission to postpone the final assault until next morning. The Hastings and Prince Edwards were ordered to take over Ferrazzano during the night and from there to simulate an early morning attack on Campobasso.<sup>89</sup>

At 5:30 a.m., while the Hastings' rifles, carbines and Bren guns banged and chattered in a noisy demonstration from the outskirts, the R.C.R. entered the city. For Spry's battalion this assault was "absolutely bloodless".<sup>90</sup> though a Hastings company commander was seriously wounded by a parting shot from the last withdrawing enemy.<sup>91</sup> For reasons best known to its Commander, the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division's morning report referred to "heavy fighting in and around Campobasso" following a penetration into

\* During this counter-attack the Hastings' Second-in-Command, Major A. A. Kennedy, lost his way while attempting to make contact with the R.C.R. and was taken prisoner. He made a daring escape many miles behind the enemy lines, and after wandering for three weeks through the mountains east of Rome, reached American positions near Venafro.<sup>86</sup>

the town by "the entire 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade". That evening the Division reported the evacuation of Campobasso "after a hard battle".<sup>92</sup>

In the meantime Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister had begun the task of breaking the enemy's hold on the nexus of roads about Vinchiaturò. The operation against the town was one of isolation rather than direct attack, and was designed to take full advantage of the Canadian superiority in artillery. Two miles east of Vinchiaturò the north and south secondary road through San Giuliano cut like a bowstring across a wide curve of Highway No. 87; to complete the analogy, Highway No. 17 formed the arrow to this bow, with the arrowhead at Vinchiaturò. The Monteverde crossroads-where shaft met bowstring-was commanded from the north-east by La Rocca, a double-peaked hill 3000 feet high. Hoffmeister ordered the Patricias to occupy this feature as a necessary preliminary to seizing the road junction; the Edmontons were to take the high ground south-east of Vinchiaturò, between Highway No. 87 and the San Giuliano road.<sup>93</sup> On the morning of the 14th, after an impressive bombardment by the 3rd Canadian and 165th British Field Regiments, the P.P.C.L.I. scaled La Rocca without meeting direct opposition. But the enemy appeared "to be defending Vinchiaturò with artillery fire rather than with troops"<sup>94</sup> and throughout the afternoon he heavily shelled the hill and the crossroads below.<sup>95</sup>

Although von Luttwitz could hardly have known that the Canadian acting G.O.C. had promised the 13th Corps to secure Vinchiaturò by noon on the 14th,<sup>96</sup> his diary recorded that evening that "the attack which was expected for today has not materialized. The enemy has not apparently completed his artillery preparations."<sup>97</sup> Later that night he ordered a retirement to a line through Baranello and Busso, about two miles east of the Biferno River. "Withdrawal now", he predicted, "will prevent heavy losses tomorrow from superior enemy forces and artillery fire."<sup>98</sup>

While the Patricias held their position overlooking Vinchiaturò from the east, Hoffmeister's remaining battalions completed the envelopment of the town. Early on the 15th the Edmontons pressed forward from Cercepicola across the San Giuliano road and occupied a hill overlooking the important highway fork south of Vinchiaturò; then they pushed patrols out to the west to investigate the villages which hugged the flank of the Matese Mountains.<sup>99</sup> During the morning the Seaforth Highlanders swung northwestward from the Monteverde crossroads to cut Highway No. 87 north of Vinchiaturò. While a platoon occupied that town, the rest of the battalion worked forward towards Baranello, in front of which a subsequent night patrol encountered a series of alert German machine-gun posts.<sup>100</sup> The significance of their presence was to be fully realized in the days that followed.

By securing the southern end of the Termoli-Vinchiaturò lateral the 1st Canadian Division had completed its part of the initial task which

General Montgomery had prescribed for the Eighth Army. Operations in the next phase, it will be recalled, were to be carried out "only with light forces", while administration was building up for a further major advance. At a conference on 14 October the Division's senior General Staff Officer, Lt.-Col. George Kitching, announced that the Canadian formations would reorganize in the vicinity of Campobasso, and he forecast a pause in major operations of eight to ten days. While adopting defensive measures the infantry brigades would send forward long-range patrols to investigate the enemy.<sup>101</sup> The gunners would continue to play an important part; given as his first priority the elimination of enemy guns shooting into the Campobasso area,<sup>102</sup> the C.R.A., Brigadier A.B. Matthews, disposed his field regiments so as to reach to the line of the Biferno River and his medium artillery the Cantalupo-Frosolone road, twelve miles west of Highway No. 87.<sup>103</sup>

The diary of the 26th Panzer Division reveals that the enemy guessed wrongly when seeking to account for the sudden change in Canadian tactics. Asked by von Luttwitz the reasons "for the discontinuation of the attacks of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, contrary to expectations", Runkel replied "that he believed the division to have suffered many casualties and that the artillery fire of the previous days might have resulted in the adoption of a more cautious method of operation."<sup>104</sup>

Long before Campobasso fell elaborate plans had been made to develop it as an administrative and recreational centre. Despite the German shelling, which continued intermittently for a week,<sup>105</sup> the 13th Corps lost no time in establishing a Forward Maintenance Centre there,<sup>106</sup> and every afternoon long convoys arrived from the east with vast stocks of the complex paraphernalia of war. Under the energetic direction of the 1st Division's A.A. and Q.M.G., Lt.-Col. W.P. Gilbride, Auxiliary Service organizations--the Canadian Legion, the Knights of Columbus, the Y.M.C.A. and the Salvation Army--provided recreational facilities for the troops, Canadian and British, in the area. Within a week of the German withdrawal officers and men to the number of 4000 a day were being brought into "Maple Leaf City" to see moving pictures at the "Savoy" and the "Capitol", and enjoy the hospitality of the "Aldershot Officers' Club" or the soldiers' "Beaver Club", which a certain sense of dramatic justice had established in the former local Fascist Youth Headquarters.<sup>107</sup> On the second day of the city's occupation the R.C.R. initiated the practice of units in turn mounting ceremonial guards in the town square. The newly appointed Town Major read a proclamation and the pipes of the 48th Highlanders played. But German shells were still falling on the city, and, according to the Brigade Major, the gesture was "rather wasted, as the population very sensibly remained deep in their cellars."<sup>108</sup>

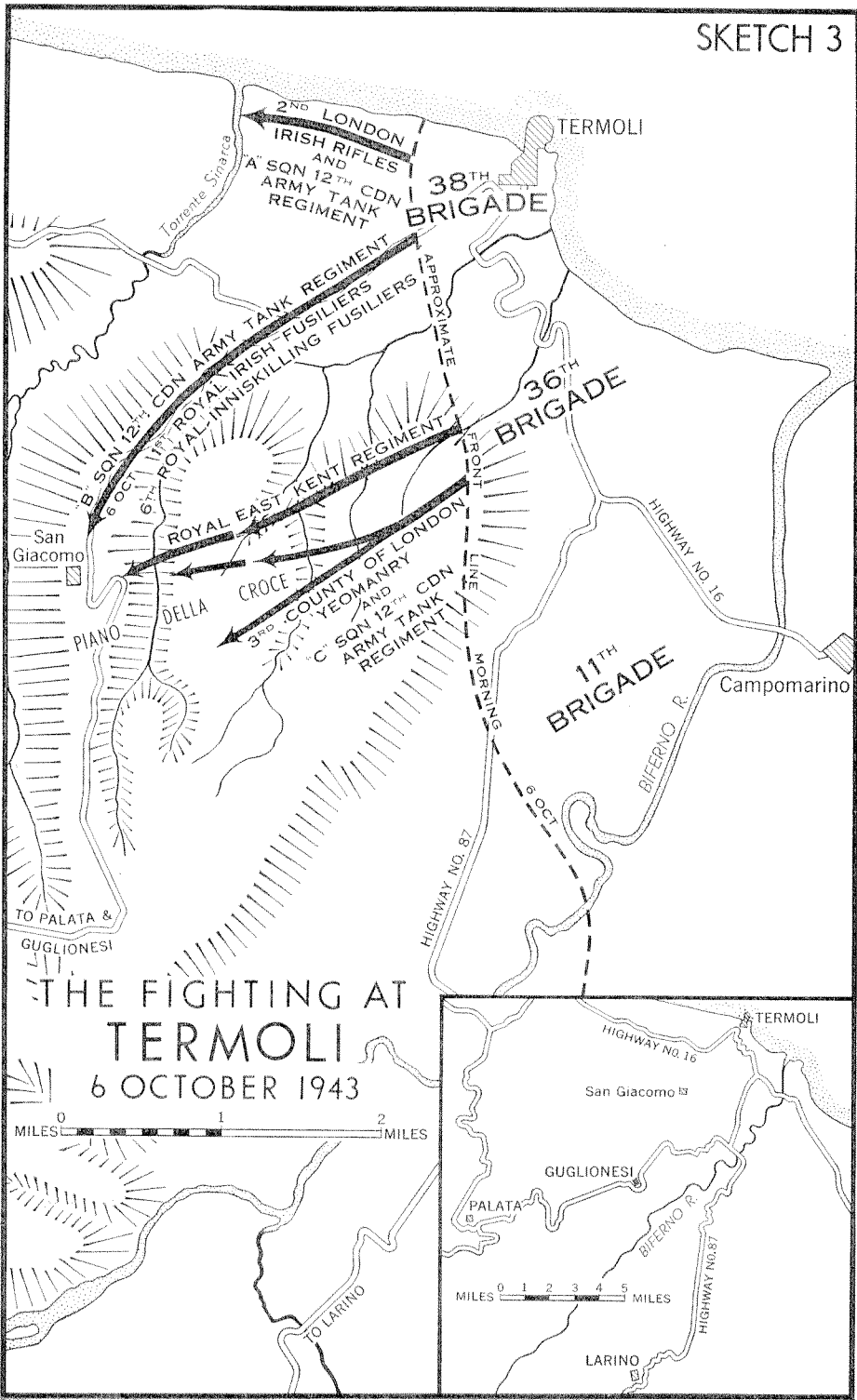
At this point, before continuing with the Canadian advance across the Biferno, we must shift our attention, in both space and time, to follow the fortunes of the Three Rivers Regiment, which had been sharing in a dramatic episode on the Adriatic coast.

### The Three Rivers Regiment at Termoli, 5-6 October

At the end of September the small port of Termoli, situated three miles north of the mouth of the Biferno near the junction of the coast road with Highway No. 87, anchored the extreme left of the German defences in Italy (see Map 8). It was not strongly garrisoned. On the last day of the month Heidrich, disturbed by the possibility of an Allied landing, had sent one platoon of paratroops to reinforce the weak railway company and the company of medical troops in the town,<sup>109</sup> but he could not provide more substantial forces without authority from his Corps Commander. Late on 1 October General Herr revealed his concern for the security of his left wing by signalling the Tenth Army: "Situation Heidrich further aggravated. Help required, including help from higher up."<sup>110</sup> By the afternoon of the 2nd the 16th Panzer Division (commanded by Major-General Rudolf Sieckenius), which only a few days earlier had been withdrawn from the 14th Panzer Corps into army reserve along the Volturno north of Caserta to recover from the effects of the Salerno battle, was speeding up Highway No. 87 towards the east coast.<sup>111</sup> That night the armoured columns rolled into Campobasso, where early on the 3rd they received word that Allied troops had landed at Termoli.<sup>112</sup>

This surprise seaborne assault, which has been called "the most concentrated Commando landing in Mediterranean operations",<sup>113</sup> was made by a Special Service Brigade, commanded by Brigadier J.F. Durnford-Slater, which had sailed from Manfredonia at midday on the 2nd. Its task was to seize Termoli and prevent the destruction of the harbour. It would then be reinforced by the 78th Division's 11th Brigade, which was advancing up the coast road (Highway No. 16). The amphibious force-which included the 40th Royal Marine Commando, comrades of the 1st Canadian Division in the Pachino landings-went ashore at 2:15 a.m. on 3 October, and took the garrison completely by surprise. Within six hours the port and town had been secured undamaged; before dark elements of the 11th Brigade crossed the Biferno near the ruined road bridge and joined the Special Service troops in forming a defensive perimeter about the town<sup>114</sup> (see Sketch 3).

During the next two days the bridgehead was reinforced by the arrival by sea of the 78th's remaining brigades-the 36th and the 38th (Irish)-



and by such guns and tanks as could be moved across the Biferno.<sup>115</sup> Spitfires of the Desert Air Force provided a rapidly growing air cover to combat German fighters and bombers attacking Allied troops and shipping,<sup>116</sup> and two destroyers of the Royal Navy rendered timely service in bombarding enemy positions.<sup>117</sup>

The enemy quickly matched this strength. On the morning after the initial landing two battle groups of the 16th Panzer Division, hastening down the west side of the Biferno valley, reached the road fork at Palata; from there they closed in on the bridgehead in a two-pronged movement--Battle Group von Doering (79th Panzer Grenadier Regiment) from the south through Guglionesi, and Battle Group Stempel (64th Panzer Grenadier Regiment) in a wide left sweep to the coast road west of Termoli.<sup>118</sup> They attacked early on the 5th, and in a series of sharp infantry-tank thrusts drove the defenders back to the outskirts of Termoli itself and all but broke through to the vital junction of Highway No. 16 and the Larino road.<sup>119</sup> The position of the Termoli force was precarious (at one stage, when the enemy was reported within "three cables"\* of the town, the Senior Naval Officer began preparing for an evacuation);<sup>120</sup> for more than 36 hours it had been virtually without armour--only six tanks of the 3rd County of London Yeomanry (Sharpshooters), which was supporting the 11th Brigade, had been able to ford the rain-swollen Biferno. By mid-afternoon, however, the completion of a tank-bearing bridge enabled the remainder of the Sharpshooters to cross the river and enter the fray.<sup>121</sup>

Such was the situation when, shortly after 3:00 p.m., two squadrons of the Three Rivers Regiment arrived at Campomarino, a small village overlooking the right bank of the Biferno from Highway No. 16.<sup>122</sup> On the night of 2-3 October Brigadier Wyman had been hurriedly ordered to place the Three Rivers under command of the 78th Division, as Eighth Army intelligence staffs gave warning of a probable armoured counterattack against the Termoli bridgehead.<sup>123</sup> The long move from Manfredonia, where the regiment's tanks had just arrived by sea from Taranto, was made by forced stages over a route which followed many miles of muddy crosscountry trails.<sup>124</sup>

The area of Termoli offered attractive tactical possibilities to both the attack and the defence. The generally flat terrain lent itself to the manoeuvre of armour; but from some relatively high ground stubborn resistance was possible. Occasional gullies thickly clothed with vineyards and olive groves provided covered approaches for the advance of infantry and tanks, but might at the same time conceal hostile machine-guns or anti-tank weapons. Nevertheless, the region was, on the whole, better tank country than Canadian armour had found in Sicily or elsewhere in Italy. West of the

\* A cable is 600 feet.



broad Biferno flats the ground rose above Highway No. 87 in a low clay ridge, which was overlooked by the Piano della Croce, a long plateau about a mile wide stretching southward from Termoli and rising to a height of 1200 feet at Guglionesi. Along its western edge ran the secondary road from Termoli to Palata, passing through the village of San Giacomo about four miles inland. To sweep this double barrier from east to west and clear the San Giacomo road became the tasks of the Three Rivers Regiment.

The next day (6 October) saw the 16th Panzer Division's supreme effort. The seizure of the eastern hinge-pin of the German line in Italy had caused concern at the highest enemy level. "The eyes of the whole Armed Forces High Command are on Termoli", the Tenth Army Operations Officer telephoned to his opposite number at Corps level late on the 4th, and added significantly, "The Führer wishes to be informed about the situation...."<sup>125</sup> Vietinghoff's headquarters recorded: "The developments of the battle of Termoli are being watched at A.O.K.\* 10 with extreme suspense."<sup>126</sup> "The attack is of considerable importance, and must succeed", the Army Commander told Herr.<sup>127</sup> At the actual scene of operations the effect of this cumulative pressure appeared in von Doering's order of the 5th: "Termoli will be captured on 6 Oct."<sup>128</sup>

But Sieckenius had missed his chance by one day.† By the evening of the 5th all three brigades of the 78th Division had joined the Special Service Brigade in the bridgehead, and with the timely reinforcement by the Canadian armour, the Divisional Commander, Major-General Vyvyan Eveleigh, gave orders to go over to the offensive.<sup>130</sup>

At 7:00 a.m. on the 6th the Three Rivers "C" Squadron, placed under command of the 3rd County of London Yeomanry, struck westward across the lower ridge, with the object of cutting the lateral road and taking San Giacomo from the south. An infantry battalion of the 36th Brigade—the 5th Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment)—followed the armour to consolidate its gains. Progress was slow, as Canadian and British tanks met heavy fire from a strong screen of anti-tank guns which von Doering had placed in front of Guglionesi. The Sharpshooters lost four tanks and the Canadians two; by mid-morning, in spite of small local successes, the attack had been halted short of the Croce plateau.<sup>131</sup>

While this left-flanking move was still in progress, "B" Squadron, in support of the 38th Brigade, advanced south-westward from Termoli down the road towards San Giacomo. In the face of heavy enemy fire, which quickly knocked out three tanks, the Canadian squadron cleared the way for an attack by the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers (Princess Victoria's) and the 6th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, and then skilfully supported the infantry on to the objective.<sup>132</sup> Besides killing a large number of Germans "B"

\* *Armeoberkommando* (Army Headquarters).

† Some units of the 16th Panzer Division did not reach the Termoli area until 6 October because a short-sighted quartermaster had skimped on petrol supplies.<sup>129</sup>

Squadron's gunners claimed the destruction of eight enemy tanks and much transport. This well executed thrust was the key to success in the battle for Termoli. With the enemy's hold on San Giacomo broken the 36th Brigade resumed its attack from the left and mopped up disorganized pockets of resistance on the Piano della Croce.<sup>133</sup> At 4:35 p.m. the 16th Panzer Division reported to Corps Headquarters: "Enemy attack in brigade strength has crushed exhausted left wing of Battle Group Doering .... Orders have been given to withdraw to the area north of Guglionesi."<sup>134</sup>

The remaining Three Rivers squadron, which had come up from reserve on the morning of the 6th, was in time to assist the Irish Brigade to extend and secure the extreme right flank. Advancing westward from Termoli with the 2nd London Irish Rifles, "A" Squadron cleared the ground between Highway No. 16 and the Torrente Sinarca (which entered the sea two miles west of the port), destroyed enemy machine-gun positions across the river and took a heavy toll of the retreating German infantry.<sup>135</sup> By the end of the day the battle was over, and a thoroughly disorganized enemy was withdrawing to positions well inland and up the coast.<sup>136</sup> On 7 October the Three Rivers went into divisional reserve. Their losses of ten all ranks killed or wounded and five tanks destroyed or disabled<sup>137</sup> were light compared with the damage they had inflicted on the enemy. Before the Regiment left the 78th Division the Commander of the Irish Brigade, Brigadier N. Russell, bestowed the brigade battle flag on Major J.R. Walker\*, commander of "B" Squadron.<sup>139</sup> A warm tribute reached Brigadier Wyman from the 13th Corps Commander. "I have been speaking during the last two or three days to several of the units of the 78th Division and the S.S. Brigade which took part in the operations at Termoli", wrote General Dempsey. "Wherever I have been I have heard nothing but praise of the way in which Lt.-Col. Booth's regiment fought. There is no doubt that they played a very important part in bringing about the defeat of the 16th Panzer Division."<sup>140</sup>

On the evening of 7 October Field-Marshal Kesselring appeared in person at the headquarters of the 16th Panzer Division near Palata to conduct a post mortem into the causes of the defeat at Termoli.<sup>141</sup> One month later General Sieckenius left the Division to enter the "Reserve of Higher Commanders" of the Armed Forces High Command.<sup>142</sup>

### Clearing the Right Bank of the Upper Biferno, 15-24 October

When, during the third week of October, the 1st Canadian Division began reorganizing in the Campobasso area, it had been assumed that the

\* For their part in the fighting at Termoli Major Walker and another officer of the regiment, Lieut. J. F. Wallace, were awarded the M.C., and two other ranks, Cpl. R. C. Campbell and Tpr. J. W. Collins, the M.M.<sup>138</sup>

enemy's withdrawal would continue across the Biferno, and that occupation of the half-dozen villages between Highway No. 87 and the river could be entrusted to patrols of platoon strength.<sup>143</sup> But it soon became clear that neither the 26th Panzer Division nor the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division intended to relinquish without a fight their line of outposts east of the river; for from these villages they could bring down mortar as well as artillery fire on the Campobasso and Vinchiaturò areas. As events proved, ousting the enemy from some of these positions was to be a task of company or even battalion proportions.

An observation post high up in the Campobasso citadel provided an extensive view of the 20-mile Canadian front. Less than four miles to the west a white cluster of houses on a high ridge above the Biferno gorge marked the village of Oratino, overlooking the twisting road from Campobasso to Castropignano, on the left bank. North of Oratino the Germans held San Stefano\* and Montagano, two villages standing among low rolling hills which sloped gradually to the river. South-west of Campobasso the whole countryside between Highway No. 87 and the Biferno was dominated by Mount Vairano, which from a height of 1500 feet above the river overlooked Busso at its western base and Baranello, two miles to the south. From Baranello the line of the enemy's forward positions extended south across Highway No. 17 to Guardiaregia, high up the face of the great Matese rampart which filled the south-western horizon. The enemy's interdivisional boundary crossed the Biferno at Oratino, which was included in the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division's sector.<sup>144</sup>

Early efforts by the 1st and 2nd Brigades to establish standing patrols in these villages met determined reaction. On 14 October the Hastings and Prince Edwards did succeed in placing a platoon in Montagano, near the boundary with the 5th British Division, but attempts on three successive days to secure San Stefano failed.<sup>145</sup> The enemy clearly regarded San Stefano as necessary to his retention of Oratino and its control of the main crossing over the Biferno; and from both villages he continued to bring down fire on Campobasso. On 19 October Brigadier Graham ordered a brigade attack against Busso, Oratino and San Stefano.<sup>146</sup>

In the meantime the 2nd Brigade, charged with clearing the western approach to Vinchiaturò, had been having trouble with Baranello, which was held by troops of the 67th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. On 17 October the village was taken by a Seaforth company, supported by Saskatoon Light Infantry mortars and machine-guns and a battery of the 165th Field Regiment R.A. But the enemy quickly brought up reinforcements from divisional reserve,<sup>147</sup> and in the face of a threatened counter-attack in some force, the Seaforth detachment withdrew to a hill 1000 yards to the east.<sup>148</sup> Next day,

\* See p. 497,



#### THE CLEARING OF CAMPOCHIARO

Men of The Carleton and York Regiment fight their way up the steep main street of this village high in the Matese Mountains, 21 October 1943.



#### THE PIPES PLAY IN "MAPLE LEAF CITY"

The 48th Highlanders' pipe band plays in Campobasso. This photograph was taken on 18 October 1943, four days after the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade had entered the city.

Lt.-Col. J. D. Forin, who had succeeded Hoffmeister in the command of the battalion, attacked on a more ambitious scale. After "A" Company had seized some dominating high ground south of Baranello, "B" Company assaulted from the east. There was stiff fighting at the edge of the town, but late in the afternoon the enemy withdrew, leaving behind 35 all ranks killed or captured. The Seaforth casualties for the two days were fifteen, four of them fatal.<sup>149</sup> During the action on the 18th the infantry received useful support from a squadron of the 11th Canadian Army Tank Regiment, now commanded by Lt.-Col. H. R. Schell. It was the first fighting in Italy for the Ontarios, who had only recently relieved the Calgaries.<sup>150</sup>

"And then the pressure at Baranello increased", Wentzell telephoned to Kesselring next morning. "The enemy penetrated from the rear and threw out our troops. Our company there fought bravely."<sup>151</sup>

This ousting was followed within 24 hours by the 1st Brigade's capture of Busso. During the 19th, "B" Company of the R.C.R. worked its way around the south side of Mount Vairano, from whose wooded heights, according to German reports, a battalion of the 71st Panzer Grenadier Regiment had earlier withdrawn into Busso.<sup>152</sup> About sundown, supported by a battery of the 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A. the R.C.R. took the town in what its C.O. later described as "an excellent example of an infantry company using battle drill".<sup>153</sup> With Baranello and Busso lost, the enemy soon surrendered the rest of his hold on the right bank of the Biferno. Early on the morning of the 20th a company attack on Oratino by the R.C.R. and a more elaborate effort by the Hastings and Prince Edwards, with substantial fire support, against San Stefano met no resistance; during the night General Fries had pulled his threatened outposts back across the river to Castropignano.<sup>154</sup>

While these operations were taking place, on the extreme left flank the Carleton and Yorks had begun the task of freeing Highway No. 17 as far as Boiano.<sup>155</sup> This involved clearing Guardiaregia and its companion villages of Campochiaro and San Polo Matese, which, clinging like swallows' nests to the huge Matese wall, commanded the narrow plain through which the highway ran westward from Vinchiaturo. The mutual inaccessibility of these mountain hamlets added to the difficulties of the Carletons, who could not use the lateral approaches from the main road because of the continuous enemy fire. Guardiaregia was occupied without resistance on 18 October, and as infantry detachments felt their way along the edge of the mountains,<sup>156</sup> a squadron of the Ontario tanks gave a measure of support by shelling opportunity targets from extremely exposed positions in the plain.<sup>157</sup> On the 20th Lt.-Col. Hangman's men dispersed German outposts along the Torrente Quirino, a small tributary of the Biferno,<sup>158</sup> and next morning "A" and "C" Companies attacked and cleared Campochiaro,<sup>159</sup>

The remainder of the Carletons' task was completed under the command of the 2nd Brigade, which had begun operations against German positions on the Biferno's left bank. On the morning of the 23rd "D" Company pushed forward to San Polo and in an all-day fight drove the Panzer Grenadiers from the last of their vantage points south of Highway No. 17.<sup>160</sup> Finally, on 24 October, all companies joined in an attack on Boiano. They met virtually no resistance. Boiano, huddled at the foot of the Matese near the highway-crossing over the infant Biferno, had been under our artillery fire for days and had been bombed twice in the preceding week by the Desert Air Force;<sup>161</sup> by the time the Carleton and Yorks attacked, the 2nd Brigade's capture of Colle d'Anchise and Spinete on the high ground north of the highway had made the badly damaged town untenable to the enemy.

The Carletons' expedition into the mountains created an unusually complicated supply problem. Unit pioneers had to build a route westward from San Giuliano, basing it on the ruins of an old Roman road. In spite of the efforts of the indispensable mule trains and the use of all available jeeps, the provision of rations and ammunition, and even medical supplies, to the forward troops was difficult at all times and frequently impossible. The Carletons suffered only thirteen battle casualties in these operations, but there were 40 cases of illness. Some of these were caused by excessive fatigue, as their exacting role frequently required the infantry to scale the heights above their objectives and "outflank" the enemy from above. The unit medical officer attributed much of the sickness to the unsuitability of the normal "bulk" rations to an enterprise of this nature. The inconvenience and danger of preparing and serving food in such adverse conditions emphasized the superiority of the "compo",\* box-type ration, which Canadian troops had received in Sicily.<sup>162</sup> But provisions were only occasionally issued in this form during the campaign in Italy, and "Q" officers, cooks and the troops themselves were quick to learn how improvisation could meet the problem of feeding in the most unfavourable circumstances.

### The Fighting West of the Biferno

On 21 October the last enemy shells fell on Campobasso,<sup>163</sup> but any hopes that the cessation might bring the Canadians in the area an undisturbed rest were quickly dispelled. On the same day General Dempsey ordered the 13th Corps to regroup for a new offensive.<sup>164</sup>

The pause on the Termoli-Campobasso line had enabled General Montgomery to build up his administration for a resumption of the advance in strength, and already in the coastal sector the 78th Division had begun

\* See above, p. 208n.

"squaring up to the defences of the River Trigno".<sup>165</sup> With his eyes on the Pescara end of the "Rome Line" (the lateral which crossed the peninsula through Avezzano and Popoli\*), Montgomery planned that the main effort against these defences should be made by the 5th Corps on the Eighth Army's right. The thrust up the coast would be preceded by "diversionary operations" on his western flank. "In order to focus the enemy's attention inland", he writes, "I intended that 13 Corps should deliver a strong attack on the axis Vinchiaturò-Isernia prior to the 5 Corps operations on the Trigno."<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, the capture of Isernia would deprive the German Tenth Army of one of its main front-line communication links and would open the way to a junction of the Eighth and Fifth Army troops after the Americans had cleared the Volturno valley.

For his drive on Isernia Dempsey brought the 5th Division over from his right flank to the Vinchiaturò area, and assigned the Canadians the task of establishing a firm base for the attack. At a divisional conference on 22 October, General Simonds, who had returned from hospital on the 15th, gave his orders for the Canadian undertaking, which was designed to gain the high ground west of the Biferno, and to "hit a good hard blow at the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division" before the British attack towards Isernia and the more crucial offensive in the coastal sector.<sup>167</sup> The operation had two phases. That same night the 2nd Brigade was to cross the Biferno and attack Colle d'Anchise, a village perched on top of the far bank opposite Baranello, and then secure Spinete, three miles to the northwest. Consolidation of this high ground west of Vinchiaturò would complete the Division's task on the left. The ultimate objective on the right was the region about Torella and Molise, two villages on the height of land between the Biferno and the Trigno. The 1st Brigade was to secure this ridge by the evening of the 26th.<sup>168</sup>

At four o'clock on the morning of the 23rd the Edmontons, whom Hoffmeister had charged with the capture of Colle d'Anchise, waded across the waist-deep and ice-cold Biferno just below its junction with the Torrente Quirino. While the pioneers went to work with engineers of the 3rd Field Company on the preparation of a tank crossing, the rifle companies, shunning an easier but more obvious approach, turned northward along the bank and began to scale the 700-foot escarpment leading to their objective. Even in the heavy fog which had descended they met some enemy fire, but left it unanswered in order to press home the advantage of surprise. By daybreak "A" Company had reached the top of Point 681, an eminence at the eastern end of the single straggling street which is Colle d'Anchise. Caught unawares, the garrison—members of the 1st Battalion, 67th Panzer Grenadier Regiment<sup>169</sup>—tumbled out of their billets to engage the attackers in bitter hand-

\* See map at front end-paper.

to-hand fighting. Soon all the Edmonton rifle companies were involved in the struggle, which continued throughout the morning without producing a definite decision.<sup>170</sup> At one point an N.C.O., Sgt. R. B. Whiteside, of "A" Company, single-handed and armed only with a rifle, successfully engaged two German machine-gun posts, inflicting an estimated eleven casualties. He was awarded the D.C.M.<sup>171</sup>

In the meantime the supporting tanks of the Ontarios' "A" Squadron were experiencing the greatest difficulty in establishing contact with the Edmontons. The heavy mist which lay in the gorge of the Biferno was as embarrassing to the armour as it had been of assistance to the infantry. Although the tanks got down into the rocky river bed at 6:30 a.m., two hours elapsed before the busy sappers, toiling heroically under continuous machinegun and mortar fire, had finished carving an exit in the precipitous far bank. Ten minutes later seven tanks were across the river.<sup>172</sup> They found no Edmonton guides (battalion pioneers left at the crossing had been dispersed by sniper fire), and repeated signals to Brigade Headquarters in Vinchiaturio failed to establish liaison with the infantry in Colle d'Anchise, whose wireless had failed and who seem to have been ignorant of the proximity of Canadian armour.<sup>173</sup> Towards mid-morning the two Ontario troops began working their way up the long slope towards Colle d'Anchise, but half a mile south of the village an ambush by German Mark IVs—identified in German documents as a troop of the 26th Panzer Regiment<sup>174</sup>—knocked out three Shermans, killing three men. The remaining tanks bogged down or were immobilized by thrown tracks, and were of no further use that day.<sup>175</sup>

Now the situation in Colle d'Anchise took a turn for the worse. The presence of the Canadian tanks west of the Biferno had not prevented the enemy from bringing up infantry from Boiano, and these joined with his three Mark IVs in a counter-attack which forced Lt.-Col. Jefferson's "D" Company from the western end of the village. Anti-tank guns and other support weapons were still held up by heavy mortaring at the Biferno crossing, so that the hard-pressed Edmontons had only their PIATs with which to oppose the German armour, and PIAT ammunition ran short when the mule supply column failed to get forward.<sup>176</sup> At 3:30 p.m. the enemy reported having recaptured three-quarters of the village.<sup>177</sup> But the counterattack was not followed up, for the Commander of the 76th Panzer Corps had authorized a withdrawal from the Colle d'Anchise-Spinete area.<sup>178</sup> During the night the enemy pulled back to the Cantalupo-Torella lateral—the Luttwitz position<sup>179</sup>—and early next morning the Edmontons consolidated their hard-won positions. They had suffered 30 casualties in the action; the German losses were estimated at more than 100. The fierce and confused fighting for Colle d'Anchise had once again demonstrated that lack of co-ordination between tanks and infantry which was to lead to the introduction of new training methods and closer co-operation in the campaigns of 1944.



The P.P.C.L.I. attack on Spinete on the 23rd involved a daylight crossing of the Biferno at an exposed ford, to be followed by an advance uphill of two and a half miles which would carry the battalion far beyond the protection of flanking units. In the absence of a crossing suitable for vehicles the Patricias had to rely exclusively on mules (sixty were available for the 2nd Brigade's operations), and considerable delay might be expected in the provision of supporting arms. At midday Lt.-Col. Ware led his companies to their forming-up places in the river bed west of Baranello.<sup>180</sup> At one o'clock Spinete was bombed by 24 Bostons of the South African Air Force,<sup>181</sup> an hour later, as the infantry moved across the Biferno, the greater part of the divisional artillery joined in a bombardment of the objective.<sup>182</sup> Success for the Patricias depended largely on what the Edmontons might achieve on the left, and the latest report from Colle d'Anchise was favourable. Uninformed of the near loss of that position, Ware proceeded with his own attack as planned.<sup>183</sup> Fortunately, however, his advance encountered practically no resistance, for it coincided with the enemy's withdrawal. By early evening the Patricias had entered Spinete without suffering a single casualty.<sup>184</sup>

It was now the turn of the 1st Brigade to strike a still stronger blow with all three battalions against the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division lower down the river. In order to reach his final objective-the "Torella-Molise feature" -Brigadier Graham had first to secure Castropignano and Roccaspromonte, two villages standing about a mile apart on the edge of the almost sheer rampart which formed the left bank of the Biferno opposite Oratino. Patrols had discovered that the only crossing-place in the brigade sector that could be developed for vehicles was at the demolished bridge below Castropignano; and this site, like the section of the Campobasso-Torella road between Oratino and the river, was entirely under enemy observation. Graham's first intention was for the 48th Highlanders to ford the Biferno in the neighbourhood of Casalciprano, about two miles upstream from the broken bridge, and then capture Roccaspromonte and Castropignano from the south. Major D. W. Banton (who was temporarily commanding the battalion) sent "C" Company across the river on the morning of the 24th; but the absence of enemy opposition brought a change of plan, and the task of taking the two villages was given to the R.C.R. The 48th Highlanders would then follow through and take Torella, four miles up the road from Castropignano. The capture of Molise, two miles south-west of Torella, was to be carried out by the Hastings and Prince Edwards in a thrust along the left flank behind Roccaspromonte.<sup>185</sup>

In the late afternoon of the 24th "A" Company of the R.C.R. forded the Biferno below the Roccaspromonte cliffs, and guided by civilians, ascended to Roccaspromonte itself, finding it free of enemy. During the night "B" Company, crossing the river immediately below the demolished bridge,

climbed the steep slope by which the main road spiralled up to Castropignano, and took the town in the face of fire from only one machine-gun. But although the enemy had yielded the two villages without a fight, the succeeding 48 hours showed his determination to deny to us as long as possible the Torella road, which formed the main axis of withdrawal for the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division--just as Highway No. 17 through Isernia provided a means of retreat for the 26th Panzer Division. A German outpost still held a hill west of Castropignano--Point 761--which overlooked the junction of the road from Spinete and Roccaspromonte with the main route. Here "C" Company, moving up through the darkness from "A" Company's positions, ran into the R.C.R.'s first serious opposition. German machine-guns opened up by the light from parachute flares, killing the company commander and compelling a withdrawal. Not until noon next day, after effective shelling by our artillery, was Point 761 reported clear of enemy.<sup>186</sup>

The attack on Torella could now go forward. On the morning of the 25th 35 Kittyhawks and twelve U.S. Warhawks bombed the village,<sup>187</sup> and early in the afternoon the 48th Highlanders passed through the R.C.R. and began advancing up the road from Point 761. Heavy shelling and mortar fire soon brought them to a halt, and there was no further movement that day.<sup>188</sup> Since the treeless, rolling uplands between them and their goal looked promising for armour, Brigadier Graham ordered "B" Squadron of the Ontarios to cross the river. During the previous night the Engineers had completed a diversion at a demolished bridge where the main road crossed a gully below the Oratino hill, but nothing could be done to construct a vehiclecrossing over the Biferno itself. Late in the afternoon on Graham's insistence the Ontarios attempted the impossible, and after several tanks had bogged down, the remainder succeeded in scaling the far bank. They carried the dismantled 75s and the gun crews of a battery of the Airlanding Light Regiment, now badly needed to give close support to the 48th Highlanders.<sup>189</sup>

Early on the 26th the infantry began to advance with the armoured squadron, whose appearance provoked a considerable increase in the fire sweeping the bare ridges in front of Torella. Progress was slow. It was not until dusk, after the full weight of the divisional artillery had pounded the enemy's positions continuously for half an hour, that the Highlanders, who had suffered more than a score of casualties, were able to close in on their objective. But the enemy did not await their coming. Reacting to the steady Canadian pressure, the Commander of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division had already ordered a withdrawal from Torella and Molise to take place that evening,<sup>190</sup> and early morning patrols on the 27th reported Torella clear.

Before the morning was over the Hastings and Prince Edwards had come up on the left flank after an arduous, though unopposed, cross-country march

from the Biferno. Under cover of thick fog and driving rain they climbed the conical hill on which Molise stood, "to be met with a formidable array of Italian flags and a very shifty looking mayor."<sup>191</sup> The people of Molise proved far from friendly; some, indeed, evinced strong Fascist sympathies. There seems little doubt that they gave the Germans details of the Hastings' defences, for the harassing fire which the enemy inevitably directed against his abandoned positions was more than usually effective, his shells landing with unpleasant accuracy upon slit-trenches dug around the perimeter of the town, and causing twenty Hastings casualties in a few hours. In view of this and other instances of civilian interference the battalion commander found it necessary to threaten the populace with drastic punitive measures. "That"-to quote Lord Tweedsmuir--"quieted them down."<sup>192</sup>

The Canadian Division had successfully completed its part of the 13th Corps operation in time for the 5th Division's attack on the left to be made on schedule. On 27 and 28 October two British brigades relieved the Carleton and Yorks at Boiano and the 2nd Canadian Brigade in the Spinete-Colle d'Anchise area. On the next night the advance along Highway No. 17 began in the worst kind of weather, with a Three Rivers squadron providing armoured support for the leading troops. Light rearguard resistance supplemented by road demolitions and mine craters retarded progress, and it was 4 November before patrols of the 13th Brigade entered Isernia, to find it abandoned by the enemy.<sup>193</sup> By that time the 78th Division, making the main 5th Corps assault on the night of 2-3 November, in bitter fighting had broken the German hold on the lower Trigno, and across the Eighth Army's entire front the enemy had begun pulling back to the River Sangro.<sup>194</sup>

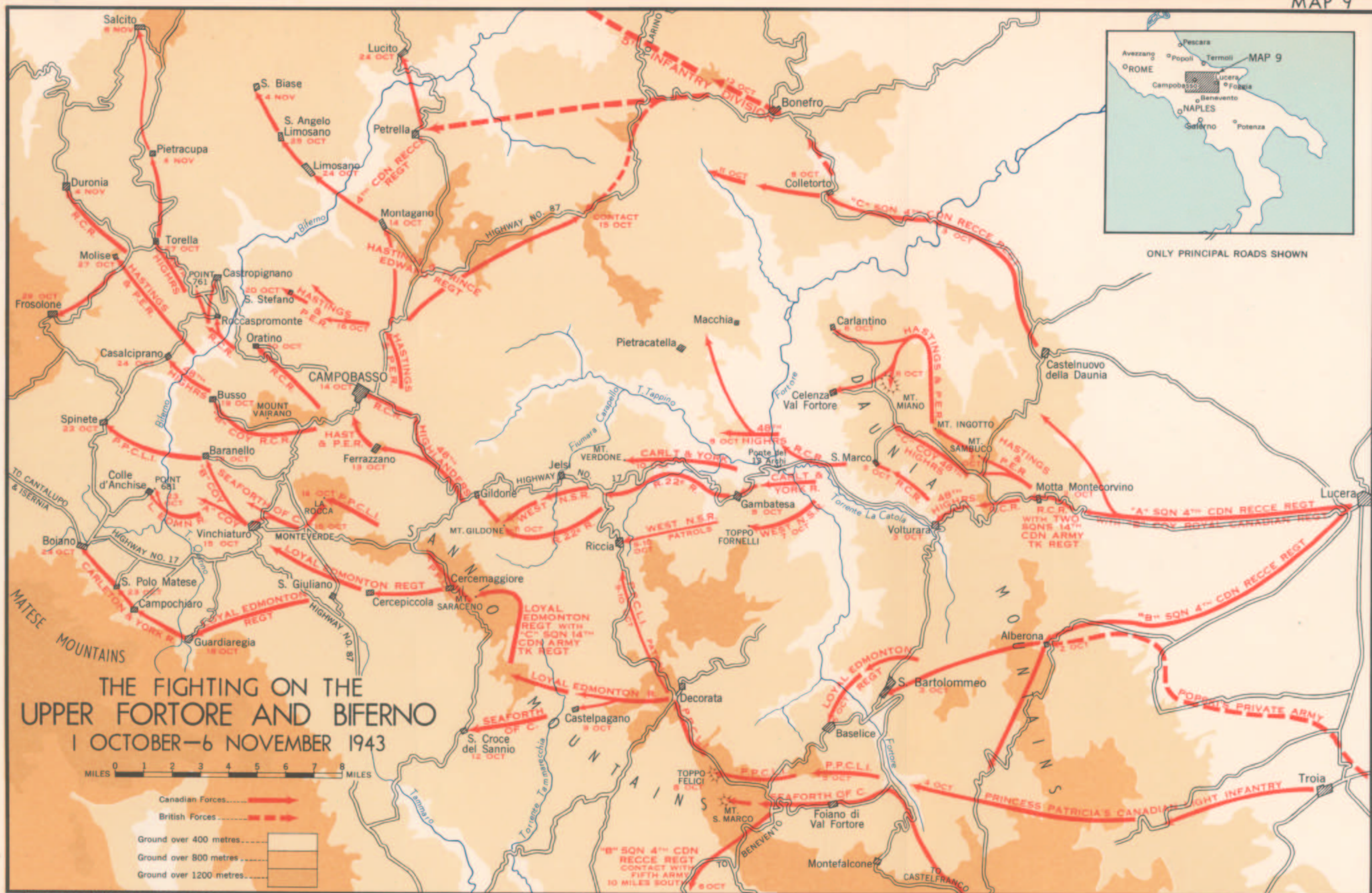
While these major gains were being measured off on either flank, units of the 1st Canadian Brigade followed their patrols into the rolling uplands overlooking the headwaters of the Trigno, to take over scattered hill towns abandoned by the retreating Germans. A company of the Hastings entered Frosolone, on the Cantalupo-Torella lateral, on 29 October, and on 4 November the R.C.R. moved from Molise to Duronia. On the same day the 48th Highlanders sent a company into Pietracupa, three miles north of Torella, and patrols subsequently ranged five miles beyond to occupy Salcito.<sup>195</sup> The infantry was assisted in such operations by detachments of the divisional reconnaissance regiment. The Princess Louise had been given the formidable task of filling the gap created by the transfer of the 5th Division from the 13th Corps' right flank, and during the last week of October and first week of November their far-flung patrols, reaching north from the Montagano-Petrella area into the hills between the Biferno and the Trigno Rivers, secured a number of isolated villages midway between the Eighth Army's two axes of advance.<sup>196</sup>

For most of November the Canadian Division, with the exception of the 3rd Brigade, for which an important independent role was in the offing, was able to enjoy a period of rest and preparation for the bitter December battles on the Adriatic coast. The forethought and energy which had gone into the development of Campobasso as a recreational centre paid gratifying dividends; the amenities enjoyed on 48-hour leaves in "Maple Leaf City" were particularly appreciated by the units of the 1st Brigade, who continued to occupy cheerless billets in the unprepossessing villages across the Biferno. The arrival of more than 1500 reinforcements during the month brought the Division to within 350 other ranks of full strength.<sup>197</sup> The advance from the Foggia plain and the fighting at Termoli had cost the 1st Division and the Army Tank Brigade 630 casualties, of which 170 were fatal. Of the armoured units The Calgary Regiment, which had furnished the bulk of the tank support along Highway No. 17, had sustained the greatest losses-16 killed and 15 wounded. Most depleted of the infantry battalions was the 48th Highlanders, which, in spite of a relatively unspectacular role during most of the October fighting, had lost 26 killed and 70 wounded--striking evidence of the exacting nature of the routine infantry task.

On 1 November the Division said good-bye to General Simonds, who left to take over command of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, soon to arrive in the Italian theatre. With him went his G.S.O. 1, Lt.-Col. Kitching, to command the armoured division's infantry brigade. Brigadier Vokes, promoted to the rank of Major-General, succeeded Simonds; Kitching was followed by Lt.-Col. C. M. Harding, R.C.A. Two changes in command affected the infantry brigades. Hoffmeister, now brigadier, was confirmed in his command of the 2nd Brigade; and on Brigadier Penhale's appointment as Brigadier General Staff at C.M.H.Q., Brigadier T. G. Gibson (who had been commanding the 3rd Canadian Division's 9th Brigade in the United Kingdom) took over the 3rd Brigade.

### The German Plans for the Winter Campaign

By the autumn of 1943 their reverses compelled German leaders to pay increasing attention to the defence of the Fatherland and (as Hitler had emphasized at the Feltre meeting) those areas of Europe, particularly the Balkans, which provided the raw materials essential for the prosecution of the war. The Russian front could no longer retain its priority. "The danger in the East remains", announced the Führer in a directive to the Armed Forces High Command early in November, "but a greater one is looming in the West."<sup>198</sup> The High Command expected that the Allies would attempt a



**THE FIGHTING ON THE  
UPPER FORTORE AND BIFERNO  
1 OCTOBER—6 NOVEMBER 1943**

MILES 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 MILES

- Canadian Forces.....
- British Forces.....
- Ground over 400 metres.....
- Ground over 800 metres.....
- Ground over 1200 metres.....

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Compiled and drawn by Historical Section, G.S.

cross-Channel invasion by the spring, and this influenced any over-all disposition of German forces. Hitler's directive set forth clearly the policy that would be followed:

In the East the territories involved are so large that in the worst case loss of a considerable area can be accepted without seriously endangering Germany. In the West it is different. Should the enemy succeed in penetrating our defences there on a broad front, the consequences within a short time would be incalculable. ... Hence I can no longer tolerate that the West should be further weakened to benefit other theatres of war.<sup>199</sup>

Such were the conditions governing enemy strategy in the Mediterranean. German reaction to events there since the landings in Sicily had been rapid, thorough and consistent. Operation "Achse" had rendered impotent the Italian armies in the north, and had laid the foundations for the Fascist Republican Government which Mussolini proclaimed after he had been snatched from his place of confinement on the Gran Sasso.\* German formations could thus to a great extent be released from security duty in Northern Italy for employment against the Partisans in Istria and Slovenia, or for reinforcing Kesselring in the south. Rommel's Army Group "B" Headquarters had been brought from Munich to Lake Garda, and with additional forces was now to safeguard the industrial cities of the north from Allied seaborne operations. Hitler had clarified the relationship between Rommel and Kesselring by an order which brought both men under his direct command; any right of the former Commander of the Afrika Korps to control the C.-in-C. South would become effective only if decreed by the Führer.<sup>201</sup> By the end of September, the number of German divisions in Italy had increased to eighteen.<sup>202</sup>

In attempting to forecast the probable trend of events south of the Alps the High Command was worried about the disposition of the large forces available to the Allies after the North African campaign, the majority of which had not yet appeared in the fighting in Italy. That it seriously considered the possibility of landings in Northern Italy or in the Balkans indicates its failure to appreciate the shortage of landing craft which was to worry Allied Commanders so greatly in the coming months. A question of immediate concern, particularly in the light of Salerno, was whether or not the fighting was to continue in Central and Southern Italy.<sup>203</sup>

From the beginning there had been two main conflicting opinions on the future conduct of the campaign. One, advanced by Rommel, was that to commit German troops down the peninsula was to expose them to landings in the rear, which would make retreat impossible. He favoured a withdrawal

\* This "rescue" was carried out on 12 September by a force of 100 glider-borne S.S. troopers, led by S.S. Hauptsturmführer Otto Skorzeny, a notorious Hitlerian aide.<sup>200</sup>

to the Northern Apennines,\* where the forces available would be better able to hold seaborne attacks on Genoa and Spezia or along the Adriatic coast.<sup>205</sup> Against this Kesselring argued that experience had already shown the mountainous country of the Southern Apennines to be ideally suited to defence, and that since there was no need at the moment to retire, the ground should be held. He had already selected a series of lines across the peninsula which he considered could be defended. Should there be a landing in the north-which he doubted-he could still extricate the six or seven motorized divisions in the south. "It is very doubtful", he reported on 15 September, "whether the enemy will proceed with his attack against Central and Northern Italy." He believed that the Allies would be satisfied with the Foggia airfields, and could be denied those about Rome, thereby diminishing the air threat against Northern Italy and Southern Germany.<sup>206</sup>

Any scheme which favoured retention of ground was bound to find favour with Hitler, and Kesselring's arguments soon convinced the High Command. On 19 September Keitel directed that since landing operations in the north were not expected in the near future, Army Group "B" was to concentrate on cleaning up Partisan activity in Istria and Slovenia, and to co-operate with the German Commanders in the Balkans, whose urgent task was to prepare for an Allied invasion, particularly on the Dalmatian-Albanian coast.<sup>207</sup> On 30 September Hitler conferred with Rommel and Kesselring at "Wolfschanze" (his headquarters near Rastenburg in East Prussia),<sup>208</sup> subsequently issuing orders which reflected his acceptance of the C.-in-C. South's plan.

I expect that the enemy will direct his main operation from Italy against the south-east area, perhaps also with some forces from Africa. However, it cannot yet be determined whether the enemy will turn from Southern Italy toward Albania, Montenegro and Southern Croatia, or whether he will first try to push the German forces in Italy further north in order to create for himself a base in central Italy for attacking Northern Croatia and Istria.

I order as follows for further warfare:

1. a. C.-in-C. South will fight a delaying action only as far as the line Gaeta-Ortona. This line will be held. The time necessary for organizing the defences and for bringing up the infantry divisions† will be won by operations forward of the line to be held.

b. 5 Divisions, including the two infantry divisions (305th and 65th) are to be used at the Gaeta-Ortona front. One division is to be kept in reserve behind each of the two wings....<sup>209</sup>

Army Group "B" was to secure Kesselring's lines of communication and continue its activities against uprisings in the north-western Balkans with the infantry divisions moved from the coastal areas-a risk which

\* This was in keeping with an operations order issued by the High Command on 18 August which stated that in the event of Italy withdrawing from the war "Southern and Central Italy will be evacuated, and only Upper Italy, beginning at the present boundary line of Army Group B (line Pisa-Arezzo-Ancona) will be held."<sup>204</sup>

†German divisions in the fighting in Italy up to this time were either Panzer (Armoured), Panzer Grenadier (Motorized) or Parachute.

could be taken now that Allied landings were considered less imminent. Included in the Führer's order was the demand for plans for a counter-attack on Apulia, in the event that the Allies turned from Italy into the Balkans.<sup>210</sup>

There were certain secondary considerations behind the decision to hold south of Rome. After the long withdrawal from El Alamein to Naples the German Army was in need of the stimulant which a successful defensive stand might provide. The importance of repairing morale was stressed by von Vietinghoff in an order calling on personnel of every rank to "use their entire energy to make good the inroads in the fighting spirit of the troops . which are the inevitable result of a long delaying action."<sup>211</sup> The new plan of campaign also meant that it would be possible to release to the Eastern front some armoured formations no longer considered necessary for the defence of the Po Valley.<sup>212</sup> Not least important were the political implications. Denying the Italian capital to the Allies would not only give substance to Mussolini's new state; it would serve to reassure the puppet regimes of the overrun European countries, and give a fillip to civilian morale at home.

As we have seen, the slow withdrawal of the German forces which took place during September and October followed the pattern which the C.-in-C. South had forecast—gradual yielding of the less important trans-peninsular lines until the one from Ortona to Gaeta was reached. This, the Bernhard Line, was well chosen. It crossed the narrowest part of Italy, a distance of only 85 miles. On the eastern slope of the Apennines it was based on the River Sangro, and on the western slope on the Garigliano; in the centre the peaks of the Abruzzi, some of the highest in the entire Apennine range, provided a natural impregnability surpassing that of the river barriers on either flank. Although near the western end of the Line the Liri and Sacco valleys opened a corridor to Rome, this avenue might only be entered through the narrower gateway of the Mignano defile between the Matese massif and the Aurunci Mountains in the coastal area. The few roads which wound their way across these rugged ranges were poor and unsuited to heavy military traffic. Autumn and winter rains could be expected to make them virtually impassable and bring the rivers into flood. All these advantages of terrain the enemy augmented by skilful demolitions and by extensive defence works.

His preliminary measures have already been noted.\* As early as 26 September General Hube, temporarily in command of the Tenth Army during a brief absence of von Vietinghoff, had ordered, in anticipation of confirmation from Berlin: "During the course of the next few weeks 10 Army will withdraw to the defence line 'Bernhard' in a delaying action."<sup>213</sup> While this retirement was taking place, both Kesselring and his Army Commander issued instructions for the preparation of the position. "The main require-

\* Above, p. 237.



ments for 'Bernhard'", ordered von Vietinghoff on 4 October, "are security from mechanized attack and protection from concentrated drum-fire by enemy artillery."<sup>214</sup> This security was to be achieved by having "everything underground", defence works on the rear slopes shielded from artillery fire, heavy minefields in the coastal areas, and artillery placed to bring concentrated fire upon troops in the open defiles. Construction plans called for anti-tank ditches, strongpoints protected by wire, thorough clearing of the field of fire, and dummy installations. With all this came the demand for "the will to fight stubbornly down to the last soldier in my army."<sup>215</sup>

It was easier to order the construction of the Line than to find the labour, and resources with which to build it. Early in October the Tenth Army, with a special engineering staff and additional engineering battalions and rock<sup>d</sup>rilling companies, became responsible for the work. It was also given a police battalion for "the seizing of Italian labour".<sup>216</sup> Kesselring, determined that the Line should hold, was as dissatisfied with the progress of its construction as he was disappointed with the failure of his formations appreciably to delay the Allied advance. On 1 November, in an "Order for the Conduct of the Campaign", he delivered an exhortation to greater effort, and prescribed remedial action where the work had not come up to the standards he demanded. In the mountains, "mule tracks, high-lying valleys and gorges must be made secure by strongpoints, mines, wire entanglements, barricades of tree limbs ...";<sup>217</sup> because of the expected snowfall these strongpoints must be stocked with fourteen days' supply of ammunition, food and fuel, and in more difficult sectors overhead cable railways were to be installed. On the coasts strongpoints must be "well covered against fire from naval guns and air attack."<sup>218</sup>

Comprehensive as these instructions were, with the limited resources available to him Kesselring's object "to create an impregnable system of positions in depth, and so save German blood"<sup>219</sup> must be regarded as too ambitious. When performance fell short of intention, he found it necessary to censure his Army Commander. In an extraordinarily crisp message to von Vietinghoff he charged that command within the Tenth Army was not being carried out "with the energy and farsightedness required by the situation"; his own personal intervention had been "necessary to point out to the 14th Pz. Corps the shortcomings of the work on the Bernhard position."<sup>220</sup>

General Vietinghoff, who was ill and about to leave for medical treatment in Germany, found time to write a lengthy rejoinder.<sup>221</sup> He pointed out that it was already three days past the target date for the withdrawal into the defences, and nowhere were the Allies directly before them. In some sectors they were 40 kilometres away. If the construction was not satisfactory it was because, he complained, "no construction troops worthy of the name

were available."\* Police battalions had arrived late, and were not the number originally promised; yet nevertheless Tenth Army formations had rounded up 6000 Italian civilians. Comments by a visiting general and by subordinate commanders showed that in one of the sectors "more positions exist than troops can occupy"; and "defence construction in the Mignano defile may be looked upon as a model for the entire army command." Finally the Army Commander drew attention to the grave shortage of ammunition and to the much reduced fighting strength of the panzer grenadier divisions.<sup>223</sup>

Having thus defended the performance of his Army, von Vietinghoff went off on sick leave, and so missed the November and December battles in the Bernhard Line. Until his return at the beginning of the year, his place in command of the Tenth Army was taken by General of Panzer Troops Joachim Lemelsen, a former Corps commander on the Russian front, who had been described by his seniors as "an average corps commander, not suitable for the next higher command."<sup>224</sup> His handling of the Tenth Army, however, was to win him favourable reports from Kesselring.<sup>225</sup> One more important change of command in Italy came with the departure of Rommel's Army Group "B" Headquarters for a new assignment in North-West Europe,† and the creation of the Fourteenth Army under the command of Colonel General Eberhard von Mackensen. On 21 November Kesselring assumed control of all German troops in Italy with the title of Commander-in-Chief, South-West. His two armies became Army Group "C".<sup>227</sup>

\* This stricture apparently did not apply to German engineers. Early in November von Vietinghoff's headquarters reported to O.B. South that up to 7 November these had laid 75,127 mines in the area of the Bernhard Line and its approaches. By 31 October railway engineers had carried out the following demolition:

Bridges destroyed .....	12,210 metres
Culverts .....	1830 metres
Tunnels .....	6565 metres
Railroad tracks .....	667,000 metres
Railroad engines .....	77
Railroad carriages .....	2043

A further 116,300 metres of railroad track had been pulled up by "rail rooter".<sup>222</sup>

† In mid-October orders had been drafted for Rommel to take sole command in Italy, but Hitler had changed his mind before confirming the appointment. Rommel's new task was to check and strengthen the defences in the west against invasion.<sup>226</sup>

## CHAPTER X

### THE UPPER SANGRO DIVERSION AND THE BATTLE OF THE MORO RIVER, NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1943

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#### The Allied Decision to Take Rome

“This German decision to stand south of Rome”, wrote General Alexander later, “did not affect my general plan of campaign though it was, of course, destined to affect its timing.”<sup>1</sup> As we have noted, the Allied Armies had embarked on the campaign in Italy with the intention of forcing Italy out of the war and containing the maximum number of German troops. With the surrender of the Badoglio government on 9 September the first part of this mission had been accomplished; the extent to which the second aim was achieved would depend largely on what the enemy might do next.

If, in pursuing a policy of shortening his lines around Europe in order to create reserves, he made an orderly withdrawal with a comparatively small force to a selected line either in the Alps or on one of the major rivers in north-eastern Italy, he would be aided all the way by the defensible terrain and by the administrative difficulties which a long pursuit would impose upon the Allies. When the need arose there would be time to install the larger force required to hold such a line, for Allied preparations to assault a defensive position of this type would necessarily be slow. The initiative was clearly with the Germans, to the extent that, as Alexander observed, “had they decided to withdraw altogether ... instead of us containing them, they would be containing us.” Hitler’s decision to try to hold Rome was therefore welcomed by the C.-in-C. 15th Army Group as a “positive assistance to me in carrying out the Combined Chiefs of Staff directive.... From the moment of that decision the German Army undertook a commitment as damaging and debilitating as Napoleon’s Peninsular campaign.”<sup>2</sup>

The Führer’s choice of central Italy, as a battleground settled one further problem for the Allied planners—it ended, at least for the time being, the necessity of considering an offensive across the Adriatic. General Alexander had not excluded the possibility of attacking the Balkans after the capture

of Foggia and Naples, for German sensitiveness there was well known, and there is little doubt that an Allied venture in that direction would have produced a violent enemy reaction. Such seaborne operations could not, however, be carried out with the existing resources of amphibious equipment and troop reinforcements in the Mediterranean. It was accordingly a matter for satisfaction that the business of "containing and manhandling" German formations which might otherwise be used against "Overlord" could now be conducted exclusively in Italy.

The immediate objective was Rome. For every reason for which the enemy wished to retain the Italian capital there was one equally pressing on the Allied side for its capture. Strategically, its possession meant the availability of all-weather airfields, closer to the industrial heart of Germany than those at Foggia. Politically, the city had all that significance to the Allies which it had to the Germans. The Badoglio government, buttressed by a discredited royalty, had turned up in Brindisi and had offered co-belligerency in exchange for leniency. It was to the Allied interest to invest this shadow rule with some substance. Reinstatement of an Italian government on the banks of the Tiber could present a serious threat to the enemy's security by encouraging the Italians to forsake the new Mussolini regime. The prestige of that German-bolstered Republican Fascist administration would dwindle without Rome in its possession, for (as Mr. Churchill was to put it at the Cairo Conference), "whoever holds Rome holds the title deeds of Italy."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, if Italy's *volte face* could be made a reality, other countries, despairing to remain in the German orbit, might follow her example. Above all, the enemy's obvious determination to dispute strongly the possession of Rome presented the Allies with the opportunity which they continually sought -to draw him into battle and destroy his forces.<sup>4</sup>

First, however, the Allies had to solve the vital problem of getting the shipping for the build-up on the Italian mainland. It had been decided at the Quebec Conference that "as between Operation 'Overlord' and operations in the Mediterranean, where there is a shortage of resources, available resources will be distributed and employed with the main object of ensuring the success of 'Overlord'".<sup>5</sup> This meant, wrote Alexander later, a withdrawal from Mediterranean waters of "eighty percent of our Landing Ships, Tank and Landing Ships, Infantry and two-thirds of our assault craft of all natures."<sup>6</sup> Most of these craft were to be under way by early November. Whilst there was no disputing the prior claims of "Overlord", some way of overcoming the lack of shipping had to be found if the campaign in Italy was to fulfil its role. "At 15 Army Group conference today", Alexander signalled General Eisenhower on 12 October, "it became evident that the removal of craft as ordered by C.C.S. [Combined Chiefs of Staff] will seriously prejudice our operations to gain Rome."<sup>7</sup> Such a withdrawal would curtail the coastal maintenance which the enemy's systematic destruction of road and rail facilities

had made necessary if the advance were to be pressed, and prevent the mounting of amphibious operations designed to reduce the need for costly frontal attacks.

It may be noted that not only the ground forces had a call on shipping. In September it had been decided to establish the Strategic Air Force as quickly as possible at Foggia rather than wait for the capture of bases in the Rome region.<sup>8</sup> The task of transporting this Force was about equal to that of moving two divisions, and its maintenance required almost the same amount of resources as the whole of the Eighth Army. This seriously delayed the build-up of the Allied Armies at a time when there was urgent need for rapid expansion. "The monstrous block of Air, in its eagerness to get ahead", wrote Mr. Churchill late in November, "has definitely hampered the operations of the Army."<sup>9</sup> Unlike the Tactical Air Force, whose close support of the ground operations made its transfer to Italy a matter of prime importance to the 15th Army Group, the Strategic Air Force was to be used in "Pointblank", the heavy bombing programme against Germany, and thus from a purely local viewpoint, as Lord Alexander notes, "the move represented a positive disadvantage\* to the progress of the Italian Campaign."<sup>11</sup>

By the last week of October Allied ground formations in Italy numbered eleven divisions; it was estimated that because of the reduction in the Mediterranean sea lift the number of divisions in the country by the end of 1943 would not exceed fifteen.<sup>12</sup> Allied Intelligence, piecing together information gained from enemy prisoners and deserters and from the thousands of Allied soldiers who had escaped from Italian prison camps after the Armistice, estimated the number of German divisions in the peninsula at "a known total of twenty-four, and perhaps as high as twenty-eight divisions".<sup>13</sup> (This was an over-estimate; enemy documents show an actual German order of battle, on 26 October, of just under 21 divisions, of which five were in transit.<sup>14</sup>) Although the Tenth Army was employing only nine divisions against the 15th Army Group, Rommel's formations in the north represented a reservoir of reinforcement or replacement which could neutralise any slight superiority which the Allies might hold on the battlefield after allowance had been made for the defenders' advantage in terrain. Furthermore the enemy's adequate lines of communication would make it possible for him to increase his total forces in Italy to "a theoretical 60 divisions and a logical 30", should these be available, and to maintain them during the coming winter months.<sup>15</sup>

\* But not, of course, to the total war effort. The Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces was to write: "The capture of the air bases on the plains of Foggia in the early stages of the Italian campaign may go down in military annals as one of the keys to the liberation of Europe, for it was there that the Allies drove in order to base the strategic heavy bombers which were to fly in Adolf Hitler's 'back door' and help destroy his war machine."<sup>10</sup>



SAN PIETRO, 26 NOVEMBER 1943

One of the ten villages on the upper Sangro which were systematically devastated by the retreating Germans.



"RAIL-ROOTING", NOVEMBER 1943

As they withdrew through Carovilli, the Germans destroyed the railway line, using a specially constructed type of plough dragged behind a locomotive.



#### VISIT OF THE MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Col. The Hon. J. L. Ralston visits the 11th Infantry Brigade in the Naples area, 30 November 1943. Accompanied by Major-General G. G. Simonds (left), commanding the 5th Armoured Division, he is met by the Brigade Commander (Brigadier George Kitching).



#### G.O.C.'s ORDERS

During the operations at the Moro in December 1943 Major-General Christopher Vokes (left), commanding the 1st Canadian Division, confers with Brigadier B. M. Hoffmeister (centre) (2nd Infantry Brigade, later to command the 5th Armoured Division) and Brigadier R. A. Wyman, commander of the 1st Armoured Brigade.

These two factors-the slowness of the Allied build-up and the superior strength of the enemy-formed the background to a discussion of future operations at a conference between Alexander and his Commanders-in-Chief at La Marsa, near Tunis, on 25 October. Two alternatives were open to the 15th Army Group: either to continue the fight to Rome, or call a halt. Alexander's appreciation pointed to the obvious choice.

A stabilized front south of Rome cannot be accepted, for the Capital has a significance far greater than its strategic location and sufficient depth must be gained before the Foggia airfields and the port of Naples can be regarded as secure. This being so, the seizure of a firm defensive base north of Rome becomes imperative.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the fact had to be faced that with the resources then available, the Allies would be committed to "a long and costly advance to Rome, a 'slogging match' " which might result in an arrival north of the Italian capital in such a weakened state as to invite a successful counter-attack by the enemy.<sup>17</sup>

The Commanders-in-Chief, agreeing that the Allies must keep the initiative, accepted the plan which General Alexander outlined to capture Rome. Briefly, this was for the Eighth Army to launch a heavy attack across the Sangro River, thrust northward to gain control of the Rome-Pescara highway, and then turn south-westward into the mountains towards Avezzano so as to threaten the capital from the east. Timed with the Eighth Army's attack, the Fifth Army on the left would strike northward towards Rome. The operations of both armies would be assisted by amphibious operations on the enemy's exposed flanks: that of the Eighth Army to the extent of a brigade group, that of the Fifth Army by at least an infantry division and some armour.<sup>18</sup>

General Eisenhower urged the Combined Chiefs of Staff (on 31 October and again on 3 November) to allow him to hold in the theatre until 15 December the landing ships (56 British and 12 United States L.S.Ts.) due to return to England, in order to assure the build-up and maintenance of the formations in Italy, and enable a divisional amphibious assault to be mounted.<sup>19</sup> Their acquiescence on 6 November meant that planning could now proceed with greater certainty, although Alexander was still not satisfied that the resources were adequate for the major operations ahead. He faced a deficiency of 10,000 vehicles by the end of the year, and he pointed out to Eisenhower that unless the time limit for holding the landing craft could be extended to mid-January, it would be necessary to postpone the proposed amphibious operation and the arrival of the Strategic Air Force.<sup>20</sup> The Supreme Commander asked the Combined Chiefs for a further extension.<sup>21</sup>

With the shipping question still unsettled, on 8 November Eisenhower issued a new directive, instructing the Allied Armies to secure Rome as quickly as possible. Apart from the establishment of six heavy bombardment groups of the Strategic Air Force in Italy by 31 December, priority in ship-



ping would be governed solely by the requirements of this immediate objective. After the capture of Rome and the occupation of a general line to include Civitavecchia and Terni, sufficient in depth to allow the use of the former as a port, the armies would pause to regroup, repair communications and bring up reserves for the next big advance. At that time, too, the movement of the Strategic Air Force would be completed.<sup>22</sup>

On the same day General Alexander issued new instructions to his two armies. Their joint effort to break through the Bernhard Line was planned in three phases which followed the pattern outlined at the La Marsa conferences. The first was the Eighth Army's attack--the main thrust of which would not begin before 20 November--to gain the Rome-Pescara highway between the Adriatic coast and Collarmele, a town half way across the peninsula (map at front end-paper). From this area Montgomery would threaten, through Avezzano, the communications of the enemy facing the Fifth Army. The second phase was the Fifth Army's drive up the Liri and Sacco valleys as far as Frosinone, fifty miles south-west of Rome. Because of the expected deficiencies in shipping after 15 December there was considerable uncertainty about the third phase, which was to be the landing south of Rome, aimed at the Alban Hills.<sup>23</sup> Not until after the "Sextant" Conference in Cairo at the end of November, when the Chiefs of Staff agreed to leave the vital L.S.Ts. in the Mediterranean until 15 January,\* could a firm decision be made to proceed with this operation.<sup>25</sup> Planning, however, proceeded on the assumption that craft would be available, and when in January the amphibious assault was made at Anzio, it had grown from a landing by one division with some armour into a full-scale corps operation. Before that event, however, there were heavy battles for the Eighth Army in its advance from the Sangro to Ortona, and for the Fifth Army in front of the Cassino bastion.

### The Allied Armies Reach the Winter Line

By the middle of November, both armies had drawn up to the Bernhard Line. Earlier in the month the Fifth Army had begun a series of attacks on the mountain defences which dominated the path of Highway No. 6 through the Mignano gap, but by the 13th the momentum which had carried General Clark's troops from Naples, across the Volturno and through the "Barbara" Line, the last delaying position before the Bernhard, was spent. Rugged mountain slopes, tenaciously held by a reinforced enemy, and the autumn fog and rains which brought bitterly cold nights and aggravated already difficult

\* This deadline was subsequently postponed to 5 February in order that the landing craft might be used in the Anzio operation.<sup>24</sup>

supply problems, produced a situation in which further attacks "would exhaust divisions to a dangerous degree."<sup>26</sup> On orders from the 15th Army Group Clark called a halt.<sup>27</sup> Assuming a temporary defensive role the Fifth Army waited out the remainder of the month as it rested and regrouped in preparation for a renewed attack.<sup>28</sup>

During this lull in the fighting the enemy was not idle. Although he had been successful in holding these initial penetrations of the Bernhard Line, the Allied encroachment spurred him to a more rapid development of his rearward positions, where, a dozen miles behind the Mignano gap, the rampart of Monte Cassino formed the anchor to the deep system of defences designed to block the broad Liri Valley. Organization Todt was now called in to assist in the construction.<sup>29</sup> With forced generosity, Berlin authorized a "tobacco premium" as incentive to the unenthusiastic Italian labour forces.\*

On the Adriatic, troops of the Eighth Army advancing from the Termoli-Campobasso-Vinchiatturo line had reached the Sangro--the 78th Division, under the 5th Corps, on 8 November, and on its left the 8th Indian Division eleven days later.<sup>31</sup> Once the Adriatic end of the "Barbara" Line (which was based on the Trigno River) had been broken, the enemy had lost little time in withdrawing to his Bernhard positions. In the mountainous central sector the 13th Corps had taken without opposition the important road junction of Isernia. North of Campobasso active patrolling continued in the gap between the two main axes of advance.<sup>32</sup>

While his leading units were probing forward from the Trigno, General Montgomery was considering how best to break through the Bernhard Line and put his forces on the Rome-Pescara road--the ancient Via Valeria, now Highway No. 5. To present a significant threat to the enemy defending Rome it would be necessary to gain Avezzano in the centre of the peninsula. The problem was how to reach this fifteenth-century city in the heart of the highest Apennines, surrounded by peaks of more than 9000 feet. On the Eighth Army's left flank two roads led north-westward from Isernia through defiles in the forbidding Abruzzi region to join Highway No. 5 east of Avezzano. Although a division might be put on each route, the hill ranges between would prevent mutual support, nor would either have room to manoeuvre. The approach of winter brought the prospect of roads blocked with snow, and the prevalence of cloud and mist in the mountains promised little opportunity for effective air support. The enemy was known to have constructed defence positions at the entrance to each defile, and even if these were overcome, extensive demolitions could be expected along the mountainous routes to the rear.<sup>33</sup>

\* Among the measures taken against Italian civilians after the capitulation, the German Tenth Army had ordered the conscription of 120 Italian labour groups, of 500 men each, as construction battalions.<sup>30</sup>

The only alternative was to smash the defences in the foothills of the coast region. In this area two roads led to the Via Valeria, one edging along the base of the Maiella mountain range through Guardiagrele to Chieti, the other following the coast through San Vito Chietino and Ortona to Pescara. This corridor-about fifteen miles wide-between the Apennines and the Adriatic, opposed immense obstacles to an advancing army. The coastal plateau, rising abruptly from the water's edge, was deeply scored by a series of streams and rivers which flowed north-eastward from the Apennines into the sea, transforming the intervening terrain into a corrugation of gully and ridge. Once the Eighth Army had overcome these difficulties and reached the Rome-Pescara lateral in the coastland area it would still have to turn south-westward through the defile at Popoli and fight up into the mountains. The plan had one saving feature, however. Should this turn inland be impossible of achievement, the drive to the north could be extended to threaten the port of Ancona-a worthwhile objective in itself.<sup>34</sup>

General Montgomery decided to make his offensive on the right. Of the two available roads on this flank he selected the good coastal route, Highway No. 16, as his main axis.<sup>35</sup> He ordered the 5th Corps, with the 78th and the 8th Indian Divisions, the 4th Armoured Brigade and the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade\* (which moved over from the 13th Corps on 15 November),<sup>37</sup> to concentrate on a narrow front and deliver the main assault, the target date for which was to be 20 November. Lieut.-General Sir Bernard C. Freyberg's experienced 2nd New Zealand Division, which had been brought from Africa to rejoin the Eighth Army, was to relieve the Indian Division on the 5th Corps' left flank and mount a strong attack to threaten the inland road through Guardiagrele.<sup>38</sup>

"My detailed orders", writes Montgomery, "... were based on achieving surprise by deceiving the enemy as to the direction of my main thrust."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly his planners devised an elaborate scheme to create the impression that the assault would be made by Dempsey's Corps through the mountains, rather than by the 5th Corps along the coast. This meant concealing the concentration on the right and, before the main assault was launched, presenting a strong threat by the 13th Corps against Castel di Sangro and Alfedena--two towns on the upper reaches of the River Sangro commanding the roads which led north-westward to Avezzano (see Map 10). The deception was heightened by building false dumps of materiel in the 13th Corps Maintenance Area, moving reinforcing troops towards the mountains by day and the coast by night, and masking the arrival of the New Zealanders by active patrolling by the Indians. Wireless messages in Urdu were designed

\* On 26 August 1943 H.Q. 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade was redesignated H.Q. 1st Armoured Brigade, and its three regiments became the 11th Armoured Regiment (The Ontario Regiment), 12th Armoured Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment) and 14th Armoured Regiment (The Calgary Regiment) Canadian Armoured Corps.<sup>36</sup> It was November before the new designations were adopted in the field.

to give the impression that the Indian Division was to join the 13th Corps; and in the hope of persuading the enemy to spread his forces along the coast the Royal Navy and the 1st Airborne Division made fake preparations to repeat the Termoli landing in the area of Pescara.<sup>40</sup>

Although, as we have seen, the 13th Corps had entered Isernia on 4 November, it was then still some distance from the Bernhard Line. In order to bring his forces level with the upper Sangro General Dempsey now ordered the 5th Division to advance towards Alfedena and Castel di Sangro, and the 1st Canadian Division to cover the 5th's right flank by patrolling along the narrow road which ran northward past the headwaters of the Trigno River to Carovilli. The Canadians were to occupy and hold this town as a base for further operations.<sup>41</sup>

This uncompromising region reaching across Montgomery's left front from the 5th Division's position at Isernia to the 8th Indian Division thirty miles farther north represented an enemy salient of loosely held outposts to the Bernhard Line. Along the sparse communications between Highway No. 17 and the River Sangro German engineers had excelled themselves in demolition. Every bridge had been blown, and the narrow, twisting roads were blocked by yawning craters and broken culverts. Any movement forward by the 13th Corps, other than patrolling, must be delayed until the damage had been repaired—a task which became increasingly difficult as heavy rainfall kept the rivers high and made the diversions hazardous and troublesome to maintain.<sup>42</sup>

### The 3rd Brigade's Demonstration on the Upper Sangro, 16-30 November

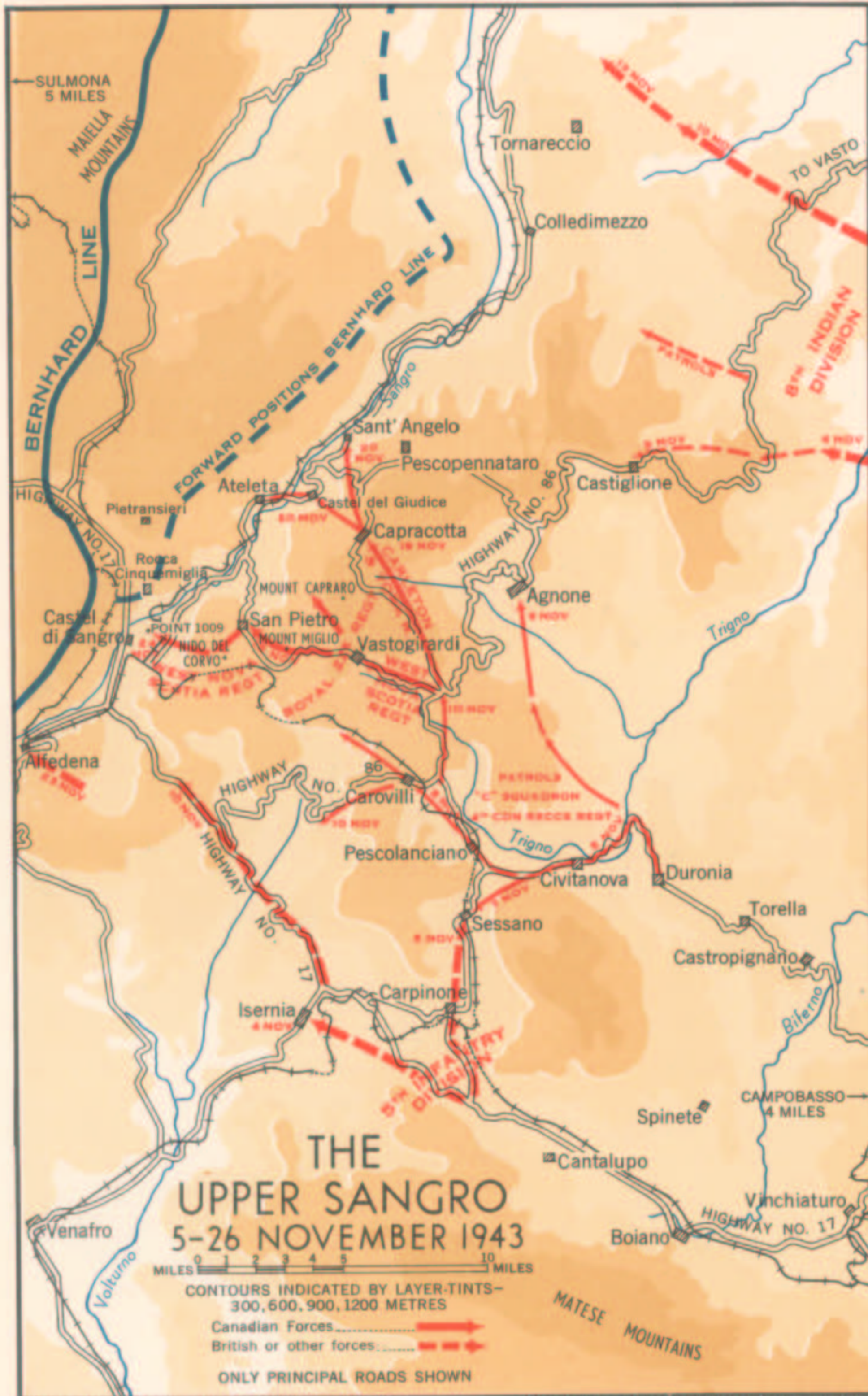
While patrols of the 1st Canadian Brigade and the Princess Louise using mules ranged across the barren area between the upper Biferno and Trigno Rivers,<sup>43</sup> the 3rd Brigade, which, except for the Carleton and Yorks, had been battle-free since 13 October, was put on 48 hours' notice to move up to Carovilli.<sup>44</sup> From the first reconnaissance on 5 November it was clear that the group would reach its destination only through the good services of the Engineers. Two poorly surfaced roads were the sole routes from Campobasso. One, already referred to, left the main Corps axis (Highway No. 17) about ten miles west of Boiano, to run northward through the hills past Carpinone and Sessano to Carovilli. The other (and less promising) was an extension of the minor road by which the 1st Brigade had crossed the Biferno to Castropignano and Torella in late October. From Torella a trail zig-zagged in a generally westward direction (although at one time or another during its winding course it pointed everywhere except east), and

having climbed into the hilltop hamlets of Duronio and Civitanova joined the former route three miles north of Sessano.

Brigadier Gibson had a grim choice to make. Immediately north of Carpinone the first route was blocked by a landslide which had been dynamited out of the overhanging cliff. At a sharp U-turn immediately beyond this obstruction 150 feet of the ledge which carried the road had been blown into the ravine below. One hundred feet farther a demolished bridge called for a 60-foot Bailey span, precipitous river banks making any diversion impossible. Between this last point and Sessano, a distance of a mile and a half, von Vietinghoff's engineers, continuing their task with zealous thoroughness, had left three large craters and two more gaps where they had blown the road completely away.<sup>45</sup> For the rest, sappers of the 4th Field Company reconnoitring as far as Carovilli, reported that within the eight miles between Sessano and Carovilli they had lifted their motorcycles over fourteen blows.<sup>46</sup>

The Civitanova route was equally uninviting. Difficulties began at the Biferno, when heavy rainfall threatened the 250-foot pontoon crossing below Castropignano. Between Duronio and Civitanova the retreating enemy had destroyed five bridges and three culverts, and beyond Civitanova two more bridges and another culvert.<sup>47</sup> It was decided on 8 November to move the brigade by this route, although it was clear that it would not be opened for several days.<sup>48</sup> In the meantime small detachments occupied the towns and villages which the enemy, confident that his demolitions would block a major advance, had abandoned. The P.L.D.Gs., now covering the entire front between the 5th Division and the 8th Indian Division, established a standing patrol in Carovilli on the 8th. This was joined one week later by members of The West Nova Scotia Regiment's "C" Company, which had already occupied Sessano in order to give protection to the exposed 4th Field Company repairing the road.<sup>49</sup>

On 14 November Headquarters 1st Corps defined the leading role assigned to the 3rd Canadian Brigade in the deception plan. The 5th Division, simulating an attempt to link up with the American Fifth Army, was to cut the lateral road between Castel di Sangro and Alfedena, and launch an attack on the 18th against the latter town. The Canadian Division was to get its brigade group up to Carovilli as soon as possible, gain control of the upper Sangro from Castel di Sangro to Ateleta (a dozen miles downstream), and be prepared to attack across the river on the 21st, with the purpose of subsequently advancing a brigade group up Highway No. 17 to Sulmona. The maximum air effort was requested; and a special artillery group was to support the 5th Division until the 20th, and the Canadians afterwards. To give the impression that the whole Division was moving forward from Campobasso, the Canadians were to open a tactical divisional headquarters in the Carovilli area.<sup>50</sup>



The success of the scheme depended on how rapidly the Engineers could repair the routes to Carovilli. On the Sessano road the break in the U-turn at Carpinone meant that no bridging material could be moved forward for the gaps beyond. The task of blasting a new road from the face of the cliff required the special drilling equipment of the detachment of No. 1 Canadian Tunnelling Company which had followed the Division to the Mediterranean.\* For three days the tunnellers bored into the rockface, preparing it to take a ton of explosive; but when they blew the charges in the early hours of the 12th, the result was disappointing. At the suggestion of the Chief Engineer of the 13th Corps 24 six-pounder anti-tank shells were fired into the cliff in an attempt to dislodge the rock which the blast had loosened, but with negligible effect. Nothing was left but to resort to compressors, picks and shovels, and smaller charges; it was another two days before the road was opened and all gaps bridged as far as Pescolanciano, five miles to the north.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, in friendly rivalry with the 4th Field Company, on the Civitanova route the 1st and 3rd Companies were leapfrogging towards the junction between Sessano and Pescolanciano, the 13th Corps Engineers having taken over the Biferno crossing in order to release all the Canadian sappers for work on the Carovilli routes. Continual heavy rain brought need of constant vigilance to ensure that the softened river banks did not give way beneath the weight of the Bailey bridges, which in some cases had to be jacked up so that bankseats might be reinforced.<sup>53</sup>

By the 15th the Engineers were putting the finishing touches to the Civitanova road and the 3rd Brigade was preparing to move forward from Campobasso to Carovilli next day, when a sudden rise in the Biferno washed out the pontoon bridge below Castropignano. In this new emergency, Corps Headquarters gave permission for use of the highway through Vinchiaturu and Boiano.<sup>54</sup> On 16 November Brigadier Gibson opened his headquarters in Carovilli, and Tactical Divisional Headquarters was established in Pescolanciano--an old walled town dominated by a massive square castle (which provided somewhat draughty accommodation for an officers' mess in its great hall while housing large numbers of refugees in its upper levels).<sup>55</sup> Two days later the whole brigade group had completed the move.<sup>56</sup>

The uplands region of the Molise Apennines about Carovilli formed the watershed from which the Trigno flowed north-eastward to the Adriatic, while a tributary of the Volturmo started southward towards the Tyrrhenian Sea. Numerous small streams laced this high, bleak valley, cutting through stunted oak forests and dodging around rocky peaks. The vine country stopped at Isernia; up here the peasants wrested with muscle and mattock a hard living from the poor, windswept fields, which were at too great an

\* The detachment had moved from Sicily to Italy on 18-19 September, serving as Eighth Army Troops.<sup>51</sup>

altitude to mature good crops. Communications were few and difficult. The only good road was the Isernia-Vasto lateral highway (No. 86) which twisted its way north-eastward from Highway No. 17 through Carovilli to Agnone and Castiglione. Two other routes running north-westward from Carovilli to the Sangro were narrow and badly surfaced. The left-hand trail crossed the swampy pasture-land in which the Trigno had its source, and then climbed sharply through a rocky pass into Vastogirardi, a gray, fog-infested village, 3700 feet above sea-level. Then it descended, skirting the southern base of two rocky peaks, Mount Capraro and Mount Miglio, and coming by way of San Pietro to the Sangro valley. The second road, equally rough and tortuous, passed to the east of Mount Capraro to serve the lofty winter resort of Capracotta, five miles north of Vastogirardi, before zig-zagging down into the Sangro valley, where it joined a river road which linked the communities of Sant' Angelo, Castel del Giudice and Ateleta with the market town of Castel di Sangro.

This sector of Kesselring's defences was the responsibility of Heidrich's 1st Parachute Division, which early in October had been picked to hold the 76th Corps' right flank in the Bernhard Line.<sup>57</sup> General Herr now had only three divisions in the line—the 16th Panzer Division' on the paratroops' left,\* and the 65th Infantry Division in the coastal sector. His boundary with the 14th Panzer Corps ran north-westward from Carovilli, to intersect the main defence line about three miles south-west of Castel di Sangro.<sup>59</sup>

The 3rd Canadian Brigade's immediate task was to clear the enemy outposts from this wide area south of the Sangro, and exploratory patrols from the West Novas immediately probed forward into the hamlets and villages beyond Carovilli. First contact came on the afternoon of the 17th, when an enemy party entering Vastogirardi was surprised by a Canadian standing patrol and forced to withdraw, leaving four dead, which were identified as members of the 1st Parachute Division.<sup>60</sup> Next day the Royal 22e Regiment set up headquarters in Vastogirardi and pushed its "B" Company on to San Pietro, in order to establish there one of the strong patrol bases ordered by Brigadier Gibson.<sup>61</sup> On the way the company came to the assistance of a platoon of West Novas skirmishing with a German patrol at the foot of Mount Miglio, and aided by artillery fire sent the enemy hurrying back towards the Sangro.<sup>62</sup>

When the Quebec unit reached San Pietro in the early evening of 18 November, a scene of desolation and misery met their eyes. The village of 2000 inhabitants was in flames, and not a house was standing. It was the first of the ill-fated communities in the upper Sangro valley marked by the retiring Germans for deliberate destruction. A zone ten miles long and five

\* The 16th Panzer Division was scheduled for transfer to the Russian front. Allied action however delayed completion of its disengagement from the Sangro area until 28 November.<sup>58</sup>



miles wide, extending along the river from Castel di Sangro to Sant' Angelo in the area where the enemy had expected to hold our troops during the winter, had been subjected to a pitiless "scorched earth" policy. With typical thoroughness the Germans had seized all food stocks and cattle, evicted the unfortunate inhabitants and then demolished and burned their homes.<sup>63</sup> On the 19th the brigade war diary entered terse reports from forward patrols: "Castle del Giudice visibly burning . . . S. Pietro flattened, also burning. Ateleta observed burning. Capracotta also burning." In all, ten villages were deliberately and systematically destroyed, with no house left standing. The enemy had spared little thought for the peasantry, who now homeless\* were trekking, some with carts and mules, into the brigade's forward areas, blocking the roads and bringing with them the problem of their care and transportation to the rear areas.

For the next few days Gibson's infantry battalions were to engage in "hide and seek" patrolling through the woods and gullies. There were short and sometimes bitter skirmishes with enemy parties who had remained in isolated positions east of the Sangro, or who had recrossed the river in quest of information.<sup>64</sup> On the 20th the West Novas moved forward to San Pietro, and established Battalion Headquarters in a tunnel beneath a demolished tile factory. That night a patrol from "D" Company scaled the high ridge to the west and made its way down into Castel di Sangro. It stayed for several hours in the shattered town and encountered no enemy; but on its return journey it was fired upon from a high jagged pinnacle-Point 1009 on the map-which formed a rocky acropolis overtopping the north-eastern corner of Castel di Sangro. Three members of the patrol, left in hiding in the town for another 24 hours, learned from civilians that 20 to 30 Germans were holding an old monastery at the summit.<sup>65</sup> At first light on the 21st Lt.-Col. Bogert established an observation post on Nido del Corvo (the Raven's Nest), a lofty crag on the long ridge behind San Pietro. From here there was an excellent view of Castel di Sangro, three miles to the west, with the main road beyond running north towards Sulmona, and to the north-west, on the far bank of the river, the still smouldering ruins of the hill villages of Rocca Cinquemiglia and Pietransieri.<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile "A" Company of The Carleton and York Regiment, which had moved up to Capracotta on the 20th, was patrolling the river line in the brigade's right sector. To their surprise patrols discovered the Sangro still bridged in two places. A pontoon bridge was in position half a mile below Ateleta; and two miles farther downstream, at Sant' Angelo, which lay on the Canadian side of the river, stood a permanent concrete bridge in which demolition charges had been prepared. This seeming lapse in the

\* It should be borne in mind that in this region, as in the greater part of Southern Italy and Sicily, the entire population live in the towns and villages, and dwelling places are rarely to be found in the intervening country.

enemy's defence measures was explained when word came from another patrol that 50 Germans were in the village of Pescopennataro, two miles east of Sant' Angelo, apparently holding a small bridgehead on the right bank to protect engineers who were still laying mines and completing their . demolitions. An intercepted wireless message revealed their fear that they were trapped (like "a housewife who has scrubbed herself into the corner", wrote the 3rd Brigade's Intelligence Officer), not only by the few Canadians at the Sant' Angelo crossing but by their own minefields, which made a withdrawal lower down the river extremely hazardous.<sup>67</sup>

The attempt by the small Carleton and York patrol to preserve the permanent crossing was thwarted by the arrival on the far bank (shortly after midday on the 21st) of a superior enemy party, armed with machineguns. In the ensuing skirmish the Germans suffered three or four casualties but retained possession of the bridge, which they destroyed just before midnight. While it was still dark the enemy removed the pontoon bridge below Ateleta, leaving the swiftly flowing Sangro unbridged along the Canadian front.<sup>68</sup>

Thus it was that reinforcement by the Carleton and Yorks' "C" Company, supported by a battery of the 1st Airlanding Light Regiment, came too late. It was not until the morning of the 22nd, several hours after the bridge had been blown, that the road leading to Capracotta had been repaired sufficiently for the passage of the battery's jeeps and guns. While the maroon-beretted gunners went into action in Capracotta, shelling enemy outposts dug into the rocky slopes across the Sangro, the infantry advanced to join "A" Company's platoon in Sant' Angelo. Heavy mortars and machine-gun fire from the far bank killed three men and wounded eleven, and delayed their arrival at Sant' Angelo until long after darkness had fallen. In the meantime the German paratroopers in Pescopennataro, risking their own minefields, had withdrawn by means of a wide detour to the north. The Carleton and York patrol which had been watching them entered the village and reported it completely demolished.<sup>69</sup>

### The Fighting for Point 1009, 23-24 November

Except for the high pinnacle at Castel di Sangro, the 3rd Brigade now controlled the whole of the east bank of the Sangro. From General Dempsey came a note to the Brigade Commander, congratulating him "on the splendid way in which your Brigade has operated during the last few days."<sup>70</sup> In the centre of the brigade front, the Royal 22e, which had joined the West Novas in San Pietro, continued to patrol down to the river searching for possible crossings. In this they had little success, for the current was swift with the rains of early winter, and in most places five feet deep; but from

observation posts near the bank they were able to direct the fire of the 3rd Field Regiment, which had arrived from Campobasso to furnish the diversionary operation with plausible artillery support. Refugees, risking the dangers of "no man's land", came over from Rocca Cinquemiglia and other ruined villages on the far bank. They brought pathetic stories of ruthless destruction and of women being held as hostages because their menfolk refused to work on the German defences. Canadian patrols which crossed the river were held up by machine-gun posts, well dug in and skillfully concealed.<sup>71</sup>

It was important that the near bank should be completely cleared before the 3rd Brigade launched its main attack, which had been postponed because of heavy rain along the Eighth Army's entire front.<sup>72</sup> Early on the 22nd Gibson and Bogert viewed Point 1009 from the Raven's Nest observation post, and decided to take it by a company attack. "B" Company of the West Novas, commanded by Capt. F.H. Burns, was ordered to leave at one o'clock on the following morning. Soon after the marching troops had disappeared into the rain and darkness wireless communication with them failed, and not until they returned seven hours later did Battalion Headquarters learn what had taken place in their attempt to reach the objective.

After descending the west side of the San Pietro ridge the company began climbing the muddy slopes to the great rock which rose sheer out of the hilltop. It rained continually. Breathless and soaked, the leading platoon reached the summit by the only possible route, a narrow path ascending the west side. Without delay the Canadians streamed across the plateau to attack the monastery, firing their Brens and hurling grenades through the windows.

But the platoon had been lured into a trap. The defenders, some of the 1st Parachute Regiment's 3rd Battalion, had held their fire, apparently feigning weakness to avoid engagement by Allied artillery.<sup>73</sup> Now machinegun posts skilfully sited around the perimeter of the plateau caught the West Novas in a severe cross-fire. A few managed to escape; the others, not hearing the dying platoon commander's orders to withdraw, were killed, wounded or captured. Efforts of the rest of the company to gain the plateau failed. One platoon, following up the first, was driven back by a murderous fire; the other, attempting a flanking movement from the right, could not scale the sheer cliff. Both were now caught in a perilous position on a shelf of rock half way up the pinnacle, as the Germans increased their fire and began to throw grenades down on them. With the approach of daylight a thick mist coming up from the valley provided a screen which aided escape, although several men of one section broke arms and legs in jumping from the high ledge.

The cost had been heavy. Four men and their platoon commander had been killed and ten others wounded. Evacuation of the casualties from the plateau involved a long and arduous descent through mud and slipping rock, and several wounded had to be left behind. In all 16 of the battalion were taken prisoner.<sup>74</sup>

While the West Novas were struggling on Point 1009, off to the left the 5th Division, after a delay of three days caused by severe weather which brought a serious rise in the Sangro, had begun its part in the deception.<sup>75</sup> Air bombardment and heavy artillery concentrations supported the feint attack. By the early hours of the 23rd Alfedena, on the inner fringe of the Bernhard defences, had been cleared, but further progress was halted by the strong enemy resistance.<sup>76</sup>

On the Eighth Army's right, in preparation for the main assault across the lower Sangro, the 78th Division was enlarging and consolidating a footing gained by its 36th Brigade in preliminary operations on 19 and 20 November<sup>77</sup> (see Map 11). It was time for the 3rd Brigade to play its role as the vanguard of a simulated major attack. The main effort would consist of a heavy artillery demonstration, staged by the three regiments already with the brigade and by all the guns which had been supporting the 5th Division. General Vokes ordered Point 1009 to be taken on 24 November, and Rocca Cinquemiglia on the 25th.<sup>78</sup>

All day on the 24th the thunder of the guns of nine artillery regiments\* rolled through the valleys and echoed from the hills. During the past few days targets had been noted from the numerous observation posts on the south bank, and the entire firing programme was controlled from the Raven's Nest, the highest of them all. Five field regiments concentrated on Rocca Cinquemiglia alone. There was spirited reply from the enemy's big guns in the Bernhard Line, and two batteries of the 3rd Canadian Field Regiment in positions forward on San Pietro suffered casualties and had several guns put out of action. The 75th Medium Regiment, also hit by enemy shells, was transferred to a counter-battery role; but the German guns were so well concealed in the mountains that "sound and flash" bearings, essential to effective action, were almost impossible to obtain.<sup>80</sup>

Under cover of this day-long bombardment The West Nova Scotia Regiment again tackled the pinnacle which had proved so costly to "B" Company two nights before. This time it was no stealthy foray against an enemy feigning weakness. Five thousand rounds from eight of the artillery regiments fell on the position within half an hour. The plan was for a flanking assault by "A" Company, while "C" provided fire cover from the

\* The 1st Field Regt. R.C.H.A., 2nd Field Regt. R.C.A., and the 1st Airlanding Light Regt. R.A.--all with the 1st Division; the 91st, 92nd and 156th Field Regts. R.A., of the 5th Division; and the 75th Medium and 78th and 165th Field Regts. R.A., under 13th Corps command.<sup>79</sup>

front. Mules carried the battalion's three-inch mortars and the medium machine-guns of a platoon of the Saskatoon Light Infantry down the muddy slopes, Lt.-Col. Bogert's headquarters moving with the attacking force to direct operations. By three in the afternoon, after the column's progress had been considerably delayed by enemy shelling, "C" Company was in position on a crest 800 yards east of the objective. An hour later, "A" Company had reached the top of the plateau without firing a shot: the enemy had withdrawn the previous night. In the cellar of the monastery the West Novas found three wounded men of their "B" Company, left behind by the Germans. Protected by walls four feet thick they had safely survived the artillery bombardment. At last the enemy had been driven north of the Sangro, and the Canadians held an excellent observation post which commanded long stretches of the river valley.<sup>81</sup>

Throughout the night of the 24th and all the following day the artillery kept up harassing fire, and as a result the attack on Rocca Cinquemiglia by the Royal 22e which had been scheduled for the 25th was cancelled. A reconnaissance patrol across the river on the following morning found the enemy well dug in on the steep approaches to the town. The party fell foul of an "S" mine,\* and came under severe machine-gun fire, so that before it finally rejoined the battalion every member had become a casualty.<sup>82</sup>

By 27 November preparations for the Eighth Army's main drive up the Adriatic coast had been completed, and the diversionary operations in the mountains came to an end. After several days' fighting in what General Montgomery termed "quite disgusting conditions" the 5th Corps had secured a bridgehead across the flooded Sangro six miles long and 2000 yards in depth and had held it against repeated counter-attacks.<sup>83</sup> Farther inland the New Zealanders were ready to strike across the river, so that there was no longer need for deception on the left flank. On the 25th, as the Canadian Division received warning to move to the Adriatic coast to relieve the 78th Division in its bridgehead, all troops had listened to a personal message from the Army Commander emphasizing the assistance which they were giving to the Fifth Army in its efforts to secure Rome. "We will do our part in a manner worthy of the best traditions of the Eighth Army and the Desert Air Force . . . WE WILL NOW HIT THE GERMANS A COLOSSAL CRACK."<sup>84</sup> The following day the Division's Tactical Headquarters returned to Campobasso; the 3rd Brigade came under the direct command of the 13th Corps, and its relief by units of the 5th Division began.<sup>85</sup>

Two observers at the Raven's Nest post before it was taken over by a British battalion were the Minister of National Defence, Colonel J.L. Ralston, then visiting Canadian troops in Italy, and General Crerar, who had recently

\* See below, p. 497, footnote.

brought the 1st Canadian Corps Headquarters, Corps Troops and the 5th Canadian Armoured Division to the Italian theatre.\* Before leaving the brigade front Colonel Ralston sent a personal message to the battalion commanders, extending to all ranks "the warmest greetings and remembrance from their folks back home".<sup>86</sup>

While they "thinned out", the Canadians continued to patrol the river line, but without becoming involved with the enemy. Half a dozen miles to the rear all three R.C.E. companies with the Division toiled at opening the important Isernia-Vasto lateral, which the 3rd Brigade's operations had made available to the Eighth Army. The numerous ridges and rivers which the road crossed in the region had given German demolition parties ample scope, and the toll on permanent bridges had been heavy. Rising to the challenge, Canadian sappers quickly built ten Bailey bridges; one of them, across a 180 foot gap, was completed in less than 18 hours. General Montgomery himself had ordered that the route be opened as far as Castiglione by the 28th. The deadline was met. Two days later, after a brief inspection in Agnone, General Dempsey gathered the Canadian engineers around him and personally thanked them for their "splendid work."<sup>87</sup>

Other arms had performed well their role of serving the brigade sixty miles beyond its base in Campobasso. The 3rd Infantry Brigade Company, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, for the first time since landing in Sicily dropped its role of transporting rations for the Division and became a composite company.† Although the roads were muddy and the diversions difficult, it kept up the supply of rations, petrol and ammunition, the last amounting to 12,000 rounds of 25-pounder shells a day during the heavy artillery bombardments. Medical services were efficiently provided by the 4th Field Ambulance, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, working under conditions anything but favourable. The wild terrain enforced long stretcher carryings over mountain trails to bring the wounded to a road or track along which jeeps could travel. Because the forward troops were far from surgery, No. 2 Canadian Field Surgical Unit moved forward on 24 November to join the Field Ambulance's advanced dressing station at Civitanova.<sup>89</sup> Now that the rain and snow of winter had come to "sunny Italy", ordnance services gave special attention towards supplying winter clothing for the brigade on the upper Sangro, where shelter of any kind was virtually unobtainable.<sup>90</sup>

A major administrative problem was presented by the unfortunate victims of the Germans' "scorched earth" policy, thousands of whom flocked into

\* See Chapter XII.

† Brigade companies of the R.C.A.S.C. had functioned as composite companies in the United Kingdom, each maintaining a particular brigade with ammunition, petrol and rations. In Sicily, however, it was found more practicable for each company to supply the whole Division with one of these commodities.<sup>88</sup>

the Canadian forward areas, homeless and helpless. Corps Headquarters ordered firm measures to prevent the blocking of essential traffic. All carts were put off the narrow roads, and the oxen turned on to the land to graze. Refugees were collected in San Pietro and Carovilli, and loaded into R.C.A.S.C. vehicles returning to Campobasso. Here they were held overnight, and after being screened by the 1st Canadian Field Security Section for the presence of possible enemy agents, were carried in 13th Corps lorries to the railhead at Lucera, and shipped thence by train to reception centres near Bari.<sup>91</sup> Not all could join this constant stream back to the rear areas. "We have many unsheltered civilians sick and wounded", the Medical Officer of the Royal 22e Regiment at San Pietro notified Divisional Headquarters.<sup>92</sup> To avoid overtaxing the resources of the medical units with these unfortunates, an emergency civilian hospital to care for them was set up in Carpinone.<sup>93</sup>

By such means was the refugee problem dealt with promptly and efficiently. If, in blotting out the communities of the upper Sangro, the enemy indeed had it in mind to repeat the defensive technique-so skilfully and ruthlessly developed in France and the Low Countries in 1940-of using a civilian population to create interference with the opposing forces, the attempt was a complete failure.

The degree of success attained by the 13th Corps' operations in the mountains must be judged by the enemy's reactions and on the evidence of his commanders. In the early stages the effect desired by Montgomery seems to have been partially obtained: on 15 November Kesselring's headquarters reported the possibility of renewed commitment of the Canadians between the 5th British and the 8th Indian Divisions.<sup>94</sup> Three days later, however, the acting Tenth Army Commander signalled Kesselring: "The concentration of Eighth Army on the Adriatic front leads 10 Army to expect an early attack on our left wing."<sup>95</sup> German commanders were quick to realize the impracticability of a major offensive in the centre of the peninsula. Indeed, on 24 November, the day of the 3rd Canadian Brigade's big artillery demonstration, the 1st Parachute Division began extending its front towards the east, as though confident that the Sulmona road-now the only snow-free axis in central Italy-might be thinly held with the aid of the weather and substantial support from German guns. In the Adriatic sector the persistent rain and the consequent fluctuations in the level of the Sangro had forced Montgomery to sacrifice some of the measures taken to achieve surprise and to adopt a policy of advancing by short methodical stages.<sup>96</sup> It was a pattern which the enemy could recognize, and on the 25th General Lemelsen accurately assessed Allied intentions: "By means of a thrust towards Pescara, Eighth Army are trying to force 10 Army to commit its reserves and to take troops from the right wing thereby facilitating the main thrust towards Rome."<sup>97</sup>

### The Eighth Army Breaks the Bernhard Line

On 28 November General Montgomery had delivered his "colossal crack". The attack was successful, and by darkness on the 30th the whole ridge overlooking the Sangro river flats had been overrun and the backbone of the winter line in the Adriatic sector had been broken (see Map 11). Next to the sea the 78th Division, supported by the 4th Armoured Brigade, had taken Fossacesia on the coastal road. Farther inland the 8th Indian Division had gained the village of Mozzagrogna atop the ridge, and in fierce fighting had thrown back the counter-attack of a battle group of the 26th Panzer and the 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions, which Kesselring had rushed to the scene. On the 5th Corps' left the New Zealanders had forced their way across the Sangro and joined their bridgehead to the main penetration on their right.<sup>98</sup> Direct Canadian contribution to this Commonwealth effort came from the skies, as Spitfires of the *City of Windsor* Squadron patrolled overhead to prevent the Luftwaffe from destroying the Allied bridges across the Sangro. It was the 417th Squadron's last good hunting of the year. In clashes on November 30 and December 3 and 8 its pilots claimed five enemy aircraft destroyed, two probables and one damaged.<sup>99</sup>

Montgomery's intention now was to establish a firm base on the vital ridge while supply and support continued to cross the river. The 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade, which had been in reserve under the 5th Corps, was ordered forward to join the 8th Indian Division in this task. On 1 December The Calgary Regiment crossed the Sangro and came under the command of the Indians, and by the following day Brigade Headquarters and The Ontario Regiment were also on the ridge.<sup>100</sup>

When his positions were firm the Army Commander decided to push one division up the coastal axis to Ortona, and subsequently to Pescara; a second (the New Zealand Division) would follow the inland route through Orsogna and Guardiagrele to Chieti. There was every prospect of difficult fighting, for the intervening Moro River would provide the Germans with an opportunity of making a stand before the Pescara River, and the weather, already allied with the enemy, might at any time deprive our infantry of close air support. It was in these circumstances that the 1st Canadian Division was called forward to relieve the tiring 78th-which in six months' fighting had had 10,000 battle casualties-and to take the lead in the 5th Corps' advance.<sup>101</sup> While Brigadier Gibson's battalions were handing over their responsibilities on the upper Sangro to British units, the other brigades of the 1st Division had already moved to the coast. On the last day of November the 2nd left Campobasso for a staging area north-west of Termoli,\* followed next day by units of the 1st.<sup>102</sup>

\* Around San Salvo and Petacciato at the mouth of the River Trigno.



Late on 1 December Brigadier Hoffmeister's units crossed the Sangro and relieved the 78th Division's 11th Brigade south of Fossacesia,<sup>103</sup> and on the next afternoon General Eveleigh turned over command to the Canadian Division. In order that there might be no pause in the advance up the coast, the 38th (Irish) Brigade and the 4th Armoured Brigade, which by now had passed through Rocca San Giovanni and were approaching San Vito, remained temporarily in the battle under General Vokes' command.<sup>104</sup>

### The 1st Canadian Division at the Moro River

Canadian troops were now to fight across the gullies and ridges which furrowed the coastland plateau east of the Maiella. The main rivers dissecting this wide tableland were the Feltrino, the Moro and the Arielli, which entered the Adriatic respectively seven, nine and fourteen miles up the coast from the mouth of the Sangro. The whole well-farmed area was covered with olive groves and with vineyards which produced some of the finest table grapes in Italy. Narrow, poorly-surfaced roads connected the scattered hamlets and villages with Highway No. 16, which in general remained on top of the plateau. From San Vito, standing above the mouth of the Feltrino River, a newly-constructed portion of the highway followed the coast northward across the Moro. The old road (the only one shown on available maps) climbed the plateau again after crossing the Feltrino, and turned inland to Sant' Apollinare, a farming village overlooking the Moro two miles from the sea. Bending sharply to the north it made a long, gradual descent into the river valley—here about 500 yards across (the Moro itself was a mere trickle)—and mounted the far bank into San Leonardo. Thence it struck north-westward, on gently rising ground, and traversed a pronounced gully just before it joined the lateral road running north-eastward from Guardiagrele through Orsogna to Ortona. The newer road (which subsequently became Highway No. 16) kept to the beach until about half a mile from Ortona, where it mounted the high ground to join the Orsogna lateral.

The road through Sant' Apollinare and San Leonardo had been selected as the Canadian main axis. On assuming command in the coastal sector, Vokes ordered the Irish Brigade and the 4th Armoured Brigade to push on after taking San Vito. By the night of the 4th they were on the ridge between the Feltrino and the Moro.<sup>105</sup> On the left, troops of the 8th Indian Division, having captured Lanciano on 3 December, had reached Frisa, three miles inland from Sant' Apollinare.\* Vokes now ordered the 2nd Canadian Brigade

\* These operations were supported by the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment, which came under command of the 8th Indian Division on 1 December. On the night of 2-3 December Calgary tanks carried Sikh troops of the 21st Indian Brigade to the outskirts of Lanciano, and then joined the 5th Royal West Kents (of the same brigade) in a noisy demonstration towards the coast, designed to assist the 78th Division's capture of San Vito. On the 4th they formed part of the flying column which occupied Frisa.<sup>106</sup>

to occupy positions facing the Moro between Sant' Apollinare and the Indians. The 1st Brigade was concentrated on the San Vito plateau, while the 3rd, still south of the Sangro, was ordered to cross on 5 December.<sup>107</sup>

At this time, however, the weather demanded its price for having temporarily forsaken the enemy. The fair skies which had aided the efforts of the Allied air forces had also begun to melt the snow in the mountains, deepening the rivers in the narrow valleys and widening them across the silty plains. During the night of the 4th the Sangro rose six feet. All the bridges serving the 5th Corps were awash or carried away, paralysing traffic on both sides of the river.<sup>108</sup> While Eighth Army Engineers strove to complete an all-weather bridge, operations north of the Sangro were kept supplied from a large dump which had been built up on the beach near Fossacesia by DUKWs\* plying around the mouth of the river.<sup>110</sup> Gibson's brigade, caught on the wrong side of the stream, was prevented from rejoining the 1st Division for two more days. When it moved forward on the 6th, 200 of its heavier vehicles had to remain south of the Sangro.<sup>111</sup>

Intelligence staffs appreciated correctly that the enemy, having been thrown out of the Bernhard Line, would try to check the Allied advance on the Moro. Intentions of the 76th Panzer Corps on 1 December were "to hold main battle line as far as Melone [two miles east of Guardiagrele]. To develop a new line from Melone to Ortona. To stop enemy attacks in the area of the outposts by obstinate delaying actions."<sup>112</sup> Montgomery's "colossal crack" had completely smashed the inexperienced 65th Division, whose remnants were ordered on 2 December to move north to the Fourteenth Army.<sup>113</sup> The 90th Panzer Grenadier Division (200th and 361st Regiments), brought down in haste from Venice, had taken over the coastal sector by the afternoon of 3 December.<sup>114</sup> On its right the 26th Panzer Division had already relieved the 16th Panzer Division, whose move to the Russian front Berlin would no longer postpone.<sup>115</sup> The inter-divisional boundary paralleling the coast, ran through Lanciano, about seven miles inland.<sup>116</sup>

Although the 5th Corps Intelligence Summary of 4 December reported that "recent air photographs reveal no large-scale preparation south of Pescara", it soon became known that the enemy was busy digging in on the reverse slopes of the gullies.<sup>117</sup> They had good reason. Recorded telephone conversations between the German commanders disclose the crushing blow which air attacks had dealt to enemy morale during the few good flying days at the end of November. Colonel Baade (whose efficient command of the defences of the Strait of Messina will be recalled) was temporarily replacing the wounded commander of the 65th Division,<sup>118</sup> and he had declared that not even in Africa had he seen anything like the Allied air offensive. "With

\* This amphibious supply line enabled the R.C.A.S.C. to fill large orders for the fighting across the Moro. On 7 December these included more than 50,000 rounds of artillery ammunition, 10,000 gallons of petrol, and 40,000 rations.<sup>109</sup>

Montgomery you could count on that", commented Kesselring.<sup>119</sup> The enemy might well expect a repetition of the concentrated air and artillery bombardment which had hit him on the Sangro ridge, and in ordering the preparation of a new defence line in front of the Ortona-Orsogna lateral road the commander of the 76th Corps gave as the "watchword for one and all: 'Into the Ground'."<sup>120</sup> Thus as Canadians and Irish looked across the Moro at the patchwork of vineyard and olive grove which rose gradually to the horizon from the top of the far bank, they saw nothing to indicate the presence of a division of fresh troops warily lying in wait for the next Allied blow.

On the morning of the 4th General Allfrey signalled the Canadian headquarters, "Indians are in Frisa with some tanks over river. New Zealanders held up at Orsogna and Guardiagrele.... You must get over River Moro as soon as possible."<sup>121</sup> At once General Vokes ordered both the Irish and the 2nd Canadian Brigades to send patrols, accompanied by sappers, across the river during the night.<sup>122</sup> They were to investigate three possible areas in which a crossing might be forced: on the right flank, along the new coast road; on the old highway leading to San Leonardo; or on a narrower road which crossed south of Villa Rogatti,\* a village on top of the left bank about two miles upstream from San Leonardo.<sup>123</sup> On the long slope behind these two villages lay the hamlets of La Torre, Villa Jubatti and Villa Caldari, separated from one another by deep gullies which cut back sharply from the Moro Valley. These re-entrants might provide a useful approach to the top of the plateau.

P.P.C.L.I. patrols reconnoitring below Villa Rogatti reported the river fordable by infantry and its bed sufficiently hard to carry tanks, although the route up the far side was very steep. Two hundred yards beyond the west bank (the general course of the Moro from Villa Rogatti to the coast being almost northerly) these scouts heard considerable activity of half-tracked vehicles and motorcycles.<sup>124</sup> Reports from 38th Brigade patrols indicated that farther downstream the river was deeper and wider and the approaches more difficult.<sup>125</sup> Vokes decided to continue the advance along the old Highway No. 16 with the object of establishing one of his brigades as soon as possible at the junction with the Guardiagrele-Ortona lateral. He could then exploit first to Tollo, four miles to the north-west across the Arielli River, and secondly, seawards against Ortona. The Engineers were ordered to prepare a crossing below San Leonardo, while the infantry established diversionary bridgeheads near the coast and at Villa Rogatti. Although the central route had been selected for the main crossing, the possibility of developing the other two approaches was not excluded.<sup>126</sup>

\* A typographical error which persisted in all maps used during the fighting resulted in this village being consistently referred to by Allied troops as Villa Roatti, and by the Germans as Villa Ruatti.

The First Crossings and the Capture of Villa Rogatti,  
6 December

The plan which emerged was for an assault by the 2nd Brigade to the south of the central axis, and a diversionary attack on the right flank by the 1st Brigade (which relieved the Irish Brigade on the afternoon of the 5th). At midnight on 5-6 December Brigadier Hoffmeister would strike at two points—the Seaforth Highlanders storming San Leonardo to form a bridgehead which would protect the Engineers working in the valley, and the Patricias attacking in the area of Villa Rogatti, from where they would attempt to cut the lateral road farther inland. The Edmontons would remain in reserve on the east bank. To aid surprise no barrage was to precede the attacks, but the divisional artillery would remain "on call". Each Canadian battalion was to be supported by a battalion of the 4th Armoured Brigade. To counter the enemy's expected armoured support there was need to get anti-tank guns into the bridgeheads as soon as possible, towing them over with tanks, if no other means availed.<sup>127</sup>

Throughout the 5th patrols continued to reconnoitre the river line, and tank crews checked the crossings for themselves. Occasionally enemy aircraft ventured over the battlefield against the Spitfires of the Desert Air Force, but the bombing was negligible. So complete was the Allied air superiority that even the inviting target of halted vehicles crowding the area forward of the broken Sangro bridges brought no enemy attack.<sup>128</sup>

Little was known to the P.P.C.L.I. of the enemy defences in Villa Rogatti, although patrol reports indicated that it was held by a perimeter defence with a central garrison, later identified as belonging to the 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (of the 90<sup>th</sup> Division). The defenders had the advantage of ground, for the village, besides being protected from the east by the sharp escarpment of the Moro, lay between steep gullies to north and south and was itself divided by a smaller ravine which intruded from the east. The only level ground was to the south-west, and carried a rough track leading to Villa Caldari. Lt.-Col. Ware decided to cross the river on a one-company front. Tanks of the 44th Royal Tank Regiment would descend a winding road which crossed the Moro a mile south of Villa Rogatti, and having forded the stream, move down the valley under the lee of the far bank to a gully 500 yards north of the village, which offered a more gradual climb to the high ground.<sup>129</sup> (See illustration facing page 304.)

At midnight "B" Company forded the river and did not draw fire until the leading platoon reached a track linking the two parts of the village. Assaulting from the left, the Patricias rushed and silenced two machine-gun posts before ineffective firing broke out around the perimeter. The Panzer Grenadiers, unwarned by any preliminary artillery fire, were taken by surprise;

some indeed were captured in their beds. Slowly "B" Company forced its way into the central square, routing the defenders, who clung tenaciously to the houses and swept the open places with severe cross-fire. "A" Company, which had closely followed "B", swung to the right towards the northern part of the village, and began clearing the houses and caves in the intervening gully.<sup>130</sup> By daylight the Canadians were established in Villa Rogatti, but still under intense mortar fire and sniping. To meet the inevitable counter-attack they needed ammunition, which they had heavily expended, and the support of the armour which was struggling up a winding mule track to reach the top of the plateau.<sup>131</sup>

While the Patricias were fighting through the darkness to their objective, the Seaforth were finding the approaches to San Leonardo stubbornly defended. Like the smaller Villa Rogatti the town had a natural eastward defence in -the high river bank, and it was flanked on the south by a long gully cutting 2000 yards through the plateau to La Torre. Of the enemy defences even less was known than at Villa Rogatti. Constant shelling of the Seaforth positions on the near side of the river and the crossing on which the Engineers were working had restricted reconnaissance and observation. "It sounded like a rush job," wrote the Seaforth commander afterwards, "and always rush jobs have spelt to us unfavourable settings and advantage with the Germans."<sup>132</sup> Lt.-Col. Forin had planned his attack in two phases. At midnight "B" Company was to take up positions in the gully on the left flank, in order to block any enemy assistance which might come from La Torre; at the same time "C" was to attack up the road towards San Leonardo. Thirty minutes later "A" Company would carry out a right-flanking movement by a more covered approach to the town. Action against La Torre, which was to be included in the Seaforth bridgehead if possible, depended on the earlier progress made by the battalion. Supporting tanks were to follow in daylight.<sup>133</sup>

In silence the Seaforth waded the Moro. "B" Company reached its allotted positions without interference and dug in. "C" Company, less fortunate, had progressed only 100 yards beyond the river's edge when it was stopped by a hail of bullets from machine-guns on the high ground firing through the darkness on fixed lines. On the right, "A" Company met equally strong resistance from an estimated 15 to 20 machine-guns. The company commander was wounded, and his sergeant-major killed. Communication with Battalion Headquarters failed. One of the platoon commanders, making several gallant but unsuccessful attempts to work small parties forward, was finally forced to withdraw the company to the south bank. Once again "A" Company forded the muddy stream, following "C" up a mule track 150 yards south of the road. But the effort accomplished little. After five hours' fighting the two companies had succeeded in gaining only a small bridgehead

which fell far short of the original objectives and left the enemy free to dominate with his fire the main crossing where the Engineers were working. Under incessant shelling and mortar fire, the Seaforth clung to their precarious foothold in the hope that with the coming of daylight armour and artillery would be able to break the hard core of enemy resistance on the high ground.<sup>134</sup>

The third action of the night, the 1st Brigade's diversionary attack on the right, had found the enemy fully alert. Brigadier Graham's troops had relieved the Irish Brigade on the evening of the 5th, and it was already dark when The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment took over from The Royal Irish Fusiliers on the seaward flank. Patrols were immediately sent forward to discover suitable crossings, and on the strength of their reports it was decided to make the feint at a point about 200 yards from the sea. Should the forward company gain a bridgehead on the edge of the plateau, the battalion was to follow and consolidate for the night.<sup>135</sup> Two hours before midnight the leading platoon of the Hastings' "A" Company forded the river and disappeared into the darkness. It reached the top of the bank, but a faulty wireless set prevented it from calling the remainder of the company forward. In due time the other platoons followed, but never caught up with the leaders. Both parties became pinned down in sweeping fire from machineguns which the enemy had carefully laid in daylight to oppose attempted crossings by night. With the company radio also out of order, it was impossible to call for supporting mortar fire. Mindful of their diversionary role, the Hastings engaged in a chaotic exchange of small-arms fire, before withdrawing at 1:00 a.m.<sup>136</sup>

At nine on the morning of the 6th, after the enemy had shelled Rogatti for two hours, infantry of the 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment counterattacked from the west, advancing through the mist which still lay heavy over the valley and plateau. As the Grenadiers worked their way forward through the olive groves, Ware's "A" Company in the isolated northern part of the village received the brunt of their fire. A determined stand by a forward platoon gave time for the company commander, Major W. de N. Watson, calmly and skilfully organizing his remaining platoons in the thick of the enemy fire, to hold off the threat to the main battalion positions until the first tanks had struggled up from the river.\* The cheering sound of 75s and a seemingly inexhaustible stream of machine-gun fire raised the spirits of the hard-pressed Patricias. Tank commanders leaned out of their Shermans to receive the shouted directions of the infantrymen. At the height of the action the first mule train of ammunition climbed into the village. Finally,

\* Major Watson (who was holding acting rank at the time) won the Military Cross in this engagement.<sup>137</sup>

at 11:30 a green flare shot up, and the counter-attack subsided. The Grenadiers fell back, leaving many dead among the olive trees. They had not lacked courage: during the action one group of their machine-gunners engaged a British tank, and persisted until all of them had been killed by its answering fire.<sup>138</sup>

Quickly the Patricias strengthened their grasp on the village, reinforcing their positions from the reserve company. Eight of their supporting tanks had now arrived, and these were placed in hull-down positions covering the only possible approach for enemy armour—the narrow plateau and road to the south-west. The remaining tanks had bogged down or fallen victims to the mines along the route.

The second counter-attack developed from the expected quarter at half-past two. This time the Grenadiers, supported by a company of the 26th Panzer Regiment with nine Mark IV tanks, struck at "B" Company, which was holding the main, or southern, part of the village. But the defenders were ready, and as the enemy force came into sight through the vines and olive trees, it was hit by what the German commander described as "a terrific bombardment".<sup>139</sup> Three tanks were knocked out in short order, one of them by the Patricias' anti-tank guns firing from across the Moro. In spite of the setback, the attackers, returning fire, split into two groups and gamely moved in on the P.P.C.L.I. company from both flanks.

For two hours the bitter struggle continued, as the action surged right up to the village outskirts. Although their tank support was failing them, and they were being heavily shelled, the Grenadiers five times re-organized and returned to the attack. Always they were met with searing fire from the Patricias' small arms and from the machine-guns of the British tanks. When they finally limped off towards Caldari they left behind them more than 40 prisoners and an estimated 100 dead. Five of their Mark IVs had been destroyed, and much of their gear had fallen into the Patricias' hands. The Canadian losses of eight killed, 52 wounded and eight taken prisoner had been the battalion's highest casualties of any single day's fighting. But "B" Company's determined stand saved the bridgehead.<sup>140</sup> From the war diary of the 26th Panzer Division comes a tribute to "the excellent fire discipline of the enemy, who let our tanks approach to within 50 metres and then destroyed them."<sup>141</sup> With the approach of night, Ware regrouped his battalion, and stretcher bearers began the two-mile trek back with the wounded.

Meanwhile, the Seaforth had unsuccessfully attempted to enlarge their narrow bridgehead below San Leonardo. Efforts to bring sorely needed tanks across the Moro were frustrated by the soft river bed, the heavy vehicles bogging down at four attempted crossing-places. Accordingly the Shermans were aligned along the escarpment on the Sant' Apollinare side, from where

they engaged at long range enemy machine-gun posts in San Leonardo, although with uncertain effect in the morning mist. A new plan for an attack with strong artillery and mortar support was cancelled when German tanks appeared in San Leonardo early in the afternoon. At 8:00 that evening word came from Brigade Headquarters that it had been decided to abandon the Seaforth bridgehead in favour of exploiting the Patricias' at Rogatti.<sup>142</sup>

As the Seaforth withdrew across the river, the achievements of "B" Company came to light. It had spent most of the day on the La Torre spur, out of communication with the rest of the battalion. Engaged at daybreak with heavy mortar and machine-gun fire, the Canadians pressed on towards the village, overrunning sixteen machine-gun posts and taking 40 prisoners. In the late afternoon the company commander, realizing that he had penetrated a dangerous distance into enemy territory, and seeing that La Torre was being reinforced by some 200 men, adroitly withdrew his platoons.<sup>143</sup>

Before the day was over, on the Division's right flank the 1st Brigade had succeeded, in establishing a bridgehead of battalion strength in the area of the new coast road. The diversion by the Hastings and Prince Edwards on the previous night, though short-lived, had provided their C.O., Major A.A. Kennedy, with a clearer picture of the enemy defences in the area, and he shared Brigadier Graham's confidence that with sufficient support a bridgehead could be gained there. Vokes gave permission for the attempt to be made.

The objective was a junction, about 500 yards beyond the Moro, where a secondary road left the coast road to traverse the plateau into San Leonardo. At 1:40 p.m. the guns of the 2nd Field Regiment began pounding the suspected enemy positions on the high ground, and twenty minutes later the Hastings' "C" Company forded the stream under cover of the Saskatoons' 4.2-inch mortars. The line of approach was less steep than elsewhere along the far bank, but the defenders, members of the 90th Division's 361st Panzer Grenadier Regiment, had it well covered. When severe fire from the left flank held up the advance, Major Kennedy ordered "D" Company to cross and, reduce this opposition. Success was only temporary; the Hastings soon came under fire from new positions which could not be spotted by observers directing the mortars. Both companies lost their wireless sets, and in the fog of battle the situation appeared hopeless from the east bank. Orders were given to withdraw, but "D" Company, out of communication, received no message, and continued fighting until it had won a commanding position on the high ground. By 4:30 the effect of this aggressiveness was evident on the near side of the river, and Kennedy took "A" and "B" Companies across to exploit "D's" success. The enemy fell back from his dominating escarpment,



and by eight o'clock the Hastings were holding a small bridgehead somewhat short of the objective. They had suffered 28 casualties, including five killed. Further advance without support of armour or anti-tank weapons was not practicable, and the battalion dug in for the night among the tangled grape vines.<sup>144</sup>

While Kesselring reported to Berlin "powerful" Canadian assaults over the Moro and the "sealing off" of the "points of penetration at Ruatti",<sup>145</sup> General Yokes' plan to switch his axis to the left and advance through the Patricias' bridgehead ran into difficulties. Engineers reconnoitring the crossing south of Rogatti on 6 December reported that there was no straight stretch of road on the near bank which would allow a bridge to be assembled and launched\* from that side.<sup>147</sup> Accordingly late that night, the Edmontons, already preparing to pass through the Patricias, were halted.<sup>148</sup> Early the next morning, the Corps Commander directed the 8th Indian Division to take over the Rogatti area, in order that Vokes might shorten his front for a more concentrated blow at San Leonardo.<sup>149</sup> It was a significant decision,-for it meant that instead of outflanking San Leonardo from the left and then advancing along the grain of the country the Canadians were now to become involved in a series of costly frontal assaults in which advantages of topography lay with the defenders. Throughout the 7th the P.P.C.L.I. "stood to" against further attack, but the enemy was not disposed to repeat his costly ventures of the previous day, and confined his activity to shelling and mortaring. By midnight a battalion of the 21st Indian Brigade had taken over Villa Rogatti, and the Patricias were back on the east bank. "After nearly sixty hours of fighting and `standing to' ", recorded the unit diarist, "the troops are beginning to look tired; the strain and excitement has keyed them to a pitch higher than has ever been reached in any previous battle during the Italian Campaign."<sup>150</sup>

The Hastings were now the only unit across the Moro on the contracted divisional front. The river barrier was too great for tanks, but two anti-tank guns were manhandled across into the bridgehead. With this slight support, and despite heavy shelling and mortaring, before the end of the day Major Kennedy had advanced one of his companies forward to the road junction. Here the Hastings hung on, while their pioneers laboured to improve the crossing, and mule trains brought forward food and ammunition.<sup>151</sup> What had started as a diversionary measure on the Division's flank was assuming increasing importance. It was the retention of this bridgehead between the coast road and the sea that eventually led to the successful crossing of the Moro.

\* Three days later, however, engineers of the 8th Indian Division, carrying every piece of equipment across the river and working from the far bank (while infantry- posted on the crest kept German patrols out of observation range), succeeded in completing a Bailey crossing, which they labelled "Impossible Bridge".<sup>146</sup>

## The Battle for San Leonardo, 8-9 December

On the evening of 7 December General Vokes issued his orders for another crossing of the Moro, having planned it as an operation by two brigades to secure the main axis and its junction with the Orsogna-Ortona lateral. The plan called for an initial two-pronged assault by the 1st Brigade to capture San Leonardo, and a subsequent breakout by the 2nd to seize the divisional objective. From the Hastings and Prince Edward bridgehead on the right the R.C.R. would thrust south-westward along the plateau against San Leonardo, while at the same time the 48th Highlanders would make a frontal attack across the river on to the spur of ground between San Leonardo and La Torre. Once the 1st Brigade had secured a firm base on the San Leonardo escarpment, a strong infantry and armoured force would cross the Moro and strike at the junction on the Ortona road. The tanks would be those of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade, which relieved the 4th Armoured Brigade at six o'clock that evening.\* Full-scale support was available from four field and two medium regiments of artillery,† and from fourteen squadrons of Kittyhawk bombers.<sup>154</sup>

The narrow road along which the attack from the right was to come left the coast road at the top of its climb from the river valley and a few yards west of the little chapel of San Donato--which was later to mark the entrance to the Ortona (Moro River) Cemetery. It struck almost due south over the plateau, keeping about half a mile from the river bank, and making three right-angled jogs before it became San Leonardo's main street. It was unnamed even on large-scale maps of the area, but by Canadians who fought at the Moro River this mile and a half of lane stretching between tangled vines and crooked olive trees will always be remembered as "Royal Canadian Avenue".

The Royal Canadian Regiment's "right hook" was the vital part of the 1st Brigade plan. To drive laterally across the 361st Panzer Grenadier Regiment's front was a bold measure, even given every support except tanks. The plateau offered the enemy good runs for an armoured counter-attack, and the river barred assistance to the Canadians should one be launched. Realizing this danger, Brigadier Graham instructed Lt.-Col. Spry to start manhandling six-pounders across at dusk on the 8th, and emphasized the necessity of clearing the bridgehead area of machine-gun posts in order that the Engineers could work on the crossing. The R.C.R. start line was approximately at the coast road on the left of the Hastings' positions. The battalion plan was that

\* In place of the Three Rivers Regiment, which was still with the 13th Corps, Brigadier Wyman had the 44th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment under command.<sup>152</sup>

† The 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A., the 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments R.C.A., the 57th Field and the 4th and 70th Medium Regiments R.A. The 98th Army Field Regiment (S.P.) and the artillery of the 8th Indian Division were included in the final fire plan.<sup>153</sup>

the four companies should advance successively in bounds to occupy four predetermined areas between the road and the river bank. In a succeeding phase the two leading companies would leapfrog through to seize San Leonardo itself.<sup>155</sup>

There was no lack of support for the main effort. Good flying weather during daylight on the 8th allowed the Desert Air Force to hit the enemy along the whole of the Adriatic sector. In the Ortona area altogether 108 fighter-bomber and 72 light bomber sorties were flown in support of the Canadians.<sup>156</sup> For 60 minutes before H hour the supporting artillery "searched" the far bank from the coast to the divisional main axis, and in the last half-hour the Saskatoons' 4.2-inch mortars and medium machine-guns added their fire to the general cannonade.<sup>157</sup> At three o'clock the R.C.R. began to form up in a small gully in the Hastings' bridgehead, while opposite San Leonardo the 48th Highlanders moved into position for their frontal assault. At half-past four both battalions attacked.

By an unfortunate coincidence the enemy now counter-attacked what he apparently supposed to be the Hastings' position. Hardly had the leading R.C.R. company crossed the start line when it was caught in a heavy barrage of artillery and mortar fire. All members of one section were either killed or wounded.<sup>158</sup> The R.C.R. beat off the enemy, and took several prisoners. But the delay disorganized plans. It was not until 7:00 p.m., after slow and cautious progress through the olive groves, that "A" Company reported having reached its first objective, code-named "Halifax"-the second of the reverse bends on the San Leonardo road, about 1000 yards from the start. Without waiting for this success signal, "B" Company had set out ten minutes after H Hour, swinging to the right of its axis in order to avoid the enemy's artillery fire. It was hard to keep direction, for in the close vineyards visibility was obscured by the tangled vines, which hung in a dense curtain from wires stretched six feet above the ground. Some time elapsed before the company, finding itself too far to the west, regained its bearings and reached its objective, "Toronto", about 400 yards east of "Halifax". In the meantime the battalion commander, deciding against further delay, ordered "C" Company to pass through "Halifax" to its objective just north of San Leonardo. Almost immediately it ran into heavy machine-gun fire, which swept the road from both sides. Mounting casualties and the appearance of an armoured car and a tank from the -direction of the town forced a retirement to the second road bend, where the weakened platoons were reorganized and incorporated into "A" Company's defensive positions.<sup>159</sup>

By this time "D" Company, which was to pass through "B" to a position astride the main axis between San Leonardo and the river, had dispatched its leading platoon from the start line. It was now 9:45 p.m. and bright moonlight. The platoon, meeting little interference, quickly reached a point near the second jog in the road, but a violent artillery and mortar barrage

suddenly struck those following, wounding both platoon commanders and killing the signaller who carried the wireless set. Attempts by these two platoons to find either the advanced detachment or the other companies failed, and soon a second and more damaging barrage drove them to seek shelter on the reverse slope of a small gully, where some caves gave protection to the wounded. Meanwhile the forward platoon, which was commanded by Lieutenant M. Sterlin, was put under "A" Company, and began preparing defences around a small farmhouse between "Halifax" and "Toronto".<sup>160</sup>

The Royal Canadian Regiment's attack had come to a halt. The outlook was not bright. Only half way to San Leonardo, the battalion was on an exposed tableland without armour or anti-tank guns. It had hardly begun to dig in when an armoured counter-attack rolled in from the north-west. Having only artillery with which to meet this threat, the C.O., in full knowledge of the narrow margin of safety about his own troops, called for a concentration. The risk proved justified: although a few shells landed in "A" Company's area, causing three casualties, the counter-attack was broken up. Realizing that his positions would be even more untenable by daylight Spry decided to withdraw to a reverse slope, where the plateau dropped away towards the coast road and the Moro. Only Lieutenant Sterlin's platoon remained in its battered house near the bend in Royal Canadian Avenue.<sup>161</sup>

On the La Torre spur to the west of San Leonardo the frontal assault of the 48th Highlanders had been more successful, for both infantry and artillery had benefited from several days of observing enemy positions from the Sant' Apollinare side of the river. After the preliminary bombardment, Lt.-Col. Johnston sent two companies across. The enemy's artillery caught one in the river bottom, but there was no other resistance. By eight that evening all companies had crossed and were dug in against counter-attack.<sup>162</sup>

As day broke on the 9th, the enemy still occupied San Leonardo and dominated the river below. But now armour could cross the Moro. At 4:30 a.m. Brigadier Graham had signalled General Vokes, "It appears that it is not possible for me to form the bridgehead as ordered by you, but at least the operation enabled the diversion to be prepared ... It would be of great assistance if tanks were pushed over as soon as possible . . . It has been an exceedingly busy night."<sup>163</sup> On the previous evening, after waiting in vain for a success signal from across the river, sappers of the 3rd Field Company R.C.E. had begun constructing a diversion around the blown bridge on the main axis, coming under harassing shellfire and sniping in the river bed. One of the heroes of the night was a bulldozer operator, Sapper M.C. McNaughton, who drove his cumbersome machine across the exposed river flat, making "as much noise as an entire tank brigade"<sup>164</sup>, and "under continual machine-gun, mortar and shellfire ... quickly and skilfully cut down the far bank."<sup>165</sup> At 6:00 a.m. the diversion was ready for use. Unfortunately

the sappers, who had survived the hours of darkness with very light casualties,\* were caught in a barrage which met the Canadian armour as it began to move across at seven o'clock. One man was killed and 21 wounded.<sup>167</sup> McNaughton's contribution to the success of the operation was typical of the fine support given by the Engineers throughout the campaign, and won for him the Military Medal.

Although the task originally conceived for the 2nd Brigade was a breakout from San Leonardo across the plateau to the lateral road, the unfavourable situation on the morning of the 9th made it obvious that San Leonardo itself must first be secured. As "D" Company of the Seaforth, under command of the Calgarys' "A" Squadron, and mounted on its tanks, began to descend the exposed road to the river, there was little doubt that they would have to join in the fight for the town. They soon ran into trouble. Two tanks failed to negotiate a sharp bend and rolled over a thirty-foot cliff. Down in the valley heavy shell and mortar fire forced the infantry to dismount and cross the river on foot. On the climb up to San Leonardo, the leading tank struck a mine and blocked the road. Major E. A. C. Amy, the squadron commander, immediately led his tanks off to one side to continue the attack through the olive groves. Finally at ten o'clock, five tanks-all that were left -broke into San Leonardo. The Seaforth company arrived with 39 effective men.<sup>168</sup> A platoon commanded by Lieutenant J. F. McLean, after leading a frontal attack on the town during which it silenced a number of machine-guns and killed or captured 26 Germans, cleared the place from one end to the other, enabling the tanks to pass through. McLean won the D.S.O., one of the very few junior officers to receive this award in the Italian campaign.<sup>169</sup>

But the enemy was not yet ready to relinquish his hold on San Leonardo and the Moro escarpment. Hardly had the remnants of Amy's small force worked their way into the town when twelve German tanks approached the town from the east. Amy, ordered to hold on, dealt with these in "a determined and gallant manner" (in the words of the recommendation for his M.C.), knocking out several, and driving off the rest. By noon the remainder of the Seaforth had joined the struggle which was still going on in the northern part of the town; their arrival turned the scale, and by 5:40 p.m. San Leonardo was firmly in our hands. As night fell the Calgarys strengthened the infantry's defensive positions about the town. Of the 51 battleworthy tanks with which the regiment had entered the fight that morning, only 24 remained.<sup>170</sup>

The enemy's main effort of the day, however, was directed not at San Leonardo but against the Hastings' positions near the coast and The Royal Canadian Regiment in its precarious foothold on the edge of the plateau. In the early morning light the R.C.R. could see the Calgarys farther upstream

\* Much of this immunity can be attributed to the protection given by a troop of Calgary tanks on the near bank. It was the beginning of a routine provision by the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade of covering parties for R.C.E. troops working in the face of the enemy.<sup>166</sup>

struggling to get their tanks into the battle. At nine o'clock they received the cheering message from Brigade Headquarters, "one sub-unit Wyman's boys are across. They should be very close ...." Fifty minutes later they were told, `Brothers No. 2 [2nd Canadian Brigade] in town . . . move over and contact."<sup>171</sup> After his bitter experience on the top of the plateau the C.O. decided to reach the San Leonardo bridgehead by moving under the lee of the escarpment. His numbers were small, for "D" Company was with the Hastings, and "C" had been sent back across the Moro as a carrying party for the wounded and an escort for prisoners. Shortly after "B" Company had been dispatched towards San Leonardo, the enemy launched a counterattack which appeared to be in battalion strength. Spry sent his command group down to the river and ordered "A" Company and "D" Company's No. 16 Platoon, who were still in their positions of the previous night, to disengage. As the pressure of the counter-attack increased, "A" Company withdrew as instructed. But Lieutenant Sterlin's platoon was now isolated, and received no order to retire. There followed the fight which was to give this Abruzzi farmhouse its strange name of "Sterlin Castle".

During the morning the building had served as an outpost to the battalion positions, and when the enemy struck, riflemen held all the doors and windows, and the platoon's Bren guns were in weapon-pits outside. After a furious fire fight which exhausted all their ammunition the Bren-gunners escaped towards the river. Eleven men of No. 16 Platoon were left in the farmhouse, which had become the target of six German machine-guns. About mid-afternoon the enemy assaulted the house, "leaving their dead literally leaning against its wall . . . . An Oberleutnant was shot in the act of forcing a stick grenade through the bars of one window and a soldier wearing the ribbon of the Iron Cross was killed within four feet of the same window while giving ... covering fire."<sup>172</sup> When the artillery, which had been fully occupied in breaking the attack elsewhere, came to the rescue with a concentration about the house, thirty Germans had been killed and the platoon's ammunition was running out. An hour later, Sterlin\* and the survivors of his little band were able to join the Hastings.<sup>173</sup>

It was against the Hastings' bridgehead on the coast road that the main force of the 90th Panzer Grenadiers' counter-attack had come. Over-estimating the importance of this sector to the advancing Canadians the enemy had thrown in most of his divisional reserves. It was his misfortune to strike too soon-before the Hastings and the R.C.R. had made their planned move into the San Leonardo bridgehead. He found the Hastings still in position behind well-prepared defence zones, which had been carefully registered for artillery and mortar fire and covered by machine-guns set up to fire on fixed

\* Lieutenant Sterlin was killed in the fighting for Ortona and was posthumously Mentioned in Despatches.

lines. The enemy preceded his attack with heavy concentrations from self-propelled batteries and mortars; then the Panzer Grenadiers entered the defence zones. What followed, as described in the Hastings' war diary, was decisive.

'A' Company on the left flank withheld their fire until the Germans had reached a vineyard some two hundred yards to their front, and then called for observed mortar fire and opened up with small arms, catching at least a company, and cutting them up completely. On 'B' Company's front another company was allowed into an enfiladed ravine and then decimated by crossing machine-gun fire.<sup>174</sup>

The counter-attack faded with the daylight; when the enemy withdrew it was estimated that he had suffered 170 casualties in killed or wounded, besides losing 30 prisoners.<sup>175</sup>

Having so disastrously committed its reserves in a counter-attack which failed, the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division conceded to the Canadians San Leonardo and the line of the Moro, and looked to the rear for some feature upon which another defence might be prepared. It selected the deep gully before the Guardiagrele-Ortona lateral. At the same time the Tenth Army took steps to strengthen the defences of Ortona, by sending to the coastal sector the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Parachute Regiment. Asked why by Kesselring, Wentzell replied, "so that he [the enemy] will be prevented from getting there at all costs."<sup>176</sup> In subsequent weeks of struggle Canadians were to feel forcibly the impact of both these decisions.

When the fighting on the 9th was over the diarist at the Canadian Division's Headquarters could well write, "This day will be remembered by the 1st Canadians for a long, long time. We had our first real battle on a divisional level with the Germans."<sup>177</sup> In the evening General Montgomery signalled, "Hearty congratulations on day's work and on throwing back counter-attack."<sup>178</sup> The Hastings were left in their bridgehead near the coast, possession of which they had undeniably established in three days' fighting.

Of all the Canadian battalions which had taken part in the action, The Royal Canadian Regiment had suffered most heavily. When the C.O. was able to gather his companies from the various directions in which the course of the fighting had taken them, he counted casualties of 21 killed and 53 wounded or missing.<sup>179</sup> The dead were buried at the scene of their struggle. In the little farm beside the bend in the road atop the Moro plateau the passing years would heal the splintered olive trees and bring repair to bullet-scarred walls, and not much would remain to remind an Abruzzi peasant that a battle had passed through his orchards and vineyards. Perhaps he might never know that by a few Canadians his house would be remembered as "Sterlin Castle", and the narrow road along which he journeyed to the sea, "Royal Canadian Avenue".

## CHAPTER XI

### ORTONA, DECEMBER 1943

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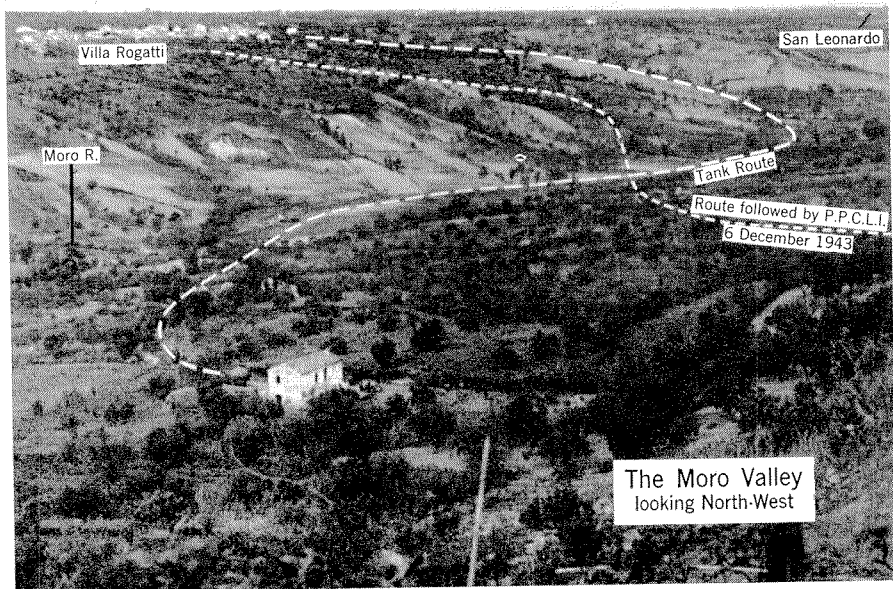
#### The Advance from the Moro, 10-11 December

Now that supporting arms could cross the Moro, the 2nd Brigade prepared to continue the advance to the Orsogna-Ortona road. On the morning of 10 December Brigadier Hoffmeister ordered The Loyal Edmonton Regiment to secure an intermediate objective half way across the San Leonardo plateau and then press on to "Cider" crossroads, the vital intersection of the old Highway No. 16 with the Orsogna lateral. The day was wet and the ground boggy.<sup>1</sup>

At nine o'clock the battalion broke out from San Leonardo, with "C" Squadron of The Calgary Regiment and a platoon of the Saskatoon Light Infantry in support, and two companies of the 48th Highlanders, temporarily under Lt.-Col. Jefferson's command, providing a firm base.<sup>2</sup> So rapid was the initial advance, there seemed good prospects that the crossroads might be captured early in the day and that it would be possible for Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry to exploit towards Ortona.<sup>3</sup> At ten Jefferson signalled, "We are now proceeding on final objective."<sup>4</sup> Air strikes which had been ordered on the crossroads were accordingly called off.<sup>5</sup> At 1:30 word came that three companies had reached their goal.<sup>6</sup> This optimistic message had been sent prematurely, however, for the Edmontons (if indeed in their unfamiliarity with the ground they were really on their objective) were almost immediately driven back by the force of the enemy's superior fire. As we shall see,, there were to be many days of furious fighting before the "Cider" crossroads was in Canadian hands.

The deep gully already referred to, which the 90th Panzer Division had picked as its next defence position, cut into the plateau from the sea, paralleling the Ortona lateral at a distance of from 200 to 300 yards. It was bridged by the old Highway No. 16 at the bottom of a long, hairpin bend in the road, and thence continued inland for another 1000 yards before merging into the surrounding level ground. The enemy had chosen well. The Gully-it bears, and needs, no other designation to distinguish it from a thousand other ravines





*Photograph by the Author, 1948*

This is the scene of the successful assault on Villa Rogatti by Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, supported by the 44th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, on 6 December 1943.



#### THE C.I.G.S. VISITS THE 1st CANADIAN DIVISION

General Sir Alan Brooke (centre) visits Divisional Headquarters near San Vito on 15 December 1943. With the C.I.G.S. are, left to right: General Sir Harold R. L. G. Alexander, C-in-C. 15th Army Group; Brigadier A. B. Matthews, C.R.A. 1st Division; General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, G.O.C.-in-C. Eighth Army; and Lt.-Col. W. P. Gilbride, A.A. & Q.M.G. 1st Division.



From an aerial reconnaissance photograph taken before the battle.

which lay athwart the Canadians' path in Italy formed a complete tank obstacle, and German weapon-pits constructed in its steep bank were practically immune from damage by our shellfire, which fell harmlessly on the level ground to the front and rear. Experience was to show that the mortar was the only weapon with which the Canadian attackers could successfully reach into this narrow cleft.

In the late afternoon of the 10th a company of the 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment supported by self-propelled guns launched a sharp counter-attack against the Edmontons' right flank. It was beaten off, but not before three Calgary tanks had been knocked out.<sup>7</sup> As darkness fell the Edmontons consolidated with the remaining armour on the San Leonardo side of the Gully. A grim incident had accounted for several of the 27 casualties sustained by the battalion during the day: German machine-guns opened fire upon a platoon which was accepting the surrender of a group of Grenadiers who had come forward with their hands up. By order of General Vokes the atrocity was publicized throughout the Division as a stern reminder of the need for constant vigilance against treachery.<sup>8</sup>

The Edmontons' failure to capture "Cider" crossroads had not been confirmed in time to prevent the P.P.C.L.I. from being committed to what was intended to be an exploitation, but which resulted in the battalion becoming involved in indecisive action east of the Gully: While moving up in the wake of the assaulting Edmontons, the Patricias had been caught in the heavy barrage which supported the German counter-attack; their casualties included three of their company commanders. They dug in for the night behind the Edmontons, to the right of the road leading to "Cider". The Seaforth Highlanders, having occupied with the help of the Calgaries' "A" Squadron the high ground west of San Leonardo during the day, took up positions level with Jefferson's left flank.<sup>9</sup> During the move forward Lt.-Col. Forin was wounded by shellfire, and Major S.W. Thomson took over the battalion.<sup>10</sup>

The Canadian Division was now entering upon the third stage of the battle which had opened with the successive struggles for Villa Rogatti and San Leonardo. The tactical significance of the obstacle blocking the path to Ortona became increasingly apparent. Near the sea the Gully widened considerably, so that an approach by the coast road would be under direct observation from the high promontory on which Ortona stood. Two alternatives were left to the advancing troops--either they must force a passage along the central route, or circumvent the whole feature by a drive westward to the lateral road, followed by an assault on the crossroads from the south-west. The G.O.C. decided to take the former course, and on the evening of 10 December he ordered the 2nd Brigade to persist in its effort against its original objective in the centre, and also test the enemy's position

on the coast road to determine whether any weakness in the defence existed below Ortona. At the same time he began moving his reserve brigade forward to the Moro River.<sup>11</sup>

The 11th brought hard fighting to all three of Hoffmeister's battalions, but gains were small. Pre-dawn patrols discovered the enemy digging in along the length of the Gully and his armour patrolling the lateral road beyond. All attempts by the Edmontons to advance failed in the face of heavy machine-gun and mortar fire.<sup>12</sup> In the afternoon the Patricias, with a squadron of the Calgarys in support, struck out towards the coast road. By nightfall they had battled through a tangle of olive groves and vineyards infested with anti-tank mines and booby-traps to reach the edge of the Gully. After successfully beating off a counter-attack by some 40 Grenadiers, they settled down on the right of the Edmontons to a busy night; for "Vino Ridge"-as the position became familiarly known-was within easy grenadethrowing distance of the German slit-trenches in the Gully.<sup>13</sup> On the left flank one company of the Seaforth battered its way through the mud of deeply ploughed olive groves in an attempt to secure the ridge on the near side of the Gully, half a mile south of where the road crossed. The boggy ground, saturated by the previous night's heavy rain, hampered the movement of supporting Ontario tanks. About 45 infantrymen struggled up the muddy slopes to the objective, but the threat of a counter-attack forced them to withdraw to their starting point.<sup>14</sup>

While the 2nd Brigade thus closed up to the enemy's positions, a battalion of the 1st Brigade had drawn level on either flank. During the day the Hastings and Prince Edwards, supported by The Ontario Regiment, had pushed forward along the coast road to a point on the Patricias' right within 2500 yards of Ortona.<sup>15</sup> On the inland flank the 48th Highlanders were holding the hamlet of La Torre, which they had occupied without opposition on the previous night.<sup>16</sup>

### The Fight for the Gully

At noon on 11 December, when it was clear that progress was falling short of intention and that even if the 2nd Brigade should capture the crossroads it would be too exhausted to exploit, Vokes decided to commit his reserves. The West Novas, less one company, were detailed to push through the Seaforth's positions, cross the Gully and capture the lateral road in the vicinity of Casa Berardi, a prominent square, whitewashed farmhouse, three quarters of a mile south-west of "Cider". They were then to cut the road which from the crossroads wound westward to Villa Grande and Tollo.<sup>17</sup> The remaining company, together with "B" Squadron of The Ontario Regiment,

was held in readiness to move west from San Leonardo along a narrow trail (named by us "Lager"\* track) which skirted the head of the Gully and joined the Ortona road a mile and a half south-west of "Cider"; this was considered a less precarious approach for tanks than the direct route from San Leonardo.<sup>18</sup> What the Seaforth had failed to accomplish during the day, the West Novas were to attempt at night.

At 6:00 p.m. the three companies left San Leonardo for their start line, which was 500 yards north of the town. The attack failed completely. Little artillery support was possible, for fear of endangering the attackers, and what was given did not greatly disturb the enemy, well dug in below the near edge of the Gully. The confusion increased when the battalion lost its wireless sets and the artillery F.O.O. was killed. Early morning found the enemy-members of the 1st Battalion of the 200th Grenadier Regiment-still secure on their reverse slope.<sup>19</sup> At eight o'clock Brigadier Gibson ordered the West Novas to renew the attack towards Berardi, and the fight continued in driving rain. Again wireless communication was destroyed as rapidly as it could be repaired or replaced.<sup>20</sup> Four times the Grenadiers launched counter-attacks, but the Canadian battalion held its ground. In repulsing one of these thrusts forward elements of the West Novas, eager to close with the enemy, left their slit-trenches and were drawn forward to the crest, where intense machine-gun fire from across the Gully added to an already long casualty list. During the morning the C.O., Lt.-Col. M.P. Bogert, was wounded, but he continued to direct the fight until relieved in the afternoon. The deadlock could not be broken. The West Novas, having lost more than 60 killed and wounded, dug in and awaited another plan.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere along the divisional front efforts to advance had been equally fruitless. Between the central and coast roads the Patricias had broken up two minor counter-attacks, but had not been able to make contact with the Hastings' elongated bridgehead.<sup>22</sup>

At an afternoon conference on the 12th Vokes ordered the 3rd Brigade to make another frontal attack on the crossroads, using one battalion. The task fell to the Carleton and Yorks. A thick creeping barrage, augmented by the mortars of the 2nd and 3rd Brigades, would be preceded by a heavy artillery concentration along the length of the Gully; Calgary tanks were to give what armoured support was possible in the deteriorating weather.<sup>23</sup> The P.P.C.L.I. on the right and the West Novas on the left would make a co-ordinated effort on either flank of the main thrust, moving forward under the same barrage. One company of the Royal 22e Regiment was detailed to follow the Carleton and Yorks in a mopping-up role. Zero was 6:00 a.m. on the 13th.<sup>24</sup>

The attack proved as abortive as the previous attempts of the Edmontons and the West Novas. The leading Carleton and Yorks, pressing forward

\* This code name, which was suggested by a familiar beverage, has appeared erroneously in some accounts as "laager"--the designation given to a park for armoured vehicles.

immediately after the artillery concentration, managed to clean out three machine-gun nests on their side of the Gully and take 21 prisoners, but they were met with murderous machine-gun and mortar fire as they showed themselves above the crest. Those who were not cut down were forced back to their own side of the ridge. Within an hour the attack was spent; the artillery barrage had far outdistanced the infantry, allowing the German defenders to fight back vigorously with machine-guns and small arms. A threat by two Mark IV tanks on the left flank of the Carleton and Yorks resulted in a troop of the Calgarys' "C" Squadron being committed—at the cost of one of its Shermans.<sup>25</sup> Casualties mounted; by the end of the day Lt.-Col. Pangman had lost 81 officers and men—including 28 taken prisoner when a company headquarters and one of its platoons were surrounded.<sup>26</sup> Low cloud had prevented fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force from giving their usual effective support. Pilots were compelled to bomb alternative targets farther north or return to base with their full load.<sup>27</sup>

The attacks on the flanks were scarcely more fruitful than the Carleton and York effort: neither the Patricias nor the weakened companies of the West Novas gained the edge of the Gully. The latter unit's fighting strength had been reduced to about 150 men, and these numbers were still further depleted in a heroic but futile late afternoon sally against a German outlying position near Casa Berardi.<sup>28</sup> On the coast road the Hastings pushed two companies forward a few yards under heavy fire.<sup>29</sup>

The gloomy picture of the day's events was momentarily brightened by a temporary success, upon which we unfortunately failed to capitalize. It will be recalled that for the past two days Gibson had been holding at San Leonardo an infantry-tank combat team, made up of "B" Company of the West Novas and "B" Squadron of The Ontario Regiment, augmented by some engineers and the self-propelled guns of the 98th Army Field Regiment R.A. An infantry patrol from this force reconnoitring "Lager" track on the night of 12-13 December discovered a number of German tanks near the shallow head of the Gully, apparently guarding the approach to the main Ortona road.<sup>30</sup> At seven next morning, while the Carleton and Yorks were making their abortive attack opposite Berardi, three of the Ontario Shermans, carrying a West Nova platoon, drove into the enemy laager. The startled Germans had time to get away only one shot; armour-piercing shells fired at a range of less than 50 yards knocked out two of their tanks, while eager infantrymen closed in and captured the remaining two. The destruction of an anti-tank gun completed a satisfactory job.<sup>31</sup>

If this prompt action, which was initiated and controlled by the West Nova platoon commander, Lieutenant J.H. Jones—and which won him the M.C.—did not itself open the door to the main lateral road, it at least unbarred it. By 10:30 a.m. the remainder of "B" Company and its supporting

squadron arrived with orders to turn north-east and drive towards Casa Berardi. The combat team advanced between the lateral road and the Gully, but less than 1000 yards from the "Cider" crossroads a ravine, lying at right angles to the main Gully, stopped the tanks. Efforts of the infantry to cross by themselves were unsuccessful; for the enemy, already concerned with the attack on his front by the main body of the West Novas, reacted quickly and vigorously to this new threat to his flank.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, another small Canadian infantry-tank team, organized by Brigadier Wyman with the authority of the G.O.C., had made a spectacular thrust on the left which "almost loosened the whole front."<sup>33</sup> The action caught the enemy unaware, and, promptly exploited, might quickly have ended the struggle for the crossroads. Earlier on 13 December "A" Company of the Seaforth, numbering but 40 men, had set out along "Lager" track with the four effective tanks remaining to the Ontarios' "C" Squadron. It was the strongest force that could be mustered for the purpose, for, as we have seen, the whole Division was committed, and there was no reserve. Describing a wider arc around the head of the Gully than that taken earlier by the West Nova Scotia combat team, the tanks crossed on a culvert which the enemy had neglected to demolish and led the attack up the lateral road along the rear of the German positions. The surprised enemy, not realizing the numerical weakness of their assailants, ran out of houses and strongpoints to surrender. By nightfall the enterprising little group had advanced almost to Casa Berardi; it had taken 78 prisoners (including a German battalion headquarters) and knocked out two German tanks.<sup>34</sup> But unfortunately this brilliant achievement, which was to point the way to the eventual capture of Casa Berardi, could not immediately be followed up. Towards dusk the Ontario squadron commander, Acting Major H.A. Smith, who had been in constant touch by radio with Brigadier Wyman, reported that his ammunition was expended and that he was very low on petrol. With no reserve immediately available for reinforcement Wyman instructed the force to withdraw and to hold the entrance to the main road secure throughout the night. The vulnerability which the enemy had betrayed on this flank changed the Canadian plan of battle, and Vokes now ordered an attack to be made the following morning by the Royal 22e, the only battalion of the Division yet uncommitted west of the Moro.<sup>35</sup> During the night, however, the Germans restored their right flank positions, as troops of the 1st Parachute Division replaced the battered Grenadier units defending the Gully.

From the time of its committal in the coastal sector to restore the chaotic situation produced by the debacle of the 65th Infantry Division the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division had fought with spirit, but had paid dearly for its stand. German situation maps of 13 December showing dispositions along the Gully bore the significant designations: "Remnants 1 Bn 200 Gren

Regt"; "Remnants 361 Gren Regt".<sup>36</sup> The reckless and extravagant manner in which the Grenadiers had been engaged, particularly during their counterattacks, had drained the division's manpower beyond immediate reinforcement. The fighting on the 13th had cost 200 prisoners (many of these to an attack by the 8th Indian Division west of Villa Rogatti).<sup>37</sup> bringing the total during the two weeks' contact up to nearly 500.<sup>38</sup> But the number of prisoners did not tell the whole story of the 90th Division's losses. One counter-attack against the West Novas was typical of many instances indicating the length to which the enemy was prepared to go to maintain his position. It was made by some 50 Grenadiers advancing in extended line; almost all were annihilated by the West Novas, who held their fire until the last minute.<sup>39</sup> The war diary of the 76th Corps recorded regretfully on the 13th: "A great fighting value can no longer be ascribed to the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division. The units have become badly mixed and the troops are exhausted. The fighting value of at least two battalions has been used up. The present positions can only be held by bringing in new battalions ...."<sup>40</sup>

The 3rd Parachute Regiment, transferred from the relatively quiet sector of the upper Sangro, had already supplied these new battalions.<sup>41</sup> The 2nd Battalion of this regiment was committed opposite the Canadian centre in time to repulse the Carleton and York attack on the 13th.<sup>42</sup> That night it was joined by the 3rd Battalion in the Berardi area, while to its left the hapless "remnants" of the 200th Regiment's 1st Battalion held the coastal salient." Temporarily the commander of the 3rd Parachute Regiment was in charge of all operations in the coastal sector, for Herr, who felt that operations of the 90th Panzer Division could have been more skilfully directed, had removed Lieut.-General Karl Hans Lungershausen, and was replacing him by the very capable Colonel Baade.<sup>44</sup>

#### Casa Berardi, 13-15 December

Late in the afternoon of the 13th General Vokes announced the plan by which he hoped to turn the enemy's flank. The Royal 22e Regiment, supported by "C" Squadron of the Ontarios, would strike out at 7:00 next morning from "Lager" track and attack north-eastward along the Ortona road towards "Cider". Corps and divisional artillery would fire a barrage 1500 yards wide, which would move up the road with its right flank covering the Gully. Coincident with the attack the P.P.C.L.I. would once more attempt to cross the Gully and cut the lateral road, while the Hastings maintained pressure along the coast.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the night recovery teams of The Ontario Regiment worked to free "C" Squadron's tanks from the deep mud of "Lager" track. They



retrieved seven, and with these Major Smith moved off at 3:00 a.m. to join the infantry at the start line, in the area where "Lager" crossed the shallow head of the Gully.<sup>46</sup>

Forty minutes before the Royal 22e Regiment was scheduled to begin its advance (at the request of the 3rd Brigade zero hour had been postponed to 7:30),<sup>47</sup> the enemy counter-attacked at the junction of "Lager" with the Ortona road. This threat to the success of the 3rd Brigade's venture was capably handled by a company of the 48th Highlanders, which had been sent to the Division's left flank on the previous afternoon to provide additional support to the combat team, and had spent the night in defensive positions astride the track. Wisely holding their fire until the last minute the Highlanders killed nine enemy and captured 31 before the remainder hurriedly withdrew.<sup>48</sup>

It was Lt.-Col. Bernatchez's intention to advance along the main road with two companies. This imposed upon "C" Company on the left the necessity of securing a bridgehead across, this road before both made a right turn towards the final objective. Shortly after 7:00 a.m. on the 14th, as "C" Company approached the start line it came under fire from a German tank which had been hidden behind a house near the road junction. The situation looked serious, for at the time the supporting Shermans were lumbering over the muddy track some distance behind the infantry.<sup>49</sup> Skilful manoeuvre and determined action by one of the platoons saved the day. While the rest of the company, applying the battle-drill tactics so diligently rehearsed on training fields in southern England, worked forward by sections to divert the attention of the German tank crew and of enemy infantry across the highway, the platoon commander led his PIAT group through the partial cover of an olive grove into a position from which the tank could be engaged. During the approach the officer was wounded, and the PIAT's mechanism damaged, but the platoon sergeant, Sergeant J. P. Rousseau, taking his commander's place, secured another weapon from a following platoon. With this he dashed across the open ground to within 35 yards of his target, and fired. The bomb struck between turret and engine casing and must have detonated the ammunition; later 35 pieces of the Mark IV Special were counted scattered over the ground.<sup>50</sup> By his courage and initiative this plucky N.C.O. won the Military Medal.<sup>51</sup>

To the crouching men of "C" Company the explosion was a success signal which heralded the capture of the road junction; but the bomb which blew that tank to pieces exploded too the long controversy on the effectiveness of the PIAT, which after numerous failures had lost the confidence of many of the troops. Now, as a training memorandum issued by the 1st Canadian Division pointed out, "this quick, resolute and well thought out action demonstrated clearly that enemy tanks can be dealt with effectively by infantry men who have confidence in their weapons and the ability to use them."<sup>52</sup>

By this time it was 10:30, and the company commander, Captain Paul Triquet, signalled up the Ontario's Shermans, which had been waiting in the shallow Gully. They arrived in time to destroy a second German tank which had made its appearance at the track junction.<sup>53</sup> The infantry surged forward, and for the second time Canadians had a footing on the lateral road. Without further delay Triquet pushed forward along the highway, with the tanks moving on his right, immediately to the rear of the Gully. At first resistance was light, but half way to Casa Berardi the attackers encountered savage opposition. "C" Company and the Ontarios were now alone; "D" Company on the right had become lost in the confusing terrain, and straggled into the West Novas' area later during the afternoon.<sup>54</sup>

It was evident that the enemy had appreciated the danger to his flank and had taken full measures to meet it. After a week's air and artillery bombardment, the approach to the crossroads was a wasteland of trees with split limbs, burnt out vehicles, dead animals and cracked shells of houses. Now every skeleton tree and building was defended by machine-gunners backed by tanks and self-propelled guns, and paratroop snipers lurked in every fold of the ground. Against this formidable resistance our armour and infantry co-operated well. The Shermans blasted the stronger positions, while the Royal 22e cleaned out what remained. Two more German tanks were knocked out and a third put to flight. A heavy barrage caught the infantry company and reduced its strength to only 50; Triquet was the sole surviving officer. He reorganized the remnants of his force into two platoons under the two remaining sergeants, and spurred them forward. "There are enemy in front of us, behind us and on our flanks," he warned.\* "There is only one safe place—that is on the objective."<sup>56</sup>

The attack continued. Ammunition was short; there was none following, and no one who could be sent for it. The wounded were treated hurriedly, and left where they had fallen. A Mark IV approaching along the road was first blinded by smoke laid down by one of Smith's Shermans, and then destroyed by tank fire through the smoke.<sup>57</sup> In the late afternoon Casa Berardi was taken, and the indomitable few fought on almost to the crossroads. Finally the enemy's mortar fire stopped them, and the survivors, less than fifteen, drew back to the big house. A count revealed five Bren guns and five Thompson sub-machine guns on hand, and a woefully small supply of ammunition. "C" Squadron had four tanks left. With these slender resources Triquet organized his defences against counter-attack, and issued the order, "Ils ne passeront pas!"<sup>58</sup>

When news of the success reached Brigade Headquarters, Brigadier Gibson impressed upon Bernatchez the importance of holding and reinforcing the

\* This is corroborated by the Tenth Army war diary, which describes the German counter-measures as "a concentric attack on the enemy who had broken through".<sup>55</sup>

position which had been -so gallantly won on the west side of the Gully.<sup>59</sup> At nightfall "B" Company of the Royal 22e joined the small group of tanks and infantry clustered about Casa Berardi. The failing light made any renewed attack with armoured support impossible, and the force took up an alert defence for the night. In the dark two Mark IV tanks, the last enemy traffic on that part of the lateral road, slipped by towards Ortona. The German flank was sealed.<sup>60</sup> Under cover of night Bernatchez led his two remaining companies across the empty Gully in front of the West Nova Scotia area, reaching the Casa at 3:00 a.m.<sup>61</sup>

Elsewhere on the Canadian front units of all three brigades had maintained pressure on the 14th, but without making any substantial gains. Near the central axis the Carleton and Yorks beat off a strong counter-attack in the late afternoon;<sup>62</sup> on the right flank attempts by the Patricias and the Hastings and Prince Edwards to advance were thwarted by the heavy enemy fire.<sup>63</sup> These fruitless efforts convinced the Canadian G.O.C. that the key to success lay in an exploitation of the favourable situation around Casa Berardi.<sup>64</sup>

The probability of such a move was already unpleasantly realized at 76th Panzer Corps Headquarters, whose war diary recorded on the 14th, "Enemy will bring up further forces and tanks and, in the exploitation of today's success, will presumably take Ortona."<sup>65</sup> German accounts did not conceal the extreme concern at the break-through south-west of Berardi. Characterizing 14 December as "a day of major action", Tenth Army Headquarters admitted that Canadian exploitation had been stopped only "by sacrificing the last resources".<sup>66</sup> The prolonged telephone conversations of the day showed that the Germans were exhausting every possible source of quick reserves. "The situation is very tense . . ." Wentzell told the 76th Corps Chief of Staff. "Either the Corps receives something tangible [in reinforcements] or it will have to adopt another method of fighting."<sup>67</sup> A hint as to what this might be was provided by the commander of the 3rd Parachute Regiment. "Heilmann thinks that even now one ought to change tactics and withdraw to the mountains", Herr suggested to the Army Commander, General Lemelsen. "If reserves arrive tomorrow it will be possible to hold, otherwise only a delaying action is possible."<sup>68</sup>

With neither Corps nor Army able to provide replacements, Kesselring ordered his Army Group Reserve-Regiment Liebach\*--to be committed in the Ortona sector.<sup>70</sup> He gave instructions that everything had "to be thrown in" and that the 76th Corps was to be "held responsible for the sealing off of the enemy penetration." "It was a serious decision to make Liebach available", commented Lemelsen to Herr.<sup>71</sup>

\* Consisting of the 3rd Battalion, 6th Parachute Regiment, an airlanding training battalion and an artillery battery.<sup>69</sup>

This conclusive German testimony to the significance of the blow delivered along the Ortona road on 14 December by the hard-fighting force under Captain Triquet strikingly endorses the recognition which this gallant officer received for his achievement. He was awarded the Victoria Cross--the first of three won by Canadians in the Italian campaign. Major Smith, under whose intrepid leadership the Ontario tanks had so effectively supported the successive thrusts of the Seaforth and the Royal 22e along the lateral road, received the Military Cross.<sup>72</sup>

General Vokes did not immediately undertake the major thrust up the Ortona road which the enemy was expecting. "My appreciation of the situation at this time", he writes, "led me to believe that a strong build-up of tanks in the Casa Berardi area, which must be held at all costs, would so shake the enemy, who had been badly mauled, that pressure from this flank and on his front would cause an early collapse."<sup>73</sup> Late on the 14th the G.O.C. therefore ordered a further squadron of tanks to be moved up to Berardi during the night, and another frontal assault to be made in the morning by The Carleton and York Regiment, with the support of heavy artillery concentrations. If this attempt to cross the Gully failed, he planned alternatively to have the 1st Brigade envelop the crossroads by a deep movement on the left flank. At the moment, however, the R.C.R. and 48th Highlanders--the only infantry battalions not in contact with the enemy--were well placed to exploit through the crossroads position, should the 3rd Brigade's effort succeed.<sup>74</sup>

The Carleton and York attack began at 7:30 a.m. on the 15th, and lasted less than an hour. Artillery fire had failed to neutralize enemy positions, which remained secure against frontal assault. After an advance of only 200 yards the battalion was ordered to consolidate; three officers and nine other ranks had been killed, one officer and 27 other ranks wounded.<sup>75</sup> This ended all attempts to force the Gully from the east. From now on the main Canadian endeavour shifted to the Berardi area and the axis of the Orsogna-Ortona road.

For the Royal 22e in their newly won positions west of the Gully, 15 December was a difficult day. Their C.O.'s plans to press forward along the lateral road in conjunction with the Carleton and York attack went awry. Immediately before zero hour "B" Company was caught in its own supporting artillery fire and suffered heavy casualties. With communications broken, nothing could be done to correct the offending batteries. The enemy was quick to profit from the mishap, and manoeuvred his tanks into positions from which their guns could cover the ground held by the Canadians. Deadly machine-gun and artillery fire kept the remaining companies at their start line.<sup>76</sup> Early in the afternoon enemy shelling slackened as a force of 200 paratroopers with tank support launched a determined counter-attack. The

weakened battalion contracted to withstand the shock and to allow a margin of safety for our artillery fire. Speedy and efficient action by the self-propelled 105-millimetre guns of the 98th Army Field Regiment R.A., which in fifteen minutes hit the enemy with 1400 rounds, crippled the German thrust, and sent the discomfited paratroopers reeling back with heavy losses.<sup>77</sup>

As night descended, the infantry companies drew into tight defensive positions with the armour. Orders came from Brigade Headquarters to hold at any price for 48 hours-the time which Vokes considered would be needed to prepare for the 1st Brigade attack.<sup>78</sup> By daylight on the 16th the force at Berardi had received welcome reinforcements and much-needed ammunition for the tanks. About 100 "left out of battle" personnel from the Royal 22e Regiment's Support and Headquarters Companies came forward with a wellladen pack train\* of mules.<sup>79</sup> Seven Ontario tanks filled with 75-millimetre ammunition (to provide more space each co-driver was left behind) set out along "Lager" track at midnight and groped their way safely through the darkness to solve the most vital problem confronting the hard-pressed "C" Squadron.<sup>80</sup>

Thus fortified, the Royal 22e continued during the 16th and 17th to dominate the area about Casa Berardi and thereby frustrate any attempt by the enemy to restore his flank. Intense artillery activity on both sides persisted all along the front, and each Canadian battalion along the edge of the Gully suffered an average of a score of casualties daily. A small probing attack by the West Novas on the 17th immediately to the left of the main bridge over the Gully confirmed patrol reports that the enemy was thinning out south of the "Cider" crossroads.<sup>81</sup> This news was received without undue

optimism: intelligence staffs correctly appreciated that defence of the sector was being placed in the safer hands of Heidrich's parachutists.<sup>82</sup>

### The Capture of "Cider" Crossroads, 18-19 December

It is fitting that the attack launched by the 1st Brigade on 18 December should be remembered by the code name of the barrage which supported its opening phase-"Morning Glory". Not only was it the heaviest fire yet employed by the 1st Division, but in its initial stages "Morning Glory" set a standard of almost faultless co-operation between artillery, infantry and armour, not previously attained by Canadians in the Italian campaign.<sup>83</sup> The complex details of the plan for the set-piece assault were painstakingly worked out by the headquarters staffs of the 1st Canadian Division, the 1st

\* The Commander R.C.A.S.C., 1st Canadian Division had available some 370 mules, which were kept in a "harbour" under the care of an Indian Mule Company and sent forward as they were required by the front line troops.

Infantry Brigade and the 1st Armoured Brigade. Final responsibility for carrying out the operation rested with Lt.-Col. Spry, of the R.C.R., who took over the 1st Brigade on 16 December when illness forced Brigadier Graham to relinquish command.<sup>84</sup>

"Morning Glory" was designed to drive a deep salient into the German defence line south-west of Ortona, from which an attack might be mounted against the town itself. The three phases in which the operation was planned would successively bring into action all the battalions in the 1st Brigade. From a forming-up area on "Lager" track at the head of the Gully the 48th Highlanders were to attack due north behind a creeping barrage to cut the Villa Grande road at a point about 2000 yards from "Cider". With this achieved, after a minimum pause of one hour the second phase would begin with a new barrage ("Orange Blossom"\*) running at an angle to the original one. Behind this the R.C.R. (commanded now by Major W. W. Mathers), forming up in the wake of the 48th Highlanders, would attack north-eastward along the railway track, which closely paralleled the Ortona lateral; on reaching the Villa Grande road it would assault, the isolated enemy garrison at the "Cider" crossroads. In the final phase the 2nd Brigade would exploit to capture Ortona, while the Hastings and Prince Edwards, brought over from the coastal sector, would extend the salient northward towards San Tommaso and San Nicola, villages each about two miles inland from Ortona. Phases I and II were to be supported by all the artillery of the 5th Corps, consisting of three medium and nine field regiments and a heavy anti-aircraft battery.† The "Morning Glory" barrage, 1000 yards wide, would advance to a depth of 2200 yards, moving forward 100 yards every five minutes. At the same time, the whole area over which the infantry was advancing would be curtained by protective walls of intermittent bursts designed to stop any counter-attack from the flanks. "Orange Blossom" followed a similar pattern; in effect, each battalion attack was to be supported by 250 guns.<sup>87</sup> It may be noted that the array of artillery strength assembled for "Morning Glory" included the 166th (Newfoundland) Field Regiment R.A., which had joined the Eighth Army in Italy at the end of October, having served with the First Army during the final stages of the Tunisian campaign. It had supported the 78th Division north of the Trigno, and the 8th Indian Division at the Sangro crossing,<sup>88</sup> and its forthcoming employment with the Canadians was to add force to the claim, later made by one of the battery commanders, that the

\* In selecting code names for these fire plans Headquarters R.C.A. 1st Canadian Division was allotted for the week names of flowers having the initial letter "M" to "O". The choice of "Morning Glory" came from a flower on the C.R.A.'s family crest; "Orange Blossom" was picked not so much for the flower as for the cocktail of that name, which someone suggested "carried a tremendous wallop".<sup>85</sup>

† The 4th, 58th and 70th Medium Regiments R.A., the 1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A. and the 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments R.C.A., the 3rd, 52nd and 53rd Field Regiments R.A., the 57th, 98th (S.P.) and 166th (Newfoundland) Army Field Regiments R.A., and the 51st Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery R.A.<sup>86</sup>

Newfoundlanders had "fired their 25-pounders in support of most infantry formations in the [Eighth] Army."<sup>89</sup>

If for nothing else the 48-hour pause was necessary to replenish ammunition stocks for these mighty barrages. This task called for unremitting toil by R.C.A.S.C. units, which for three days hauled daily from the beaches north of the Sangro 16,000 rounds for the 25-pounders alone-making round trips\* of close to 35 miles.<sup>91</sup> The tired gunners themselves welcomed the brief respite. From the commencement of the first attack across the Moro eleven days earlier their guns had seldom been silent, and there had been periods of intensive action when, to quote the 3rd Field Regiment's historian, "they fired until the paint curled from the red-hot steel and the men reeled in the pits from exhaustion and were sick from the blast."<sup>92</sup>

Some mention must be made of the peculiar difficulties confronting the artillery at this time. Up to the crossing of the Moro the gunners when developing their fire plans had usually been able to carry out preliminary shooting in order to register by observed fall of shot the salient points of the barrage. In the battle in which the Canadians were now engaged, however, the number and variety of the demands for artillery support meant that sometimes two or three fire plans were under preparation at once, and the guns frequently had to switch from one side of the divisional front to the other in a matter of minutes. In these circumstances adequate artillery registration was not possible, and fire plans had to be developed from the map. The risk accompanying this method was recognized, and all infantry commanders were warned down to the platoon level. It soon became evident, moreover, that the only large-scale maps available-Italian sheets with the British grid superimposed-were far from accurate (see below, p. 371), and in some cases had an error of as much as 500 metres. Every effort was therefore made to do the maximum observed registration, but often the pressure of the battle forced a resort to map shooting. Nor did the weather help the gunners. Rapidly changing conditions which produced an overnight variation of several degrees in the temperature of the gun charges and sudden high winds which blew off the Adriatic with unpredictable velocity further complicated the problem of providing effective artillery support.<sup>93</sup>

The care and precision with which the artillery programme for "Morning Glory" was planned was matched in the design for the armoured support. This role fell to the Three Rivers Regiment, which had been uncommitted since its arrival on 15 December from Vinchiatturo, where it had rested during November after supporting the 5th British Division in the advance to Isernia.<sup>94</sup>

\* The exacting role of controlling this and other extensive supply traffic for the Canadian Division was capably carried out by No. 1 Provost Company, recruited in 1939 from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Detachments were under continual fire on exposed roads and bridges, and a number of men were later killed by enemy shelling while on point duty in Ortona.<sup>90</sup>

The regiment's return to the command of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade released the 44th Royal Tank Regiment, which since the Moro crossings had been employed mainly in support of the 8th Indian Division.<sup>95</sup> "B" Squadron was assigned to the 48th Highlanders and "A" Squadron to the R.C.R. "C" was held in reserve. It was arranged that each squadron commander should move with the battalion commander, and that a troop of tanks would work with each rifle company. To ensure proper intercommunication an infantry officer rode in the squadron commander's tank with a wireless set tuned to the battalion frequency. More meticulous attention was paid to ensuring close infantry-tank co-operation than in any previous Canadian operation in Italy. Officers of the squadron and of the battalion met to discuss the coming action together, so that (as a divisional account records) "when they went into battle it was not merely three tanks supporting a company, but it was 'Bill Stevenson's' troop working with 'Pete Smith's' company-and it made a lot of difference."<sup>96</sup>

Promptly at eight o'clock on the morning of the 18th, the thunder of massed artillery announced the opening of "Morning Glory". The first phase of the operation proceeded with the precision of a well-rehearsed exercise. Behind a wall of bursting high explosive 300 yards thick "A" and "D" Companies of the 48th Highlanders advanced resolutely through the broken orchards and tattered vineyards that encumbered their path. (The battalion was using the "Y" formation, in which the two leading companies were directed to follow the barrage on to the objective without becoming involved in any fighting en route, while the company immediately behind them mopped up any enemy who might appear after the barrage had passed-the fourth company being held in reserve to exploit the success of either of the leading companies.)<sup>97</sup> Dust and smoke reduced visibility to about 200 yards, and some platoons maintained their direction only by using the compass. Enemy reaction was at first limited to some small-arms fire, but soon mortar and artillery shells began to fall behind the barrage-a German manoeuvre calculated to destroy our troops' faith in the efficiency of their own gunners. The Three Rivers tanks found a target in every building and haystack, and when soft ground forced them to select routes which separated them from their infantry, the arrangements made in advance to ensure good intercommunication proved their worth. German self-propelled guns opened fire from the flanks, but the presence at Berardi of the Royal 22e Regiment (which had come temporarily under Spry's command) reduced the effect of interference from the right, while the tanks successfully dealt with the opposition on the left.<sup>98</sup> At 10:30 the forward companies reported that they were on the objective, and the remainder of the battalion moved up rapidly to consolidate. The first phase was over. Casualties for the 48th Highlanders numbered only four killed and twenty wounded; half of these losses were



caused either by shells of the supporting barrage falling short, or by enemy fire designed, as we have noted, to create just such a false impression.<sup>99</sup>

When the success signal came back, Spry ordered "Orange Blossom" to begin, and at 11:45 a.m. the guns of the 5th Corps again opened fire.<sup>100</sup> In their forming-up places near the junction of "Lager" with the lateral road The Royal Canadian Regiment prepared to advance astride the railway track on a two-company front. But whereas success and economy had marked the Highlanders' attack, that of the R.C.R. within a few minutes met with misfortune and heavy casualties. As the barrage began to creep, "C", and "D" Companies, closely supported by their tanks, moved across the start line and reported over the wireless that everything was going well. While our shells were still bursting on the opening line, however, the Carleton and Yorks on the right flank sent an urgent message that rounds were falling in their forward positions, despite the fact that the battalion had previously been withdrawn 300 yards from the edge of the Gully. At the same time the 48th Highlanders reported that their mopping-up companies were coming under our fire. (The artillery had not been able to carry out registration by observed fire for "Orange Blossom"; and dependence on faulty maps was the probable cause of the barrage's failure to "fit the ground", which was very uneven and divided by embankments and deep gullies.)<sup>101</sup> These complaints could not be set aside, and the C.R.A., Brigadier Matthews, who was with Spry at the time, ordered the barrage to lift 400 yards and at the same time cancelled the right-hand wall of protective fire.<sup>102</sup>

The effects were immediate and disastrous. The advancing R.C.R. suddenly found themselves face to face with a strong group of paratroopers whom the lifting of the barrage had left unscathed. From these and from the east side of the Gully, where the modification of the artillery plan had also given the enemy unexpected freedom of action, a murderous cross-fire laced the Canadians. Men dropped like flies. The two leading companies were smashed to pieces, all officers becoming casualties. "Never before", wrote a surviving officer, "during either the Sicilian or Italian campaign had the Regiment run into such a death trap."<sup>103</sup> After an hour of bitter and confused fighting, Major Mathers, himself wounded, decided that since the barrage had been lost it would be futile to commit his reserves, and ordered a consolidation. Two artillery officers who had gone forward with the infantry brought back the remnants of the assault companies—a dozen or fifteen men each. These carried on the fight from some buildings 100 yards ahead of the start line.<sup>104</sup>

Throughout the ensuing night The Royal Canadian Regiment, its strength reduced to 19 officers and 159 other ranks, held its position under mortar fire and sniping, and prepared to return to the attack. Fully aware of the predicament of his own battalion, Spry had ordered that for the sake of morale as well as from tactical considerations the R.C.R. must make another

effort to take its objective. Every man that could be spared from the Support and Headquarters Companies came forward, and with these and the remnants of the rifle companies, three companies were organized of 65 men each.<sup>105</sup>

The attack started at 2:15 p.m. on 19 December, after a shortage of petrol and ammunition for the tanks had caused a delay of four hours. This time all went well. Communications were excellent, and "A" and "B" Companies with their accompanying tanks advanced unwaveringly behind an intense barrage. The relatively light enemy resistance in contrast to the deadly opposition of the previous day indicated that Heidrich\* had accepted the loss of the Gully. Shortly before nightfall "Cider" crossroads, which had remained the objective of the 1st Division during two weeks of bitter fighting, was captured with surprising ease. In the final advance to their goal the R.C.R. had suffered only three casualties. With "Cider" in Canadian hands, the Carleton and Yorks crossed the Gully and spent an unpleasant night mopping up enemy pockets among the bodies and booby traps which littered the area of the fateful road junction.<sup>107</sup>

The operation just completed, like every other in the campaign, had seen the unit chaplains making their fine contribution to the comfort of the wounded and the welfare of the troops generally. They administered first aid, evacuated casualties in their jeep-ambulances, and buried the dead. Their roadside Regimental Aid Posts were friendly stopping places for individuals and small parties moving up or down at night. Here they combined medical aid with cheering little deeds of hospitality, dispensing "tea, insect powder, apples, bandages, sulfanilamide, biscuits, advice and news". From the pen of a padre of the 1st Armoured Brigade (H/Major Waldo E. L. Smith, who himself won the M.C. at Colle d'Anchise for bravery in caring for the wounded under direct enemy observation) comes this tribute to the chaplains of the 1st Canadian Division:

You heard about them in the Ambulance wards, in conversations at our roadside R.A.P., in the contacts you had in the fields and streets that were the scene of this fighting. They tended the wounded and helped carry them out. They went to the boys in their company positions. They shared all their dangers and all their hardships. "It is service under fire that counts."<sup>108</sup>

In winning the bloody 2500 yards from San Leonardo to the Ortona road each brigade of the Canadian Division had successively played its costly part. Now it was once more Brigadier Hoffmeister's turn to take up the struggle. During the morning of 19 December, the Seaforth Highlanders relieved the Hastings on the coast road. The P.P.C.L.I. had remained on "Vino Ridge", about a mile inland, while The Edmontons were in immediate reserve north of San Leonardo.<sup>109</sup> The 2nd Brigade was thus in good position to exploit the capture of the crossroads and advance on Ortona.

\* H.Q. 1st Parachute Division assumed command of the coastal sector on 19 December.<sup>106</sup>

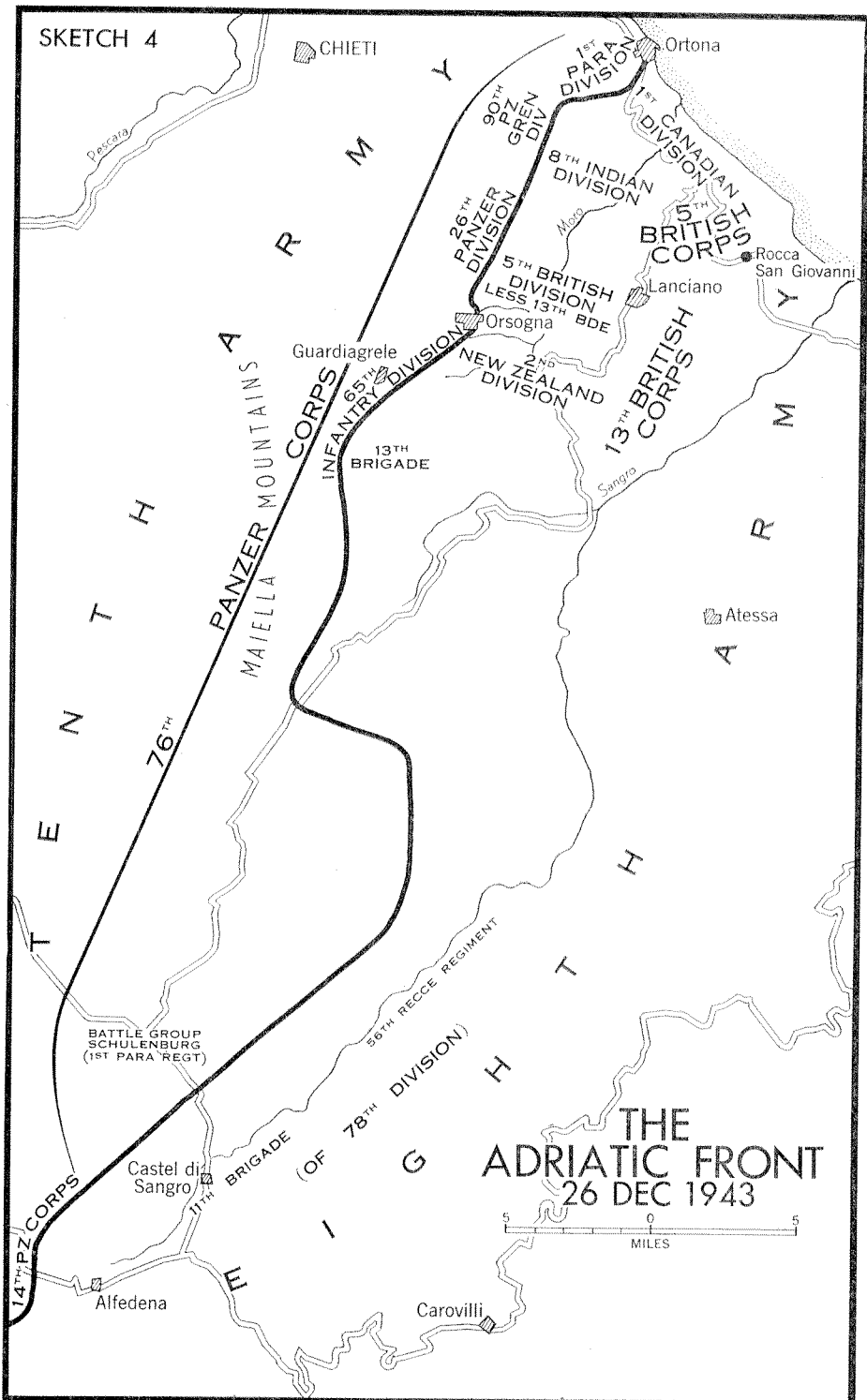
## The Approach to Ortona, 20 December

The second week in December had seen another regrouping of the Eighth Army. The arrival of winter had ended any possibility of conducting offensive operations in the mountainous sector of the 13th Corps; the enemy recognized this fact when he relieved the formidable 1st Parachute Division in that region of snow-covered peaks by a mere handful of mountain troops.\* To provide a greater concentration of forces in the coastal sector, General Montgomery accordingly ordered the 13th Corps to move east, replacing it in the mountains with the battle-weary 78th Division. On 16 December the 5th Division entered the line on the right of the 2nd New Zealand Division, which now came under command of General Dempsey's headquarters. This redeployment of his strength gave the Army Commander four divisions abreast on the twelve-mile front from Ortona to Orsogna<sup>111</sup> (see Sketch 4).

While the 1st Canadian Division had been fighting to secure a firm hold on the Ortona-Orsogna road, each of the three divisions farther inland had also managed to cut the important lateral. On the Canadians' immediate left the 8th Indian Division, thrusting slowly westward from the Villa Rogatti bridgehead which it had inherited from the Patricias, captured Villa Caldari on 14 December and Villa Jubatti three days later, and by the 18th had put patrols into Crecchio, one mile beyond the highway.<sup>112</sup> In the 13th Corps' sector infantry of the 5th Division entered Poggiofiorito, midway between Ortona and Orsogna, on the 17th, and supporting tanks crossed the road to shoot up the village of Arielli.<sup>113</sup> Below the Maiella massif, on Dempsey's left flank, the New Zealand Division had been engaged since 2 December in continuous heavy fighting against the 26th Panzer Division, whose stubborn and reckless defence of Orsogna had won praise from the Fuhrer himself.<sup>114</sup> Three bitterly contested assaults on Orsogna failed, but by the morning of 17 December the New Zealanders had secured a firm hold on a mile of the Ortona road north-east of the town.<sup>115</sup> This achievement, following hard upon the Canadian success in the Berardi sector, forced the enemy to surrender the lateral communication link which he had so long and stubbornly defended. But although he retired a few thousand yards to the mass of ridges, ravines and watercourses to the north-west, he still retained possession of the terminal towns of Orsogna and Ortona.

Experience of German defensive tactics led Montgomery's staff to expect that the enemy, having been evicted from his delaying position in the Gully, would withdraw to the next natural obstacle. This was the Arielli, a small stream cutting across the line of advance to enter the Adriatic three miles north of Ortona. A 13th Corps operation order issued on 22 December

\* The 3rd and 4th Alpine Infantry Battalions (*Hochgebirgsbataillon*). These non-divisional units were composed almost wholly of highly skilled mountaineers.<sup>110</sup>



stated somewhat optimistically: "Eighth Army is going to reach the line of the river Arielli by 24 Dec."<sup>116</sup> It was not considered that the Germans would make a serious stand in Ortona; indeed, the Army's administrative staffs were busy with plans to develop the town into a maintenance area and a rest centre, where troops would find in the high stone buildings which lined the narrow streets adequate protection from the winter weather. To this end the small harbour below the ancient citadel had not been included among the targets of our heavy bombers, and the town itself was spared the almost daily strikes with which light and fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force pounded Orsogna during December.<sup>117</sup> As the Canadians prepared to capture Ortona and so free the coastal highway, Montgomery ordered a sustained thrust to be made at the same time along the inland road through Villa Grande and Tollo, with the object of opening a second route to the north. Accordingly a battalion of the 8th Indian Division moved north across country from the lateral road, and in the early hours of 22 December launched a strongly supported attack against Villa Grande.<sup>118</sup> By that time Canadian soldiers were battling their way into Ortona in the face of unexpectedly stern resistance.

By 10:00 a.m. on the 20th sappers of the 4th Field Company R.C.E. had repaired the blown bridge on the main axis, and Canadian tanks crossed the Gully to "Cider" crossroads.<sup>119</sup> At midday The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, supported by "C" Squadron of the Three Rivers, struck out along the Ortona road, with orders to occupy the buildings at the edge of the town. Moving steadily behind an effective barrage the attackers met little resistance in their 3000-yard advance. Engineers accompanying the infantry swept the tank routes, but despite their efforts the mines and booby-traps with which the ground was sown disabled four of the armoured squadron's tanks. At 2:26 p.m. the Edmontons were on their objective; fighting in the later stages of the attack had become more severe, and had produced 14 German prisoners.<sup>120</sup> By nightfall "C" Company of the Seaforth, attacking up the coast road, had scaled the cliffs south-east of the town and had linked up with the Edmontons, coming temporarily under Lt.-Col. Jefferson's command.<sup>121</sup> In the gathering darkness eight anti-tank guns and a platoon of medium machine-guns. were brought forward to join the twelve tanks supporting the infantry in the western outskirts of Ortona.<sup>122</sup>

During the 2nd Brigade's approach fighters and fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force had swept over German-held territory from Orsogna to the coast, scouring the enemy's supply roads and attacking his gun and forming-up areas.<sup>123</sup> In the past fortnight adverse flying conditions had reduced air activity over the battle area, but what limited support had been available to the Canadians had benefited by the introduction of a new system of control. In Sicily, as we have noted (above, p. 111), requests by forward

troops for air support had to be channelled through brigade and army headquarters to the air force—a cumbersome process which virtually precluded effective support in a fast-moving battle. Early in the fighting on the Italian mainland No. 2/5 Army Air Support Control had modified two of its armoured tentacles as "Rovers"—visual control posts which could "rove" from one brigade front to another without interfering with normal air support communications and seek out additional targets for air attack. Besides being linked with the Army Air Support Control and one of the forward brigades, the Rover was in direct communication with its affiliated fighterbomber wing on the ground, and by means of a Very High Frequency wireless set could control similarly equipped fighter-bombers in the air. Thus the time lag between placing a request and its fulfilment was considerably reduced, and ground-air co-operation materially improved.<sup>124</sup> During the battle of the Sangro the addition of the "cab rank"\* produced the system of airborne fighter-bomber control which became universally adopted in the later stages of the campaign. The cab rank, a flight of six fighter-bombers, would call in to the Rover control post by V.H.F. set at a stated time, and for a maximum period of twenty minutes would circle just behind the battle area awaiting briefing on impromptu targets. If the air controller with Rover had none, the aircraft would proceed against an alternative pre-selected target, and another flight would move into the cab rank.<sup>125</sup>

### The 2nd Brigade's Struggle in the Streets

At first light on 21 December the Edmontons began to fight their way into Ortona. It was the start of a week of hand-to-hand struggle with the elite of the German Army. From it Canadian troops emerged with an enhanced reputation, and a technique of street fighting which was to be closely studied by training staffs in all the Allied armies.

Ortona was typical of the many communities up and down the Adriatic which had their origin as coastal strongholds in mediaeval days when the maritime power of Venice dominated Mediterranean commerce. Huddled against the massive 15th-century castle which crowned a high promontory thrusting squarely into the sea, the Old Town with its tall, narrow houses and dark, cramped streets, merged into the more modern section which had grown up on the flat tableland to the south. This newer part of the town was laid out in a system of rectangular blocks, although only the main thoroughfares were wide enough to allow the passage of a tank. The buildings were packed wall to wall, and rose generally to a height of four storeys. From the eastern edge of the town an almost precipitous cliff fell away to the small

\* First used in support of the Canadian Division on 8 December.

artificial harbour, which was enclosed by two stone breakwaters protruding far out into the water. A deep ravine west of Ortona restricted the townsite to an average width of 500 yards-about one third of its length from north to south. This natural impregnability against attack from three sides meant that the German defenders could concentrate on blocking the only possible approach-the route from the south (Highway No. 16) by which the Canadians were attempting to force an entry. At the outskirts of the town this road became the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, which continued northward to the Piazza Municipale. From this central town square, overlooked by the great dome of the cathedral of San Tommaso, the Via Tripoli led out past the cemetery to emerge as the main coast road to the north.<sup>126</sup>

The Edmontons, attacking northward on a two-company front, spent the whole of 21 December clearing the score or more of scattered buildings which spread across the southern outskirts of the town. By nightfall they had reached the Piazza Vittoria, at the beginning of the main built-up portion of Ortona, where they were within a quarter of a mile of the central square.<sup>127</sup> The Seaforth's "C" Company had a stiff fight to clear the church of Santa Maria di Constantinopoli in the extreme south-east corner of the town, and during the afternoon the Brigade Commander ordered the full battalion to be committed to assist the Edmontons in what was developing into a major task.<sup>128</sup>

Although these were relatively modest gains, a misconception of what the Canadians had achieved during the day produced a feeling of gloom in the highest German military circles. The 1st Parachute Division's daily report to the 76th Corps stated without elaboration that an enemy attack south-west of Ortona had been repulsed. Hitler's headquarters, interpreting this reticence as the normal forerunner of bad news, assumed that the town had been lost. "The High Command called me on the phone," Westphal told Wentzell that afternoon. "Everybody was very sad about Ortona." "Why", replied the Tenth Army Chief of Staff, "Ortona is still in our hands."<sup>129</sup> It may have been to guard against any recurrent lapse of confidence that on the evening of the 22nd-when the Edmontons had been fighting in the streets of Ortona all day, and the report of the 1st Parachute Division spoke of hard house-to-house fighting-the Tenth Army's war diary recorded. "Contrary to the reports of the opponents, the enemy is still outside Ortona."<sup>130</sup>

Edmonton patrols reporting before first light on 22 December disclosed the effectiveness of the defenders' demolition plan. The Corso Vittorio Emanuele was free of barricades for 300 yards or more, but all other lines of advance were blocked by the debris of houses which German engineers had systematically toppled into the narrow streets. It looked as though the defenders intended to channel the Canadian attack along the main street to the open Piazza Municipale, which they hoped to make a "killing ground". Jefferson decided to clear the enemy from both sides of this central route

so that the street itself might be swept of mines to enable tanks to penetrate the town.<sup>131</sup> "A" Company took the left and "D" the right, with "B" Company carrying out flank protection in the troublesome area between the main Corso and the esplanade overlooking the harbour. Company tasks were divided into platoon and section objectives, and commanders instituted a strict system of reporting each house clear before starting on the next. House by house and block by block the infantry worked forward, followed by the armour. By nightfall the Edmontons had reached the Piazza Municipale, but 25 yards short of it a high pile of rubble stopped further advance by the tanks.<sup>132</sup>

The day, typical of those to follow, had been one of bitter struggle against a stubborn and vicious defence. The German paratroopers, fresh, well trained and equipped and thoroughly imbued with Nazism, fought like disciplined demons. Each sturdy Italian house that they elected to defend became a strongpoint, from every floor of which they opposed the Canadian advance with fire from a variety of weapons. They left other buildings booby-trapped or planted with delayed charges; and if these faced houses which they were holding, they demolished the front walls in order to expose the interiors to their own fire from across the street. Every obstructing pile of rubble was covered by machine-guns sited in a second storey, and the litter of shattered stone and broken brick usually concealed a liberal sowing of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines.<sup>133</sup>

Although the employment of armour in such restricted conditions was anything but orthodox, the Three Rivers tanks gave the infantry invaluable support. They became in turn assault guns, their 75-millimetre shells smashing gaping holes in the walls of enemy-held buildings, and individual pillboxes, covering a sudden sally by our infantry with sustained bursts of machine-gun fire; frequently they carried ammunition forward and evacuated casualties through the bullet-swept streets. They performed these tasks under constant threat from German anti-tank guns sited to cover the obvious approaches and often concealed close behind the barricades so as to catch the attacking tank's exposed underside as it climbed over the rubble.<sup>134</sup>

From the Piazza Municipale the Edmonton commander continued towards the Via Tripoli, intending to cut off the garrison holding the northeastern portion of the town. Early on the 23rd a troop of tanks managed to scale the barrier blocking the Corso Vittorio Emanuele; yet even with this support it took the infantry the whole of that day to cover the 200 yards to the wide Piazza San Tommaso in front of the cathedral. On the right another Edmonton company had by nightfall secured the south end of the Corso Umberto I, which, being free of buildings on its seaward flank, could be covered by Canadian anti-tank fire and on that account offered a promising means of approach to the Castle.<sup>135</sup>



Their heavy casualties had left the Edmontons in a weakened state; none of the infantry battalions of the 1st Division had received any reinforcements since crossing the Sangro, and Jefferson was reduced to fighting on a basis of three companies of 60 men each. On 22 December "D" Company of the Seaforth had been given the task of clearing the left flank, and the entry of the remainder of the battalion into battle on the 23rd further eased the heavy strain on the Edmontons. The two commanders divided the town between them-the Seaforth to take the western half, and the Edmontons to push along the Corso Umberto I to the Castle and the cemetery beyond.<sup>136</sup>

In their grim efforts to advance the infantry received magnificent support from the anti-tank guns-which were better suited than field guns for shooting at such short ranges. The battalion six-pounders and the six- and 17-pounders of the 90th Anti-Tank Battery were employed with devastating effect against enemy-occupied buildings. In the early stages of the fighting two six-pounders covered the advance of the infantry and tanks along the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, each firing high-explosive shells into the windows along either side of the street immediately ahead of the leading troops. When enemy fire prevented the sappers from demolishing the barricades of rubble which blocked the streets, the same guns blew the crests off the piles, enabling our tanks to mount them. As resistance in the streets stiffened, and infantrymen had to battle their way forward house by house, anti-tank gunners were called on to smash a way through. They obtained particularly effective results by first penetrating an obstructing wall with an armour-piercing round fired at close range, and then sending a high-explosive shell through the breach to burst inside. German snipers posted on the tops of buildings received short shrift: one round from a six-pounder was usually sufficient to blast a tile roof to pieces. From a ridge south-east of the town two 17-pounders, firing at a range of 1500 yards, systematically ripped apart buildings which the infantry indicated along the sea front.<sup>137</sup>

Failing in their attempt to outflank the enemy by striking up the Corso Umberto I, the Edmontons reverted to their former practice of working forward house by house. The necessity for getting from a captured house to the next one forward without becoming exposed to enemy fire along the open street produced an improved method of "mouse-holing"-the technique, taught in battle-drill schools from 1942 on, of breaching a dividing wall with pick or crowbar.<sup>138</sup> Unit pioneers set a "Beehive" demolition charge in position against the intervening wall on the top floor, and exploded it while the attacking section sheltered at ground level. Before the smoke and dust had subsided the infantry were up the stairs and through the gap to oust the enemy from the adjoining building. In this manner the Canadians cleared whole rows of houses without once appearing in the street; and as they progressed the German paratroopers automatically vacated the buildings on the opposite side.<sup>139</sup>

By this time the enemy had belatedly admitted the forced entry into Ortona. The Tenth Army war diary on the 23rd disclosed an attack by "two battalions, supported by flamethrowers\* and 17 tanks ... used as artillery", and reported that "the number of our own casualties" had compelled the abandonment of the "more remote and southernmost positions . . . after exceedingly hard fighting."<sup>140</sup> Next day the 1st Parachute Division reported that "in hard house-to-house fighting the enemy advanced to the centre of Ortona."<sup>141</sup>

Heidrich now had two battalions in Ortona--the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Parachute Regiment, which had borne the brunt of the early Edmonton attacks, and the 2nd Battalion, 4th Regiment,† which was pushed into the battle on the 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>143</sup> The remaining units of the 1st Parachute Division were in position between the coast and Tollo, covering San Tommaso, San Nicola and Villa Grande; the divisional reserve was reduced to a single infantry company at Tollo.<sup>144</sup> On Heidrich's immediate right was the Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion Hermann Goring, which Kesselring, in his efforts to find forces to stop the Eighth Army, had detached from its parent formation west of the Apennines.<sup>145</sup> This action by the C.-in-C. South-West incurred the severe displeasure of Goring himself. "I received a terrific blast from the Reichsmarschall today", Kesselring told Lemelsen on 23 December. "He said that I had no understanding for his division and demands that it be committed as a compact force and not piecemeal with the Recce people at one coast and the infantry at the other."<sup>146</sup>

"For some unknown reason the Germans are staging a miniature Stalingrad in hapless Ortona", wrote the Associated Press correspondent on 22 December.<sup>147</sup> Had he, instead of Lemelsen, been listening to Kesselring on the telephone on Christmas day he would not have been left in doubt. "It is clear we do not want to defend Ortona decisively", the Field Marshal told the acting Commander of the Tenth Army, "but the English have made it appear as important as Rome." He agreed with Lemelsen's protest, "It costs so much blood that it cannot be justified", but argued ". . . you can do nothing when things develop in this manner; it is only too bad that ... the world press makes so much of it."<sup>148</sup>

Kesselring may well have been trying to rationalize an unhappy situation, yet it was true that by mid-December this formerly insignificant town on the Adriatic coast had acquired considerable prominence. On the 8th it was merely the Adriatic end of "makeshift German defences",<sup>149</sup> but by the 14th

\* A misstatement--only the Germans used flamethrowers in the battle for Ortona.

† This unit had been held in divisional reserve at Torre Mucchia, three miles up the coast from Ortona. "The mistake was that 2 Bn. 4 Regt. was kept too far back", Kesselring complained to Lemelsen on Christmas Day.<sup>142</sup>

the Associated Press from Algiers was calling it a "strategic road junction".<sup>150</sup> Newspaper despatches emphasized the violence of the enemy's counterattacks and underlined the fact that he had had to throw in three divisions to defend Ortona; and on 16 December the Associated Press cited a captured document which ordered the Germans to hold on at all costs.<sup>151</sup>

This forcible reminder of the power of the press to turn a limited tactical operation into a long and costly "prestige" battle was not lost upon the Allied commanders. Before the next offensive opened Headquarters Allied Armies in Italy took special care to instruct Public Relations Officers and censors to ensure "a truer presentation of what has actually taken place . . . than has been the case in previous battles." An echo of the fighting in Ortona was heard clearly in one such directive: "DON'T before Rome is captured claim it as a great military objective. Show that Rome as a town has no military significance."<sup>152</sup>

### Christmas Day-and the End of the Battle

Long after the lessons of Ortona recede into the pages of military textbooks men who were there will remember how, despite their joyless surroundings, the two Canadian battalions observed Christmas Day. Nothing could be less Christmas-like than the acrid smell of cordite overhanging Ortona's rubble barricades, the thunder of collapsing walls and the blinding dust and smoke which darkened the alleys in which Canadians and Germans were locked in grim hand-to-hand struggle. The daily report of the 76th Corps testified to the bitterness of the day's fighting:

In Ortona the enemy attacked all day long with about one brigade supported by ten tanks. In very hard house-to-house fighting and at the cost of heavy casualties to his own troops [he] advanced to the market square in the south part of the town. The battle there is especially violent. Our own troops are using flamethrowers, hand grenades and the new *Ofenrohre*\*. . .<sup>155</sup>

In such dreadful circumstances did men thousands of miles from home keep the greatest of all home festivals.

Battalion administrative personnel were determined that, whatever the situation, their rifle companies should have a Christmas dinner. The

\* The *Ofenrohr* (stovepipe) or *Panzerschreck* (tank terror), the German counterpart of the United States "bazooka", was an 88-millimetre anti-tank rocket launcher, firing a hollowcharge rocket projectile weighing about seven pounds.<sup>153</sup> Another enemy anti-tank weapon which had just made its appearance in the Italian theatre (one was captured intact at Ortona) was the *Panzerfaust 30*, or *Faustpatrone 2*, a single-shot, expendable, recoilless grenade discharger, firing a hollow-charge bomb comparable to that of the PIAT.<sup>154</sup>

Seaforth's banquet hall was the abandoned church of Santa Maria di Constantinopoli. Let their diarist relate the event:

The setting for the dinner was complete, long rows of tables with white tablecloths, and a bottle of beer per man, candies, cigarettes, nuts, oranges and apples and chocolate bars providing the extras. The C.O., Lt. Col. S. W. Thomson, laid on that the Companies would eat in relays . . . as each company finished their dinner, they would go forward and relieve the next company.... The menu . . . soup, pork with apple sauce, cauliflower, mixed vegetables, mashed potatoes, gravy, Christmas pudding and mince pie....

From 1100 hours to 1900 hours, when the last man of the battalion reluctantly left the table to return to the grim realities of the day, there was an atmosphere of cheer and good fellowship in the church. A true Christmas spirit. The impossible had happened. No one had looked for a celebration this day. December 25th was to be another day of hardship, discomfort, fear and danger, another day of war. The expression on the faces of the dirty bearded men as they entered the building was a reward that those responsible are never likely to forget. . . . During the dinner the Signal Officer . . . played the church organ and with the aid of the improvised choir, organized by the padre, carols rang out throughout the church.<sup>156</sup>

Nor had a sense of humour been lost when the Padre remarked, "Well, at last I've got you all in church." The Edmontons, marking their fifth Christmas on active service with "the fiercest fighting so far encountered", ate their Christmas dinner in small groups, as officers and men were relieved from battle a few at a time to share what was to be for some their last meal.<sup>157</sup>

German records reveal that during the week before Christmas the Tenth Army had given serious consideration to launching a concentrated offensive which would "annihilate those elements of the Eighth Army which are north of the Sangro."<sup>158</sup> "The Christmas feast days are best suited to our purpose", Herr had written to Lemelsen, "as the enemy will think that the Germans will then be in a soft mood."<sup>159</sup> The plan was a bold one, based upon the conclusion that Montgomery's concentration of the Canadian, Indian and New Zealand Divisions in the northern coastal sector, with the bulk of his artillery well forward, had left him with few reserves behind the front. (The 5th British Division was not expected to arrive from the interior in time to affect the issue.) \* German defensive action was known to have inflicted very considerable casualties upon the three divisions in the Eighth Army's front line, and Herr believed that a sudden blow might achieve victory before their striking power could be restored. The Tenth Army plan envisaged a three-fold thrust. On the inland flank the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division would attack from the south-west to envelop Montgomery's left wing; in the centre an assault force made up of every available unit of the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division (which had been earmarked to relieve the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division), the 334th (newly arrived from France) and the 65th Infantry

\* On 21 December Lemelsen reported to Kesselring that "the enemy is moving up 5 Brit Div".<sup>160</sup> Actually on that date the Division had been in the line for five days.

Divisions and the 26th Panzer Division would drive eastward from the Orsogna-Guardiagrele area through Lanciano in an attempt to reach the coast between Fossacesia and San Vito; the 1st Parachute Division would then seal the fate of Montgomery's forces by striking south from Ortona to San Vito.<sup>161</sup>

Tempting though these proposals appeared to Herr and Lemelsen, they did not win Hitler's approval. On 27 December the Armed Forces Operations Staff in Germany notified Kesselring "that the Fuhrer has given the order to desist from the planned offensive in view of the inability of the Air Force to meet requirements and because of the fact that certain formations in the theatre are slated for transfer to C.-in-C. West and are therefore to be relieved."<sup>162</sup>

The "Christmas feast days" passed, and the fighting continued with unabated fury. Slowly and with mounting casualties the Edmontons forced their way towards the Castle and the Seaforth battled through the western part of the town, where their exposed left flank compelled a weakening of their front and led to several lively skirmishes with enemy parties attempting to take them in the rear.<sup>163</sup> In the relentless struggle for the mastery no holds were barred. On the 27th a house in which an Edmonton officer and 23 of his men were distributing ammunition was blown up by a prepared charge; only four men were dug out of the ruins alive. Retaliation was swift. Two buildings occupied by the enemy were reconnoitred under cover of smoke, and infantry pioneers laid heavy charges of captured explosives during the night. When these were simultaneously blown, it was estimated that nearly two German platoons were destroyed.<sup>164</sup>

It was remarkable that amid so much death and destruction many of the people of Ortona clung to their homes and warmly welcomed the Canadians to the houses which they had been shelling for days. A British war correspondent has described the scene he stumbled upon in a basement living room in one of the forward positions:

What a strange clutter of humanity it was. There were some five or six Canadian soldiers, there were old women and there were children innumerable. A painter of genius--Goya, perhaps--might have done justice to the scene. I felt no verbal description could do so. In the half-darkened room the *pasta* for the midday meal was simmering over the fire in the corner. Haggard, prematurely aged women kept emerging shyly one after another from some inner chamber where an old man, the grandfather of the numerous children, was dying. . . . Another old man was uttering maledictions against Mussolini. Then his wife surprisingly produced a jeroboam of Marsala and half a dozen glasses and moved around among 'the soldiers, filling and re-filling their glasses. The children clambered around the Canadian soldiers and clutched at them convulsively every time one of our anti-tank guns, located only half a dozen paces from the door of the house, fired down the street in the direction of one of the remaining German machine-gun posts. Soon each one of us had a squirming, terrified child in his arms. And the old lady went on distributing Marsala.<sup>165</sup>

The Edmontons and the Seaforth had now begun to receive their long-awaited reinforcements. Rarely does a commanding officer wax enthusiastic over the quality of an incoming draft, and it soon transpired that many of the newcomers had much to learn. (According to one C.O., some had not received advanced training.)<sup>166</sup> Yet if these replacements, who were thus so violently introduced into battle, required example to inspire their own actions, they had not far to seek. The epic of the Ortona fighting is rich with many recorded feats of gallantry,\* besides many more that went unrecognized amid the turmoil of the struggle. In the close intensive fighting, when actions were frequently decided on the platoon or section level, success or failure depended essentially on the individual initiative of junior leaders. A typical case is that of Sergeant J. E. W. Dick, of The Loyal Edmonton Regiment's "B" Company. While engaged in street fighting on Christmas afternoon his platoon (and "A" Company on its left) came to a halt in the face of severe machine-gun and sniper fire and the searing blasts from an enemy flamethrower. Given permission to investigate a means of outflanking this strongpoint, Sergeant Dick discovered a way of reaching a small upstairs room which, although under fire, overlooked the enemy post. By this route, which involved crossing an exposed alley and climbing ten feet of water pipe, he led two sections of his platoon forward and skilfully disposed them in positions from which they were able materially to assist the advance of "A" Company. Significantly the recommendation for the Military Medal which came to Dick stated: "A large proportion of his platoon had not been in action previously. His conduct was an inspiring example to them."

Although the paratroopers were gradually losing their hold on the town, they did not slacken their resistance. It was apparent that the garrison was being supplied and reinforced on a rotation basis each night. In order therefore to increase the Canadian pressure Brigadier Hoffmeister decided to commit a fresh battalion, and on 27 December he ordered the Patricias to enter the battle and pass through the Edmontons, supporting them with the Three Rivers' "B" Squadron, which had relieved "A" Squadron on Christmas Eve.<sup>167</sup>

The enemy had had his fill of battling for Ortona, however. On the 26th the 76th Corps reported to the Tenth Army that all the reserves available on its left wing had been committed.<sup>168</sup> As the force of the Canadian attack continued undiminished, Herr realized that further fighting without quick replacements would bring about the destruction of the 1st Parachute Division. On the morning of the 27th he obtained authority from Lemelsen to withdraw from the battered town during the coming night.<sup>169</sup> (Heidrich, who had

\* Between 21 and 29 December five D.S.Os., three M.Cs. and seven M.Ms. were won by members of the two participating infantry battalions, the Three Rivers Regiment and the 90th Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A.

departed for Germany on leave the previous day, later told Allied interrogators that at the time he believed the situation to have become more or less stabilized.)<sup>170</sup> The sudden German evacuation changed the 2nd Brigade's plan. As Edmonton parties entered the Castle unopposed, the Patricias, without a shot being fired, occupied positions in the area of the cemetery and on the roads leading north-westward from the town.<sup>171</sup>

The battle for Ortona was over, but the victory had been bought at a heavy price. Hardest hit was The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, which had borne the brunt of the early stages of the battle; its casualties for the nine days which ended at Ortona Castle numbered 172, of which 63 were fatal. The Seaforth Highlanders lost 41 killed and 62 wounded. Losses by the supporting arms and by the troops of the 1st Brigade, whose operations west of Ortona, as we shall see, had contributed materially to the final decision, brought the total Canadian casualties in the eight-day battle to 650 all ranks. The enemy too had suffered heavily. "Each of Heidrich's battalions has now a strength of merely one company", Wentzell noted in conversation with the 76th Corps Chief of Staff on 29 December.<sup>172</sup> The Corps' daily returns to the Tenth Army show that the 1st Parachute Division reported total losses of 455 for the period 20-28 December. Most of these casualties were undoubtedly incurred in the bloody shambles of Ortona itself. Although Heidrich admitted only 68 killed,<sup>173</sup> the finding by the Canadians of the unburied bodies of about 100 paratroopers in the town left little doubt as to the fate of a high proportion of the 205 who had been listed as missing.<sup>174</sup>

"It costs so much blood ...", Lemelsen had said.

#### Clearing to the Riccio, 22 December-4 January

While the battle raged in the streets and houses of Ortona, farther west the 1st Canadian Brigade was engaged in a series of attacks to develop the salient created by "Morning Glory". These operations were designed to cut the main coast road and thus isolate the Ortona garrison, and there is little doubt that the threat which they created to his communications hastened the enemy's decision to concede the town to the 2nd Brigade.<sup>175</sup>

About a mile west of the "Cider" crossroads, and 1000 yards before it reached Villa Grande, the road to Tollo was cut by the narrow valley of the Riccio River, which flowed almost due north to enter the sea beside Torre Mucchia. This stream formed with the sea coast and the blood-soaked Gully south of the Ortona-Osogna road a rough triangle, enclosing a narrow plateau, which was itself intersected by numerous gullies and watercourses. A more westerly branch of the Riccio joined the main stream about a mile

and a half inland, and on the high ground between the forks stood the small hamlets of San Nicola and San Tommaso. It was the task of the 1st Brigade to attack northward from the southern apex and drive the Germans from their positions along the west side of this triangle. After the capture of the crossroads the brigade had enjoyed two or three days of relative inaction during which the R.C.R. reorganized its hard-hit companies, and' patrols from the 48th Highlanders felt out the enemy's positions on the plateau. On 20 December and succeeding days the Highlanders watched heroic but unsuccessful attempts by a battalion of the 8th Indian Division to take Villa Grande.<sup>176</sup> Patrols reported that the paratroopers were holding the Villa Grande road in strength, and were still firmly dug in east of the Riccio gully.<sup>177</sup>

On 22 December, Lt.-Col. Spry received orders to undertake what was in effect the third phase of the "Morning Glory" assault. He decided to carry out the operation by leapfrogging his three battalions up the plateau. First, The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment was to attack through the 48th Highlanders to objectives 1000 yards north of the Tollo road; while the Hastings were still in combat with the enemy the Highlanders would pass through them to seize the high ground overlooking San Nicola and San Tommaso from the east; finally from positions thus gained the R.C.R., passing through both battalions, would strike north-eastward to the coast. The allocation of four field and three medium regiments to the attack assured adequate artillery backing.<sup>178</sup> Less certain was the prospect of effective armoured support, for heavy rain throughout the night of the 22nd-23rd left no doubt that the tanks of the Ontarios' "A" Squadron would encounter difficult driving conditions on the muddy plateau.<sup>179</sup> The important problem of maintaining the salient once it was formed was met by loading a fleet of DUKWs at San Vito, with orders to land at a prearranged point on the coast when needed.<sup>180</sup>

At 9:30 on the morning of 23 December the Hastings attacked north from the Berardi area. An hour later, as they neared their objectives north of the Villa Grande road, the two leading companies were forced to ground with heavy casualties by a deluge of shells and mortar bombs. A reserve company called forward by Lt.-Col. Kennedy fared better, and during the afternoon fought its way on to the objective, although unsupported by the tanks, which had bogged down in the rear. An enemy report admitted the setback with heavy German losses.<sup>181</sup> There followed a tense night during which small bands of paratroopers armed with automatic weapons attempted to infiltrate through the extended positions of the Hastings.<sup>182</sup> By midday on the 24th, however, the battalion had moved forward and completed consolidation of the original objective. Engineers of the 1st Field Company



went to work under continuous shellfire to clear a lane for the tanks through the heavily mined area.<sup>183</sup>

There was something of a gamble about the 48th Highlanders' attack, which was launched in the darkness and rain of a cheerless December night, without artillery support and with little hope of any aid from the tanks. But from their very nature these apparently unpropitious conditions brought success. The Highlanders moved in single file along an unreconnoitred footpath not shown on maps and barely discernible on air photographs. So dark was the night that in order to keep direction each had to hold on to some part of the equipment of the man ahead. Two unguarded houses filled with Germans opening Christmas presents yielded 19 prisoners. By morning of the 24th the battalion was at its objective on the eastern bank of the Riccio, overlooking San Nicola and San Tommaso.<sup>184</sup> A strong fighting patrol sent back to bring up the Highlanders' supporting weapons found its route blocked by resolute paratroopers of the 3rd Regiment's 3rd Battalion and was unable to break through to the Hastings and Prince Edwards.<sup>185</sup>

Efforts on 24 December to establish contact between the two Canadian battalions failed. Infantry patrols were stopped by determined machine-gun fire, and tanks could not negotiate the sea of mud to which three days of continual rain had reduced the area. The plan of maintenance by sea could not, of course, function until 1st Brigade troops reached the coast; cut off from supplies, the 48th Highlanders eked out their dwindling rations with three sheep rounded up in the area.<sup>186</sup> Company attacks by the R.C.R. and the Hastings and Prince Edwards to break through to the isolated battalion were thrown back with great loss.<sup>187</sup> Fortunately the enemy, who apparently did not realize until Christmas Day that a full battalion had penetrated his positions, made no move against the 48th Highlanders until the 26th.<sup>188</sup>

Seeking a way out of the impasse, on Christmas morning Spry ordered the R.C.R. to abandon the original intention of cutting the coast road and instead to establish a corridor through which the 48th Highlanders could receive supplies and evacuate their casualties. At the end of a day's steady fighting against tough enemy bands the R.C.R. reached the beleaguered battalion, which, in the words of its diarist, had spent a "most unhappy Christmas." Through the lane thus secured 60 men of the Saskatoon Light Infantry set off at dusk with food and ammunition for the needy Highlanders. At dawn next morning they returned with the wounded.<sup>189</sup> "It was a hazardous, wearisome job to perform on Christmas Night", Lt.-Col. Johnston afterwards wrote to the commander of the Support Group, "but you may be assured this unit, and in particular the casualties you carried safely out, will be forever grateful."<sup>190</sup>

At 10:00 a.m. on 26 December the 3rd Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment attacked and penetrated the Highlanders' positions, and some very close fighting followed. By midday, however, thanks to the untiring efforts of the Engineers and the Ontarios' drivers to move armour through the long salient, one troop of tanks had arrived on the scene.\* With this long-awaited support Johnston's men struck out vigorously at the paratroopers, driving them across the Riccio towards San Nicola and San Tommaso, and killing or capturing an estimated 100.<sup>192</sup> The other two battalions of the brigade joined in routing the enemy from the scattered buildings along the edge of the plateau, and by 27 December the east bank of the Riccio upstream from San Tommaso was in our hands.<sup>193</sup>

General Vokes planned to follow up these successes of the 1st and 2nd Brigades by maintaining pressure on the Germans as they withdrew to the north-west. It was generally believed that the enemy would retire to the Arielli River, where there awaited him the same tactical features which he had so well exploited on the Moro and at the Gully,<sup>194</sup> the 5th Corps intelligence staffs had no means of knowing General Herr's decision of 27 December to pull back only as far as a line running inland from Torre Mucchia and passing to the west of San Tommaso and Villa Grande.<sup>195</sup> Accordingly Vokes ordered the 1st Brigade to take San Nicola and San Tommaso, and the 3rd, now rested and reinforced, to press on to the Arielli.<sup>196</sup> Brigadier Gibson gave the Royal 22e the task of seizing the high ground within the forks of the Riccio, and directed the Carleton and Yorks to cut the coast road and take the Torre Mucchia headland, better known to both sides as Point 59. He planned to use the West Novas subsequently to clear the ground between the Riccio and the Arielli.<sup>197</sup>

It soon became apparent that the enemy was not prepared to relinquish any defensible ground without dispute. As the Royal 22e (commanded since 18 December by Major J. V. Allard) moved forward from the 48th Highlanders' area on the morning of the 29th, they came under considerable fire from the far side of the Riccio; a little later the Carleton and Yorks, approaching Highway No. 16 from the south, were halted by shelling and by determined machine-gun fire sweeping inland from the bare top of Point 59.<sup>198</sup> The triangular promontory, protected on two sides by its steep seaward flanks, was held by fresh paratroopers of the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, which had been transferred to the coast from the right wing of the 76th Corps during the night of 27-28 December.<sup>199</sup> The enemy's interest in Torre Mucchia was understandable; its retention not only gave him effective control of the highway, but denied the Allies excellent observation

\* The Ontario tanks were guided to the battalion area by the 48th Highlanders' Intelligence Officer, Lieut. J. M. E. Clarkson, who braved heavy mortar and machine-gun fire to reconnoitre a route across 1000 yards of enemy-held ground and lead the armour forward. He was awarded the Military Cross.<sup>191</sup>



#### ENTRY INTO ORTONA

Making a cautious advance through the city's outskirts, men of The Loyal Edmonton Regiment begin house-clearing in Ortona, 21 December 1943.



#### FIGHTING IN AN ORTONA ALLEY

An Edmonton six-pounder anti-tank gun fires on a German strongpoint in Ortona, 21 December 1943.



#### CANADIAN TANKS IN ORTONA

Shermans of the 12th Armoured Regiment (Three Rivers) move forward along the Corso Vittorio Emanuele to engage enemy-held houses, 23 December 1944.



#### A HIT BY GERMAN MORTARS

A jeep and a 15-cwt. truck of The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada are set alight by mortar fire, 23 December 1944. The church at the left of the picture was being used as a company headquarters.

of long stretches of the coast to the north. In the face of the unexpectedly strong resistance Gibson ordered the Carleton and Yorks to close into a defensive position. During the night the Germans blew the bridge which carried the highway across the mouth of the Riccio.<sup>200</sup>

On the morning of the 30th the Royal 22e secured their objective within the forks of the Riccio after two costly attempts on the previous day had failed. The C.O. judged that to advance farther would create too dangerous a salient, and ordered the attack stopped.<sup>201</sup> The Carleton and Yorks on the coast road had less success. When mines and mud halted a troop of the Ontarios' "B" Squadron supporting a company which Lt: Col. Pangman sent forward to clear the headland, the infantry dug in to guard the stranded tanks and await reinforcement.<sup>202</sup> The year ended darkly for the New Brunswick unit. A second company attack early on the 31st was thrown back in confusion, and the few tanks that managed to reach the battalion bogged down and had to be protected. Orders came from Brigade Headquarters to postpone further attempts to take Torre Mucchia by direct assault, and instead to reduce the German resistance with mortar and observed artillery fire. Late on New Year's Eve the enemy launched a furious counter-attack under cover of lashing rain and a raging gale which swept in across the bleak coast. The relentless paratroopers burst in among the two forward companies, forcing them back and inflicting more than 50 casualties.<sup>203</sup>

Point 59 did not fall until 4 January. On that day field, medium and heavy artillery regiments joined in a complex programme of sharp concentrations which intermittently switched from one target to another across the divisional front. At 4:30 p.m., before the bewildered enemy had recovered from these barrages or decided from what direction our infantry would strike, a company of the Carleton and Yorks (the regiment was now commanded by Major E. D. Danby) put in a two-pronged attack on Torre Mucchia from the highway and from the beach. By nine o'clock the promontory was in our hands. As usual the paratroopers had resisted fiercely; after the engagement 40 of them were buried near the old look-out tower. The Canadians had lost but three killed and four wounded.<sup>204</sup>

While the 3rd Brigade was thus occupied in wresting from the enemy the coastal anchor of his new positions, farther inland Canadian and Indian troops had closed up to the defence line selected by Herr on 27 December. On New Year's Eve the 48th Highlanders seized San Nicola and San Tommaso in bitter house-to-house fighting which lasted all day and brought 35 Canadian casualties.<sup>205</sup> A mile to the south Villa Grande was occupied by the 8th Indian Division on the morning of the 28th, after a week's battle in which one attacking battalion (the 5th Battalion, The Essex Regiment) alone had suffered 285 casualties.<sup>206</sup>

## The Offensive is Abandoned

Apart from making these enforced concessions the enemy stood firm along the whole of the 76th Corps front. A major attack by the 13th Corps on 23 and 24 December—with the 5th Division directed against high ground commanding the village of Arielli, and the New Zealanders assaulting the Fontegrande Ridge a mile beyond the lateral road failed to achieve a break-through.<sup>207</sup> The year ended with the Germans still in possession of Crecchio, Arielli, Orsogna and Guardiagrele.

The Eighth Army's winter offensive had ground to a halt. Heavy fighting and the additional strain imposed by the hostile weather had exhausted the troops. Against a determined enemy, strongly emplaced, the infantrymen had carried the weight of the fighting, for the soaked ground had nullified the Allied superiority in armour, and the continual rain and overhanging cloud had drastically curtailed flying operations. Artillery support had been on a magnificent scale, but by Christmas week declining ammunition stocks were beginning to cause some anxiety.\* Although Pescara, the original objective of the offensive which began at the Sangro, still lay ten miles ahead of his foremost troops, General Montgomery realized that to continue to attack in conditions so unfavourable to the infantry might seriously prejudice his Army's ability to launch a balanced offensive when the return of good weather should again allow effective employment of armour and air power. General Alexander concurred in this appreciation, and the Eighth Army reduced its pressure on the foe.<sup>209</sup>

For the Canadian Division, the transition from its first long period of intensive fighting to the less exacting conditions of static warfare came none too soon. Heavy casualties had left it temporarily unfit for further offensive action.<sup>210</sup> On 3 January General Vokes reported to General Allfrey, the G.O.C. 5th Corps, that the month-long advance from the Moro to the Riccio had cost his Division casualties of 176 officers and 2163 other ranks killed, wounded or missing. An unusually high incidence of sickness had further depleted his strength by 1617 all ranks.† The arrival of reinforcements amounting to 150 officers and 2258 other ranks partly met these deficiencies, which were further reduced by the return to duty of many of the sick. On 31 December, however, the 1st Division was still about 1050 below strength.<sup>212</sup> In spite of replacements the G.O.C. found it no longer possible to maintain what he termed "the sharp fighting edge."<sup>213</sup> Every one of his infantry battalions had suffered 50% casualties in its rifle companies; and it was by the

\* The shortage existed only at the Army level, and was due mainly to transport difficulties in bringing stocks forward from Sicily.<sup>208</sup>

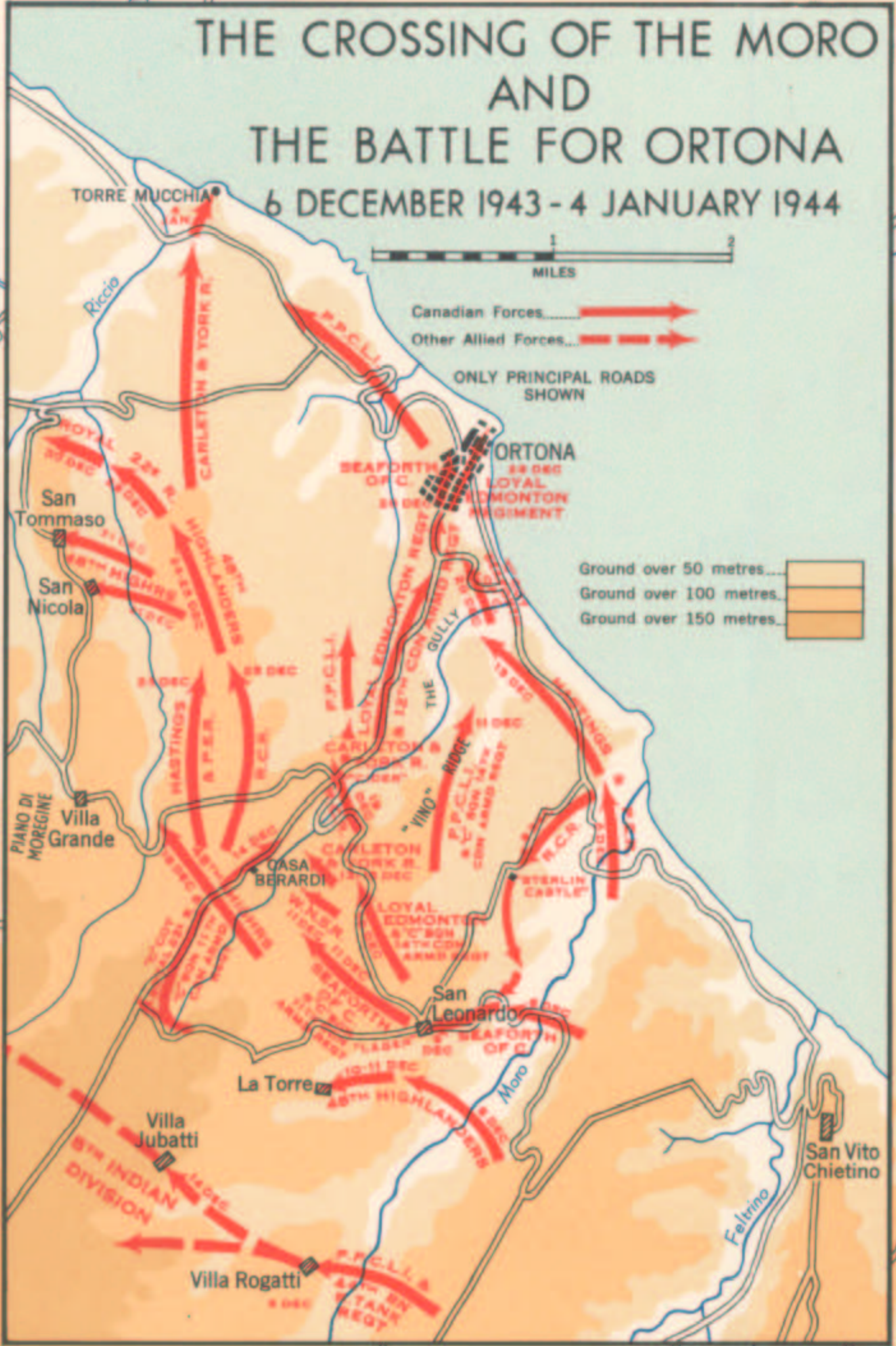
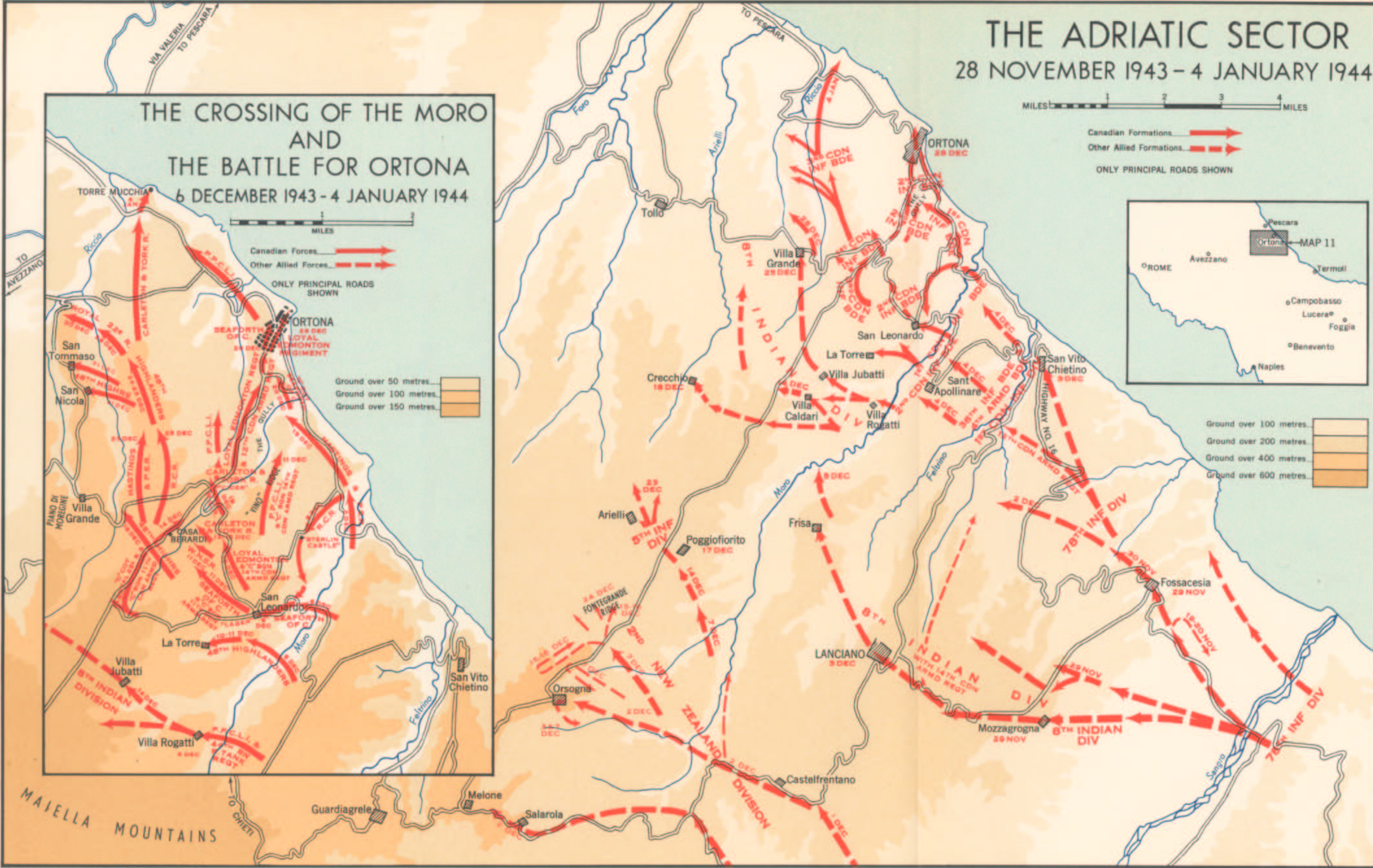
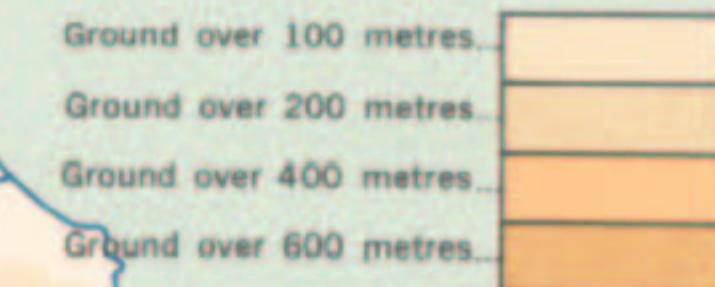
† During the third week of December, when the majority of the infantry battalions were being subjected to continuous intense shelling and mortaring, cases of battle exhaustion (which were included in sickness statistics) rose to 20% of all casualties.<sup>211</sup>

# THE ADRIATIC SECTOR

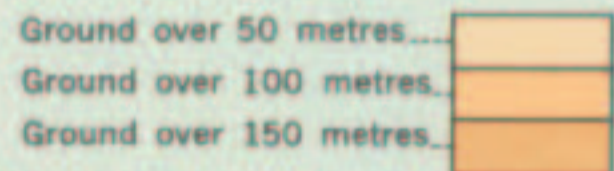
28 NOVEMBER 1943 - 4 JANUARY 1944



Canadian Formations...  
Other Allied Formations...  
ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN



Canadian Forces...  
Other Allied Forces...  
ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN



MAIELLA MOUNTAINS

rifle strength of its battalions that the condition of the Division had to be judged. Units in contact with the enemy could not readily absorb large numbers of reinforcements, no matter how well trained. "Without a pause for reorganization", declared Vokes, ". . . the offensive power of an infantry division is bound to become spent, not for lack of offensive spirit, but simply because the quality of offensive team play within the rifle companies had deteriorated."<sup>214</sup>

"We could not do everything at once", writes Lord Montgomery in reviewing the tasks which confronted Allied arms in the autumn and early winter of 1943.<sup>215</sup> The three months which followed the launching of "Husky" had seen spectacular gains-Sicily captured, Italy knocked out of the war, and Naples and the Foggia airfields fallen into Allied hands. But thereafter the tempo slowed. As 1943 drew to a close our land forces in Italy began to feel increasingly the effects of the preparations for the approaching invasion of Western Europe. Thus it happened that at a time when the early capture of Rome might still have been made possible by allocating greatly increased resources to the 15th Army Group, men, material and shipping were being diverted from the Mediterranean Theatre, and the Eighth Army found itself competing for import facilities with the build-up of the Strategic Air Forces at Foggia (see above, p. 272).<sup>216</sup>

At the turn of the year Allied forces in the Mediterranean further contributed to the forthcoming campaign in the West by releasing to it two of their outstanding commanders. On 8 January General Eisenhower handed over command of Allied Force Headquarters to General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson and left for the United Kingdom to assume his duties as Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force. On New Year's Day General Montgomery, who had been chosen to command the 21st Army Group, was succeeded as G.O.C.-in-C. Eighth Army by Lieut.-General Sir Oliver Leese, in whose 30th Corps the 1st Division had fought in Sicily.

"We have been successful in everything we have undertaken", Montgomery wrote in his farewell message to the Eighth Army. The Canadian contribution, no mean one, was summed up by General Vokes in his report on the Ortona battle: "We smashed the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division and we gave the 1st German Parachute Division a mauling which it will long remember."



## CHAPTER XII

### THE ORTONA SALIENT, JANUARY - APRIL 1944

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#### The Background of Operation "Timberwolf"

WHEN the decision was reached to dispatch Canadian forces to the Mediterranean, it was generally understood both in London and in Ottawa that on the completion of Operation "Husky" they would be sent back to the United Kingdom, to bring to the First Canadian Army the benefit of the battle experience which they had gained. A memorandum issued by the planning section of Allied Force Headquarters on 28 June (the day on which the Fast Assault Convoy bearing the majority of the Canadian troops left Greenock) listed the 1st Canadian Division and the 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade among the formations provisionally earmarked for return to the United Kingdom as part of the build-up for a cross-Channel operation in 1944.<sup>1</sup> Other selections were made later, however, and as we have seen the 1st Division and its attached troops proceeded directly from Sicily to operations in Italy.

By the middle of October the question of the Division's future role had become a matter of concern to General Simonds, who was anxious to move his reinforcement base from North Africa to the Italian mainland if his forces were to remain in Italy for the winter. In a signal to General McNaughton he requested a "definition of broad policy in respect to future employment of 1 Canadian Division and 1 Canadian Armoured Brigade in this theatre indicating whether we are to winter here or probable date of move elsewhere." He also questioned the continuing validity of the directive which governed the operations of the Division. This had authorized employment in operations "from or based on North Africa", and was qualified by a cable in which the Canadian Government had extended such authorization to apply to operations across the Strait of Messina and in the toe of Italy. The G.O.C. considered that neither of these conditions now applied; and he had learned further that General Montgomery had received no information as to the future of the 1st Canadian Division.<sup>2</sup>

General McNaughton confirmed next day that the operations then being undertaken by the 1st Canadian Division and the Army Tank Brigade were

within the scope of Simonds' directive. As to the Division's future role he answered, "15 Army Gp should by now be fully informed of Operation 'Timberwolf.'"<sup>3</sup> This allusion conveyed little to Simonds; and if the 15th Army Group was indeed in the picture the news had not yet reached the Eighth Army. On 16 October Montgomery signalled McNaughton: "Have never heard of 'Timberwolf.'"<sup>4</sup>

Operation "Timberwolf", the project whose existence had been thus well concealed, had been in process of development for more than two months. At the beginning of August Canada's Minister of National Defence, then in England, had visited in turn the British Prime Minister and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and had told them of his desire to send a Canadian Corps Headquarters and additional Canadian troops to the Mediterranean. In a discussion with General McNaughton on 5 August Colonel Ralston said that he had advocated such a course on the grounds of "(a) giving a Canadian Corps H.Q. training, (b) battle experience for additional Canadian troops, (c) morale of Canadian Army in U.K., (d) morale of Canadian people", and he reported that General Sir Alan Brooke\* had received the proposal favourably.<sup>6</sup>

The matter was raised more formally in consultations held in the Chateau Frontenac, before the "Quadrant" Conference opened. Mr. Churchill promised that the Combined Chiefs of Staff would give the question full and sympathetic consideration, but at the conclusion of the "Quadrant" meetings he was unable to hold out much hope that the request could be granted. The United Kingdom was under obligation to bring back certain formations from the Mediterranean, and the sending of more Canadians to Italy would mean that a correspondingly greater number of British forces must be withdrawn. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister promised to pursue the matter further, and on 31 August he cabled his Deputy (Mr. Attlee) and the Chiefs of Staff in London in the following terms:

*Most Secret*

1. At my meeting with Canadian War Committee today a strong desire was expressed that a second Canadian Division should be despatched to the Mediterranean area as soon as possible. I understand that C.I.G.S. is fully in picture as the result of his talks with General Stuart.

2. Pray let me know as soon as possible what can be done. We can then put our request to the Canadian Government in the usual way. 31. 8. 43 (Sgd) W.S.C.

The British Chiefs of Staff found the proposal impracticable, and on 14 September the C.I.G.S. told General McNaughton that the existence of firm commitments for the build-up of United States forces in Britain meant that

\* On the day following this discussion, however, McNaughton had a talk with Field Marshal Sir John Dill (head of the British Joint Staff Mission in Washington), and afterwards recorded his conclusion that "the chance of a Canadian Corps and additional divisions being really required in the Mediterranean is remote."<sup>5</sup>

shipping would not be available for the transfer to Italy of an additional Canadian division and Corps Troops.<sup>7</sup> This decision was confirmed by a telegram from Mr. Churchill to Mr. King on 19 September conveying a negative reply to the Canadian Government's request, on the grounds that the movement of Canadian troops to Italy would "involve disturbing decisions taken as recent[ly] as Quebec Conference without any military justification which was not valid when Conference took place."<sup>8</sup>

The Canadian Government did not yet give up hope (its experience in getting the 1st Division to the Mediterranean had shown what may be accomplished by perseverance). On the last day of September the Canadian High Commissioner, Mr. Vincent Massey, asked Mr. Churchill whether the British decision might be reconsidered, and was told: "I will have another try."<sup>9</sup>

This the Prime Minister did to good effect. On 7 October the C.I.G.S. informed General McNaughton that the question of building up Canadian troops in the Mediterranean to a Corps had been reopened, and that whereas it had been negatived before because of inability to provide shipping, it had now been re-examined on the basis of an interchange of personnel only. Sir Alan said that the project to bring back three British divisions to the United Kingdom had been enlarged to include additionally the 30th Corps Headquarters and Corps Troops, and the 7th Armoured Division. These formations would leave their equipment, and he had recommended to the Prime Minister that a Canadian Corps Headquarters and Corps Troops and a Canadian division should be sent to Italy, and should be equipped from this source. There was some discussion whether the division to be sent should be armoured or infantry. Brooke favoured an armoured formation, a preference which was endorsed by McNaughton, for to remove an infantry division would leave the 2nd Canadian Corps in the United Kingdom with one infantry and two armoured divisions, a very unbalanced grouping.\* General McNaughton then nominated the Headquarters of the 1st Canadian Corps, commanded by Lieut.-General H. D. G. Crerar, and the 5th Canadian Armoured Division; Corps Troops would be selected up to the capacity of the shipping available.<sup>12</sup>

Five days elapsed before approval came from Mr. Churchill. On 12 October the Canadian Government received his formal suggestion for an exchange of troops which would result in a Canadian Corps being formed in the Mediterranean theatre.<sup>13</sup> As soon as this message reached Ottawa the Cabinet War Committee met to consider a reply. Although, as we have seen, there had been repeated requests to the United Kingdom authorities

\* It may be noted that a month earlier the V.C.I.G.S., Lieut.-Gen. Sir Archibald Nye, had told McNaughton that if an additional Canadian division were dispatched to Italy it would in all likelihood be an infantry division, as there was already in the Mediterranean theatre more armour than was appropriate.<sup>10</sup> Later Montgomery was to express similar views to the G.O.C. 5th Canadian Armoured Division, declaring that no role existed for an armoured division in Italy.<sup>11</sup>

for the invitation which had at last been extended, the decision which the Canadian Government now had to make was a critical one. The fact had to be faced that acceptance of the proposal might entail dissolution of the Army Headquarters\* and the termination of General McNaughton's command, for there was no assurance that the corps sent to Italy could be returned to Britain in time for the Army to be reconstituted for major offensive operations in North-West Europe.<sup>14</sup> The Government realized that it would have to face public criticism on the score that it was breaking up the Army and depriving the Army Commander of his command. But these considerations were overridden by the recognition of the value of providing urgently needed battle experience for more Canadian troops and the importance, from the point of view of Canadian-American relations, of Canadian armed forces playing something more than a purely defensive role. The Committee agreed that Mr. Churchill's proposal should be accepted, and a telegram containing the approval of the Canadian Government was dispatched to London that same night.<sup>15</sup>

In the course of McNaughton's discussions with Ralston and Stuart when "Timberwolf" was first proposed, it became evident that the divergence of view between the Army Commander and the Canadian Government over the question of the operational employment of Canadian troops had reached a critical stage. The G.O.C.-in-C. had told the Minister of National Defence that "if operations were to continue in the Mediterranean, he unhesitatingly supported developing a Canadian Corps in North Africa. . .", but only if it could be assumed that the Canadian contingent "would return to the Canadian Army in the U.K. before the date† set for a major offensive on the Continent."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, McNaughton's record of these conversations reveals that the C.G.S. "favoured building up Canadian Forces in Africa to a corps . . . even if there was no certainty that they could be brought back". This would make the Army Headquarters redundant as an operational command, and Stuart proposed that it might be combined with C.M.H.Q. to administer all Canadian troops in the European and North African Theatres, a course for which (according to McNaughton) "both he and the Minister indicated throughout the conversations a strong predilection".<sup>17</sup>

To McNaughton, under whose leadership the First Canadian Army had grown to maturity, "the important thing for Canada at the end of the war was to have her Army together under the control of a Canadian."<sup>18</sup> Asked by Colonel Ralston for his advice to the Cabinet War Committee, he reiterated that as a matter of principle he "was opposed to the dispersion

\* This would not necessarily be the case, and indeed proved not to be so. The British Eighth Army provided but one of many instances of the troops of an Army not all having to be of the same nationality as its headquarters.

† At that time it seemed probable that "Overlord" might not be mounted before September 1944.

of the Canadian Army, but in this connection an expedition to the Middle East on the same basis as 1 Cdn Div did not necessarily imply dispersion. If the Canadian Government decided upon dispersion, then [he] thought it would be wise to put someone in control who believed in it."<sup>19</sup> This fundamental difference of opinion certainly contributed to producing his retirement before the end of the year.

### Planning for the Movement

Preparations for "Timberwolf" went ahead rapidly. As soon as Canadian acceptance was received, the British Chiefs of Staff notified the Combined Chiefs of Staff and General Eisenhower of their intention to exchange a British armoured division in the Mediterranean for a similar Canadian formation from the United Kingdom. This arrangement, they pointed out, would provide a battle-experienced armoured division for operations in North-West Europe, and would meet the Canadian desire to form a Canadian Corps in the Mediterranean. Preliminary examination indicated that the effect upon the build-up for "Overlord" would be negligible.<sup>20</sup> Subsequent signals gave details of the units to be dispatched, and asked for an immediate decision as to their destinations.<sup>21</sup> These communications brought from General Eisenhower a reply qualified in its enthusiasm. He agreed that the proposed movement could "be accomplished in shipping already scheduled to carry back British and US Divisions without serious dislocation", and that although the dispersal of ships for disembarkation at various Mediterranean ports would produce administrative complications, such could be overcome. The Allied Commander-in-Chief continued:

While the arrival of these troops at this time is likely to cause us considerable embarrassment. General Alexander advises me, and I agree, that, appreciating the political considerations which may be involved, we accept the Canadian Corps Headquarters, Armoured Division and non-divisional troops. In view of our total build-up we shall eventually be glad to have this HO.

The aspect which causes me most concern is the pressure I anticipate will be put upon me to get these troops into action at an early date...<sup>22</sup>

Although General Alexander had bowed to the inevitable in agreeing to accept Canadian formations, his views on the matter were clearly set forth in a signal to the C.I.G.S.:

The proposed move of the Canadian Armoured Division has come as a complete surprise to me. We already have as much armour in the Mediterranean as we can usefully employ in Italy. I should have preferred another Canadian Infantry Division. Arrangements for the relief of the Seventh Armoured Division by First Armoured Division are already in hand. I do not want another Corps Headquarters at this stage. I shall be grateful if I can be consulted in future before matters of such importance are agreed upon. These decisions upset my order of battle which in turn affect my plans for battle.<sup>23</sup>

At C.M.H.Q. planning for "Timberwolf" proceeded expeditiously and smoothly. There was no time to lose, for the first convoy was scheduled to sail in the last week of October. On 8 October, before "Timberwolf" was finally approved, General McNaughton had called together eight senior officers for what was described as a "movement conference". He announced that he had just agreed with the War Office that the Canadian Army would ship to the Mediterranean 25,000 troops on 25 October (personnel were to be ready by the 20th), 10,000 troops in November, 4000 in December, and the remainder as required in January 1944. This would provide "a balanced Corps", which would include the 1st Canadian Division, the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade, and one Army Group Royal Artillery, together with hospitals on an appropriate scale and such rear echelon units as might be required. The General made it clear that the detailed composition of this Canadian Corps had been left entirely in the hands of the Canadian Army.<sup>24</sup> Next day with some of his senior officers he attended a conference at the War Office, and presented a list of the units which it was proposed to send in the October convoy. "Timberwolf" was adopted as the code name for the move.<sup>25</sup>

It was highly important to maintain the closest security, for although the hazards of Mediterranean convoy movement had been greatly reduced since the days of Operation "Husky", to the menace of the submarine had been recently added that of the aerial glider-bomb.\* Accordingly, planning at Canadian Military Headquarters in the early stages was restricted to a very small group of officers, who paid for their exclusive information by giving up a considerable amount of sleep. Special warnings were issued against assuming that all War Office officials were fully informed, and even at H.Q. 1st Canadian Corps four days elapsed before General Crerar told his two senior staff officers of the contemplated move.<sup>29</sup> Security regulations issued with the main movement order prescribed the restrictions to be placed upon all means of communication by personnel after they had been warned for embarkation, the removal of identifying unit and formation badges and patches from uniforms, the marking of baggage by non-revealing serial numbers, and the avoidance of conversation with stevedores or other civilians at the ports. The instructions ended on an uncompromising note: "No units, formations or individuals will give farewell †parties."<sup>31</sup>

\* The first attack on Allied shipping by glider-bombs (radio-controlled winged missiles, launched and guided from aircraft) was made on 25 August 1943, off the north-west corner of Spain. Two days later, in the same area, the Canadian destroyer *Athabaskan* was badly damaged by a glider-bomb.<sup>26</sup> On 8 September the Italian flagship *Roma*, when leaving Spezia to surrender to the Allies, was sunk by Luftwaffe glider-bombs,<sup>27</sup> and on 16 September, during Operation "Avalanche", a direct hit from the same new weapon disabled H.M.S. *Warspite*.<sup>28</sup>

† Interpreting this injunction with commendable ingenuity, the 5th Armoured Brigade Headquarters held a *housewarming* party, and afterwards reported, "Security seems to be excellent-all local guests seemed to be of the opinion that we are to be here for the winter. The party was quite a success."<sup>30</sup>

While negotiations were still proceeding between the United Kingdom and Canadian Governments, the C.M.H.Q. planners were busily engaged in drafting "Special Instruction No. 1 ", which contained the detailed information regarding the move. The job was completed on 12 October, and at 4:10 on the following afternoon word came from the War Office that Canada had accepted the British Government's request and that the cable to Allied Force Headquarters announcing "Timberwolf" had been signed.<sup>32</sup> This was the green light signal for the operation to begin; within the hour dispatch-riders were speeding on their way from Cockspur Street to the G.H.Q. and L. of C. units spread across Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire.<sup>33</sup>

More than 200 units and detachments were to take part in "Timberwolf", the order of battle comprising four main groups: the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, 1st Canadian Corps Troops, elements of Army Troops, and elements of General Headquarters and Line of Communication Troops. The main fighting formation was the 5th Armoured Division, numbering close to 15,000. It was composed of the 5th Armoured Brigade and the 11th Infantry Brigade, and a full complement of supporting arms and services. This, the senior of Canada's two armoured divisions, had been organized in Canada in the spring of 1941, and had reached the United Kingdom late the same year. Major-General C. R. S. Stein had succeeded the Division's first G.O.C., Major-General E. W. Sansom, in January 1943, but in mid-October a medical board found him unfit for further overseas service.<sup>34</sup> Major-General Simonds replaced him, and the Division moved to Italy under the temporary command of its Commander Royal Artillery, Brigadier R. O. G. Morton.<sup>35</sup>

It will be recognized that although the organization of a division (which is the largest formation in an army to have a permanent composition) enabled it to provide for its own extensive needs as fully as possible while carrying out its allotted role, the need for preserving the mobility requisite to a fighting formation placed limits upon the size and complexity of its establishment. Accordingly it was standard practice for certain units of a specialist nature (such as heavy and medium artillery, light anti-aircraft artillery, and various survey, engineer, signal and armoured units, together with appropriate service units required to ensure proper maintenance) not to be included within the divisional formation, but to be organized as "Corps Troops" or "Army Troops", available for temporary allotment to subordinate formations as occasion demanded. In addition to these non-divisional troops there were certain specialized formations and units under the command of General Headquarters, which were normally sub-allotted by G.H.Q. to armies to assist them in their tasks, or employed at the base and along the Lines of Communication.

The 1st Canadian Corps Troops, approximately 8500 strong, comprised the Corps Headquarters and the extensive array of units required to support and maintain a corps of two divisions in the field. The Canadian Armoured Corps contributed to the order of battle the 1st Armoured Car Regiment (The Royal Canadian Dragoons); the Royal Canadian Artillery supplied the 1st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment and the 1st Survey Regiment; the Royal Canadian Engineers a field park and three field companies; of the remaining arms and services the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (which provided two corps troops composite companies, a corps transport company and a motor ambulance convoy), the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals and the Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps were the most strongly represented.<sup>36</sup>

The bulk of the 3700 Army Troops selected to accompany the 1st Canadian Corps to the Mediterranean was made up of the 1st Army Group R.C.A., which comprised the 1st, 2nd and 5th Medium Regiments and the 11th Army Field Regiment, together with requisite signal, ordnance and supply and transport units. Also included were two dental units-No. 3 Company Canadian Dental Corps to look after the needs of Army and Corps Troops, and No. 8 Company to serve with the 5th Armoured Division. Among the 6600 G.H.Q. and L. of C. troops were Nos. 1 and 14 Canadian General Hospitals (of 600 and 1200 beds respectively), certain other medical units, a base reinforcement depot with four reinforcement battalions, and a number of miscellaneous administrative units and detachments. Two increments to expand the Canadian Sections of G.H.Q. 1st and 2nd Echelons already serving in the theatre of operations completed the "Timberwolf" order of battle.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that the troops proceeding to the Mediterranean would come immediately under British command necessitated action by the legal branch of Canadian Military Headquarters. As long as they were in the United Kingdom, Canadian troops were in the position of "serving together" with British forces. This meant (under the terms of the Visiting Forces (British Commonwealth) Act 1933) that control of all matters of discipline, training and internal administration of Canadian forces in Britain rested with the Government of Canada. It was now necessary for a properly constituted military authority-in this case General McNaughton-to issue a directive which would give the G.O.C.-in-C. 15th Army Group powers of command and discipline over the troops concerned. Similar action had been taken with respect to the 1st Division and the Army Tank Brigade for the Sicilian operations. McNaughton's Order of Detail of 20 October placed all Canadian Military Forces in the Mediterranean theatre "in combination with all the Naval, Military and Air Forces ... of the British Commonwealth ...



serving in or based upon or operating from the Continent of Africa ..."\* from the time of their embarkation in the United Kingdom.<sup>38</sup>

In the initial discussions on "Timberwolf" the War Office had made the condition that the 5th Armoured Division would take over the equipment of the British 7th Armoured Division, which it was replacing in Italy, and the rest of the Canadian Corps units that of the 30th Corps. It was agreed that the Canadians would carry with them only their personal arms and equipment (including Bren guns and two-inch mortars).<sup>39</sup> This problem of meeting their needs, especially in vehicles, was to cause considerable trouble before it was finally settled. From the first A.F.H.Q. regarded the War Office proposal as impracticable. In explaining his inability to guarantee getting the Canadian "troops into action at an early date", General Eisenhower notified the War Office that the equipment being released in Sicily by the 30th Corps and its divisions was "already heavily depleted and almost fully mortgaged as reserves for the British forces now engaged on the mainland." Equipment earmarked for these formations was being imported as fast as port capacity would allow, so that even if additional shipments were made for the purpose of re-equipping Canadians, they "would remain in the ports undischarged."<sup>40</sup>

General Eisenhower further pointed out that the equipment of the 7th Armoured Division did "*not* correspond with that of Canadian Armoured Divisions", and that a period of training would be essential to accustom the Canadians to the new types, particularly of wireless equipment. There was also the consideration that for administrative reasons a large proportion of the non-divisional troops would have to be disembarked in North Africa, with the prospect of a long wait before moving to Italy. Priorities of transportation had to be determined strictly on an operational basis, and reinforcements to units already in the field, and service troops required to operate the extended lines of communication, had first claim on available shipping across the Mediterranean. General Eisenhower's message concluded:

I have elaborated these points because I would like it made clear in advance that necessarily there will be a considerable delay in equipping the Canadians and bringing them into action.<sup>41</sup>

This naturally disturbed General McNaughton, and he expressed to the D.C.I.G.S., Lieut.-General R. M. Weeks, his serious concern "at the

\* The directive to Crerar empowered him to withdraw the Canadian force from "in combination" if he received orders that did not in his opinion "represent a practicable operation of war or are otherwise at variance with the policy of the Government of Canada on any matter; provided always that by so doing an opportunity is not lost nor any part of the Allied force endangered." He also had the right of reference to the Canadian Government (through the Senior Combatant Officer) in respect to any matter involving the forces under his command, but only if representations made to the Officer Commanding the Combined Force (in this case the G.O.C.-in-C. 15th Army Group) had failed to secure appropriate action.

thought of his troops being scattered about the Mediterranean without equipment."<sup>42</sup> The War Office, however, took a somewhat brighter view of the situation, and McNaughton was assured that there was a good supply of equipment in or on the way to North Africa.\* If necessary it was "prepared to send a complete divisional equipment from here to Sicily or to wherever 5 Cdn Armd Div is located."<sup>44</sup> There the matter rested pending General Crerar's arrival in Algiers.

The decision to enlarge the Canadian force in the Mediterranean necessitated a review of the constitution and status of the Canadian administrative staff there. By the middle of October Canadian troops in the theatre were widely dispersed. The 1st Division and units of the Armoured Brigade were fighting in the hills about Campobasso; the Canadian Section, G.H.Q. 1st Echelon had just moved from Sicily to Santo Spirito (see p. 697), near Bari, the location of Headquarters 15th Army Group; while the Canadian Section, G.H.Q. 2nd Echelon, the Base Reinforcement Depot and No. 14 Canadian General Hospital were still near Philippeville in North Africa. The difficulties caused by these widespread dispositions, already great, would be multiplied by the arrival of the balance of the 1st Canadian Corps, particularly in view of the impending problems of re-equipment.

The situation could best be met by concentrating all the Canadian administrative services and maintaining them under a single direction. As the first step Brigadier A. W. Beament, Deputy Adjutant General at C.M.H.Q., who, it will be recalled, had already gained practical experience in the Mediterranean theatre during the preparations for Operation "Husky", was appointed Officer-in-Charge, Canadian Section, G.H.Q. 1st Echelon. Lt.-Col. Tow became Colonel in Charge of Administration.<sup>45</sup> The question then arose as to the most suitable location for Brigadier Beament's Section. Up to now it had been attached to Headquarters 15th Army Group, an arrangement which had meant for Colonel Tow as Senior Officer (the designation was later changed to Officer-in-Charge) much air travel between Italy, Sicily and North Africa. A change in General Eisenhower's administrative system furnished a satisfactory solution.

Once the Fifth and Eighth Armies were firmly established in Italy, the resultant lengthening in the lines of communication had emphasized the need for a major reorganization which would allow closer co-ordination in the administration and supply of the Allied Forces as a whole, and also facilitate

\* In a letter to Eisenhower's Chief Administrative Officer, Weeks denied that British equipment was not interchangeable with Canadian and queried A.F.H.Q.'s inability to unload shipments sent out from the United Kingdom. "The point is really, do you know what you want? I can well believe that with all your efforts at re-equipping, with your congestion at ports, and your re-loading problems from North Africa to Italy ... it is difficult to have a clear picture."<sup>43</sup>

dealings with the Italian Government.\* The possibility of moving A.F.H.Q. to Italy had been examined during the summer of 1943, but early in October it was decided that the most satisfactory solution would be to set up an advanced headquarters in the Naples area.<sup>47</sup> The new organization, known as A.F.H.Q. Advanced Administrative Echelon (or more briefly "FLAMBO"), came into being on 24 October 1943. It was headed by Major-General Sir Brian H. Robertson, with the title of Deputy Chief Administrative Officer,† who was to serve as "personal administrative adviser" to the G.O.C.-in-C. 15th Army Group.<sup>48</sup>

A Canadian proposal that Brigadier Beament's Section should remain accredited to Headquarters 15th Army Group, although accommodated physically at "FLAMBO", was accepted by both A.F.H.Q. and 15th Army Group.<sup>49</sup> A confirmatory telegram from General Eisenhower to the War Office agreed that the Senior Officer of the Canadian Section, 1st Echelon should have direct access to the G.O.C.-in-C. 15th Army Group. It would be the Section's function to relieve the Canadian Corps Headquarters to the maximum extent of non-operational tasks; and contact with both Corps and Army Group Headquarters would be made "through frequent visits by Staff and senior Officers instead of permanent liaison detachment."<sup>50</sup>

The arrangement proved satisfactory. No better location could have been chosen for the operations of the Canadian 1st Echelon than Naples. The Section found good office and living space within a few steps of General Robertson's headquarters. Liaison with Headquarters 15th Army Group presented no difficulties while that body remained near Bari, for direct telephone communication was supplemented by several daily flights each way; and when in November it moved to Caserta, it was less than an hour's drive from Naples.<sup>51</sup> The need for Canadian liaison with A.F.H.Q., which did not move from Algiers until July 1944, was met by the appointment of an Assistant Deputy Quartermaster General (Liaison) for the Canadian Section, 1st Echelon. Brigadier N. B. MacDonald, A.D.Q.M.G. at Canadian Military Headquarters, was given the post, and he remained in Algiers with a small technical staff until May 1944. From July until the end of 1944 No. 1 Canadian Liaison Detachment, commanded by Brigadier G. R. Bradbrooke, gave C.M.H.Q. and H.Q. 1st Canadian Corps liaison with Allied Force Headquarters.<sup>52</sup>

The dispatch of additional Canadian forces to Italy necessitated the organization of a second base reinforcement depot of four battalions. It

\* It may be noted that Headquarters 15th Army Group had never assumed the full administrative responsibilities of a Force Headquarters placed between A.F.H.Q. and the forward armies. The executive administrative work was performed on the British side in Sicily, and later in Italy, by Headquarters "Fortbase", an Eighth Army organization, authorized to deal directly with A.F.H.Q.<sup>46</sup>

† The Chief Administrative Officer, Major-General Sir Humfrey M. Gale, remained at A.F.H.Q.

also led to the concentration in the Naples area of the majority of the Canadian reinforcement units in the theatre, thereby ending the delays which a shortage of shipping had imposed upon the movement forward of reinforcements from No. 1 Depot near Philippeville.<sup>53</sup> To control the two Depots and other base units, Headquarters No. 1 Base Reinforcement Group was formed, under the command of Brigadier E. W. Haldenby. The two new headquarters and two of the battalions of No. 2 Depot sailed direct to Naples (Nos. 7 and 8 Battalions spent a month near Algiers en route).<sup>54</sup> The Canadian 2nd Echelon moved from Philippeville early in December, to be followed by No. 1 Depot. By January the entire Canadian Base Reinforcement Group (less No. 4 Battalion, which was operating as an advanced reinforcement base) had been brought together at Avellino, 35 miles east of Naples.<sup>55</sup>

### The 1st Canadian Corps Arrives in Italy

Long before preparations to receive the Canadian Corps had been completed in the Mediterranean theatre the big movement had begun. General Crerar and an advance headquarters of about 30 officers and N.C.Os. made the journey by air, reaching Algiers on 24 October. There they were joined by the remaining groups of the advance party.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile, troop trains were converging on Liverpool, Glasgow and Gourock, carrying the "Timberwolf" units to their waiting ships. Embarkation continued from the 23rd to the 26th, and the ships which had been loaded in the Mersey slipped up the English coast to rendezvous with the main convoy in the Clyde. As the Canadians settled down aboard their transports there came the welcome transition from British wartime rations to shipboard fare; scarcely a single war diary fails to testify eloquently to the excellent food which appeared in seemingly unlimited quantities.

In the evening of the 27th the convoy, consisting of 24 vessels, most of them United States transports, sailed down the Clyde. The course lay well out into the Atlantic, refuting the story\* (circulated as part of the cover plan) that "Timberwolf" was but a training venture with American troops in Northern Ireland.<sup>58</sup> The North Atlantic extended a rude welcome, but after two days the weather cleared. In the late afternoon of 4 November the convoy passed through the Strait of Gibraltar.<sup>59</sup>

\* Amid the general speculation as to the convoy's destination the most popular rumour favoured North Africa. An officers' sweepstake conducted aboard the troopship carrying the 5th Armoured Division Headquarters listed eighteen possible ports of disembarkation, ranging along the African coast from Casablanca to Port Said, and including ports in Sicily and Italy, and even Cagliari in Sardinia.<sup>57</sup>

During the voyage through Atlantic waters there had been various submarine alerts, none of which had materialized in action. Now, at 6:10 p.m. on 6 November, when the convoy had reached a point about twenty miles north of Philippeville, a dozen German torpedo-bombers swept in from the north, diving down to almost mast height to release their bombs and torpedoes. Anti-aircraft fire claimed three enemy aircraft, but at least three ships in the convoy were hit. The S.S. *Santa Elena*, an American liner carrying more than 1800 Canadian personnel, including No. 14 Canadian General Hospital, was struck near the waterline by a torpedo, while about the same time a bomb crashed into the deck near the stern. In spite of the violent initial explosion, which plunged the ship into darkness and quickly produced a decided list, and the thunderous racket of the blazing guns, there was a remarkable absence of panic or confusion. All ranks took their places at the boat stations in an orderly manner, and when "Abandon Ship" sounded, the life-boats were loaded with the 121 nursing sisters and lowered. The crews of these comprised South American waiters and stewards, described as "rather inferior small boatmen", and in many cases, as the craft pulled away from the ship's side, the nurses themselves took the oars. Half a mile away the S.S. *Monterey* (with the bulk of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade aboard) had come to a halt and was standing by to pick up survivors, and the exertions of the nursing sisters reached a climax in an exhausting 50-foot climb by rope ladder up her towering side.<sup>60</sup>

In the meantime the *Santa Elena* had righted herself, but an attempt by a destroyer to come alongside and take off the troops was frustrated by a considerable swell. Life rafts were lowered, and the men went down the ship's side on scramble nets. Paddling was slow work-one raft's equipment consisted of one paddle, one boat-hook and a steel helmet-so that it took an hour to reach the *Monterey*. Fortunately the sea was warm, and a new moon gave good visibility. Shortly after midnight a submarine alarm sent the *Monterey* off to Philippeville, and the remainder of the *Santa Elena's* passengers and crew were rescued by circling United States destroyers. There was no loss of life. The doomed vessel remained afloat for nearly twenty-four hours, but finally sank as she was being towed into Philippeville harbour. "It is a sad sight to see a ship go down at any time", wrote one of the officers who had been aboard her, "but the survivors were not comforted by the thought that their complete kit and equipment, with the exception of the clothes they were wearing, was going down as well."<sup>61</sup> The *Monterey* was prevented by rough weather from berthing at Philippeville, and on orders from the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean she set course for Naples.<sup>62</sup>

Besides the *Santa Elena* two other ships of the convoy, the Dutch *Marnix van St. Aldegonde* and the U.S. destroyer *Beatty*, were lost as a result of the air attack on 6 November. Neither carried Canadians.<sup>63</sup>

The remainder of the voyage was completed without incident; the convoy split up, and on the 8th the troopships bearing the Canadians anchored at Augusta, Palermo and Naples. The majority of the Army and Corps Troops were taken to the Sicilian ports. Headquarters 1st Canadian Corps, part of 4700 troops aboard the *Edmund B. Alexander*, disembarked at Augusta, and the *Argentina* unloaded 3700 at the same port, the men being ferried ashore in landing craft. At Palermo the *James T. Parker* and the *Sloterdijk* discharged another 4000 troops.<sup>64</sup> After spending from one to four days in an American staging camp outside the island's capital, the units in turn moved by rail to various destinations along the eastern seaboard. The journey through the length of Sicily, in trains consisting each of "fourteen box wagons and one passenger coach", was uncomfortable and slow.<sup>65</sup> By the time that movements from Augusta and Palermo had been completed, Canadian troops were distributed along the east coast of Sicily from Messina to Syracuse and as far inland as Lentini on the Catania plain.<sup>66</sup>

The complex arrangements for the reception of the new arrivals and their billeting in accommodation vacated by forces returning to the United Kingdom had been expertly worked out with the British administrative authorities in the base areas by the "A" and "Q" officers in General Crerar's advance headquarters. After discussions at A.F.H.Q. in Algiers the group, which was headed by Brigadier J.F.A. Lister, D.A.Q.M.G. 1st Canadian Corps, flew to Sicily and established temporary headquarters in Catania. On the arrival of the main body, Headquarters 1st Canadian Corps was set up in the San Domenico Palace Hotel at Taormina. This fine hotel, in an old Dominican convent, had been used as a German headquarters and more recently had been occupied successively by the Headquarters of the 50th Division and the 30th Corps; one wing had been destroyed by bombing, but the remainder was in good condition and well furnished. From its windows the Canadians enjoyed the magnificent views of Etna and the Mediterranean which had in peacetime attracted many international tourists.<sup>67</sup>

The transports carrying the 5th Canadian Armoured Division and the G.H.Q. units docked at Naples, the *John Ericsson* and the *Thurston* on 8 November, and the *Monterey* two days later. As the various units disembarked in the badly battered harbour, the bulk of them marched into a large transit area which had been marked out about five miles north of the port, astride the road to Caserta. Here they pitched their tents among the vineyards and olive groves, while Divisional Headquarters was established nearby in the little town of Afragola.<sup>68</sup> The two hospitals and some small attached units went to Caserta, seventeen miles north of Naples.\* Within a month No. 14 General

\* Late in November the dispatch of a fifth Canadian hospital, No. 3 General Hospital (200 beds), was authorized to meet the needs of the growing Canadian base area at Avellino. It arrived from the United Kingdom at the end of January.

Hospital was in operation there with over 1000 beds, and No. 1 had moved across Italy to begin work at Andria, near the Adriatic port of Barletta.<sup>69</sup>

For the "Timberwolf" troops there were a few days of inevitable disorganization and adjustment to their new surroundings; then they settled down to such limited training as was possible in a somewhat restricted area and with only personal weapons and a bare minimum of transport obtained from British Ordnance Depots. The 5th Armoured Division, as we have seen, welcomed a new commander; as did the 11th Infantry Brigade in the person of Brigadier George Kitching (formerly G.S.O. 1 with the 1st Division). Brigadier G.R. Bradbrooke, who had been in command of the 5th Armoured Brigade for the past year, continued in the appointment until the end of February, when he was succeeded by Brigadier J.D.B. Smith. At the end of 1943 Brigadier H. A. Sparling took over from Brigadier Morton as Commander Royal Artillery.

General Simonds' transfer from the 1st Division to gain experience in the command of an armoured division had been suggested to General McNaughton by General Montgomery on the occasion of their meeting in Sicily. The Eighth Army Commander had spoken "in the highest terms of the way in which he [Simonds] had handled the operations under the direction of 30 Corps and Eighth Army and of his possibilities for promotion to command a corps in the future after further experience as a commander on the divisional level."<sup>70</sup> He was succeeded as G.O.C. 1st Canadian Division by Brigadier Vokes, who had earned Montgomery's approval while temporarily commanding the Division in October during General Simonds' illness.<sup>71</sup>

When the question of moving Simonds to an armoured division first arose, General McNaughton had proposed that General Crerar, who had on several occasions applied for operational experience,<sup>72</sup> should take over the 1st Division for a few months.\* The suggestion did not find favour with Ottawa, for at that time the only Canadian armoured divisions were in the United Kingdom, where they apparently were to remain for some time to come, and it was feared that if Simonds were sent back from the Mediterranean to assume command of one of these, the action might be misconstrued by the Canadian public as a reflection on a commander whose work had in fact been thoroughly satisfactory.<sup>73</sup> During the first half of September, when, as a result of the Quebec meetings, it looked as though a Canadian Corps might be formed in the Mediterranean, the matter rested. On the 28th, however, the possibility that "Timberwolf would take place had become so remote that General Stuart cabled McNaughton "that it would seem advisable to discuss with C.I.G.S." the proposal to replace the G.O.C. 1st Canadian

\* Prior to becoming G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps Crerar had not commanded a field formation. He was Senior Combatant Officer at C.M.H.Q. from October 1939 to the following July, and from then until his appointment as Corps Commander in April 1942 he served successively as Vice Chief and Chief of the General Staff.

Division.<sup>74</sup> Two days later, having received word of Simonds' illness, the Army Commander signalled Montgomery asking his acceptance of Crerar to command the 1st Division. "No question of seniority arises", he pointed out, "as Crerar is quite content to serve under any of your Corps Commanders."<sup>75</sup> It seems likely that this message did not reach Montgomery, for no reply was received. However, the prospect for "Timberwolf" had suddenly brightened, and it became apparent that General Crerar would go to the Mediterranean theatre as G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps.

The matter came up again at the end of October, on the occasion of Crerar's first meeting with General Montgomery in Italy. His directive from General McNaughton had enjoined him to request the 15th Army Group that all Canadian formations and units then in Sicily and Italy be brought together under his command in the 1st Canadian Corps at the earliest convenient date. Montgomery, however, frankly stated that he did not want another corps set up in Italy, and proposed instead that Crerar should take over command of the 1st Canadian Division and turn his back, for the time being, on Headquarters 1st Canadian Corps and the problems of equipping the Corps Troops and the 5th Canadian Armoured Division. But the circumstances in which General Crerar might have become G.O.C. 1st Canadian Division had changed materially during the past month, and the proposal was one which his present instructions did not permit him to accept.<sup>76</sup>

### Equipping the 5th Armoured Division

The Canadians did not stay long in the Naples area. On 15 November General Simonds wrote to General Crerar, "I am most anxious to get the troops away from this sort of suburban 'built up' area as quickly as I can. It is a very poor training area, the squalid slums are depressing and constitute a very bad atmosphere in which to condition troops." A suitable concentration area had been selected at Altamura, 28 miles south-west of Ban; but before the Division could move, it had to take over the vehicles and equipment of the British 7th Armoured Division. The transfer was made during the third week of November, and in the process the misgivings with which Canadian units had parted with their vehicles before leaving England proved fully justified.

Most of the equipment (except tanks, which were to be supplied by Headquarters 15th Army Group under a different plan) changed hands directly between the units concerned, the 11th Canadian Brigade taking over from the 131st Brigade, and the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade from the 22nd Armoured Brigade. It was soon seen that there were problems of establishment to be settled. Differences existed between the scales and types



of equipment as prescribed for Canadian armoured divisions and their British counterparts in the Middle East,\* and the situation was further complicated by the fact that the 7th Armoured Division during its many months of fighting with the Eighth Army had devised substitutions and improvements in the official scale of both personnel and vehicles to such an extent that Canadians trying to make an accounting during the take over reported despairingly that "the 'Desert Rats' have a War Establishment all their own."<sup>78</sup> Thus, in many cases the vehicles received from the British formations were found to be in excess of normal establishments, and the Canadian units were unable to man these with their existing driver strength.

There was more serious ground for complaint, however, with respect to the type and the condition of the vehicles. In the first place, the proportion of transport with two-wheel drive was unsatisfactorily high. Such equipment might well serve on the dry and level desert; but the prospect of facing the mountain grades and winter mud of Italy without their accustomed four-wheel drives was as displeasing to the units of the 5th Division as it had been to those of the infantry division when re-equipping for Operation "Baytown".† There was greater dissatisfaction over the unserviceable condition of a large number of the vehicles relinquished by the 7th Armoured Division. Diaries of the Canadian units concerned are uniformly critical of the lack of battleworthiness or even roadworthiness of their acquisitions; indeed the 7th Division's own published history remarks that some of its "vehicles had been with the division since the previous February [1943], when they had been obtained second hand from 4th Indian Division. Several thousand miles, mostly over open desert, had not subsequently improved them."<sup>80</sup> "It is true", wrote General Simonds to the Canadian Corps Commander, "that the 7 Armd Div landed at Salerno with this same transport, but they had been told that providing their vehicles were good for 2000 miles they should not worry. Most of these same vehicles have now done well over 3000 miles since landing."<sup>81</sup> To make matters worse, it appears that a natural spirit of camaraderie among the veterans of the desert fighting had led to extensive unofficial "swapping" of the 7th Armoured Division's better vehicles for the worst in other units and formations of the Eighth Army, these latter finishing up in the hands of the Canadians.<sup>82</sup> There was an almost complete lack of tools, and the problem of the supply of spare parts promised to be seriously complicated by the discovery that the resourceful mechanics of the Eighth

\* One important difference in the scale of transport arose from the fact that the Sherman tanks of the 7th Armoured Division required a greater bulk of ammunition and petrol than the Ram tanks on which the establishment of the Canadian Division was based.<sup>77</sup>

† Experience in the 1st Division had shown that two-wheel drive vehicles could be pulled *out* of trouble if a *sufficient* proportion of four-wheel drives were available. In a letter to 1st Echelon early in December, General Simonds gave his opinion that unless at least fifty per cent of its transport were four-wheel drive, the 5th Armoured Division would "be more or less immobilized whenever the ground is wet."<sup>79</sup>

Army had been in the habit of "cannibalizing" transport of different makes, in order to produce from two or more broken-down vehicles one that was reasonably roadworthy.

There was little time to effect running repairs on the badly worn equipment, for almost immediately General Simonds' units began to cross the peninsula to Altamura. This move was described by the officer in charge of an accompanying Canadian Light Aid Detachment as "outstanding for the number of breakdowns which swamped the Ordnance recovery services.... Of the magnitude of the recovery problem only this need be said: the 11 Cdn Inf Bde R.E.M.E. facilities worked for over three weeks to recover broken-down vehicles to the Altamura area."<sup>83</sup>

Not much could be done to remedy this disconcerting situation other than to press continuously for replacement by new or well-conditioned transport of the type with which Canadian formations had been equipped up to that time. General Simonds carried the matter through his channels in the field to Headquarters 15th Army Group, while, on instructions from General Crerar, Brigadier MacDonald made strong representations to Allied Force Headquarters in Algiers. The result in both instances was nil; as reported to Simonds by a representative of General Alexander's headquarters: "The vehicles simply do not exist in the Mediterranean theatre."<sup>84</sup>

Arising out of a visit by the Minister of National Defence to the 5th Armoured Division on 2 December (during the course of which Colonel Ralston inspected part of the recently acquired equipment) a proposal was put forward that some of the 3500 new Canadian vehicles which were on their way from the United Kingdom to equip the 1st Canadian Corps Troops might be used to meet the needs of the armoured division.<sup>85</sup> The Corps Commander, however, took a firm stand against any such action. On his arrival at Algiers he had discovered that the original agreement reached with the War Office, by which the Canadian Corps Troops should be re-equipped from the 30th Corps, was without practical basis, as indeed General Eisenhower had already pointed out.<sup>86</sup> The British Corps had landed in Sicily with many of its units equipped on only assault or light scales, and these had not subsequently received their full normal issue of vehicles and stores. Vehicle mortality and deterioration during "Husky" had outstripped programmes of replacement and repair, and stocks remaining at the conclusion of the campaign had been turned in for overhaul and dispatch to meet the needs of the Eighth Army\* on the mainland.<sup>88</sup> A.F.H.O could make no stocks of vehicles or other equipment in North Africa available to replace this almost total deficiency. Indeed, Canadian staff

\* A major factor of the serious vehicle situation existing in the Eighth Army during September and October was the necessity, occasioned by the absence of a Base Workshop organization in Italy, of sending all worn engines back to Egypt for reconditioning—a round journey of 4000 miles.<sup>87</sup>

officers in conversation with their British "opposite numbers" at Algiers and in Sicily had found a marked lack of enthusiasm towards the forthcoming arrival of the Canadian Corps in the Mediterranean. "Their reaction was one of surprise that we should be coming at all, and incredulity that we should be coming almost completely unequipped."<sup>89</sup>

To meet the situation A.F.H.Q. asked the War Office to provide from the United Kingdom the vehicles required to equip the 1st Canadian Corps Troops. The request was passed to C.M.H.Q. "on the grounds that if complete vehicles are to be from the U.K., Canadian types would be more suitable for [Canadian] units."<sup>90</sup> C.M.H.Q. had already undertaken to provide vehicles for the returning British units, and the 3350 which General McNaughton immediately made available were credited against this commitment.<sup>91</sup>

This was the transport which General Crerar was determined should be held intact for equipping his Corps units, in spite of the difficulties which were being encountered by the 5th Armoured Division. He set forth his reasons for this decision in a letter to Brigadier Beament on 11 December:

The basis we are now working on is that agreed to by Gale with me in Algiers and on the conditions which Gale assured me obtained, i.e., that A.F.H.Q. had the means available, in this theatre, adequately to equip 5 Cdn Armd Div. but that Corps Troops would need to obtain their M.T. from the U.K. I desire to stand on that policy until it is proved, quite definitely, that it is impossible for A.F.H.Q. to produce for Simonds the . . . vehicles, weapons, etc., which I was assured could be made available. There is danger in switching M.T. from Corps Troops to 5 Cdn Armd Div because the result may well be that a reason can thus be found to delay the formation of 1 Cdn Corps owing to the non-equipment of one or more Corps Troops units which Army or Army Group may then say are essential for the purpose.<sup>92</sup>

To General Simonds he wrote:

Gale is fully aware of the political importance attached to the re-equipment of the Canadian formations . . . as well as knowing the military implications. He is also in a position to do what is required about the situation.<sup>93</sup>

The Corps Commander had decided wisely. At the end of the year Simonds was to report: "Eighth Army have 'turned on the heat' for us and controlled stores to complete our W.E. \* are flowing through fairly well. We have been given 97 new engines for vehicles ...."<sup>94</sup>

Delivery of tanks to the 5th Armoured Division encountered the almost inevitable delay. When the initial proposal was made at the War Office to equip the Canadians from the returning British armoured division, General McNaughton had stipulated that the 5th Division should be provided with Sherman tanks fitted with 75-mm. guns.† Given the choice of accepting

\* War Establishment.

† At that time McNaughton had told the C.I.G.S. that "we had no confidence in British types with 2-pounder or 6-pounder" guns. He added that the only reason that the Canadian Army did not adhere to the Ram tank "was that it was easier for Shermans to be provided than convert Rams to 75-mm."<sup>95</sup>

diesel-powered Shermans from the 7th Armoured Division or waiting for new tanks from North Africa equipped with Chrysler engines, General Simonds decided on the latter, having been promised delivery at the rate of 50 per week from the beginning of December.<sup>96</sup> Shipping difficulties slowed down this programme. It was 19 December when The Governor General's Horse Guards received the first two Shermans to reach the Division, and by that time the G.O.C. had learned "that only a very few tanks would be available until the end of December or January."<sup>97</sup>

### Vehicles and Guns for the Corps Troops

By contrast with the difficulties encountered by the armoured division, once the decision had been reached to furnish the 1st Canadian Corps Troops with transport from the United Kingdom the programme of re-equipment moved smoothly and with only minor delays. Space for the 3350 vehicles was found in three convoys, the first of which arrived on 11 December. Vessels unloaded at Catania, Naples and Bari, and at each of these places a specially formed Canadian Port Organization looked after servicing and distribution, and fully justified its existence by ensuring that the new Canadian vehicles-which amid the existing shortage were regarded as fair game by any unit or ordnance depot which could divert some of them from the supply stream-did not fall into other than Canadian hands.<sup>98</sup>

Not all the personnel in these organizations were specially trained for their task; a good example of the adaptability of the Canadian soldier was provided by No. 3 Mobile Laundry and Bath Unit, R.C.O.C., which while waiting for its laundry equipment to arrive from the United Kingdom, worked with one of the Port Organizations in receiving and distributing the Canadian Corps' vehicles.<sup>99</sup>

On the other hand, the contribution of No. 1 Salvage Unit, R.C.O.C., in the Captured Enemy Stores Depot at Syracuse, illustrates well the effective employment of specialists in their own field of labour. By General McNaughton's direction the unit had been carefully trained in the handling of enemy equipment, and during its two months' stay in Sicily its 42 members, aided by Italian labour, examined, sorted and classified all the Italian equipment taken in the island, and cleaned, assembled, packed and loaded on board ship all serviceable arms and stores for carriage in gun-running expeditions to Yugoslav patriots.<sup>100</sup>

By the end of January, except for a few technical vehicles the Corps Troops had received all their transport.<sup>101</sup> Provision of the rest of the equipment needed by the Canadians involved a search of resources throughout the Mediterranean theatre. Ordnance depots in Sicily supplied what limited

quantities they had available; the remaining requirements formed an "inability list", to fill which A.F.H.Q. depots in North Africa (principally Bone and Algiers) and ultimately those of the Middle East Command (Alexandria and Cairo) were canvassed in turn.<sup>102</sup> As a result, the Corps' Deputy Director of Ordnance Services, after visiting Cairo on 12 January to present the Canadian bulk requirements in spare parts, was able to report within a week "1000 tons of spare parts ... shipped from Egypt", and ten days later, "balance of our deficiencies of ordnance equipment ... shipped from Middle East."<sup>103</sup>

In the months that passed while the Corps slowly acquired its needs, probably none felt more keenly the lack of even token equipment for training purposes than the artillery units; as one commanding officer declared, "the gunners . . . never feel equipped unless they have guns, and no guns' are available."<sup>104</sup> At the beginning of December the 1st Medium Regiment R.C.A. went into action on the Fifth Army front "with a scratch lot of equipment and guns which were raked together for them",<sup>105</sup> but it was late in February before the 2nd and 5th Medium Regiments received their first guns, and two months later before they had their full complement.<sup>106</sup> After similar delays the 7th Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment had by April been equipped with its "M-10" self-propelled guns, and the self-propelled battery of the 1st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment had been promised its establishment of 40-mm. Bofors before the end of the month.<sup>107</sup>

With these and certain other exceptions-notably in motorcycles and signal stores-the equipment of Canadian troops in Italy had in general been brought up to at least local standards by the end of January. Although complaints about deficiencies continued, these were common to all units in the Mediterranean theatre-which was beginning to feel more and more keenly the effect of the priority being given to the needs of the approaching invasion of North-West Europe. The obstacles in the Canadian path had been many, but all had been surmounted, in a manner which was thus summarized by the Corps A.Q.M.G.:

The background of the story would appear to be broadly, incomplete arrangements at a high level, frustration, delay, self-help as the only salvation, Canadian control of Canadian business, and the Corps Commander's unwavering intention to put an efficient machine into battle at the earliest opportunity.<sup>108</sup>

It may be appropriate at this point to include a few general remarks about the maintenance of the Corps in its new theatre. In the early days of the war, while Canadian industry was being geared to meet the new demands upon it, the Canadian Army Overseas had drawn on United Kingdom supply for most items of the equipment it needed. General McNaughton considered, however, that when Canadian production reached full flood a supply pipe-line should be organized stretching from the manufacturer in Canada to the

soldier in the field. He preferred to receive Canadian equipment because of its established quality and a standardization of parts and components which permitted interchangeability and so facilitated repair, and because close contact with Canadian industry meant that developments initiated in the field could be quickly brought into use to the advantage of the troops. A third consideration was the encouragement given to men and women in Canadian factories to know that the products of their efforts were going to their own Army. In McNaughton's opinion only such items as could not satisfactorily be produced in Canada should continue to be bought from the United Kingdom.<sup>109</sup>

During 1942 a Base Ordnance Depot and a Base Ordnance Workshop were established in England and action was taken to provide the First Canadian Army with the necessary R.C.O.C. units to complete the pipe-line.<sup>110</sup> But before the system was fully functioning the situation regarding supply changed as a result of the strategic plan produced at Casablanca. For the first time it became possible to calculate the actual requirements of the United Nations' armed forces in different parts of the world and to co-ordinate production and distribution so as to fill these needs with the greatest economy of shipping. Since the steadily increasing War Office stocks in the United Kingdom provided the only readily available source from which Canadian formations could be re-equipped to meet changing operational needs, it was obviously practical to assign Canadian production to more distant theatres where armies were equipped to British pattern and to drop the idea of a separate pipe-line for the Canadian Army Overseas.<sup>111</sup> The result was the adoption of the greater part of a War Office proposal, advanced in March 1943, whereby the resources of British and Canadian ordnance, engineer and medical stores depots in the United Kingdom and any joint theatre of operations should be pooled to avoid duplication, conserve both manpower and storage space and reduce administrative problems.<sup>112</sup>

Negotiations continued well into the summer, and in June General McNaughton formally advised C.M.H.Q. that "First Cdn Army shall be organized and equipped in accordance with the War Office pattern for British armies", and that only "a comparatively few items of equipment" would be reserved as "continuing Canadian supply".<sup>113</sup> Such items included vehicles and spare parts, clothing generally, certain signal stores and special engineer equipment. Canadian vehicles and spares remained under Canadian control in the United Kingdom; and liaison officers were attached to British depots to ensure that other equipment of "continuing Canadian supply" was issued to meet Canadian requirements, and to advise C.M.H.Q. when to order additional stocks from Canada. It was further agreed that Canadian formations in an operational theatre should be supplied with engineer and medical stores from British depots.<sup>114</sup> The position taken by Canada in this important matter was dictated by a broad view of the advantages which

might result in the conduct of the war as a whole. That it resulted in many difficulties and disadvantages to the Canadian forces themselves cannot be denied; and in order that appropriate lessons may be drawn from this Experience, it will be discussed in a subsequent volume of this History, where the policy on supply will be taken up in some detail.

Since the 1st Canadian Corps was provided with no rear installations other than hospitals, dental units and base reinforcement depots, its maintenance became even more of a British responsibility than had been envisaged for the First Canadian Army.<sup>115</sup> Under the system of supply already in use for the 1st Division, Canadian ordnance staffs in Italy periodically indented in bulk for stores held by British Advanced Ordnance Depots (that at Naples later became a Base Ordnance Depot). In the special case of technical stores (including spare parts for vehicles) for which there was a constant demand, a forward supply was held in the Canadian Ordnance Field Park with each formation. Ammunition, petroleum products, engineer and medical stores, and other supplies (of which rations formed a major item) were drawn in bulk from the Eighth Army by the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, whose units carried out distribution to all units and formations of the 1st Canadian Corps. Canteen supplies came from the Expeditionary Forces Institute—the overseas component of the N.A.A.F.I. with which Canadian troops had become familiar in the United Kingdom.

#### The "Arielli Show", 17 January

Early in the new year Headquarters 1st Canadian Corps moved from Taormina to the mainland. On 11 January the main body reached its new accommodation—a tented camp in an oak wood half a dozen miles north of Altamura.<sup>116</sup> The bulk of the Corps Troops had now crossed into Italy, and while these went about their training, Headquarters personnel engaged in exercises designed particularly to fit them to the task of directing operations in a campaign in which continual movement was to be expected.

Meanwhile the G.O.C. continued to press for an active role for his Corps. He had been not a little concerned at demands made by the 15th Army Group and Eighth Army Headquarters for large bodies of Canadian troops to undertake tasks which neither added to their standard of training nor brought them nearer to contact with the enemy. Shortly after their arrival on the mainland four artillery units—the 11th Army Field, the 2nd Medium, the 1st Light Anti-Aircraft and the 7th Anti-Tank Regiments R.C.A.—were hurried off to the Salerno area to fill a request for 1600 officers and men to operate a transit camp for the dispatch of the forces taking part in the Nazi landings.<sup>117</sup> Two days later the Corps was called upon to provide

1700 all ranks for refugee control at Brindisi and Bari, the unattractive assignment falling to The Royal Canadian Dragoons and a composite group drawn from available artillery units.<sup>118</sup>

Under no illusion as to the adverse effect which this employment on sedentary duties, even though only temporary, might have on the enthusiasm of troops who had trained for several years in the United Kingdom and had come to Italy expecting immediate action, General Crerar was moved to write to General Alexander:

I dislike intensely complicating in any way the difficult problem which already faces you in AFI\* concerning the proper military employment of the several Dominion and Allied forces under your command, in which problem the 1 Cdn Corps is an important factor. This is a situation, however, unfortunately inherent in a heterogeneous, as opposed to a homogeneous, military command. On the other hand, my responsibility to my own Government compels me to tell you that this combination of what appears to be a comparatively slow re-equipment and the recent large-scale employment of trained combatant Cdn. troops on L of C guard duties threatens to produce very undesirable reactions among the Canadian forces in this theatre and, indeed, among Canadians generally.<sup>122</sup>

In reply, General Alexander expressed his sympathy with the Canadian Corps Commander in his difficulties, but at the same time warned against the "tendency among some troops to consider themselves incapable of doing their job unless they are absolutely complete in all items of transport and equipment." On the question of the employment of the Canadians on non-operational duties the C.-in-C. declared that unless lower category men were to be brought in to perform these tasks (which would automatically cut down fighting strength) all troops must take their share. It was "in no sense derogatory to ask fighting troops to carry out such duties when for any reason they cannot be employed on the battle front."<sup>123</sup> A week later Alexander sent Crerar a comment by the Commander of the British 1st Division, which had taken part in the assault at Anzio: "The Canadian units who ran the Assembly Areas did a marvellous job and gave the troops that send off which is so invaluable"; to which the Army Group Commander added, "If you had any doubts as to the importance of the work which was assigned these units, your doubts will, I think, be completely removed by the results."<sup>124</sup>

On 12 January Crerar attended a conference called by Sir Oliver Leese, when it was agreed that the Canadian Corps Headquarters should take over from Headquarters 5th Corps as soon as the Canadian G.O.C. was in a position to do so, and that Canadian Corps Troops would be introduced forward as soon as they were equipped and concentrated.<sup>125</sup> In his letter

\* H.Q. Allied Forces in Italy. This name was adopted by H.Q. 15th Army Group on 11 January 1944.<sup>119</sup> A week later it was changed to "H.Q. Allied Central Mediterranean Force".<sup>120</sup> On 9 March, in accordance with a preference expressed by Mr. Churchill, General Alexander's headquarters was redesignated "H.Q. Allied Armies in Italy".<sup>121</sup>



to Alexander three days later, Crerar expressed the hope that this relief could begin on 1 February.<sup>126</sup> Before the end of January, however, some of the "Timberwolf" units had already found the action their commanders sought.

Early in December, and long before the supply of tanks for the 5th Armoured Division was complete, General Simonds had informed General Crerar that the 11th Infantry Brigade was "steaming ahead" and that by the end of the month he would like to send a brigade group forward "to get its first experience of contact with the enemy."<sup>127</sup> On 4 January Brigadier Kitching was notified that he was to relieve the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade on the 1st Division's front north of Ortona. The role was to be one of holding and patrolling. "The intention", wrote the brigade's diarist, "is to 'break us in easily'. We shall soon see whether it is 'easy' or not."<sup>128</sup> The brigade, augmented by field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery, and other units of the supporting services,\* began to move north from Altamura on 9 January. Just before dark on the 12th leading elements passed through the rubble-filled streets of Ortona, and by the following evening the relief had been completed.<sup>130</sup> The brigade now held the coastal end of the Eighth Army's thinly spread fifty-mile front, its sector of responsibility reaching 3000 yards inland over the high ground between Ortona and the Riccio River. Immediately to the left were the battle-seasoned battalions of the 1st Canadian Brigade, and beyond these the 8th Indian Division and the 2nd Parachute Brigade held the left of the 5th Corps sector. Confronting them were as worthy opponents as could be found in all Italy-the 1st Parachute Regiment of Heidrich's veteran division.<sup>131</sup>

Patrolling by the two forward battalions-The Irish Regiment of Canada and The Cape Breton Highlanders-began immediately, and continued for three nights. The terrain was fairly open, and well suited for nocturnal prowling. Inland from the coastal road the ground rose sharply into a broad plateau cut by narrow ravines running generally north-eastward (see Sketch 5). The Canadian positions were on the forward slope of a ridge overlooking one of these-the steep gully of the Riccio River. Beyond the Riccio rose a higher ridge, the Regione di Fendo, behind which was the valley of the Arielli, a much larger stream about midway between Ortona and Francavilla. Along the east slope of the Fendo ridge ran a secondary road which meandered up from the coastal highway at the mouth of the Riccio and eventually crossed the Arielli to arrive at the village of Tollo, some five miles inland.

\*Major units of the 11th Brigade Group were. the Princess Louise Fusiliers (Brigade Support Group, later reorganized into Independent M.G. Companies), The Perth Regiment, The Cape Breton Highlanders, The Irish Regiment of Canada, the 17th Field Regiment, 49th Anti-Tank Battery (of the 4th Anti-Tank Regt.) and 47th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery (of the 5th L.A.A. Regt.) R.C.A., the 10th Field Squadron R.C.E., the 11th Brigade Company R.C.A.S.C. (No. 14 Company), No 24 Field Ambulance R.C.A.M.C. and the 11th Infantry Brigade Workshop R.C.O.C. (later R.C.E.M.E.).<sup>129</sup>

**INSERT MAP**

About this road lay several scattered groups of farm buildings, in the vicinity of which the enemy had constructed a number of strongpoints and weaponpits. During the hours of darkness patrols from both sides wandered over the Ortona side of the ridge with reasonable freedom, arranging booby traps and occupying likely posts from which to shoot up opposing parties. The whole area was in effect a "no man's land", virtually abandoned during the day and at night the property of the most aggressive.<sup>132</sup> During the daytime spasmodic mortaring and shelling from the enemy gave the 11th Brigade a comparatively gentle baptism of fire, and casualties were very light. So far, the "breaking in" had been quite easy.

At the army conference of 12 January to which we have already referred, General Leese, in outlining the 15th Army Group's intentions, had made it clear that the forthcoming amphibious operations by the Fifth Army at Anzio (to be launched on 22 January) and a co-ordinated attack in the Cassino area two days earlier, would be supported "in every way possible" by the Eighth Army.<sup>133</sup> The Eighth Army had already contributed to the Fifth Army's operations two infantry divisions (the 1st and 5th British) and additional artillery, while a third (the 2nd New Zealand) division was under orders to go as soon as its relief arrived. A directive issued by General

Alexander on 12 January suggested further means of providing the required support:

Commander Eighth Army will maintain sufficient pressure on the enemy forces on his front to prevent the enemy from moving any troops from 76 German Corps to reinforce those opposing Fifth Army.<sup>134</sup>

To this end General Leese charged that "all ideas of a static or low priority front were erroneous and must be eradicated from everybody's minds."<sup>135</sup> He planned that the Eighth Army's main effort would be an attack by the 13th Corps in the Orsogna-Guardiagrele area on 24 January. The role of the 5th Corps was defined thus:

5 Corps using I Cdn Inf Div reinforced by 11 Cdn Lorried Bde were to make every effort to gain the high ground east of R. Arielli. This operation to be supported by all artillery available. Heavy casualties are *not* to be incurred, and if the Corps Comd decided that this cannot be done without incurring heavy casualties the matter is to be re-referred to the Army Comd.<sup>136</sup>

A Corps operation instruction issued next day set the date for the Canadian attack "on about 16 January" and gave orders for a deception scheme to be put into effect "to induce the enemy to believe that the attack on the high ground . . . was a preliminary operation to a major attack across the R. Arielli."<sup>137</sup>

There is evidence that General Leese's disinclination to regard the Adriatic front as being of low priority was shared by Kesselring and the Commander of the German Tenth Army. A directive from the C.-in-C. South-West to the fighting formations on 14 January did not presage any particular developments, but exhorted the troops to greater tenacity, declaring emphatically: "The 'Gustav-Foro' position will be held." The order carried a significant postscript signed by von Vietinghoff: "In the event of a soldier being so devoid of honour as to desert to the enemy, in future the most severe measures against his family will be taken."<sup>138</sup>

The Foro sector, as distinct from the Gustav\* Line-the name which had been given to the southern stretches of the German Winter Line-designated that portion of the enemy's positions which extended from the Maiella Mountains to the Adriatic Sea. It consisted of a system of half a dozen successive defence lines grouped about the River Foro, a small stream two miles north of the Arielli. These lines fanned out from Pennapiedimonte (near Guardiagrele) to various points along the coast between Torre Mucchia and Pescara.<sup>139</sup> The sector was the responsibility of General Traugott Herr's 76th Panzer Corps, which in mid-January had three divisions in the line-the 1st Parachute, the 26th Panzer and the 334th Infantry-and the 90th Panzer Grenadier, Division† moving out.<sup>141</sup>

\* Named from the letter "G" in the German phonetic alphabet.

† By 15 January about half of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division had moved to the Rome area. Its intended replacement on the Adriatic front by the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division was cancelled when the Fifth Army's offensive held that formation on the west coast.<sup>140</sup>

At an orders group on the afternoon of 15 January Brigadier Kitching announced that the 11th Brigade's task was to seize a series of strongpoints along and beyond the Tollo road, and thence to push down into the Arielli valley, thus moving the Allied forward positions on to the Fendo ridge. The assault would be made in successive attacks by The Perth Regiment (commanded by Lt.-Col. W. S. Rutherford) on the left, and The Cape Breton Highlanders (Lt.-Col. J. B. Weir) on the right. Each thrust would be supported by a squadron of the Three Rivers Regiment.<sup>142</sup>

In the sector assigned to the Perths a rough trail crossed a fork in the Riccio by two fords about 250 yards apart, and thence climbed steeply for half a mile to join the Tollo road near the top of the Fendo ridge. This junction, and a blown bridge 500 yards to the north where the lateral road crossed a small gully, were the main Perth objectives. These had to be secured before The Cape Breton Highlanders began the second phase of the brigade operation, which was the capture of the high ground lying between the Tollo road and Highway No. 16. The third and final phase called for exploitation by both battalions towards the Arielli to establish firm positions on its right, or near, bank. For his reserve the Brigade Commander had the Irish Regiment and a squadron of the 11th Canadian Armoured Regiment. General Leese's specification of "all artillery available" was implemented in a comprehensive plan of barrages, concentrations, and counter-battery, defensive fire and smoke tasks, which involved all the guns of the 1st Canadian and 8th Indian Divisions and the 1st Army Group Royal Artillery-a total of one heavy, five medium and nine field regiments. The allotment of ammunition was 400 rounds per gun for the field regiments and 300 for mediums, and this impressive fire power was to be further augmented by thirty-two 4.2-inch mortars of the 1st Division's mortar group, which were given targets mainly on the right of The Cape Breton Highlanders' objectives.<sup>143</sup>

The Desert Air Force assigned four squadrons of Kittyhawks and twelve light bombers to attack targets up and down the Tollo road during the 16th; on the 17th the bomblines would move forward to the Arielli River.<sup>144</sup> Finally, in order to distract the enemy's attention, the 1st Brigade on the left and Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry on the right were ordered to demonstrate strongly with "diversionary noises" before and during the first phase of the operation.<sup>145</sup> All in all it would seem as though the 11th Brigade was going into its first action with as much support as it could wish.

The 5th Corps' "last light sitrep" on 16 January reported "heavy air and artillery bombardment of enemy positions on 11 Cdn Inf Bde front throughout day",<sup>146</sup> and the 1st Canadian Division sent a message of appreciation to the Desert Air Force for the "close support provided today right on the button".<sup>147</sup> 11th Brigade patrols probing the battle area that night found little conclusive evidence regarding German locations, although

some came in contact with small enemy groups which they judged to be working parties. A patrol from the Irish Regiment reported that the trail across the Riccio in the Perth's sector showed signs of digging and had been strewn with rushes.<sup>148</sup> This paucity of information appears to have had little effect upon the plans for the next day's operations, for which both Canadian battalions had been thoroughly briefed. From an observation post overlooking the Riccio the Perth company and platoon commanders had studied the battle area, and Lt.-Col. Rutherford had further rehearsed them on a representative plot of ground in the battalion rear area. "It looks as though an attack by us is in the making", recorded the diarist of The Cape Breton Highlanders.

Promptly at half-past five on the morning of the 17th the artillery barrage opened and the Perth's began their attack. On the left "C" Company moved quickly down the track into the valley of the Riccio, and within ten minutes the leading platoon, under Lieutenant R.S. Chamberlain, had forded the stream. But the enemy, aroused by the barrage, was quick to reply. The Perth attack was headed directly into the area held by the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Parachute Regiment; between them and the sea the 1st Battalion faced The Cape Breton Highlanders.<sup>149</sup> In preceding weeks the Germans had had ample opportunity to survey the valley and register their targets, and now from their artillery and from well-sited mortars on the Arielli side of the Fendo ridge shells began to burst with deadly accuracy about the river crossings, and fire from heavy and light machine-guns swept down the hillside. The main body of the Perth's "C" Company was stopped at the second ford, and thus deprived of the support of the barrage. Since the most damaging fire was coming from a large white house about 200 yards up the hill, the company commander, Major R. A. MacDougall, led a party of seven in a gallant effort to storm it. The entire group was wiped out. The remainder of the company, unable to advance, took cover in the tall rushes about the ford.<sup>150</sup> From behind them tanks of their supporting squadron "thickened up the firing in the valley and on the ridge in front." One tank ran on to a mine and was put out of action.<sup>151</sup> In the meantime Chamberlain's platoon had been split by the intense fire, but with one section he had worked his way up to his part of the company objective. Having silenced the machine-gun posts there, his little band stood their ground throughout the day, doggedly repelling all attempts to dislodge them.<sup>152</sup>

Meanwhile on the right, the same withering fire had halted "A" Company as it reached the bed of the Riccio at the point from which the narrow gully led to its objective-the destroyed bridge-on the Tollo road. The key point in the German resistance was a farmhouse in a commanding position a hundred yards up the ridge. A flanking platoon attack against this strongpoint failed; nor could subsequent fire from the supporting tanks dislodge the



#### A COMPANY HEADQUARTERS IN THE ORTONA SALIENT

A shell-shattered house beside a large olive tree serves as the headquarters of "A" Company Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. This photograph was taken in January 1944, when the 1st Canadian Division was holding positions east of the Riccio.



#### WITH THE CANADIAN PROVOST CORPS IN ITALY

Members of No. 1 Provost Company (R.C.M.P.) find temporary accommodation in hillside caves north of Ortona, 15 February 1944.



#### TANKS IN AN ARTILLERY ROLE

"C" Squadron of the 8th Princess Louise's (New Brunswick) Hussars lines up for a predicted shoot on Tollo by the whole regiment, 4 March 1944.



#### CHANGE OF COMMAND, 1st CANADIAN CORPS

Lieut.-General H. D. G. Crerar (left) and Lieut.-General E. L. M. Burns, who succeeded him as Corps Commander. This photograph was taken at Corps Headquarters at Rocca on 3 March 1944.

enemy. "A" Company remained pinned down in the valley bottom, many seeking shelter in German-dug slit-trenches. Attempts by "B" and "D" Companies to work forward to the left and right objectives respectively were equally ineffective.<sup>153</sup>

At Brigade Headquarters there was a dearth of accurate information. Smoke and haze limited visibility across the valley; telephone communications were broken repeatedly by artillery and mortar fire as well as by the movement of our tanks, so that in spite of the efforts of a hard-working and heroic repair crew there were many times when no clear picture of the attack could be obtained at any level of command.\* At 11:35 a.m., when at the most two platoons had reached the base of the Fendo ridge and the remainder of the forward companies were either casualties or severely pinned down, a message was passed to Divisional Headquarters by the 11th Brigade Intelligence that the Perth's "A" Company was on its objective at the gully and that an unknown number of the supporting tanks had crossed the Riccio and were about half way up the ridge (approximately at the strongpoint earlier attacked by Major MacDougall).<sup>154</sup> But twenty minutes later The Perth Regiment was reporting to Brigade Headquarters, "No known infantry across ford at present moment."<sup>155</sup>

Although it had been intended not to start the second phase of the operation until the Perth's had control of at least the right end of their objectives, it was now decided to commit the Cape Bretons, on a somewhat modified plan. At 12:45 p.m. Brigadier Kitching ordered Lt.-Col. Weir to shift his axis of attack to the right, using as a covered approach the draw of a small stream which entered the Riccio from the Canadian side about 1000 yards below the main ford.<sup>156</sup> A message to Divisional Headquarters at one o'clock announced that "Phase Two" would start at 1:45, and that the Perth's would launch another attack with smoke at half-past one.<sup>157</sup>

At first it looked as though the Highlanders might succeed. Screened from view in its approach to the Riccio, "D" Company in the lead quickly had its forward platoon across the river and within 35 yards of its objective on the ridge. Then the enemy mortars burst into action and the company was caught in deadly cross-fire from machine-guns in houses on either side of its path. There was difficulty in getting an effective smoke screen, for the wind was eccentric and the Highlanders were too close to where the smoke shells must fall.† "C" Company, following within ten minutes, met the

\* The Cape Breton Highlanders' war diary reports that "aerials could not be erected as they were too exposed, and this prevented use of wireless."

† The 1st Canadian Field Regiment, which had been assigned all smoke tasks for the operation, was unable to meet this demand of The Cape Breton Highlanders, presumably because the overlapping of the first and second phases found it still committed in support of the Perth's and it was running short of smoke shells. Accordingly the assignment on the right was given to the 4.2-inch mortars, which had a danger area considerably greater than that of the 25-pounders.<sup>158</sup>



full force of the enemy fire. Platoons lost contact and wireless communication with Battalion Headquarters failed. For two hours the whole company was completely pinned down, before the cover of smoke allowed a withdrawal up the gully.<sup>159</sup> Attempts throughout the afternoon by "D" Company to reach its objective failed. No supporting tanks crossed the stream. One was knocked out by a mine before it reached the bottom of the valley, and at both battalion crossing-places the incessant mortar and machine-gun fire prevented engineer parties from doing the necessary mine-clearance around the fords.<sup>160</sup> An hour after the attack started Weir received orders from Brigadier Kitching not to commit his remaining companies until the first two were consolidated on their objectives, and not to become involved in a night attack.<sup>161</sup>

Meanwhile the second Perth attempt to gain the initial objectives on the Tollo road had been launched on the left. At 4:15 p.m., after a 30-minute bombardment of the road by the nine field and five medium regiments,<sup>162</sup> "D" Company crossed the main ford under cover of smoke provided by the battalion mortar platoon to join the "C" Company group which had gone to ground after the death of Major MacDougall. Then the combined force, supported by fire from two troops of tanks which had successfully negotiated the first ford and taken up positions on the knoll within the forks of the Riccio, struggled up the hill to within 200 yards of their road-junction objective.

That marked the high tide of the 11th Brigade's effort in its first day of fighting. Shortly after five o'clock the Perths' "A" Company, which had been suffering heavy casualties from snipers and machine-gun fire, was reported to be abandoning its untenable position in the gully on the battalion right.<sup>163</sup> As darkness fell orders came from Brigade Headquarters to withdraw the whole battalion.<sup>164</sup> On the right flank The Cape Breton Highlanders moved back from the Riccio, and special details were organized to assist the regimental stretcher bearers in bringing the wounded up from the valley.<sup>165</sup> Throughout the night a steady trickle of stragglers from both battalions made their way back from the battle area, among them Lieutenant Chamberlain and his section from "C" Company of the Perths. The courageous platoon officer received the Military Cross.<sup>166</sup>

Late that evening Kitching held another orders group at which plans were made for a resumption of the attack next morning,<sup>167</sup> but before midnight word came through Divisional Headquarters that the G.O.C. 5th Corps had ordered the 11th Brigade's withdrawal into corps reserve.<sup>168</sup> In the early hours of the 18th the tired battalions handed over to relieving units of the 2nd Canadian Brigade.

In spite of General Leese's injunction not to incur heavy casualties, the "Arielli Show" had cost the Canadians eight officers and 177 other ranks. Worst sufferers were the Perths, who lost three officers and 44 men killed, 62 men wounded, and one officer and 27 men taken prisoner. The Cape

Breton Highlanders, who had committed only two companies to action, had thirteen men killed and three officers and 30 men wounded. Not only had the brigade failed to take and hold its ground objectives, but from evidence in German documents it would appear that the enemy had not been deceived as to the intention behind the attack. The Tenth Army's war diary carried the following entry for 17 January:

In the area of I Para Div the enemy attacked after heavy artillery preparation (20,000 rounds in the afternoon alone) in various places during the whole day, and was repulsed. A temporary penetration was eliminated in a counter-attack. The action was apparently a diversion.<sup>169</sup>

The 1st Parachute Division reported 27 killed and 36 wounded on that day.<sup>170</sup>

Various reasons may be advanced for the 11th Brigade's lack of success. Reference has already been made to the breakdown of communications which resulted in a very imperfect picture of the situation reaching Brigade Headquarters. Contributing to the obscurity was the inadequacy of the maps in use. In default of accurate large-scale maps,\* units had been issued with a gridded aerial photograph of the area, from which references to actual positions could be reported with only approximate accuracy.† Poor flying conditions on the 17th had cancelled the air programme, even though its implementation would have assisted only the intended exploitation to the Arielli River. The brigade plan of delivering successive punches by single battalions has been criticized as enabling the enemy to meet each attack in turn with all his fire power concentrated in one spot; whereas, with the tremendous artillery support available to the Canadians, a joint assault by both battalions simultaneously would have dissipated the German fire and brought the attackers greater chance of success.<sup>173</sup> Above all the Canadian troops, unpractised in battle, were opposed, battalion for battalion, by seasoned veterans of a formation unequalled among the German armies in Italy for its fighting skill and tenacity, and on ground decidedly favourable to the defenders.

This Canadian inexperience was underlined by Kesselring in his telephone conversations with the Commander of the Tenth Army. On 19 January the two were discussing the reported relief of brigades of the 1st Canadian Division by formations of the 5th Armoured Division:

*Kesselring*: . . . We need not be afraid that anything will happen there; they are unseasoned troops and we can easily cope with them.

*von Vietinghoff*: They all want to show their wares.

*Kesselring*: The trial runs of green troops are nothing famous<sup>174</sup>

\* See above, p. 317. A reliable 1/25,000 scale map\* of the area was produced and distributed at the end of January.<sup>171</sup>

† A message in the 1st Canadian Division's log late on the afternoon of the 17th reported: "Trace for air photo most inaccurate. C.B.H. NOT on objective. Believe some are in gully this side of stream."<sup>172</sup>

In accordance with the Eighth Army plan of 12 January, the 11th Brigade, after only three days in reserve, returned to the line on the night of 21-22 January to occupy positions in the 13th Corps' sector, immediately north-east of Orsogna. Here Brigadier Kitching's battalions relieved a brigade of the 4th Indian Division, in order that the G.O.C., Major-General F.I.S. Taker, might concentrate his forces for the projected attack against Orsogna.<sup>175</sup> On their immediate left (also under command of the Indian Division) were two other units of the 5th Canadian Division, The Westminster Regiment (Motor), near Salarola, and the 2nd Armoured Regiment (Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians)) in the Castelfrentano area. These had been equipped at short notice and by devious means and brought forward to supply General Taker's lack of motorized and armoured troops. But the 13th Corps' proposed operation was postponed, and later cancelled. It was postponed when General Leese, anxious to husband the Eighth Army's limited strength, obtained General Alexander's permission to defer his offensive until mid-February, when he would have in reserve the fresh Canadian Corps Headquarters and Corps Troops, the 5th Canadian Armoured Division and the newly-formed Polish 3rd Carpathian Division; it was cancelled when early in February the 4th Indian and the 78th Divisions, with which the attack was to have been mounted, were called in quick succession to reinforce the Fifth Army in the west.<sup>176</sup> For the remainder of January the activities of the 5th Division units in the line were restricted to patrolling by the infantry,<sup>177</sup> and occasional direct fire against enemy positions by the tanks.<sup>178</sup> The Westminster diary recorded somewhat naively, "Everyone is pleased over working with the Indian troops, because it is something to talk about later." It was more; it was a strengthening of the happy association of Indian and Canadian soldiers which had begun in November between the Sangro and the Moro (see above, p. 289n.) and which was to continue to thrive on many fronts throughout the entire Italian campaign.

### The Anzio Landings and the German Reaction

Meanwhile on the other side of Italy the Fifth Army was delivering the blows which it was hoped would force the Germans to withdraw north of Rome.<sup>179</sup> Late on 17 January the 10th British Corps attacked across the lower Garigliano River, and in three days of bitter fighting secured a substantial holding\* and breached the outer defences of the Gustav Line.<sup>180</sup> Kesselring called the situation "the greatest crisis yet encountered", and began mustering all reserves within reach to counteract what he obviously

\* Four months later this bridgehead was to provide the Fifth Army with a springboard for its advance to Rome.

took to be the principal Allied effort. He ordered the 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions from the Rome area to the Garigliano, and on the morning of the 22nd he launched a violent counter-offensive against the 10th Corps bridgehead.<sup>181</sup>

On that same morning, when every available formation of the Tenth Army was actively committed on its southern flank, a combined AngloAmerican force under the command of the United States 6th Corps landed at Anzio, 35 miles south of Rome. It gained complete surprise, for the reinforcement of the Garigliano sector had left only small contingents of the 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions guarding the 100 miles of coast south-eastward from Civitavecchia. In the area of the Allied landings the only German troops-responsible for 40 miles of coast-were three engineer companies and one panzer grenadier battalion.<sup>182</sup> It was not the first time that an Allied offensive had taken Kesselring unaware, but as on other occasions he reacted promptly and vigorously.\* A month earlier the German High Command had taken steps to meet just such an eventuality. It had issued orders to the C.-in-C. West (France and Lowlands), the C.-in-C. South-East (Balkans) and the Commander of the Replacement Army (Germany), specifying the units that were to be transferred to Italy in the event of a landing in any one of five designated sectors. Thus the C.-in-C. South-West was assured of reinforcements; pending their arrival he was directed to throw his own forces into the struggle.<sup>185</sup>

The prearranged plans worked with clockwork precision. Army Group "C" promptly alerted replacement units in the Rome area and ordered Tenth Army Headquarters to transfer to the Anzio sector all the combat troops that could be spared, to which end the counter-attack at the Garigliano was cancelled. At the same time it asked the Armed Forces High Command that the task forces provided for in "Case Richard" (a landing in the Rome area) be sent to Italy. By nightfall on the 22nd troops of the Fourteenth Army were on their way from Northern Italy and the two succeeding days saw formations on the move from France, Germany and the Balkans.<sup>186</sup> Among the units which left the Adriatic front within 24 hours of the Anzio landings was the 3rd Battalion, 1st Regiment of the 1st Parachute Division, which had dealt so sternly with The Perth Regiment less than a week before.<sup>187</sup>

The denuding of the Tenth Army's Adriatic flank continued. By 26 January the 26th Panzer Division had virtually disappeared from the

\* On 12 January, in a directive to his Air Commander, Kesselring warned that a fresh Allied landing in Italy would "certainly be carried out at the same time as a heavy attack on the Tenth Army front."<sup>183</sup> On the other hand, according to General Westphal (Kesselring's Chief of Staff), Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Chief of the Intelligence Branch, Armed Forces High Command, visited the Army Group on 21 January, and stated his conviction that a new landing was definitely not to be feared in, the immediate future.<sup>184</sup>

Eighth Army's front, its place being taken by the bulk of the 305th Infantry Division, which was moved up from the Maiella sector and inserted between the 1st Parachute Division on the coast and the 334th Division inland. To guard the mountainous centre of the peninsula as far as Alfedena three battalions of the 305th Division were left behind with a G.H.Q. Alpine Infantry battalion to form an independent group, known from the name of its commander as 'Blocking Group Bode'.<sup>188</sup> Then, at midday on 2 February, the Headquarters of the 76th Panzer Corps (with Corps Troops) moved off to the south-west, and was relieved by that of the 51st Mountain Corps, brought down from the north under the command of General of Mountain Troops Valentin Feurstein.<sup>189</sup>

The Allied forces at Anzio had met virtually no opposition during the landings, yet exploitation inland was slow. General Alexander's instruction of 12 January had set down as the main object the capture of the Alban Hills, in order to cut the German communications south of Rome (see Map 15). But the Fifth Army's Order to the Commander of the 6th Corps, Major-General J. P. Lucas, specified only an "advance on" (not to) the Alban Hills. Four German divisions were reported to be in the neighbourhood of Anzio, and for the 6th Corps (with a strength of little more than two divisions) to have pushed forward to the hills would have dangerously overextended its forces and risked their destruction. Accordingly Lucas had concentrated on consolidating his beachhead position.<sup>190</sup> On the German side the C.-in-C. South-West made use of the breathing spell to bring some order into the confused mass of heterogeneous units that had crowded into the area. On 24 January he directed the Tenth Army to defend its present positions from the Gulf of Gaeta to the Foro Line; the Fourteenth Army (under General Eberhard von Mackensen) was to take over the coastal front from Cecina (20 miles south of Leghorn) to Terracina (18 miles up the coast from Gaeta), its chief task being "to counter-attack and to throw the enemy forces landed south of Rome back into the sea." The former responsibilities of the Fourteenth Army were transferred to a new command created for that purpose, the *Armeegruppe von Zangen*,\* which was ordered to guard the northern coasts and carry on "with the utmost energy the construction work on the Apennine position and on the coastal fronts."<sup>191</sup>

For the first time the Germans had two armies engaged in active operations against the Allied Fifth and Eighth Armies. The troops of neither were left in any doubt of what was demanded of them. On 24 January a direct order came from Hitler, to be read to all members of the Tenth Army: "The Gustav Line must be held at all costs for the sake of the political consequences

\* A German *Armeegruppe* was not an Army Group in the Allied sense, but merely a provisional organization, intermediate in status and responsibility between Corps and Army. The commander, General of Infantry Gustav von Zangen, later commanded the Fifteenth Army in North-West Europe.

which would follow a completely successful defence. The Fuhrer expects the bitterest struggle for every yard."<sup>192</sup>

An exhortation to the Fourteenth Army four days later was couched in less restrained terms. In it Hitler saw the Allied landings as "the beginning of the invasion of Europe planned for 1944", and he called on every member of the Fourteenth Army to wage battle

... with inspired hatred towards an enemy who is carrying on a pitiless war of extermination against the German people.... The battle must be hard and merciless, not only against the enemy, but also against every officer and man who fails in this decisive hour. As in the battles on Sicily, the river Rapido and at Ortona, the enemy must be made to realise that German fighting strength is unbroken and that the invasion of 1944 is an undertaking which will be smothered in the blood of Anglo-Saxon soldiers.<sup>193</sup>

### The Attack Along the Villa Grande-Tollo Road, 30-31 January

At the end of January Canadian troops carried out one more limited attack, the last of the winter on the Adriatic front. As we have noted, the idea of a major offensive by the Eighth Army was languishing, although by vigorous patrolling and simulation of other preparations for a large-scale assault it was hoped to disguise that fact from the enemy. After the Anzio landings the need for determining the enemy dispositions had given this patrolling added significance. Intelligence staffs, appreciating that the 76th Panzer Corps would contribute reinforcements to the new danger area, depended upon the identification and interrogation of prisoners to give them a picture of changed enemy dispositions. Confirmation of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Division's replacement by the 305th Division was obtained from patrol captures on 25 January, but questions regarding the strength of the 1st Parachute Division on the Canadian front\* went unanswered.<sup>195</sup> There were strong grounds for suspecting that some of Heidrich's units might have been called across the peninsula; in the somewhat complacent words of a recently captured member of the 1st Regiment, "Whenever they get in a mess they throw in the Paratroops."<sup>196</sup> In spite of determined efforts, however, our patrols had taken no paratrooper since the 22nd.<sup>197</sup> It was therefore ostensibly with the object of securing a base for bolder and more effective patrolling that plans were made to deepen the salient held by the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade on the left of the 1st Division's front.

A more pressing reason for the forthcoming operation, however, was disclosed by the G.O.C. 5th Corps, Lieut.-General Allfrey, who with

\* First intimation of the move of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment on 23 January came from the Fifth Army front, where it was identified in action on the 31st<sup>194</sup>

Brigadier Hoffmeister (acting Divisional Commander in the absence on leave of General Vokes) attended a brigade conference at Brigadier Spry's command post on the afternoon of 29 January. It was to be a "holding attack", carried out in keeping with a 5th Corps instruction (of 23 January) which read: "During the crux of the fighting on Fifth Army front, additional steps are to be taken to stop the enemy reinforcing from this side." Possibly because the holding attack is one of the costlier operations of war the Corps Commander directed that the real purpose of the venture\* should be kept from the participating troops. The proposed operation was discussed at length by Spry and the commanders of the units which were to participate; in the light of the detailed knowledge of the ground which nearly a month's patrolling and observation by the brigade had produced there was little optimism about the chances of success.<sup>198</sup>

The area over which the attack was to be made was the Piano di Moregine, a 500-foot plateau rising from the gully gouged out by the left fork of the Riccio west of San Nicola and Villa Grande (see Sketch 6). At the time Brigadier Spry's force was disposed with The Royal Canadian Regiment on the right, the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards (under command, serving as infantry) in the centre, and the 48th Highlanders on the left, about 1000 yards west of Villa Grande.<sup>199</sup> The Brigade Commander selected his reserve battalion, The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, to attack through the 48th's positions, following a secondary road which from Villa Grande crossed the plateau to join the main Tollo road (the 11th Canadian Brigade's objective of 17 January). The objectives were positions code-named "Apple Blossom" and "Trafalgar", respectively to the right and left of the Villa Grande-Tollo road where it began its sharp descent to the Arielli.<sup>200</sup> The attack was to be carried out by day, with two companies operating forward for the whole distance-about a mile-followed by tanks of "B" Squadron of The Calgary Regiment. It was a long thrust to make in daylight across generally flat, exposed ground, even though the enemy forces guarding Tollo were believed to be light,† and the attackers would have strong artillery and air support. The artillery programme called for the fire of the 2nd and 3rd Field Regiments R.C.A., two field regiments of the 8th Indian Division, two British medium regiments and the 14th Heavy Battery R.A. It included counter-battery firing, and made available on call a smokescreen to cover the left flank.<sup>202</sup>

\* Formation and unit war diaries and other documentary sources throw no light on why the operation was undertaken. Late on 29 January the 5th Corps gave as the next day's "intentions" for the 1st Canadian Division: "Active patrolling continues with object PW."

† Three days later, referring to the Hastings' casualties in this and a subsequent attack, the 1st Brigade diarist (who was apparently ignorant of the "holding" purpose of the operation) was to write: "A very heavy price to pay for the knowledge that the enemy is holding the approach to Tollo in Strength."<sup>201</sup>

**INSERT MAP**

At 3:45 in the afternoon of the 30th, fifteen minutes before H Hour, 24 Kittyhawks of the Desert Air Force bombed enemy gun positions on the far side of the Arielli.<sup>203</sup> Promptly at four o'clock, under an impressive and apparently effective artillery barrage across the 1000-yard front, the Hastings moved off, with "B" Company on the right and "D" on the left. Initial progress was good, and at five o'clock Lt.-Col. Kennedy reported his troops to be only a "few minutes" away from the objective.<sup>204</sup> As the advance continued, however, the enemy (later identified as the 1st Battalion, 4th Parachute Regiment)<sup>205</sup> laid down a barrage of his own behind that of our artillery. "B" Company, hard hit and thoroughly bewildered by this assumedly friendly fire that failed to lift, was driven to the cover of a small gully 400 yards from the "Apple Blossom" group of houses; here it reorganized for a second attempt. Meanwhile, on the left, "D" Company had been halted by heavy machine-gun fire. Towards last light the two companies again attacked, with fresh artillery support and assisted as before by tanks. This time "B" Company managed to approach to within 200 yards of its goal and "D" Company was still more nearly successful; but suddenly the growing darkness was streaked with tracer as the enemy's machine-guns once more broke into action. The fire increased in intensity and, with further progress being impossible, both sub-units withdrew to positions 300 yards short of the battalion objectives.<sup>206</sup> In less than three hours the Hastings had suffered casualties of fifteen killed and 33 wounded.

Kennedy now reported to the Brigade Commander, and plans were drawn up for a further attack next day. A number of changes were made in the support arrangements. The preliminary artillery concentration was eliminated, for the sake of surprise; the rate of advance for the barrage was reduced



from 100 yards in two minutes\* to 100 in three; the tanks were this time to precede the infantry, moving close under the barrage and covered by a smoke screen.<sup>208</sup> As on the previous occasion the Desert Air Force was to assist, but in greater strength; during the early afternoon of the 31st Kittyhawk fighter-bombers made 72 sorties on hostile gun positions.<sup>209</sup>

The start of the fresh attack, originally timed for 2:00 p.m., was delayed half an hour, for stretcher bearers were still collecting the previous day's casualties from the battlefield. "A" Company was now to advance on the left, replacing "D", with "B" Company still on the right. Promptly at the new H Hour, as high explosive shells screamed overhead and the supporting tanks rumbled forward through the covering smoke, the Hastings again began advancing across the open fields on either side of the road. Almost immediately heavy mortar fire fell on them from the right flank. At about the same time two of the Calgarys' six Shermans were stopped by mines. The remaining four, bursting through the smoke only fifty yards behind the barrage, caught the enemy with his head still down. Despite the loss of two more of their number--one returned with the troop commander fatally wounded, and yet another struck a mine--the tanks shot up targets on both sides of the Arielli, inflicting considerable casualties and knocking out three 75-millimetre anti-tank guns. In the meantime, the Hastings found themselves under increasingly heavy mortar fire, with machine-guns as well now sweeping them from the front and left. At last, as the advancing platoons were cut down to sections, and sections reduced to two or three men, Kennedy withdrew both companies. Left without prospects of infantry support, the two surviving tanks, their ammunition running low, also retired.<sup>210</sup>

In this one bitter hour The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment had lost nine killed (including two officers) and 34 wounded, which brought the casualties for both days to more than ninety. Yet the operation had taught or confirmed more than one useful lesson, as was reflected in a report submitted to General Crerar† by General Vokes on his return from leave. He emphasized the need for adjusting the barrage to "a speed which enables the leading infantry to keep close behind", and pointed to the advantage of the infantry advancing quickly through enemy fire rather than allowing themselves to be pinned down; for "the enemy cannot alter range as fast as they can move". (In subsequent attacks the conventional moving barrage

\* Of this rate of progress prescribed for the attack on the 30th the war diary of the C.R.A. 1st Division observed beforehand: "Time alone will tell if our infantry can follow at such a pace, even though the ground is favourable."<sup>207</sup>

† On 11 February 1944 Crerar addressed the Commanders and Staff of the Eighth Army on "The Principles of Effective Fire Support in the 'Break-in' Battle". He gave his view that "in this theatre conditions and circumstances have faced us once more with the tactical problems and conditions which typified the last Great War," and he emphasized the need of applying those tactics and techniques which had proved most successful in offensive operations during that war.<sup>211</sup>

was to be largely replaced by the more flexible timed or "on call" concentrations on known or suspected enemy positions.)<sup>212</sup> Above all the G.O.C. stressed the value of flexibility in "infantry-cum-tank" tactics, in which "each must endeavour to observe and conform to the actions of the other, thereby helping where help is obvious."<sup>213</sup> This last item was to receive very close attention in training exercises in rear areas before Canadian infantry and armour again went together into action. Nor should any assessment of the value of Canadian operations in January ignore the fact that at a time when Chiefs of Staff of German formations in Italy were racking their brains to find units which could be moved from relatively quiet sectors to reinforce the Anzio and Cassino fronts, the enemy did not feel free to withdraw from the Adriatic front the brilliant fighters of the 1st Parachute Division.

Late on the night of 31 January, Kesselring's Chief of Staff telephoned congratulations to his opposite number in the German Tenth Army.

*Westphal:* With the paratroops you have obtained a new success. They are really wonderful.

*Wentzell:* Yes. They counted 90 dead [*sic*]. It was again the 1st Canadian Infantry Division; where the 5th Division is we do not know. But they must be up there; they keep on talking with Corps.<sup>214</sup>

Von Vietinghoff's Chief of Staff was right in his surmise. The 5th Canadian Division was "up there", and at noon on the next day took over the Orsogna sector from the 4th Indian Division.<sup>215</sup> In command of the Armoured Division was Major-General E. L. M. Burns, former G.O.C. 2nd Infantry Division, who had succeeded General Simonds on 30 January on the latter's appointment to command the 2nd Canadian Corps. At midnight on 31 January-1 February General Crerar's headquarters had formally relieved Headquarters 5th Corps. Now for the first time in the Second World War a Canadian Corps was operating in the line.<sup>216</sup>

### "The Adriatic Barricade"

A few days were to elapse before the forces under General Crerar became a completely Canadian command. When his headquarters opened at Rocca San Giovanni, eight miles south of Ortona, the seven-mile front for which it assumed responsibility was manned by the 1st Canadian Division, next to the sea, and on its left the 8th Indian Division and the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade, covering the Ortona-Orsogna Highway opposite the villages of Crecchio and Arielli.<sup>217</sup> Crerar had continued to press for "a speedy amalgamation of Canadian forces in C.M.F. under my command",<sup>218</sup> and the departure of the 4th Indian Division for the Fifth Army front during the first week in February and the demand for the 78th to follow shortly

brought a regrouping of the Eighth Army in which his purpose was largely achieved.

In a series of reliefs on the night of 8-9 February the 5th Canadian Armoured Division replaced the 8th Indian Division in the Canadian Corps' sector, coming under General Crerar's command at midday on the 9th.<sup>219</sup> On 4 February the 1st Army Group Royal Canadian Artillery, commanded by Brigadier W. E. Huckvale, had become operational with the Canadian Corps, releasing for service on the Fifth Army's front the British 1st Army Group Royal Artillery, which had been providing the medium and heavy support for the 5th Corps.<sup>220</sup> Only the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade remained outside Crerar's command; on 9 February it came under the 13th Corps to replace the 5th Armoured Brigade in providing Lieut. General S. C. Kirkman (who had succeeded Lieut.-General Dempsey as G.O.C. on 22 January) with the requisite armour.<sup>221</sup> Units of the brigade spent the rest of February\* and most of March in the Lanciano-Castelfrentano area filling a counter-attack role while training with infantry of the 8th Indian Division.<sup>223</sup>

For the Canadians the next twelve weeks were to be devoid of major action, as both sides relegated the Adriatic sector to static warfare (although, under directions of the Army Commander, General Crerar drew up outline plans for more than one major operation designed to clear the enemy east of the Arielli and lead to the capture of Tollo).<sup>224</sup> The only break in the routine of patrolling was to come with the periodic reliefs which withdrew units from their watch along the front line for brief interludes of rest seasoned with bursts of "refresher" training for the expected offensive in the spring. The weather, which towards the end of January had shown some improvement over its wretchedness at the beginning of the year, turned depressingly bad again in February, and the continual rain converted the heavy clay of the coastal sector into a morass. In such circumstances the necessity of holding front-line positions which had been neither deliberately organized for defence nor constructed with a view to any degree of permanent occupancy imposed a considerable strain on the troops, who frequently found themselves forced to spend the day cramped in slit-trenches, with anything approaching normal movement only becoming possible at night. These difficulties, observed an officer of the Division, "are immeasurably increased when the slit-trenches are full of water, the ground is deep in mud, and temperatures at night are below the freezing point."<sup>225</sup>

Night after night our patrols were out along the entire front, as the need for prisoners was stressed from corps to, division, from division to brigade,

\* During the third week of February The Ontario Regiment provided a ski-party of 50 to carry rations to a troop of the 56th British Reconnaissance Regiment snowed in at Colledimezzo, on the east bank of the Sangro (see Map 10), and ammunition to a unit of the Polish Carpathian Division, isolated at Pescopennataro.<sup>222</sup>

and thence to every battalion, company and platoon. These stealthy sallies into "no man's land" were made by parties whose strength varied with their assignment. The smallest was the "recce patrol", consisting usually of one officer and three or four other ranks sent out to reconnoitre enemy positions and obtain information by listening, watching or searching; although heavily armed and capable of defending itself in necessity, it avoided fighting. More aggressive were the roles of the "standing patrol"-of any number up to a platoon, organized as a protection against enemy patrols, and prepared to ambush and kill-and the "fighting patrol", consisting generally of one officer and a section of ten men (although not infrequently in platoon strength) whose business it was to move boldly through unoccupied territory and make contact with the enemy, with the purpose of capturing or killing a German for identification purposes.<sup>226</sup>

Successful results came slowly. On 4 February a Seaforth fighting patrol took a prisoner, the first on the divisional front for some time. He was a young paratrooper of the 3rd Regiment, and before he died of his wounds his interrogation established the fact that Heidrich's division had not left the sector. The latest entries in his diary revealed something of the effect of our patrolling on the enemy morale:

I have changed a good deal, I cannot smile now. Here one must run for one's life .... We squat day and night in our anti-tank ditch. Listening posts are put forward and patrols with grenades and machine pistols. One cannot feel safe here. . . .<sup>227</sup>

Mid-February passed, and still no evidence had been collected of any major change opposite the Eighth Army's front; the enemy's line was held in succession from the coast (the dispositions were later confirmed by captured documents) by the 1st Parachute Division as far as Villa Grande, the 305th and 334th Infantry Divisions, and "Blocking Group Bode" in the mountains. "Excellent", "good", "inexperienced" and "satisfactory" were the respective ratings given these formations by Kesselring and von Vietinghoff in the course of their daily telephone conversations.<sup>228</sup>

Heidrich's division finally moved during the third week of February; on the 20th his headquarters and the last battalion hurried from the coastal sector to join the 14th Corps at Cassino.<sup>229</sup> A planned exchange with the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division did not materialize, and on 21 February Kesselring ordered that exhausted formation into army group reserve at Frosinone, where it would be readily available to strengthen either the Cassino or Anzio front. In its place he dispatched to the Pescara sector the 992nd Grenadier Regiment (278th Infantry Division) which had been guarding the Ligurian coast south of Leghorn.<sup>230</sup>

Having lost his best formation without replacement, Feurstein was forced to spread his remaining forces more thinly in front of the Foro position;

initially he placed in the coastal gap a temporary headquarters under the commander of the 334th Artillery Regiment to administer whatever units Army Group "C" might be able to spare him.<sup>231</sup> The 146th Grenadier Regiment\* came to stay for a month, but was packed off again after only four days. By the end of February the 305th Division, supplemented by the 334th Engineer Battalion next to the sea, manned the entire front opposite the Canadian Corps.<sup>233</sup>

The departure of the paratroops did not go unnoticed by the Canadians. The interception of a German message on the 19th warned of the approaching move, and Canadian guns roared an appropriate send-off. Although a general shortage of ammunition had limited expenditure on the Eighth Army's front† the occasion was a special one, as was pointed out by the diarist at the divisional artillery headquarters.

Will we arrange a special BF [Harassing Fire] programme? Will we? Just give us the ammunition and watch us go to town. Twenty rounds extra per gun will be forthcoming. Intelligence has given us the known routes of a changeover and relief by Jerry, so we will plaster these places from 1830 to 2100 hrs.<sup>235</sup>

With Heidrich's battle-wise soldiers out of the way the taking of prisoners suddenly became much easier. On 20 February a Carleton and York patrol brought in from a slit-trench on the Moregine Plateau two members of the 146th Grenadier Regiment, whose interrogation gave first proof that the Parachute Division had been relieved.<sup>236</sup> The capture earned for the patrol five pounds from General Vokes, and a similar sum (in lieu of a temporarily unobtainable bottle of whiskey) from Brigadier Gibson. To this reward the Corps Commander added a further five pounds, which he described as "the most welcome payment I have ever made."<sup>237</sup> After that the flow of prisoners increased; the spirits of our troops were lightened by the disappearance of an old enemy, and they found in their new opponents a marked deterioration of the will to resist.<sup>238</sup> In the sector held by the 11th Infantry Brigade there were few days which did not see a patrol of some kind going out. The highlight of this activity was a daylight raid across the Arielli by members of The Cape Breton Highlanders who snatched a German from his weaponpit and dragged him screaming back to our lines.<sup>239</sup>

February passed into March without either side undertaking a formal attack, although the ever-present possibility that the enemy might become more adventurous kept the Canadians continually on the alert. History was made on 4 March, when for the first time in the war a full armoured regiment

\* This was the strongest surviving formation of the 65th Infantry Division, which had been so badly mauled in November. Although slated to be withdrawn by 15 March, the regiment stayed only until 24 February, when its place was taken by a general sidestepping of units of the 305th Division.<sup>232</sup>

† On 8 February the maximum daily expenditure of ammunition within the 1st Canadian Corps was set at 25 rounds per gun for the 4.5- and 5.5-inch guns, and 20 rounds per gun for heavier equipment.<sup>234</sup>

carried out a precision bombardment on a German position. Forty-eight tanks of the 8th Princess Louise's (New Brunswick) Hussars, firing from regimental line at a range of 5200 yards, dropped 720 shells into Tollo. The rounds fell accurately in an area 200 yards by 100, the concentration bringing from an Air Observation Post Officer the tribute, "The most beautiful sight I have seen in a long time."<sup>240</sup> The state of relative inactivity amid the rain, the cold and the mud severely tested the morale of the troops in the line. There were disquieting factors from outside the realm of actual operations. Men five thousand miles from their families found cause for dissatisfaction in the irregularity of the arrival of mail from Canada. The introduction of "Mailcan",\* the Canadian forces air-mail service from Canada, had disappointingly failed to shorten materially the time taken for letters to come from home. Christmas parcels did not reach units of the 1st Canadian Corps Troops until 2 February, and during the last two weeks of that month no letters, by air or any other means, were received.<sup>242</sup> On the battlefield rumour travels fast, and a tale, immediately and officially denied, circulating throughout the Corps that English wives of Canadians in Italy were being compulsorily shipped to Canada, contributed to the general depression.<sup>243</sup>

As an antidote to war-weariness a period of rest behind the line in the vicinity of Ortona and San Vito provided a blessed change of environment which brought dry billets, baths, change of clothes, hot meals at regular hours, and a variety of entertainment furnished by the British and Canadian military administrative and auxiliary services. An amusement guide to Ortona would include the names of "The Beaver Club", "Monastery Inn", "Loew's Theatre", "The Red Shield Club" (in the Ortona Opera House), "The Cinema" and the "Hole-in-the-Wall"†; at these the tired soldier could find recreation in a liberal choice of movies, in "ENSA" shows, and in the popular offerings of "The Tin Hats"-an all Canadian concert party.<sup>244</sup> At the "Sword and Drum" in San Vito dances for officers brought together the charm and beauty of Canadian nurses and closely-chaperoned Italian girls from the two towns (although the society girls of San Vito were hesitant to attend until they knew the names of signorine invited from Ortona).<sup>245</sup> There were some fortunate souls-the total weekly allotment for the Canadian Corps was 17 officers and 370 other ranks<sup>246</sup>—who spent a few days at the Eighth Army's Rest Camp in Bari. They returned full of praise of its efficient administration and the fact "that those attending are left completely free of

\* The "Mailcan" service was inaugurated late in 1943, on a tri-weekly schedule from Montreal to Prestwick, with one trip every five days from Prestwick to Naples and Foggia, to carry all letters and registered mail to Canadian forces in the Mediterranean theatre. The first cargo reached Catania on 28 December, in a Flying Fortress manned by an R.C.A.F. crew. Bad flying weather seriously interrupted the schedule during February.<sup>241</sup>

† This theatre was named after a London public house at which many Canadians had spent their last minutes of leave before boarding the train at Waterloo Station.

any parade."<sup>247</sup> Such were the amenities which helped to combat decline in morale during these somewhat discouraging weeks. Nor should we omit mention of the daily army newspaper which the Minister of National Defence at the time of his visit to the 1st Canadian Corps had ordered to be started as a means of bringing the troops regular up-to-date Canadian news. Publication of *The Maple Leaf* began in Naples on 14 January 1944, under the editorship of Lt.-Col. R. S. Malone. High priority was given to the newspaper's distribution. It was flown daily up to forward airfields so that troops in the field could read it the same day that it came off the presses.<sup>248</sup>

The Canadian Corps' first operational tour of duty lasted for 36 days. On 7 March the British 5th Corps Headquarters came up from army group reserve to relieve both General Crerar's headquarters and that of the 13th Corps. It was the first step in the regrouping of the Eighth Army for a spring offensive west of the Apennines. The Canadian headquarters closed at Rocca San Giovanni and moved south into the Biferno country, to open next day at Larino.<sup>249</sup> At the same time the 5th Armoured Division was withdrawn from the line,\* going into reserve at Castelnuovo in the Daunia hills, half a dozen miles north of Motta Montecorvino; and on 26 March the 1st Armoured Brigade (commanded since 27 February by Brigadier W. C. Murphy) was relieved from its duties with the 5th Corps by the British 23rd Armoured Brigade, and moved across the mountains to a training area in the Volturno Valley, near Venafro.<sup>251</sup>

Coincident with these moves General Crerar departed for the United Kingdom to become G.O.C.-in-C. First Canadian Army, and General Burns took over the Corps.<sup>252</sup> Brigadier G. A. McCarter continued as Chief of Staff, 1st Canadian Corps. Burns was succeeded in the command of the 5th Division by Major-General Hoffmeister, former commander of the 2nd Brigade,<sup>253</sup> which was taken over by Brigadier Gibson. Lt.-Col. J. P. E. Bernatchez was promoted to brigadier and placed in command of the 3rd Brigade. The appointment of Commander Royal Artillery, 1st Canadian Division passed from Brigadier Matthews to Brigadier W. S. Ziegler.

For seven more weeks the 1st Canadian Division remained in the Ortona salient--its units widely dispersed along a seven-mile front from the coast to Crechchio. To man this extended holding General Vokes had to keep all three brigades in the line, each with two battalions forward. A rotating system of reliefs within the brigades gave each unit a welcome respite of a few days in reserve after two or three cheerless and exhausting weeks in the front line.<sup>254</sup> To compensate for the lack of strong reserves behind the line, and to meet any attempted breakthrough to retake Ortona--a contingency which, though remote, could not entirely be ruled out--Vokes co-ordinated a plan of defence which made the town a fortress to be garrisoned

\* The relief of the Division's infantry brigade was *not* completed until 14 March.<sup>250</sup>

by the 1st Brigade (whose positions were in the coastal sector), and designated defended concentration areas to be manned in an emergency by troops not actually committed in the battle line.<sup>255</sup>

No enemy thrust came, however, and as improved weather in late March introduced a somewhat tardy and capricious Adriatic spring, reserve battalions found it possible momentarily to abandon their counter-attack role in order to undertake long route marches over the rapidly drying roads. There was a perceptible easing of tension. "Even the most casual and unpractised observer", wrote the Division's Historical Officer on 3 April, "cannot fail to notice the emptiness of the once teeming gun areas and the general slackening of traffic along our lines of communication."<sup>256</sup>

On the German side there were signs that the enemy was beginning to relax his vigilance. His carelessness in exposing himself on ground covered by our fire brought sharp reminders from our artillery to mule trains, vehicles and wandering parties of infantry.<sup>257</sup> He apparently no longer feared an Allied attack in the sector. Captured intelligence reports of the 51st Mountain Corps for March noted the gradual thinning out of the Canadian forces in the coastal sector and the weekly rotation of battalion reliefs in the front line.<sup>258</sup> Work on the Foro position had stopped early in the month as Kesselring ordered all efforts concentrated on the construction of defence lines in front of Rome.<sup>259</sup>

On the evening of 20 April a brigade of the 10th Indian Division began to relieve the 1st Canadian Brigade next to the sea, and the changeover of the whole division proceeded during three busy nights and days.<sup>260</sup> To mask these movements the last days before the Canadian departure were marked by more than usually vigorous patrolling across the divisional front, and in all three brigade sectors raiding parties came fiercely to grips with the enemy.<sup>261</sup> Early on the 23rd General Vokes handed over command of the sector to Major-General Denys Reid, G.O.C. 10th Indian Division, which was newly arrived from Syria. Three days later he had established his headquarters at Vinchiatturo, and the 1st Division was once again under command of the Canadian Corps.

The end of April found one Canadian formation still actively engaged in the line. This was the 11th Infantry Brigade Group (commanded from 14 February by Brigadier T.E.D'O. Snow),\* which on 9 April took over a mountainous 9000-yard section of the 13th Corps' front five miles north-east of Cassino. Besides his three infantry battalions Brigadier Snow had under his command The Westminster Regiment (Motor) of the 5th Armoured Brigade, the 17th Field Regiment R.C.A. and other artillery and engineer units, and the Italian Bafile Battalion-composed mainly of about 1000

\* Brigadier Kitching returned to the U.K. to take command of the 4th Armoured Division.



sailors from the Italian Navy who had volunteered for land duty after surrendering their ship at Malta.<sup>262</sup> On 15 April the Brigade Group came under the command of Lieut.-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, G.O.C. 2nd New Zealand Division (then part of the 10th Corps). There was extensive patrolling, although very little fighting (Canadian infantry casualties for the four-week period totalled 125 all ranks). The most formidable problem was the maintenance of Snow's 7500 troops in their isolated, rocky positions. Supplies had to be transferred successively from heavy lorries to 15-cwt trucks, to jeeps, to mules, and finally carried by man-pack to the forward companies. The brigade ended its tour in the line on 5 May, when it handed over to the 12th South African Motor Brigade and went into reserve in the Capua area.<sup>263</sup>

The relief of the 1st Canadian Division ended the long, and in many respects often unsatisfactory, period of service on the Adriatic front. Among the units and formations moving down to the Biferno Valley there were few regrets. The sector had been the scene of much bloody fighting by the men of the Division, and many had fallen on the battlefield. In Ortona (Moro River) Cemetery, beautifully sited on a headland overlooking Ortona Bay, rest 1372 Canadians, nearly a quarter of all those who fell in Italy and Sicily. Of the score of cemeteries from Agira to Villanova in which Canadian soldiers are buried no other harbours so many Canadian graves.

But now the change in environment turned the thoughts of all in the Canadian Corps to the prospect of future action. It was no secret that preparations for a great offensive were afoot, and a spirit of eagerness filled the air. Before many weeks had passed Canadians were to have undertaken successfully one of their most spectacular operations of the entire Italian campaign.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE BATTLE FOR ROME BEGINS, MAY 1944

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#### Allied Plans for the Spring Offensive

**B**Y THE New Year of 1944 the failure of the 15th Army Group to dislodge the enemy from his Winter Line was not only causing concern to the Allied commanders in Italy but was threatening seriously to interfere with the basic strategy which had been conceived at Casablanca, Quebec and Cairo.

Allied planners were keenly aware that the success of the approaching cross-Channel attack would depend upon the closest co-ordination of operations in the Mediterranean with that vast enterprise. At Quebec, in the previous August, the Combined Chiefs of Staff had proposed that the most effective assistance which the Allied Forces in the Mediterranean could give to "Overlord" would be to initiate "offensive operations against Southern France."<sup>1</sup> Three months later in Cairo it was agreed at the "Sextant" Conference that a major assault of not less than two divisions should be launched against Southern France at the same time as "Overlord". The project was given the code name "Anvil", and shortly afterwards at the "Eureka" Conference in Teheran the decision was embodied in agreements with the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> In the light of these the Combined Chiefs reported to President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill that "...`Overlord' and `Anvil' are the supreme operations for 1944. They must be carried out in May 1944. Nothing must be undertaken in any other part of the world which hazards the success of these two operations."<sup>3</sup> On 6 December Eisenhower was directed to plan for the invasion of Southern France, a task which passed to General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, who succeeded him as Allied Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Theatre\* on 8 January, 1944.<sup>4</sup> Responsibility for detailed planning was given to Headquarters United States Seventh Army, which since the completion of the Sicilian campaign had been relatively inactive.<sup>5</sup>

Among the assumptions on which the early planning for "Anvil" was based the most important was that by May 1944 the advance in Italy would

\* On 9 March 1944 redesignated Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theatre.

have forced the enemy back to his prepared defences along the Pisa-Rimini line, where he might be held by such comparatively moderate pressure as would not divert Allied resources from the operation.<sup>6</sup> But the December battles on the Adriatic and south of Cassino were evidence that this condition was unlikely to be fulfilled; until Rome had been captured no German retirement northward could be expected. Accordingly at a conference of Commanders-in-Chief held at Tunis on Christmas Day plans were initiated for the amphibious assault at Anzio. It was hoped that such an operation would turn the enemy's flank and enforce his withdrawal north of Rome, for, as Mr. Churchill cabled to Mr. Attlee from the meeting: "We cannot leave the Rome situation to stagnate and fester for three months without crippling amalgamation of 'Anvil' and thus hampering 'Overlord'. We cannot go to other tasks and leave this unfinished job behind us."<sup>7</sup>

As we have seen, the Anzio landings produced unexpectedly strong German reaction. "None of us", writes General Wilson, "had sufficiently realized the strength of political and prestige considerations which would induce the enemy to reinforce his front south of Rome up to seventeen divisions to seal off the bridgehead and even to expend much of his fighting strength in counter-attacks to drive us into the sea."<sup>8</sup> These bold and desperate measures stopped the Fifth Army's advance on both its fronts, and brought a reconsideration of the "Anvil" proposal. On 18 February, at a meeting of General Wilson with his Commanders-in-Chief at Caserta, it was agreed that overriding priority must be given to linking up the bridgehead with the main effort and subsequently capturing Rome; the projected operation against Southern France (which would eventually build up to ten divisions) should be cancelled.<sup>9</sup> The Supreme Commander communicated these recommendations to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 22 February, and asked for a fresh directive "to conduct operations with the object of containing the maximum number of German troops in South Europe", using the forces earmarked for "Anvil".<sup>10</sup> The request was promptly met. On the 26th General Wilson received a new directive, approved by the President and the Prime Minister, which granted the Italian campaign "overriding priority over all existing and future operations in the Mediterranean" and gave it "first call on all resources, land, sea and air" within the theatre. The whole situation would be reviewed in a month's time.<sup>11</sup> "Anvil" was postponed. The Combined Chiefs considered that to cancel the operation altogether would be strategically unsound and contrary to the decisions reached at Teheran.<sup>12</sup> On 22 March, after receiving from General Wilson a further appreciation of the Italian situation, the British Chiefs of Staff proposed that the assault landing in Southern France "should be cancelled as an operation but retained as a threat." The American Chiefs of Staff concurred on 19 April.<sup>13</sup>

Plans for an all-out spring offensive were agreed upon at a conference of Army Commanders held at General Alexander's headquarters in Caserta on 28 February. The bulk of the Allied force was to be concentrated west of the Apennines. The Fifth Army's sector would be reduced to the sea flank (as far inland as the Liri River), and the Anzio bridgehead; the weight of the Eighth Army would be transferred from the Adriatic to a narrow front covering Cassino and the entrance to the Liri Valley. The administrative problem of maintaining a greatly increased number of formations west of the Apennines was eased by the decision to retain with the Fifth Army all American-equipped United States and French formations in Italy, while all British-equipped divisions—which included Dominion, Indian and Polish forces—would return to the Eighth Army. General Alexander's intention was to take immediate steps to secure the Anzio bridgehead, and to capture the Cassino spur and a bridgehead over the Rapido. The armies would then regroup for a full-scale attack through the Liri Valley, designed to link up with a co-ordinated breakout from the Anzio bridgehead and bring about the fall of Rome.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly on 15 March the New Zealand Corps struck once more unsuccessfully against the ruined town at the foot of Monte Cassino and the broken Monastery on its crest.\* Renewed attacks made no progress, and the termination of the battle on 25 March brought the winter offensive to an end. To the north the third major German assault against the Anzio beachhead had petered out on 3 March, and both sides passed to an active defence of the positions they then held.<sup>15</sup>

The change in the boundary between the Fifth and Eighth Armies came into effect on 26 March, and thereafter regrouping went steadily forward. The vast undertaking could not be unduly hurried, for the troops in both armies, exhausted with the winter campaign, had to be rested, re-equipped and reinforced. The tentative date for the offensive was 10 May, a timing calculated to ensure the best support being given to the Normandy invasion.<sup>16</sup> The schedule of reliefs and moves was completed as planned and the eve of the attack found all formations ready in their new positions (see Map 12). The Fifth Army was holding a sixteen-mile front from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Liri River with two corps—the United States 2nd Corps (Major-General Geoffrey T. Keyes) on the coastal flank and the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais (General of the Army Alphonse Juin) in the mountainous region on the right. The Eighth Army's sector extended for 55 miles from the American right boundary to the Maiella Mountains, but its centre of gravity was well to the left. From the Liri to the southern edge of Cassino was the 13th Corps, with four divisions and an armoured brigade

\* Previous attempts to take Cassino had been made by the United States 2nd Corps on 2 February, and by the New Zealand Corps on 16 February, when the Abbey of Monte Cassino was destroyed by heavy bombing and artillery fire. The fighting during the period 20 January to 25 March has been officially designated the First Battle of Cassino.

(the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade); on its immediate right, ready for the attack on Cassino, was the 2nd Polish Corps, with two divisions and an armoured brigade. In reserve behind the 13th Corps the 1st Canadian Corps, comprising the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, the 5th Canadian Armoured Division and the British 25th Tank Brigade, brought to a total of eight divisions and three brigades the striking force concentrated on a short ten-mile front. The Eighth Army's right flank in the mountainous centre of the peninsula was held by the 10th Corps, and in the dormant Adriatic sector was the 5th Corps, placed directly under the command of General Alexander's headquarters.<sup>17</sup>

During the whole of April the anxious calm which precedes great battles covered the Italian front. But while the troops were resting, training and regrouping, a battle of wits, with Rome as its prize, was being fought between Alexander and Kesselring. The German commander had shown himself strong in defence and brilliant in improvisation, but none too well served by his intelligence staffs. He had been surprised in Sicily, at Salerno and Anzio. The Allied aim was to catch him off balance once more—to hurl an overwhelming force against a sector where it was not expected, and at a moment when his mobile reserves were pinned down elsewhere by some action or a threat of action.

As the German command in Italy examined the changing picture of Allied dispositions—the transfer of the bulk of the Eighth Army westward from the Adriatic could not, of course, be concealed—it was faced with the momentous problem of deciding where and when Alexander would strike next, and which attacks would be diversionary and which the main effort. The fact that the Allied inter-army boundary was now at the Liri pointed to the imminence of a thrust up that valley, but it also increased the possibility of a seaborne operation. The Anzio landing was fresh in Kesselring's mind, and captured documents show that he gave serious consideration to the likelihood of amphibious assaults at Gaeta, at the mouth of the Tiber, at Civitavecchia, and even at Leghorn\* far to the north.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary German records reveal frantic efforts to pierce the Allied cloak of security. Kesselring, his Army and Corps Commanders and their Chiefs of Staff demanded, ordered and pleaded for the taking of prisoners to throw some light on the mystery of Allied dispositions. Hitler attached much importance to the babbling of a Moroccan deserter;<sup>21</sup> much was made of the statement under narcosis of a wounded and captured British officer "that the Allies would strike when the weather was favourable",<sup>22</sup> and radio interception teams

\* on 23 April Kesselring warned the Commander of the 14th Panzer Corps that a landing was to be expected at Leghorn, to cut off the Tenth and Fourteenth Armies from Northern Italy.<sup>18</sup> According to his Chief of Staff, the Field Marshal believed that such an operation could have been carried out without serious interference from German air or naval forces, and would have resulted in the collapse of the entire Central Italian front.<sup>19</sup>

sought to identify units from Canadian regimental numbers carelessly divulged in the small talk of signal units near the front.<sup>23</sup>

In the interception and decoding of Allied radio messages lay the enemy's main hope of gaining the information he so desperately needed; for his air reconnaissance was no longer able to penetrate our areas, reports of agents were woefully scanty, and prisoners were almost non-existent.<sup>24</sup> His resultant interest in our signal traffic the Allied Command shrewdly turned to our advantage, using it as the basis of an elaborate cover plan, designed to deceive Kesselring as to Alexander's intentions.

### Outwitting the Enemy

It was known that among the weaknesses of the enemy's Intelligence were a tendency consistently to over-estimate Allied strength and resources and, from his dearth of experience of amphibious operations, a marked inability to assess accurately the probability of an Allied seaborne assault at any particular time or place. That the Allies might lack the requisite number of landing craft for another major landing in the Mediterranean does not seem to have been realized by Kesselring. Had he known of the concern which this shortage was causing the Allied Commanders and the Combined Chiefs of Staff, he might have worried less about the vulnerability of his long coastal flank.

Playing upon this known sensitivity of the C.-in-C. South-West, Headquarters Allied Armies in Italy devised a scheme to produce the impression that an amphibious assault was being planned to take place on 15 May against the port of Civitavecchia, forty miles north of the mouth of the Tiber. If Kesselring could be convinced of the imminence of such an operation, there seemed a good chance that he might concentrate the bulk of his reserves in that area, leaving the Cassino front with only local reinforcements. The example of Anzio strongly aided the device, for since in January a strong attack on the Garigliano had preceded the landings, the enemy, with his attention attracted to Civitavecchia, might be expected to mistake the opening of the assault in the Liri Valley as only a diversion to a major attack from the sea.<sup>25</sup>

In the plot framed by General Alexander's playwrights the leading role was given to the 1st Canadian Corps. Dummy signal traffic was to create the illusion that the Corps, consisting of the 1st Canadian Division, the 36th United States Infantry Division and the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade, had assembled in the Salerno area to train for amphibious operations. This force-so ran the script-would make the initial landing at Civitavecchia,

and follow-up divisions would be drawn from the formations opposite the Tenth Army's southern front.<sup>26</sup>

On 18 April the headquarters of the formations participating in the scheme began going off the air—the normal sign of an impending move. The silence was broken four days later as Canadian signal detachments began operating from simulated headquarters near Salerno.\* For three weeks they maintained a steady stream of fictitious cipher messages, whose volume was carefully regulated to represent the normal flow of signal traffic between a corps and its subordinate formations. At the same time "Corps Headquarters" ostensibly kept up communications with Headquarters Allied Armies in Italy at Caserta, and the Canadian Section, G.H.Q. 1st Echelon in Naples. To further the deception, on 2 May a signal exercise, in which units of the Royal Navy co-operated, portrayed the rehearsal of an amphibious assault on the shores of Salerno Bay. Messages in code and signals "in clear" based upon a carefully prepared script passed between a "notional" force headquarters and lower imaginary formations to convey the impression that the 1st Canadian Division, supported by two regiments of the 5th Armoured Brigade, was practising an opposed landing immediately north of Ogliastro, a town 25 miles down the coast from Salerno. Two factors made the device the more convincing: the inclusion of the 1st Canadian Division, which because of its part in the landings in Sicily and Calabria was now recognized by the enemy as an assault formation, and the close topographical resemblance which the site of the fictitious landing bore to the coastal area immediately north of Civitavecchia.

While Canadian signallers at Salerno were perpetrating this hoax upon Kesselring's intelligence staffs, in the hilly country south-east of the Liri Valley the forces of the Eighth Army were mustering for the offensive. Elaborate precautions were taken to conceal their arrival from the enemy, for the cover plan would reap its richest dividends if Kesselring could be persuaded that there would be no attack on his southern front until some time after the threatened assault on Civitavecchia had taken place. Accordingly the transfer of the Canadian units from their training grounds was carried out in the utmost secrecy. All moves were made by night, and in each case rear parties remained behind with enough vehicles or tanks to suggest continued occupancy of the vacated areas. The arrival in the new locations was concealed by careful siting and skilful camouflaging, in which art all units had been well instructed before moving. Experts from Army and Corps supervised the work of hiding vehicles and guns in the natural protection

\* "Notional" Headquarters of the 1st Canadian Corps was established at Baronissi, five miles north of Salerno; of the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade at San Cipriano nearby; and of the 1st Canadian Division (on 28 April) at Nocera, ten miles north-west of Salerno. The 36th United States Division opened up on the Canadian Corps wireless net from its real location south of the River Voltorno, having closed communications with the Fifth Army.<sup>27</sup>

of some olive grove, or masking them with huge mottled green and brown camouflage nets realistically garnished with foliage.\* The enormous telltale dumps of ammunition, petrol, engineer equipment and other stores which normally characterized maintenance areas were absent; instead the vast mass of material was inconspicuously distributed along roadside ditches and in the shadowed edge of clumps of trees, where, covered with nets and leafy branches, its presence was effectively hidden from possible enemy observation.<sup>29</sup>

An examination of captured German war diaries and intelligence files discloses that these various deceptive measures left the enemy very much in the dark concerning Allied dispositions and intentions. During the first few days of May Tenth Army Intelligence reported the identification of "Headquarters I Cdn Inf Div at Nocera",<sup>30</sup> and "the concentration of enemy troops in the Salerno-Naples area. Amongst others, 1 Cdn Inf Div. ..."<sup>31</sup> A map of the Allied order of battle as known to the enemy on 12 May (the day after the main attack began) revealed a very confused picture of Canadian dispositions. Headquarters 1st Canadian Corps was unlocated; the 5th Armoured Division was shown under Polish command at Acquafondata, north-east of Cassino;† and the 1st Division was placed at Nocera.<sup>33</sup> The actual situation was very different. General Bums' headquarters was three miles south of Mignano, whither it had moved from Raviscanina on 10 May. The 5th Armoured Division was concentrated beside Highway No. 6 at Vitulazio, a few miles north of Capua. Headquarters and two brigades of the 1st Division were at Sant' Agata, east of Caserta, while the other brigade was still at Lucera completing its training with British tanks.<sup>34</sup>

German intelligence staffs fared little better with respect to other Allied formations. The strength in both the French Corps and the Polish Corps sectors of the front was badly misjudged, and the 13th Corps Headquarters was believed to be at Termoli. In all, the enemy underestimated our strength in the area of the main attack by seven divisions.<sup>35</sup>

Having concluded that the Allies were holding in the rear large reserves, of which at least three divisions were on or near the coast, Kesselring kept his southern front thinly manned, and disposed his reserve divisions along the Tyrrhenian coast to meet the landing which he confidently expected.<sup>36</sup> On 11 May (the day that was to end with the opening of the great Allied offensive) he announced, "I feel that we have done all that is humanly possible."<sup>37</sup> There seemed justification for his complacency. That morning

\* For ease in camouflaging the 5th Canadian Armoured Division's tanks were fitted with five-inch lengths of two-inch piping, welded vertically to the sides and turret. In these could be placed branches appropriate to the local background.<sup>28</sup>

† The German identification of the 5th Canadian Division was based on the capture on 23 April by the 5th Mountain Division of a member of The Irish Regiment of Canada, which was then employed in the 11th Brigade's holding role in the mountains (above, p. 385).<sup>32</sup>



the Commander of the Tenth Army had reported to him: "There is nothing special going on. Yesterday . . . both Corps Commanders [14th Panzer and 51st Mountain] told me as one that they did not yet have the impression that anything was going to happen."<sup>38</sup> In the evening von Vietinghoff departed for Hitler's headquarters to receive a decoration.

### The German Defences South of Rome

The Liri Valley, through which the Allied blow was soon to be struck, formed with its western extension, the Sacco Valley, a natural corridor leading to Rome. Along its northern edge ran the Naples-Cassino-Rome railway, and Highway No. 6, perpetuating the ancient Via Casilina. The main valley is from four to seven miles wide and about twenty miles long. From a point near Ceprano, where the Liri, twisting down from the mountains about Avezzano, is joined by its Sacco tributary, it stretches south-eastward to the junction with the Gari,\* six miles south of Cassino. It is enclosed by rugged mountain barriers. To the south, the scrambled masses of the Aurunci and the Ausoni Mountains intervene before the narrow coastal plain. To the north rise the outlying spurs of the Meta massif, dominated by the towering 5500-foot Mount Cairo (see p. 697). At its Cassino end the valley is flat and open, and extensively cultivated with vine and grain, but westward the ground becomes more rolling and fairly thickly wooded with small poplars and scrub oak. Two water barriers cross the valley floor to join the Liri in its course along the southern edge-within half a dozen miles of the Gari, the *Forme d'Aquino*, a deep gully carrying a pair of small semi-canalized streams; and farther west the wide but shallow *Melfa River*, about five miles below Ceprano (see Maps 13 and 14).

To bar this promising avenue of approach to Rome Kesselring depended on three fortified lines. The first of these, already tested and in some places dented, but not broken, by persistent Allied assaults, was the *Gustav Line*, the rearward position of the *Winter Line* west of the Apennines. North-east of Cassino the massive *Monti della Meta*, and southward the swiftly flowing *Rapido-Gari-Garigliano*, were topographical obstacles which the Italian General Staff had considered could be made into an impregnable position.<sup>39</sup> The *Gustav Line* was anchored on *Monte Cassino*, and in general followed the west bank of the river down to the *Gulf of Gaeta* (although for the last ten miles before the coast the Fifth Army was holding a bridgehead on the right bank about two miles deep). As might be expected, Kesselring's engineers had devoted most attention to the open sector across the mouth

\* This river, called the *Rapido* in the vicinity of Cassino, becomes the *Gari* lower down, before joining with the *Liri* to form the *Garigliano*.

of the Liri Valley. The natural barrier of the Gari--forty or more feet wide and six to eight deep, and flowing with the speed of a millrace--they had reinforced with an extensive network of wire and minefields along the flats on the east bank. The whole of this forward zone could be swept with machine-gun fire from concrete emplacements and semi-mobile steel pillboxes on the German side of the river. These substantial positions were supplemented by deep shelters to protect the defenders against air and artillery bombardment. Most effective of all from a defensive standpoint was the fact that from the heights to north and south of the Liri Valley observers could direct artillery fire on any force attempting to cross the Gari in daylight.<sup>40</sup>

Formidable as the Gustav Line might be, experience had taught the Germans the importance of backing up each forward position with an alternative defence line, at which a large-scale attack might be held after intermediate territory had been surrendered. Accordingly in December 1943 work began on a second position to be known as the "Führer Riegel" (Führer Switchline). The Anzio landing however apparently caused Hitler to doubt the propriety of bestowing his name on defences which might soon be broken. On 23 January, Westphal telephoned the Tenth Army's Chief of Staff: "We may not call the Führer Riegel by that name any more; the Führer has forbidden it ..."<sup>41</sup> Next day the Tenth Army issued an order changing the name to "Senger Riegel"--a somewhat dubious compliment to General von Senger and Etterlin, the Commander of the 14th Panzer Corps.<sup>42</sup> At the same time Kesselring ordered the position to be strengthened, under the direction of his own General of Engineers.<sup>43</sup>

Hinged on the main Winter Line at Mount Cairo, the Adolf Hitler Line (the name used by the Allied Armies) crossed the valley some eight miles west of the Gari, immediately in front of the villages of Piedimonte, Aquino and Pontecorvo. South of the Liri the Line swung south-westward through Sant' Oliva into the Aurunci Mountains, to reach the coast at Terracina.<sup>44</sup> In the mountainous sector on the German right flank there was little need for artificial defences; and the great strength of the Hitler Line was concentrated across the open valley between Piedimonte and Sant' Oliva. Lacking the effective water-barrier which gave the Gustav Line its best means of resistance to tanks (for though the *Forme d'Aquino*, a natural tank obstacle, intersected the Line at Aquino, it diverged thence to the south-east to cross the Liri Valley obliquely), the Senger Riegel depended upon a formidable wall of concrete and steel fortifications to stop the Allied armour and infantry.

The work had been completed in five months by construction battalions, mostly non-German, labouring under the supervision of the *Organization Todt*, builders of the famous West Wall defences.<sup>45</sup> By early May a line of "permanent installations" (so called by the Germans to distinguish them

from the usual type of field defences) ran from Piedimonte across the Via Casilina to Aquino, and thence along the lateral road to Pontecorvo and Sant' Oliva. At intervals of 150 yards or more were forty shell-proof sunken shelters of sheet steel construction with an outer casing of reinforced concrete one metre thick,\* each housing a section of men twenty feet below ground. Immediately adjoining each was a "Tobruk" weapon-pit. This was an underground concrete chamber with a circular neck-like opening projecting a few inches above the ground. A metal track inside the neck provided for the rotation of an anti-tank turret or machine-gun mount.<sup>48</sup> Interspersed between these subterranean bunkers were eighteen specially constructed armoured pillboxes cased in reinforced concrete, each mounting a long 75-mm. anti-tank gun in a revolving Panther turret. It was the first appearance in Italy of this form of defence, although in North Africa the Germans had similarly used turrets from captured British tanks. Skilful camouflage concealed these miniature fortresses from Allied detection until the Line was stormed, when they disclosed their identity with deadly effectiveness and inflicted on the Eighth Army its heaviest tank losses of the Italian campaign.<sup>49</sup>

This formidable row of installations was reinforced by an extensive system of field fortifications, which included concrete shelters, mobile steel pillboxes,† machine-gun and rifle positions (some of concrete, others merely open weapon-pits dug in the ground), and observation posts for all weapons. Anti-tank ditches traversed all favourable approaches, and when the time came to man the Line, a fairly continuous broad belt of minefields and wire stretched across the valley. It had been intended that these field installations should serve at least four divisions in the front line, a requirement which would take, according to the engineer in charge, approximately 400 shell-proof shelters, 2786 firing positions and observation posts, and the same number of dug-outs.<sup>50</sup> Considerably fewer than these were actually completed.

By contrast to this impressive strength, the portion south of Sant' Oliva was much more lightly fortified. The Germans called this sector the "Dora" position (a name which they eventually gave to the entire Line in anticipation of its fall), and they obviously relied on the rock cliffs of the Aurunci Mountains to break any Allied attack which might pierce the Gustav defences. There were no permanent installations, but only fairly widely distributed shelters and weapon-pits cut into the hillside and camouflaged with rocks

\* Major-General Erich Rothe, who was in charge of construction writes of walls two metres thick.<sup>46</sup> The smaller dimension appears in a key to conventional signs used on German engineer maps of the Gustav and Senger Lines, which was issued by Kesselring's General of Engineers on 29 April 44.<sup>47</sup> It was verified by the writer's personal observation.

† This was a steel cylindrical cell, seven feet deep and six feet in diameter, housing a two-man machine-gun crew and their weapon. Only the top 30 inches, which was of armour five inches thick, extended above the ground. They were nicknamed "Crabs", from their appearance when being towed on removable wheels to the place of installation.

and stones. Construction was far from complete when the Fifth Army struck on 11 May.<sup>51</sup>

While the Gustav and Hitler Lines might together be reasonably regarded as an effective block to any Allied thrust up the Liri-Sacco Valley, their security was seriously threatened by the presence at Anzio of a strong Allied force many miles to their rear. A breakout from the bridgehead reaching Highway No. 6 would render the Hitler Line useless as a barrier to Rome. Kesselring recognized the need for a defence line north of Anzio from which in the event of a forced German withdrawal the Tenth and Fourteenth Armies could, side by side, further delay the capture of Rome. Early in March he ordered construction work on the Caesar Line to be pushed forward and completed by 20 April.<sup>52</sup> This line (whose name denoted "C" in the phonetic alphabet, and bore no historical significance) crossed the peninsula from the sea coast west of Velletri\* (a town on the southern slopes of the Alban Hills) to the Saline River, north-west of Pescara. Defences were not designed on the elaborate scale of the Hitler Line, and in many instances were never completed. By May the most developed section was in the vital Valmontone area, where Highway No. 6 cut through the gap between the Alban Hills and the Prenestini Mountains. Eastward to the Adriatic, very little work had been done<sup>54</sup> (in spite of the fact that the Tenth Army was employing in its sector alone, which extended from west of Highway No. 6, 25 construction battalions, twelve of them Italian, and four rockdrilling companies).<sup>55</sup> As events turned out, Canadian forces were to be little concerned with the Caesar Line. The Germans were quite unable to stabilize on this last-ditch position, and before General Alexander's advancing armies reached it Canadian soldiers had already performed their allotted task in the Liri Valley. The bitter fighting in which they broke through the strongest of all the enemy's positions there was to link lastingly the name of the 1st Canadian Corps with that of the Adolf Hitler Line.

The April lull which had enabled the enemy to push forward the work on his defence positions had also allowed him to rest and regroup his forces. He withdrew his motorized divisions from the front lines and disposed them along his coastal flank so that they might build up their strength and be ready to counter the Allied landing which he believed to be imminent (see Map 12). Thus by 11 May, of the three† Panzer Grenadier Divisions which constituted Kesselring's potential mobile reserve, the bulk of the 15th had

\* The first "C" Line, reconnoitred in December 1943, began near Littoria, leaving the Tyrrhenian coast a dozen miles below Anzio. After the Allied landings the alternative position through Velletri was adopted. It skirted the bridgehead to the north, and joined the original position near Avezzano.<sup>53</sup>

† A fourth motorized formation—the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division—was holding the line of the bridgehead under the 1st Parachute Corps of the Fourteenth Army. Weakened by more than 4000 casualties sustained in continuous frontline duty since the first landings at Anzio, it was of dubious value as a mobile reserve.<sup>56</sup>

moved down from the Liri Valley to the Fondi area to protect the Tenth Army's right flank from amphibious attack by watching the sector between the Gustav Line and the bridgehead; the 90th was reorganizing between the northern flank of the bridgehead and the Tiber; the 29th was stationed north of Rome about Viterbo, covering the Civitavecchia area. These last two divisions were being held in army group reserve; in fact all three might be moved only on Kesselring's orders.<sup>57</sup> Of the two German armoured divisions in Italy, the 26th Panzer Division was on the Anzio front, as an armoured reserve for the Fourteenth Army in case of an Allied breakout, and the Hermann Goring Division was north of Leghorn, where it was being held as an Armed Forces High Command reserve, earmarked for France.<sup>58</sup> Thus, when the Allies struck at the Gustav Line, the German mobile reserves were too far away to give immediate help; and in any case none of them was under the control of either army.

The transfer of the Tenth Army's weight to its right flank which had matched the Allied concentration west of the Apennines had brought necessary changes in the German chain of command. The 14th Panzer Corps, on a narrowed front extending from Terracina to the Liri River, controlled the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division on the coast and two infantry divisions (the 94th and the 71st). General Feurstein's 51st Mountain Corps Headquarters was brought down from the Adriatic to take over the sector north of the Liri, leaving the eastern flank, opposite the British 5th Corps, the responsibility of "Gruppe Hauck"—a force directly under Army Command, composed of the 305th and 334th Infantry Divisions, and bearing the name of the former's commander (Lieut.-General Friedrich Wilhelm Hauck).<sup>59</sup> In the plans for the final regrouping of the Tenth Army, Feurstein was allotted four divisions. He held his mountainous left flank from the Maiella to the northern slopes of Mount Cairo with the 114th Jäger\* and the 5th Mountain Divisions.<sup>60</sup> To defend the Cassino front he had General Heidrich's 1st Parachute Division and the 44th† Infantry Division,<sup>61</sup> commanded by Lieut.-General Bruno Ortner.<sup>62</sup>

Misled as to the direction and unaware of the imminence of the Allied attack, the Germans were still rearranging their forces in the Liri Valley when the 13th Corps struck across the Gari on 12 May. The 1st Parachute Division was holding the important Mount Cairo-Cassino hinge, where Feurstein and Heidrich expected the main pressure would come.<sup>63</sup> South of Cassino Ortner's headquarters had relieved the 15th Panzer Grenadier

\* The *Jäger* or light division was similar in organization to the mountain division, but its greater mobility suited it for employment in flat as well as mountainous terrain.

† The 44th Infantry Division carried the honorary title *Reichsgrenadierdivision "Hoch und Deutschmeister"* (originally that given to the Grand Master of the Order of Teutonic Knights). German documents identify the formation by the abbreviation *H. u. D.* as commonly as by its numerical designation.

MAP 12



Compiled and drawn by Historical Section, G.S.

Reproduced by Army Survey Establishment R.C.E.

Division, but his two infantry regiments were still in the mountains to the north (the 134th Grenadier Regiment under command of the 5th Mountain Division, the 132nd under General Heidrich).<sup>64</sup> Pending their expected arrival the line of the Gari from Cassino to the Liri was comparatively lightly manned by the 1st Parachute Division's Machine Gun Battalion, two battalions of the 115th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (which had not accompanied the rest of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to the coast), and two from the 576th Grenadier Regiment of "Blocking Group Bode", brought down from the mountainous centre of the peninsula.<sup>65</sup>

In the early stages of planning General Alexander had affirmed that a force attacking organized defences in Italian terrain needed "a local superiority of at least three to one".<sup>66</sup> By the second week in May skilful Allied manoeuvre had produced just such a disparity of strength in the battle area. Along the line of the Garigliano, from Cassino to the sea, four German divisions opposed an Allied strength of more than thirteen.<sup>67</sup>

### The Assault of the Gustav Line, 11 May

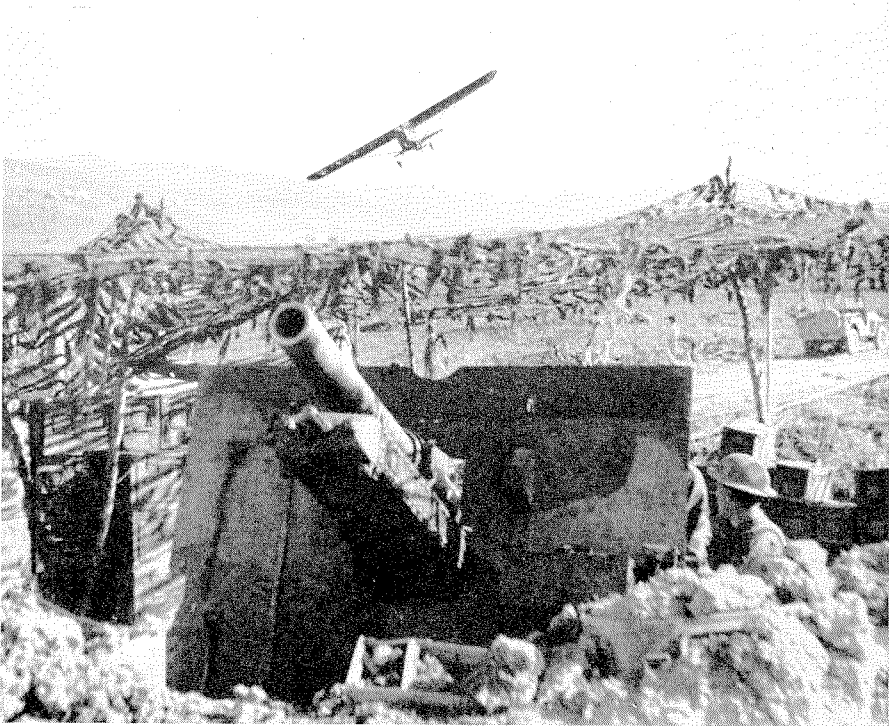
Detailed plans for the Allied offensive emerged from an Army Commanders' Conference held on 2 April at Caserta, and were confirmed at a final meeting on May Day. In his operation order of 5 May Alexander defined the intention of the Allied Armies in Italy "to destroy the right wing of the German Tenth Army; to drive what remains of it and the German Fourteenth Army North of Rome; and to pursue the enemy to the Rimini-Pisa line, inflicting the maximum losses on him in the process."<sup>68</sup> The initial task in this comprehensive programme, which thus envisaged the capture of Rome and a sweeping advance of 200 miles up the Italian peninsula, was a simultaneous frontal attack by both Allied Armies on the night of 11 May. General Leese's divisions were to force an entry into the Liri Valley and advance up Highway No. 6 on Valmontone. On their left the Fifth Army was to break through the Aurunci Mountains and drive forward "on an axis generally parallel to that of [the] Eighth Army but south of the Liri and Sacco Rivers".<sup>69</sup> On Leese's right the 5th Corps, holding its front with minimum troops, would follow up the expected German withdrawal. It was calculated that the launching of these blows against his southern front would draw in all the enemy's resources and weaken his forces encircling the bridgehead. The achievement of this object, to be effected by the time that the second line of defence (the Hitler Line) had been broken, would mark the moment for General Clark's 6th Corps to strike inland from Anzio and join the forces advancing up the valley.<sup>70</sup> The breakout from the bridgehead was to be in readiness from D plus four.

By thus timing his punches General Alexander ensured that each would receive the undivided support of his air effort. Already the Allied air forces were taking full advantage of a supremacy of nearly 4000 aircraft over an enemy strength of 700 (half of which were based in Southern France and Yugoslavia). From 19 March to D Day the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force\* concentrated all its power in Operation "Strangle"-a mighty programme of interdiction against the enemy's rail, road and sea communications south of the Pisa-Rimini line, designed to prevent his acquiring the necessary stocks with which to increase his resistance to the forthcoming ground attack.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, as the Coastal Air Force harassed the sea lines of supply, bombers of the Strategic Air Forces attacked railway junctions, marshalling yards and bridges in Northern Italy. From the last week in March all lines to Rome and the front were continuously cut, so that no through rail traffic approached nearer to the capital than 50 miles, and usually no closer than 125 miles.<sup>73</sup> The tasks for D Day were to isolate the battlefield by maintaining this disruption of German communications; by counter air force operations to keep the Luftwaffe in a state of ineffectiveness; and to neutralize the gun positions commanding the crossings over the Gari River.<sup>74</sup>

The Eighth Army's part in the offensive was formulated at a series of conferences in April and early May.<sup>75</sup> Following Eighth Army practice, General Leese, beyond giving his Corps Commanders a short directive, issued no written operation order. In simultaneous assaults on the Gustav Line the 13th Corps would make a frontal attack across the Gari below Cassino, while the 2nd Polish Corps struck through the mountains to turn the line from the north. Their junction on Highway No. 6 would isolate Cassino and "Monastery Hill" and prepare the way for their capture. The 10th Corps was to secure the Army's right flank and stage a demonstration to delude the enemy into expecting an attack against his thinly held positions in the centre of the peninsula. The Canadian Corps, in army reserve at the beginning of the offensive, would be prepared for one of two alternative roles, depending upon the progress of the battle. If the 13th Corps should succeed in breaching both German lines of defence, the Canadians would pass through and exploit up Highway No. 6 towards Rome. If on the other hand-and Leese considered this the more likely possibility--General Kirkman's formations encountered strong opposition after establishing the initial bridgehead, the Canadian Corps would be called on to cross the Gari and go into action on the left of the British Corps.<sup>76</sup>

\* On 10 December 1943 the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, commanded by Lieut.-General Ira C. Eaker, replaced the Northwest African Air Forces and the Mediterranean Air Command. In the following March the major components of the N.A.A.F. were redesignated the Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Force, Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force, Mediterranean Allied Coastal Air Force, and Mediterranean Allied Photographic Reconnaissance Wing.<sup>71</sup>





#### CANADIAN ARTILLERY AT CASTELFRENTANO

The 17th Field Regiment R.C.A. checks radio communications with a British Air Observation Post (Auster), 6 February 1944.



#### VISIT BY THE EIGHTH ARMY COMMANDER

Lieut.-General Sir Oliver Leese (wearing sweater) arrives at an airfield near Vinchiatiuro on 3 May 1944 to visit Canadian troops. On his right is Lieut.-General E. L. M. Burns, G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps; and facing him Major-General Christopher Vokes, G.O.C. 1st Division.

Although it was not expected that the Canadian infantry would be required before the night of 14-15 May,<sup>77</sup> Canadian artillery and armour would be engaged in the attack from the very first. Less than half a dozen miles east of the Gari, regiments of the 1st Army Group R.C.A. and the divisional artilleries waited in carefully concealed gun areas between the hills for the signal that would start the biggest bombardment programme yet fired in the campaign by Allied gunners.<sup>78</sup> Nearby on the narrow flats beside Highway No. 6 the squadrons of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade\* were assembled ready to help the 13th Corps infantry win the initial bridgehead across the river.<sup>80</sup>

There was an understandable feeling of tension among the Canadian troops, but morale was high. The exhilarating prospect of action was accompanied by a confidence that in winning the approaching battle the Allied Armies would not only strike a disastrous blow at the enemy in Italy, but would contribute materially to the liquidation of Hitler's empire. An inspiring message addressed to the "Soldiers of the Allied Armies in Italy" came from General Alexander on the eve of the battle:

The Allied armed forces are now assembling for the final battles on sea, on land, and in the air to crush the enemy once and for all. From the East and the West, from the North and the South, blows are about to fall which will result in the final destruction of the Nazis, and bring freedom once again to Europe and hasten peace for us all. To us in Italy has been given the honour to strike the first blow.

We are going to destroy the German armies in Italy. The fighting will be hard, bitter, and perhaps long, but you are warriors and soldiers of the highest order, who for more than a year have known only victory. You have courage, determination and skill. You will be supported by overwhelming air forces, and in guns and tanks we far outnumber the Germans. No armies have ever entered battle before with a more just and righteous cause.

So with God's help and blessing, we take the field-confident of victory.

Cloudy skies over Latium on 11 May cleared in the evening, but a thick ground mist in the Liri Valley partly obscured a moon four days past its full. At 11:00 p.m. the thunder of artillery broke along the entire Allied front, as all medium and heavy guns of the Fifth and Eighth Armies began neutralizing the enemy's gun positions with massive concentrations of fire. On the Eighth Army's front 1060 guns of all kinds were deployed;<sup>81</sup> the Fifth Army was using approximately 600.<sup>82</sup> In the 13th Corps' sector the counter-battery programme went on for forty minutes, and then abruptly switched to a barrage from 17 field and four and a half medium regiments, as the 4th British and 8th Indian Divisions attacked across the Gari. At 11:45 the first assault boats were launched into the swirling river, and

\* The 12th Canadian Armoured Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment) had come under command of the 13th Corps on 27 March; its squadrons had supported units of the 4th and 78th British Divisions and the Polish 3rd Carpathian Division north-east of Cassino.<sup>79</sup>

crossings began in four brigade sectors. The Indian Division was on the left; the task of its four assaulting battalions was to secure an immediate bridgehead at, and south of, the village of Sant' Angelo in Teodice (see p. 697), midway between Cassino and the Liri<sup>83</sup> (see Map 13). The three regiments of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade were under command of the Division, but until the Gari had been bridged the assaulting infantry would of course be without tanks. A novel form of support, however, was provided by three troops of the Three Rivers Regiment, which moved up to the east bank and covered the Indians' crossing\* with high-explosive and machine-gun fire.<sup>85</sup>

The attack got off to a bad start. The swift current capsized assault boats and swept many downstream (in one of the 4th Division's brigade sectors all but five boats out of forty had been lost by early morning);<sup>86</sup> and the enemy's automatic and small-arms fire was even heavier than had been expected. Only a shallow bridgehead had been secured by daybreak. The vital business of constructing tank-bearing bridges had begun, but German domination of the 4th Division's precarious holding between Sant' Angelo and Cassino halted the work in this sector. On the left the Indians had been more successful, and the infantry had reached the lateral road which ran along the low escarpment west of the river. Exposed to withering fire, and hampered by fog and the smoke from the dense screens with which each side was attempting to confuse the other, Indian engineers toiled heroically throughout the night preparing launching sites and approach ramps, and bolting together their Bailey sections into the required span. By 8:40 on the morning of the 12th they had completed "Oxford" bridge, about a mile south of Sant' Angelo; but their efforts at a second site above the village had been stopped by the German fire.<sup>87</sup>

Five hundred yards below "Oxford" bridge, at a point where the Gari curved close to the lateral road, a third site, "Plymouth", had been selected; but throughout the night it had remained free from engineer activity. A new experiment in assault-bridging was about to be made. About an hour after the completion of "Oxford" bridge two Shermans of The Calgary Regiment approached the Gari, the front one, with turret removed, bearing the weight of a complete 100-foot Bailey span, which had been constructed in relative concealment from the enemy's fire, 600 yards to the rear. An officer walked coolly alongside, controlling their direction and speed by telephone. Without pausing, the leading tank drove down the soft bank into the bed of the river, the crew escaping just before it submerged. The rear tank thrust

\* The troops of the Three Rivers Regiment had been carefully trained for three weeks for their night fire task, and there seems little doubt that the volume of fire which they blasted across the river helped to keep the Germans' heads down as well as greatly contributing to the morale of the assaulting infantry. The Commander of the 17th Indian Brigade declared that the assistance of the Canadian tanks was invaluable.<sup>84</sup>

forward, and the bridge slid across the back of the carrying Sherman to the far bank. The pusher tank disconnected, and fifteen minutes from the time it left its building-site the bridge was in position\* across the 60-foot water gap.<sup>89</sup>

Each of the two assaulting Indian brigades now had a bridge over the river, and without delay troops of Canadian tanks, the olive branches of their camouflage belying their warlike intent, drove across to succour the hard-pressed infantry. Two squadrons of The Ontario Regiment, supporting the 17th Indian Brigade in the Sant' Angelo sector, crossed at "Oxford", but before they could reach the lateral road half their tanks were bogged in the marshy river flat. During the afternoon two Sherman recovery tanks of the 59th Light Aid Detachment R.C.E.M.E. returned fourteen of these to action,<sup>90</sup> and the Ontarios spent the rest of the day under heavy fire clearing isolated enemy positions south of Sant' Angelo and slowly working their way northward along the river road, which provided the only approach for armour to the village.<sup>91</sup> On the 19th Brigade's front, "Plymouth" bridge was temporarily put out of action by a shell after only four tanks of the Calgary's leading "A" Squadron had crossed. "Oxford" bridge now provided the sole means by which armour could cross the Gari; yet before nightfall the greater part of five Canadian squadrons had reached the German side of what the enemy had regarded as an impassable tank obstacle. ("A" Squadron of The Ontario Regiment remained on the near bank giving supporting fire to the 4th Division's brigade north of Sant' Angelo.) There were frequent delays, as Shermans were trapped in the treacherous footing between road and river, and many were stopped by mines.<sup>92</sup> Those that reached firm ground quickly relieved the pressure on the Indian infantry. On the left flank of the bridgehead the surviving four tanks from the Calgary "C" Squadron, unable to link up with the infantry, who had become widely dispersed in the withering fire, pushed westward 1000 yards to the village of Panaccioni,† playing havoc with the enemy's strongpoints, and engaging transport retreating up the valley.<sup>94</sup>

The general situation across the Allied Armies' front at the end of the first day's fighting was not as favourable as had been hoped. In the Fifth

\* This method of launching a Bailey bridge from the backs of tanks was employed, with various modifications, in subsequent operations in Italy. Its initial success was largely due to the ingenuity and courage of Captain H. A. Kingsmill, an officer of the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, attached to The Calgary Regiment, who developed the bridge after many experiments in the Volturno Valley. His cool efficiency in conducting the launching under heavy fire after he had been wounded by a shell, brought him the M.C.<sup>88</sup>

† This penetration by Canadian armour was recorded with concern by a 14th Panzer Corps Intelligence Report of 12 May:

The deep northern flank of 14 Pz Corps is being threatened by the enemy, who has broken through at S. Angelo and who has deployed tanks able to fire to the south between 53/12 and 53/13 [i.e., along the left bank of the Liri, south of Panaccioni].<sup>93</sup>

Army's sector south of the Liri both the 2nd Corps-and the French had encountered stubborn opposition, and had achieved no break-through. The Eighth Army's position was no better. On the right the Poles after bitterly fighting their way on to an early objective north-west of the Monastery had been driven back to their starting line by very heavy fire and a vicious counterattack. The 13th Corps had gained only half of its initial objectives, and the 4th Division's bridgehead north of Sant' Angelo was still without armour. Nevertheless the Gustav Line had been penetrated, if not very deeply, and there were tank-bearing bridges across the Gari.<sup>95</sup>

General Alexander's Armies had received the fullest support from the Allied air forces, which in spite of intermittent bad weather, had flown that day a record-breaking 2991 sorties. Yet it must be recorded that the earlier programme of interdiction, while it hampered the Germans and strained their motor transport, had not succeeded in isolating the battlefield; research shows that both the Tenth and Fourteenth Armies were more adequately supplied at the start of the May offensive than in earlier or later operations in Italy.<sup>96</sup> Early on the 11th, in a striking gesture of encouragement to our troops and intimidation to the enemy, heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force paraded low along the battle front before delivering 375 tons of bombs on Kesselring's personal headquarters north of Rome and Tenth Army Headquarters\* near Avezzano.<sup>98</sup> Medium and light bombers of the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force (the Twelfth Tactical Air Command, formerly the Twelfth Air Support Command, and the Desert Air Force) concentrated on command posts in the rear of the Hitler Line, while in the forward areas fighter-bombers smashed at German gun positions across the Liri Valley and behind Cassino.<sup>99</sup>

It had been a day of painful surprises to the enemy, but after the initial shock he had acted with his customary resilience to stabilize the situation. It was too early to assess the full scope of the Allied intention-the 14th Panzer Corps looked for "an expansion of the battle through a landing operation",<sup>100</sup> while the Fourteenth Army expected "an attack from the bridgehead . . . at any moment . . . and new landings either between the southern flank of Tenth Army and the bridgehead . . . or at the mouth of the Tiber and to the north of it. . . ."<sup>101</sup> But the penetration had to be sealed, and from midday to midnight a succession of orders emanated from Army and Corps Headquarters for the dispatch of reinforcements to the front south of Cassino.<sup>102</sup> Calling in reserve detachments of company strength from the 5th Mountain and 114th Jager Divisions on his left flank, Feurstein provided a small measure of assistance to his outnumbered forces behind the Gari, and hastily assembled north of Aquino a battle group built around the hard core of two battalions of the 1st Parachute Regiment. This Battle

\* According to the Tenth Army's Chief of Staff, the air raid seriously disrupted the operations of the Army Headquarters, which shortly afterwards joined the 14th Panzer Corps Headquarters at Frosinone.<sup>97</sup>

Group Schulz (so-named from the regimental commander) he placed at the disposal of the 1st Parachute Division, at the same time extending Heidrich's command southward over the 44th Division's area.<sup>103</sup> As a more substantial counter-measure Feurstein demanded and obtained the dispatch of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division's 200th Grenadier Regiment to the Liri Valley. Kesselring, however, was not yet ready to abandon his fear of a landing behind the front, and reserved to himself the decision to commit the regiment\* to action.<sup>105</sup> Events were to show that these hasty but niggardly measures would not suffice to stem the tide.

Early on the morning of 13 May a bridge was completed over the Gari between Sant' Angelo and Cassino, and tanks of the 26th Armoured Brigade crossed into the bridgehead to lead the 4th Division's attack.<sup>106</sup> British tanks and infantry overran Heidrich's Machine Gun Battalion, which was ordered to fight its way back to Battle Group Schulz.<sup>107</sup> Sant' Angelo, keystone of the German resistance in the 13th Corps' sector, fell early in the afternoon. Two companies of Gurkhas stormed the village at midday, after a five-minute bombardment by seven field regiments. Tanks of The Ontario Regiment helped silence the defenders' machine-guns, and at the end of an hour's deadly fighting Sant' Angelo was won.<sup>108</sup>

The way was now open for our armour to deploy on the open ground to the west. An attack towards Panaccioni by two battalions of the 19th Indian Brigade with the support of The Calgary Regiment proved the worth of joint training exercises conducted in preceding weeks on the banks of the Voltumo by Indian infantry and Canadian armour.† Displaying fine teamwork the Canadian Shermans knocked out many a machine-gun nest opposing the infantry's advance, while in turn keen-eyed Indian riflemen successfully directed the Calgaries' cannon fire against German self-propelled anti-tank guns lurking behind heavy foliage or hidden in sunken lanes. In a fierce late afternoon assault the 6th (Royal) Battalion, Frontier Force Rifles, captured Panaccioni, and with it a battalion headquarters of the 576th Grenadier Regiment.<sup>110</sup> That night, while the German 44th Division was reporting a withdrawal of 1500 yards from the Gari,<sup>111</sup> the British 78th Division passed through the Indian bridgehead and attacked north-westward towards Highway No. 6.<sup>112</sup>

The next two days saw a steady enlargement of the bridgehead, but only after much hard fighting. Early on the 14th squadrons of the Three Rivers Regiment went into action with the 21st Indian Brigade in a drive to cut the lateral road which traversed the valley from Cassino to San Giorgio a

\* On its arrival in the Pontecorvo area on the 13th it was assigned to the 14th Panzer Corps' hard-pressed 71st Infantry Division south of the Liri.<sup>104</sup>

† Between 23 April and 8 May each battalion of the 8th Indian Division's two assaulting brigades attended a two-day "infantry-cum-tank" course with the Ontario and Calgary Regiments.<sup>109</sup>

Liri, crossing the river south of Pignataro. Their way lay across a formation of low hills arranged in the shape of a crude horseshoe, which had its extremities at Sant' Angelo and Panaccioni and its toe against the lateral road north of Pignataro. Covered with close-growing vineyards and thick patches of scrub oak, and intersected by narrow ravines and sunken lanes, the Sant' Angelo "Horseshoe" included some of the roughest ground in the Liri Valley.

This unfavourable terrain and the determined resistance of the enemy, who was well-equipped with anti-tank weapons, resulted in frequent loss of contact between armour and infantry (its commitments in the line with the 13th Corps had prevented the Three Rivers Regiment from training with battalions of the 8th Indian Division in the Volturno Valley).<sup>113</sup> On several occasions the Canadian armour outdistanced the Punjabi riflemen and had to return to destroy by-passed German sniper positions and machine-gun nests now pinning the infantry to ground. Progress was slow, but the enemy suffered heavy casualties, and many surrendered to our tanks. On the right two squadrons of the Ontarios, supporting the 17th Indian Brigade west of Sant' Angelo against stem resistance, knocked out a tank, a self-propelled gun and eight anti-tank guns as they methodically cleansed the Horseshoe of the enemy.<sup>114</sup> By midday on the 15th the two Indian brigades were firmly on the lateral road, and before dark two companies of the Frontier Force Rifles had worked their way into Pignataro under cover of high explosive and smoke shells fired from Calgary tanks.\* The garrison fought back bravely, stubbornly resisting the Pathans house by house and street by street. By midnight, however, the town was reported clear of enemy, and the lateral road from the railway to the Liri was in Allied hands.<sup>116</sup> Elements of the 361st Panzer Grenadier Regiment—second of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division's formations to be rushed into the fray—arrived in the Pignataro area too late to save the town.<sup>117</sup>

Of the fortifications of the vaunted Gustav Line, only the battered Cassino stronghold now remained in German possession. South of the Liri General Juin's hill-trained African forces had made sweeping gains through the mountains, and the 2nd Corps was keeping pace in the coastal area. On 13 May the 2nd Moroccan Division had captured the 3000-foot Mount Majo, key to the mountain defences overlooking the Garigliano. Two days later, Algerian troops, striking with amazing speed over the Aurunci Mountains, had entered the Ausonia defile, through which the road passed to Esperia and Pontecorvo.† By the night of the 14th the French 1st Motorized Division

\* Contemporary German accounts of the fighting in the 44th Division's sector on 15 May emphasize (if they do not exaggerate) the strength of the Allied armour. "At Pignataro alone he had advanced on our positions with 45 tanks; south of Colle d'Alessandro [the toe of the "Horseshoe"] with another 45 tanks, and ... in the area of Battle Group Schulz with 54 tanks. A total of 250-300 tanks were observed along the whole front."<sup>115</sup>

† In his *Memoirs* Kesselring seeks to cover his failure to commit sufficient reserves by blaming the 94th Division for assembling in the coastal area instead of in the Aurunci Mountains as he had ordered. "This meant", he writes, "that the Alpine troops of the French Expeditionary Force had a clear path."<sup>118</sup>

had cleared the south bank of the Liri as far west as San Giorgio.<sup>119</sup> As the whole German right flank staggered back from these successive blows, Kesselring angrily demanded a clear picture from every sector of his front, declaring it intolerable that troops could "be in fighting contact with the enemy for two days without knowing whom they are fighting."<sup>120</sup> His failure to realize the full measure of the momentum of the Allied offensive is revealed in a directive to his two Armies on the evening of the 15th, ordering stabilization on a new main line of defence from Esperia through Pignataro to Cassino, to permit "the continued defence of the Cassino massif".<sup>121</sup> But by the morning of 16 May 13th Corps forces were already holding the road which such a line would follow, and a further German withdrawal was imperative.

At 5:25 that evening Marshal Kesselring and his Army Commander discussed the situation on the telephone:

*Kesselring: . . . I consider withdrawal to the Senger position as necessary.*

*von Vietinghoff: Then it will be necessary to begin the withdrawal north of the Liri; tanks have broken through there.*

*Kesselring: How far?*

*von Vietinghoff: To 39 [two miles north-west of Pignataro].*

*Kesselring: And how is the situation further north?*

*von Vietinghoff: There were about 100 tanks in Schulz's area.*

*Kesselring: Then we have to give up Cassino.*

*von Vietinghoff: Yes.*

Within an hour von Vietinghoff had issued directions for a general withdrawal to the Senger Line.<sup>122</sup>

### The Advance to the Hitler Line, 16-19 May

The success of the 8th Indian Division in breaching the Gustav Line from Sant' Angelo to the Liri, and the relatively slow progress that had been achieved on the 13th Corps' right flank and on the Polish front, presented a situation for which General Leese had his plans ready. He decided to commit his army reserve, and continue the battle on a three-corps front. On the evening of 15 May he directed the 1st Canadian Corps to relieve the Indian Division and maintain the advance in the south half of the valley, and the 13th Corps to put its whole weight into a joint effort with the 2nd Polish Corps to isolate Cassino and Monastery Hill.<sup>123</sup> General Burns immediately ordered the 1st Canadian Division forward.

General Vokes had been awaiting these instructions for two days, and he had already arranged with the G.O.C. of the Indian Division, Major-General Dudley Russell, that the take over should be made a brigade at a time. During the night 15-16 May Brigadier Spry's 1st Brigade dug in behind the Indians' left flank, and early next morning began to advance-The Royal Canadian Regiment next to the Liri, and The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment



(now commanded by Lt.-Col. D. C. Cameron) in the vicinity of Pignataro. Both battalions met resistance from troublesome German outposts, and being further slowed down through having to operate off the roads (and thus manhandle their heavy wireless sets, 3-inch mortars and ammunition), gained little ground during the day.<sup>124</sup> On the left the R.C.R., supported by tanks of the 142nd Regiment Royal Armoured Corps (25th Tank Brigade) \*, hotly disputed the enemy's possession of a low hill which overlooked the junction of the Pignataro lateral with the river road and commanded the approaches to the only bridge across the Liri below Pontecorvo. When driven off the feature with heavy losses the Germans employed a favourite trick of raking it with mortar and artillery fire. The assaulting R.C.R. company was forced to withdraw, and nightfall found the battalion with casualties of 20 killed and 36 wounded and still on the wrong side of the empty hill.<sup>126</sup> The Hastings, encountering somewhat lighter opposition, by-passed Pignataro, which was still being cleared by the Indians, and reached positions about a mile to the west of the village. The relief of the Indian Division was completed that night, as Brigadier Bernatchez put The West Nova Scotia Regiment and the Carleton and Yorks into the line north of Pignataro, and Vokes took over command of the sector from General Russell. The Canadian G.O.C. learned from General Burns that the Army Commander had expressed disappointment at the 1st Brigade's lack of progress "in the face of quite light opposition",<sup>127</sup> and he gave orders for a determined advance by both his forward brigades to make contact with the Hitler Line.<sup>128</sup>

The advance was resumed at dawn on the 17th. On the right the three battalions of the 3rd Brigade, each supported by a squadron of the Three Rivers (the unit allotted from the 25th Tank Brigade could not reach the battle area in time),<sup>129</sup> attacked in succession, with the Royal 22e Regiment in the lead, and the West Novas and the Carleton and Yorks following through. They advanced vigorously against moderate rearguard action, for the 361st Grenadier Regiment was under orders to fall back to the Senger Line.† Boggy ground and minefields claimed sixteen of the Three Rivers tanks, but throughout the day infantry and armour worked together in perfect harmony. "It was a real thrill to see the battle-wise 'Van Doos' march straight forward spread out and half crouching", wrote the Three Rivers diarist. "They never dug in." After advancing some three miles, Brigadier Bernatchez did not halt with the coming of darkness, but "contrary to all expectations" of the German defenders<sup>131</sup> pushed the Royal 22e through the Carleton and Yorks on the east bank of the Forme d'Aquino, to secure a substantial bridgehead on the far side of the gully.<sup>132</sup>

\* The 25th Tank Brigade had fought in the Tunisian Campaign, and since that time had been training in North Africa.<sup>125</sup>

† The 51st Mountain Corps war diary recorded that the 361st Grenadier Regiment had been "enveloped from both sides by superior enemy forces with tanks; overtaken and finally encircled."<sup>130</sup>

For units of the 1st Brigade the fighting on 17 May was very nearly the heaviest of any day in the whole Liri Valley campaign.<sup>133</sup> The brigade's axis lay across more difficult terrain than that of the 3rd Brigade, notably the narrow but steep gully of the Spalla Bassa, which formed a tank obstacle midway between the Pignataro road and the Forme d'Aquino. Well dug in on the wooded ridges, remnants of the 576th Grenadier Regiment, reinforced by the 190th Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion,\* fought a skilful delaying action, in which they were strongly backed by shell and mortar fire, and it took the Hastings and Prince Edwards, deprived of the help of their armour, all day to cross the ravine.<sup>135</sup> On Lt.-Col. Cameron's left a squadron of the 142nd Regiment R.A.C., supporting the 48th Highlanders along the river road, was delayed by a minefield at the Spalla Bassa crossing. Before it caught up again with the infantry the squadron was surprised in tall grain by enemy troops whose *Faustpatronen* accounted for five Churchills.<sup>136</sup> In the meantime the Highlanders, fighting forward without armoured support, stormed an enemy 75-mm. position on high ground a mile west of the Spalla Bassa. Gallantly led by its commander, Lieutenant N. A. Ballard (who when his supply of grenades was used up tackled a German officer with his bare fists and forced his surrender), the foremost platoon drove the Germans off the hill, killing or taking prisoner a score of them and capturing three 75-mm. guns and one half-track vehicle. Ballard was awarded an immediate D.S.O.<sup>137</sup>

The end of the day's confused fighting, which had netted the Canadians 200 prisoners, found the 1st Brigade drawn level with the 3rd, overlooking the Forme d'Aquino and within three or four miles of the Hitler Line. An unsuccessful night counter-attack across the Forme against the 48th Highlanders on the Pontecorvo-Pignataro road cost the enemy heavy casualties and two of the 190th Panzer Battalion's 75-mm. self-propelled guns, which were destroyed by the skill and ingenuity of the anti-tank platoon sergeant,† who fired his six-pounder by the light of mortar flares over his target.<sup>138</sup>

This was the enemy's last marked reaction before taking up his stand in his prepared Senger defences. While the Forme d'Aquino obstacle allowed the disengagement of forces in front of the Canadian Division, on the north side of the valley Heidrich's paratroops reluctantly slipped back along the Via Casilina during the night 17-18 May, before the Poles and the 13th Corps could close the gap. Retirement of the 1st Parachute Division had to be personally ordered by Kesselring--"an example", he points out, "of the drawback of having strong personalities as subordinate commanders."<sup>139</sup> On the morning of the 18th the British 4th Division held the rubble that had been

\* This unit had arrived the previous day. Its parent formation, the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division, took over from the 44th Division command of the sector opposite the 1st Canadian Division at 8:00 a.m. on 16 May.<sup>134</sup>

† This N.C.O., Sgt. R. J. Shaw, was awarded the M.M. for his part in the action.

Cassino town, and the Polish standard flew over the ruins atop Monastery Hill.<sup>140</sup> That day the two Canadian brigades pushed forward unopposed another two miles to the fringes of the Hitler Line, while the 4th Field Company bridged the *Forme d'Aquino* for the passage of armour.<sup>141</sup>

In spite of the loss of Cassino the enemy's northern flank was still secured by his retention of Piedimonte, overlooking Highway No. 6 from the lower slopes of Mount Cairo (see Map 15). But the situation on his right was serious. The hasty committal of a regiment\* of the 26th Panzer Division to strengthen the 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment had failed to halt the astonishing drive of the French spearheads through the Aurunci Mountains. General Augustin Guillaume's Goumiers--tough North African tribesmen who excelled in hill fighting†--had taken Esperia on the 17th, and next afternoon Sant' Oliva, less than four miles south-west of Pontecorvo.<sup>145</sup> General Alexander now ordered the Polish Corps to capture Piedimonte at the northern end of the Hitler Line; the French Corps to turn the southern flank by an encircling move from Pico, which they were fast approaching; and the Eighth Army to "use the utmost energy to break through" the defences in the Liri Valley before the Germans had time to settle down in them.<sup>146</sup>

For a short time on the 18th chances looked bright for a break-through by a quick thrust against the enemy's disorganized battle groups. Early in the evening armoured and infantry units of the 78th Division, advancing rapidly through the good tank country south of the railway, reached Aquino airfield, on the edge of the main German defences. An attempt to take Aquino village after dark failed. Brigadier Murphy's armoured brigade had moved up to relieve the 26th Tank Brigade, and in a more deliberate assault next morning by the 36th Brigade, The Ontario Regiment was called on to support the 5th Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment), who were attacking on the right. When the sun suddenly dispersed the heavy morning mist, the Canadian tanks found themselves in the open, within point-blank range of the deadly Panther cupolas of the Hitler Line. The three Shermans of a troop which had approached to within 300 yards of Aquino were rapidly knocked out by a single anti-tank gun. The infantry suffered heavily from shelling and mortaring, and were forced to retire. The armour, ordered to hold its ground (the planned attack on the brigade's left front did not materialize), continued throughout the day to engage all possible targets, protected to some degree from the withering enemy fire by a constant smoke-screen laid down by

\* The 9th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, which moved to Pico from the Fourteenth Army on 17 May.<sup>142</sup> Kesselring placed the whole of the 26th Panzer Division under command of the 14th Panzer Corps on the evening of the 18th.<sup>143</sup>

† The Corps Expeditionnaire Francais had about 12,000 of these troops, who were lightly equipped, extremely mobile, and specially trained in mountain tactics. They were organized into three Groups of Tabors (approximately battalions) of Goums (or companies).<sup>144</sup>

artillery and Engineers with the 78th Division. When at dusk they pulled back to a harbour area east of the airport, the Ontarios had lost twelve Shermans to anti-tank guns, and one by a mine; every remaining tank of the two leading squadrons had received at least one direct hit by high explosive.<sup>147</sup>

In compliance with General Alexander's urging on the 18th the Army Commander had ordered the Canadian Corps to maintain pressure, and to have the 5th Armoured Division ready to pass through should the 13th Corps succeed in breaching the Hitler Line.<sup>148</sup> Late that night General Vokes directed the 3rd Brigade to advance next morning against objectives on the Aquino-Pontecorvo road, behind the main German defences. At 6:30 a.m. the Royal 22e and the Carleton and Yorks attacked with the support of the 51st Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment. Unfortunately much of the artillery originally assigned for the Canadian attack had been switched to support the 78th Division's assault on Aquino.<sup>149</sup> Deciding that insufficient fire remained to cover the advance of two battalions, Brigadier Bernatchez halted the Carleton and Yorks 800 yards short of the Hitler Line and sent the Royal 22e on alone. Lt.-Col. Allard's leading companies were now about 2000 yards south of Aquino, and midway between the Forme and the lateral road.<sup>150</sup>

At first the thick patches of stunted oak trees—from five to ten feet high hid them from the enemy's view, but as they emerged into the open fields they were caught in the relentless fire of machine-guns. A German 88 in a forward position knocked out several of the supporting tanks. During the morning one company worked its way to within 50 yards of the barbed wire, where it came under heavy mortar fire. Greatly increased artillery concentrations were needed if the attack was to succeed; but these were not immediately available because of the priority being given to the 13th Corps' effort. At two o'clock Colonel Allard received orders from the Brigadier to withdraw his battalion. It had then suffered 57 casualties.<sup>151</sup>

### Preliminaries to Operation "Chesterfield"

It was now apparent to Leese that the heavy fortifications of the Hitler Line could be overcome only by a major assault, substantially mounted and carefully co-ordinated. On the morning of 20 May he issued orders for the Canadian Corps to attack and break the Line between Pontecorvo and its junction with the Forme d'Aquino. The 13th Corps would maintain pressure at Aquino,\* and concentrate forward, ready to advance on the

\* The effect of giving the 13th Corps this relatively inactive role on the right flank is discussed on page 452. General Mark Clark, who had urged that both Allied armies should attack with the maximum effort at the same time, was extremely critical of the fact that the Eighth Army's assault of the Hitler Line was made with only one division<sup>152</sup>

Canadians' right once the break-through had been achieved.<sup>153</sup> Allowing 48 hours for reconnaissance and regrouping, the Canadian attack was tentatively timed to begin on the night of 21-22 May, or early next morning, matching a simultaneous breakout which General Alexander had ordered to be made from the Anzio bridgehead.<sup>154</sup> In an early morning instruction Burns gave his 1st Division the task of breaching the Hitler Line; the 5th Canadian Armoured Division would be ready to support the infantry, and to exploit their success by seizing crossings over the Melfa and advancing towards Ceprano.<sup>155</sup>

In a careful study of the problem assigned to him General Vokes had already selected a lane of attack about 2000 yards wide, with the right resting on the *Forme d'Aquino*. The ground in this sector provided a better approach for armour than in the vicinity of Pontecorvo, a factor which the Divisional Commander considered outweighed the disadvantage of being enfiladed from Aquino, on the immediate right of the proposed avenue of assault.<sup>156</sup> The 1st Division's blow would be delivered in two phases, designed to breach the defences and gain as successive objectives the line of the Pontecorvo-Aquino lateral, and the high ground 1500 yards to the west, along which ran a second lateral road, joining Pontecorvo to Highway No. 6. This operation would make a hole in the Hitler Line wide enough and deep enough for the 5th Armoured Division to pass through.<sup>157</sup>

To effect such a breach the G.O.C. originally intended to launch the assault on a two-battalion front, employing the 2nd Brigade under cover of an intensive barrage and supported by two regiments of tanks, while the 1st and 3rd Brigades made feint attacks on the left.<sup>158</sup> This plan was accepted at a Corps conference on the 20th, but met criticism from the Army Commander, who felt that an assault on a frontage of this width, against such strong defences, required two infantry brigades forward, fighting on a three or four-battalion front.<sup>159</sup> Accordingly the 3rd Brigade, less the Royal 22e Regiment, was included in the attacking force. There would thus be ranged across the Corps front three infantry battalions with supporting armour: Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry on the right, with one squadron of the North Irish Horse; The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada in the centre, with the two remaining North Irish squadrons; and on the left The Carleton and York Regiment of the 3rd Brigade, with two squadrons of the 51st Royal Tank Regiment. The Loyal Edmonton Regiment and the remaining squadrons of the 51st would form the 2nd Brigade's reserve; Brigadier Bernatchez would have the West Nova Scotias in support. H Hour was set at 6:00 a.m. on 23 May.<sup>160</sup>

The next three days were busy with preparations for "Chesterfield"-the somewhat ironical code name given to the Canadian Corps operation. While infantry and engineer patrols probed cautiously into the fringe of the German defences, lifting mines and reconnoitring tank routes, the narrow valley

roads between the Gari and the Forme d'Aquino were clogged with the unaccustomed weight of military traffic moving up for the offensive. Artillery staffs worked without sleep co-ordinating fire plans and drawing up the necessary task tables. "For an attack on such a scale as this operation 72 hours' preparation is only just sufficient", the C.C.R.A., Brigadier E.C. Plow, was to observe later.<sup>161</sup> Beginning late on 19 May a continuous "counterpreparation" bombardment of 1000 rounds per hour from 400 guns (which included artillery of the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais and the 13th Corps) crashed down on all known enemy strongpoints.<sup>162</sup>

Meanwhile the outflanking of the German defences on the left by the French had directed attention to a possible weakening of enemy resistance in the Pontecorvo area. By 21 May General Juin's troops had cut the Pontecorvo-Pico road and captured the dominating 1600-foot cone of Mount Leucio, four miles to the west.<sup>163</sup> In its sweep along the south bank of the Liri on the 20th the French 1st Motorized Division had received impromptu aid from the 1st Canadian Brigade, which called down artillery fire and summoned 24 Kittyhawks to attack Pontecorvo.<sup>164</sup> Next day Canadian artillery helped disperse a group of 50 enemy tanks\* heading south towards the town and threatening the exposed French right flank.<sup>166</sup>

That same morning the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards on the left of the 1st Brigade had taken 22 prisoners of the 44th Field Replacement Battalion (*Feldersatzbataillon*),<sup>167</sup> whose poor fighting quality encouraged the belief that the Pontecorvo end of the Hitler Line was lightly held. On receiving a report that French troops were in the part of the town which lies on the river's right bank, Vokes sent Brigadier Spry to the French divisional commander to explore the feasibility of the R.C.R. making an assault-boat crossing of the Liri from the far bank and taking the defences of Pontecorvo in the rear. After discussion with the French the plan was judged impracticable (the German flank was seen to be well protected with machine-gun positions atop the Liri's steep twelve-foot bank),<sup>168</sup> and General Vokes ordered the 1st Brigade to make a frontal assault next morning on the battered town, intending, if the attack succeeded, to ask permission to exploit with the 2nd Brigade and turn the Hitler Line defences from the left. For this reason he deferred until 5:00 p.m. on the 22nd† the regrouping of the 2nd and 3rd Brigades for "Chesterfield".<sup>170</sup>

\* The presence of these tanks was reported by a Canadian O.P. high on Monte d'Oro, south of the Liri. Fire was also directed, on this as on numerous other occasions during the fighting in the Liri Valley, by pilots of No. 654 Air Observation Post Squadron, R.A.F., which had flights under the respective commands of the 1st Army Group R.C.A. and the 1st Canadian Division.<sup>165</sup>

† In reviewing the lessons learned from the Corps operation, Burns noted that the fact that battalions of the 2nd Brigade "were not in occupation of the sector of attack was a considerable handicap. When they finally relieved the 3 Cdn Inf Bde at about 1700 hrs on 22 May, there was not sufficient time for all the recces and patrolling that should have been done."<sup>169</sup>

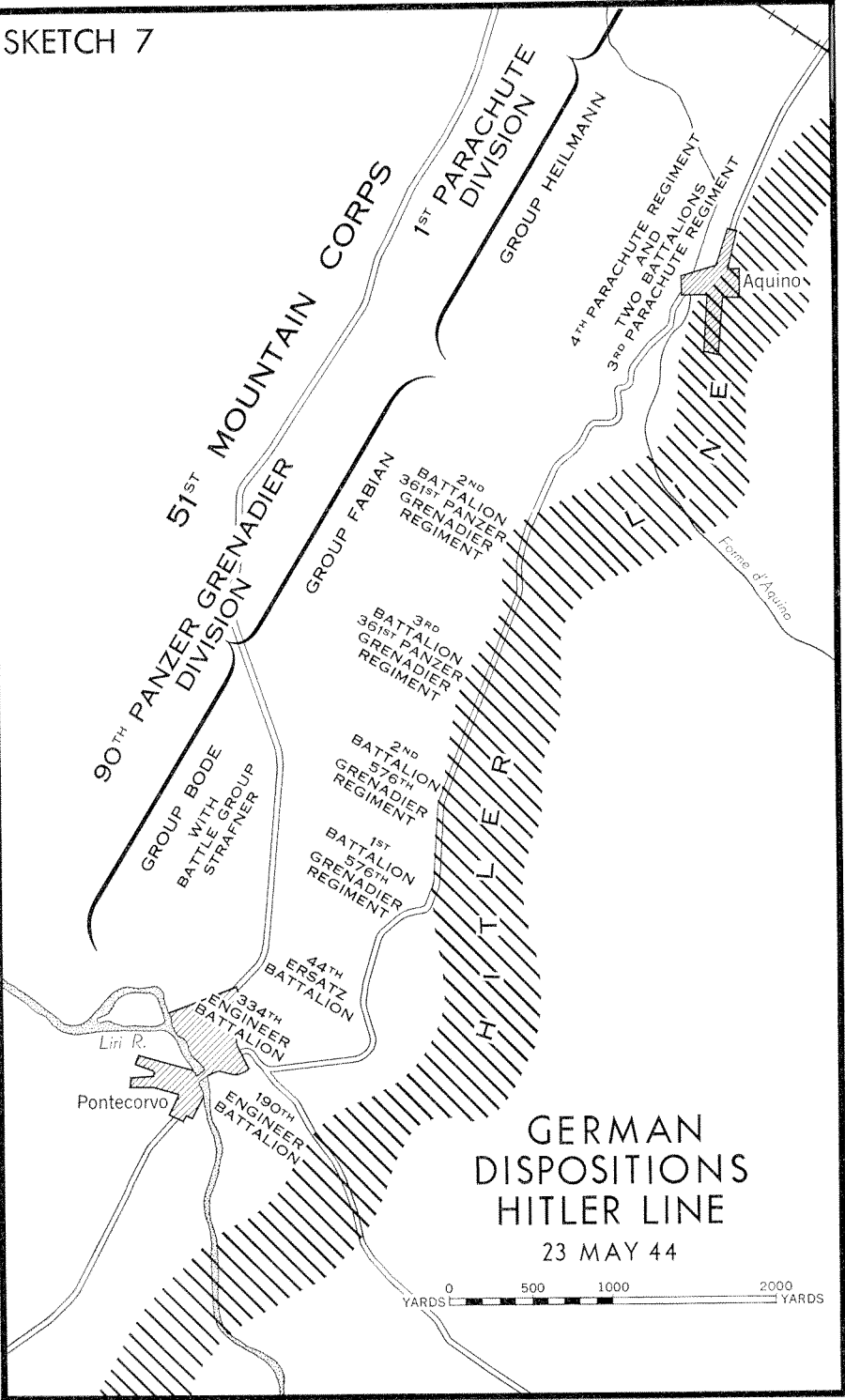
An early morning attack on the 22nd by the Princess Louise and two squadrons of the 142nd Regiment along the Pignataro-Pontecorvo road preceded the main brigade effort. Under heavy fire the tanks and one of the reconnaissance squadrons penetrated the defences to a depth of 400 yards before being stopped by a minefield. The capture of 60 more prisoners from the Ersatz Battalion partly offset the loss of three tanks.<sup>171</sup> At 10:30 the 48th Highlanders north of the road began to fight forward. An anti-tank ditch delayed their supporting armour, from which mines and enemy guns took a heavy toll. When surviving tanks caught up with the infantry in the late afternoon their petrol was about exhausted. By this time Lt.-Col. Johnston's men had driven a wedge well into the German line, and were within 1000 yards of Pontecorvo. But there the advance ended. Surrounded on three sides, and without continued tank support, the Highlanders were forced to consolidate. It was abundantly clear that the enemy was still defending Pontecorvo in strength. The planned follow-through by the Hastings and the R.C.R. was cancelled.<sup>172</sup> On the right a diversionary attack by the 3rd Brigade had reached the German wire, which platoons of the Carleton and Yorks penetrated. The information which they gained about the enemy's defences was to serve in good stead next day.<sup>173</sup>

Their determined stand against these Canadian thrusts earned the 90th Panzer Grenadiers and their commander Kesselring's special praise. Late that evening he requested von Vietinghoff by telephone "to convey my full appreciation to the troops of Baade and Heidrich." "There was not much action today on Heidrich's front", replied the Army Commander, "but Baade fought brilliantly." "Yes", said Kesselring, "in their case one could cry with admiration; in the case of the others\* from rage."<sup>175</sup>

Although the 1st Brigade had cracked the Hitler Line, the breach was not sufficient to justify changing the "Chesterfield" plan—the Army Commander telephoned General Burns and cautioned him "against getting too involved in this subsidiary operation"<sup>176</sup>—and during the evening of the 22nd the infantry and armour assigned to the main assault carried out their reliefs and made their final preparations. Last-minute intelligence about the strength of the enemy's defences was "guardedly optimistic" (later the Commander of the 2nd Brigade reported that "air photos still had not revealed the nature of camouflaged objects in the line", and the presence of tank mines on the right flank was not suspected).<sup>177</sup> A message of good wishes came from the Eighth Army to the Canadian Corps for success in the forthcoming venture. "I am confident", wrote General Leese, "that you will add the name of the Adolf Hitler Line to those epics of Canadian battle history—Sanctuary Wood; Vimy; Ortona. Good luck to you all."<sup>178</sup>

\* This was an allusion to the failure of the 26th Panzer Division to halt the French at Mount Leucio.<sup>174</sup>

SKETCH 7





The pause required by the Canadians to prepare a full-scale assault had given the enemy much-needed time in which to improve his own position. The Hitler Line was by no means as complete as its planners had intended, for confidence in the impregnability of the Gustav defences had led to a neglect of this secondary defence line once its main fortifications had been built. Insufficient firing positions and crawl trenches had been dug for the infantry, there had been no large-scale laying of mines across the front, and fields of fire were restricted by the uncut grain. Now last-minute attempts to repair these omissions were seriously hampered by the intensity of our harassing fire and by the preliminary thrusts which forced the enemy to employ his engineer units in an infantry role.\* From the time of his taking over the five-mile front north of the Liri from Ortner on 16 May, Baade's greatest weakness had been his shortage of infantry. Kesselring's hesitant policy of committing reinforcements by bits and pieces had brought the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division only a few miscellaneous units and subunits-notably the horse-drawn engineer battalions of the 305th and 334th Divisions, which had arrived from the Adriatic Coast on the 17th.<sup>180</sup> This lack of infantry replacements was partly met by the organization of battle groups, in which units of every arm were inextricably intermingled. On 22 May the strongest of these in its infantry component was Group Fabian, which was built around two battalions of the 361st Grenadier Regiment, and guarded the northern sector, opposite the 1st Canadian Division's right flank (see Sketch 7). To hold the southern part of the line Group Bode† had the remnants of the badly hit 576th Grenadier Regiment, and the inferior 44th Field Replacement Battalion; in Pontecorvo itself were two companies of the 334th Engineer Battalion.<sup>182</sup>

All these units had suffered heavily in their fighting in the valley (on 18 May the two battalions of the 361st Grenadier Regiment reported their fighting strengths at respectively 120 and 60 men),<sup>183</sup> so that probably not more than 800 infantry‡ faced the Canadian attack on the Hitler Line. The principal German strength lay in the fixed fortifications and supporting artillery-particularly in anti-tank weapons. Sited among the main armoured emplacements (which were manned by the Panther Turret Company of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division) were three companies of towed 75-mm.

\* The Senior Engineer Officer of the 51st Mountain Corps later reported:

305 and 334 Engineer Battalions which were committed between Aquino and Pontecorvo succeeded during the nights 18-19 and 19-20 May in planting 3000 additional "T" [Teller] and wooden mines, until they themselves became embroiled in the fighting and were committed in the role of infantry, to fight tanks.<sup>179</sup>

† Under Colonel Bode's command was a smaller, group, Battle Group Strafner, composed of three companies from the 5th Mountain Division and other assorted elements, which had sustained severe losses when opposing the 1st Canadian Brigade on the night of 17-18 May.<sup>181</sup>

‡ Estimates of unit strengths on which this total is based were derived from interrogation of prisoners immediately after the battle. They are supported by such statistics as are available from enemy documents.

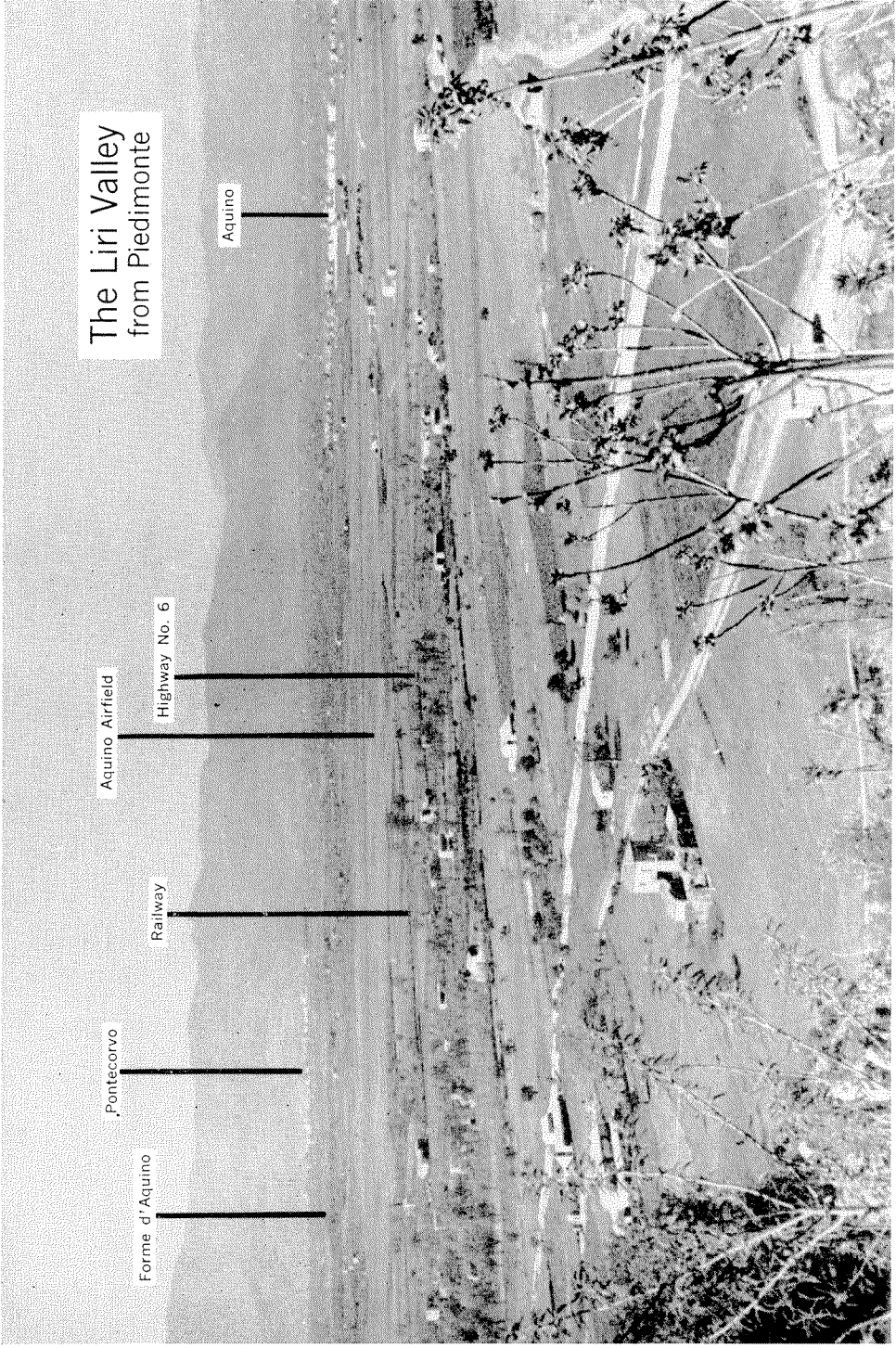


**CANADIAN TROOPS RELIEVE INDIANS IN THE LIRI VALLEY**  
The Carleton and York Regiment relieves a unit of the 8th Indian Division north of Pignataro, 16 May 1944.



**SUPPLIES TO THE FRONT**  
A long supply column moves westward from the junction of the Liri River with the Gari, 21 May 1944. The vehicles are those of the Eighth Army and 1st Canadian Corps Troops.

# The Liri Valley from Piedimonte



Pontecorvo

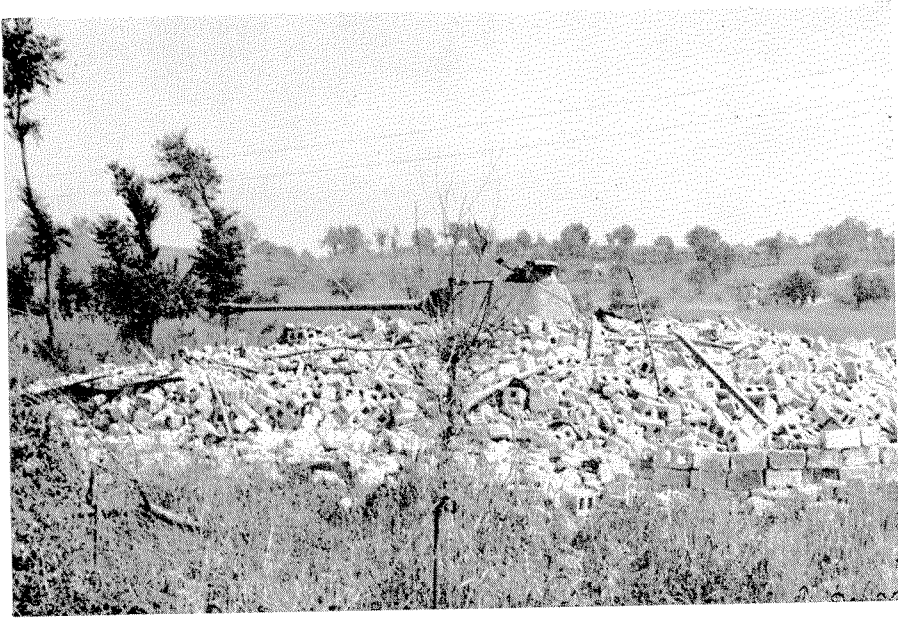
Forme d' Aquino

Railway

Aquino Airfield

Highway No. 6

Aquino



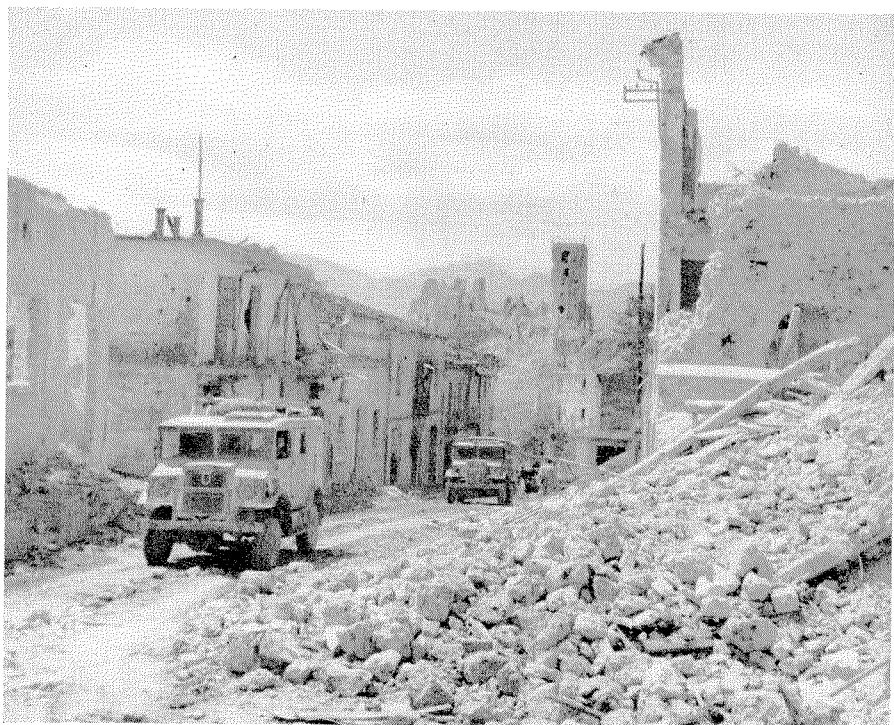
**A GERMAN ANTI-TANK POSITION IN THE HITLER LINE**

This long 75-mm. anti-tank gun mounted in a Panther turret beside the Aquino-Pontecorvo road was knocked out in the assault on the Hitler Line on 23 May 1944.



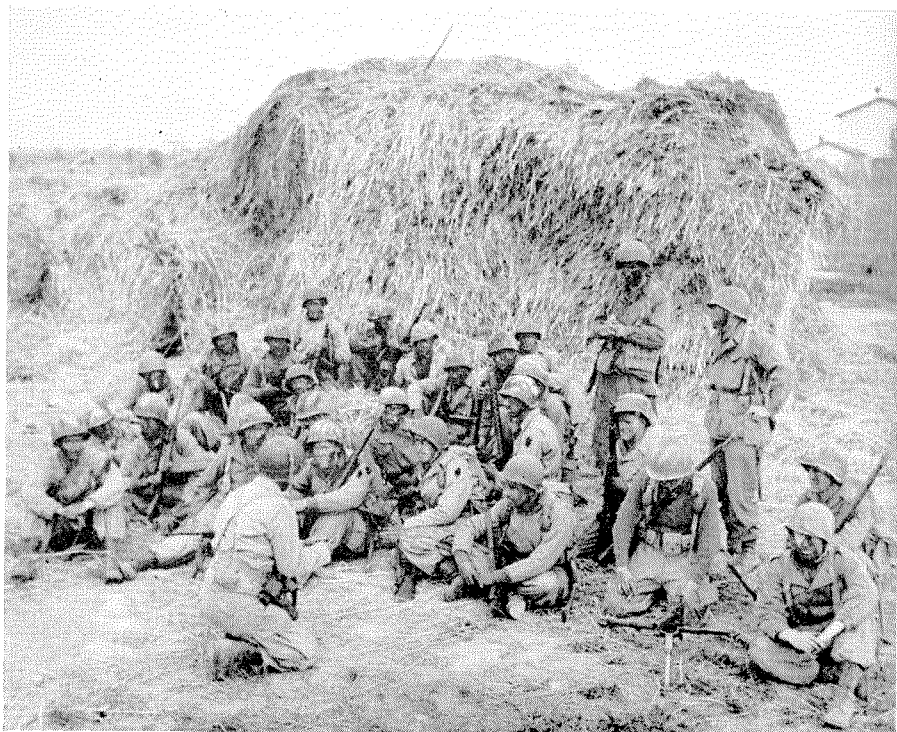
**CANADIAN GUNNERS VIEW A GERMAN WEAPON**

This photograph, taken on 24 May 1944, shows two members of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment examining a "Moaning Minnie" (*Nebelwerfer*) captured the day before in the Hitler Line.



PONTECORVO, 24 MAY 1944

Canadian transport moves through the heavily damaged town the day after its capture by The Royal Canadian Regiment.



PATROL IN BLACKFACE ON THE ANZIO BEACHHEAD

Briefing a patrol of the Canadian-U.S. First Special Service Force, 27 April 1944. Some of the patrol, including the briefing officer, are members of the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion.

guns (from the 114th and 190th Anti-Tank Battalions); while in readiness to the rear were self-propelled guns of varying calibre (including 75s of the 907th Assault Gun Brigade and ten 88-millimetre "Hornet" tank-destroyers of the 525th Heavy Anti-Tank Battalion). By the afternoon of the 22nd the 71st Projector Regiment, with two battalions (each including three four-gun batteries) in the Pontecorvo-Aquino sector and a third covering Highway No. 6, had finished ranging its five-barrelled *Nebelwerfers* on the forward zones across which the Canadian assault must come.<sup>184</sup>

There was indeed some justification for the mutual expressions of confidence with which, two days before "Chesterfield" was launched, Kesselring and von Vietinghoff sought to reassure themselves concerning the positions north of the Liri: "The defence works were excellent; effective concentrations of artillery and anti-aircraft artillery, under the direct command of the Army's Senior Artillery Commander, were ready for action in the area of San Giovanni Incarico [six miles behind Pontecorvo] and on both sides of the Melfa; the two divisional commanders [Baade and Heidrich] were in a class by themselves."<sup>185</sup>

It is important to note that although the French Expeditionary Corps in its rapid advance through the Aurunci Mountains had reached positions behind the Hitler Line, the enemy showed no intention of abandoning the Line across the Liri Valley. A mere thrust from a flank was seldom enough to persuade the Germans to give up a strong position, particularly when, as in this case while the "set-piece" attack was being prepared, strong frontal pressure was missing. In spite of General Juin's penetration between Pico and Pontecorvo, von Vietinghoff still had a defensible flank on the Liri River, and his left flank was securely anchored in the mountains above Piedimonte. Captured documents reveal that at the time of the Canadian assault on the 23rd the Tenth Army Headquarters had not made even provisional arrangements for giving up the Hitler Line; as late as 2:50 that afternoon, when the battle was at its height, the 51st Mountain Corps' Chief of Staff was telephoning von Vietinghoff's Operations Officer urgently requesting directives for a possible withdrawal, "so that the Corps could make preparations that would prevent the loss of arms and equipment. ..."<sup>186</sup>

### The Launching of the Assault, 23 May

Daylight on 23 May was slow in coming, and a thick haze hung over the Liri Valley as the opening rounds of a mighty cannonade struck the German lines. The spectacular fire plan in support of the assaulting Canadian Division was the heaviest ever to be utilized by the Western Allies up to

this stage in the war. The 810 guns\* to be employed were provided by 58 British, French, Polish and Canadian fire units; among these were 18 heavy batteries (7.2-inch to 240-mm.), eleven medium regiments and 20 field regiments (including self-propelled).<sup>187</sup> A ten-minute bombardment of the positions in front of the 13th Corps, carried out at General Leese's instigation to confuse the enemy as to the direction of the main attack,<sup>188</sup> was followed by a crushing counter-battery programme against German gun positions across the valley. At 5:57 more than 300 guns of all calibres began laying down a barrage 3200 yards wide across the attacking zone, and three minutes later the three assaulting battalions crossed the start line.<sup>189</sup>

The enemy was quick to sense the impending attack, and as the Seaforth and Patricias moved through the patches of low-growing oaks which partly concealed their early advance, the full force of his fire fell on them from front and flank. Intense *Nebelwerfer* fire, punctuated with artillery shelling, caught them between start line and wire, and as our barrage passed, German machine-gun crews emerged from their deep shelters and added their vicious bursts to the general fusillade. On the right, the Aquino sector was strongly held by the 4th Parachute Regiment and part of the 3rd<sup>190</sup> (for retention of the town meant denial to the Eighth Army of the valley's main thoroughfare), and many of the early casualties suffered by the 2nd Brigade came from the deadly cross-fire which swept down the open Forme d'Aquino from Heidrich's paratroops on the high banks south-east of the town.

At first the Patricias, whose axis of advance was on the extreme right where the ground fell sharply away into the Forme d'Aquino, made steady progress, and within an hour had closed on "February"-the second of five report lines which at intervals of 300 yards marked off the distance to the first objective. Here the supporting tanks of the North Irish Horse, advancing on a front restricted to 150 yards by the wooded slopes to the north, encountered an unexpected minefield which completely blocked their path. While thus immobilized they came under deadly fire from the previously unidentified "camouflaged objects", which now revealed themselves as Panther turrets mounting 75-mm. guns. They were forced to fall back to the outskirts of the wood.<sup>191</sup> The infantry fought their way forward into a shallow gully branching from the main valley of the Forme, and the two leading companies penetrated the wire in the grainfields beyond. (Wounded Patricias were afterwards found well beyond the wire, and two days later the battalion welcomed back some 30 able-bodied men of the assault companies who had gone to ground in the Hitler Line when organized forward movement ceased.)<sup>192</sup> At this point -direct communications failed, and the only information reaching Lt.-Col. Ware's headquarters came from

\* This number included 682 guns of all types for firing the barrage and concentrations, and a further 128 guns for counter-battery and counter-mortar programmes.

casualties streaming back with tales of platoons decimated and all officers dead or wounded.<sup>193</sup>

On the brigade left the Seaforth Highlanders, commanded by Lt.-Col. S.W. Thomson, were meeting with better success. Under a rain of mortar and artillery fire the leading companies pushed through the wire and doggedly worked their way into the mass of pillboxes and emplacements in front of the Aquino-Pontecorvo road. As on the right, infantry-tank co-operation broke down, when mines halted the two supporting squadrons of the North Irish Horse and gave German anti-tank guns a profitable target. (One gun is reported to have accounted for thirteen Churchill tanks before an armourpiercing shell penetrated its emplacement and exploded its ammunition.)<sup>194</sup> The Highlanders resolutely pushed on alone, though suffering heavily. At 8:40 the Officer Commanding "B" Company, Major J.C. Allan, reported by wireless that he had gathered together the remnants of the four rifle companies, about 100 strong, and had consolidated on the objective.<sup>195</sup> Although later in the morning eleven of the North Irish tanks broke through the main fortifications and by midday reported themselves on their second objective, near the junction of the westerly lateral with Highway No. 6, there was no contact with the hard-pressed Seaforth. Forced by heavy shelling to withdraw, the tanks once more ran the gauntlet of the Hitler Line, from which only four survived to join the squadron in the Patricias' sector. Altogether 41 of the 58 British tanks engaged on the 2nd Brigade front were knocked out during the day.<sup>196</sup>

It was the brigade plan that when the P.P.C.L.I. had reached the Aquino road (which was given the code name "Aboukir")--an undertaking for which 135 minutes had been allotted in the artillery programme--The Loyal Edmonton Regiment would pass through to begin the second phase while the Patricias established a firm flank to the north. At the same time the Seaforth Highlanders were to advance on the Edmontons' left to the final objective.<sup>197</sup> The failure of the assaulting battalions of the brigade to get forward caused frequent postponements in this schedule;<sup>198</sup> but at eight o'clock the Edmonton Commander, Lt.-Col. R.C. Coleman, ordered his battalion, accompanied by a squadron of the 51st Royal Tanks, to cross the original start line,<sup>199</sup> so as to reach "Aboukir" in time for the opening of the second phase, which was then set at 8:45. Advancing along the edge of the Forme d'Aquino, the Edmontons caught up with the Patricias, who were pinned down in the gully and in the open fields beyond. While the tanks joined the halted North Irish squadron, "A" Company of the Edmontons pushed forward into the tall grain which concealed the enemy's wire. To the murderous assault from mortar and machine-gun was added fire from enemy sharpshooters, some of whom were hidden in the branches of the taller trees along the bank. Two sections of the Edmontons breached the wire, but there the effort was



stayed. Wireless communication within the battalion broke down, and at 8:50 a.m. Coleman reported to Brigade Headquarters that he had lost control of his companies.<sup>200</sup> Shortly afterwards he was wounded, and command passed to Major F.H. McDougall. Attempts to get the supporting tanks forward failed, as sappers engaged in lifting the deeply laid box-mines were virtually wiped out. The battle on the right of the 2nd Brigade front had reached a deadlock. Unfortunately Brigadier Gibson could not relieve the situation by exploiting the Seaforth's success on the left, for with the Edmontons prematurely involved in the fighting he had no infantry reserve.<sup>201</sup>

### The Hitler Line is Breached

The 3rd Brigade's attack on the left had followed the intended pattern more closely. The Carleton and Yorks had explored passages through the wire and minefields on the previous day, and, keeping close up to the barrage, they were not greatly troubled by small-arms fire; the greatest obstacle to their advance was the relentless pounding of the hostile mortars, *Nebelwerfers* and artillery.\* Lt.-Col. Danby's right-hand company reached "Aboukir" on schedule, and was soon joined by the remaining rifle companies. But behind them a desperate tank battle developed. The supporting squadrons of the 51st were stopped by mines on an open rise of ground (called the Campo Vincenzo) and engaged from the deadly cupolas of the Hitler Line, as well as by tanks and self-propelled guns which worked their way unseen through the close country on either flank. They lost heavily before they silenced the anti-tank defence and destroyed or drove off the enemy armour.<sup>203</sup> It was now ten o'clock; the tanks joined the infantry on the Aquino-Pontecorvo road, and anti-tank guns were brought forward.<sup>204</sup> The West Nova Scotia Regiment, commanded by Lt.-Col. R.S.E. Waterman, moved up between the broken enemy positions, ready to start the second phase of the attack. But the unsatisfactory situation on the 2nd Brigade's front brought successive postponements, and the battalion dug in, incurring many casualties from the unremitting mortar and rocket fire. In their exposed positions the tanks were the target of enemy gunners on both sides of the breach, and Churchills were ablaze in every company area.<sup>205</sup>

Throughout the morning General Vokes had continued to postpone the second phase until success on the right should enable both brigades to advance together to the final objective. But early in the afternoon it was apparent that the 2nd Brigade's attack had failed. The enemy opposition on

\* A German "Experience Report on Enemy Fighting Methods", which paid tribute to the fighting quality of the Canadian troops, observed however that "the enemy infantry was very sensitive to fire. Our mortars and projectors were especially feared."<sup>202</sup>

that flank showed no sign of diminishing, and our casualties mounted rapidly. The armour was still held up by mines, and no anti-tank weapons had yet reached Brigadier Gibson's hard-pressed battalions. German tanks, counterattacking from the direction of Aquino, were held off only by artillery concentrations.<sup>206</sup> (These were fired simultaneously by large numbers of medium and heavy guns, and their effectiveness in stopping attacks of from thirty to forty tanks bore testimony to the artillery's excellent communications and flexible central control of fire.)

In the circumstances Vokes decided that the best chance of success lay in exploiting the results achieved by the 3rd Brigade. Shortly after midday, with the agreement of General Burns, he released his divisional reserve to Brigadier Bernatchez, and ordered him to attack and capture the final objective. Two squadrons of the Three Rivers moved forward to replace the badly battered tanks of the 25th Brigade, and the Royal 22e formed up in the area through which the 3rd Brigade's assault had passed. The barrage portion of the fire plan required no change; but the protective screen of fire over the objective was altered by substituting a series of concentrations which would also serve as prearranged defensive fire tasks once the objective was gained.<sup>207</sup> Regrouping and the promulgation of the necessary orders within the brigade were completed by half-past four. A little earlier the West Novas, who throughout the day had endured the intensity of the enemy fire on their exposed positions, received the welcome assurance: "Tank reinforcements coming up; attack 1640\* hours."<sup>209</sup>

Rain was falling heavily as Waterman's "A" and "B" Companies burst across the start line, "leaning on the barrage".<sup>210</sup> The attack swept forward so rapidly that the enemy's counter-barrage not only missed the leading West Novas but fell harmlessly behind the reserve companies mopping up in the rear. German reserves, forming up for a counter-attack, were caught in the open by our artillery, and badly demoralized.<sup>211</sup> Shortly after six o'clock assaulting troops reported themselves on the final objective.<sup>212</sup> While "B" Company consolidated on the lateral road, "A" moved forward to the high ridge beyond. But there was still fight left in the Panzer Grenadiers: they counter-attacked with tank support and took many of "A" Company prisoner. These were not long in custody, however, for their captors, apparently ignorant of the magnitude of the Canadian attack, marched them straight into "B" Company's positions, where the tables were quickly turned. The arrival of a troop of the Three Rivers tanks, which had had trouble in negotiating the Rio San Martino (a small stream between the two roads), secured the infantry from further enemy reaction.<sup>213</sup>

To the Royal 22e fell the task of widening the breach to the north and

\* The attack which opened the modified second phase actually commenced at 4:50 p.m., eight hours and 35 minutes later than had been originally planned.<sup>208</sup>

seizing objectives in front of the Seaforth Highlanders. Shortly after five o'clock the 22e began to advance behind the West Novas.<sup>214</sup> Shells of the counter-barrage were dropping thick and fast about them, but they met no small-arms fire. They crossed the Rio San Martino and turned to the right. The opposition stiffened, but by 9:15 p.m. two companies had established themselves on a tongue of high ground midway between the lateral roads, and about 1200 yards north of the positions held by the West Novas.<sup>215</sup> In the mopping up they took several prisoners, and a considerable amount of equipment; at one captured headquarters they came upon twenty unawarded Iron Crosses.<sup>216</sup>

Darkness found the 3rd Brigade firmly established west of the wide gap which it had made through the much vaunted Hitler Line. Its casualties had not been excessive—45 killed and 120 wounded in the three battalions. There was indeed cause for satisfaction. The timely exploitation of the Carleton and Yorks' early success was the crowning achievement of a day which had seen the heaviest fighting which Canadian troops had thus far experienced in Italy. A warm message of congratulation came from the divisional commander, who declared himself "the proudest man in the world".<sup>217</sup>

Throughout the afternoon and early evening bitter fighting had continued farther north, as the 2nd Brigade tried vainly to break through the most heavily fortified section of the Hitler Line.<sup>218</sup> The heroic efforts of the Seaforth in reaching their first objective had been set at naught by the deadlock on the right, and the absence of their expected armour and anti-tank support. About midday a resolute two-man PIAT team had accounted for a German tank with their last two bombs.<sup>219</sup> "It is tragic", the unit narrative recorded bitterly, "after fighting the grimmest battle the Brigade has ever known, being the only troops in the Brigade to gain the objective, and then hanging on all day, that we could not be supported by anti-tank\* weapons."<sup>221</sup> In the late afternoon, shortly before the West Novas opened the second phase of the divisional operation, Major Allan's isolated force was counterattacked by German infantry and tanks. Allan, who was to receive the D.S.O. for his part in the day's fighting, was wounded, but continued to direct a vigorous resistance.<sup>222</sup> With their supply of PIAT bombs exhausted, however, the Seaforth had no means of effectively engaging the enemy armour. Some fought back with small-arms fire from slit-trenches and shelters, and others sought in the roadside ditch some scant protection from the murderous fire. The German tanks lumbered slowly down the road, depressing their machine-guns to sweep the ditches with bullets. The Seaforth

\* The battle narrative of the 90th Anti-Tank Battery records that "it was the considered opinion of the Battery Commander that it was at no time possible to move guns further forward on either the P.P.C.L.I. or Seaforth of C. fronts, as the area between the forward and rear companies was controlled by enemy anti-tank and small-arms fire."<sup>220</sup>

suffered grievously, and 54 survivors fell into the enemy's hands. Allan himself escaped capture by feigning death.<sup>223</sup>

The successful break-through in the centre brought lessening opposition in front of the other units of the 2nd Brigade. By seven o'clock the only hostile fire came from a battery of heavy guns systematically searching the woods beside the *Forme d'Aquino*. By then Ware had collected his sadly depleted battalion, now at a fighting strength of 77 all ranks. This small band of survivors, strengthened by the remnants of a company from The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, stood to in the woods throughout the night, on guard against any enemy counter-attack. The other three Edmonton companies, reduced to 161 all ranks, took over the positions which the *Seaforth* had held so bravely throughout the day.<sup>224</sup>

The day's ordeal had cost the 2nd Brigade dearly; indeed its casualties of 543 (162 killed, 306 wounded and 75 taken prisoner) were unequalled in a single day's fighting by any Canadian brigade during the entire Italian campaign. Afterwards Brigadier Gibson enumerated the lessons which the "set-piece" attack had taught. "The paramount lesson of the battle", he wrote, "was that where the ground, as here, made control and reconnaissance difficult, the reserve on company, battalion and brigade level should have been held well back and committed according to the development of the fight. . . . The headquarters controlling must be well back from the line of contact." He attributed wireless failures, with consequent loss of control, to the fact that "all battalion headquarters were too far forward," with the result that many vital communication links were knocked out. (Officers had made insufficient use of the alternative facilities provided by the various command nets-artillery, anti-tank and heavy mortar, each of which was available for passing back information.)<sup>225</sup> Noting that the majority of the supporting tanks had become casualties before the best axis for a tank advance was known, the Brigadier stressed the need of keeping the bulk of the armour out of action in such a close and heavily defended area until infantry and engineer parties had breached the enemy's minefields in several places and silenced a portion of his anti-tank artillery.<sup>226</sup>

In seeking the causes of the high casualties suffered by the 2nd Brigade, the Corps Commander, as we have already noted, blamed the circumstances which had prevented battalions from carrying out preliminary reconnaissances, and gave his opinion that the narrow frontage on which the divisional attack was made allowed the enemy to concentrate his artillery and mortar fire, with disastrous results to our infantry.\* He referred to the advantage enjoyed

\* On the other hand the narrow frontage enabled our own artillery to fire very heavy concentrations. Thus shortly after midday the C.R.A. 1st Division, Brigadier W. S. Ziegler, called for a "William" target (i.e., a concentration by a full army artillery) to be fired on the town of *Aquino*. On Brigadier Plow's orders, within 33 minutes the target was engaged simultaneously by 19 field, nine medium and two heavy regiments—a total of 668 guns firing 3509 rounds (or 92 tons) of ammunition. This was the first time in the war that a "William" target had been fired by an Allied army.<sup>227</sup>

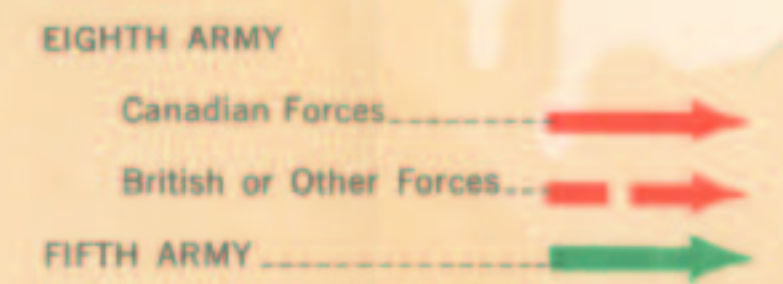
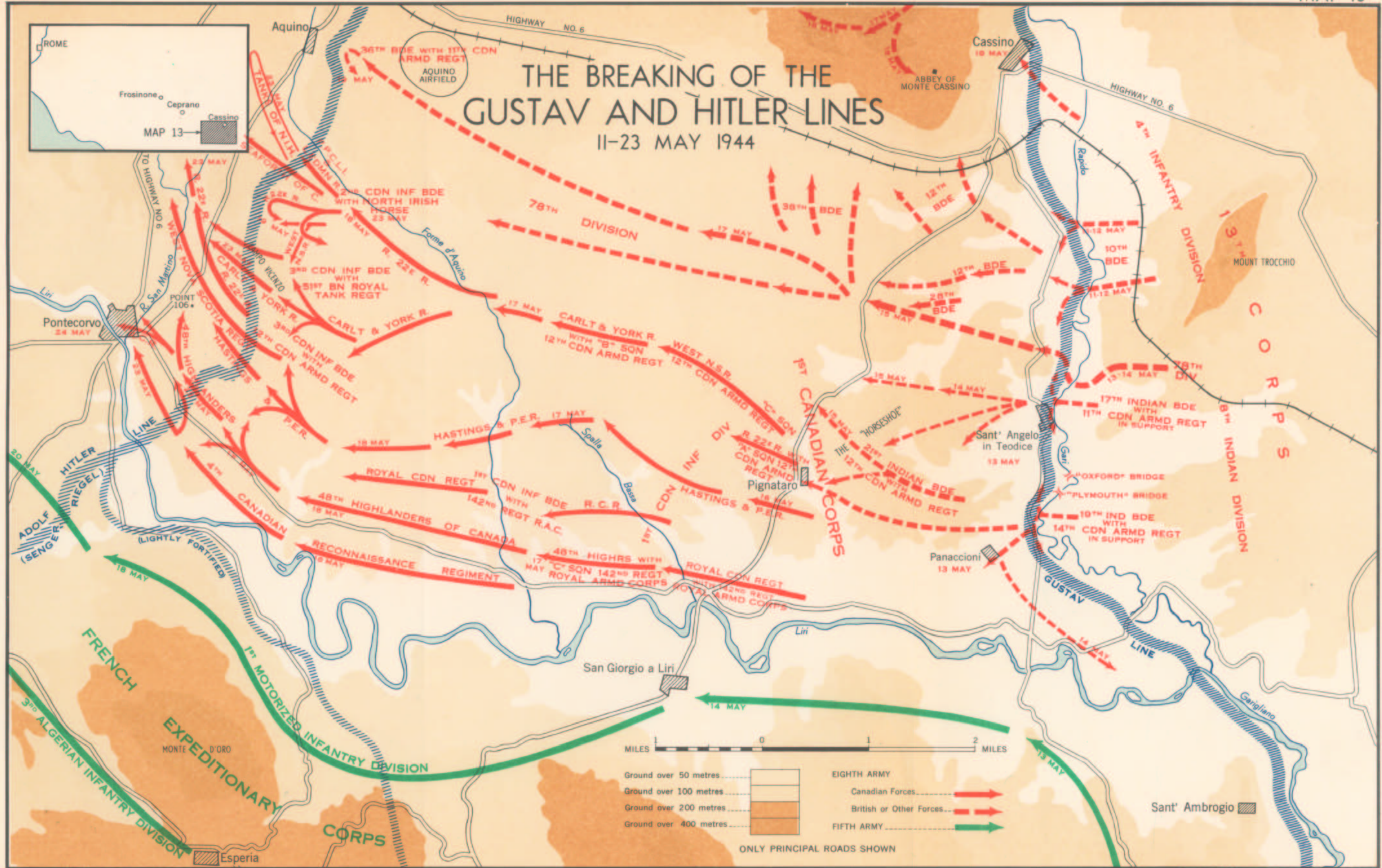
by the Germans in their possession of observation points on the high ground north of the valley, from which they could direct artillery fire, particularly upon the Patricias' area. "It does not appear that we took adequate measures to screen this by either smoking the line of the Forme, or by blinding the enemy O.P.s towards Monte Cairo."<sup>228</sup> In the view of the divisional commander the battle demonstrated the impossibility of adhering to a rigid time-table, and emphasized the unsoundness of tying the advance to an artillery barrage, which he styled "the most inflexible form of artillery support in the gunner's lexicon.... never suited [to] the mentality of the Canadian soldier in Italy."<sup>229</sup> This was not to deny that the weight of fire needed for the break-in was so tremendous as to require control on a carefully prearranged schedule; although, as we shall see, before the Division fought its battles of the autumn a more flexible method of fire support had been devised.

On the Division's left flank, the 1st Brigade had played an important, if less spectacular, part in the day's success. Continuing the uncompleted task of the previous day, the 48th Highlanders, supported by a fresh squadron of tanks of the 142nd Regiment, struck out from its bridgehead and fought bitterly throughout the morning to reach Point 106, a hill about a mile north-east of Pontecorvo, between the main defences and the lateral road. At 2:00 p.m. when the remnants of a company of the Highlanders had gained the top of the hill and a second was pinned down on its slopes, Brigadier Spry ordered the Hastings to relieve the situation by attacking on the right. Lt.-Col. Cameron skilfully committed his companies in successive tasks. With great determination "D" Company stormed through the enemy's defences, carrying machine-gun pillboxes and anti-tank emplacements in bitter hand-to-hand fighting. Much credit for this success is due the acting C.S.M., Sgt. J. W. Loshaw, who led a party into the heart of a German position and personally killed a number of the enemy and forced nineteen to surrender. He was awarded the Military Medal.<sup>230</sup> Through the breach made by "D" Company a second and third company passed in turn, both with excellent tank support. By five o'clock Point 106 was secure and the two battalions were busily engaged in mopping up the disorganized enemy. Early next morning the R.C.R. entered the ruins of Pontecorvo, taking prisoner the remnants of the garrison.<sup>231</sup> Thus ended one more episode in the town's 22 centuries of history. Ancient Volscian city, Roman colony, in mediaeval times it formed part of the wide domains of the abbots of Monte Cassino, and in later days it had acknowledged one of Napoleon's Marshals as Prince of Pontecorvo.

Phase I of the Canadian Corps' Operation "Chesterfield" was now complete. At the close of its hardest day of fighting the 1st Division had driven the enemy from the Hitler Line and sent him reeling back towards the Melfa.

# THE BREAKING OF THE GUSTAV AND HITLER LINES

11-23 MAY 1944



ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN

Throughout the night mopping up continued and by first light on 24 May the whole sector from Pontecorvo to the southern outskirts of Aquino had been cleared. Aquino itself was still in German hands, however, as was Piedimonte at the northern end of the Line. On 20 May a Polish mixed battle group, aided by fire support from the 8th Indian Division's 21st Brigade, had unsuccessfully assaulted the latter hill town, which was held by about 250 members of the 1st Parachute Division. Further attacks on the next two days had also failed, for although the infantry managed to reach the outlying houses, the supporting tanks could not master the mines and steeply terraced slopes.<sup>232</sup>

The cost to the Canadians had been high-47 officers and 832 other ranks of the 1st Division (besides seven officers and 70 men not in the 1st Division's order of battle) were reported casualties in the day's action. But the enemy, with fewer men to lose, had lost more. Over 700 had been taken prisoner, and several hundred others killed.<sup>233</sup> German records confirm these heavy casualties. At 11:30 p.m. on the 23rd the following "Official Note of Fact" was entered in the war diary of the 51st Mountain Corps:

C. of S. reports to Maj.-Gen. Wentzell, C. of S. Tenth Army, that according to reports received from the commander of 90 Pz Gren Div, due to enemy artillery fire lasting for 14 hours, 1 Bn 576 Gren Regt, 2 Bn 361 Gren Regt and Battle Group Strafner must be considered as destroyed. . .<sup>234</sup>

And another entry recorded that after "the enemy's deep penetration on the left wing of 90 Pz Gren Div ... the troops sent in to rectify the situation (one battalion 1 Para Div and two companies 5 Mtn Div) were wiped Out ...."<sup>235</sup> These German reports regarding the effectiveness of our artillery fire were confirmed by a survey subsequently conducted under the direction of the C.R.A. 1st Canadian Division, Brigadier Ziegler. Results showed that the fire had been devastating and had contributed in a marked degree to the success of the whole operation.<sup>236</sup>

Other developments across the battle fronts gave the German command full cause for concern. Early on the 23rd, half an hour after the launching of the Canadian assault on the Hitler Line, the U.S. 6th Corps (commanded now by Major-General Lucian K. Truscott) had struck northward from the Anzio bridgehead towards Valmontone, obtaining complete surprise. On the Fifth Army's main front the 2nd Corps had advanced rapidly along the coast during the day and almost outflanked Terracina; although the French Corps' attempted breakout from Pico towards Ceprano was held with little gain by newly committed troops of 334th Infantry Division.<sup>237</sup> "Contrary to all expectations things do not look good on Mackensen's front", Kesselring telephoned von Vietinghoff that evening.<sup>238</sup> Describing the day as "a critical one", a late entry in the Tenth Army war diary noted the threat presented to the Army's right wing by the Anzio breakout, and referred in guarded

terms to the Liri Valley front, where "north of Pontecorvo the enemy obtains a rather deep penetration. Based on the situation as a whole, a fighting withdrawal to the "C" position is under consideration."<sup>239</sup>

To speed such a withdrawal was the task of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, which had been waiting in readiness to embark on its first offensive action as a division. For the bulk of the 1st Division there was momentary relief from fighting, and an opportunity to repair the damage incurred in the battle. As they inspected the shattered Senger Riegel, where broken and burned out fortifications revealed even more strikingly than those which remained intact the strength and ingenuity of their construction, the wearers of the red patch had just cause for satisfaction. The Eighth Army's recognition of their efforts was warmly expressed by its Commander, who wrote to General Vokes a few days later:

I feel at this stage of the battle I would like to write this letter to thank and congratulate you and all ranks of your great Division on your breach of the Adolph Hitler Line. . . .

Your attack was extremely well laid on, very well supported and brilliantly executed. Your Infantry attacked with that same dash and determination that I have grown always to expect in them since your first operations with pie in Sicily. Your action played a decisive part in our initial victory. The Adolph Hitler Line will always be a worthy battle honour in the annals of the 1st Canadian Division. .<sup>240</sup>



## CHAPTER XIV

### THE END OF THE BATTLE FOR ROME, 24 MAY - 4 JUNE 1944

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#### The Exploitation by the 5th Canadian Armoured Division

WHILE the forces under General Voke's command were breaching the Hitler Line, drawn up behind the Forme d'Aquino the 5th Canadian Armoured Division awaited from the Corps Commander the code word, "Punch", which would launch the second phase of Operation "Chesterfield". This involved, it will be recalled, an advance to seize two successive objectives—a bridgehead over the Melfa River, which crossed the valley about five miles north-west of Pontecorvo, and the town of Ceprano five miles beyond, where Highway No. 6 swung over to the right bank of the Liri. Major-General Hoffmeister assigned the first of these tasks to the 5th Armoured Brigade; on its completion the 11th Infantry Brigade would pass through the armour at the Melfa and continue the advance to Ceprano<sup>1</sup> (see Map 14).

In laying his plans for his armoured brigade's operation, Brigadier J.D.B. Smith had to take into account the limited front on which the advance could be made and the considerable depth to which it had to go. There was also the consideration that German retention of positions along the north side of the Liri Valley in front of the 13th Corps meant that the Canadian thrust would be made with a badly exposed right flank. To meet these difficulties, Smith organized the units at his disposal into two strong striking forces and a reserve group.<sup>2</sup> The first of these, formed from the 9th Armoured Regiment (The British Columbia Dragoons) and The Irish Regiment of Canada (temporarily withdrawn from the 11th Infantry Brigade), he ordered to secure a firm base midway between the Hitler Line and the Melfa, where it could deal adequately with enemy opposition on either flank. From this position the 2nd Armoured Regiment (Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians)), supported by a company of the armoured brigade's lorry-borne infantry battalion—The Westminster Regiment (Motor)—would push forward and seize a crossing over the Melfa. Moving up from the reserve group, the

remainder of The Westminster Regiment would be prepared to enlarge the initial bridgehead, from which the 5th Armoured Regiment (8th Princess Louise's (New Brunswick) Hussars) would exploit towards Ceprano. Each battle group, known by the name of the commander of its armoured regiment (Lt.-Col. F. A. Vokes, of the B.C. Dragoons, and Lt.-Col. P. G. Griffin, of Lord Strathcona's Horse), was supported by a self-propelled battery from the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment R.C.A., a detachment of the 10th Field Squadron R.C.E., and a section of the 7th Light Field Ambulance. Additional artillery support could be called forward from the self-propelled 105s of the 8th Field Regiment R.C.A. in reserve.<sup>3</sup>

At 5:30 p.m. on 23 May General Hoffmeister telephoned his Corps Commander that he considered the situation favourable for the armoured division to begin its advance. General Burns gave the necessary order,<sup>4</sup> and the battle groups of the 5th Armoured Brigade started moving across the Forme d'Aquino. There were unexpected delays. The centre line for the advance had originally been laid to break out through a gap on the extreme right of the Corps front, turning north behind Aquino and thence swinging westward parallel to the railway. But the position of the 3rd Infantry Brigade's breach made it necessary to shift this axis about a mile to the south, and to select a new assembly area and start line.<sup>5</sup> Rain which had begun to fall during the late afternoon rapidly made the tracks forward from the Forme d'Aquino all but impassable to armour, and considerable congestion was caused by tanks of the 25th Tank Brigade returning from the battle to re-arm and refuel. As a result of these difficulties Hoffmeister reported to General Burns about 8:30 p.m. that his armoured brigade could not attack before morning.<sup>6</sup>

The leading tanks of Vokes Force crossed the new start line on the Pontecorvo-Highway No. 6 lateral road at 8:00 a.m. on the 24th. Each B.C.D. squadron was supported by a company of the Irish riding in carriers drawn from the battalions of the 11th Brigade.<sup>7</sup> Immediately behind came squadrons of the 3rd Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment (The Governor General's Horse Guards) charged with the duty of covering the flanks. Guns of the 1st Canadian Corps (230 in number) had fired a preliminary series of timed concentrations across a front 2400 yards wide. (The original programme of support by all the available artillery of the Eighth Army had been considerably reduced by the change of axis and the postponement of the advance; for the guns of the 13th Corps were now required on the 78th Division's front).<sup>8</sup> Almost immediately the Force came under heavy shellfire from the front and from the general neighbourhood of Aquino. About a mile west of the Pontecorvo lateral road it quickly disposed of some German infantry, who were supported by a few anti-tank guns. These were all that was left of the 361st Grenadier Regiment, which, with other remnants of the

90th Panzer Grenadier Division driven out of the Hitler defences, had been ordered to establish an emergency line running from San Giovanni (on the Liri, about three miles above Pontecorvo, and not to be confused with the larger San Giovanni Incarico, four miles farther upstream) to Ponte Regno, at the bend in the lateral road, midway between Pontecorvo and the Via Casilina.<sup>9</sup> The report in the 51st Mountain Corps' war diary of this failure to halt the Canadian advance emphasizes the strength of the attacking column: "At 1000 hours the enemy attacked with 100 tanks, supported by artillery and aircraft, on the boundary between 1 Para Div and 90 Pz Gren Div. After breaking through at Ponte Regno and overcoming the remaining elements of 361 Gren Regt to the west thereof, he succeeded in advancing to the Melfa...."<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after midday Vokes Force had reached its objective in the area of Mancini, a farm two miles north-west of Aquino. On the way a brisk clash with enemy armour marked the first Allied encounter on the Western front with German Panther tanks.\* The Canadians emerged on roughly even terms. They destroyed three Panthers and captured several self-propelled 88s, for a loss of four Shermans. The engagement cost the Irish and the Dragoons a total of 33 casualties; 90 paratroopers were rounded up and sent to the rear.<sup>15</sup>

It was apparent to Brigadier Smith from reports coming back to him that enemy resistance east of the Melfa was not well organized, and he ordered his second group forward to the river at 11:30 a.m., although at that time Vokes Force had not established the planned base. Two hours later Griffin Force had passed Mancini, where the Irish were digging in around the B.C.D. tanks, and was heading across country, deployed for battle. In the lead was Strathcona's Reconnaissance Troop, with orders to press on to the Melfa with all speed. The rest of the regiment moved with "A" Squadron "up", and "B" and "C" well off to right and left of the centre line. Immediately behind the leading Strathcona squadron rode the Westminsters' "A" Company in their White scout cars (armoured 15-cwts. on wheels). As the spearhead neared the Melfa, sunken roads and crosstracks made the going increasingly difficult. Close-growing scrub restricted visibility and movement, and the Westminsters were hard put to it† to follow the armour across

\* Since early in 1944, when it became the first Panther-equipped unit in Italy, the 1st Panzer Battalion, 4th Panzer Regiment, had been carefully kept in reserve. Kesselring, in whom the desire to husband good tanks was strong, had not committed it even against the Anzio bridgehead.<sup>11</sup> On 15 May, however, in response to urgent appeals for help, he agreed to send von Vietinghoff one Panther company from the Battalion,<sup>12</sup> and five days later this appeared in the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division's area,<sup>13</sup> engaging Vokes Force on 24 May. On the 25th U.S. forces encountered Panther tanks near Velletri.<sup>14</sup>

† The regiment's large "portees"--3-ton lorries used for transporting the six-pounder anti-tank guns--were particularly hard to manoeuvre. These vehicles, which had been taken over from the 7th Armoured Division, were subsequently replaced by light anti-aircraft artillery tractors.

irrigation ditches and over ground covered with stumps and fallen trees.<sup>16</sup>

Shortly before three o'clock the Reconnaissance Troop, commanded by Lieutenant E.J. Perkins, reached the Melfa at a point about a mile downstream from the railway crossing. Captured German maps later revealed that this was on the boundary between Baade's 90th Panzer Grenadier Division, which was holding the south half of the valley, and Heidrich's 1st Parachute Division.<sup>17</sup> The bed of the river was here some 50 yards wide, with little water flowing, but to reach it Perkins had to find a tank descent down a sharp 20-foot bank, tangled with saplings and underbrush. After a quick reconnaissance, which revealed many hastily abandoned enemy positions above the river, he discovered a crossing-place. Under intense shell and mortar fire, and with considerable exertion, which included hewing a rough track out of the far slope, he managed to get his three remaining Stuarts\* across the river and on top of the west bank. Within half an hour of their arrival at the Melfa the little party of 15 had taken possession of a house on the west bank of the river, capturing its eight German occupants, and with their tanks in "hull-down" defensive positions were preparing to hold their small bridgehead until reinforcements should arrive.<sup>19</sup>

#### The Battle at the Melfa, 24-25 May

In the meantime "A" Squadron of Strathcona's had reached "Benedictine" crossroads (code names for successive bounds and report lines along the route of advance were chosen from alcoholic beverages), a track junction 500 yards short of the Melfa, and about three-quarters of a mile south-west of Roccasecca Station. One thousand yards downstream was a ford by which the enemy had been withdrawing, and where he obviously expected the Canadians would attempt to cross. Here he had prepared his defences, and with a view to diverting our forces into his field of fire, farther north he had sited some cleverly constructed dummy tanks in the bushes along the bank.<sup>20</sup>

From the area of the ford a number of German S.Ps. and Panthers now engaged "A" Squadron. "C" Squadron, on the left, quickly became involved, and a desperate tank battle ensued. With visibility restricted by the trees and hedges, squadron control was almost impossible, and the action developed into a series of bitter duels between individual Shermans and Panthers. By half-past four the German force had been destroyed or driven across the river; but the enemy had moved up reinforcing armour and guns to the far bank, and a heavy fire fight raged back and forth across the river until dark. When the battle ended Strathcona's had lost 17 Shermans. They

\* A light American tank. in which a mounted .5-inch Browning machine-gun replaced the original turret. Six of the troop's Stuarts were being used to carry engineer parties accompanying Griffin Force.<sup>18</sup>

claimed the destruction of five German tanks,\* eight S.P. guns, a considerable number of anti-tank and other weapons and several vehicles.<sup>22</sup>

Between Mancini and the Melfa Griffin Force had by-passed various elements of enemy infantry, who appeared completely demoralized by the rapidity of the armoured advance and by the weight of our artillery. These were taken care of by the fast-moving squadrons of The Governor General's Horse Guards, whose light reconnaissance tanks in particular showed great dash and initiative in engaging the enemy and preventing infiltration behind the armoured column. All three squadrons fought almost continuously throughout the day under very heavy shell and mortar fire. They knocked out at least five S.P. guns, and killed more than 50 enemy, taking prisoner as many more.<sup>23</sup>

Around Benedictine crossroads and overlooking the main German crossing-place downstream the two battered Strathcona squadrons took up defensive positions for the night. Tired tank crews dug slit-trenches by the light of the burning Shermans that marked the scene of the battle. "B" Squadron remained on the right flank, where during the afternoon it had carried on profitable operations against enemy traffic rolling westward along the Via Casilina. Although the original plan had been for the armour to push across the Melfa at the earliest opportunity, in view of Strathcona's weakened condition and the enemy strength on the far bank, Griffin realized the need for first securing a firm bridgehead. This was a task for infantry, and already Westminsters were across the river.<sup>24</sup>

"A" Company of the motor battalion had reached Benedictine crossroads at the height of the tank battle; a knocked-out Strathcona tank blocking the narrow road had halted the column and forced the infantry to dismount half a mile from the river.<sup>25</sup> Under heavy artillery fire the Westminsters covered the intervening ground in extended line and slid down the steep bank into the shallow stream. As the leading sections reached the far side they fanned out and began cleaning up small pockets of enemy. By half-past four the entire company had crossed, with the loss of only one man, and had joined the little party of Strathconas, who were putting up a stout fight from their limited holding. The company commander, Major J. K. Mahony, set up his headquarters in the farmhouse captured by Perkins; his flanking platoons began to dig in about 200 yards to right and left. On the open ground beyond the river only a few isolated groups of trees and exposed farm buildings interrupted the view from the wooded fringe along the bank. Thus, while the Westminsters could quickly spot any threatening move by the

\* For once German statements of losses on both sides agreed remarkably closely with Allied figures. The war diary of the 51st Mountain Corps recorded on the 24th "embittered battles in the sector of 90 Pz Gren Div" in which "18 enemy tanks were destroyed while we lost four."<sup>21</sup>

enemy, he could only guess what strength-particularly in anti-tank weapons-might be concealed in the shallow Canadian bridgehead.<sup>26</sup>

The first major success came when a PIAT gunner with the platoon on the left knocked out a German self-propelled 88 firing at Strathcona tanks east of the Melfa.<sup>27</sup> Then, about six o'clock, four enemy tanks were seen advancing slowly across the stubble fields towards the centre of the bridgehead, followed by about fifty infantry on foot. Mahony had no anti-tank guns, but he ordered his PIATs to engage the armour at long range with high-angle fire, and as the enemy force came closer it was greeted by a fusillade from every rifle and machine-gun in the bridgehead. The German infantry went to ground, and the tanks, unharmed by a hail of bullets bouncing off their steel hulls, but evidently suspecting a trap, turned and withdrew when they were only 200 yards away.<sup>28</sup>

Within an hour enemy tanks (possibly the same four) approached the northern flank of the bridgehead, where "A" Company's right-hand platoon was partly dug in. The foremost section was overrun, but not before one of the Westminsters, Private J.W. Culling, had single-handedly disposed of a tank and its entire crew. As the tank commander stopped to reconnoitre, Culling rose from his unfinished slit-trench and killed him with a No. 36 grenade. In full view of the remaining enemy armour he lobbed a second grenade into the open turret, killing the driver and expelling the crew. As these ran for cover the cool Westminster shot two of them with his Bren gun and took the third prisoner. Culling received the Military Medal.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, attempts by the platoon in the left of the bridgehead to clear a group of farm buildings which were sheltering an enemy tank and S.P. gun had been unsuccessful; continuous shelling and *Nebelwerfer* barrages were inflicting many casualties on the Westminsters. Accordingly, as darkness fell, Mahony ordered his little band to draw in closer to his headquarters, and so make the bridgehead more compact. By this time there were no stretchers left, and while some of the able-bodied men helped the more seriously wounded back across the river others dug in, loosening the stubborn, sun-baked ground with No. 75 (Hawkins) anti-tank grenades. The anti-tank platoons with the six-pounders which Mahony so desperately needed were still east of the Melfa, unable to cross in daylight because of the small-arms fire which was sweeping the river from enemy positions upstream. With no adequate defence against the German armour, the holders of the bridgehead waited grimly for the next counter-attack.<sup>30</sup>

The remainder of the Westminster Regiment, called forward by Lt.-Col. Griffin, had reached the Melfa about five o'clock. The Commanding Officer, Lt.-Col. G.C. Corbould, ordered "B" and "C" Companies to cross and seize objectives about 2000 yards apart, and to link up with "A" Company from the right and left. "B" Company crossed under heavy fire about half a mile

upstream from Mahony's positions, and by 8:30 had reached the railway at a road-crossing 1500 yards west of the river. The attempt on the left failed. Tank and machine-gun fire from the German side of the Melfa caught "C" Company in the open ground south of the centre line and stopped it short of the river bank. Revising his plan, Corbould sent the company over directly into "A" Company's positions.<sup>31</sup> Shortly after nine o'clock these welcome reinforcements began to filter across the river. They were used to "thicken up" the small bridgehead, which was further strengthened soon after midnight by the arrival of the first of the long-awaited six-pounders. Under cover of darkness the Westminsters lowered the eight heavy anti-tank guns down the steep eastern bank and laboriously manhandled them across the rough river bed and up the far side. The bridgehead now seemed secure until daylight, and Corbould called his "B" Company back across the Melfa from its isolated positions on the right flank.<sup>32</sup>

During the evening the Irish Regiment had come forward from Mancini. They reached the Strathcona area at 11:00 p.m. and dug in for the remainder of the night.<sup>33</sup> Brigadier Smith had planned an early morning crossing of the river, but difficulty in bringing up supporting arms delayed the attack for several hours. Heavy artillery and mortar fire continued to harass the Westminsters, and both companies suffered casualties. Major Mahony was wounded in the head and leg, but carried on.

Shortly before midday on the 25th the Irish assaulted at the main German crossing, while simultaneously the Westminster's "C" Company broke out from the left flank of their bridgehead. "C" Squadron of The British Columbia Dragoons, supporting the Irish across the river, met the full force of the enemy's anti-tank fire and lost seven tanks.<sup>34</sup> But the infantry attack went well. Within an hour both battalions were holding the lateral road 1000 yards west of the river, and the battle for the Melfa crossing was won.<sup>35</sup> Other units of the 11th Infantry Brigade now entered the bridgehead. In the late afternoon The Cape Breton Highlanders, supported by the 8th Princess Louise's (New Brunswick) Hussars, drove forward another 1000 yards, and by nightfall The Perth Regiment had been brought forward on their left flank.<sup>36</sup>

Much of the credit for the armoured division's success in its first operational task belongs to the Strathcona Reconnaissance Troop, which seized the first foothold, and the Westminsters' "A" Company, which secured and held the bridgehead for several hours against an enemy force vastly superior in armoured support and fire power. Failure on their part would have meant "delay, a repetition of the attack, probably involving heavy losses in men, material and time, and would have given the enemy a breathing space which might have broken the impetus of the Corps advance."<sup>37</sup> Strathconas and Westminsters in the bridgehead were given inspired leadership

by their respective commanders, each of whom performed individual deeds of gallantry during the course of the battle. Early in the action Lieutenant Perkins temporarily recrossed to the east bank of the Melfa, and standing in turn on two of the Strathcona tanks, fully exposed to the enemy's shelling, directed fire against a concealed German 88. His brave and skilful leadership in this and a subsequent action (on 30 May, at Torrice) won him the D.S.O., an award rarely conferred upon subalterns.<sup>38</sup>

To the Westminsterers, huddled in their narrow bridgehead, their numbers steadily diminishing under the fire which raked them continuously, and menaced at all times by the grim prospect of being overrun by armour, their company commander was a constant source of inspiration. Having skilfully organized his defences, throughout the entire action, even after he had received painful wounds, he was energetically on the alert, visiting each of his section posts in turn, and personally directing the fire of his PIATs. He "never allowed the thought of failure or withdrawal to enter his mind, and infused his spirit and determination into all his men. At the first sign of hesitation or faltering, Major Mahony was there to encourage, by his own example, those who were feeling the strain of battle."<sup>39</sup> His heroism brought him the Victoria Cross. He was decorated by King George VI on 31 July, when His Majesty, travelling incognito as "General Collingwood", reviewed Canadian troops near Raviscanina in the Volturno Valley.<sup>40</sup>

While the 5th Armoured Division was playing the major role in the exploitation phase of Operation "Chesterfield", a composite force from the 1st Division made an important contribution on the Corps left. On 23 May, while the battle for the Hitler Line was still in progress, General Vokes had been authorized by the Corps Commander to make a thrust forward to the junction of the Melfa and the Liri with his Reconnaissance Regiment, supported by tanks "and his freshest infantry brigade".<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, early on the 24th the commander of the Princess Louise, Lt.-Col. F.D. Adams, led a battle group consisting of his own regiment, two squadrons of The Royal Canadian Dragoons, one squadron of the Three Rivers, and the Carleton and Yorks, along the river road running north-westward from Pontecorvo. Progress was slow as the force engaged small pockets of enemy resistance in a series of running fights throughout the day, and consolidation for the night came two miles short of the Melfa.<sup>42</sup>

At first light on the 25th Adams Force pushed on to its objective. Immediately above its junction with the Liri the Melfa is 500 yards wide and is commanded from the west side by forty-foot cliffs; but the Carleton and Yorks discovered a fording place about 1000 yards upstream. Covered by the guns of the tanks "D" Company made a quick crossing which caught the enemy-remnants of the 361st Grenadier Regiment<sup>43</sup>—by surprise. Then defensive fire began to fall along the river, and the remaining rifle companies suffered heavily as they crossed. About midday a troop of the Three Rivers



tanks joined the Carleton and Yorks in the flat wheatfields west of the Melfa, but shelling and mortaring kept infantry and armour pinned down all day, and casualties mounted. Contact was established with the 5th Division's bridgehead, and towards dusk the situation eased. The West Novas with more tanks crossed the Melfa and established themselves on the Carleton and Yorks' left;<sup>44</sup> by nightfall Canadian holdings west of the river extended from the Liri to the line of the railway. The Melfa had been bridged in each divisional sector, and artillery and supporting arms were moving forward.

On General Burns' right a number of factors had delayed the parallel advance by the 13th Corps, scheduled to follow the breach of the Hitler Line. In the first place, the continued presence of the enemy at Aquino after the Canadian break-through had prevented the 78th Division from moving forward, as planned, on the 24th. It was therefore decided that the 6th Armoured Division should pass south of Aquino along the route which had been earlier assigned to the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade, and advance on the Canadian right flank to capture the foothill towns of Castrocielo and Roccasecca (the thirteenth century birthplace of Thomas Aquinas, one of Monte Cassino's most illustrious alumni). It was arranged that the route would be clear of Canadian units by 2:30 that afternoon. "However", wrote Burns in his war diary, "through the rest of the afternoon and evening, due to difficulties caused by bad roads and stream crossings, congestions and unexplained delays occurred, and the 5 Cdn. Armd. Div. did not get clear of the point where 6 Armd. Div. was to come in until about 2100 hours."<sup>45</sup> As a result the advance of the 13th Corps was postponed for another day.<sup>46</sup>

Early on the 25th patrols found Aquino and Piedimonte clear of the enemy. Members of The Calgary Regiment, mopping up around Aquino, discovered in a dug-out the operation order for the withdrawal of the 1st Parachute Division's Artillery Regiment. The document was relayed back through Intelligence channels; Eighth Army Headquarters received it actually before the enemy had completed the operation.<sup>47</sup> Enemy sources disclose that the order to withdraw his division to the west bank of the Melfa had reached Heidrich only at four o'clock on the previous afternoon, as Canadian tanks were reported at Roccasecca Station.<sup>48</sup>

As the 6th Armoured Division started in pursuit, it encountered unexpected trouble with uncleared mines on the west bank of the *Forme d'Aquino*.<sup>\*</sup> The advance was delayed five hours,<sup>52</sup> and it was late afternoon

\* The information that the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade had been compelled to switch its intended route in this area to the left had not reached the leading units of the 6th Armoured Division.<sup>49</sup> Failure of Canadian sappers to remove the mines on their front was attributed by General Burns to enemy sniping from south of Aquino. "For some unexplained reason", he wrote, "2 Cdn. Inf. Bde. had been withdrawn from the line, and this may have allowed certain German elements who had not been mopped up to come to life again."<sup>50</sup> (The brigade, as we have seen, had suffered heavy casualties--next day P.P.C.L.I. reported only 79 effectives, the Seaforth 280 and the Edmontons 245--and the consequent need for reorganization, coupled with a premature report that the enemy was in full retreat, brought an order from the Brigadier to take up defensive positions in their present battalion areas, about 1000 yards east of the Pontecorvo-Aquino road.)<sup>51</sup>

when the British spearhead reached the Melfa. Infantry and light tanks forded the stream 500 yards south of Highway No. 6; they encountered stern resistance, and all eight tanks were destroyed.<sup>53</sup> The steep river banks prevented the passage of supporting arms, and when darkness fell the small bridgehead was relinquished. Meanwhile two squadrons of The Calgary Regiment leading the 78th Division along Highway No. 6 (while an Ontario squadron covered the division's right) had reached Roccasecca Station. There they halted for the night, while the British division closed up to the river.<sup>54</sup> On the Eighth Army's right flank the 8th Indian Division had occupied Castrocielo during the day without meeting any opposition.<sup>55</sup>

### The Enemy's Plans for Retreat

At midday on the 25th General von Vietinghoff had telephoned Feurstein: "I would like to emphasize that according to the Fuhrer's orders the Melfa line must be held for several days. An early withdrawal is out of the question. Enemy elements that have crossed the river must be thrown back..."<sup>56</sup> The Commander of the Tenth Army was relaying to his subordinate instructions which he had received from Kesselring at four that morning calling for "fanatical defence of the designated main defence lines" and forbidding "the withdrawal of any division and the giving up of any strongpoint without my prior explicit consent."<sup>57</sup> But while commanders in high places might issue peremptory demands to stand fast, those nearer the scene of action knew that such orders could not be obeyed. General Feurstein was aware that Baade's forces were now reduced to only 300 men of the 200th Grenadier Regiment and 100 survivors of the 361st.<sup>58</sup> An "Official Note of Fact" by the 51st Mountain Corps' Chief of Staff preserves the telephone conversation which took place shortly after midday on the 25th.

*Feurstein:* I report as a matter of duty that we will not bring back many men if we have to hold at all costs.

*Colonel-General [von Vietinghoff]:* We must accept that risk; Army Group has given explicit orders to hold the line for several days.

*Feurstein:* I report to the Colonel-General that the enemy has already crossed the Melfa in two places and that no forces are available to rectify the situation.<sup>59</sup>

Vietinghoff's attempts to convey to the Army Group Commander the hopelessness of the situation failed. In a prolonged and painful telephone conversation next day the two wrestled with the problem of reconciling reality with Hitler's orders. Kesselring could not be convinced. "It is the Fuhrer's explicit order and also my belief that we must bleed the enemy to exhaustion by hard fighting", he declared. "You have always been optimistic; why has your attitude changed?"<sup>60</sup>

During the early phases of the Allied offensive the High Command's concern had been mainly with events in the Anzio bridgehead, for it was from that quarter that Hitler expected the major blow to be struck. Thus, on 22 May he had approved the transfer of the Hermann Goring Panzer Division to the Rome area, and its replacement at Leghorn by the 20th Luftwaffe Field Division from Denmark (where the likelihood of an Allied attack was assessed as being "far lower than that of a landing on the Ligurian coast").<sup>61</sup> Beyond this action the Supreme Command had taken no further hand in the direct control of operations. It was in general agreement with the conduct of the battle by Kesselring, whose immediate concern was to frustrate the Allied efforts on the southern front without having to withdraw all the main reserves needed to cope with a possible new landing.<sup>62</sup> But after the surprise of the Canadian break-through in the Senger position on the 23rd, the deterioration of the situation farther south in the sector of the 14th Panzer Corps, and the breakout from the bridgehead, Kesselring did not lack instructions from Hitler. As we have seen, these sounded the familiar Hitlerian keynote of clinging to ground. "Only a short while ago", Westphal told von Vietinghoff on the afternoon of the 24th, "Jodl rang up: 'The Fuhrer absolutely demands that any withdrawal be carried out step by step and with the consent of Army Group.' If at all possible, no withdrawal is to be made without the personal concurrence of the Fuhrer."<sup>63</sup>

By the night of 25 May a crisis had developed on the Fourteenth Army's front. During the day the 6th Corps, having overrun two German divisions in its path, had captured Cisterna, midway between Anzio and Valmontone, and was pushing a spearhead northward towards the latter town (see Map 15). On Truscott's right flank a task force had made contact with troops of General Keyes' 2nd Corps advancing along the coast from Terracina.<sup>64</sup> As a result of these developments, the Fourteenth Army and the right wing of the Tenth Army were now deployed along a great straggling curve which was quite unsuited for protracted defence. Should the Fifth Army succeed in blocking the German line of retreat by cutting the Via Casilina at Valmontone, there was the danger that a rapid advance by the Eighth Army might lead to the encirclement of the 14th Panzer Corps.\* To the Armed Forces Operations Staff it was quite apparent that the retirement of the entire front to the Caesar position could not long be postponed.<sup>66</sup> Plans were made for a methodical and economical withdrawal. While the northern wing of the Fourteenth Army held firm between Velletri and the sea, von Mackensen's left wing would pivot about Cisterna, and with the Tenth Army's right fall back in a delaying action, nursing and saving their

\* On the afternoon of 25 May, however, General Clark decided on his own volition to shift the main axis of the 6th Corps away from Valmontone to the western side of the Alban Hills. The result was that Valmontone did not fall until 1 June, and a great opportunity to cut off and destroy the Tenth Army's right wing was lost.<sup>65</sup>

troops to the utmost so as to gain all possible time for the occupation and improvement of the "C" position. To block the vital Valmontone gap, the most seriously threatened part of the line, it was decided to move the 356th Infantry Division down from the Genoa area, replacing it with a division (the 42nd Jager) from the Balkans. The remnants of the 71st and 94th Infantry Divisions would be put into the line immediately, and brought up to strength.<sup>67</sup>

Hitler approved these proposals, and appropriate instructions reached Kesselring on the 25th, and again on the 26th. He was to defend the "C" position at all costs. The immediate object was not however (as Kesselring forcibly reminded his Army Commanders) "to reach the Caesar line soon; rather, whilst stubbornly holding the sectors designated from time to time, to inflict such heavy casualties on the enemy that his fighting potentiality will be broken even before the Caesar line is reached."<sup>68</sup> Construction work on the line itself was to be accelerated by committing not only all the labour forces already on hand, but also the security garrison, the able-bodied natives living in the neighbourhood, and, if the opportunity arose, Organization Todt forces withdrawn from other sectors with all available equipment.<sup>69</sup>

In the early hours of the 27th Kesselring, after discussion with his Army Commanders, designated a number of lines of defence to which successive withdrawals might be made only at his express orders.<sup>70</sup> In the Tenth Army zone the first of these lines (which were from six to ten miles apart) crossed the Via Casilina behind Ceprano, and followed thence the west bank of the Liri into the mountains north of Arce; the second cut the highway a few miles south-east of Frosinone, along the line Ceccano-ArnaraRipi; a third ran through Ferentino to Alatri. A decisive and prolonged stand was to be made at the final position before Valmontone--a line running east and west through Anagni.<sup>71</sup>

The German commanders chose shrewdly when they sited the first of their delaying lines in the Ceprano area. Here the main valley divides into the valley of the upper Liri, leading northward to Sara and Avezzano, and that of the Sacco, which runs north-westward towards Rome. The right wing of the Tenth Army was pulling back through both these avenues of escape, following Highway No. 82 to Sora and Highway No. 6 to Frosinone. Natural obstacles gave the Germans a chance 'to block the mouth of each. At the north side of the main Liri Valley the Via Casilina passed through a narrow defile between commanding hills before it joined Highway No. 82 at Arce; on the south side the entrance to the Sacco Valley was blocked by the upper Liri, which the main road bridged at Ceprano, and the Isoletta Reservoir, an artificial lake created by damming the Liri below the confluence of the two streams. Thus the Eighth Army was faced with a defile to be forced on the one side and a serious water obstacle on the other.<sup>72</sup>

## Bridgeheads Over the Liri, 26-28 May

On the morning of 26 May General Burns issued orders for a rapid exploitation along the general axis Ceprano-Pofi-Frosinone. The direction of the advance turned almost due west. The first objective was the lateral road west of the Liri joining Ceprano with its railway station. Gaining this line would complete the second phase of "Chesterfield" (see above, page 427). The infantry division would then pass into reserve, while the 5th Armoured Division pushed on alone to the north and south road which connected Pofi with the railway.<sup>73</sup>

At 7:00 a.m. General Hoffmeister sent his infantry brigade forward from the Melfa. The Commander, Brigadier T.E.D'O. Snow, used two battalions -The Cape Breton Highlanders on the right and The Perth Regiment (now commanded by Lt.-Col. J. S. H. Lind) on the left, each supported by a squadron of the New Brunswick Hussars. Progress was slow. The difficulties of negotiating the rough and narrow tracks through the thick bush were aggravated by the presence of numerous mines and booby traps, and it was necessary to build several diversions for tanks and vehicles. There was continuous mortaring and shelling over the area, and from the uncleared woods on the high ground to the north enemy snipers maintained troublesome fire.<sup>74</sup> These conditions might have presented no serious problem to seasoned troops, but the two battalions of the 11th Brigade, lacking the experience of the veteran units of the 1st Division, allowed their advance to be delayed unnecessarily.<sup>75</sup> It took a sharp attack about midday by the Cape Bretons with artillery support to win a crossing for the armour over the railway. Then the tanks ran short of petrol, and while they retired to refuel, both infantry battalions remained halted for most of the afternoon.<sup>76</sup> As darkness fell, the Highlanders and the Perths consolidated on high ground a mile east of Ceprano and prepared to resist the counter-attack which the long exposed right flank in front of the 78th Division seemed to invite. The brigade had then advanced about four miles and had suffered casualties of 22 killed and 54 wounded-most of these by shellfire. Urged by the divisional commander to keep on pressing, Brigadier Snow ordered the C.O. of the Irish Regiment, Lt.-Col. R. C. Clark, to send two companies forward to the Liri.<sup>77</sup> These found all bridges destroyed. During the night patrols swam the river and reported Ceprano free of enemy.<sup>78</sup>

In the 1st Division's sector on the Corps' left flank Adams Force had pressed forward again in the early hours of 26 May with the object of seizing a bridgehead over the Liri south of the reservoir. The advance was virtually unmolested, for the enemy had been driven off in bitter fighting by the French, who on the previous evening had taken the hill village of San Giovanni Incarico, overlooking the reservoir from Highway No. 82.<sup>79</sup>

The Canadians found the bridge below the dam blown, but a patrol of the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards waded the river and, making its way on foot two miles westward, crossed the Sacco and spent the night just south of Ceprano Station.<sup>80</sup>

Next day (27 May) the 11th Brigade established its bridgehead over the Liri. The river was under heavy shelling from high ground north of Ceprano, but about 1000 yards below the town the Perths found a place where a break in the steep banks, screened by trees from the enemy's view, furnished a suitable launching site for assault boats. In the limited cover there was room to use only one boat, and this was shuttled forward and back on a rope until "B" and "D" Companies were on the far bank.<sup>81</sup> During the crossing 4.2-inch mortars of the Brigade Support Group (The Princess Louise Fusiliers) effectively masked German self-propelled guns on the far bank.<sup>82</sup> The Perths entered Ceprano about 9:30 a.m. and in short order cleaned up a few remaining pockets of machine-gunners and snipers; early afternoon found the whole battalion over the river. Towards evening "C" Company was repulsed when trying to clear a troublesome enemy rearguard from a hill about 600 yards south-west of the town.<sup>83</sup> The Cape Breton Highlanders then entered the bridgehead, and by midnight the brigade was holding the road from Ceprano to the railway station. At daybreak the Perths took their hill objective without meeting further resistance.<sup>84</sup> The enemy had been dislodged from the first of his delaying lines west of the Melfa.<sup>85</sup>

In the course of their advance from the Melfa the Canadians had cut obliquely across the enemy front, and had thus met remnants of unfamiliar units of von Vietinghoff's battered forces. The 90th Panzer Grenadier Division was now in the path of the British 13th Corps, and the resistance to Brigadier Snow's battalions came from elements of Lieut.-General Smilo Baron von Luttwitz's 26th Panzer Division. On 26 and 27 May von Luttwitz was holding the Ceprano area with the 26th Panzer Battalion (down to 150 men) and a battalion of the 1027th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. He was also using (for what they were worth) the pitifully small remnants of his two infantry regiments—the 9th and 67th Panzer Grenadier Regiments—each reduced to 100 men or less, in unprofitable attempts to halt General Juin's fierce mountain fighters.<sup>86</sup>

On 27 May the 26th Panzer Division reported: "Numerous tanks in assembly positions on the east bank of the Liri indicate that after dark, and when the bridges are ready, the enemy will cross the river with the intention of carrying out an armoured break-through along the Via Casilina on 28 May."<sup>87</sup> During the night, therefore, von Luttwitz withdrew five miles to positions west of Pofi.<sup>88</sup> But the expected onrush of Allied armour along Highway No. 6 did not materialize on the 28th, and Tenth Army staff officers

who had insistently demanded permission to withdraw covered their embarrassment by numerous references to the efficacy of German minefields. "Advance tanks of the Moroccan Division made their appearance at Ceccano", reported the 14th Panzer Corps' Chief of Staff to Vietinghoff at 6:15 p.m., "but in the centre the enemy did not show up. They have tremendous difficulties with our minefields."<sup>89</sup> Kesselring received with satisfaction the news of the slow-down in the Eighth Army's advance, coupled with the report of a temporary stabilization on the Fourteenth Army's front, where the Hermann Goring Panzer Division had successfully counter-attacked south of Valmontone.<sup>90</sup> He felt that he had done well to sit tight when others wavered and his directive to the Fourteenth Army that evening reflected a degree of optimism greater than usual.<sup>91</sup>

It was not, however, German minefields which had held up the Eighth Army's advance and given Vietinghoff's forces a valuable extra day in which to maintain a reasonably unhurried and orderly retreat. Trouble in bridging the Liri had caused the delay. Throughout the night of the 27th-28th Canadian engineers had laboured to construct bridges to carry the armour forward. The Liri had been bridged below the Isoletta dam during the previous night, and by 4:30 on the morning of the 28th (enemy shelling on the 27th had prevented bridging material being brought up in daylight)<sup>92</sup> sappers of the 1st Division had spanned the Sacco and a route had been opened around the Corps' left flank.<sup>93</sup> At the site of the Perth's crossing, south of Ceprano, however, where the 5th Armoured Brigade was waiting to pass its tanks over the Liri, efficiency was apparently sacrificed to speed. Two troops of the 1st Field Squadron R.C.E. worked through the night, but at 7:30 a.m., as the 120 foot Bailey bridge was being pushed to the far bank, an improperly constructed launching nose buckled, and the whole span collapsed into the river.<sup>94</sup> A troop of the 10th Field Squadron\* was called forward, and under the direct supervision of the Division's Commander, Royal Engineers, Lt.-Col. J. D. Christian, the bridge was ready for traffic at 5:30 p.m. "This delay", recorded the C.R.E. in his diary, "caused a change in the Army plan, and has given us a bit of a black eye."<sup>96</sup>

Earlier in the day, when it was seen that no crossing would be possible before evening, the 13th Corps had been given priority over the Canadian armoured division in the use of the bridge. General Kirkman's axis of advance along Highway No. 6 was still blocked by the Germans in the defile

\* Up to this time the 5th Armoured Division's order of battle included only two Field Squadrons-the 1st and the 10th. On 27 May, however, the C.R.E. was notified that as the result of an Eighth Army decision that an armoured division required three field companies or squadrons, the 11th Field Company South African Engineer Corps would come under command the 1st Canadian Corps Troops, which could then release the 14th Field Company R.C.E. to the 5th Armoured Division. "It has been necessary", the C.R.E. recorded in his diary, "to get the troops to work 36 hours at a time before people finally realized that a third Fd Sqn was absolutely essential in an Armd Div."<sup>95</sup>

south of Arce, and on 27 May he had begun to move the 78th Division across country to the east bank of the Liri opposite Ceprano, in order, when the town had fallen to the Canadians, to cross the river and so frustrate the enemy's delaying manoeuvre. As soon as the bridge was completed a British brigade moved over to the west bank and established a small bridgehead north of Ceprano to cover their own bridging.<sup>97</sup> In the meantime, not wishing to delay his start any longer, Brigadier Smith had dispatched a strong force from the 5th Armoured Brigade by the route which the 1st Division had developed on the left. The group began the long detour around the Isoletta Reservoir at four o'clock but did not reach the 11th Brigade area until midnight. Further advance was postponed until morning.<sup>98</sup>

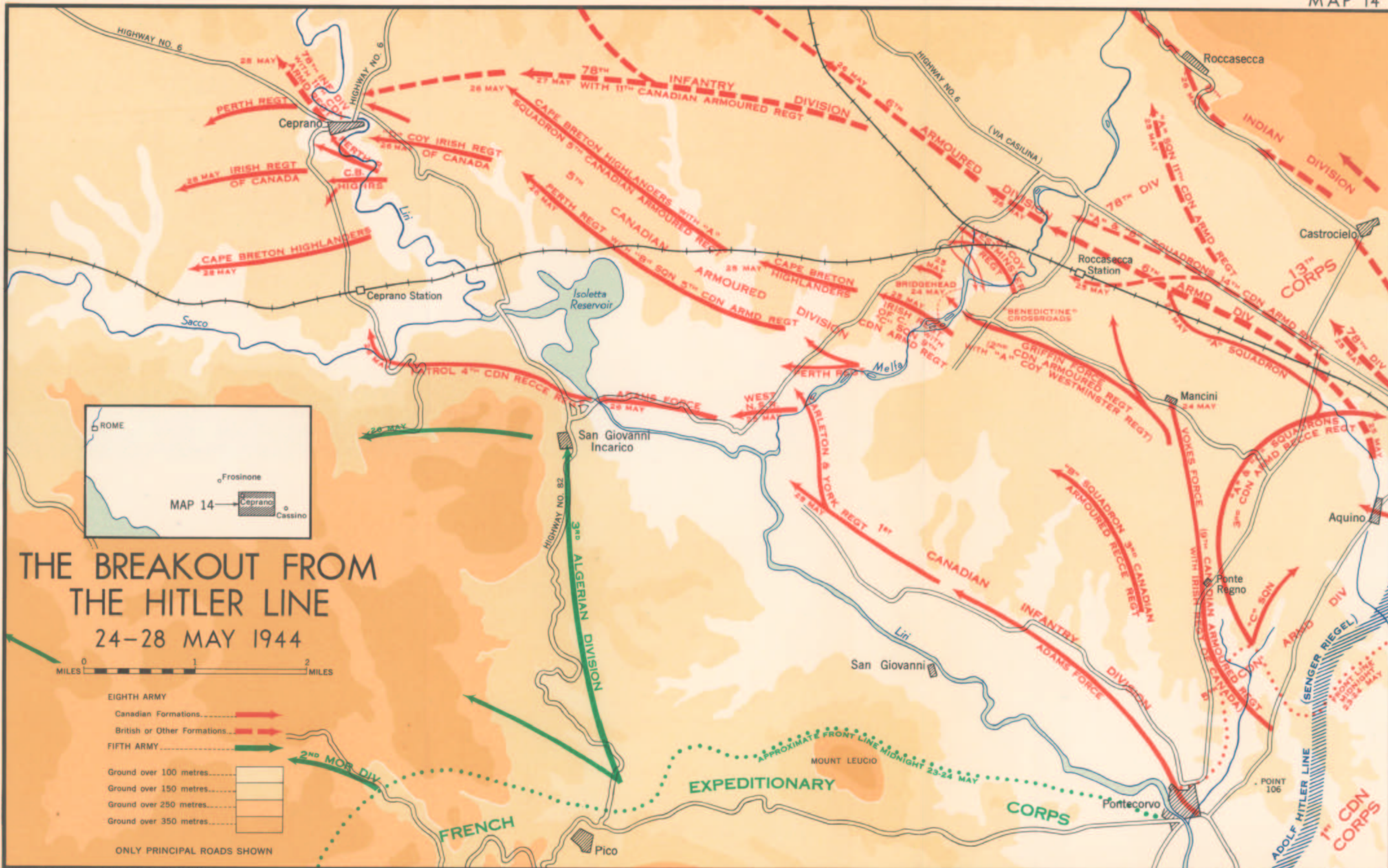
The phase of operations upon which the 1st Canadian Corps was now embarking had been forecast by General Leese before the battle for the Hitler Line, and he had issued the necessary orders to the Eighth Army on 22 May.<sup>99</sup> Although the eyes of all Allied forces west of the Apennines were directed on Rome, it had already been decided that the honour of taking the city was to go to the Fifth Army. It was General Alexander's intention to take advantage of the German determination to retain Rome at any cost, by driving against the enemy's weakened centre while the Allied left kept his forces fully engaged in the defence of the capital. "There were, therefore, topographically considered, two objectives", he notes; "to capture Rome and to pass a force east of Rome up the axis of the Tiber where it flows southwards from the mountains of Umbria. These two objectives I allotted to the two Armies, the former to General Clark and the latter to General Leese."<sup>100</sup> The Eighth Army's task was to break through the Caesar Line in the Valmontone-Subiaco sector, and then exploit northwards to Rieti and Terni.<sup>101</sup>

For the advance to the Caesar Line Sir Oliver directed that from the line Arce-Ceprano the Canadian Corps would move westward along the secondary roads south of Highway No. 6 as far as Ceccano, and then follow the Highway in order to link up with the Fifth Army at Valmontone (see Map 15). The 13th Corps would have the use of Highway No. 6 to Frosinone, and would then be prepared to carry the pursuit on a more northerly axis on either side of the Simbruini Mountains—through Sora on the Arce-Avezzano route (Highway No. 82), and along the road which led north-westward from Frosinone to Alatri and Subiaco.<sup>102</sup>

#### Up the Sacco Valley to Frosinone, 29-31 May

Early on the 29th the Canadian armoured force moved off towards Pofi. Westward from Ceprano the uneven, closely cultivated country between the Via Casilina and the River Sacco became increasingly difficult for tank





# THE BREAKOUT FROM THE HITLER LINE

## 24-28 MAY 1944



0 1 2  
MILES

- EIGHTH ARMY
    - Canadian Formations →
    - British or Other Formations →
  - FIFTH ARMY →
  - Ground over 100 metres
  - Ground over 150 metres
  - Ground over 250 metres
  - Ground over 350 metres
- ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN

manoeuvre. Across the axis of advance ran sharp, thickly wooded ridges, and through intervening gullies flowed troublesome streams with their bridges blown. Brigadier Smith had decided that in such terrain he could not deploy more than one armoured regiment. He had therefore given to The British Columbia Dragoons, with two companies of the Westminsters and the 98th (Self-Propelled) Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A. under command, the task of outflanking the hill on which Pofi stood by seizing a stretch of high ground between Pofi and Arnara, a village two miles farther west.<sup>103</sup>

Lt.-Col. Vokes moved his force on two axes, about a mile apart, in order to take advantage of any possible route forward that might be found. Progress was exceedingly slow. The narrow twisting trails were blocked by mines and demolitions; and two tributaries of the Sacco--the Fornelli and the Meringo, about half way to Pofi--proved major obstacles. Bridging tanks accompanied the force, but at the second of these streams there was a delay of six hours before a scissors bridge was in position.<sup>104</sup> The crossing came under intermittent enemy shelling, and when the advance was resumed, German self-propelled guns north of Highway No. 6 knocked out several B.C.D. tanks. The Dragoons kept battling forward, and the two leading squadrons arrived in the Pofi area about 7:00 p.m. with only nine tanks left. "Of the remainder", records the unit account of the operation, "five had been destroyed by enemy action and the rest were bogged down, stuck on banks, rocks, tree stumps. . . ."<sup>105</sup> As early as 9:00 that morning "B" Company of the Westminsters had reached Pofi, but had been pulled back because of an impending air strike against the town. The infantry remained with their respective armoured squadrons until eight in the evening, when they reverted to the command of their own battalion, which had moved up from the rear, and pushing on without the tanks occupied their objective in the face of surprisingly little resistance.<sup>106</sup> The motor companies had had their own troubles in getting their wheeled transport over the adverse terrain. Their diarist reported that night that "bits and pieces of the Regiment were all over the countryside, numerous vehicles being suspended over cliffs or jammed in sunken roads."<sup>107</sup>

Direct artillery support of the armoured brigade's advance had been well provided by two self-propelled regiments, the 8th Field Regiment R.C.A. and the 142nd Field Regiment R.A. (Royal Devon Yeomanry). Old friends of the Sicilian campaign, the 142nd had supported the 25th Tank Brigade (and thus indirectly the 1st Canadian Division) in the Liri Valley, coming under General Hoffmeister's command on 28 May. The decision of the Divisional C.R.A., Brigadier H. A. Sparling, to decentralize these regiments to the armoured brigade proved justified. The self-propelled guns were invaluable in negotiating the difficult routes, and by leapfrogging forward the two regiments were able to give Brigadier Smith's armour continuous support.<sup>108</sup>

The capture of Pofi itself was completed by the 11th Infantry Brigade, which had moved up behind the armoured group during the afternoon of the 29th. In the early evening the town was bombed by the Desert Air Force, and after dark the Perths climbed the steep hill and mopped up a few remaining snipers.<sup>109</sup>

Because the country between Pofi and Frosinone was so unsuitable for armour, Burns had issued orders on the 28th for the 1st Canadian Division to pass into the lead; it would relieve the armoured division a brigade at a time, that there might be no sudden halt in the pursuit.<sup>110</sup> On 30 May, the final day of his division's participation in the battle for Rome, Hoffmeister employed both his brigades to form a firm base from which the 2nd Infantry Brigade, first of the relieving formations, could advance to attack or outflank Frosinone. He assigned his armoured regiments three hill objectives, "Tom", "Dick" and "Harry", respectively one and a half miles north, two miles west, and two and a half north-west of Arnara. A battalion of the 11th Infantry Brigade would follow each armoured unit to secure the position.<sup>111</sup>

At daybreak a company of the Perths entered Arnara unopposed, to receive the usual warm welcome from the inhabitants.<sup>112</sup> At 5:00 a.m. the armour began to advance from the Pofi area over extremely bad tank-going =Lord Strathcona's Horse towards "Tom", the right-hand objective, and the New Brunswick Hussars (commanded by Lt.-Col. G. W. Robinson) heading for "Dick" on the left.<sup>113</sup> The infantry soon pushed into the lead, and by midday the Cape Bretons had taken "Tom" without trouble, while the Irish had driven enemy rearguards from "Dick".<sup>114</sup> During the afternoon the New Brunswick tanks, assisted by the Irish pioneer platoon, worked their way slowly along the mine-strewn road from Arnara to Ceccano. The armoured regiment laagered for the night immediately north of Ceccano, which Moroccan infantry of the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais, advancing up the west bank of the Sacco, had entered about midday.<sup>115</sup>

Meanwhile on the right flank a sharp tank battle was taking place. At about three o'clock Lord Strathcona's Horse, advancing behind The Cape Breton Highlanders, was ordered to proceed with all haste to the junction of the Via Casilina and the lateral road from Arnara to Torrice, in order to halt the westward flow of enemy traffic that was reported to be fleeing before the advancing 78th Division. Two troops of "B" Squadron pushed northward -from Arnara along a thickly wooded "hog's back" ridge. Just south of Highway No. 6 the route emerged as a bare stretch of road, twenty or thirty yards long, with steeply falling banks on either side which made it impossible to get tanks off the skyline. From positions covering the road junction (remembered by Strathconas as "Torrice Crossroads") tanks and self-propelled guns of the 26th Panzer Division engaged the leading Canadian tanks, knocking out three as they crossed the dangerous open space, to block

the route completely. Only one Strathcona tank reached the highway, where it had the satisfaction of accounting for a Panther tank.<sup>116</sup> From the exposed ridge the sole remaining Sherman, which was commanded by an N.C.O. of "B" Squadron, Corporal J. B. Matthews, carried on the fight against the German armour. Although under direct fire, Matthews coolly manoeuvred his tank backwards and forwards so as not to present a stationary target, and destroyed a Panther, a 75-mm. self-propelled gun, and a Mark IV tank. This outstanding performance brought him the D.C.M.<sup>117</sup> The rest of "B" Squadron came forward in time to share in the action. Shortly afterwards a platoon of The Cape Breton Highlanders joined the armour, and nightfall found Torrice Crossroads securely in Canadian hands. Besides losing five tanks Strathcona's had suffered casualties of sixteen wounded (including the Commanding Officer, Lt.-Col. Griffin) and seven killed.<sup>118</sup>

In the late evening the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade relieved Brigadier Snow's weary troops, and The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, supported by "A" Squadron of Lord Strathcona's, reached "Harry", the last of the 5th Armoured Division's objectives.<sup>119</sup> That night the enemy methodically fell back to a new defence line about a mile behind Frosinone.<sup>120</sup> A 14th Panzer Corps' situation map identifies the infantry forces opposing the Canadian advance as a conglomeration of the remnants of von Luttwitz's two Panzer Grenadier regiments with fragments of battalions drawn from four other divisions.\*

At 6:15 on the morning of the 31st command of the Canadian sector passed to General Vokes, as the three battalions of the 2nd Brigade began closing in on Frosinone. Perched on a rocky hill 300 feet above the plain to the west, the provincial capital commanded the vital junction of Highway No. 6 with the alternative escape route northward through Alatri. The Germans had left in the city a battalion of the 134th Grenadier Regiment with some Panther tanks, and when the Edmontons entered, they met sharp resistance from this rearguard.<sup>122</sup> (Enemy accounts of "violent street fighting" appear to exaggerate the strength of the German opposition.)<sup>123</sup> While Frosinone was being cleared, the Seaforth were carrying out an encircling movement on the left flank, and by mid-afternoon two companies had driven the Germans from the important crossroads west of the town. The Canadians were heavily mortared and came under some tank fire, but they held their position and successfully ambushed a small enemy party moving down the road from the north.<sup>124</sup>

Nightfall on the 31st found the 2nd Brigade consolidated in a position of vantage overlooking the rolling plain that stretched towards Rome.<sup>125</sup> The

\* The 1st Battalion, 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (15th Panzer Grenadier Division), the 334th Division's Fusilier Battalion, the 2nd Battalion, 578th Grenadier Regiment (305th Infantry Division), and the 1st Battalion, 134th Grenadier Regiment (44th Infantry Division).<sup>121</sup>

1st Brigade had come up on the left flank, and General Vokes' division was once more in the line on a two-brigade front, supported by the same regiments of the 25th Tank Brigade as before.<sup>126</sup>

The withdrawal of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division into reserve marked the end of a week of difficult operations; its achievements in its first fight as a division were summed up in the Army Commander's congratulations to General Hoffmeister.

To you was given the arduous task to exploit the break of the 1st Canadian Division through the Adolf Hitler Line and continue the pursuit. Owing to physical difficulties, it was particularly difficult for you to pass your Division quickly through the bottle-neck of the breach in the Hitler Line. That you accomplished this task is to the credit of you all.

You then advanced with great dash to the Melfa Line, where brilliant actions were fought; in particular by The Governor General's Horse Guards, Strathcona's Horse, and the Westminster Regt. After that you had considerable fighting with your infantry brigade, culminating in the passage by swimming and boating, under fire, by The Irish Regiment of Canada and The Perth Regiment, at Ceprano.

I congratulate you particularly on the work of your infantry, tanks, and sappers. I am very proud to have the 5th Canadian Armoured Division in the Eighth Army; and I have learned in this battle how greatly I can rely on you in the future. . . .<sup>127</sup>

During the pursuit from the Hitler Line, traffic congestion had caused many delays, for, as we have seen, the narrow Liri-Sacco corridor with its one good highway provided very limited facilities for a parallel advance by two corps. A particularly confused tangle occurred on 31 May as the 5th Armoured Division began making its way eastward against the current of the 6th South African Armoured Division marching up to relieve the 1st Canadian Division; and on the night of 1-2 June the forward move of the 1st Army Group R.C.A. from behind the upper Liri to an area west of Pofi created the worst traffic jams of all.<sup>128</sup> Faulty control and poor traffic discipline among formations and units were blamed in an instruction issued on 1 June by the Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General, 1st Canadian Corps.<sup>129</sup> "We have attempted to feed the absolute maximum number of vehicles on to our system . . ." said Brigadier Lister. As a result roads had given way at various points and it had been necessary to lower the classification of a number of weakened bridges. Chaotic conditions had arisen from Provost personnel not having a thorough understanding of the current traffic plan; drivers thought only of themselves, and continually caused bad blocks by breaking out of line, only to find themselves halted by oncoming vehicles, and with the gap in their own traffic lane, closed behind them. To remedy these conditions Lister ordered the immediate organization at Corps Headquarters of a special Traffic Control Office to be headed by the Corps Assistant Quartermaster General.<sup>130</sup>

### The Final Phase

The Eighth Army's operations against the Caesar Line were now moving into the final phase.<sup>131</sup> In the 13th Corps' sector the 78th Division, after difficult fighting along the line of hill villages overlooking the Via Casilina from the north-east, had drawn level with the Canadians opposite Frosinone. On General Kirkman's right flank the 8th Indian Division had turned off Highway No. 82 and was battling westward through the Simbruini foothills towards Alatri.<sup>132</sup>

General Leese's planning had still to include the possibility of a full assault by both Allied Armies on the Caesar Line, for on 31 May General Mark Clark's forces were still a few miles short of Valmontone, locked in a tense struggle for the Alban Hills.<sup>133</sup> In order to allow the Fifth Army freedom of manoeuvre while it continued the attack single-handed, General Alexander moved the inter-army boundary northward, so that Highway No. 6, which had previously been allotted to the Eighth Army as far as the eastern outskirts of Rome,<sup>134</sup> now became available to Clark from a point midway between Ferentino and Valmontone.<sup>135</sup> Should a combined assault become necessary, the original boundary would be reinstated; in the meantime the three corps\* under Leese's command were instructed to maintain their thrusts to the north and west.<sup>137</sup>

About midday on the 31st General Burns issued orders for the 1st Canadian Division to continue the advance towards Valmontone.<sup>138</sup> General Hoffmeister's division was to remain in reserve, but the 6th South African Armoured Division (commanded by Major-General W.H.E. Poole), which had joined the 1st Canadian Corps on 29 May,<sup>139</sup> would send forward an infantry brigade group on 1 June to come under Vokes' command. An armoured brigade group would follow, and when the South African Division was fully committed, it would take over control of the forward sector.<sup>140</sup>

From the top of the Frosinone hill the Canadians could look straight up Highway No. 6 to their next objectives. Seven miles to the north-west the pinnacle of Ferentino rose 500 feet above the surrounding plain; while north of the highway, and about three miles east of Ferentino, a large rounded hill, Mount Radicino, overtopped the town by 350 feet. The G.O.C. directed the 1st Brigade to capture Ferentino; the 2nd Brigade would secure the right flank by occupying Mount Radicino.<sup>141</sup>

About the same time that General Vokes was issuing these orders the Commander of the 14th Panzer Corps, unaware of the withdrawal of the

\* The 1st Canadian, the 13th and 10th British Corps. The 2nd Polish Corps, weakened by heavy casualties and a shortage of replacements, had been withdrawn into army group reserve on 29 May.<sup>136</sup>

5th Canadian Armoured Division, and unpleasantly conscious of the open nature of the country west of Frosinone, urgently signalled the Tenth Army: "Situation imperatively demands immediate dispatch of considerable tank and anti-tank formations for defence against imminent attack by massed tanks between Morolo [eight miles west of Frosinone] and Ferentino."<sup>142</sup> But no such large-scale armoured action was forthcoming; for it was the opinion of the Eighth Army Commander that the greatest progress could be made by sending infantry groups forward behind strong reconnaissance forces. This was to be the pattern of the 1st Division's advance, and the method of relief by the South African Division was adjusted to conform.<sup>143</sup>

Occasional light shelling and demolitions were the only resistance met by the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards as they preceded The Royal Canadian Regiment across the Ferentino plains on 1 June. In the evening an R.C.R. patrol found Ferentino but lightly held; the main enemy forces had withdrawn to Anagni, half a dozen miles to the west.<sup>144</sup> Before daylight on the 2nd a company of the R.C.R. had cleared the town, taking ten prisoners.<sup>145</sup> Opposition to the 2nd Brigade's advance on the right was also light. After some delay from demolitions on Highway No. 6, the Edmontons, supported by a squadron of the North Irish Horse, cleared Mount Radicino to its rocky summit. "C" Company, attacking a small hill north-east of the main objective, was held up for several hours by machine-gun fire from a large building on the eastern slope, the Convent of Ticchiena, which was reported by prisoners to be garrisoned by 200 Germans. Tank, artillery and mortar fire brought to bear upon the position hastened the enemy's withdrawal, and "C" Company, assaulting at 10:00 p.m., found the place deserted.<sup>146</sup>

Ferentino, like Frosinone and Ceprano, had suffered heavily from bombing. Much of this damage had arisen from attacks which had been made on specific targets within these towns because they lay astride a major German escape route. The 239th (Fighter-Bomber) Wing of the Desert Air Force—the formation which provided direct air support for the Eighth Army throughout the fighting in the Liri Valley—had refused requests for the destruction of these and other centres, for Cassino had taught that not even mass attacks by all the air resources in the theatre could entirely eliminate determined enemy resistance in a town.<sup>147</sup> Far more profitable targets during this period were to be found in the crowded roads leading out of the battle area, and along these 239 Wing's "armed reconnaissances" took a heavy toll of the retreating enemy's transport\* and guns.<sup>149</sup>

Spurred on by instructions from Eighth Army Headquarters, the Canadians continued their effort to establish contact with the main German

\* One such effort in support of the Canadian advance was the bombing of a column of fifty German vehicles near Frosinone on 31 May; afterwards the Air Force claimed 22 set on fire.<sup>148</sup>

forces, as all three battalions of the 1st Brigade pressed forward on foot from Ferentino on the afternoon of 2 June. By midnight the Hastings and Prince Edwards had advanced astride Highway No. 6 to the road junction south of the town of Anagni, which the R.C.R., following through, found in the hands of Italian Partisans.<sup>150</sup> The rapidity of the move forward presented special problems to the artillery. Early on the morning of 3 June Brigadier Ziegler dispatched the 1st and 3rd Field Regiments and the 5th Medium Regiment from gun areas near Frosinone to take up positions west of Ferentino, from where they might supply supporting fire for the 1st Canadian Brigade, and subsequently for the 6th South African Division within the limits of range. Because of the very tight road allocations on the Via Casilina the regiments, stripped to the barest minimum of vehicles, proceeded along the highway at top speed, deploying in their new gun areas within minutes of the arrival of their reconnaissance parties. The risks thus taken proved justified; for the same road limitations later delayed the South African divisional artillery, and the Canadian guns were able to provide the necessary fire support until late afternoon.<sup>151</sup>

That same afternoon (3 June) a patrol of five jeeps from the Princess Louise met soldiers of the French Expeditionary Corps at Colleferro, ten miles up the Highway from Anagni.<sup>152</sup> The honour of first establishing contact between the two armies, however, fell to an enterprising American technical sergeant, who earlier in the day lost his way in the 2nd Corps' sector, and having driven his jeep down Highway No. 6 from Valmontone without seeing any enemy or encountering demolitions or mines, turned up at the 1st Brigade Headquarters in time for lunch with the Brigade Commander.<sup>153</sup>

By 3 June the Fifth Army's part in the battle for Rome was drawing to a successful close. On the 1st General Mark Clark had unleashed two powerful offensives against the stubbornly resisting Fourteenth Army. Striking northward on the east side of the Alban Hills, General Keyes' 2nd Corps met intense opposition from the Hermann Goring Panzer Division, but by nightfall had cut Highway No. 6 at Valmontone. Next day infantry and armoured units reached the Prenestini foothills in the Palestrina area, thereby effectively sealing the upper end of the Liri-Sacco Valley. Keyes now ordered a great wheeling movement to the left which sent three divisions marching down the Via Casilina to Rome.<sup>154</sup> In the meantime General Truscott's 6th Corps, attacking westward into the volcanic heights behind Velletri, found resistance suddenly slacken on the night of 2-3 June, as von Mackensen, in fear of having his left flank turned by the 2nd Corps, abandoned all thought of holding the Caesar Line and pulled out of the Alban Hills, leaving the Via Appia (Highway No. 7) an open road to Rome.<sup>155</sup> At the same time Kesselring ordered von Vietinghoff to withdraw the Tenth Army's right



wing to the general line Tivoli\*-Subiaco, roughly a dozen miles north of Highway No. 6.<sup>156</sup>

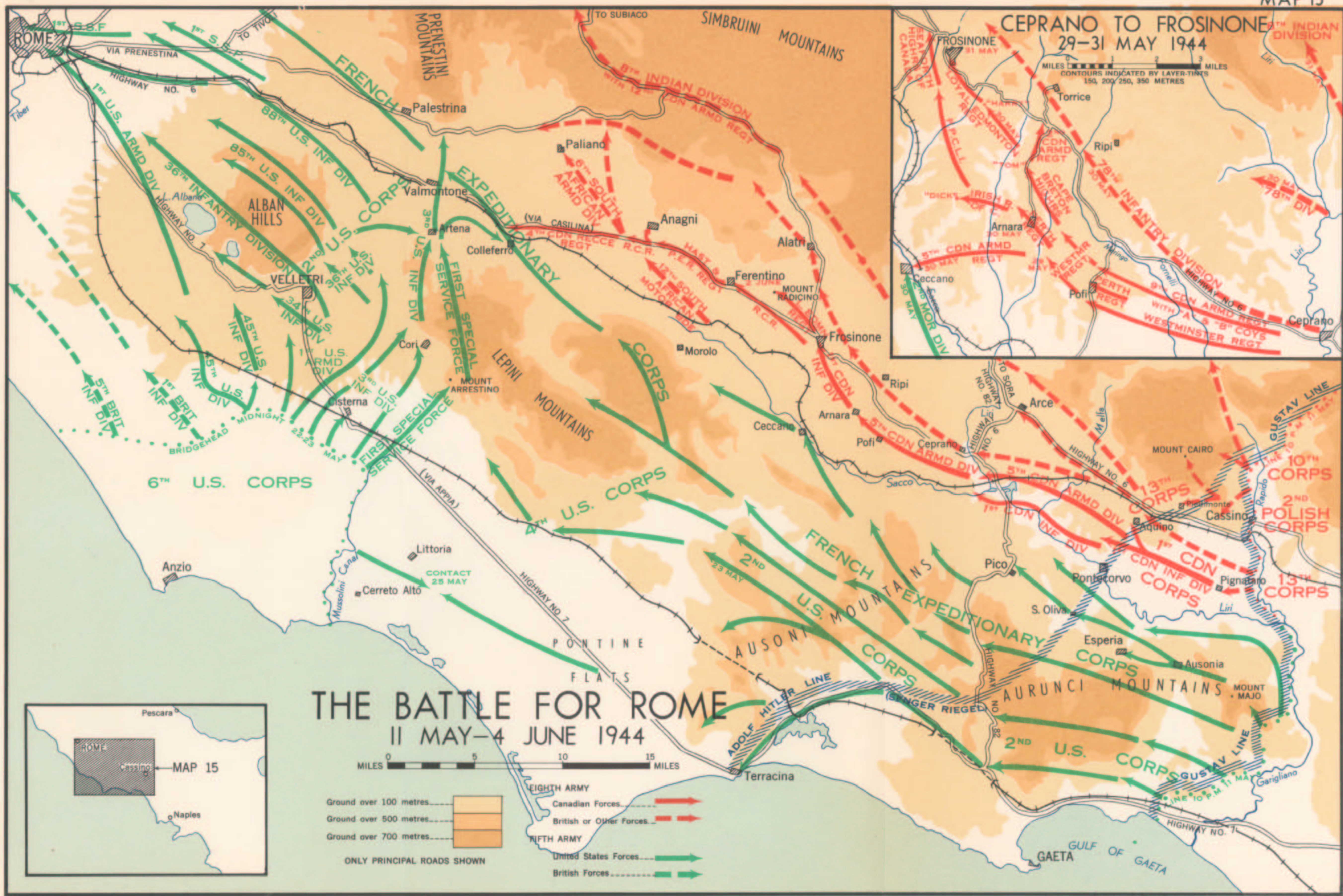
The Canadian advance towards Rome had reached its limit. On 1 June General Burns had been ordered by Sir Oliver Leese to halt the 1st Canadian Corps when it reached Anagni, so that the French might come on to Highway No. 6 from the south and press the pursuit on the Fifth Army's right flank.<sup>157</sup> Command of the 1st Canadian Division's sector passed to General Poole on the afternoon of 3 June, as the 24th Guards Brigade Group (which was fighting with the South African Division) passed through the 1st Canadian Brigade at Anagni. General Poole's immediate task was to loosen resistance in front of the 13th Corps.<sup>158</sup> The Guards turned northward toward the Via Prenestina, while the 12th South African Motorized Brigade, which had been advancing along the Sacco on the Canadian left flank, pushed on northwestward and entered Paliano on the morning of the 4th.<sup>159</sup> The South African Division's stay under Canadian command was brief. At 6:00 p.m. on 4 June it came under the 13th Corps Headquarters, and the 1st Canadian Corps passed into army reserve.<sup>160</sup>

That evening news came of the capture of Rome. During the day flying columns from a half a dozen formations of the Fifth Army had entered the city, and seized intact the all-important Tiber bridges,† which by Hitler's express orders,<sup>162</sup> had escaped demolition. The majority of the men in the Canadian Corps, having little knowledge of the tactical considerations which influenced the decisions of the higher command, had looked forward to an entry into Rome as a logical sequence to their hard-won victory in the Liri Valley. They were disappointed that that good fortune should go exclusively to the Fifth Army; but although they missed the hysterical reception given by the citizens of Rome to General Clark's forces, they were able to join wholeheartedly in the general jubilation that broke out in the small towns which they had just liberated.<sup>163</sup> To add to the general enthusiasm came the B.B.C. announcement on 6 June of the Normandy landings. Next day the Canadian formations began the long journey back through the battlefields of May to training areas near Piedimonte d'Alife in the upper Volturno Valley.<sup>164</sup>

General Leese's decision to bring the Canadian Corps into reserve and to use the 10th and 13th Corps in the Eighth Army's advance north of Rome was made with a view to giving the Corps Headquarters and the 5th Armoured Division "time to absorb the lessons which they had learned in the recent fighting"; he considered the Corps Headquarters not yet capable "of handling a corps of several divisions in mobile warfare". He also wished

\* See p. 697.

† According to Kesselring's Chief of Staff, the Field Marshal, who had made it a matter of pride to see that Rome remained unscathed, had spared the bridges because destruction of the gas and water conduits attached to them would have caused the civilian population to suffer.<sup>161</sup>



# THE BATTLE FOR ROME

## 11 MAY - 4 JUNE 1944

MILES 0 5 10 15

Ground over 100 metres  
 Ground over 500 metres  
 Ground over 700 metres

ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN

EIGHTH ARMY  
 Canadian Forces  
 British or Other Forces  
 FIFTH ARMY  
 United States Forces  
 British Forces



to give the 1st Canadian Division a much-needed rest after eleven months of almost continuous fighting.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, General Alexander and the Eighth Army Commander put forward a proposal "that the Corps be broken up and the divisions placed under command of a British Corps."<sup>166</sup> In suggesting this to the C.I.G.S., Alexander pointed out that a corps of one infantry and one armoured division was "sadly unbalanced" and "very extravagant in overheads", and that Leese was loath to put a British or Indian division under a headquarters in which he did not have full confidence.<sup>167</sup> It will be recalled that the 15th Army Group had not wanted another corps headquarters in 1943, and in these circumstances it was natural that the work of Headquarters 1st Canadian Corps should be subjected to unusually searching scrutiny. In General Crerar's personal opinion the views held by Generals Alexander and Leese regarding the 1st Canadian Corps were influenced by some degree of national bias as well as by "the 'military inconvenience', if nothing less, of restrictions on the complete interchangeability of formations, units, etc., under a higher command." In a memorandum to General Stuart, now Chief of Staff at C.M.H.Q., he observed, "In practice, this means that no Canadian, or American, or other 'national' commander, unless possessing quite phenomenal qualities, is ever rated quite as high as an equivalent Britisher. It also means that, to a British Army Commander, such as Leese, the Canadian cohesiveness created by the existence of a Canadian higher formation, such as a Corps, is a distinctly troublesome factor."<sup>168</sup>

As we have seen, the Eighth Army's advance had been slowed by many avoidable delays, the cumulative result of which had been to allow the enemy to withdraw in his own time, and even break off contact.<sup>169</sup> For this the 1st Canadian Corps must take its share of responsibility;\* its success in the pursuit phase had not equalled its achievement in the assault.<sup>174</sup> Both the Corps and the armoured division were fighting their first battle, and it is understandable that lack of experience should show itself in the staff work of the two headquarters. This was particularly the case with the armoured division, which, as already noted, was beset by traffic difficulties and problems arising from unexpected changes in operational plans. One specific shortcoming was its failure to pass back information; it was reported that

\* After the offensive the Brigadier General Staff and Chief Engineer of the Corps and also the Commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade were replaced. When Leese requested a change in the Corps command (he offered the "best British officer that could be made available" if no suitable Canadian could be found)<sup>170</sup> as an alternative to disbanding the Corps,<sup>171</sup> General Stuart, at the instance of General Crerar (who as Senior Combatant Officer overseas was responsible to the Canadian Government respecting senior appointments in the 1st Canadian Corps), flew to Italy for discussions with the Eighth Army Commander.<sup>172</sup> With the Corps Commander's concurrence Stuart interviewed the commanders of the two Canadian divisions, and received assurance of their confidence in General Burns' leadership. He then obtained the agreement of Alexander and Leese that Burns should remain in command for another phase of operations, after which the matter could be reviewed.<sup>173</sup>

not more than three routine "sitreps" reached Corps Headquarters from the 5th Armoured Division during the whole of the operations.<sup>175</sup> Both General Burns and his Brigadier General Staff laboured to correct this neglect,<sup>176</sup> which caused the Eighth Army to send an experienced G.S.O. 1 to assist the divisional headquarters staff.<sup>177</sup>

Yet the Corps' contribution to the Allied victory had been an important one. In its three weeks of action it had broken one of the strongest defence lines in Italy and advanced a distance of 41 miles in a straight line. It had inflicted heavy casualties, killing and wounding an unknown, but certainly large, number of the enemy, and capturing more than 1400 prisoners.<sup>178</sup> This had been accomplished at no small cost. In the fighting from Pignataro to Anagni between 15 May and 4 June the 1st Canadian Corps had lost (excluding British units under its command) 789 killed, 2463 wounded and 116 taken prisoner.

Could the battle have been won more cheaply, and with more damaging effect on the enemy? There will be some critics of the Army plan who will question the soundness of trying to advance with two corps abreast through the narrow defile of the Liri Valley. They will suggest that operations should have been under the control of a single corps headquarters—a practice which, it will be noted, was followed by the Germans throughout the battle. Significant of the difficulties attending the attempt by two separate corps to fight side by side in such restricted space were those that arose when the lack of suitable routes compelled General Leese, on two occasions as we have seen, to send one of the 1st Corps' formations forward through the Canadians. "To change boundaries in the middle of an operation like this", wrote General Burns afterwards, "and still more, to endeavour to pass a division under command of one Corps through the area of another is bound to result in traffic confusion and delay."<sup>179</sup> Again, bearing in mind the fact that the heaviest casualties suffered by the 1st Canadian Division in its assault of the Hitler Line were those inflicted from the right flank, and that this exposed flank remained a source of embarrassment to the 5th Armoured Division in its subsequent advance, the question must be asked whether greater pressure might not have been maintained in the Aquino sector by a Corps Commander in command of the entire front. Above all, control by one headquarters instead of two would have meant a reduction in the number of wireless channels in use (actually some frequencies were duplicated in adjacent corps)<sup>180</sup> and a consequent elimination of much of the interference which caused such trouble during the fighting.

Eight months later General Crerar, striking a similar blow on a narrow front against the strong defences in the Reichswald area, was to launch an attack by seven divisions and three armoured brigades under the control of a single corps.<sup>181</sup> It is interesting to speculate how much more effective might

have been the results obtained in the Liri Valley had General Leese adopted a like plan. In such a case, however, it is by no means certain that the control of the battle would have been placed in the hands of the 1st Canadian Corps.

### The First Special Service Force in Italy

Although the Eighth Army did not share directly in the occupation of Rome, some Canadians were among the first troops to enter the city. In the vanguard of the United States 2nd Corps' thrust from Valmontone were elements of the joint Canadian-American First Special Service Force.<sup>182</sup>

This force, which was commanded from its inception by Colonel Robert T. Frederick, U.S. Army, had been specially organized in 1942 to undertake tasks more difficult and hazardous than were usually assigned to regular troops.\* It comprised a Combat Force of three regiments, each of two battalions, and a Base Echelon or Service Battalion. Personnel of the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, the designation given for administrative purposes to the Canadian component, were distributed through the combat regiments. The number of Canadians fluctuated between 600 and 800 all ranks, and made up a little more than one third of the Force's fighting strength. Plans for the Force's employment in Operation "Plough" in northern Norway during the winter of 1942-43 fell through, but in the following August it formed the spearhead of the Allied landings on Kiska. It returned to the United States immediately, and late in October sailed for the Mediterranean,<sup>183</sup> the Combined Chiefs of Staff having decided at the Quebec Conference that there might be employment in the Apennines, "or better still in the Alps if we get as far north", or "in collaboration with patriot forces in the mountains of the Dalmatian Coast."<sup>184</sup> After a brief stay in North Africa the Force reached Naples in mid-November and entered the Fifth Army, which was regrouping for a renewed offensive against the Bernhard Line (see above, page 275).<sup>185</sup> At that time Colonel D.D. Williamson, commanding the 2nd Regiment, was the senior Canadian officer, and Canadians commanded five of the Force's six battalions.<sup>186</sup>

At the beginning of December General Mark Clark launched his main blow against the Camino hill mass, a formidable group of peaks and ridges dominating the Mignano Gap from the west (see Map 16). While the British 10th Corps on the left attacked Mount Camino, the United States 2nd Corps was ordered to seize adjoining heights in the northern half of the massif, which was held by the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division.<sup>187</sup> The capture of two

\* The organization of the Force and the administration of its Canadian component are discussed in Volume I of this History.

of the highest features, Mount la Difensa and Mount la Remetanea (Hills 960 and 907), was assigned to the First Special Service Force. On the night of 2-3 December Colonel Williamson's 2nd Special Service Regiment climbed the almost precipitous side of Mount la Difensa, using scaling ropes at the steepest places. In the early dawn the assault battalion, which also was commanded by a Canadian, Lt.-Col. T.C. MacWilliam, drove the stubbornly resisting enemy from their caves and pillboxes around the summit.<sup>188</sup>

For two days the 2nd Regiment held Hill 960, repelling a counter-attack by the 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment early on the 4th. On 5 December Williamson's 1st Battalion pushed forward along the narrow ridge which led to Mount la Remetanea, 1000 yards to the north. The attackers came under mortar and machine-gun fire from Mount Camino, which was still in enemy hands, but gained the crest of their objective without meeting direct opposition.<sup>189</sup> On the following day Mount Camino fell to the 56th (London) Division, and by 8 December the whole Camino hill mass had been cleared of the enemy.<sup>190</sup> The Winter Line had been pried loose from its southern anchor. The First Special Service Force had fought its first action with distinction; it had incurred more than 400 casualties, of which Canadian losses numbered 27 killed (including Lt.-Col. MacWilliam) and 64 wounded.

To complete the freeing of the Mignano Gap it was next necessary to capture Mount Sammucro--a huge mass of towering cliffs and ridges which from the north dominated Highway No. 6 and the village of San Pietro Infine, eight miles east of Cassino.<sup>191</sup> The main 4000-foot peak (Hill 1205) fell to the U.S. 36th Division on 7 December, and after two bitter battles (in which Italian troops--the 1st Italian Motorized Group--entered the campaign on the Allied side),<sup>192</sup> the Division occupied San Pietro on 17 December.<sup>193</sup> On Christmas Day, in bitterly cold weather, the 1st Special Service Regiment stormed Hill 720, a rocky feature half a mile west of Hill 1205. The attack came under heavy shellfire (four Canadians were killed and 13 wounded), but the stubborn defenders, members of the 71st Panzer Grenadier Regiment (of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division), were driven from their positions. Canadians and Americans ate their Christmas dinner of field rations on their snow-covered objective.<sup>194</sup>

By the end of December the 2nd Corps had secured favourable positions from which to launch new attacks, which were designed to force the enemy back to his Gustav Line positions along the Rapido River.<sup>195</sup> Early in the New Year, while fresh American formations prepared to strike against Mount Porchia and Mount Trocchio, the remaining obstacles south of Highway No. 6, on the northern flank the First Special Service Force was ordered to oust the enemy from the great mass of Mount Majo, whose 4000-foot peaks dominated the Rapido valley north-east of Cassino. The Force's special training and equipment for mountain fighting once more stood it in good



stead. Striking northward from the region of Mount Sammucro on 4 January, the 1st and 2nd Special Service Regiments captured in quick succession three outlying peaks (Hills 670, 724, 775). Two infantry battalions and additional artillery were placed under Colonel Frederick's command for the assault on the main objective, which comprised three of the highest pinnacles on the 2nd Corps front—Mount Majo (Hill 1259), Vischiataro Hill (Hill 1109), and Hill 1270.<sup>196</sup>

During the night of 6-7 January the augmented 3rd Regiment, led in the assault by its 1st Battalion (which was commanded by a Canadian, Lt.-Col. T.P. Gilday),<sup>197</sup> swept to the ragged crest of Mount Majo and drove a battalion of the 132nd Grenadier Regiment (of the 44th Infantry Division) from its rock-ribbed positions. For the next three days the 3rd Regiment, using German machine-guns, captured with large supplies of ammunition, beat off a series of desperate counter-attacks. Farther west the 1st Regiment's initial efforts to take Vischiataro Hill were repulsed, but on the following night (7-8 January) it made a wide flanking movement which caught the enemy completely by surprise. Attacking westward from Mount Majo the regiment captured its second objective, Hill 1270, and then swung southward to take Hill 1109 against relatively light resistance.<sup>198</sup>

For another week the Special Service Force continued to clear stubborn enemy rearguards from the mountain slopes opposite Cassino, while other 2nd Corps formations loosened the German hold on Highway No. 6. The capture of Mount Porchia on 7 January, and Cervaro, north of the Highway, on the 12th, made Mount Trocchio untenable, and the position fell to the U.S. 34th Division on 15 January. By nightfall enemy opposition east of the Rapido had virtually ceased.<sup>199</sup>

The six weeks of action in the mountains had exacted a heavy toll on the First Special Service Force. Frostbite and exposure had caused almost as many casualties as the enemy's fire.<sup>200</sup> The operations against Mount Majo and its surrounding hills cost the Canadian Special Service Battalion 14 killed or died of wounds, and 53 wounded. By the end of January these and earlier casualties had reduced the unit's effective strength to 26 officers and 323 other ranks.<sup>201</sup>

With its Canadian element in this weakened state—for it was then the policy of National Defence Headquarters that the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion would not be reinforced<sup>202</sup>—the Special Service Force landed at Anzio on 1 February, and went into the line next day under Major-General Lucas' 6th Corps. Lt.-Col. J. F. R. Akehurst had taken over the Canadian command from Colonel Williamson, who had returned to Canada on medical grounds. In the first ten days of the operation British and American forces had developed the bridgehead approximately to the



extent which it was to maintain until the May breakout.\* The right flank was at the Mussolini Canal, which entered the sea twelve miles east of Anzio<sup>205</sup> (see Map 15). For the next fourteen weeks the First Special Service Force held a line about a mile east of the canal.

The length of General Frederick's† seven-mile front-almost a quarter of the entire bridgehead perimeter-precluded defence in normal depth (according to a Canadian officer with the Force, the ratio was one man to twelve yards of frontage).<sup>206</sup> It necessitated active patrolling and large-scale raids out into the Pontine flats. Retaliatory enemy measures were successfully dealt with-such as the German counter-attack near the coast on 29 February, which cost a mixed group from the 715th Infantry and Hermann Goring Panzer Divisions 111 prisoners, as against five Special Service men wounded.<sup>207</sup> The Force carried out one of its larger raids early on 15 April, when three companies of the 2nd Regiment, supported by twelve tanks of the 1st U.S. Armoured Division, attacked the village of Cerreto Alto, three miles south-west of Littoria, killed a score of Germans, and took 61 prisoners at a cost of one casualty and the loss of two medium tanks.<sup>208</sup>

On 9 May the Force was withdrawn into the centre of the bridgehead, where for the next twelve days, while still under artillery fire and almost daily air raids, it prepared for further offensive operations. The Canadian Special Service Battalion, which had suffered 117 casualties since landing at Anzio, absorbed infantry trained reinforcements of 15 officers and 240 other ranks who had been specially selected from No. 1 Canadian Base Reinforcement Group and given training there with U.S. weapons.<sup>209</sup>

In the early morning of 23 May, as the 6th Corps struck out from the bridgehead, the First Special Service Force attacked north-eastward towards the Via Appia. By midday the 1st Regiment, in the spearhead of the advance, had cut the highway and the railway beyond, isolating Cisterna to the north and Littoria to the south. Then a counter-attack by twelve Tiger tanks with infantry of the 715th Division cut off and destroyed one company and forced a temporary withdrawal south-west of the road.<sup>210</sup> During the next two days the Force continued its attack towards the Lepini Mountains, which command from the east the narrow valley leading north to Artena and Valmontone. The 3rd Regiment took Mount Arrestino at dusk on 25 May, and next morning "caught the welcoming wine" in the nearby town of Cori,

\* The members of the Special Service Battalion were not the only Canadians to take part in the Anzio operation. From 27 March to 6 May a party of 42 tunnellers from the 1st Drilling Company R.C.E. worked with an American Engineer Company in the construction of an underground command post for Fifth Army Headquarters.<sup>203</sup>

In the air the R.C.A.F. *City of Windsor* Squadron, transferred from the Adriatic front, helped provide cover for the bridgehead. The squadron fought over the sector for sixteen weeks, achieving a gratifying bag of nineteen enemy fighters destroyed, five probables and thirteen damaged.<sup>204</sup>

† He was promoted to Brigadier-General at the end of January.

which had fallen on the 25th to 3rd Division troops moving forward from the capture of Cisterna.<sup>211</sup> Under the command of the 3rd Division the Force worked northward along the heights, while on its left the infantry cleared the corridor between the Lepini Mountains and the Alban Hills. Ardena was occupied on the 27th, but stiff resistance by the Hermann Goring Panzer Division, which Kesselring had hurriedly thrown into the Valmontone sector, stopped further advance and put the 3rd Division on the defensive for the next three days. Special Service Force forward troops threw back armoured counter-attacks at dusk on the 28th and early on the 30th.<sup>212</sup>

On 1 June the Force, now under the command of General Keyes' 2nd Corps, which had taken over the sector east of the Alban Hills, joined in the thrust which cut Highway No. 6 at Valmontone. Next day Akehurst's 2nd Regiment attacked eastward along the highway and captured Colleferro, with 400 prisoners, and joined hands east of the town with Algerian troops of the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais.<sup>213</sup>

The First Special Service Force, with a composite armoured task force attached, led the 2nd Corps in the final drive into Rome. During 3 June the armour advanced fifteen miles westward from Valmontone, and that evening the 2nd and 3rd Regiments passed through to clear the last ten miles into the city. Early on the 4th two companies of the 1st Regiment were hurried forward on tanks to secure the seven Tiber bridges in the northern half of the capital. The group entered the city limits at 6:30 a.m. (thereby establishing the claim of being the first Allied troops into Rome),<sup>214</sup> but was stopped by anti-tank and machine-gun fire from Hermann Goring rearguards still holding out in the eastern suburbs. It was not until six that evening, after the 2nd and 3rd Special Service Regiments had attacked into the city from the north-west, that resistance was broken, and the bridge force could proceed to its allotted task. By 11:00 p.m. all the bridges had been secured intact.<sup>215</sup>

The breakout battle and the subsequent fighting for Rome had cost the Special Service Regiments dearly: Canadian losses alone numbered 37 killed, 135 wounded and 13 taken prisoner. The Force's operations in Italy were now ended; at the end of June it left the Fifth Army to prepare for participation in the invasion of Southern France. General Clark's farewell message to the Force Commander paid high tribute.

The part played by your elite American-Canadian Force is so well known that it hardly needs to be rehearsed at this time. The gruelling fighting which you went through on the main front in the dead of winter, the important part which you took in the establishment and in the defence of the beachhead during its historic four months' siege, the way in which your relatively small Force maintained an aggressive offensive on a front equal to that held by a full division, and finally your brilliant performance in the final breakout and in the strong fighting which culminated in the capture of Rome have entered history and forged a bright, new link in our military tradition.<sup>216</sup>

## CHAPTER XV

### THE ADVANCE TO FLORENCE, JUNE - AUGUST 1944

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#### Enemy Intentions After the Fall of Rome

THERE was now a great opportunity for an aggressive exploitation northward from Rome; the two German armies were divided and had no communication with each other, and there was considerable disorganization and confusion both among their forward and rear elements. Bold enveloping movements against the weak forces of the Fourteenth Army might have paid handsome dividends; but the Allied plan called for an orthodox pursuit.\* The Eighth Army's immediate task, as General Alexander had directed before the offensive opened on 11 May, was "to pursue the enemy on the general axis Temi-Perugia"; the Fifth Army was to capture the port of Civitavecchia and the Viterbo airfields<sup>2</sup> (see Map 17).

Seizure of the Rome bridges had given the Allies entry to three first class roads to the north. By 6 June two armoured divisions of the 13th Corps were driving up the Tiber valley towards Terni, 50 miles north-east of the capital-the 6th South African along the Via Flaminia (Highway No. 3) on the west bank, and the 6th British up the Via Salaria (No. 4), east of the river.<sup>3</sup> On the left the Fifth Army advanced with two corps. While the 2nd Corps headed up Highway No. 2 towards Viterbo, 40 miles to the north, armoured combat commands of the 6th Corps swept up the coastal flank, to seize Civitavecchia on 7 June. In spite of German demolitions the port, the largest between Naples and Leghorn, was opened to Allied shipping on 12 June.<sup>4</sup> As the retreating German columns streamed up the highways employing any means of transport that would move, the relentless air attacks which had harassed them south of Rome continued to exact a heavy toll. The Tactical Air Force claimed 1698 vehicles and armoured cars destroyed

\* In his post-war comments Kesselring, noting "the remarkable slowness" of the Allied advance, declares that "the enemy behaved very much as I had expected. If on 4 June he had immediately pushed forward on a wide front, sending his tank divisions on ahead along the roads, our Army Group west of the Tiber would have been placed in almost irreparable jeopardy ...."<sup>1</sup>

and 1755 damaged in daylight attacks between 2 and 8 June, while road and rail transport near the sea fell prey to fighters of the Coastal Air Force. Even the darkness did not allow the hapless enemy to move unmolested. Night after night Baltimores and Bostons harried the traffic flowing from the battle area, and farther afield Wellingtons and heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force struck effectively at bridges and road junctions along the escape routes to the north.<sup>5</sup> There was virtually no opposition from the Luftwaffe; on many days scarcely one enemy aircraft ventured into the Italian skies.<sup>6</sup>

For the first time since the beginning of the Italian campaign the terrain favoured the Allies. Northward from Rome, as the Italian leg broadens at the calf, the Apennines, which in the region of the Winter Line cover two thirds of the peninsula, narrow away towards the Adriatic, leaving in the latitude of Lake Trasimene a series of rolling plains which stretch 100 miles across Tuscany to the Tyrrhenian Sea (see map at back end-paper). Between Lake Trasimene and Florence the country becomes more rugged again. The main mountain backbone swings back towards the west, to form north of the River Arno a solid barrier spanning the peninsula from coast to coast, and blocking all approaches to the Lombard Plain except by the narrow coastal strip south of Rimini. Both topography and the season of the year were now against Kesselring. On these wide plains and with winter no longer on his side there seemed little likelihood that his armies could make any protracted defence until they reached the line of the Arno and the Northern Apennines.

The nineteen divisions with which the C.-in-C. South-West had attempted to bar the road to Rome were now battered and disorganized, and in no condition to offer any immediate effective resistance. On the day after the city's fall he told Berlin, "By 2 June the divisions had reported a total of 38,024 dead, wounded and missing. The figure keeps mounting. . . ." <sup>7</sup> A preliminary estimate showed the fighting strength of his formations, both in personnel and guns, to be only from ten to fifty per cent\* of that with which they had entered the battle.<sup>8</sup> Within a week disquieting information in greater detail reached Kesselring. Abbreviated "condition reports" showed that on 10 June no division of the 14th and 76th Panzer Corps could put into action more than 2500 men; the Hermann Goring Panzer Division numbered only 811, and the 1st Parachute Division 902 all ranks. Heavy deficiencies in guns and tanks completed the general picture of ruination.<sup>9</sup>

Characteristically Kesselring acted promptly to restore his broken front. His first concern was to reinforce the Fourteenth Army, which in the open

\* Among the hardest hit were the 94th and 362nd Infantry Divisions (reduced to 10 per cent of their normal strength), the 1st Parachute, the 44th Infantry and the 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions (15 per cent), and the 26th Panzer and the 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions (20 per cent).

country west of the Tiber was in greater danger than von Vietinghoff's forces nearer the Apennines. He replaced von Mackensen with General of Panzer Troops Lemelsen (who had temporarily commanded the Tenth Army at the end of 1943 before taking over the First Army in the Bordeaux area), giving him three fresh, if inexperienced, formations—the 356th Infantry Division and the 162nd (Turcoman) Division from *Armee Gruppe von Zangen*, and the 20th *Luftwaffe* Field Division from Denmark.<sup>10</sup> He ordered the new Army Commander to send back three hard-hit formations from the front "to the Gothic Line\* for rejuvenation, where at the same time they will act as security garrisons."<sup>13</sup> To add further strength to the German right flank, the 14th Panzer Corps, with its three motorized divisions (the 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadier and the 26th Panzer Divisions), moved west of the Tiber to join the 1st Parachute Corps in the Fourteenth Army. Its place was taken by the 76th Panzer Corps, which assumed responsibility for the Tenth Army's right flank as the inter-army boundary was shifted westward.<sup>14</sup>

At first the German leaders saw little prospect of halting the Allied advance south of the Pisa-Rimini line. On 8 June the Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Staff, General Walter Warlimont, who had been sent to Kesselring's headquarters to get first-hand information, reported to General Jodl that "if the worst should happen and despite the greatest efforts the enemy cannot be brought to a halt previously, it will be necessary to fall back to the Gothic position in about three weeks."<sup>15</sup> To Kesselring "the worst" would be an Allied encircling landing; spared this, he hoped "to lengthen this time considerably by fighting a delaying action with all means available."<sup>16</sup>

Next day the German C.-in-C. issued a comprehensive operation order for a gradual fighting withdrawal to the Gothic Line. His instructions followed the pattern of those given after the loss of the Hitler Line. Every effort was to be made to hold the Dora position, a line which crossed the peninsula about 40 miles north of Rome, passing south of Lake Bolsena through Rieti and Aquila to merge into the Foro defences on the Adriatic coast. From this stand Army Group "C" would only withdraw northward "if forced to do so by the enemy", and then only over several lines of resistance, each to be stubbornly defended, and in bounds that would "not exceed 15 km. at any one time."<sup>17</sup>

The terms of this order were received with misgivings and distrust by Hitler, who suspected his Army Group Commander of wanting to fall back to the Gothic Line without offering serious resistance. A teletype message

\* Originally called by the Germans the "Apennine position", the Pisa-Rimini line was given the more romantic designation, the "Gothic Line", in April 1944.<sup>11</sup> On 16 June it was renamed the "Green Line".<sup>12</sup>

from Kesselring to the High Command on 10 June reinforced these doubts, for the Field Marshal, while reaffirming "his intention of defending Italy as far south of the Apennines as possible", declared that "his second imperative duty is to prevent the destruction of his Armies before they reach the Gothic Line and to let them reach the new line in battleworthy condition."<sup>18</sup> But Kesselring failed to make his point, and next day his war diary recorded: "Order from the Fuhrer: Delaying resistance must not be continued [indefinitely] till the Apennines are reached. After reorganization of the formations the Army Group will resume defence operations\* as far south of the Apennines as possible."<sup>19</sup> In vain Kesselring protested to Jodl the hopelessness of attempting to defend unprepared positions, emphasizing the continued threat of an encirclement of the Tenth Army, and the danger that too slow a withdrawal to the Gothic Line might not only weaken his forces below the point where they could form an adequate garrison, but might allow the Allies to arrive there simultaneously with German troops, and so achieve an immediate break-through.<sup>20</sup> Hitler was adamant. As a staff officer of Army Group "C" observed,<sup>21</sup> "When the Fuhrer says 'Thus it shall be done', that is the way it will have to be done."<sup>†</sup>

On 14 June (by which date Allied forces were 70 miles north of Rome)<sup>23</sup> the C.-in-C. issued a sharply worded "Army Group Order for the Transition to the Defence".<sup>24</sup> The Gothic Line was to be built up sufficiently to resist any large-scale Allied attempt to break through to the plains of the River Po. To gain time for these preparations the Army Group would "stand and defend the Albert-Frieda Line." This position (in Allied records the Trasimene Line) crossed the peninsula from Grosseto, on the Tyrrhenian flank, to Porto Civitanova, 25 miles down the Adriatic coast from Ancona, passing around the southern shore of Lake Trasimene. "Every officer and man must know", insisted Kesselring, "that upon reaching this line the delaying tactics will come to an end and the enemy advance and break-through must be stopped."<sup>25</sup> The Commander of the Fourteenth Army was one of the first to find that Kesselring meant business. On 15 June he was sternly reprimanded by the C.-in-C. for having retreated 20 kilometres in a single day. "Lemelsen was made very unhappy by my words", Kesselring told von Vietinghoff later, "but after all it must be possible to use strong language at times; we cannot afford to go back 20-30 km. in one day."<sup>26</sup>

\* The distinction between "delaying resistance" and "defence" should be noted. The former (*hinhaltender Widerstand*) meant a gradual yielding under moderate pressure; the latter (*Verteidigung*), to hold to the last.

† A short time later, however, Kesselring, as told in his *Memoirs*, won a concession from the Fuhrer. On 3 July he flew to Hitler's headquarters and successfully urged that he be given a free hand in Italy, guaranteeing "to delay the Allied advance appreciably, to halt it at latest in the Apennines."<sup>22</sup>

### "Anvil" is Given Priority

Allied progress in the initial stages of the pursuit was so satisfactory that on 7 June General Alexander was able to set new and more distant objectives for his forces. He ordered the Eighth Army to advance with all possible speed to the general area of Florence-Bibbiena-Arezzo in the region of the middle and upper Arno, and the Fifth Army to occupy the triangle formed by Pisa, Lucca and Pistoia at the northern limit of the Tuscan plains. He authorized Generals Clark and Leese "to take extreme risks to secure the[se] vital strategic areas" before the enemy could reorganize or be reinforced.<sup>27</sup> In order to save the resources in transportation and bridging material which would be required for an advance over the difficult terrain of the eastern flank, the 5th Corps was directed not to follow up the enemy on its front. Should the general advance of the Eighth Army fail to force the Germans to abandon Ancona, Alexander intended to take the port by attacking from the west with the Polish Corps.<sup>28</sup>

To carry out these new instructions both Armies reshuffled and augmented their pursuit forces. On the Fifth Army's right the French Expeditionary Corps relieved the 2nd Corps, while the 4th Corps took over the coastal sector from the 6th Corps, which now withdrew from the Italian campaign.<sup>29</sup> The Eighth Army's drive developed into an advance by two corps; on 9 June General McCreery's 10th Corps, which had been fighting through the mountainous region east of Rome, assumed the 13th Corps' responsibilities on the left bank of the Tiber, leaving General Kirkman free to concentrate on the push to Arezzo.<sup>30</sup> On the same day troops of the 5th Corps entered Orsogna, as the enemy began relinquishing his long tenure of the Adriatic flank.<sup>31</sup>

German attempts to hold at the Dora Line\* produced the first serious fighting north of Rome, but by 14 June the 13th Corps had broken past Lake Bolsena to capture Orvieto, and the 10th Corps was at the gates of Temi. On that day Alexander signalled General Wilson that since the fall of Rome his armies had advanced an average of seven miles a day, and were now nearly half way to Florence and Leghorn--"an extremely satisfactory situation which we must take full advantage of by speeding up the tempo still higher."<sup>32</sup> The Allied pressure continued. The Fifth Army captured Grosseto on the 17th; and the reduction of the island of Elba, which fell on 19 June to an assault mounted from Corsica by French ground forces with British naval and American air support, compelled the enemy to pull back still farther on his coastal flank.<sup>33</sup> The 13th British Corps reached the southern shore of Lake Trasimene on the 19th, and next day the 10th Corps

\* Not to be confused with the alternative name given to the Hitler Line.

entered Perugia. In the Adriatic sector the 2nd Polish Corps had relieved the 5th Corps and was midway between Pescara and Ancona, its progress impeded by bad weather and extensive demolitions.<sup>34</sup> Thus by 20 June the momentum of the main attack had carried General Alexander's forces up to the Albert-Frieda Line.<sup>35</sup>

While the Allied Armies in Italy were thus achieving satisfactory tactical successes, in the wider field of strategy the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean and his Commander-in-Chief were fighting a losing battle to retain for the Italian campaign the overriding priority in Mediterranean operations which it had been given at the end of February. When the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed in April to the cancellation of Operation "Anvil", so as not to interfere with an all-out offensive in Italy, they had directed General Wilson to make plans for the "best possible use of the amphibious lift remaining to you either in support of operations in Italy, or in order to take advantage of opportunities arising in the south of France or elsewhere. . . ."<sup>36</sup> Accordingly on 22 May Wilson warned General Alexander that he intended to mount an amphibious operation not later than mid-September, either in close support of the advance up the peninsula, or as an assault outside the Italian theatre. He gave Alexander a tentative schedule of dates for the release to A.F.H.Q. of the necessary formations for this undertaking.<sup>37</sup> For the next six weeks, while the Combined Chiefs strove to reconcile British and American views on "Anvil", the C.-in-C. had to carry on without knowing whether he was to lose four French and three American divisions. "This uncertainty", he writes, "was a very great handicap to our planning, and its psychological effect on the troops expecting to be withdrawn, especially the French, was undoubtedly serious."<sup>38</sup>

In an appreciation to General Wilson on 7 June Alexander pointed out two alternative courses that he might take. After breaking the Pisa-Rimini line, he could either bring his offensive to a halt and so free resources for operations elsewhere, or if permitted to retain all the forces which he then had in Italy, he could carry the offensive into the Po Valley and form there a base for an advance into either France or Austria.<sup>39</sup> He warmly recommended the second as the course likely to achieve his object of completing the destruction of the German armed forces in Italy and rendering the greatest possible assistance to the invasion of North-West Europe. "I have now two highly organised and skilful Armies, capable of carrying out large scale attacks and mobile operations in the closest co-operation . . .", he wrote. "Neither the Apennines nor even the Alps should prove a serious obstacle to their enthusiasm and skill."<sup>40</sup>

On 14 June the Combined Chiefs of Staff notified General Wilson of their decision that an amphibious operation on the scale planned for "Anvil" would be launched-either against Southern France, Western France or at



the head of the Adriatic;<sup>41</sup> General Alexander was immediately instructed to begin withdrawing from action the 6th U.S. Corps Headquarters and the divisions already earmarked for inclusion in the Seventh Army.<sup>42</sup> Wilson strongly urged adoption of the third alternative proposed by the Combined Chiefs. He contended that an advance across the Po Valley and through the Ljubljana Gap into Austria, with the assistance of an amphibious operation against Trieste, would make the best contribution to the success of General Eisenhower's operations in the west.<sup>43</sup> The claims of "Anvil", however, were not to be denied. General Marshall had already pointed out to General Wilson that the capture of Marseilles would provide an additional major port through which some 40 or 50 divisions from the United States, all of them ready for action, might be introduced into France.<sup>44</sup> General Eisenhower was firm in his desire for the operation against Southern France, and on 2 July Wilson received a directive from the Combined Chiefs of Staff that the assault was to be made\* on 15 August.<sup>47</sup> The operation was to be given overriding priority over the battle in Italy to the extent of a build-up of ten divisions in the south of France. General Alexander's task was still the destruction of the German forces in Italy; and to this end he was directed "to advance over the Apennines and close to the line of the River Po, securing the area Ravenna-Bologna-Modena† to the coast north of Leghorn." Thereafter, should the situation permit, he was to cross the Po to the line Padua-Verona-Brescia at the northern edge of the Plain. The Combined Chiefs hoped that these advances, together with the exploitation of the "Anvil" assault, would cause the enemy to withdraw from north-west Italy, and thus render unnecessary any further offensive in that direction.<sup>48</sup> To the C.-in-C., however, any large-scale penetration into the Po Valley before winter set in now appeared most unlikely. He therefore gave permission for the bombing of the Po bridges, which he had hitherto spared because of the major engineering problems that their rebuilding would have involved. On 12 July the Tactical Air Force went to work, and within 72 hours knocked out all the 23 rail and road bridges‡ in use over the river.<sup>50</sup>

"Whatever value the invasion of Southern France may have had as a contribution to operations in North-western Europe", Alexander was later to declare, "its effect on the Italian campaign was disastrous. The Allied Armies

\* Mr. Churchill, who was against any reduction in Alexander's armies except as direct reinforcements to "Overlord", opposed "Anvil" to within a few days of its mounting. On 28 June he urged that it be abandoned in order to "do justice to the great opportunities of the

Mediterranean commanders";<sup>45</sup> and on 4 August, declaring that the enemy on the Riviera coast was much stronger than the Allies could hope to be, he recommended that the "Anvil" forces be sent around to the west coast of France to join the "Overlord" forces in the St. Nazaire region.<sup>46</sup>

† See p. 697.

‡ Subsequent action by the Air Forces kept the Germans from restoring these important links in their communications. At a conference on 30 August the Tenth Army's Chief Engineer Officer reported: "At the moment all bridges across the Po are destroyed."<sup>49</sup>

in full pursuit of a beaten enemy were called off from the chase, Kesselring was given a breathing space to reorganize his scattered forces and I was left with insufficient strength to break through the barrier of the Apennines."<sup>51</sup> Almost a full year after the landings in Sicily the Italian campaign had reached its climax. "From the beginning", observed the C.-in-C., "both Germans and Allies regarded Italy as a secondary theatre and looked for the main decision to be given on either the Eastern or Western front."<sup>52</sup> Henceforth Allied commanders in Italy were to feel increasingly the effects of this subordination. But the main intention, to bring to battle the maximum number of German troops, never varied, and in the ten months of fighting that remained this object was relentlessly pursued.

### Canadian Tanks at the Trasimene Line, 21-28 June

Canadian participation in the initial stages of the pursuit which followed the capture of Rome was limited to the operations of one armoured unit. When General Burns' 1st Corps was withdrawn into reserve on 6 June, the Three Rivers Regiment was supporting the leading brigade of the 8th Indian Division,\* which it had joined two days before on the Frosinone-Subiaco road, about four miles north of Alatri.<sup>54</sup> During the next five days the Indians carried out a steady but unspectacular advance along the rocky western slopes of the Simbruini Mountains. They passed through Guarcino on the 4th and Subiaco on the 6th, and on the evening of the 9th reached Arsoli at the junction with the Via Valeria (Highway No. 5). The contribution of the Canadian armour at this stage was minor; most of the time the tanks trailed far behind the infantry, being held up by demolitions and mines on the narrow mountain roads.<sup>55</sup> On 9 June, as a regrouping of the Eighth Army placed all formations west of the Tiber under the 13th Corps, the Three Rivers Regiment left the 8th Indian Division and rejoined the rest of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade, which was still at Aquino and now under General Kirkman's command. Three days later the brigade (which General Leese described to Brigadier Murphy on 22 June as "the most experienced armoured brigade in Italy and therefore in great demand")<sup>56</sup> began concentrating with the 4th Division fifteen miles north of Rome, and by the 18th both formations had moved up to the Viterbo area for a very brief period of infantry-tank training.<sup>57</sup> While there they formed the reserve to the 13th Corps, which was carrying the pursuit with the 78th Infantry Division and the 6th South African Armoured Division.<sup>58</sup>

\* The Indian Division was then under command of the 13th Corps, but next day came under the 10th Corps as General McCreery's forces took up the pursuit.<sup>53</sup>

By the time the Eighth Army reached the Trasimene Line the advance of its two corps against Arezzo was developing on two independent axes, dictated by the general topography and the limitations of the road system. The 13th Corps was allotted Highway No. 71, which skirted the western shore of Lake Trasimene and followed the east side of the broad Val di Chiana to Arezzo. Fifteen miles east of the lake the 10th Corps was assigned a secondary road running northward from Perugia along the Tiber.<sup>59</sup> General Kirkman's advance would thus take him through the gap between Lake Trasimene and the smaller Lake Chiusi and Lake Montepulciano, which lie five miles to the west. This defile is covered by a belt of low, rolling hills rising about 300 feet above the surrounding country and extending a dozen miles up the west side of Lake Trasimene. It was an area favourable to defending troops, who could find good observation and cover from view in the scattered villages and farms which surmounted the successive ridges and hilltops, and additional concealment in the woods and in the standing crops which in midsummer clothed the intensively cultivated slopes.

Three days of heavy rain which began on 17 June had slowed the Allied advance and given the Germans time to prepare hurried defence positions along the line selected by Kesselring for a delaying action. The sector of this line opposite the 13th Corps was anchored in the east at Lake Trasimene, and in the west on a high ridge extending north-west from the town of Chiusi -the old Etruscan Clusium. The whole position was about two miles in depth, and was based upon a series of dug-in strongpoints along the Pescia River, a narrow stream flowing into Lake Trasimene with banks steep enough to make it an effective tank obstacle. About half a mile south of the Pescia an almost continuous line of slit-trenches and machine-gun posts linked the hamlets of Pescia, Case Ranciano, Badia and Lopi on the crests of the ridges, and in front of these a forward line ran westward from Carraia on the Trasimene shore through Sanfatucchio and Vaiano to Lake Chiusi.<sup>60</sup> The German forces holding these positions formed the right wing of the 76th Corps on von Vietinghoff's extreme right flank. In the eastern half of the five-mile gap between the lakes was the 334th Infantry Division, reinforced to four regiments, while on its right, from Vaiano to Lake Chiusi, was Heidrich's 1st Parachute Division, still fighting with its customary ferocity. The Hermann Goring Panzer Division held Chiusi, and farther west, on the other side of the inter-army boundary, the recently committed 356th Infantry Division\* covered the road leading northward to Montepulciano.<sup>63</sup>

\* These formations had all received reinforcements since the Rome battle. A Tenth Army return for 2 July gave the following "fighting strengths": 334th Division, 1750; 1st Parachute Division, 1530; and Hermann Goring Division, 3380.<sup>61</sup> In a Fourteenth Army return the 356th Division reported a strength of 3927.<sup>62</sup>

On 21 June, when it was apparent that a full-scale attack would be needed to dislodge the enemy, Kirkman decided to commit his reserves. He ordered the 4th Division (commanded by Major-General A. D. Ward) and the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade to move up on the left of the 78th Division and take over the centre of the Corps front opposite Vaiano.<sup>64</sup> The first of the Canadian armoured units to go into action was The Ontario Regiment, placed temporarily under command of the 78th Division while the 4th Division was completing its take over. Early on the 21st two squadrons supported two battalions of the 38th (Irish) Brigade in an attack on the enemy's foremost positions between Sanfaticchio and the lake. By midday the village had been cleared after extremely bitter hand-to-hand fighting. During the evening Pucciarelli, a mile to the north, was captured by the 6th Inniskillings after "A" Squadron's tanks had rushed the village. German counter-attacks on the 22nd to regain the eastern end of their forward line were beaten off, and our infantry and tanks spent the day clearing the low ridge between the two villages.<sup>65</sup>

By the evening of the 23rd the 4th Division had taken over the 78th Division's left flank in the sector between Vaiano and Chiusi, and arrangements were completed for an attack by both divisions next day. At dawn the 78th Division attacked astride Highway No. 71 with two brigades. To the left of the road two battalions of the Irish Brigade advanced from Pucciarelli, with tanks of The Ontario Regiment protecting both flanks. As the infantry approached Pescia, a small group of German tanks launched a counter-attack from Case Ranciano, a handful of farmhouses off to the left flank. Prompt action by the Ontarios' "A" Squadron destroyed two Panthers and damaged a third, forcing the remainder to withdraw. Aided by "C" Squadron The Royal Irish Fusiliers took Pescia, and moved on to clear Case Ranciano. By evening the 78th Division had crossed the Pescia River on both sides of the highway, although partial demolition of the road bridge kept armour on the south bank. The 334th Infantry Division had resisted stubbornly across its whole front; a high proportion of the 200 prisoners captured had been wounded.<sup>66</sup> The Ontarios' bag of five German tanks brought a personal message of congratulations from the Army Commander to the C.O., Lt.-Col. R. L. Purves.<sup>67</sup> In its four days of fighting the regiment had suffered casualties of seven killed and 18 wounded.

The attack by the 4th Division in the centre of the 13th Corps front progressed more slowly. A battalion of the 28th Brigade advancing northwards from Villa Strada found members of the 1st Parachute Division firmly in possession of Vaiano.<sup>68</sup> But now faulty co-operation between our armour and infantry showed the effects of lack of joint training.\* When the infantry

\* After training briefly with the 10th Brigade, the Three Rivers Regiment had suddenly taken The Ontario Regiment's place in support of the 28th Brigade when the Ontarios were transferred to the 78th Division.<sup>69</sup>

failed to take advantage of the Three Rivers' covering fire, the Canadian tanks by-passed the village, driving another 1000 yards on to a ridge which marked the brigade objective, only to find that their action exactly suited the tactics of the paratroopers, who from the tall grain pinned down the infantry in the rear with small-arms fire. Throughout the day the Three Rivers remained forward, waging their own battle against the enemy's strongpoints, and suffering casualties from anti-tank and mortar fire. In the evening they withdrew to consolidate with the British battalions, which had not been able to pass Vaiano. The day closed with a heavy cloud-burst that saturated the ground and slowed tank movement. The crew of a Sherman which bogged down in a muddy gully without infantry protection were captured; these five were the only members of the regiment to be taken prisoner during the Second World War.<sup>70</sup>

Before daylight on the 25th the paratroopers pulled back from Vaiano, conforming with the 334th Division's withdrawal across the Pescia River. As the 4th Division's advance gained momentum the Canadian tanks found manoeuvre over the rain-sodden ground made increasingly difficult by the sharp little hills with their steep terraced sides and the dense curtains of vines strung on wires between sturdy low-growing oak-trees. Of seven tanks lost by the Three Rivers' "C" Squadron that day, five fell victim to the rough Umbrian terrain as they threw their tracks or became hopelessly bellied down on the rocky terraces.<sup>71</sup>

By 26 June the 78th Division, after breaking through the right of the Trasimene Line, had been halted between the Pescia and the Castiglione del Lago-Montepulciano lateral road in open country dominated by the enemy's artillery. The 4th Division now took up the main attack, sending the 10th Brigade along a secondary road which wound into the hills about a mile east of Lake Chiusi. Tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment led the way into Lopi, whose possession the enemy did not dispute, and then supported an attack by the 2nd Battalion, The King's Regiment (Liverpool) on Gioiella, which was taken after determined resistance by strong paratroop rearguards.<sup>72</sup> The loss by the Canadian unit of seven officers and men killed and 19 wounded during the day prompted the regimental diarist to comment, "The Three Rivers Regiment is suffering more casualties than in the Gustav and Hitler shows! And personnel and tank reinforcements are very short, mainly because tank rail-head is about 200 miles back at Cassino, and transporters and road space are very limited."<sup>73</sup>

About 1000 yards north of Gioiella a dominating ridge extending westward from a bend in the Pescia River to the village of Casamaggiore formed the rear and strongest part of the German defences on the 4th Division's front. It took two days of combined effort by four infantry battalions and all three squadrons of the Three Rivers Regiment to rout the, enemy from this

final position.<sup>74</sup> "C" Squadron fought a brilliant action on the 28th when, having pushed a mile past Casamaggiore, it seized vital high ground and then for seven hours stood off a series of determined counter-attacks by German armour and infantry, thus enabling the British battalions to close in on their objectives.<sup>75</sup> When, early in the engagement, the squadron commander's was one of four Canadian tanks knocked out in rapid succession, his second-in-command, Captain I. M. Grant, assumed control of the three remaining Shermans and throughout the day directed their operations with great skill and daring. As small groups of paratroopers attempted to infiltrate through the standing crops he left his own tank and for five hours, under continual sniping and mortar fire, sought them out on foot and guided his tanks from one fire position to another to deal with them. This "complete disregard for his personal safety and superb leadership" won Grant the D.S.O.,\* an honour not often bestowed on a junior officer.<sup>77</sup> Largely due to "C" Squadron's gallant efforts the strength of the German position on the ridge was broken. During the evening "A" Squadron supported the 1st/6th Battalion, The East Surrey Regiment in a successful attack on Casamaggiore. This time tank co-operation with the infantry was good, as "A" Squadron shot them from objective to objective and then covered them into town."<sup>78</sup> Its final action in breaking the Trasimene Line had cost the Three Rivers Regiment eleven killed and 14 wounded. "It was the 12th's roughest day on record", wrote the unit diarist, "and everyone felt deeply the loss of such fine men and officers."<sup>79</sup>

In the meantime on the Fifth Army's front the 4th U.S. Corps had been advancing steadily up the relatively lightly defended coastal flank, while on the 13th Corps' immediate left the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais, after being held from 22 to 26 June on a 29-mile front along the Orcia River, had broken through the stubborn resistance of the 4th Parachute and 356th Infantry Divisions.<sup>80</sup> "There are no words to express what is going on", lamented Lemelsen to von Vietinghoff on the morning of the 26th. "He is breaking through on the coast and is extending his gains in the centre. Everything goes wrong. There are no reserves to save the situation."<sup>81</sup> That evening Kesselring acceded to the demands of his Army Commanders and issued orders for a general withdrawal, to be accompanied by bitter rearguard resistance, particularly in the sector between Lake Montepulciano and Castiglione del Lago.<sup>82</sup> As we have seen, there was little immediate lessening of resistance opposite the 13th Corps, but during the night of 28-29 June the enemy broke contact and pulled back three or four miles across the entire Corps front.<sup>83</sup>

German documents reveal that Kesselring's staff had been indulging in much uneasy speculation regarding the future movements of the 1st Canadian

\* The only troop commander to survive with Grant, Lieut. F. A. Farrow, won the M.C. in the same action.<sup>76</sup>

Corps, which on 24 June was erroneously reported to be in the Terni-Foligno area<sup>84</sup> In the momentary lull which followed the 78th Division's overrunning of the forward Trasimene positions, Tenth Army intelligence staffs waited for the commitment of the Corps (which they believed was being concentrated immediately behind the front) to disclose the centre of gravity of the expected attack.<sup>85</sup> "One of these days", remarked Runkel (Chief of Staff of the 76th Corps) to Wentzell, "the Canadian Corps is going to attack and then our centre will explode."<sup>86</sup> The capture of members of the Three Rivers Regiment on the 24th (see above, p. 468) led to the faulty conclusion that a Canadian armoured division had entered the battle in the Vaiano sector, and for a time the identity of the attacking infantry was in question. "My Intelligence Officer tells me that it is the 1st Canadian Division ...", Wentzell reported to the Army Group's Chief of Staff (Lieut.-General Hans Rottiger). "Personally I believe it is the 4th British Division, but my Intelligence Officer says, 'Only Canadians attack like that', and after all the 5th Canadian Armoured Division has been identified."<sup>87</sup> Before the end of June the enemy correctly recognized the 1st Armoured Brigade as the only Canadian troops then opposing him in Italy; but he was still ignorant of the whereabouts of the Canadian Corps.<sup>88</sup>

#### The Advance to the Arezzo Line, 29 June - 16 July

The continuation of the advance on 29 June reflected changes in the Eighth Army's plan for the drive on Arezzo and Florence. The 13th Corps was now to have priority in men and resources over the 10th Corps, which had been making little progress in the mountainous region north of Perugia. The tired 78th Division, due for a long rest in the Middle East, began withdrawing from General Kirkman's right flank; its place was filled by transferring the 6th Armoured Division from General McCreery's command to lead the 13th Corps' advance along Highway No. 71, and by increasing the front of the 4th Division, which now brought the 12th Brigade up on the left of the 10th Brigade, supporting it with the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment (The Calgary Regiment).<sup>89</sup>

Units of the 1st Parachute Division had halted about four miles northwest of Casamaggiore on a low ridge connecting the villages of Valiano and Petrignano, and as the leading troops of the two British brigades approached at dusk on the 29th, they were greeted with heavy artillery and mortar fire. Next day squadrons of The Calgary Regiment (now commanded by Lt.-Col. C. A. Richardson) supported a two-pronged attack by the 12th Brigade on Valiano, while a battalion of the 10th Brigade, assisted by the Three Rivers, advanced on Petrignano, two miles to the east. Both attacks

met trouble. Mutually supporting fire from the defenders of each village harassed the infantry from both flanks, and our armour was hotly engaged by German self-propelled guns and tanks along the ridge. Lack of co-ordination kept the Canadian regiments from knowing the exact positions of each other's forward tanks, with the result that neither could press the attack, and no artillery fire was brought down on the enemy armour, which did some damaging shooting with relative impunity.<sup>90</sup> At nightfall the Germans, under cover of a sharp counter-attack in front of Petrignano, withdrew from both villages. "Superficially the day was not a marked success," recorded the Calgary diarist, "but we had inflicted casualties and seen the enemy once more retreat."<sup>91</sup>

The sight of the enemy in retreat became more familiar during the following week, as General Herr's divisions withdrew northward over level country little suited to effective delaying action. But as usual the German engineers missed no opportunities, and as the 4th Division pushed forward along the broad Val di Chiana, its advanced guard was checked by mines and demolitions at the numerous water-crossings and by occasional shelling and sniping by small rear parties. Smart work by the Calgary's reconnaissance troop in routing a demolition party and seizing a bridge over the main waterway--the Canale Maestro della Chiana--enabled units of the 12th Brigade to occupy the town of Foiano di Chiana by midday on 2 July.<sup>92</sup> As the advance continued along the west side of the canal, the 28th Brigade, supported by The Ontario Regiment, replaced the 10th Brigade and the Three Rivers on the divisional right flank. It was by no means ideal country for the armour; for although the level vineyards and the narrow grain plots between provided good tank going, low-strung grapevines and tall-growing maize crops seriously restricted the field of vision of the crew commander and his driver. More than once in such conditions a hidden enemy anti-tank gun caught an advancing Sherman unawares.<sup>93</sup>

On 4 July both brigades crossed the Arezzo-Siena highway east of Monte San Savino, and next day stiffening resistance along the rising ground indicated that Kesselring had decided to make another stand.<sup>94</sup> By the 6th the Allied advance had been checked all across the peninsula; it was apparent that the important rail and road centre of Arezzo and the major ports of Leghorn and Ancona on either coast were not to be taken without a struggle. In the 13th Corps' sector what we came to call the Arezzo Line ran about seven miles south of the main road from Arezzo to Florence (Highway No. 69). With their customary tactical sagacity the Germans had selected positions of great natural strength along the height of land between the valleys of the Arno and the Chiana. Steep hillsides covered with rocky outcroppings and deep gullies clothed with oak thickets made movement off the roads by infantry extraordinarily arduous and by tanks virtually impossible--and the enemy controlled all roads.



From the hilltop town of San Pancrazio General Heidrich dominated the Monte San Savino-Florence road, which provided the 4th Division's main avenue of advance, while his hold on the equally inaccessible village of Civitella, four miles to the east, barred the only other passage across the mountain ridge in the divisional sector.<sup>95</sup> On 6 July two battalions of the 12th Brigade made a vain and costly attempt to storm the olive-terraced slopes below San Pancrazio while Calgary tanks poured a heavy volume of high explosive into the enemy's positions on the heights.<sup>96</sup> On the brigade's right flank the Calgarys' "B" Squadron had been halted two days before about a mile south of Civitella by "rocks, gorges, precipitous hills, sniping, mortaring and the exhaustion of their accompanying infantry." The enemy was holding a height Point 543--so hemmed in by other hills that the armour could give little help to the infantry, and attacks by the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Fusiliers on 4 and 5 July were thrown back with heavy losses.<sup>97</sup> On the afternoon of the 5th a battalion of the 28th Brigade supported by an Ontario squadron drove the enemy from Tuori, a mean hamlet two miles east of Civitella, high above the Chiana Valley.<sup>98</sup>

Having failed to take the main San Pancrazio-Civitella ridge by frontal assault, the commander of the 4th Division made another attempt to break into the valley of the middle Arno by attacking through the somewhat less mountainous country on the right flank. Late on the 6th the 2nd Battalion, The Somerset Light Infantry of the 28th Brigade, striking into the hills behind Tuori under covering fire from Ontario tanks, gained two stubbornly held heights north-east of Civitella--Points 535 and 484.<sup>99</sup> But the divisional intention for the 10th Brigade and the Three Rivers to exploit towards Highway No. 69 three miles beyond was frustrated by strong German counter-attacks on both positions during the next three days.<sup>100</sup> On Kirkman's right flank the efforts of the 6th Armoured Division to capture Mount Lignano, which commanded the southern approach to Arezzo, had been equally unfruitful. There followed a week's deadlock, during which action along the Corps front was limited to patrolling and small-scale skirmishing. The respite gave the battle-weary British and Canadian troops an opportunity for 48 hours in Monte San Savino, which was quickly organized as an impromptu rest and recreation centre.<sup>101</sup>

The final stage in the struggle for Arezzo began in the early hours of 15 July as the 1st Guards Brigade of the 6th Armoured Division struck at the northern end of the Chiana Valley, while east of Highway No. 71 the 2nd New Zealand Division, brought forward from the Liri Valley to reinforce the 13th Corps, stormed Mount Lignano. West of the Chiana Canal the 4th Division fired all available small arms and mortars in support, an effort to which the tank guns of the Three Rivers Regiment contributed by engaging targets north of Tuori.<sup>102</sup> The Guards' attack was stoutly resisted by the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, but the New Zealanders' early capture of

their objective gave them commanding observation of Arezzo and the German gun areas to the north. With Mount Lignano in our hands, Kesselring accepted the loss of the city, and gave permission for the 76th Corps to withdraw.<sup>103</sup> The armoured division entered Arezzo on the morning of the 16th, and by evening had crossed the Arno four miles to the north-west.<sup>104</sup> The next few days saw the enemy once more withdrawing across the entire Allied front. On the 17th the United States 4th Corps reached the Arno east of Pisa, Ancona fell to the Poles on the 18th, and next morning the Americans entered Leghorn.<sup>105</sup>

### The Pursuit to the Arno, 16 July - 5 August

The prolonged battle for Arezzo had given Kesselring's labour battalions ten extra days in which to complete the defences of the Gothic Line; but the Eighth Army now held an administrative base for its planned attack on those positions. There remained, however, a further three weeks of hard fighting before Florence was secured as an operational base from which such an offensive might be launched.

The 13th Corps' advance on Florence began on a front of three divisions. While the British 6th Armoured Division thrust north-westward down the Arno valley, and west of the Chianti Mountains the 6th South African Armoured Division drove northward on the Corps' left flank, the 4th Division kept contact between them, using Highway No. 69 as its main axis.<sup>106</sup> On the morning of 16 July, as the fall of Arezzo became imminent, all three of General Ward's brigades began moving forward with their Canadian armoured regiments in support. On the left the 28th Brigade and The Ontario Regiment widened the divisional front by five miles when they relieved a brigade of the South African Division.<sup>107</sup> The enemy had pulled back from the San Pancrazio-Civitella heights, and as the brigades on the right closed up to the Arezzo-Florence highway they met only the familiar opposition of mined roads and demolished bridges while undergoing moderate shelling and mortaring. Early on the 17th the Three Rivers received a royal welcome from the local townspeople as they rolled through Pergine, a mile south of the highway, and by evening the accompanying infantry of the 10th Brigade had cleared La Querce, near the junction with the road from Monte San Savino.<sup>108</sup> Four miles down this road infantry of the 12th Brigade, having moved on from "the pile of rubble and crowd of doleful peasants that once comprised the community of San Pancrazio",<sup>109</sup> were in Capannole, which the Calgaries' reconnaissance troop had entered unopposed the previous evening. Three miles to the west the 28th Brigade had taken Mercatale, and as the two flanking formations converged towards Monteverchi--a prosperous market town on the Arno twenty miles west of Arezzo--the 12th Brigade

was squeezed out and passed into reserve.<sup>110</sup> A battalion of the 10th Brigade supported by Three Rivers tanks entered Montevarchi on the afternoon of the 18th, and by midnight had cleared the town of a considerable number of snipers.<sup>111</sup>

It was at Montevarchi that the Three Rivers Regiment encountered its first band of Partisans-tough, bearded men of many nationalities, whose fierce appearance explained the reluctance of the individual German to stir far from his fellows at night, or even by day. The unit diarist described them as a motley crowd, "dressed in odds and bits of every conceivable uniform from the German's grey-green to our own drab khaki. For weapons, they must have toured the arms factories of the world ... and from their persons hung a good supply of hand grenades, all different kinds."<sup>112</sup> During the advance through Tuscany these rough guerrillas had frequently aided the 4th Division by disclosing details of enemy strengths and dispositions and the location of minefields, and on more than one occasion our artillery was able to pin-point hostile batteries as a result of information brought back by a Partisan patrol which had penetrated the German lines.<sup>113</sup>

Resistance now stiffened sharply. West of Montevarchi a regiment of the Hermann Goring Panzer Division\* was holding a rocky ridge which overlooked both Highway No. 69 and the lateral road leading westward to Poggibonsi (on the main Siena-Florence highway). The feature formed part of one of a series of delaying positions which Kesselring had ordered "must be held to the last" in order to gain more time for the preparation of the Gothic Line.<sup>115</sup> It was shown on German maps alternatively as the "Irmgard"<sup>116</sup> or "Fritz" Line.<sup>117</sup> From Ricasoli, a mountain village about a mile west of Highway No. 69, the Hermann Gorings beat off an attack by the Ontarios and the 2nd Battalion, The Somerset Light Infantry working in from the south on the 18th. Next day they repelled a 10th Brigade attack from Montevarchi, knocking out two Three Rivers tanks. Under continual pounding from self-propelled batteries with both British brigades, the enemy vacated Ricasoli during the night, and early on the 20th the Three Rivers' "A" Squadron climbed into the village with the East Surreys and pushed on along the left of the highway. In the rugged terrain the squadron received valuable assistance from a sub-section of the 1st Canadian Assault Troop, Canadian Armoured Corps,† whose pioneers on one occasion blasted a way

\* During the last two weeks in July the Hermann Goring Division, which had been in action on the 76th Corps' right wing, was transferred to the Russian front. Its 2nd Panzer Grenadier Regiment, placed temporarily under the command of the relieving 715th Infantry Division, was the last of its formations to leave Italy.<sup>114</sup>

† The 1st Canadian Assault Troop was formed in Italy on 1 June 1944 to carry out engineer duties with the 1st Armoured Brigade. Its two officers and 84 other ranks—all Canadian Armoured Corps personnel—were given special training in methods of keeping tank routes open, including the use of demolitions and the removal of mines and booby traps. A section of the Troop joined each armoured regiment on 18 July.<sup>118</sup> (At the same time the 5th Canadian Assault Troop was organized to work with the 5th Armoured Brigade.)

for the tanks through a twelve-foot cliff face. On a ridge 2000 yards north of Ricasoli the infantry-tank force surprised and captured a party of 38 Hermann Goring's whose officer is reported to have refused to believe that Sherman's could make their way through to his position.<sup>119</sup> It was appropriate that this parting Canadian thrust against the Hermann Goring Division before it left Italy should have been delivered by the Three Rivers Regiment, for it was a rearguard of this same enemy formation that, a year before, almost to the very day, had ambushed a group of Three Rivers tanks outside Grammichele, in Sicily, thereby precipitating the first action between Canadian and German forces in the Italian campaign.

At this point the Canadian Armoured Brigade's six weeks' association with the 4th British Division ended, and in a farewell message to Brigadier Murphy the G.O.C. expressed his appreciation for "the sterling work" done by the Canadians. "All the soldiers in my Division", wrote General Ward, "have found co-operation with your regiments a very easy business, and all are impressed by their splendid determination and fighting spirit."<sup>120</sup> In the past three weeks, despite the delay at the Arezzo Line, infantry and armour had advanced together more than 35 miles from the rear Trasimene positions to the valley of the Arno. During that time the Canadians had suffered casualties of 26 killed and 102 wounded. Their relief by the 25th British Tank Brigade began on 20 July as part of a general regrouping of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps.<sup>121</sup>

With the departure of the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais to prepare for participation in Operation "Anvil" General Kirkman took over the sector which General Juin had been holding astride Highway No. 2 on the Fifth Army's right flank. This extension of his frontage, while increasing his responsibilities, gave the British G.O.C. a wider choice of areas in which to strike at the enemy. In the Arno Valley the 13th Corps' advance had come to a virtual halt, particularly east of Highway No. 69, where the 6th Armoured Division found its path blocked by two and a half German divisions between the river and the great barrier of the Pratomagno. By contrast, opposite Kirkman's left flank, the ten-mile front between the Chianti Hills (which formed the German inter-army boundary) and Highway No. 2 was held by only two divisions of the 1st Parachute Corps.<sup>122</sup> To take advantage of the expected lighter resistance in this sector the Corps Commander shifted the weight of his attack westward. He moved the 2nd New Zealand Division over to the left of the 6th South African Armoured Division and ordered both those formations to make a strong thrust northward to secure crossing-places over the Arno at and west of Florence. In the western half of the sector taken over from the Fifth Army he placed the 8th Indian Division, transferred from the 10th Corps, and assigned it the role of protecting the Corps flank and following up the main attack.<sup>123</sup> On 22 July, as the New Zealanders and the Indians were completing the

relief of the French Expeditionary Corps, the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade passed under command of the 8th Indian Division, thereby renewing a partnership which had been initiated in the Adriatic sector and substantially strengthened at the breaking of the Gustav Line.<sup>124</sup>

Moving by way of Highway No. 73 and Siena the Canadian armoured regiments joined the Indians in the Poggibonsi area. General Russell began a two-pronged advance on 23 July, sending his 21st Brigade forward on the right astride Highway No. 2, and the 19th Brigade along the secondary road which from Poggibonsi followed the valley of the River Elsa and reached the Arno near Empoli, 20 miles west of Florence. For four days, pending the arrival of the Three Rivers from the Montevarchi area, The Calgary Regiment supported both these thrusts while the Ontarios waited in reserve with the remaining brigade of the division. The Ontarios were thus privileged to provide a guard of honour to represent the Canadian brigade at a ceremonial parade outside Siena on 26 July, when His Majesty decorated a Sepoy of the 19th Indian Brigade with the Victoria Cross, won at the crossing of the Gari.<sup>125</sup>

The Calgaries now found themselves following up rearguards of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division,<sup>126</sup> old opponents of the 1st Canadian Division. These offered little opposition other than by mines and demolitions and occasional long-range shelling, for the successful attack launched two days earlier by the South Africans and New Zealanders had started a general German withdrawal between the middle Arno and the Elsa.<sup>127</sup> While the Calgaries' "A" and "B" Squadrons advanced slowly with the 19th Brigade through Certaldo and Castelfiorentino (General Russell's orders were to apply no strong pressure on the enemy), "C" Squadron supported a Mahratta battalion of the 21st Brigade up Highway No. 2 as far as Tavarnelle, thence turning north-westward along the New Zealanders' left flank.<sup>128</sup> "We were scarcely playing an inspired role", recorded the Calgary diarist on the 24th. "The engineers and assault personnel were worked to the limit, while the enemy retired leisurely laying still more mines." There was even time for squadron cooks to attend a short course of instruction on the serving of dehydrated potatoes.<sup>129</sup>

First signs of stiffening resistance came on 26 July along a line through Montespertoli,\* thirteen miles north of Poggibonsi. This was the western extremity of the Germans' "Olga" delaying position, which had brought the New Zealand and South African Divisions to a halt on the previous day.<sup>130</sup> The 4th Parachute Division, holding the ten-mile line, was well supported with self-propelled anti-tank guns, medium guns and Tiger tanks, as the Calgaries' "C" Squadron with the 21st Brigade on the Indians' right flank found to its cost-suffering six casualties and losing two tanks.<sup>131</sup> That

\* See p. 697.

night the Three Rivers relieved the squadron, and when the advance was resumed early on the 27th, it was found that the enemy, not waiting for a major attack on the "Olga" Line, had once more broken contact. Indian infantry and Canadian armour pushed on half a dozen miles along fairly good roads winding between the steep vine- and olive-covered slopes of the rich Chianti countryside. The speed of the enemy's retirement had given him little time to mine or carry out demolitions, and before the day ended the 8th Indian Division's right-hand thrust had reached to within two miles of Montelupo at the junction of the Pesa River and the Arno.<sup>132</sup> Here the 21st Brigade, waiting for the formations on either flank to catch up, began preparing for an attack north-eastward across the Pesa. Enemy shelling was troublesome, for the rapidity of the advance had placed the forward troops beyond the range of counter-battery action by the divisional artillery. Fortunately air support was readily available, and shortly after midday on the 28th 48 R.A.F. Spitfires\* bombed and strafed the hostile batteries into silence.<sup>134</sup> That night patrols of both brigades probing to the Arno found Empoli and Montelupo held by rearguards of the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division.<sup>135</sup>

By the 29th the 13th Corps' advance had been halted by the last of the enemy's planned delaying positions south of Florence. This was the Fourteenth Army's "Paula" Line, which from the Arno at Montelupo followed the right bank of the River Pesa for seven miles before swinging eastward across Highway No. 2 to the Tenth Army boundary, four miles west of Highway No. 69.<sup>136</sup> Holding the main front from the River Elsa to the Middle Arno ten miles north-west of Montevarchi, were five divisions†—one more than the number which General Kirkman had forward in the same sector.<sup>138</sup> The British Corps Commander decided to breach the "Paula" Line in the area about Highway No. 2, both because that road provided the best approach to Florence, and because the heights there were less formidable than in other sectors. Late in the evening of 30 July the 2nd New Zealand Division attacked on a narrow front between the highway and the River Pesa, supported by an extensive artillery programme in which the New Zealand guns were joined by those of the two flanking divisions and an Army Group Royal Artillery. The battle went well, and all initial objectives were taken from the stubbornly resisting 29th Panzer Grenadier Division; but heavy consumption of artillery ammunition made it necessary to postpone the second phase of the attack for twenty-four hours while stocks were replenished.<sup>139</sup>

\* The transfer of combat elements of the Twelfth Tactical Air Command to Corsica in mid-July to support "Anvil" left the Desert Air Force responsible for air operations on behalf of both the Fifth and Eighth Armies in Italy.<sup>133</sup>

† From west to east the 3rd and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions, the 4th Parachute and 356th Infantry Divisions, all in the 1st Parachute Corps, and the 715th Infantry Division holding the right flank of the Tenth Army."

As the New Zealanders struck again on the night of 1-2 August, the 8th Indian Division went into action on their left. Units of the 21st Brigade, supported by all three squadrons of the Three Rivers Regiment, secured a bridgehead over the Pesa at Ginestra, three miles upstream from Montelupo.<sup>140</sup> By daybreak on the 3rd the New Zealanders and South Africans had broken through the main "Paula" line and were driving towards Florence on the heels of a retreating enemy. That night Three Rivers tanks helped Mahratta and Punjabi infantry chase German rearguards out of the villages of Inno and Malmantile in the angle between the Pesa and the Arno. By the evening of 5 August the south bank of the Arno from Florence to Montelupo was firmly in Allied hands.<sup>141</sup>

The Three Rivers and Calgary Regiments had now reached the limit of their advance on Florence. For a few days they remained immediately south of the Arno, held in readiness for counter-attack if required, and occasionally firing in support of the infantry engaged in extending their control of the near bank. Then they began concentrating with their brigade headquarters in the general area of Greve, a dozen miles south of Florence.<sup>142</sup> Before leaving the battle area they had been joined briefly by The Ontario Regiment, which on 3 August came forward with the 17th Indian Brigade in the centre of the divisional sector. Within forty-eight hours, however, the Ontarios had been whisked out of the line again and transferred to the command of a formation which had just arrived south of Florence, and whose presence the enemy did not suspect—the 1st Canadian infantry Division.<sup>143</sup>

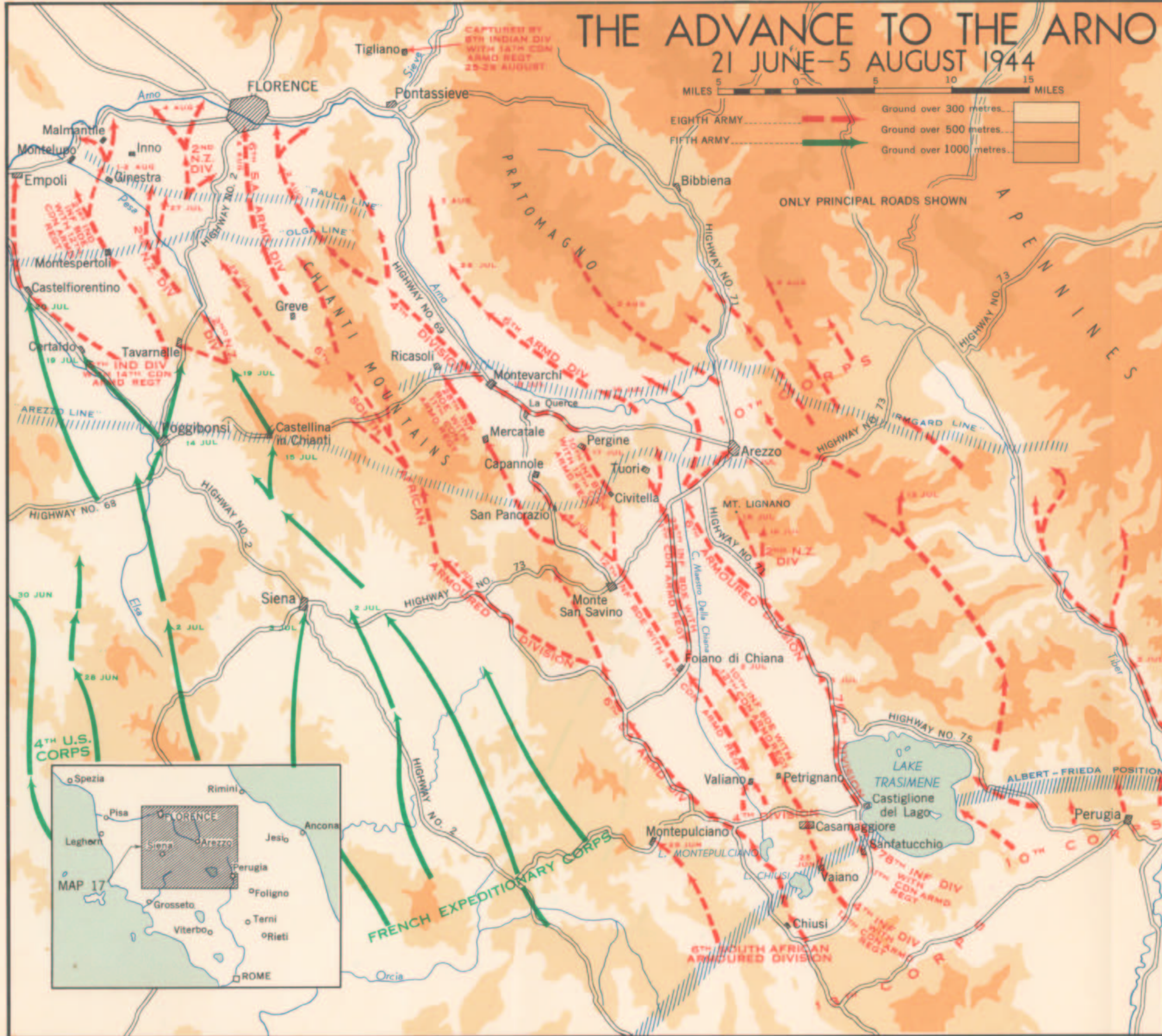
### The Organization of the 12th Brigade

Before seeking the reason for the 1st Division's appearance in the Florence area we must consider the fortunes of the main Canadian forces in Italy during June and July.

On withdrawal into Eighth Army reserve at the end of the battle for Rome the 1st Canadian Corps had settled in the upper Volturno Valley for a period of rest and refit. Corps Headquarters was established at Sant' Angelo d'Alife, near Raviscanina, while seven or eight miles to the east units and formations of the 1st Division were camped about Piedimonte d'Alife at the southern foot of the great Matese barrier. The 5th Armoured Division's area was on the west bank of the Volturno, in the region of Dragone and Alvignano.<sup>144</sup> For the battle-weary troops there were opportunities for short periods of leave in Rome (where accommodation was provided for 180 Canadian officers and 1000 other ranks),<sup>145</sup> and unit parties made 48-hour excursions to bathing beaches in Salerno Bay and the Gulf of Gaeta..<sup>146</sup> In the capital an eight-day exhibition of Canadian war art at the Canada Club on

# THE ADVANCE TO THE ARNO

21 JUNE - 5 AUGUST 1944





the Via Nazionale attracted nearly 10,000 civilian and military visitors.<sup>147</sup> The three companies of the Canadian Dental Corps in the field\* took advantage of the relatively static condition of the various units to carry out treatment of a large number of officers and men. Although a few engineer and transport units of the Corps Troops were employed on Eighth Army duties<sup>148</sup> (field companies of the 1st Division assisted Royal Engineers to reopen a railway north of Rome and other R.C.E. units were busy reclaiming bridging material on no longer essential routes in the rear areas),<sup>149</sup> most of the combatant troops were available for training. The lessons learned in the operations in the Liri Valley were assiduously rehearsed by all arms on the sun-baked Volturno flats, and in the surrounding foothills battalions of the 1st Division practised infantry-cum-tank tactics with armour of the 21st British Tank Brigade, which was destined to support the Canadian division in forthcoming operations over just such irregularities of ground.<sup>150</sup> Infantry officers received special instruction in a simplified method of controlling the fire of supporting artillery by observed shooting. Each company and platoon commander practised the procedure in turn, using guns firing live ammunition from a neighbouring valley. It was a training which was to prove its value later on occasions when infantry found themselves with no artillery officer available to bring them quick supporting fire.<sup>151</sup>

The generally rugged nature of the Italian terrain, which admirably suited the enemy's style of close defensive fighting and his delaying tactics in withdrawal, was largely responsible for an important reorganization in the 5th Canadian Division during July. During the pursuit from the Hitler Line the 11th Infantry Brigade had been severely overworked while trying to maintain the momentum of the advance in the exacting country west of the Melfa, and on 3 June the Corps Commander drew the attention of Canadian Military Headquarters to the need for two infantry brigades to work in succession with the division's armoured brigade, pointing out that the Eighth Army was providing additional infantry brigades for two of its armoured divisions.† He asked whether one of the operational brigade groups in Canada might be sent to Italy for inclusion in the 5th Armoured Division.<sup>153</sup> A request by General Alexander that the War Office support the recommendation of the G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps was turned down however by the C.I.G.S., who ruled that no "diversions from Overlord" could be agreed to.<sup>154</sup> General Leese then proposed that Burns should organize an infantry brigade from existing Canadian units in Italy, suggesting that he use the 5th Armoured Division's motor battalion (The Westminster

\* A fourth company, No. 11 Base Company, formed in the theatre in May 1944, had assumed responsibility for the dental treatment of troops in the Base and L. of C. units, besides serving as a reinforcement depot for the forward companies.

† The 61st Infantry Brigade (organized from battalions of the Rifle Brigade) and the 24th Independent Guards Brigade were added to the British 6th Armoured Division and the 6th South African Armoured Division respectively.<sup>152</sup>

Regiment) and withdraw from the 1st Canadian Corps Troops, for conversion into infantry, the armoured car regiment (The Royal Canadian Dragoons) and the light anti-aircraft regiment.<sup>155</sup> (This last unit was being eliminated from British corps in the Eighth Army since the destruction of the enemy's air power in the Mediterranean had virtually ended the Allied need of anti-aircraft defence forces.)<sup>156</sup>

In submitting to C.M.H.Q. the recommendation that he form the new brigade from resources already available to him, Burns substituted for the armoured car regiment the 1st Division's reconnaissance regiment (the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards) on the grounds that the latter unit had had more experience in infantry fighting.<sup>157</sup> When General Stuart notified National Defence Headquarters of Leese's request, he was warned by the C.G.S., Lieut.-General J. C. Murchie, that because of the probable increase in the number of infantry reinforcements that would be required the proposal was unlikely to find acceptance unless it was militarily necessary.<sup>158</sup> Stuart flew to Italy (see above, p. 451n.), and on 12 July, having discussed the problem with Generals Alexander and Leese, authorized Burns to proceed with the organization of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade, later reporting to Ottawa that such a step was an operational necessity.<sup>159</sup>

The task of organizing the brigade went ahead rapidly, although it was some time before the many complexities arising from conversion to new establishments were all straightened out. Announcement of the change was received with little enthusiasm by those most affected. Every soldier considers his own arm of the service superior to all others, and in the units which were being converted there was natural disappointment at the prospect of becoming infantry and apparently sacrificing many years of specialized training. The loss of their armoured vehicles was a bitter blow to the men of the 4th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment. "These were our homes for a long time, and no cavalryman ever felt sadder at losing a faithful and tried mount", recorded the unit diarist,<sup>160</sup> and added that when the sad news was broken to the officers of the regiment, "much vino was consumed in an effort to neutralize the pains of frustration, despair and complete loss of morale."<sup>161</sup> This disturbed feeling quickly passed, however, for in the urgency of building and training the new battalions there was little time for prolonged regrets. It may be noted here that the change was not a permanent one; although none could then foresee it, within eight months the 12th Infantry Brigade was to be disbanded, and its units were to return to their original role (below, p. 663).

The 4th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment (4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards), discarding their reconnaissance label for the balance of their stay in Italy, retained their prewar name—the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards. They were replaced as the 1st Division's reconnaissance unit by The Royal Canadian Dragoons. The converted 1st Canadian Light

Anti-Aircraft Regiment (temporarily using the improvised title of the "89th/109th Battalion", from the numbers of the two batteries\* which formed the nucleus of the new unit)<sup>164</sup> was at first officially designated the 1st Canadian Light Anti-Aircraft Battalion;<sup>165</sup> but, seeking a title which would "indicate a Highland unit from Ontario or Eastern Canada",<sup>166</sup> it was renamed in October† The Lanark and Renfrew Scottish Regiment.<sup>168</sup> The Westminster Regiment (Motor) underwent no change in name or establishment, for the Corps Commander considered it essential that although the unit was to serve as an infantry battalion in the 12th Brigade, it should also be available to be used as motor battalion for the 5th Armoured Brigade. Ottawa approved the recommendation and authorized the provision of reinforcements for the battalion's dual role.<sup>169</sup> The new brigade's support group, consisting of a mortar company (eight 4.2-inch mortars) and a medium machine-gun company (twelve Vickers), was furnished, like that of the 11th Brigade's, from The Princess Louise Fusiliers. It was named the 12th Independent Machine Gun Company (The Princess Louise Fusiliers), the 11th Brigade Support Group being redesignated to conform.<sup>170</sup>

Command of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade was given to Brigadier D.C. Spry, who was transferred from the 1st Brigade; but after a busy month of organizing and directing training, he left for France on 13 August to take over the 3rd Canadian Division. He was succeeded by Brigadier J.S.H. Lind, former commander of The Perth Regiment.<sup>171</sup>

### The Red Patch at Florence, 5-6 August

The first intimation of a return to active operations by the Canadian Corps came on 18 July, when word was received from the Eighth Army that towards the end of the month the Corps would begin secretly concentrating near Perugia.<sup>172</sup> In discussions with General Leese two days later General Burns learned that "the task of the Canadian Corps was not yet definitely determined, but generally it was intended to continue the offensive against the enemy and break through the Gothic Line."<sup>173</sup> The Corps Commander subsequently found<sup>174</sup> that his headquarters would have no part in the main attack, which was designed to penetrate the line between Dicomano (fifteen miles north-east of Florence) and Pistoia.<sup>175</sup> He was to take over the 10th

\* The regiment's third battery, the 35th, had become No. 35 Canadian Traffic Control Unit on 15 June—an outcome of the traffic difficulties in the Liri Valley—and was undergoing training in provost duties.<sup>162</sup> The new infantry battalion drew additional men from the 2nd and 5th Canadian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiments, which in common with all divisional anti-aircraft units in the theatre reduced each battery by one troop.<sup>163</sup>

† Final decision on a name for the new battalion was reached only after much discussion. One of the more original suggestions, designed to "show origin, which we think advisable", was that proposed by the Minister of National Defence—"Laircraft Scots of Canada"<sup>167</sup>

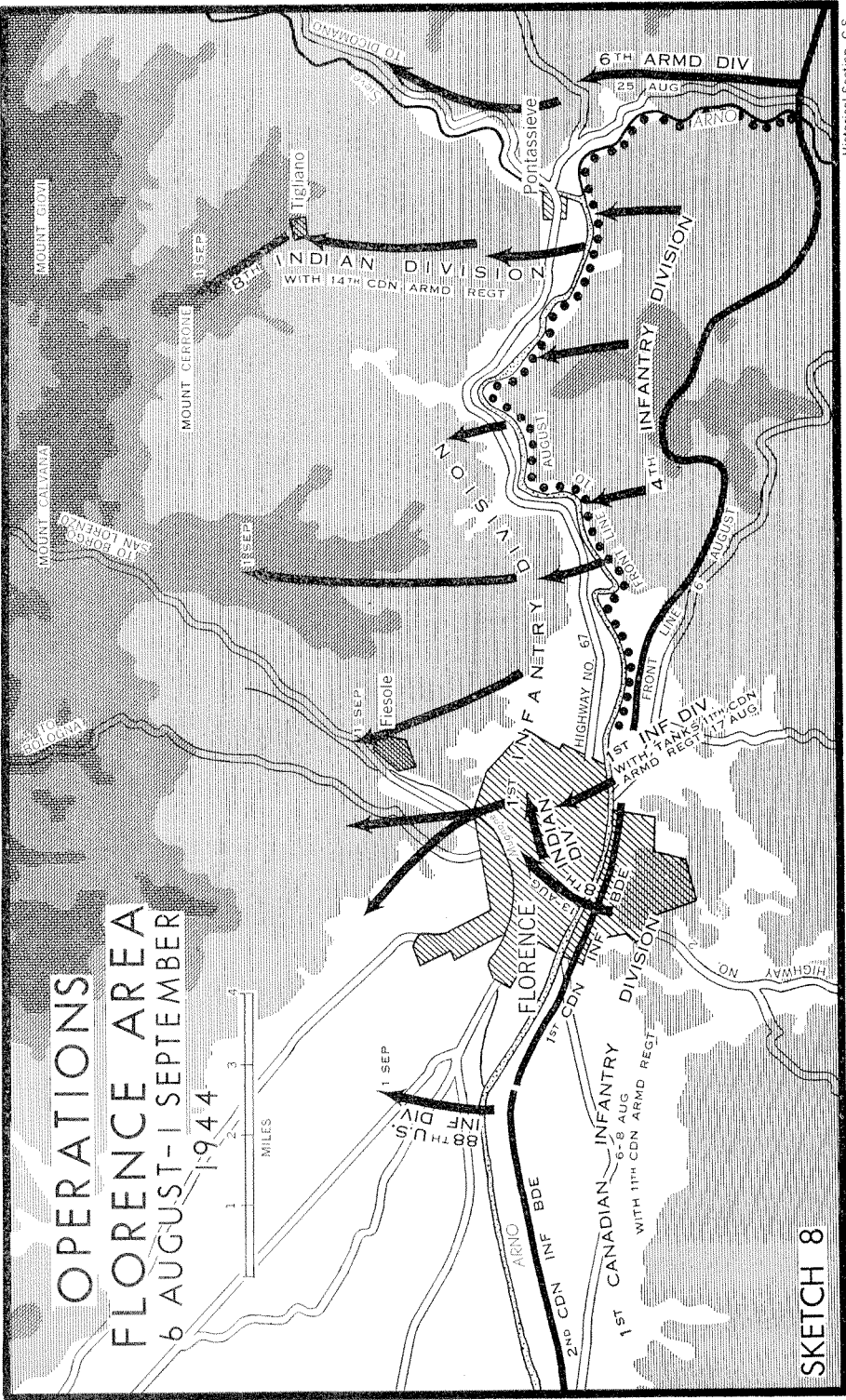
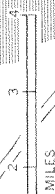
Corps' eastern flank in the Central Apennines\* so as to enable the 10th and 13th Corps to concentrate for the Eighth Army's share in the offensive; the 1st Division, however, would reinforce the 13th Corps at Florence.<sup>177</sup>

The Canadian stay in the Volturno Valley culminated on 31 July with the visit of His Majesty and the royal investiture of Major Mahony of The Westminster Regiment (see above, p. 434).<sup>178</sup> Next day the 1st Division began moving to a concentration area in the hills north of Siena, near Castellina in Chianti.<sup>179</sup> During the week the remainder of the Corps followed northward to the vicinity of Foligno, Corps Headquarters setting up its tents four miles south of the city in the inevitable olive grove. Strict precautions were taken during these moves to ensure that the same cloak of secrecy which had shrouded the transfer of the Corps from the Adriatic sector in the preceding spring should now conceal from the enemy the arrival of Canadians behind the central front. (At the time-as we shall see later-the Eighth Army was executing an elaborate cover scheme to convey the impression that the 1st Canadian Corps was assembling behind the 2nd Polish Corps, preparatory to an attack on the Gothic Line in the Adriatic sector.)<sup>180</sup> Before any troops left the Volturno Valley they painted out formation and unit identification signs on their vehicles and removed from their uniforms "Canada" badges and all other distinguishing patches and flashes, not forgetting the ribbon of the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal. Towns along the way were put out of bounds, and the customary collection of unit direction signs lining the highway were replaced by route markers carrying only a single letter.<sup>181</sup> That these measures effectively frustrated the inquisitiveness of those whom our intelligence staffs called "short range agents"<sup>182</sup> among the civilian population is shown by the significant silence of enemy war diaries regarding the true whereabouts of the Canadian formations at this time.

By a strange irony these elaborate precautions went for nought. On 4 August the illusion we had sought to create of a forthcoming drive in the Adriatic sector became our actual intention when, for reasons that will be shown in the next chapter, General Alexander abandoned the idea of a two-army attack through the central Apennines in favour of an offensive on the right flank by the Eighth Army.<sup>183</sup> The change in plan cancelled the Canadian relief of the 10th Corps but did not affect the move of the 1st Division. Red patches and unit flashes returned to arms and shoulders, and vehicles once more showed their distinguishing signs; for not only was anonymity no longer necessary, but it was desirable to advertise to the enemy the presence of Canadians at Florence and so destroy the earlier concept of their being on the east coast.<sup>184</sup>

\* The relief of the 10th Corps was slated to begin on the night of 6-7 August, with the Canadians becoming responsible for a 25-mile sector between Gubbio and Citerna, which would ultimately be extended 40 miles westward to Pontassieve<sup>176</sup> (see map at back end-paper).

**OPERATIONS  
FLORENCE AREA  
6 AUGUST-1 SEPTEMBER  
1944**



**SKETCH 8**

Historical Section, G.S.

On the evening of the 5th the 2nd Canadian Brigade took over the 2nd New Zealand Division's sector of the now almost static front, and next night on their right the 1st Brigade relieved the 6th South African Armoured Division (see Sketch 8). The New Zealand Division was thus enabled to shift to the left and allow the 8th Indian Division to pass into corps reserve.<sup>185</sup> The Canadians now faced the Arno on a ten-mile front, which in the 1st Brigade's sector included the triangular portion of Florence which lay south of the river. The German garrison-three battalions of the 4th Parachute Division-still controlled the nine tenths of the city which lay on the right bank.<sup>186</sup> German engineers had blown all the Arno bridges except the famous fourteenth-century Ponte Vecchio in the heart of old Florence, and they had ensured that no Allied vehicle would readily test its frail shop-lined footway by systematically demolishing a number of fine old mediaeval houses on either bank in such a way as to block the approaches at both ends.<sup>187</sup> The bulk of the city's population had made no move, and the front line provided the uncommon spectacle of soldiers crouching in watchful readiness with weapons at the alert, while civilians cycled or strolled past in apparent unconcern of stray bullets. The Canadians were using only their rifles and machine-guns, the firing of PIATs and mortars in the built-up area being forbidden-for Allied Force Headquarters had ruled that "the whole city of Florence must rank as a work of art of the first importance."<sup>188</sup>

It soon became apparent that not all the Italians south of the river supported the Allied cause. The R.C.R., holding the waterfront east and west of the Ponte Vecchio, suffered casualties from civilian snipers on nearby rooftops and from occasional mortaring and shelling which the enemy, less punctilious about preserving undamaged the treasured fabric of the city, was bringing down with the assistance of Fascist observers in the area. To end this practice a force of 250 Italian Partisans, assisted by a score of the battalion's "tommy-gunners", combed the south bank on 8 August, entering every building and scrutinizing its inhabitants. They rounded up more than 150 suspects, and enough rifles, pistols and hand grenades (some of these being found in the women's purses) to fill two 15-cwt. trucks.<sup>189</sup>

The 1st Division's brief stay in the Florence sector ended on 8 August. Its attachment to the 13th Corps had enabled General Kirkman to carry out among his tired formations a series of welcome reliefs, some of them short but none the less necessary; now fresh commitments awaited it on the Adriatic coast. That evening the Canadians were relieved by the 8th Indian Division, and, once more under the strictest security regulations, they moved 30 miles southward to a staging area outside Siena.<sup>190</sup> By nightfall on the 10th the Division had rejoined the 1st Canadian Corps in the Perugia-Foligno area.<sup>191</sup>

## Canadian Armour Across the Arno

On the withdrawal of the Canadian infantry from Florence, The Ontario Regiment, which General Vokes had held in a counter-attack role in the south-western suburbs of the city, reverted to the command of the 8th Indian Division.<sup>192</sup> Brigadier Murphy's other two regiments stayed in reserve near Greve, the Calgaries for the next fortnight, and the Three Rivers until early in October. For another week the Ontarios remained south of the Arno, shelling fairly steadily the main routes leading north-west from Florence, and occasionally sending a troop of Shermans with a party of infantry to deal with enemy patrols reported on the near bank.<sup>193</sup> During the night of 10-11 August the rearmost elements of the 4th Parachute Division withdrew across the Mugnone Canal into the northern suburbs,<sup>194</sup> and at daybreak white flags flying along the Arno waterfront signalled this departure, which Partisan patrols promptly confirmed. Infantry of the 8th Indian Division and the 1st British Division on its right crossed the river and began organizing the movement of food, medical supplies and water to the starving population in the main part of the city. The opening of the Ponte Vecchio to jeeps on the 14th eased the problem of supply, and next day the Royal Engineers completed a Class 30\* Bailey on the piers of a demolished bridge 300 yards downstream.<sup>195</sup>

On 14 August an exchange of sectors by the two infantry divisions (designed to employ the British troops in Florence itself and the Indians more appropriately in the mountainous country east of the city) brought The Ontario Regiment in support of the 1st Division.<sup>196</sup> A troop from "A" Squadron crossed the Arno on the 17th (the first Allied tanks to enter the city proper) and the rest of the squadron followed next day. Forbidden to use their 75s in the central part of Florence, the Ontarios continued to carry out reconnaissances, assist British infantry and Partisans to clean up machine-gun posts and snipers, and to serve as a counter-attack force in the unlikely event of a German thrust from the northern limits of the city.<sup>197</sup>

Throughout the latter half of August the enemy showed little sign of relinquishing his advantageous positions on the ring of hills commanding Florence from the north. East of the city, however, on the front held by the 1st Division's right flank and the 8th Indian Division, he began to draw back on 20 August to more defensible positions about five miles north of the Arno.<sup>198</sup> In order to maintain contact, and to secure a bridgehead for the Fifth Army's coming offensive, the 13th Corps (which had come under General Clark's operational command on the 18th) began preparations for a crossing of the river on a broad front.<sup>199</sup> On 25 August the 8th Indian Division,

\* The numerical classification of a military bridge represents approximately the "live load" (i.e., of moving vehicles suitably spaced) in tons which may safely cross it.

supported by two squadrons of The Calgary Regiment, forded the Arno two miles west of Pontassieve and without meeting serious opposition established a bridgehead 2000 yards deep. There was sharp fighting on the 29th, as the 17th Indian Brigade clashed with a regiment of the 356th Infantry Division in rugged country west of the Sieve River. The brigade's objective was Mount Cerrone, a prominent 2000-foot sentinel in front of the line of heights marking the watershed between the Sieve\* and the Arno. "C" Squadron's tanks, in "an almost hilarious morning of shooting",<sup>200</sup> helped Gurkha troops-"using the kukri when ammunition failed"-drive 200 Germans from a stubbornly defended ridge which approached Mount Cerrone from Tigliano, a village four miles north of Pontassieve.<sup>201</sup> Next day heavy mortar and machine-gun fire and a sharp counter-attack prevented the Indians from gaining more ground. By the end of the month, however, the development of the Eighth Army's offensive on the Adriatic coast caused Kesselring to abandon any hope of further delaying action along the Arno, and on the 31st the Germans pulled back their outposts to Mount Giovi and Mount Calvana in the main ridge south of the Sieve, at the same time withdrawing the last of their rearguards from the Florence area.<sup>202</sup>

The final entry in its diary for August recorded that the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade experienced "no feeling of disappointment at being left out of the Adriatic operation." The brigade had been in almost continuous action since 11 May, and much of its fighting had been done in country anything but favourable to armoured warfare. For the time being, as the Fifth Army completed preparations for its attack on the Gothic Line, a series of reliefs gave every squadron a brief period of rest and refitting. Tanks were subjected to a programme of careful maintenance and rigorous inspection.<sup>203</sup> It was time well spent, for in the mountains ahead lay stiffer tests than any that the three armoured regiments had yet been called upon to face.

\* It will be noted (Map 23) that the Sieve River flows almost due east before turning south to join the Arno.



## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BREAKING OF THE GOTHIC LINE, 25 AUGUST - 2 SEPTEMBER 1944

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#### The Enemy Bewildered

Now that the Canadians were preparing to enter the passage that would lead them between the Etruscan Apennines and the sea into Lombardy, the enemy's uncertainty as to their whereabouts would soon be at an end. Field-Marshal Kesselring's anxiety was natural enough. The onslaught which had carried the Allies some 260 miles\* from the Garigliano, through three lines of prepared defences and two major battles in twelve weeks, must soon be renewed; and the commitment of a corps held in reserve would indicate the direction of the Eighth Army's impending effort to break through to the Po.

Impressive as the Allied achievement had been, it had fallen short both, of the enemy's fears and our own expectations. The withdrawal of seven divisions for the invasion of Southern France had deprived General Alexander of more than a quarter of all his forces. At the same time new formations arriving to reinforce the Germans had brought them a net gain of some four divisions by mid-July.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen, the enemy rallied. Hard fought rearguard actions slowed us down. At the beginning of August Kesselring's Army Group was still formidable, and the Allied Armies in Italy had yet to turn defeat into debacle. At left and centre the wall of the Apennines still stood in the way, bending north-westward from Arezzo and Florence to hem in the approaches through Tuscany, before blocking them out altogether on the coast at Spezia. On the right, the alternation of lateral ridge and river, though no longer interminable as it had seemed in the previous winter, still favoured the defence.

Captured documents, including the Tenth Army's war diary and the dramatic detail of Kesselring's telephone conversations with his commanders, yield up the enemy's story. They reveal how little the Germans made of the tangle, how impossible they found it to appreciate which way General

\* The shortest distance from Cassino to Florence by main highways is 258 miles. The distance as the crow flies is 220 miles.

Alexander would strike next. This inability to discern the movements and the purposes of the Canadian Corps is characteristic of the manner in which the enemy's Intelligence was outwitted in the campaign as a whole. We have already noted the faulty interpretation put upon the appearance of Canadian tanks at the Trasimene Line, when the Germans, taking the part for the whole, confidently looked for the "interpolation of the Canadian Corps in the area west of Lake Trasimene";<sup>2</sup> and the missing piece in the puzzle had not been found when the 2nd Polish Corps began its great advance towards the seaport of Ancona at the beginning of July. "If only I knew where the Canadians are!" lamented Wentzell to the Army Group's Chief of Staff.<sup>3</sup>

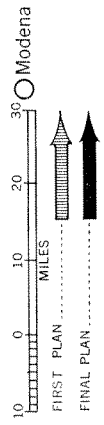
Towards the middle of the month the Poles (now in position to put in their brilliant attack on the port) were reported to be regrouping. "This may mean several things", von Vietinghoff told Kesselring on the 13th. "Either Eighth Army says: 'The Poles are getting nowhere; we might take them out and put in the Canadians.' Or he may also say to himself: 'It seems to go well in the centre. I will take the Canadians there and push ahead.'" "Which centre do you mean?" asked Kesselring. "The Tiber valley," replied Vietinghoff.<sup>4</sup>

It was in the centre that General Alexander at this time actually proposed to assault the Gothic Line. Undeterred by the loss of the divisions intended for France he did not at first alter his plan to get through the mountains by the shortest route, the ascent between Florence and Bologna (see Sketch 9). The hazards of topography were great; but since the weight of the Fifth and Eighth Armies was already on the west and centre, to attack on a front from Dicomano to Pistoia would require a minimum of regrouping, and catch the enemy while he was still on the run. The offensive would be launched by both armies, the main power being given to their adjoining wings. Using two fresh corps (the Canadian and the 5th British) with five divisions already under their command and a new one (the 1st British Armoured) then arriving in Italy, the Eighth Army would carry the bulk of the attack through the mountains and be responsible for the advance to the Po. The weakened Fifth Army (now reduced to one armoured and four infantry divisions) would thrust towards Modena but would not be expected to exploit far beyond.<sup>5</sup>

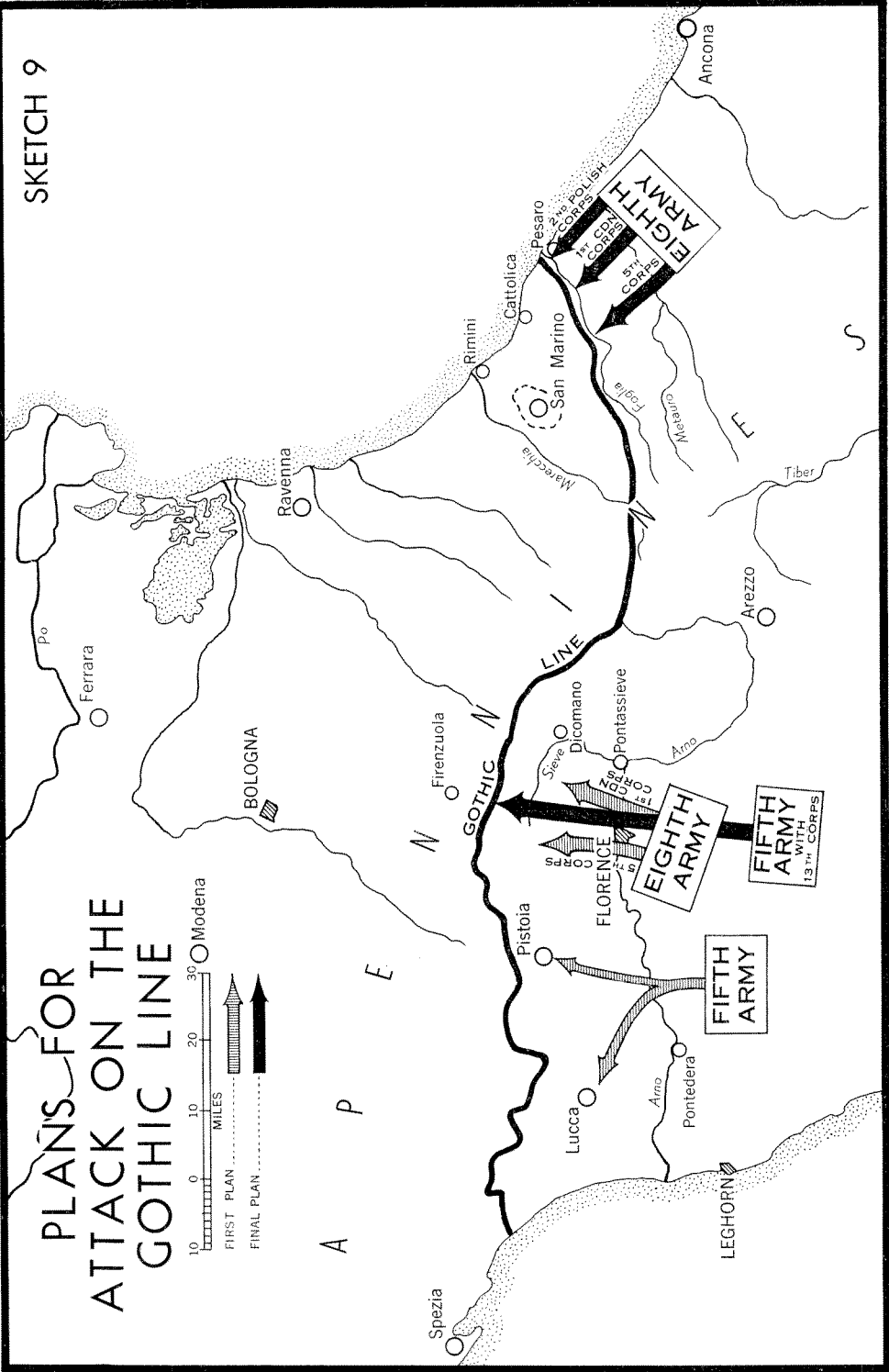
The time to be saved by attacking the German centre seemed to decide the issue, though there was little to choose between the terrain there and on the extreme right. The direct route to Bologna, the most important objective south of the Po, was high and defensible. The more roundabout way along the Adriatic shore, though lower, was cut across by the west-to-eastward trend of the hills and watercourses which formed a continuous series of barriers northward from the Sangro. The argument against it appeared to be

SKETCH 9

# PLANS FOR THE ATTACK ON THE GOTHIC LINE



A P E N



clinched by the conclusion of the Eighth Army's planning staff that an attack along the east coast would not only be difficult to mount, but would neither allow us to bring the necessary concentration of forces to bear, nor offer any good opportunities for exploitation. To get involved in a series of river-crossing operations would be playing into the hands of a withdrawing enemy.<sup>6</sup> When minds were changed and the time came to launch the offensive here instead of in the centre, it would at least be essayed with eyes open. Meanwhile, the enemy had to be deceived into thinking that he was about to be attacked in the coastal sector now.

The Germans were therefore encouraged to believe that large forces were being concentrated behind the Poles, who were to create just such an impression by their own movements, aided by the traffic and activity of signal detachments and reconnaissance parties sent over from the Canadian Corps and from the British 1st Infantry and 1st Armoured Divisions.<sup>7</sup> Kesselring was already alarmed by the new Polish tactics of driving through his lines with tanks massed on a narrow frontage, and agreed to meet von Vietinghoff's request to be reinforced by the 1st Parachute Division.<sup>8</sup> Then the Allied deception scheme brought him added cause for concern. The presence of soldiers wearing the red diamond of the Corps or the rectangle of the 1st Division on their sleeves beneath the "Canada" patch was duly observed in the Polish area. An enemy agent faithfully reported what he had seen to his employers. That was on 21 July, three days after the Carpathian Lancers had entered Ancona.<sup>9</sup> Events seemed to be moving towards a climax.

"Possibly the Canadian Armoured Division is there," Kesselring prompted his Army Commander on the 22nd. "We hear constantly about the Canadians being in the rear area", von Vietinghoff replied, "but it is quite possible that they are being saved for the attack on the Green Line. Farther up the coast the terrain is more suitable for their attack."<sup>10</sup>

It was a shrewd forecast, though as yet, ironically, not General Alexander's intention. The notion seemed to be confirmed by an appreciation from the 51st Mountain Corps' Intelligence indicating that strong Canadian and British forces were being assembled on the Adriatic flank for a major offensive.<sup>11</sup> It was precisely the impression which the deception scheme was intended to convey. However when on the 23rd (the day on which the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade began supporting the 8th Indian Division's advance from Poggibonsi\*) an Italian deserter declared that the 5th Canadian Armoured Division was moving north from Siena, the whole matter was again in doubt. Wentzell pressed the Fourteenth Army's Chief of Staff for clarification, since the 1st Parachute Division was being moved to the coast on the assumption that the Canadians would be committed there against the

\* Above, p. 476.

Tenth Army.<sup>12</sup> This idea of impending Canadian action on the eastern flank prevailed, and by the end of the month the 51st Mountain Corps affirmed that the 1st Division was actually in the line with the Italian Liberation Corps on the Polish left, an illusion reproduced (albeit with a question mark) in the "Enemy Situation Map" issued by the Tenth Army on 2 August.<sup>13</sup>

But with all the shipping and warships assembling in the Mediterranean for what soon proved to be the Allied descent on the south coast of France Kesselring feared anew that his own coasts were about to be attacked—an obvious resort in a campaign being fought against the grain of a country designed by nature to segregate the north from the south. He decided that his forces on the Adriatic must therefore be deployed in depth and measures taken to meet the possibility of a seaborne hook delivered in the region of Rimini and Ravenna. A break-through to the north from Florence (a centre of communications as well as of art) was always a possibility, but difficult to believe in. A sea- and airborne operation aimed at his deep flank on the Ligurian coast seemed to him more likely; for the Allies would hardly have sufficient mountain troops, and would think his prepared defences too strong, to attack him frontally in the Northern Apennines.<sup>14</sup>

### The Allied Change of Plan

Such thoughts were already disturbing Lieut.-General Sir Oliver Leese. He had no mountain troops at all. The French Corps, with the best training and experience in mountain warfare of all General Alexander's forces (it included the only regular mountain division), was committed to "Anvil". Without such troops, a battle through the high passes might fail. There was no chance of outflanking the enemy by sea; every available craft would soon be bound for the Riviera. The only alternative was to make a surprise attack on the Adriatic front, hitherto rejected for reasons of distance and of time. Leese resolved to put these views to the Commander-in-Chief.

General Alexander met Leese on the airfield at Orvieto on 4 August. Sir Oliver there convinced him that the difficulties of the frontal attack through the mountains with the two armies operating on such closely contiguous axes might prove too great. Briefly, informally, while they sheltered from the sun beneath the wing of a Dakota, Leese set forth his argument for a change of plan. The Eighth Army as a whole had had comparatively little experience of large-scale operations in the mountains. Pack transport trains and similar requirements for such ventures were as yet only improvised. The mountains would prevent the Army from exploiting its superiority in armour and artillery, which in combination had proved so effective in Africa and more recently against the Hitler Line. The Adriatic

coast route, however, seemed to offer a more familiar kind of battlefield, the chance of "set-piece" cannonades for the artillery, and for the armour the prospect of breaking out into the northern plain. While General Leese would give his whole endeavour to carrying out whatever strategy might seem best, he said frankly that his confidence in his ability to break through the centre of the Apennines position was not as great as he could wish.<sup>15</sup>

These considerations decided the issue. General Alexander agreed with the proposal that the plan be changed; the frontal attack might now carry too much risk. "It was anything but certain", he wrote later, "that our heavy blow in the mountains of the centre would take us through to our objective and if the first attack there fell short of expectations the advantage would be all with the defenders." They had by far the easier lateral communications, and once it was clear that the Allied strength was concentrated at one point, they could very rapidly build up a counter concentration. "On the new plan", said the C.-in-C. in his *Despatch*, "we should be able to employ what I call the strategy of the 'two-handed punch' or, more orthodoxly expressed, the strategy of attacking two points equally vital to the enemy (i.e., Ravenna and Bologna) either simultaneously or alternately in order to split the reserves available for the defence."<sup>16</sup> Thus Operation "Olive" was conceived, to be kept in the greatest secrecy, and at the outset with only the minimum reference to be made to it on paper. Under this injunction the planning staff at Leese's headquarters set about the tremendous task of moving the main strength of the Army over the mountains.

The Army Commander lost no time in informing General Burns and General McCreery (the G.O.C. 10th Corps) that the previous plans were being modified.<sup>17</sup> But before anything else was done the existing cover plan must be cancelled and a stop put to advertising the seeming presence of the Canadians on the Adriatic now that they were really to concentrate and attack there. It was necessary to resort to a double bluff, to call the enemy's attention to the seaside hoax of July and to put up a show of being about to scale the mountains in August. The success of these measures was essential if the Allies were to achieve strategic surprise. How far were the Germans taken in?

The attempt to identify the 1st Canadian Division in action with the 13th Corps failed. For some unaccountable reason, the enemy did not spot the Canadians in the line. Although the people of Florence moved freely about the positions held by General Vokes' troops during their three-day stay in the city neither Fascist nor spy seems to have been quick-witted enough to report the red patches to the German Intelligence. The records of the Fourteenth Army reveal only a few casual references to the Canadians, who were then believed to be held in reserve to the south. But the enemy's oblivion could scarcely be undisturbed by the clouds of dust and the

mechanical din raised by the thousands of vehicles which crawled in endless convoy up out of Umbria and down into the Marches. The arrival of new divisions of unbadged, anonymous soldiery, with all their guns and tanks, could not go unnoticed. What did he make of this?

The Tenth Army was at first undecided and confused. General Herr, the Commander of the 76th Panzer Corps, which now held the Adriatic sector (his headquarters had changed places with Headquarters 51st Mountain Corps on 8 August),<sup>18</sup> told von Vietinghoff on 17 August that during the past few days the volume of traffic in the mountains had been "rather striking". He assumed the phenomenon to be one of supply extending far inland and linked with the brisk unloading going on in Ancona. Yet it involved as many as 300 vehicles an hour. It must be a large-scale movement, possibly by reconnaissance units coming in to replace some of the non-British (*Exoten*) troops. He had ordered his divisional commanders to get hold of a prisoner somehow. A dead Englishman had been found in the area where the commotion was going on.<sup>19</sup>

Compared with this vagueness a Fourteenth Army intelligence appreciation, issued on the following day, was firm and remarkably correct:

From reliable source: Unusually large supply movements are being carried out at the present time in the Adriatic sector. They include bridging equipment. In connection with the intensive aerial activity in that sector, it seems that the enemy there is making preparation for large-scale operations.<sup>20</sup>

Fortunately for the Allies this acute interpretation of the evidence was either disbelieved or ignored at Kesselring's headquarters, possibly as coming from too far afield. As for the Tenth Army, the enemy went so far as to commit himself to a precarious manoeuvre of regrouping and withdrawal. On 15 August the Allied landings had taken place in Southern France (see Chapter XX), and demands soon reached von Vietinghoff for two of his divisions (the 15th Panzer Grenadier and the 5th Mountain) for service in France.<sup>21</sup> Faced with the impending loss of these two formations, and in order to ease the continued pressure of the Poles on the weary 278th Division, the Army Commander issued orders during the night of 21-22 August for a withdrawal to new positions\* about three miles in front of the main defence line.<sup>23</sup> On the 23rd the Parachute Division reported that the Poles (who were fighting what General Anders afterwards considered to be their heaviest battle along the Adriatic)<sup>24</sup> had crossed the Metauro, only ten miles down the coast from Pesaro (see p. 697), and were digging in on both banks of the river.<sup>25</sup>

\* This was the "Red" Line, which in the Adriatic sector ran inland behind the Arzilla River, just south of Monteciccardo, roughly parallel to and four miles north-east of the Metauro<sup>22</sup> (see Map 18).

The Eighth Army's attack was to be made on the heaviest scale. The plan provided for a simultaneous assault by three corps in line. On the right the Poles were to outflank Pesaro and seize the heights north-west of the town, a task that was all they could now be expected to perform, being unable, cut off from their own country as they were, to draw upon any large pool of reinforcements to make good their losses. They would then be withdrawn into army reserve. In the centre the Canadian Corps was to capture the high ground west of Pesaro, and thence cut across the front of the Poles to the coast at Cattolica\* and thrust up Highway No. 16 towards Rimini. Farther inland the 5th Corps, under the command of Lieut.General C. F. Keightley, would advance towards Bologna and Ferrara. The mountainous central region on the Army's left was to be the responsibility of the 10th Corps, with only one division and a scratch brigade group under command. When the enemy had become heavily engaged, the Fifth Army, strengthened with the 13th British Corps, would launch its complementary attack northward from Florence against Bologna.<sup>26</sup>

### The Gothic Line Defences

The Gothic Line or, as Hitler in less heroic mood had caused it to be renamed, Green Line (above, p. 460n.) barred the way for some 200 miles across the peninsula from the coastal plain south of Spezia on the Ligurian coast to the Foglia River and Pesaro on the Adriatic. As we have already noted, the original German plan for the defence of Italy had been to hold nothing south of the Northern Apennines, and with this in view construction of the Line began in the autumn of 1943, only to be broken off, as the nature of the campaign started to change, in favour of work on defences farther south.<sup>27</sup>

The shock of the Anzio landings had brought an order from Kesselring to Armeegruppe von Zangen to push work on the Apennine position "with the utmost energy".<sup>28</sup> However, difficulties of procurement because of the higher priority given to the completion of the Gustav and Hitler Lines retarded progress, and the work proceeded in fairly leisurely fashion until 2 June, when the imminent fall of Rome impelled the German High Command to issue a comprehensive order for the accelerated development of the position.<sup>29</sup>

This document, which German sources usually refer to as "The Gothic Order", was signed by Field-Marshal Keitel and began with the words: "The Fuhrer has ordered. . . ." Point by point the various tasks were enumerated and the means of completing them defined. Sectors threatened by tanks (the eastern half of the Line was considered most vulnerable in this respect)

\* See p. 697.



were to be protected by Panther turrets on steel and concrete bases such as had been used in the fortifications of the Hitler Line. Thirty of these were to reach Italy by 1 July; an additional 100 Organization Todt steel shelters were already en route, 40 of them switched from previous assignment to the defences of the Pyrenees. Construction of fortifications at the main lines of attack, "even on those mountain fronts which are considered almost inaccessible", was to include where possible rock-tunnelling and the carving out of fire embrasures (a rock-drilling company was to be brought from Norway), in order to give ground and anti-aircraft artillery protection against bomb attack.

The entire line was to be shielded by extensive minefields, and by an obstacle zone ten kilometres deep, to be created "by lasting demolition of all traffic routes, installations and shelters". This would involve evacuation of the civilian population from the whole area of construction (altogether about 20 kilometres in depth); for which purpose, and for "recruiting" male labour forces, the Plenipotentiary General in Italy\* was to be immediately provided with 2000 German soldiers. This civil labour would be formed into battalions built around German cadres withdrawn from the older age-groups of fighting troops. Under the supervision of engineers of the Organization Todt they would work with Italian construction forces released from the abandoned defences of the Caesar Line.<sup>31</sup> During June and July further particulars on construction came in a series of explanatory instructions (*Einzelanweisungen*) issued by Armeebteilung von Zangen.†

The sudden interest of the German High Command in the development of the Gothic Line, contrasted with the Fuhrer's usually negative attitude towards the construction of positions in the rear areas, came as a welcome surprise to Army Group "C", although, as events were to show, it did not come soon enough.<sup>33</sup> The work forged ahead, but attainment fell far short of intention—a situation which gave cause for anxiety to many German officers who from bitter experience of the Hitler and Caesar Lines knew the disastrous consequences of formations withdrawing too late into unfamiliar and unprepared positions. On 18 June the 51st Mountain Corps' Chief of Staff, Colonel Karl Heinrich Count von Klinckowstroem, complained to General Wentzell that the Green Line was "in no condition for defence", and asked that his Corps might be allotted the sector which it was to occupy, in order that it might detail "position construction officers" with appropriate staffs "so that construction may make real progress." His presumptuousness

\* The plenipotentiary representative of the German Armed Forces in Italy, charged with maintaining liaison between the German High Command and the Italian Fascist Republic, was General of the Infantry Rudolf Toussaint. He had the dual function of conducting negotiations involving materiel and personnel, and of exercising the territorial command over the German troops in Italy.<sup>30</sup>

† Armeegruppe von Zangen was redesignated Armeebteilung von Zangen on 19 May 1944.<sup>32</sup>

met instant rebuke. "The construction of the Green Line is not the affair of the Corps", Wentzell told him sharply. "The present task is to hold the Frieda Line. The Corps should keep its eyes to the front."<sup>34</sup>

Time was pressing, and by the end of June von Zangen was emphasizing in his supplementary instructions the need for concentrating upon the construction not of major but minor installations, which could "be made serviceable for fighting operation in time." All leaders and commanders were "sternly reminded of their supervisory duties", and signs of laxity in the movement of supplies to the construction sites brought an injunction condemning the practice of delegating successively the duty of ensuring safe delivery "until finally a corporal (as the last administrative centre) bears the final responsibility."<sup>35</sup> Kesselring's last general order for work on the Gothic defences, issued on 11 August, decreed that the position must be completed by the end of the month; though he admitted that "whether the line will be occupied before or after 1 September depends on the situation."<sup>36</sup>

In spite of the time gained to the enemy by the delaying battles at Lake Trasimene and Arezzo and at the approaches to Florence, the Gothic Line was still unfinished when the Allies attacked in the Adriatic sector at the end of August, and in some mountain sectors it was only in the early stages of development.<sup>37</sup> The greatest depth of defence was in the west coastal belt, where a seven-mile zone of anti-tank obstacles barred the approaches to Spezia. In central Italy the Line ran along the southern slope of the Apennines in front of the mountain passes, each of which was defended by positions at various degrees of readiness. By far the strongest of these, fortified with anti-tank ditches, concrete casemates and tank gun turrets, was the Futa Pass, on the main Florence-Bologna highway.

Over most of the front topography itself made the approaches formidable enough without much aid from military engineers, and although the eastern end of the Line, running along the northern slopes of the Foglia valley to Pesaro, employed less difficult natural obstacles than the forbidding escarpments of the centre, such advantage as there was still lay with the enemy. The Line was anchored on the cliffs between Pesaro and Cattolica to secure it from a short amphibious hook--even had General Alexander had the craft to make one. The defile between the foothills and the sea was narrow, ending some twelve miles inland where the ground climbed steeply and the Foglia improved as an obstacle. Within these limits the hills gave excellent observation across the floor of the valley and ran contrary to the Allied line of advance. The corridor was thickly sown with defences, although here as elsewhere much still had to be done.\* An anti-tank ditch crossed it,

\* A comparison of German maps recording progress in construction reveals that of thirteen Panther turret installations planned for the sector on 2 July, only four were actually under construction on 4 August. Work on machine-gun positions and other lesser installations had advanced much more rapidly.<sup>38</sup>

and the enemy had sited minefields, pillboxes and tank turrets with his usual skill-though in haste, and with less than his wonted thoroughness.

All in all, even though limitations of time had prevented full implementation of the Fuhrer's order of early June, the work accomplished by the end of August represented no mean achievement. A report submitted to Kesselring on 3 September revealed the state of completion of the defences in the Tenth Army's sector on 28 August. Most impressive were the figures for the minor types of installations-2375 machine-gun posts, 479 anti-tank gun, mortar and assault-gun positions, 3604 dug-outs and shelters of various kinds (including 27 caves), 16,006 riflemen's positions (of trees and branches), 72,517 "T" (Teller, anti-tank) mines and 23,172 "S" mines\* laid, 117,370 metres of wire obstacles, and 8944 metres of anti-tank ditch. Only four Panther turrets however had been completed (with 18 still under construction and seven more projected), 18 out of an intended 46 smaller tank gun turrets (for 1- and 2-cm. guns) were ready, and of 22 Organization Todt steel shelters being constructed, not one was finished.<sup>40</sup>

During the third week of August the 1st Canadian Corps and the 21st Tank Brigade, destined soon to test the adequacy of these defences, moved to the Adriatic coast. Their destination lay about fifteen miles inland from Ancona. From the starting point at Foligno wheeled convoys followed a north-easterly course through Fossato and Fabriano to a dispersal point near Jesi, the journey by night taking about eight hours. Because the tracks of tanks and Bren-gun carriers would have destroyed what road surface remained (the use of transporters was ruled out as these 34-wheeled Juggernauts were a constant source of delay on the mountain roads), the Chief Engineer 1st Canadian Corps, Brigadier Colin A. Campbell, was ordered to open an alternative one-way tank route which would avoid the main highways and would not require any Bailey bridging equipment.<sup>41</sup> A route was picked 120 miles long, following secondary roads through Spoleto, Camerino and Macerata, and early on 10 August Corps Engineers† began construction of the necessary culverts and diversions. In five days the 12th and 13th Field Companies R.C.E., assisted by sapper units of both Canadian divisions, had essentially completed the task.<sup>43</sup> At dusk on 15 August the Corps began its tortuous, two-pronged move over the Apennines, travelling only by night, and without headlights. By 20 August, states the Engineers' account of the undertaking, modestly playing down their own contribution,

\* The "S" mine (*Schrapnellmine*) was an anti-personnel mine, frequently laid in conjunction with "T" mines. When set off by being stepped on or by trip wires, its inner casing leaped from 3 to 5 feet into the air, scattering its charge of about 350 ball-bearings or scraps of steel in every direction and inflicting casualties up to a range of 200 yards.<sup>39</sup>

† The place of the 14th Field Company R.C.E. (which had gone to the 5th Armoured Division in June) was now being filled by the 264th Field Company R.E., a British unit with much experience in North Africa and Italy.<sup>42</sup>

the whole Corps . . . had mushroomed into being on the Adriatic front. . . . The rapid and comparatively unobtrusive movement of such a ponderous force over long distances across mountainous country was a tribute to the staffs concerned and a true example of the mobility of the modern Army.<sup>44</sup>

### Preparations for the Attack

The orders for the Allied offensive were issued on 16 August. General Alexander defined his intention as "to drive the enemy out of the Apennine positions and to exploit to the general line of the lower Po, inflicting the maximum losses on the enemy in the process." The assault by the Eighth Army to break through into the Po Valley and there to seize Ferrara and Bologna would be covered by ostentatious preparations by the Fifth Army simulating a coming offensive by both armies on the front between Pontassieve and Pontedera (twelve miles east of Pisa), the sector originally chosen for the main attack. The Fifth Army would actually be getting ready to strike at the enemy's centre on the axis Florence-Bologna with the 2nd U.S. and the 13th British Corps as soon as the Germans had drawn sufficient forces away to counter our blows on the Adriatic. D Day for the Eighth Army was to be 25 August, and General Clark was to be ready to attack at twenty-four hours' notice from the 30th.<sup>45</sup>

It was now becoming possible for General Alexander to gauge the effect of the invasion of Southern France on the course of his operations in Italy. The rapidity of the Allied advance up the valley of the Rhone, where the enemy was soon in full retreat, made it appear that if the Apennines were breached the Germans would be obliged to evacuate the whole of north-west Italy to avoid encirclement. They must then fall back to a shorter line from Switzerland to the Adriatic. This would free General Clark's left flank, so that he could bring the weight of his Army over to the right to thrust across the Po against Mantua and Verona. The Eighth Army would make for Venice, our lines of communication being so far stretched by this time as to require possession of its port as a prime necessity for the maintenance of our forces. Such was Alexander's projection of the offensive into the plain, once the Allied Armies had broken into it. As events transpired these axes of exploitation were not to be followed that summer or autumn either, but to await the great victory in the spring of 1945, a climax which the Canadians were not destined to share.<sup>46</sup>

Since the maintenance of morale is high in importance among the principles of war, General Leese did not fail to convey a sense of vigorous self-confidence to the audience of senior staff officers whom he briefed on the morning of 24 August in the resplendent baroque interior of the theatre at Iesi. In a brilliant eighty-minute resume of the history and prospects of

the Eighth Army, Sir Oliver reviewed the events which had taken the Army across Italy twice in the past four months, and defined the task that lay ahead -to destroy the enemy standing between it and the port of Venice.

A big battle would have to be fought to get through the Gothic Line: and we had chosen carefully where to fight it. The terrain would not be easy, the General warned. In fact, the only effective method of forcing an advance northward was by the use of seaborne hooks. But by the irony of fate, there had never been enough landing craft or airborne troops for this. Our main assets were tanks, guns and aircraft, and it was in the Adriatic corridor that these could be used to the best advantage, the Army having at its disposal 1200 tanks, 1000 guns and ten divisions. The air forces available were not overwhelming, for the Desert Air Force had now the task of covering the whole front. The essential part of the plan was to drive ruthlessly on: pockets of resistance would be left behind, to be cleaned up later. Whichever corps broke through the Army Commander would reinforce with fresh divisions. The Army was now probably larger than it had ever been before: it was better trained and more experienced. He was convinced of its ability to fight decisively what might be the last big battle in its victorious history. Sir Oliver's racy informality, the clarity of his presentation, the scope of his discourse, and his abounding confidence made an impression that his audience were unlikely to forget.<sup>47</sup>

The Canadian part in the battle General Burns intended to be carried out in four phases, which he defined in an operation instruction issued on 21 August. The four-mile front assigned to the 1st Canadian Corps centred on Montemaggiore, on the immediate left of the Poles, whose sector would be reduced to the seven miles next to the coast (see Map 18). In the initial assault the 1st Canadian Infantry Division would establish bridgeheads and crossings over the Metauro. In the second phase the advance would be carried as rapidly as possible to the Foglia, ten miles to the north-west, in order to reach the Gothic Line before the enemy, realizing that he was being attacked in strength, could be ready with a well-entrenched garrison. The third phase, the breaching of the Line, provided the necessary elasticity. If the enemy were caught on the run, the infantry would push on through the defences without waiting for the armour; otherwise a full-scale attack would be mounted with both Canadian divisions. There were alternatives also for the final phase. Either the divisions would advance together on parallel axes, or on reaching Cattolica the 5th Armoured would press on alone up the coast road to Rimini.<sup>48</sup>

The way had already been prepared by the Desert Air Force, which carried out the preliminary phases of the air plan with effects now to be read in the records of the Tenth Army. Attacks on supplies, on movement, on the Line itself, on railways, and on the Po bridges kept the enemy sorely harassed.

His telephone conversations for days were filled with recitals of endless difficulties caused in extricating the 5th Mountain Division and the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division from the battle area for transfer to the west.<sup>49</sup> For two days prior to the assault Allied aircraft took on targets in the central sector in the hope of distracting attention away from the coast, and at night redoubled their intrusion on German movements.<sup>50</sup>

Despite General Leese's intimation that air support would be somewhat limited, provision for the battle itself was encouraging. On the day of the assault 100 medium bombers would harass the Line itself with fragmentation bombs, and be ready again on the morrow if developments permitted; 300 mediums would attack the belt of defences on the outskirts of Pesaro; six squadrons of Wellingtons would hit the Line by night. Close support, both prearranged and impromptu, would be given by armed reconnaissance aircraft, and by fighter-bombers operating from the cab rank.<sup>51</sup> Cab rank had become a tactical device as heartening to our troops as it was demoralizing to the enemy, whose own air force seldom appeared in the sky, and then only in pitiful numbers.

Artillery support was impressive. It included in addition to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division's artillery the 1st Army Group R.C.A. and the guns of the 4th British and 5th Canadian Divisions and some Polish batteries; in all ten field regiments (two of them self-propelled), one heavy and four medium regiments, and a heavy anti-aircraft battery would back up the 1st Corps' attack.<sup>52</sup> The Commander, Corps Royal Artillery, Brigadier E. C. Plow, was given the responsibility of co-ordinating the counter-battery programme on the entire Eighth Army front. All other fire in support of the Canadian assault was to be controlled directly by the C.R.A. 1st Canadian Division, Brigadier W. S. Ziegler, and his staff.<sup>53</sup>

The nature of the ground and the sequence of attacks to be made on the ridges dominating the approaches into the corridor seemed to require a series of concentrations and targets in line rather than the more usual creeping barrage. These concentrations were to come down in belts 400 to 500 yards in depth and were timed to move forward 100 yards in six minutes,\* according to the assumed rate of advance by the infantry. Reaching the perimeter of the bridgehead at approximately two o'clock in the morning, an hour before the troops were expected to arrive on their objectives, the bursting shells would help them to recognize the limits of their penetration for the first phase. Provision was made for protective fire on both flanks and for concentrations in depth; and besides the counter-battery programme to be carried out by

\* This was a slower timing than in previous Canadian operations, in which the scheduled rate of advance of the barrage had varied from 100 yards in two minutes (The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment's attack near Villa Grande) to 100 yards in five minutes (the assault of the Hitler Line),

the heavy and two of the medium regiments, the enemy's known mortar positions were to be bombarded by the heavy anti-aircraft battery, the two self-propelled regiments of 105s, and the forty 4.2-inch mortars of the two Canadian divisions.<sup>54</sup>

No part of this weight of fire was to fall upon the enemy's positions at the outset. The initial move was to get the 1st and 2nd Brigades (on the right and left respectively of the Corps front) across the Metauro to the line of the Via Flaminia (Highway No. 3, two miles beyond the river) by one minute before midnight. The crossing was to be made silently until the road was reached. Then the guns would open up, and the infantry would move forward to establish a bridgehead 3000 yards deep and extending some four miles south-westward from Borgo Lucrezia, a village within the Polish boundary. Each brigade would use two battalions, and would be supported by a regiment of the British 21st Tank Brigade. The armour would go over by two crossings, which the divisional Engineers were to complete by an hour before first light-at every crossing one lane for wheels and another for tracks.<sup>55</sup> To aid surprise, until the assault was well under way the tanks were to be held several miles to the rear, out of earshot of the enemy.<sup>56</sup>

All this meant work for the sappers, who for five days were checking for mines and bulldozing the routes forward to the Metauro. Much of their mine-lifting they did by day, preferring the hazards of being shelled to the unpleasantness of dealing with mines in the dark, though throughout the night before the attack they pressed on their construction of Bailey bridges at sites on the approaches to the river.<sup>57</sup> Infantry patrols working with them on reconnaissance reported the crossing-places to be in good condition, with few mines found and the whole front quiet.<sup>58</sup> But experience of previous river fordings had shown the congestion and delay that could result if too many vehicles were allowed to approach and jam the crossings at the same time. The normal arrangements by "Q Moves" and the divisional Provost were therefore supplemented by the organization of brigade traffic-control platoons, each co-ordinated with a section of Provost under the Staff Captain, and in liaison with the battalions and supporting arms. Priorities were arranged for the passage of troops and vehicles at each crossing; control points, route signs, and wireless were all part of a scheme which soon proved its necessity.<sup>59</sup>

The brigade commanders issued their orders on the 24th. On the far bank of the Metauro in the divisional sector of attack four distinct ridges led away from the river, providing a well-defined approach into the hinterland for each assaulting battalion. Opposite the two easternmost of these Brigadier J. A. Calder (who had succeeded Brigadier Spry in the command of the 1st Brigade) put in the 48th Highlanders and The Royal Canadian Regiment,

right and left-the 48th to ford the stream at 11:10 p.m., the R.C.R. five minutes later. Their objective for the first phase was the lateral road running east from Borgo Lucrezia, about 1200 yards beyond the Via Flaminia, and would include the village of Saltara.<sup>60</sup> Brigadier Gibson proposed to send Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry over on the right at 11:35 p.m., and The Loyal Edmonton Regiment on the left 50 minutes later. The 2nd Brigade's objectives were on a line with those of the 1st Brigade, and included the village of Serrungarina and heights (Points 241 and 233) in the most westerly spur within the divisional sector. The 12th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, supporting the 1st Brigade, and the 145th Regiment Royal Armoured Corps, supporting the 2nd, would come out of harbour in the rear and be at the crossings before first light on 26 August. The anti-tank batteries, medium machine-guns and 4.2-inch mortars operating directly under Gibson's orders were to follow the axes of the advance, to be available to the leading battalions as required during the second phase.<sup>61</sup>

At six o'clock in the evening of the 24th General Burns took over from General Anders command of the river front and the screen of Polish troops north-west of Montemaggiore. (It is not unlikely that the sector now held by the 1st Canadian Corps included the lost site of the Battle of the Metaurus, where Hasdrubal's defeat in 207 B.C. saved Rome from Carthaginian domination.) The Poles remained to cover the Canadian concentration, as they did that of the 5th Corps on the left, until the leading troops had passed through. They then slipped across the front to their own now narrower sector and reverted to the command of their own Corps.<sup>62</sup> More than three days had elapsed since Anders' troops had arrived at the Metauro, and the interval gave time for enemy agents to make what they could of the formidable concentration going on behind the Polish screen. These agents were obviously at work. The Household Cavalry Regiment reported on the 24th having seen signal flashes from the church tower at Mombaroccio in enemy territory answered from a church tower behind our own lines at Montemaggiore.<sup>63</sup> Two days later a raid on a church in a neighbouring village caught two Italians in the act of hiding binoculars, maps and a mirror. One of the Canadian artillery regiments, the 17th Field, blamed these individuals for the very accurate shelling of its positions by the enemy.<sup>64</sup> It was possibly because of such activities that prisoners from the 211th Grenadier Regiment (71st Infantry Division) were able to claim later that they knew Canadians were opposite them on the evening of the 25th, two hours before the attack went in.<sup>65</sup> But these exchanges, whether sound report or mere coincidence, did not prevent the enemy from being taken by surprise. In carrying out a retirement to the outworks of the Gothic Line the Tenth Army was as unsuspecting of the impending attack as the Eighth Army was ignorant of the opponent's withdrawal.



### The Enemy Surprised

So far as the Tenth Army was concerned, 25 August was a quiet day. The sun shone brightly and it was very hot. General von Vietinghoff was even away on leave, and so was Heidrich, the paratrooper.<sup>66</sup> Von Vietinghoff's staff were actually more concerned with events behind their lines than with the offensive which, still unknown to them, would break that night all along their front. A conference was being called to deal with the problems that would arise in the event of a sudden rush of traffic across the Po, left virtually bridgeless as a result of the Tactical Air Force's blows in mid-July<sup>67</sup> (see above, p. 464). When Kesselring telephoned that morning to ask what was new, the Chief of Staff told him that nothing special was happening. The withdrawal to the intermediate line had proceeded according to plan. It was still not clear what the enemy was doing. But because the situation was so obscure, the Tenth Army wanted to pull something into reserve. Half of the 334th Division would be out by the 30th. "Otherwise nothing of importance?" asked Kesselring. "Otherwise nothing," replied Wentzell. They must watch what their opponent was doing on the coast though, for when he saw Heidrich's men there, he might take his forces farther inland.<sup>68</sup>

The opponent intended to do nothing of the kind. And he had changed his shape. From the brave but emaciated Polish Corps, its divisions reduced to two brigades, he had grown into a great army of three corps and ten divisions, about to hurl its weight into the Adriatic corridor. Of this Wentzell knew nothing. Occupied in the rear with a broken line of supply, in the forward areas with withdrawal and regrouping, and ignorant of the identity and intention of the enemy confronting it, the German Tenth Army, its General and his most tenacious divisional commander on leave, was in no posture to meet the offensive now about to strike it.<sup>69</sup> The blow would fall initially on three divisions of the 76th Panzer Corps—in order from the coast the 1st Parachute, the 71st Infantry and the 5th Mountain Divisions.

To the thousands of Allied soldiers standing quietly to arms, General Leese gave his message:

You have won great victories. To advance 220 miles from Cassino to Florence in three months is a notable achievement in the Eighth Army's history.—To each one of you in the Eighth Army and in the Desert Air Force, my grateful thanks.

Now we begin the last lap. Swiftly and secretly, once again, we have moved right across Italy an Army of immense strength and striking power—to break the Gothic Line.

Victory in the coming battles means the beginning of the end for the German Armies in Italy.

Let every man do his utmost, and again success will be ours.

Good luck to you all.<sup>70</sup>

To the Canadians General Bums spoke words of warning, as well as of exhortation. The enemy had no effective air force, was short of weapons, ammunition and men, but would still fight bravely and skilfully until the final surrender. The only way to compel that surrender was to attack him relentlessly with all their strength, ruthlessly using their superiority in weapons, until his resistance collapsed.

Let everyone of us go into this battle with the determination to press forward until the enemy is destroyed; to strike and pursue until he can fight no longer. Then, and only then, shall we have won what we, as Canadians, have been fighting for—security, peace and honour for our country.<sup>71</sup>

It was a quiet night, the air was mild, and by half-past eleven the moon had gone down and the sky was full of stars. After the uninterrupted rumble of traffic behind the front on previous nights a breathless silence held. The heavy processes of concentration and assembly were over. The planners had done their work. Everything was ready. A few minutes before midnight officers and men at General Bums' headquarters stood watching in the darkness. The infantry would be across the river by now and making their way up through the olives to the Rome road. Then at one minute before the hour the guns opened up, their flashes playing over the sky-line like summer lightning, their thunder arousing the coast and disturbing the slumber of the inland mountains. The assault had begun.

The leading battalions had little trouble in reaching their first objectives. They met no enemy at the river. They found the water gap in this dry season narrow for the fording, the water nowhere more than three feet deep. Soaked at worst only to the thighs, they groped their way in the dark up to the Via Flaminia and got to their check points on time. When the storm of their supporting artillery broke, they pushed forward up the slopes into the hilly country beyond the road. They ran into few of the enemy, and entered the villages of Saltara and Serrungarina unopposed. Still under cover of darkness, they quietly took up position along the perimeter as set down in the plan. At first light the tanks were ready to follow them across the river to join in the coming day's battle over the hills toward the Foglia.<sup>72</sup> The bridgehead was won.

The handful of prisoners taken belonged, as had been expected, to the 71st Infantry Division. From them intelligence officers learned of the division's withdrawal to the chain of hills (Monte della Marcia, Monte della Croce, Monte della Mattera) which overlooked the Arzilla from the south, the highest ground between the Metauro and the Foglia. The news was disconcerting, for to the Canadians—who had as little knowledge as the German rearguard of what was in the mind of the Commander of the 76th Panzer Corps—it suggested that the enemy had anticipated the offensive, and that the attempt to take him by surprise had

failed.<sup>73</sup> It was a heartening compensation for the 1st Division to learn from prisoners' reports (confirmed by visual evidence on the ground) that its supporting artillery fire had caught enemy troops on the move and inflicted heavy casualties.<sup>74</sup>

According to prisoners the Germans had suffered badly in front of the Poles, where Heidrich's 4th Parachute Regiment, in the act of retiring, had been stricken in the open by the heavy fire.<sup>75</sup> This intelligence the Canadians received with grim satisfaction, for they knew to their cost how ferociously the paratroopers fought, and having met them in Ortona and at the Hitler Line they looked to encounter them again somewhere along the coast. Following them up, the Poles had occupied Borgo Lucrezia and pushed up the valley of the Secco, a small tributary of the Metauro, to cleathe Eighth Army's right flank. On the left, the British 5th Corps had also crossed the Metauro unopposed, and Montefelcino, two miles beyond the river, lay safe in the hands of the 46th Division.<sup>76</sup> The second phase could now begin.

#### The Advance from the Metauro Bridgehead, 26-27 August

Major-General Vokes ordered his brigadiers to resume the advance at 7:30 a.m. on the 26th. He stressed the importance of speed, in order to get over the Foglia on the heels of the enemy before his infantry could tumble into the defences behind it.<sup>77</sup> But the Canadians must first assail a clump of three heights immediately in their path—the 1600-foot Monte della Mattera, flanked to the west by the lesser Mount San Giovanni and to the east by Point 393, which bore on its summit the Convento Beato Sante. The 1st Brigade would make for the convent, the 48th Highlanders leading and the R.C.R. in echelon to the left. The 2nd Brigade would send the Seaforth against Monte della Mattera and the Loyal Edmontons to take Mount Sa Giovanni.<sup>78</sup> From these vantage-points the troops would overlook to the north-west successively the village of Mombaroccio, the valley of the Arzilla River, and the remaining spur that stood between them and the Foglia.

Maintaining their progress of the night before, the leading battalions advanced steadily against very slight opposition. This was fortunate since mines, craters and demolitions sometimes prevented the tanks from keeping up with the infantry. The 12th Royal Tanks on the right were delayed in this way before they could get over the Metauro, and did not catch up with the 1st Brigade units until noon, four and a half hours after Vokes had ordered his troops into the second phase.<sup>79</sup>

At midday the enemy shelling increased, and as the Canadians began to close in upon their objectives the German rearguards let out a sporadic

clamour of mortar and machine-gun fire. Members of a battalion of the 211th Panzer Grenadier Regiment were entrenched in sufficient numbers among the trees fringing the Convento Beato Sante (in company strength, as reported by prisoners and confirmed by the intensity of their fusillade)<sup>80</sup> to make it necessary to mount an attack. But this could not be done until the tanks had come up, and was later put off again until after dark. In all it took elements of four battalions to encompass this feature and the surrounding country. On the left the Seaforth Highlanders cleared Monte della Mattera about noon after a short fire fight; but one company sent north-eastward to try the defences of the convent was driven back by small-arms fire.<sup>81</sup> The R.C.R. moving forward in the centre through Cartoceto, made the attack on the convent hill after darkness had fallen, in time to take only a few prisoners as the bulk of the enemy pulled out beforehand.<sup>82</sup> On the right the 48th Highlanders had a company cut off by enemy fire pouring from a strongpoint north-east of the convent, until a company of The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment came up with two troops from the 12th Royal Tanks and in a sharp engagement cleared out the resistance. The Germans there had been well armed (they left behind them a 7.5-cm. cannon and one of their two 20-mm. self-propelled guns), yet the Hastings lost only one man killed. Earlier, however, they had suffered more than a score of casualties when German shelling hit the battalion area about midday.<sup>83</sup>

On the Division's left, The Loyal Edmonton Regiment had gained its objectives by about midnight. One of its companies moved during the evening around the ridge from Monte della Mattera to take undefended Mount San Giovanni in the rear, and two more passed through to awaken enemy at the point of the bayonet on Mount Marino, a mile to the north. The Edmontons pressed home their advantage on their luckless opponents, and the feature was captured, with seven German horses and eight German soldiers left alive in Canadian hands, as the Edmonton diarist carefully records.<sup>84</sup>

Amongst the traffic swarming over the Metauro in the wake of the fighting that day, in a congestion of ration lorries, kitchen trucks, ammunition trains, ambulances, guns, tanks, and sweating soldiers, an unescorted open car brought a visitor to whose gaze the sight of the Eighth Army's offensive might have seemed no more than a neglected side-show in the strategy of the war as a whole. But the imagination of Mr. Churchill, as the figure in sun helmet and tropicals was at once recognized to be, could not fail to be moved by this spectacle of a mechanized army crawling through the hills towards the still far off plains, raising great clouds of dust that wrapped the countryside in a pall greyer than the olives, masking men's faces so that they looked like lepers. He had telephoned General Burns in the morning to wish the Canadians success;<sup>85</sup> and now in the afternoon, after a difficult interview with General Anders on the future of Poland and all that was then

happening in Warsaw,<sup>86</sup> he drove over with the C.-in-C. to the Canadian sector. Crossing the Metauro, he came up with elements of The Royal Canadian Regiment near Saltara, and in an area endangered by mortar and artillery fire had the battalion's positions and objectives pointed out to his expert eye, the forward companies being in contact with the Germans only a few thousand yards in front. "This was the nearest I got to the enemy", Mr. Churchill was to write, "and the time I heard most bullets in the Second World War."<sup>87</sup> The Prime Minister's visit, bruited among the troops, served to assure them that though the Italian theatre of operations might have ceased to be a main factor in the war, yet Mr. Churchill had been there, and that in so far as he was allowed, he had shared their battle with them.

General Anders' Corps had made good ground on the seaward flank. Anxious though his soldiers were about the fate of their own country and the desperate straits of its capital, their morale was high. They knew that before all else Germany must be defeated, and that their old adversaries of Cassino, the 1st Parachute Division, awaited them in the hills between the Metauro and Cattolica. The Poles had secured the Canadian right by driving the enemy off Monte della Forche (three miles east of Mombaroccio) into the valley of the Arzilla.<sup>88</sup> On the left the British 46th Division was struggling forward up the slopes of Monte della Croce, which it captured next morning.<sup>89</sup>

It appeared that on General Vokes' own front the Germans were falling back to the hump of Monteciccardo behind the muddy trickle of the Arzilla, and on this assumption he ordered his two leading brigades to give the enemy no respite, but to push ahead on their own initiative.<sup>90</sup> His Intelligence reported the foe to be in a bad way:

All indications show enemy has withdrawn over Arzilla into last defence positions before Gothic. P.W. reports show unit strength much reduced, weapons scarce but S.A.A. [small-arms ammunition] sufficient. Enemy morale bad and many deserters.<sup>91</sup>

This was a fair diagnosis of the state of Lieut.-General Wilhelm Raapke's 71st Infantry Division, whose reinforcements, inexperienced in battle, had been already exhausted by the Poles before they reached the Metauro. When the division crossed the river it was assessed by a German staff officer as being only "fit for defence within limits;"<sup>92</sup> on 27 August Wentzell and Rottiger in their daily telephone conversations spoke of the "weary 71st Infantry Division".<sup>93</sup> But as the fighting was to show, the division was still by no means harmless. Far more effective was the 1st Parachute Division, whose boundary with the 71st lay within the Canadian Corps' sector, and whose line the Canadians thus shared with the Poles. Though one in four below strength, the paratroopers were completely fresh. Young, well trained replacements had been mixed with the seasoned veterans of the summer; on 26 August Colonel Runkel, Chief of Staff, 76th Panzer

Corps, reported to Wentzell that Heidrich had received 2000 reinforcements, although not intending to commit them before 15 September.<sup>94</sup> Its fighting quality justly regarded by the German command as superior to that of the ordinary infantry formations committed in the Italian theatre, the Parachute Division had been moved to the Metauro "in good condition and fully qualified for any operational task".<sup>95</sup>

Head-on collision with these stalwart defenders would however be delayed a day or two, for on the 27th, as General Vokes had assumed, the enemy continued to fall back into the outworks of his line behind the Foglia. But he made quick pursuit as difficult as possible. Blown bridges, cratered roads, buildings toppled into every defile by his demolition parties, delayed the armour; skilfully posted rearguards and well placed shelling held up the infantry.<sup>96</sup> The antagonistic terrain itself, in overall pattern of gulleys and knolls, hills and declivities, had a bewildering similarity for the reader of maps. In that maze of undulations liaison was easily broken; line communications were liable to severance by mortar or artillery fire and the treads of the tanks, and wireless was apt to be intermittent or dead.<sup>97</sup> Brigades lost touch with battalions, battalions with their sub-units; for three hours one commanding officer could not find his rifle companies,<sup>98</sup> and a company of another unit disappeared among the hills for twenty-four hours.<sup>99</sup> On or off those primitive roads no wheel or foot was safe from the hidden mine. Vine and olive might harbour lurking field-grey uniforms at every turn in the track, and thick-walled house, church or monastery afford some garrison shelter from the fire which, despite the general flux and confusion, the attackers were able to call down from the supporting artillery.<sup>100</sup> Nor was the weakened Luftwaffe entirely inactive; on the night of the 27th a platoon of No. 1 Canadian Motor Ambulance Convoy suffered 24 casualties, three of them fatal, as an enemy air raid struck their lines south of the Metauro.<sup>101</sup>

### The Fighting at the Arzilla River Line, 28-29 August

Under these conditions the fighting during the next two days enabled the 1st Division to make no more than a lodgement 1000 yards in depth on the far side of the Arzilla, where the German rearguards, entrenched with machine-guns, mortars and anti-tank weapons on the adjacent spurs, defied farther advance. The hill towns of Monteciccardo and Ginestreto in the centre, Point 268 on the right, and Mount Carbone on the left, still in German hands on the 27th, made a defensive line on which the enemy was determined to gain the last hour of time before putting to the test his prepared defences across the Foglia.

The bombing of Monteciccardo on its perch 1200 feet above sea-level by the Desert Air Force that afternoon, and an assault by the Loyal

Edmonton that night, seemed likely at first to give early possession of the town, but the overlong interval between air and ground attacks gave the Germans time to reoccupy the place in force, as the Canadians learned to their cost through some twenty heated hours.<sup>102</sup> When the Edmonton C.O., Lt.-Col. H. P. Bell-Irving, sent his first company in from the right flank at about 1:30 in the morning on the 28th, they found Monteciccardo apparently empty. About ten minutes later, however, they ambushed a company of Germans, marching in to set up defences in the town. Fire from the quickly-sited Bren guns of an Edmonton platoon accounted for an estimated 60 or 70 Germans, and drove the rest of the shattered column to cover. This sudden rout down the narrow street seemed to have settled the ownership of the town, but only for a few minutes. The appearance of a tank which had been following the marching enemy changed the aspect of things. More Germans arrived, and the Canadians, finding themselves engaged from several points, and in the face of the oncoming tank, withdrew to the ridge just outside the town.<sup>103</sup> An attack put in during the afternoon, aided by tanks of the 145th Regiment Royal Armoured Corps, drove the enemy back to the western edge of Monteciccardo, where a half-demolished monastery made a stubborn fortress, resisting a violent artillery bombardment. Not until late that evening did a third attack succeed. By that time the enemy had retired, having caused the Edmontons 64 casualties.<sup>104</sup>

Once Monteciccardo was secured a company of the Seaforth passed through, bound for Sant' Angelo on its high, terraced mound clothed with cypress and olive, three-quarters of a mile to the north-west. They found the village all but flattened by Allied bombing and shelling, and void of Germans. Before daybreak on the 29th two more companies picked up Ginestreto, 1200 yards to the east, just as cheaply.<sup>105</sup> On the divisional left the Patricias, having occupied the lofty village of Monte Santa Maria on the evening of the 27th, were able next afternoon to assist with their fire the exploitation of a 46th Division attack on Mount Gaudio.<sup>106</sup> From their new position the units of the 2nd Brigade could now overlook the valley of the Foglia and the outposts of the Gothic Line. General Vokes' right had closed up too, but not without the most bitter fighting about the wide saddle between the heights in the centre and Mount Belilla--a misnamed 550-foot knoll which the Poles were to take on the following day.<sup>107</sup>

To the enemy this gap might appear to be an obvious approach to the Foglia; certainly he defended it and the neighbouring hills with great ferocity, sending in two battalions of the 4th Parachute Regiment to bolster the weakening units of the 71st Infantry Division there.<sup>108</sup> On the 28th early morning attempts by the Hastings and Prince Edwards to reach the top of Point 268, and the 48th Highlanders to seize a lower feature (Point 146) on the right flank, both failed. It was late afternoon before the 12th Royal

Tanks managed to negotiate the slippery banks of the Arzilla and bring assistance to a company of the 48th Highlanders which had been cut off all day north of the stream. Brigadier Calder ordered all three of his battalions against the enemy-held height, and at 7:15 p.m. the attack went in with artillery support.<sup>109</sup> Throughout the night his troops, fighting up the hillsides east of Ginestreto, were vigorously engaged by snipers and machine-gunners, who sighted their weapons by the light of burning haystacks, set on fire for the purpose. At least one of the supporting tanks was destroyed with a *Faustpatrone*, the Germans turning a flamethrower on the evacuating crew.<sup>110</sup> But it was the sort of aggressive defence often put up by the enemy before retiring. By dawn on the 29th the Highlanders were holding Point 146, having suffered 43 casualties, including seven men killed; the Hastings and Prince Edwards had won Point 268 at a cost of eight killed and 24 wounded. As the morning wore on patrols pushed over the brow of the hills into the Foglia valley and reported no contact with the enemy.<sup>111</sup>

#### The Assault on the Gothic Line, 30-31 August

In four days' fighting the Canadian Corps had played a major part in carrying out two of the four phases of the Eighth Army's operations to break through to the valley of the Po. Together with the two flanking corps, General Burns' forces had established bridgeheads and crossings over the Metauro. They had advanced to the Foglia, taking nearly forty square miles of ground. They had now to breach the Gothic Line and exploit to Rimini.

Although this domination of the country south of the Foglia left the enemy little time to get his troops firmly set in the Line and bring up reserves, the second phase had not gone as quickly as had been hoped, and General Leese had plans ready for an assault with the whole weight of the Army should that prove necessary. After watching the course of the battle on the Canadian front, Burns had come to face this alternative of pausing at the Foglia for a deliberate attack instead of slipping the 1st Division over quickly before the Germans had recovered. On the night of the 27th-28th he had signalled, "Any likelihood of reaching the Foglia by morning?", only to receive from General Vokes the discouraging reply, "Seems unlikely."<sup>112</sup> Accordingly, for the next two days the Canadian planners worked on the assumption that a set-piece attack might have to be made.

Yet if the Allied Commanders were in doubt, so were the Germans. They had computed that in the opening bombardment 25,000 shells had fallen on the 76th Panzer Corps' left wing, although they saw with satisfaction that "where the fireworks took place everybody had left."<sup>113</sup> They drew the conclusion that this was merely an attempt to drive a wedge between the



71st Infantry and the 1st Parachute Divisions. But in the afternoon of the 26th they were growing more concerned. "I think that it is going to be quite an affair on the Adriatic coast", Wentzell told Kesselring. "The British have appeared on Raapke's front, and now, at this very moment, comes the news that the Canadians are said to have appeared exactly at the joint between Heidrich and Raapke. Prisoners have been brought in too. Heidrich's battalion commander swears by his head that they are Canadians." If the Allies were to throw in all available divisions, the Tenth Army's Chief of Staff argued, they might collapse the German left wing. At Army Group they agreed. "The direction is the right one, all right", they said. The immense Allied air activity pointed the same way; and on the morning of the 27th von Vietinghoff was recalled from leave.<sup>114</sup>

But the German Fourteenth Army was also being alarmed by General Clark's menaces against its front. The artifice of simulating threats in the centre was succeeding. Reports came in thick and fast of concentrations of tanks in the rear areas, heavy traffic on the roads, great dumps of ammunition, talkative prisoners, a variety of insignia, New Zealand, South African, Greek, and-Canadian.<sup>115</sup> The continued presence of the 1st Armoured Brigade with the British 13th Corps was again proving itself useful in befuddling the enemy's Intelligence as to the whereabouts of the Canadian Corps. The Tenth Army got another shock when Kesselring took the view on the morning of the 27th that the whole affair in the Adriatic sector was simply a diversion to prevent a German flanking attack in the west from ruining the invasion of Southern France. "This attack will not be proceeded with in strength", he predicted.<sup>116</sup> Wentzell would have to find out from prisoners what was really happening, for he had no air reconnaissance to help him. "In this respect", he had admitted to Kesselring the day before, "we are once more totally blind."<sup>117</sup> He could get no information about the Canadians that morning from the 76th Panzer Corps Headquarters: their prisoners refused to speak. Not until the evening could the Germans feel certain that these were from the 1st Canadian Division, and concluded that the 5th Armoured Division could not be far away.<sup>118</sup>

On the 28th the enemy realized that the Canadians might reach the Line simultaneously with his own troops and before substantial reserves could be rushed into position. Throughout the day the wires were busy with the problem of which units, if any, could be moved up fast enough to stop the gap. Then came one of those dramatic finds that sometimes fall to a groping Intelligence. In June the enemy had captured a British dispatch-rider who carried an Allied Order of Battle showing all our formations across the front from one coast to the other.<sup>119</sup> This time they somehow got hold of a copy of the message sent by General Leese to the troops on the eve of the offensive. If not a fake, this gave the clue to Allied strategy in the Italian

theatre of war. Each phrase told its tale: ". . . the last lap ... secretly ... across Italy ... immense strength . . . to break the Gothic Line ... beginning of the end for the German Armies...." That night the German commanders had convinced themselves of its authenticity, and reached the momentous conclusion that it would now be safe and appropriate to shift the main weight of the Tenth Army to the Adriatic. Late that evening the 76th Panzer Corps received orders to withdraw to the Green Line, which was "to be defended under all circumstances."<sup>120</sup> At 10:35 p.m. von Vietinghoff, back from leave, heard the news from General Herr, the Commander of the 76th Panzer Corps: "On the basis of the captured document it is now certain that the enemy intends to carry out a big push to the plains of the Po."<sup>121</sup> Such was the cost of a single sheet of very inferior paper.

It had already been decided on 27 August to bring to the Adriatic coast the 26th Panzer and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions from the Fourteenth Army, and to relieve the tired 71st Division with the 98th Infantry Division,\* which had been stationed in the Ravenna-Cesena area since the beginning of August.<sup>123</sup> Yet the position of the Tenth Army was still precarious. Nor was it bettered by Kesselring's refusal to increase the forces coming from the coast defences farther north, where the Army thought that nothing was likely to happen. The C.-in-C. had not forgotten Anzio and did not propose to gamble against another seaborne hook. On the 29th, the day on which the retreating divisions of the 76th Panzer Corps crossed the Foglia, taking their heavy weapons over with them, von Vietinghoff's staff thought of the morrow as "exceptionally grave", for in spite of all acceleration, the approaching reserves could not become effective before the 30th.<sup>124</sup>

But all these things were hidden from the Allies, and General Burns had to assume that the Germans might have time to occupy the Line in strength before he could get across the Foglia. He had to follow up quickly and at the same time get himself set for an assault, his actual tactics depending upon the resistance encountered at the river. Having relieved the hard-driven 1st and 2nd Brigades with the 3rd (Brigadier J.P.E. Bernatchez) and the 11th (Brigadier I.S. Johnston), he had both his divisions patrolling along the river front while preparing for a concerted attack which would be supported by twelve regiments† of field artillery.<sup>126</sup> With the enemy's retirement during the night of the 29th-30th August, however, and from reports that armoured

\* "Corps Witthöft", which included the 98th Infantry Division, the 162nd (Turcoman) Infantry Division (between Cattolica and Ravenna), and the Venice garrison, had come under Tenth Army command on 17 July.<sup>122</sup>

† Extensive research and planning had been carried out at Artillery Headquarters, 1st Canadian Division, in expectation of a set-piece attack on the Gothic Line. Information on enemy locations and movement gathered daily from all available sources was assembled on a large mosaic air photograph, from which were drawn up an intense counter-preparation and harassing fire programme and a detailed fire plan for the main assault. Although this plan was not put into use, the targets selected were valuable in the subsequent provision of close support and the preparation of impromptu fire plans.<sup>125</sup>

cars of the 12th Lancers (under Polish command) were entering the outskirts of Pesaro, it seemed to General Leese that the Germans had either been completely taken by surprise and were not ready to man the Line, or that they had decided to withdraw their forces from Italy altogether. "I therefore ordered both Corps", he wrote afterwards, "to patrol very actively at daylight, and to try to gate crash the Gothic Line in accordance with our original plan."<sup>127</sup>

From dawn on the 30th the enemy's positions were subjected to a heavy bombardment from the air, and under its cover patrols got down into the Foglia valley. Three days of Allied bombing had ploughed up the enemy's minefields and detonated many of his thickly laid mines.<sup>128</sup> Some of these had been hurriedly relaid,<sup>129</sup> but more than one Canadian patrol went right through the broken minefields and even tapped the outworks of the Line. Their incursions made it obvious that the Germans were not yet there in any numbers. The Army Commander stopped the bombing at midday, in order that the troops might advance, and General Burns ordered both divisions "to push forward with companies followed by battalions" and to try to get a lodgement before the mass of defenders could come up.<sup>130</sup> They would find out whether the enemy was occupying the three towns which stood on the edge of the river flats in the Canadian sector--Montecchio and Osteria Nuova to be investigated by the 5th Armoured Division on the left, and Borgo Santa Maria by the 1st Division on the right (see Map 19). If the Germans were few, strong fighting patrols would lead the way, and both divisions would establish bridgeheads through which they could go forward into the hills at dawn on the 31st.<sup>131</sup>

General Burns and his planners had gained a fair idea of the strength of the Gothic Line from aerial photographs and information supplied by Italian Partisans, and they had the advantage of overlooking the whole position, whose forward defended localities ran along the lateral Pesaro-Urbino road on the north bank of the Foglia. Although there appeared to be no great depth to the defences-as General Leese observed, "Everything was in the shop-window"-the picture, subsequently confirmed in the fighting, was formidable enough. It was true that the Foglia in this season of drought had more gravel in its bed than water and was generally not a tank-obstacle; but the low-lying meadows were treacherous, and the valley itself, from one to two miles broad, with every house and tree razed to the ground to clear the field of fire, would be costly to cross in daylight against a well manned defence. The minefields in the river flats were sown in wide overlapping panels and were backed by the anti-tank ditch, some fourteen feet across, which zig-zagged in front of the road through most of the Canadian sector. The slopes beyond were planted with numerous machine-gun posts, many of them encased in concrete and the majority connected by covered passages to

deep dug-outs. Wire obstacles, more formidable than any that the Canadians had yet encountered in Italy, surrounded these positions, and behind them more wire ran in a broad belt along the whole front. This in turn was covered by fire from another zone of mutually supporting pillboxes and emplacements. Killing-ground had been proportioned off with geometric skill. All comers were provided for: anti-tank guns awaited the armour, dug-in flamethrowers the infantry. A mile or two farther back, the few Panther turrets whose installation had been completed commanded a wide sky-line that must leave the attacking tanks (if any got through) exposed in silhouette as they sailed into view over the rising ground.<sup>132</sup>

The bridgehead which General Burns had named as his Corps objective for the night of 30-31 August in the event of light enemy opposition extended about a mile into the hills behind the Pesaro lateral.<sup>133</sup> Its capture would give a foothold on the series of irregular spurs reaching like crooked fingers down to the Foglia from the bulky Tomba di Pesaro--Monte Luro hill mass, which blocked the Canadian axis three miles north of the river. These tentacles ended in sharp promontories more than 100 metres high, which overlooked the towns along the lateral road and provided the enemy with excellent points of vantage from which to meet the attack. Montecchio itself lay within the compass of two of these claws--Point 111, the termination of a long ridge coming down from the north-east behind Osteria Nuova, and Point 120, an abrupt knoll which crowded in upon the town from the west.

During the afternoon of the 30th both Canadian divisions made preparations for the advance ordered by General Burns, each on the alert to take advantage of any opportunities that presented themselves. General Vokes gave the 3rd Brigade the task of establishing the 1st Division's bridgehead, and ordered the 2nd Brigade forward in readiness to pass through.<sup>134</sup> Brigadier Bernatchez selected The West Nova Scotia Regiment to make the preliminary reconnaissance in force with one company, which was charged with breaking into the Gothic Line between Borgo Santa Maria and Osteria Nuova. The bridgehead would then be secured by the rest of the battalion, with the Royal 22e in immediate reserve.<sup>135</sup> On the left General Hoffmeister gave the 11th Brigade the task of both establishing and then breaking out of the 5th Division's bridgehead.<sup>136</sup> The key feature, Point 120, which dominated Montecchio from the west, had been reported by a Cape Breton patrol to be virtually unoccupied, with a relief probably taking place.<sup>137</sup> Accordingly Brigadier Johnston, judging the situation right for a quick, two-battalion attack, on a prearranged plan, with General Hoffmeister's concurrence ordered The Perth Regiment (commanded by Lt.-Col. W. W. Reid) to capture Point 111 and adjacent heights to the east of Montecchio, and sent The Cape Breton Highlanders (Lt.-Col. R. B. Somerville) against Point 120 and the high ground beyond.<sup>138</sup> The 4th Princess Louise Dragoon

Guards (which had been placed under operational command of the 11th Brigade on 25 August)<sup>139</sup> would mop up, and the Irish Regiment was in reserve.<sup>140</sup> In support of the 11th Brigade battalions were regiments of the 5th Armoured Brigade. Command of the brigade had passed to Brigadier I.H. Cumberland after the June fighting, when Brigadier J.D.B. Smith became Brigadier General Staff, 1st Canadian Corps.

The comparative quiet which had followed the cessation of the aerial bombing continued throughout the afternoon, and with no preliminary artillery bombardment the West Novas moved off at four o'clock. It was about 5:30 p.m. when the Perths and The Cape Breton Highlanders began their attack. Early reports indicated good progress in both sectors, and at 6:00 p.m. a conference at Corps Headquarters viewed the possibility of capturing the Monte Luro heights that night and pushing on to the River Conca.<sup>141</sup>

Later, however, there were moments when it seemed that the Germans would be strong enough to hold at the line of the river, for the outside battalions of both brigades were repulsed. The minefields across the flats were in themselves a nasty enough hazard to the infantry, and in addition they were swept by merciless fire from the heights above the three towns on the Corps front. The attempt made by The West Nova Scotia Regiment to reach Point 133, north-east of Osteria Nuova, turned into a sad debacle. With all its companies caught in a large minefield midway between the river and the lateral road, the battalion staggered helplessly under a storm of fire from the enemy's automatic weapons, mortars and artillery, ensnared in precisely the sort of killing-ground which the designers of the Line had intended to create. Unable to move, the West Novas had to be withdrawn, suffering almost as many casualties getting out of the minefield as they had while becoming involved in it. The toll totalled one officer and 19 other ranks killed, and six officers and 50 men wounded.<sup>142</sup> The action by the 11th Brigade on the left was at first almost as disastrous, for by this time the Germans had completed their reliefs on Point 120. With the support of fire from tanks of the 8th Princess Louise's (New Brunswick) Hussars, first one and then two more companies of The Cape Breton Highlanders reached the base of their objective (with one platoon managing to scale the slopes), only to be driven back each time to the Foglia, unable to cope with the ugly little knoll that bristled over the ruins of Montecchio.<sup>143</sup> They lost 19 killed and 46 wounded.

But the battalions on the inside fared better. The Perths did well enough to claim to be the first to break into the Line.<sup>144</sup> Although previous reports had led them to believe that there were no enemy above the road, and despite delays in bringing their supporting arms and tanks over the river, they managed to install themselves at Point 111 on the edge of the spur

looking down on Montecchio from the north. From there they went on to capture Point 147 to the north-east by the strategem of pushing beyond it and then doubling back to take it in the rear. The brigade as a whole might have got a better foothold that night but for a serious jamming of the traffic behind the forward battalions and the diversion of tanks of the New Brunswick Hussars and the 98th Canadian Anti-Tank Battery's self-propelled guns along the wrong route. The error led to their stoppage in a minefield, where they were only able to help the infantry by fire at long range, and where they had to stay until dawn before they could be extricated.<sup>145</sup> The delay was further aggravated by the necessity of pulling the Irish Regiment, which had concentrated on the left, across the front to send them in on the right through the Perths, so as to attack Point 120 from the flank while the Cape Bretons engaged it frontally with their fire. A broken bridge on the way, not repaired until 5:30 in the morning of the 31st, made the prospect bleaker still. The Irish suffered casualties of 19 killed and 31 wounded, one company's fighting strength being reduced to 50 men. Their attack on Point 120 did not go in until noon on the 31st, eighteen and a half hours after the brigade had begun to cross the Foglia.<sup>146</sup>

Though thus deferred, the outcome was a brilliant success. Battered by the Canadian artillery and distracted by the appearance of a company of the Irish on the spur behind them to the north-west, the Germans on the knoll were caught in the right rear by a second company coming in by stealth from the north-east. Leadership and good fieldcraft won the position, and four officers and 117 other ranks were marched off as prisoners.<sup>147</sup> The Cape Breton Highlanders passed through in the afternoon towards Mount Marrone, a sprawling hill on the south-westerly extension of the Monte Luro-Tomba ridge, following up two spirited forays in that direction by squadrons of the New Brunswick Hussars. The Perths struck off to the right to get on the main central spur leading to Monte Luro, the key to the whole German position in this part of the Line.<sup>148</sup>

The situation had begun to look promising in the centre, too, where Brigadier Gibson had sent the Patricias in through Osteria Nuova.<sup>149</sup> Their companies shared the agonizing experience of the West Novas, and in the small hours of the 31st were struggling through a field of Schu\* and Teller mines. They resorted to single file, and, accepting casualties as they went, they got to Osteria Nuova while it was still dark and in the rubble found shelter from the enemy fire which came down at first light.<sup>151</sup> The activity

\* The anti-personnel Schu-mine 42 was an easily laid obstacle against infantry, light vehicles and sledges, that could be conveniently substituted for the "S" mine (above, p. 497n.). It consisted of a small wooden box with a hinged lid which under a pressure of about 9 lbs. would explode the 7-oz. charge of T.N.T. or picric acid within. The typical injury caused to infantry by the mine was the amputation of one leg below the calf, without harm to the rest of the body.<sup>150</sup>

of the Canadian tanks on their left enabled them to take the initiative again westward along the lateral road, where in a brisk action they rounded up large batches of prisoners from the 1st Parachute Division. In the afternoon they took Point 115 behind the village, gathered in more prisoners, and pushed on north-east towards Point 133 on the spur which had been the West Novas' objective. Accompanied by a squadron of the 48th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, they ascended the bare slope through a deluge of shells and mortar bombs, seized their objective and captured 97 prisoners, to bring to 231 their total for the day.<sup>152</sup> Other British tanks ranging the country between Borgo Santa Maria and the hamlet of Pozzo Alto, a mile to the north-west, made the right flank secure.<sup>153</sup>

An even deeper wedge was driven in on the 31st by a dashing attack of the 11th Brigade up the spurs that climbed to Point 204, a height on the ridge joining Pozzo Alto to the Tomba spine. It was a fiercely fought action. Elements of the 26th Panzer Division had appeared in the Line (a battalion of the 67th Panzer Grenadier Regiment had taken part in a counter-attack at Montecchio during the afternoon),<sup>154</sup> and though too late to stop the inrush of men and tanks through the broken mesh of defences facing the Foglia, they were soon aligned with the 4th Parachute Regiment in combat with the Canadians on the hills behind.<sup>155</sup>

The attack on Point 204 had been planned as an armoured operation supported by infantry, to be carried out by the 9th Armoured Regiment (The British Columbia Dragoons) and The Perth Regiment.<sup>156</sup> But the component forces did not come together. The Perths were prevented from moving by "the severest shelling and mortaring that we had ever experienced"; this fire accounted for most of the 52 casualties they suffered that day.<sup>157</sup> The tank squadrons went off without them, and for most of the day had to fight alone over the rolling, treeless countryside. Thrusting through wire and minefield and across a trench system full of paratroopers made merely a beginning, since before they could essay the long ascent to Point 204 the Dragoons had to run the gauntlet of anti-tank guns firing from the Tomba-Mount Marrone ridge across the shallow valley to their left. They went on with great determination, paying a toll which left them at the end of the day with only 18 tanks able to run.<sup>158</sup> Their regimental headquarters was virtually wiped out with all its tanks, and their commanding officer, Lt.-Col. F.A. Vokes (brother of the G.O.C. 1st Canadian Division), was mortally wounded far forward in the van of a very gallant action. In all the B.C. Dragoons suffered 49 casualties, 22 of them fatal. But the remainder held their ground, until at nightfall they were relieved by the Perths and Lord Strathcona's Horse, whose commander, Lt.-Col. J.M. McAvity, had fought his tanks forward in a precise alternation of fire and movement. Infantry and armour then dug in or leaguered about Point 204. That night

they beat off a counter-attack by infiltrating parachutists. Lt.-Col. Reid led the Perths in a successful attack on two enemy self-propelled guns, and though twice wounded continued to direct the defence of his lines until the danger was past and the salient made secure.<sup>159</sup> Its right shoulder had been strengthened by the Seaforth, who crouched that night below Pozzo Alto, although it was somewhat exposed over to the left, where The Cape Breton Highlanders were still a mile to the south-east of Mount Marrone.<sup>160</sup>

Reid was awarded the D.S.O. for his gallantry,<sup>161</sup> and, as though inspired by such leadership, two of his men won recognition in the same action.\*

### The Capture of Point 253 and Tomba di Pesaro, 1 September

On the last night of August the Canadians thus lay within some 1200 yards of the twin peaks which had dominated their northern sky-line from the time that they occupied Monteciccardo and Ginestreto, and beyond which the country sloped gently down to the widening coastal plain. On the right, Monte Luro rose sharply 940 feet above sea level; the half dozen houses near the crest that had formed the village of Monteluro had been razed by Allied bombing. The companion height, less than a mile to the south-west, bore the name Mount Peloso, but was commonly referred to as Point 253 (its altitude in metres). A short spur off to the west carried the town of Tomba di Pesaro,† which loosely gave its name to the Peloso feature.

The third phase of the Eighth Army's operation was accomplished. The Gothic Line had been breached, and General Leese had smashed his "shop-window". Though the paratroopers were still lodged in Pesaro (the place was in any case to be by-passed), the Polish front on the Army right would soon be dissolved when the Germans facing General Anders came to be squeezed out as the Canadian Corps drew closer to the coast. In the more difficult country on the left the 5th British Corps had kept up well with the forces in the centre. Late on the 31st the 46th Division had captured Mount Gridolfo after a very stubborn action and had troops fighting for Mondaino, nearly two miles behind the Pesaro lateral.<sup>163</sup> A drive to the sea by the Canadians looked imminent. Rimini seemed to be already within

\* Lance-Sergeant K. M. Rowe, although wounded, led three successive charges to regain his platoon positions after they had been overrun in the counter-attack; these assaults resulted in 20 paratroopers being killed, and ten captured, and the securing of the battalion's hold on

Point 204. Pte. R. D. Saunders took over the leadership of his section when its commander and second-in-command became casualties, and put up so stout a resistance against the counter-attack that the enemy was forced back in disorder. Rowe received the D.C.M. and Saunders the M.M.<sup>162</sup>

† The town was renamed Tavulla some time before the outbreak of war, and was thus identified by local inhabitants and in German records. Allied and Italian maps and road direction signs used the name Tomba di Pesaro.



their grasp. For General Burns the next moves were clear. Troops of the 1st Division would scale Monte Luro and reach over to Gradara, which would bring them to the Via Adriatica (Highway No. 16) and probably force Heidrich out before they got there; the 5th Division would capture Tomba and descend on San Giovanni in Marignano, only a couple of miles southwest of Cattolica. Both divisions would exploit to sever the coast highway and seize the Conca crossing, in order to cut off the 1st Parachute Division if it stayed behind too long.<sup>164</sup>

As August faded into September the mood was buoyant. Through the dust-laden air a vista of the azure Adriatic glistened, serene and refreshing in the heat. To the tired men imprisoned in endless convoy nose-to-tail along the routes bulldozed forward to the front, the end of their journey seemed to be in sight. A traffic sign, read from every vehicle that rumbled by it, expressed the spirit of the hour: "Drive carefully if you want to see Vienna."<sup>165</sup> Men coughed and spat, and their bodies, stripped to the waist, were caked with dust and sweat, yet everyone was cheerful. "In places", one of them wrote, "the dust lies like powdered snow to a depth of three or four inches. It is impossible to see a moving tank. You are only aware of its presence by the turbulent cloud of dust which accompanies it.... The most remarkable thing is that in all this filth, fatigue and bodily discomfort the same old time-worn humour and perpetual good nature persist."<sup>166</sup>

Action by units of the 1st Division in the early morning hours of 1 September improved the Canadian right flank and provided space to assemble for the attack on Monte Luro. At 6:45 a.m. the Royal 22e Regiment reported that they had taken the ruins of Borgo Santa Maria against light opposition, although it was not until mid-afternoon that with the assistance of a company of the Carleton and Yorks placed under Lt.-Col. Allard's command they finally cleared the German posts and pillboxes on Point 131, north-east of the village.<sup>167</sup> During the morning the Seaforth seized Pozzo Alto on its 500-foot hill after two unsuccessful attacks through the Patricias during the night, and drove another 1500 yards north-east to the neighbouring spur at Point 119.<sup>168</sup>

At a conference held at Eighth Army Headquarters on the afternoon of the 31st, General Leese directed that the attack on Monte Luro would be made jointly next morning by the 1st Canadian Division and the 3rd Carpathian Division. While the Poles were to advance northward from their positions east of Point 131,<sup>169</sup> General Vokes proposed to strike with a force commanded by Brigadier D. Dawnay, whose own 21st (British) Tank Brigade would be augmented for the purpose by The Royal Canadian Dragoons and two companies of the Royal 22e Regiment under command, and the

2nd Infantry Brigade in support.\* After taking Monte Luro the group would push on to the Conca and cut road and railway south-east of Cattolica.<sup>171</sup> Preparations for the operation took up most of the afternoon of the 1st, and the assault was ready to go in at 6:00 p.m.

In the meantime the capture of Point 253 by the 11th Brigade had materially improved the 1st Division's chances of success, for the rout of the enemy from that commanding position had removed the danger of hostile fire from Vokes' left flank. The enterprise against Mount Peloso was carried out most gallantly by the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards under somewhat remarkable circumstances. Raised as reconnaissance troops and trained to the use of armoured cars as the light cavalry of modern wars, the Princess Louise, as we have seen, had had to adapt themselves after a few weeks' training as an infantry battalion of the newly formed 12th Brigade, though going into battle for the first time under command of the 11th. The assault was to have been undertaken by The Perth Regiment and Lord Strathcona's Horse from their positions on Point 204; but in view of the Perths' heavy losses—they had suffered more than ninety casualties in the last 36 hours, including their Commanding Officer, who was twice wounded in the struggle for Point 204—and because the armour could not be ready to attack before midday, the plan was changed and the task handed over to the Dragoon Guards at short notice.<sup>172</sup>

At first light on 1 September the regiment was still scattered along the line of approach, and in coming up to Point 204 the main body ran into a heavy and prolonged concentration of enemy shelling, an ordeal from which they emerged after thirty minutes, badly shaken up and with several casualties. It took most of that morning for Lt.-Col. W.W.G. Darling, who had succeeded Adams as Commanding Officer, to get his supporting arms forward and tie in his artillery programme, and it was one o'clock before the attack started.<sup>173</sup>

As the Princess Louise moved up the saddle towards Mount Peloso, heavy fire from small arms, machine-guns and mortars came down on them; but strongly supported by the Strathcona tanks, which sprayed the hedges and wheat stooks with their machine-guns, they struggled stoutly forward. Fortunately the Germans everywhere about them were not entrenched, for they had evidently been assembling to counter-attack. Caught out of position, they fell easy victims to the tanks. They were found in rows behind the hedges, and crouching or lying in the open; so many of them were killed

\* During the operations which followed the relationship between Brigadier Dawnay and Brigadier Gibson seems to have been one of "combined command", with the tank commander being the dominant partner. The arrangement provided a useful lesson in tank-infantry co-operation. The two brigade headquarters were close together, and the two commanders jointly fought the battle from each in turn, as first armour and then infantry assumed the major role.<sup>170</sup>

that bulldozers had to be used in digging their graves. The attacking troops suffered heavily from the enemy cross-fire, and when Darling reached the foot of the hill, with still some 200 yards of heavy ploughed land to go, he had only forty survivors with him for the final assault with the armour.

But the Germans by this time had had enough. The tanks knocked down the few houses that still stood there, pouring fire into all likely positions, and the depleted Dragoon Guards, who had covered the last fifty yards on their hands and knees (a gait in sad contrast to the high mobility of armoured cars) entered into possession. They found to their great satisfaction that the enemy had evacuated and were scuttling down into Tomba. This first victory of the grounded cavalry had cost them more than 100 casualties, 35 of them fatal, but, as Darling grimly observed, "the main thing was that we had taken our ground." The Strathconas lost six killed and 24 wounded.<sup>174</sup> The success of the Princess Louise was due in no small part to the outstanding leadership displayed by the Commanding Officer, who, in the words of the recommendation that brought him the D.S.O., "ignoring the continual shelling, machine-gun and sniper fire, visited each company in turn, urging his men on, and by sheer gallantry and personal example led [them] towards the objective."\* In the early evening the Irish passed through with a squadron of the New Brunswick Hussars to descend upon the almost deserted ruins of Tomba di Pesaro.<sup>175</sup>

### To the Conca and the Sea

The way was now clear for Brigadier Dawnay to drive through on the right for Monte Luro. The infantry selected were the Loyal Edmontons, and they were supported by the 12th Royal Tanks. During the afternoon of the 1st heavy air and artillery bombardments were brought down on the crest and the reverse side of the mount. Among the guns supporting the Canadians were the 25-pounders of the 5th and 6th Field Regiments New Zealand Artillery, which with the 4th Field Regiment had come under General Bums' command on 30 August.<sup>176</sup> The assault was launched at six o'clock. It went extremely well, against comparatively slight small-arms fire, for the preliminary bombing and shelling had been most effective. In turn each company with its squadron of tanks picked up its objectives, their progress directed by Lt.-Col. Bell-Irving, commanding the Edmontons, and Lt.-Col. H. H. van Straubenzee, the tank commander, from atop the tombstones of Pozzo Alto cemetery.<sup>177</sup> Although Monte Luro had been provided with an intricate and deep system of trenches, supported by well protected machine-gun and

\* Major W. J. Salter, who commanded one of the two companies which made the final assault on Point 253, was awarded the M.C.

anti-tank positions, these defences had been abandoned, and the commander of the company which climbed to the top recorded with simplicity: "We walked on to the objective, took four prisoners and reorganized."<sup>178</sup> By last light the hill was thick with consolidating troops.

The pursuit force was ready. Besides the large seaside resort of Cattolica there lay before the Conca a number of smaller towns and villages, all of which might be expected to house enemy rearguards. Three of these, Pieve, Gradara and Fanano, stood on spurs stretching down from Monte Luro; two others, San Giovanni in Marignano and Monte Albano, were on the flats within a mile of the river. Immediately Monte Luro fell, Dawnay ordered the Patricias and a squadron of the 48th Royal Tanks to advance to the spur running eastward from the captured height. It was his intention that The Royal Canadian Dragoons with a company, of the Royal 22e would then spring forward and cut the coast road and railway south-east of Cattolica, and if possible get a squadron through to seize the crossing over the Conca. Another company of the 22e was to move up behind Monte Luro with the 48th Royal Tanks and advance to Pieve.<sup>179</sup>

But in the small hours of 2 September the movement of troops became uncertain and confused in this fluid battle through the unfamiliar hills. At about two o'clock, seeing opportunity slipping through his fingers, Dawnay ordered two companies of the Patricias to climb on tanks and press on to cut the railway 2000 yards south-east of Gradara and form a defensive right flank for the division. The mission was accomplished, and when Pieve was clear, he directed the 48th Royal Tanks to swing north and capture Gradara, and the 12th Royal Tanks with the Edmontons to push forward to Fanano.<sup>180</sup>

The plan worked. From the railway bridge which the Patricias had seized a squadron of The Royal Canadian Dragoons fought forward to the Via Adriatica, continuously under fire from the Germans in the massive old castle which dominated the hilltop village of Gradara.<sup>181</sup> Since the 48th Royal Tanks could not get inside the walls of Gradara without the assistance of infantry (and the Patricias could not be withdrawn from their role of protecting the right flank), they had to be content with containing the town; they were able, however, to support the attack on Fanano, which fell to the 12th Royal Tanks and the Loyal Edmontons in the early evening. In a third prong of the combined drive by armour and infantry the 145th Regiment R.A.C. and the Seaforth, held up for a time west of Pieve, where they lost four tanks, pushed rapidly north-westward across the Tavollo and Ventena streams, to find Monte Albano free of enemy.<sup>182</sup>

On their left "D" Squadron of the reconnaissance regiment, The Royal Canadian Dragoons, roving widely through enemy country and cutting in with swift patrols, helped to throw the Germans into a deeper state of alarm. By evening San Giovanni was left behind, and the Dragoons went on to

establish a bridgehead over the Conca.<sup>183</sup> By that time the Seaforth, moving coastward from Monte Albano, were patrolling into the outskirts of Cattolica. They found the town vacant, for with the flanks collapsed, the 1st Parachute Division had no alternative but to disengage. Pesaro had been abandoned to the Poles, who had taken over the town that morning and were now a mile beyond Mount Trebbio, half way to Cattolica; it was the farthest point they reached before being withdrawn into army reserve.<sup>184</sup> The armoured trident had struck home. The Canadians had reached the sea. Before daylight on 3 September the 1st Brigade had slipped the R.C.R. across the Conca north of San Giovanni, to be followed into the bridgehead by the 48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders.<sup>185</sup>

The whole of the Corps front now ran along the line of the Conca. Late on the 1st General Hoffmeister had ordered the two fresh battalions of his 12th Brigade to take up the pursuit in the 5th Division's sector. The 1st Canadian Light Anti-Aircraft Battalion on the right, and The Westminster Regiment (particularly suited for the task since it still retained its transport as a motor battalion) on the left, each supported by a squadron of The Governor General's Horse Guards, drove forward from Tomba di Pesaro in the early moonlit hours of 2 September. They cleared the spurs of Mount Pedriccio and skirted the flats, hotfoot after an enemy too preoccupied with extricating himself to offer much resistance. In the late afternoon patrols found San Giovanni abandoned and sappers went to work on crossings northwest and west of the town. The pursuit forces made ready to go over in the morning.<sup>186</sup> On the farther side the enemy's guns and vehicles, crowding the roads to the north, were heavily engaged from the air.<sup>187</sup>

In the small hours of the 2nd Kesselring's headquarters had ordered the Tenth Army to withdraw its left wing to the line of the Conca.<sup>188</sup> The Canadian thrusts to Gradara, Fanano, and San Giovanni had jostled the parachutists hurriedly back over the river. Their 1st and 3rd Regiments got away in fair condition with the bulk of their artillery and most of the mortar battalion, but the 4th Parachute Regiment reported casualties of more than 70 per cent,<sup>189</sup> and there were admitted losses of a number of anti-tank and heavy anti-aircraft guns left behind with the dead.<sup>190</sup> The Tenth Army's "Final Appreciation of the Day" had an undertone of relief, however, recording that the attempt of the Eighth Army's spearhead to cut off the 76th Panzer Corps' left wing had been foiled "by the stubborn resistance of the strongpoint garrisons, above all in the sector of 1 Para Div. . . ." General von Vietinghoff thus had the consolation that the Parachute Division had saved itself from being enveloped, and was forming a new line at Riccione. This line was to be defended at all costs, "above all in order to gain time for the reinforcements to arrive."<sup>191</sup>

Army Group "C" was still disturbed about the possibility of an amphibious landing, and alerted the coastal defences during the night. There were reports that vessels had been seen in the offing. These were probably ships of the naval task force placed at Burns' disposal on 3 September to shell targets ashore on request by his Commander, Corps Royal Artillery. From time to time the force was changed in strength and composition\* to meet operational requirements elsewhere, but during the next six weeks, until bad weather made observation and reconnaissance by air impossible, the ships hovered on the skirts of the enemy, risking his mines, but wearing down his soldiers' morale with grim reminder that all three elements were against him.<sup>193</sup> Day after day the enemy's gun-positions and fortifications along the coast were pounded by naval fire, controlled by pilots of No. 657 Air Observation Post Squadron, R.A.F., which was providing the ground artillery with almost its only means of carrying out observed shooting.<sup>194</sup> This squadron of "flying gunners", which had served briefly with the Canadians in March 1944,<sup>195</sup> again came in support of the 1st Canadian Corps at the beginning of the battle for the Gothic Line, with "A" Flight being allocated to the Army Group Royal Artillery, and "B" and "C", Flights to the 5th and 1st Divisions respectively. It remained with the Canadians until the end of the campaign, and accompanied them when they left Italy.<sup>196</sup>

On the Allied side there was reasonable cause for satisfaction. "It had been a great success for Eighth Army", the Commander-in-Chief was to write. "By a combination of surprise in preparation and dash in attack they had swept through a fortified line which had been twelve months in preparation almost as though it were not there."<sup>197</sup> The Army Commander in turn paid tribute to the Canadian Corps. "It would have been a difficult and expensive task to capture the line if the enemy had had time to occupy it properly", he recorded. "It is, therefore, very much to the credit of the leading divisions that by active and aggressive patrolling and by the quick follow-up of these patrols, they 'gate-crashed' the enemy. By doing so we saved invaluable time and a lot of casualties; and indeed at this stage our casualties were remarkably low." Sir Oliver had a special word of commendation for the manner in which General Hoffmeister's troops had penetrated the Gothic defences: "A great deal of our success was due to the energy and daring of this Commander and his Division."<sup>198</sup>



The moment looked hopeful. With the Canadian Corps about to leap over the Conca and the 5th British Corps ready to pass the 1st Armoured Division through in a dash for the flat' country beyond, the campaign seemed about to reach a triumphant climax. The fall of Rimini would smash the

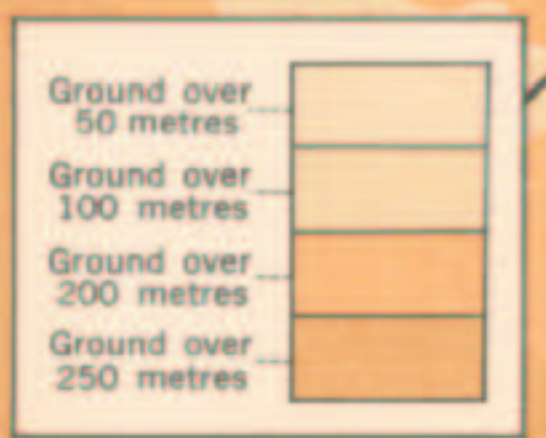
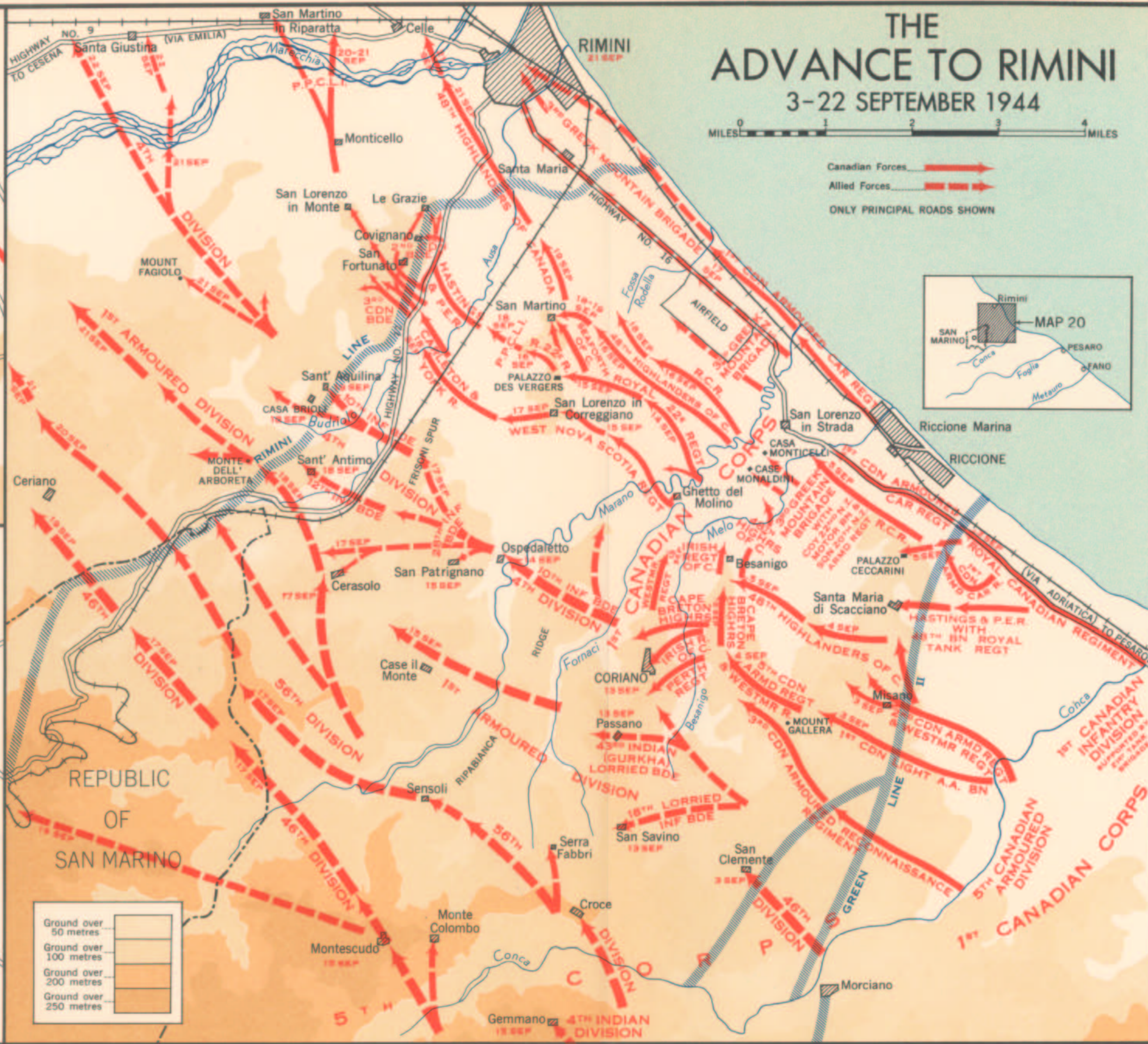
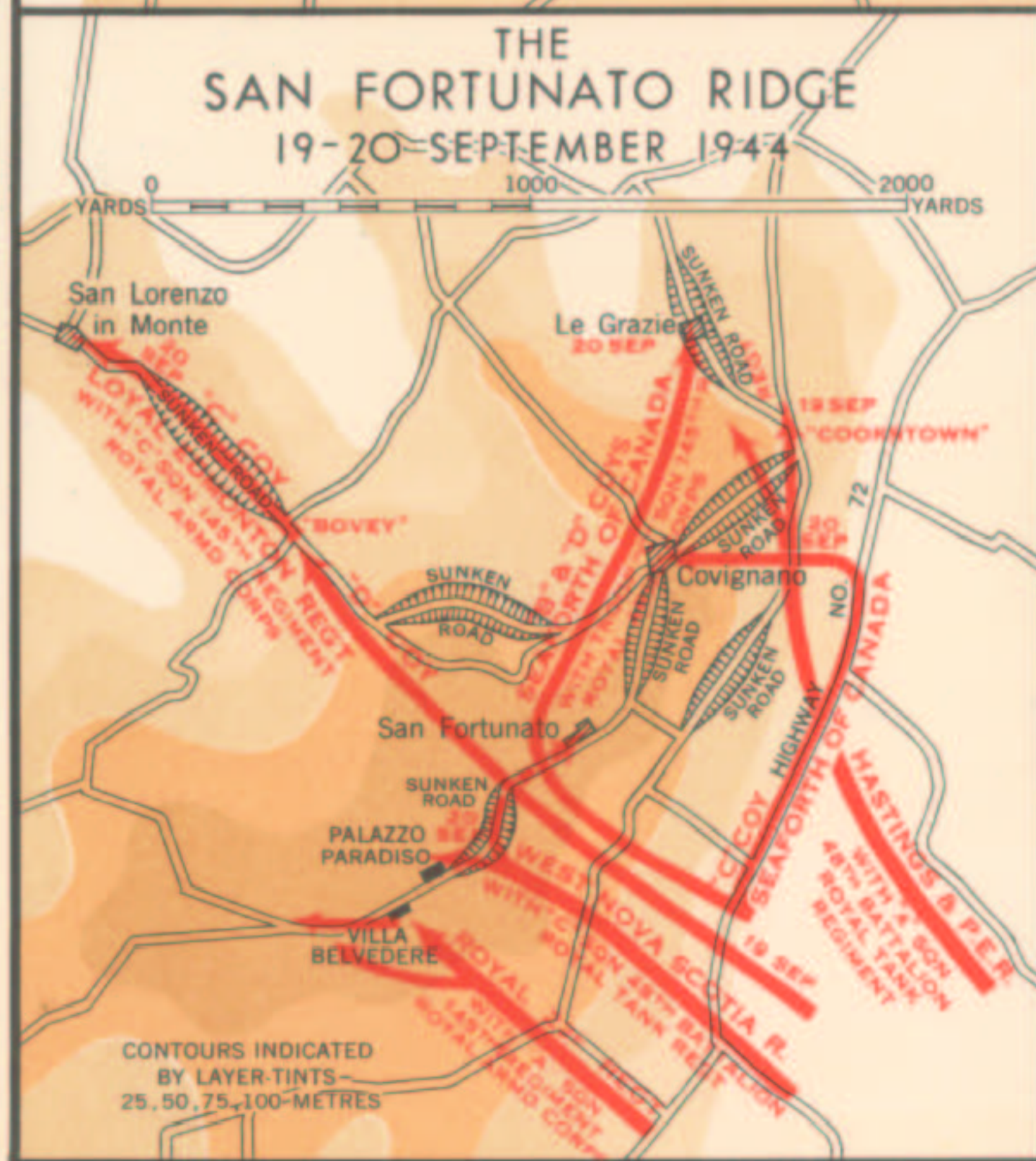
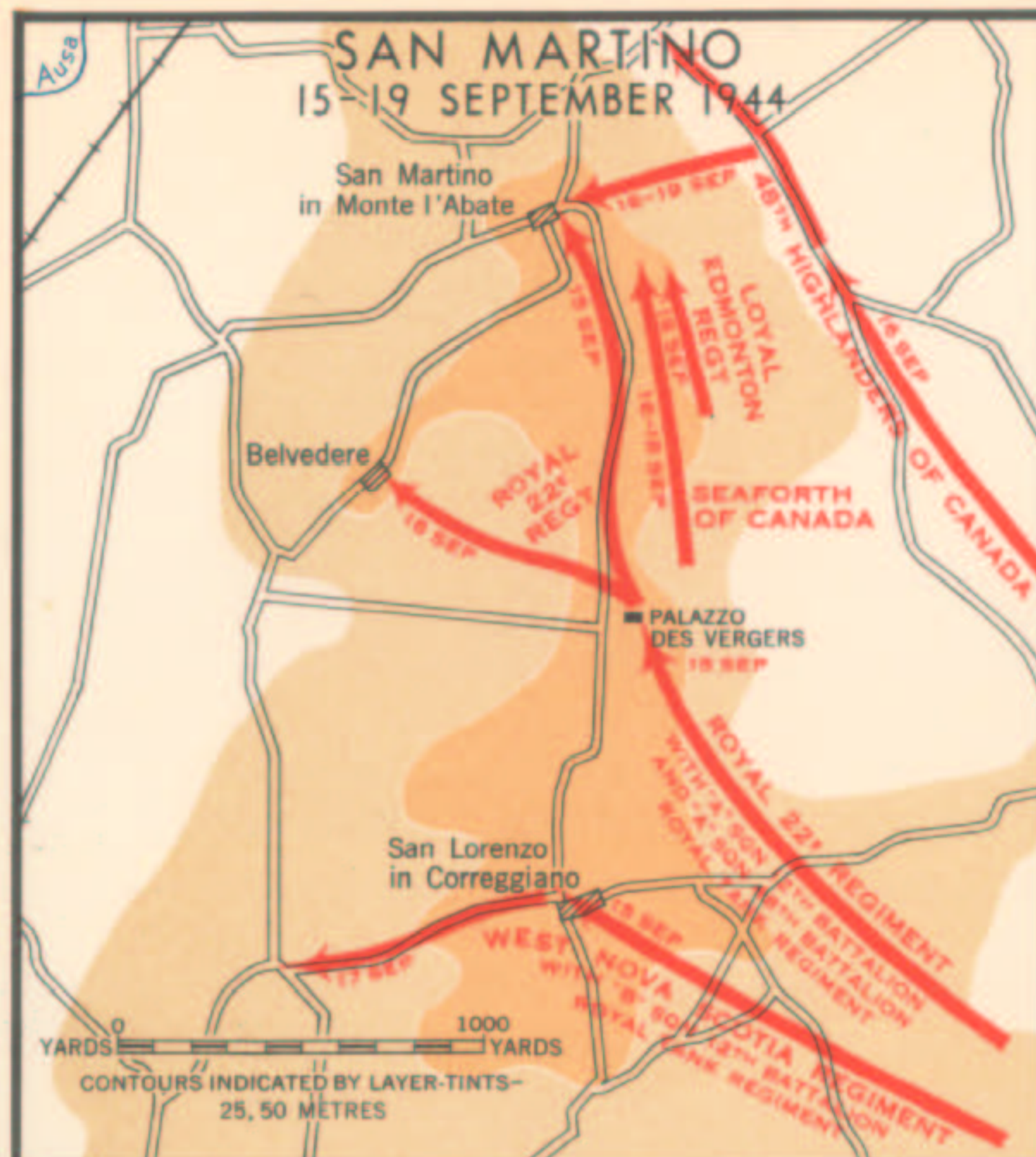
\* On 6 September the force consisted of the destroyers H.M.S. *Loyal*, *Undine* and *Urchin*, and the gunboats H.M.S. *Aphis* and *Scarab*.<sup>192</sup>

# THE ADVANCE TO RIMINI

3-22 SEPTEMBER 1944

MILES 0 1 2 3 4

Canadian Forces   
Allied Forces   
ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN



hinge on which the whole of the German withdrawal from Northern Italy must swing. But the Germans, as always, had been quick to recover, as we had been slow to exploit. Kesselring had used his easy lateral communications on the far side of the escarpment to slide reserves from one part of his front to the other, to draw upon right and centre to restore his shattered left. After the 26th Panzer Division, flung in to stem the flood pouring through the gap on 29 August, the 98th Infantry and the 162nd (Turcoman) Divisions were being committed, and now, Kesselring's last reserve from the centre, the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, dispatched eastward in haste, was soon to come into action.<sup>199</sup> The 100th Mountain Regiment of the 5th Mountain Division was halted on its way to the French frontier and brought back into the line. Other defensible ridges still lay between the Eighth Army and the plains, and about one of these, which took its name from Coriano, the village on its brow (four miles south-west of Riccione,), the 1st Parachute, the 26th Panzer and the 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions, all first-class formations (though two of them had been much reduced by casualties), were hurriedly getting into position.<sup>200</sup>

Kesselring had thrown in everything he had in order to retrieve his campaign from an autumn disaster. All he could now hope for were the autumn rains.



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE BATTLE OF THE RIMINI LINE, 3-22 SEPTEMBER 1944

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#### The Offensive is Checked

LESS than a dozen miles of foothills and coastal plain separate the Conca from the larger Marecchia River, whose course down through Rimini and under the ancient Ponte di Tiberio roughly marks the southern limit of the low lands in and adjoining the Po Valley, known historically as the Lombard Plain. Allied hopes were high that the impetus of the offensive, renewed and strengthened by the fresh blows which the Fifth Army was about to deliver, would quickly carry the formations of the Eighth Army across this narrow interval and into what was expected to be the wide field of exploitation beyond. Yet the train of events was to show that we were being too sanguine. Checks and disappointments were in store; for the enemy was to contest vigorously every spur and ridge tapering down seaward from the mountainous left flank. What was to have been a headlong pursuit turned into a bitter, creeping battle which lasted eighteen days.

The Canadian Corps order for the advance beyond the Conca had been issued on 1 September, when an enemy collapse seemed imminent. It set four bounds for the operation--the long finger of high ground pointing north-eastward through San Clemente and Misano towards Riccione (see Map 20) ; the Marano River, midway between the Conca and the Marecchia; the crest of the San Fortunato ridge, a well-defined feature two miles south-west of Rimini; and finally the Rimini-Bologna railway, north of the Marecchia. The 1st Division was directed along Highway No. 16 through the flat coastal area; General Hoffmeister's forces were assigned the more rugged ground on the left. General Vokes decided to lead with his 1st Brigade; the armoured division's advance was to be made by the 5th Armoured Brigade, with the infantry of the 12th Brigade to "mop up and consolidate".<sup>1</sup>

When the two divisions crossed the Conca early on the morning of 3 September, they were repeating the experience of other assaults over dried-up

river beds farther south. The stream offered no serious obstacle, and the troops quickly expanded their bridgehead. They began to climb the low ridge between San Clemente and Misano in the face of straggling fire coming down the hillsides from scattered enemy who appeared to have little conviction that they were there to stay. On the right The Royal Canadian Regiment rolled along the Via Adriatica in T.C.Vs., having received a report that the paratroopers were pulling back to Rimini.<sup>2</sup> But 1000 yards south-east of Riccione a blown bridge covered by fire from houses near the beach halted them, and soon afterwards they became involved in the general fight for the seaward end of the Misano ridge. The Germans were holding the strongly built Palazzo Ceccarini on the wooded extremity of the ridge and the squalid hamlet of Santa Maria di Scacciano a mile to the south, and these became the limits of the Canadian race up the highway that day.<sup>3</sup> Towards the Corps' left the Strathconas and the Westminsters had taken Misano by last light and mounted the ridge beyond, with the 1st Canadian Light AntiAircraft Battalion keeping pace farther west.<sup>4</sup> The positions which were holding up the Canadians near the coast, but which the left wing had overrun without serious difficulty, formed a defence line designated on German maps "Green Line II", a hastily executed project on the eastern slope of the Misano spur, some ten miles behind the Gothic Line itself.<sup>5</sup>

To the Germans the day was a critical one. They felt that if they could weather the storm during the hours of daylight on the 3rd, the arrival during the night of the 71st Panzer Grenadier Regiment behind the joint of the 26th Panzer and 1st Parachute Divisions would ease the situation, and they could expect to hold in front of the Marano. Their senior commanders even then were of the opinion that the Eighth Army could be brought to a halt, and that a stalemate might well ensue. Their main hope at the moment rested on the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division and its able commander, Major-General Dr. Fritz Polack, whose 71st Regiment, as expected, was in position on the Coriano ridge by the morning of the 4th. On the 26th Panzer Division's right was the newly-arrived 98th Infantry Division (commanded by Lieut.-General Alfred Reinhardt). Its planned replacement of the 71st Division had been cancelled, and General Raapke's troops remained in the line holding a reduced sector between the 98th and the 278th Divisions on the 76th Corps' extreme right flank. During the day General Heidrich rejoined his division, which, strengthened by the addition of Reinhardt's 117th Grenadier Regiment and a "blocking group" from the 162nd (Turcoman) Division, was responsible for the area between Coriano and the coast.<sup>6</sup> With these dispositions made Kesselring was so confident that the front would hold as to go off and spend an uneventful day with the Fourteenth Army.<sup>7</sup>

In the evening, however, when he returned to his own headquarters, he heard that the armoured spearheads of the 1st Canadian and 5th British Corps were threatening to sever the head of the crucial feature at Coriano. Reports were confused and contradictory. Nobody was able to give him any definite information, and his Corps Commander, General Herr, even appeared to have thoughts of further withdrawals. Kesselring seemed to sense that all he had done might still be of no avail. To make matters worse, during his absence General Warlimont, Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Staff, had appeared at his headquarters. On inquiring whether the enemy could be driven back by a counter-attack, the visitor had been told that Army Group "C" would be very happy if it succeeded even in stemming the Allied advance. Kesselring's exasperation that night culminated in a towering rage. He threatened to replace corps and divisional commanders who were able to think of nothing but retreat. Caught between Hitler's obsession for clinging to the indefensible and the preference of his field commanders for more normal tactical doctrine, he expressed his vexation by creating a scene clearly intended to exact the maximum performance from all concerned. Prolonged plain speaking crackled over the wires till far past midnight, when the more even-tempered von Vietinghoff managed to calm his superior by alluding (among other things) to the German casualties, and declaring that he knew of no man who could better the performance of General Herr.<sup>8</sup> (This testimony to Herr's first class leadership, and the high fighting quality of his troops, indirectly reflected credit on the Canadian formation opposing them.)

To General Bums and his divisional commanders it was becoming apparent that the enemy might fight a delaying action up to a line through Rimini and San Fortunato, with Coriano as an outpost, before making a stand. They agreed that if his resistance there were strong, the Canadians would have to pause and mount a full-scale attack.<sup>9</sup> On the morning of the 4th the Corps Commander flew on reconnaissance over the Conca, with his eyes on the country towards Rimini and the north-west. An hour later he met General Leese, who discussed the grouping of the Corps for operations beyond Rimini, projecting the line of advance through Ravenna and Ferrara and thence to the crossing of the Po. But when Bums saw his commanders again in the afternoon, they could only report that the Germans were still holding the reverse slopes of the long Misano ridge.<sup>10</sup> The enemy was evidently going to make a fight of it even in front of the Marano.

From Mount Gallera, a slight eminence on the ridge about a mile west of Misano, a low spur branched northward for two miles to the hamlet of Besanigo. The road along its crest seemed to offer a good means of advance to Brigadier Cumberland's 5th Armoured Brigade, which attacked early on 4 September with the New Brunswick Hussars, supported by the

Westminsters.\* Tanks and infantry battled forward 1000 yards before they were brought to a halt by vicious mortar and anti-tank fire coming from enemy detachments on the Besanigo ridge itself and from the parallel Coriano feature to the west.<sup>12</sup> "B" Squadron of the Hussars, fighting on the exposed left flank, was pinned down all day in spite of desperate efforts to extricate it by "A" Squadron, which engaged the Coriano positions and fired all its smoke shells in an effort to blind the enemy's guns. The day's action cost the armoured regiment six tanks,<sup>13</sup> but brought to one of its members, Sgt. W. P. Fleck, the unit's first D.C.M. of the war. In the late afternoon, when failing light prevented the crew commanders from seeing the movement of enemy infantry (some of whom had already knocked out a Sherman with a *Faustpatrone*), Fleck dismounted with his corporal and led his tanks forward to their objective, with machine-carbine and grenades killing five Germans in slit-trenches on the way, and capturing eight more. Although wounded by a shell splinter the intrepid sergeant then carried out a reconnaissance with his squadron leader until he collapsed from loss of blood.<sup>14</sup>

Nearer the coast the 1st Brigade could make little headway. An R.C.R. assault on the northern end of the ridge was driven back; and a plan, put in hand on the 3rd, to take Santa Maria with a mobile force of Hastings and Prince Edward companies and a squadron of the 48th Royal Tanks met little success. Demolition of all bridges over the many small streams between the Conca and Riccione held up the armour, but during the night of the 3rd-4th two Hastings companies got into the village outskirts. In the morning the tanks came up, but much hard and bitter fighting throughout the day failed to dislodge the stubborn paratroopers.<sup>15</sup> After dark that evening the 48th Highlanders outflanked Santa Maria to the west, as Brigadier Calder developed a three-pronged attack to break the deadlock. By early morning the village and the Palazzo Ceccarini were in Canadian hands.<sup>16</sup>

A hard left hook by The Cape Breton Highlanders and The Irish Regiment of Canada won Besanigo on the morning of the 5th.<sup>17</sup> Later in the day the 48th Highlanders crossed the four-foot wide Melo, but an attempt by the R.C.R. to take the village of San Lorenzo in Strada, half a mile beyond, failed.<sup>18</sup> The 1st Brigade was left at the Melo; in the four days which followed the crossing of the Conca its battalions suffered more than 300 casualties. Until the 1st British Armoured Division (in its first fight since Tunisia in the spring of 1943) could throw the Germans down off Coriano, the Canadian flank and left rear would be exposed to the enemy's command

\* Notable in the Westminster attack was the gallantry of a junior officer, Lieut. H. A. Miller, who under heavy mortar and small-arms fire, "moving well in front of his platoon, skilfully led it to the objective" and organized the subsequent defence. Three times he crossed a fire-swept area 1500 yards wide to carry to Battalion Headquarters valuable information about the enemy's positions. For this Miller was awarded the M.C.<sup>11</sup>

ing observation and fire, which had a four-mile sweep across the alternation of grain plot and vineyard from the ridge to the sea. Coriano remained untaken, and both right and centre began to be afflicted by the paralysis that had stricken the left.

General Leese was not surprised when the 1st Division was delayed by the enemy's retention of the ribbon of houses along the coast, nor when the precipitous nature of the country in the 5th Corps' sector kept the 56th British and 4th Indian Divisions echeloned back on the left flank. He had counted, however, on breaking across the Marano in the centre with the 5th Canadian and 1st British Armoured Divisions and quickly reaching the new line which air photographs disclosed the enemy was preparing in the high ground south-west of Rimini.<sup>19</sup> But continued German tenacity of Coriano and the Gemmano feature some four and a half miles to the southwest were difficult tactical complications. The full weight and density of the enemy's reserves had taken effect. Decisively assisted by the now considerable concentration of artillery at their disposal,\* the Germans snatched a hardfought success. The Eighth Army's advance was blocked, its momentum lost. That night a blanket of drenching showers covered the front. Gloomily the Canadian Corps' Meteorological Officer predicted unsettled weather for several days. By the morning of the 6th the tracks were already slippery as dust began turning into slime. The Marano, which was to have been crossed on the 4th, was to flow on, unassailed until the 14th.<sup>21</sup>

Leese was now faced with the alternatives of continuing an all-out offensive against the Rimini positions with the Canadian Corps, or of checking in order to build up for a major battle with the whole Army. Knowing that the Corps had been fighting hard for some ten days, and conscious of the great strength that the enemy had concentrated against it, he did not feel justified in committing the Canadians with neither reserves nor rest directly into the low ground ahead, and on an open flank. He determined, therefore, to halt them and regroup the Eighth Army. He informed General Burns of his decision on the morning of the 6th, telling him that in addition to the 3rd Greek Mountain Brigade, newly arrived from the Middle East, he proposed to reinforce him with the 4th British Division supported by the 25th Army Tank Brigade (less one of its regiments). Burns was to make all necessary preparations for a deliberate assault over the Marano. General Keightley, commanding the 5th Corps, was to clear the enemy from the high ground on the left flank-specifically from Coriano and Gemmano, and the hill towns

\* Statistics compiled by the Canadian Corps show that for the period 25 August to 28 October the Germans had on the Corps' front an average artillery strength of 158 field, 56 medium and 14 heavy guns, 36 *Nebelwerfers* and 161 mortars; the Corps itself had under command 240 field, 64 medium and 16 heavy guns (besides regimental and support mortars).<sup>20</sup>

of Montescudo and Monte Colombo. When this was done the two corps would advance simultaneously over the river.<sup>22</sup>

Farther to the west Allied troops had yet to close with that formidable length of the Gothic Line into which the remainder of the German forces were now retiring in accordance with an order issued by Kesselring on 29 August.<sup>23</sup> The weakening of the enemy's centre by the transfer of reinforcements to his left wing made it easier for the Fifth Army to concentrate forward in readiness to go over to the offensive. While the 2nd U.S. Corps moved into its attack zone about Florence, the 4th Corps followed the enemy over the Arno, clearing to the northern edge of the Tuscan plain. With the occupation of Pisa on 2 September, Lucca on the 5th and Pistoia on the 12th the American left wing reached the Apennine barrier, and, it may be observed, gained objectives assigned by General Alexander three months before (above, p. 462).<sup>24</sup> The time was evidently drawing near for him to unleash the Fifth Army and deliver the second punch of the two-handed attack which he had had in mind since early August.<sup>25</sup>

He visited the Eighth Army's front on 8 September to see how things here were likely to affect the timing of the Fifth Army's attack north of Florence. In the afternoon he called on General Burns at his headquarters to discuss the situation and ask about the state of the Canadian Corps.<sup>26</sup> What he saw convinced him that the advance to Rimini could not be continued until the enemy had been driven off the Coriano Ridge. This would take several more days of preparation. Alexander's original intention had been for the American attack to go in when the Eighth Army had broken through into the plains. But further delay, either through wet weather or the arrival of more enemy reserves in the battle zone, would prejudice the success of the whole operation. The weather had now improved, and a fine spell could not be missed. Accordingly he decided to start the Fifth Army off at once and to give General Clark the full air support he desired. He intended to switch the air forces back again to the Adriatic as the Eighth Army approached the defences south-west of Rimini: they would then be most essential. "It was a pity to lose the total air support in this way during the softening-up period", General Leese wrote later, "but I am sure that from the point of view of the successful issue of the campaign as a whole, this was the best decision; and in actual fact we had sufficient for our needs."<sup>27</sup>

General Clark was ready to go, but on 8 September, the same day that the Commander-in-Chief decided to strike, a further enemy withdrawal eased the way forward for the 13th Corps, and enabled it to take over the hills south of the Sieve River. Two days later the British Corps and the 2nd U.S. Corps began probing the outer defences of the Gothic Line. The advance in that sector might first have seemed to the Germans to be nothing more than a move to keep contact; but when strongpoints within four miles of the Giogo

Pass were captured on the 12th, it became clear that our activity in the centre was a major assault on the Line there.<sup>28</sup> That night the Eighth Army renewed its efforts against Coriano Ridge, and in the early hours of the 13th the Fifth Army attacked the main German positions in the mountains. "This", writes Alexander, "marked the beginning of a week of perhaps the heaviest fighting on both fronts that either Army had yet experienced."<sup>29</sup>

### The Capture of Coriano Ridge, 13 September

General Leese's changed plan of operations, as made known on 9 September, would bring the Eighth Army to Ravenna and to the north in three phases. His intentions against Coriano were to have both his corps converge upon the ridge, using the 5th Canadian and 1st Armoured Divisions and covering them by all available artillery—a total of 700 guns. To the left, the 5th Corps would mount an attack on Croce with the 56th (London) Division, while sending the 46th, supported by the 4th Indian Division, to clear the Gemmano ridge and then capture Montescudo. In the second phase of the battle both corps would close up to the Marano and secure bridgeheads, the 1st Canadian Division on the right, the British 4th Infantry (having passed through the 5th Canadian) and 1st Armoured Divisions on the left, where they could overlook the river by capturing the Ripabianca ridge, west of Coriano. General Keightley would protect the left flank by the continued advance of his 46th and 56th Divisions through the hills.<sup>30</sup>

The third and final phase would carry the Eighth Army across the Marecchia. While the 5th Corps came up on the left with all four divisions, the Canadian Corps would first capture the island of higher ground which rose out of the plain north of the Marano, and was surmounted by the villages of San Martino in Monte l'Abate and San Lorenzo in Correggiano. The Canadians would then scale the wall of San Fortunato which the enemy was busy fortifying over against Rimini. When the Army had thrown bridgeheads over the Marecchia, General Burns would pass either one or both of the 2nd New Zealand and 5th Canadian Armoured Divisions through to exploit.<sup>31</sup> On 4 September General Leese had placed the New Zealand Division under the Canadian Corps for planning purposes only. The New Zealanders were now commanded by Major-General C. E. Weir, who had taken over when Lieut.-General Freyberg was injured in an aircraft crash on the 3rd.<sup>32</sup> During the next ten days General Burns was to have frequent discussions with Generals Weir and Hoffmeister concerning the pattern that the exploitation should follow.<sup>33</sup>

It was vital for the success of the Army plan, as General Leese explained, that the 5th Corps should be able to keep up the momentum necessary' to

contain as many German divisions as possible in the battle on its front. The Army Commander's chief difficulty lay in the fact that the ground rose gradually inland from the sea, and that there was always some high feature on his left flank to interfere with the forward movement of the troops in the coastal sector. He decided to offset this disadvantage by forcing the Germans to dissipate their fire across their entire line, and by arranging for liberal supplies of smoke with which to protect the advancing troops after they had exposed their left flank to observation from the high ground. "I relied for success", he summed up, "on decisive and determined break-in action by the Canadian Corps in the coastal sector, and by sustained offensive action by 5th Corps on the left, in order to pin down the enemy all along their Corps front,"<sup>34</sup>

On 10 September Bums issued his instructions for the battle. The intention read: "1 Cdn Corps will break through and destroy enemy between Rimini 8597 and the line Coriano 8787--Ospedaletto 8589-S. Martino 7695 [five miles west and two south of Rimini] and debouch into the Po Valley."<sup>35</sup> The Corps operation was to take place in eight phases-an unusually large number of stages for the development of a planned attack. Briefly they were as follows: the 5th Canadian Armoured Division to attack and capture Coriano Ridge; the 4th British Division to pass through and seize the northern end of the Ripabianca ridge; the same division to cross the Marano and occupy the high ground about Ospedaletto and San Patrignano; the 1st Canadian Division to secure a bridgehead over the Marano and attack the ridge on which San Martino and San Lorenzo stood; the 4th Division to advance to the River Ausa and link up with the Canadians; the 1st Canadian Division to swing towards the sea and contain the enemy to the east; the 1st Canadian and 4th Divisions to attack respectively the San Fortunato feature and the high ground to the south-west; finally, both divisions to advance and establish bridgeheads across the Marecchia River.<sup>36</sup>

The plan to throw the Germans off Coriano was a simple one. The British would come at the southern end of the ridge from the direction of San Clemente. From the elbow of the Besanigo spur the Canadians (the 11th Infantry Brigade with the Westminsters and squadrons of the 5th Armoured Brigade under command) would attack westward across the intervening valley, down which the Besanigo stream flowed to join the Melo. Enemy reported by patrols to lie in force on the near bank were to be driven off by gunfire. The sappers were briefed to clear away mines and prepare crossings for the tanks of the New Brunswick Hussars, one squadron of which was assigned to each battalion of the infantry. Of these The Cape Breton Highlanders would go for the north end of Coriano Ridge, the Perths 500 yards to the south, and the Irish would pass through and mop up. The Westminsters, with a squadron of Lord Strathcona's Horse, would be ready



to exploit success; the other squadrons would provide continuous support with their guns.<sup>37</sup>

On the same day that these orders were given the Army Group Commander notified Leese that the Fifth Army's assault of the Gothic Line would start on 13 September, and directed that the Eighth Army should in the meantime drive the enemy north of the Marano in order that its main attack on the Rimini position might be launched on the 14th.<sup>38</sup> The Eighth Army could not, however, meet this schedule (the arrival of the 4th Division had been delayed by heavy rain which washed away the Bailey bridges over the Foglia), and the Canadian advance was not resumed until the 13th.<sup>39</sup> The 11th Canadian Brigade's attack was timed to begin two hours after that of the 1st Armoured Division's on the left. There the 43rd Indian (Gurkha) Lorried Infantry Brigade started off across the slopes against Passano at 11:00 p.m. on the 12th. By midnight the battalions were on their objectives, and though house clearing by the 18th Lorried Infantry Brigade in San Savino was slower, the Canadian flank was now secure. Promptly at one o'clock on the morning of the 13th the entire corps artillery began bringing down barrages on the enemy's front and concentration on either flank to prevent his reinforcement from right or left.<sup>40</sup>

The guns had been firing deceptive shoots for some days previously, and this shattering climax left the enemy so stunned and confused that the leading Canadian elements were able to close with his positions in the darkness. The Cape Breton Highlanders had early success on their right, where they passed well clear of Coriano; but their left companies ran into mines at the crossing in front of the town and had to advance through the heavy defensive fire which the thoroughly aroused enemy was bringing down.<sup>41</sup> Other things went wrong. Wireless communications broke down and the battle became difficult to control. South of Coriano, however, the Perths were on the ridge by 2:30 a.m.; they brought up their reserve companies, and in the next two hours made themselves firm within 3000 yards of the town.<sup>42</sup>

It was time for the armour to come up. The Engineers had followed the infantry into the valley with three "Shermandozers" to gouge out the Besanigo's steep banks, which were too high for the tanks to climb. Two of these bulldozers broke down, and the sappers had to work in the open under fire; but by half-past five the crossings behind the Perths were ready, and the New Brunswick Hussars rumbled through at first light, followed within an hour by the tanks supporting the Irish and The Cape Breton Highlanders. During the night the Perths had been menaced by German tanks moving around their objective, but now the presence of Canadian armour on the ridge kept the enemy from attempting to counter-attack, although the Panzer Grenadiers in Coriano were to resist the Irish bitterly all day. The defenders had sited their own tanks in the town, and had turned each house

into a stronghold, from which the attackers had to extract them almost one by one. It was nine o'clock next morning (14 September) before Brigadier Johnston's headquarters could report the town clear, and midday before the castle-topped mound on the western outskirts was proved free of Germans.<sup>43</sup> The Irish and the New Brunswick Hussars captured one tank intact, and took 60 prisoners. That was by no means the whole tally, however, for as the Canadians battered their way in from the north, the mass 'of the garrison flowed out over the slopes to the south to fall into the hands of the British, who counted fourteen officers and 775 other ranks passing through their divisional cage on the 13th.<sup>44</sup> That night the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division was to report "considerable losses in men and materiel".<sup>45</sup> The fighting on 13 September cost the 11th Canadian Brigade 210 casualties. Hardest hit were The Cape Breton Highlanders, who lost 22 killed and 63 wounded.

As the Irish were so deeply involved in Coriano, the Westminsters and their squadron of Strathconas were ordered up through the Cape Bretons to sweep the enemy off the crest to the north.<sup>46</sup> The German machinegunners and snipers stood their ground as long as they dared, but by half-past four in the afternoon they had gone, leaving a dozen corpses and some 80 prisoners behind them.<sup>47</sup> Two things in particular contributed to their rout. According to General Herr, the Allied smoke-screens blinded his guns and prevented them from aiming at observed targets;\* and Allied aircraft destroyed his daylight counter-attacks and caused heavy casualties to his reserves.<sup>49</sup> Operations of the Desert Air Force in support of the Eighth Army indeed reached a peak on the day that Coriano Ridge was captured--to be followed by a week of sustained effort at only a slightly lower level as the stubborn battle continued. During the twenty-four hours ending at sunset on 13 September D.A.F. aircraft dropped more than 500 tons of bombs, flying 900 sorties, 700 of them against targets on the, immediate battlefield.<sup>50</sup>

The beginning of the battle had thus yielded good results, and the great thing now was not to miss a moment in hitting the enemy hard again, giving him no chance to make a fight of it at the Marano. The 5th Corps had loosened his grip on the hills to the left, and though opposed by strong counter-attack, General Keightley's forces were climbing into position to close up to the river when the Army should surge forward again on the morrow. Prompt action by the Corps would prevent the Germans from impeding the crossing either by clinging to the Ripabianca ridge or striking from new positions on the slopes behind Ospedaletto. The troops of the

\* The effectiveness of the artillery smoke-screen was ensured by observation-and correction if necessary-from air observation posts. During September the 25-pounders of the 1st Canadian Division fired 25,000 rounds of smoke out of a total of 262,000 shells expended.<sup>48</sup>

5th Canadian Armoured Division, having fulfilled their part of the operation, were relieved by units of the 4th British Division, and withdrew to concentration areas about San Giovanni for rest and reorganization.<sup>51</sup> Although they did not know it, their aggressive tactics had won them added stature in German eyes. An analysis of Allied fighting methods submitted by the 76th Corps' Chief of Staff on 11 September contained the significant observation: "Enemy armoured formations, particularly Canadian tanks, no longer sensitive to artillery fire, but carry on even under heaviest fire concentrations."<sup>52</sup>

The enemy was in a bad way. His formations holding the line on the 12th were now shaken and bleeding. Besides the 29th Panzer Grenadiers, on whom the brunt of the attack against Coriano had fallen, the 71st and 98th Infantry and 26th Panzer Divisions had all been badly mauled. In poorest shape were the already depleted 98th and 71st Divisions, opposing the 5th Corps on General Herr's mountainous right flank.<sup>53</sup> Ravaging bombardment and furious assault had caught the Germans sooner than they had expected. They had known that the spring was being coiled, but they were surprised that it had been released so quickly.<sup>54</sup>

To Kesselring the day's intelligence came as a shock, as the record of his telephone conversation with his Army Commander reveals.

*Kesselring:* I have just returned and heard the terrible news. Will you please inform me of the situation.

*von Vietinghoff:* The depth of the penetrations cannot be ascertained with accuracy as yet. . . . The front has been greatly weakened.

*Kesselring:* We must realize that tomorrow will be a day of great crisis.

*von Vietinghoff:* We are certain of this; all day we have been racking our brains about how to help, but we have nothing left..<sup>55</sup>

There were indeed no reserves ready to throw in before the German formations in the line were bled beyond recovery-although three divisions were on the way. At the end of August the Fourteenth Army had been ordered to send the 20th Air Force Field Division (Major-General Erich Fronhofer) to the Adriatic as an army group reserve,<sup>56</sup> and on 6 September Kesselring had telephoned General Lemelsen to transfer the 356th Infantry Division to the Tenth Army.<sup>57</sup> On the same day von Vietinghoff was cheered by word that the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division, which since early August had been serving with the Ligurian Army on the Franco-Italian border, was being shifted to the Po Valley, west of Ferrara, a change of location which brought it within 100 miles of the Rimini battle front.<sup>58</sup> But on the 13th all three divisions were still concentrating, and could not yet be committed. At least one of them had been considerably delayed as a result of interdiction by Allied bombers. On 10 September the Tenth Army's war diary noted that "as the stretch of railway line from Rimini to Bologna is being bombarded

steadily and systematically by the enemy air force, entrainment of 356 Inf Div formations cannot take place on the section Imola-Forlimpopoli,\* and the Division is entirely dependent on marching."<sup>59</sup> Yet even with these new forces available there was no certainty as to which part of the front would take the next blow, and the situation was now further complicated by the launching of the Fifth Army's attack in the centre.<sup>60</sup>

In these desperate straits the enemy gained the breathing space he needed by the Allied inability to exploit the successes of the 13th. The 1st British Armoured Division was prevented from advancing farther that day by the discovery that the Fornaci stream, which had seemed to trickle innocently between them and the Marano, had been swollen by the rain into an obstacle for tanks. Farther north the relief of the Canadian Armoured Division, which was to have taken place on the 13th, was delayed until next morning by heavy shelling of the 4th Division's leading brigade as it came forward to attack through the Canadian positions.<sup>61</sup> On the 14th Kesselring passed his crisis.

Beyond and below the Allies' newly won outposts on Coriano Ridge the Marano River was still a mile away to the north and north-west; a mile farther on the defensible hump of San Lorenzo in Correggiano blocked the way to Rimini; two more miles and the last isolated spur of the foothills darkened the skyline at San Fortunato and Le Grazie. The sudden capture of Coriano merely confronted the Canadians with these further obstructions; just as every other gain by the Eighth Army on the Adriatic coast had been succeeded by new obstacles during the long, wasting progress northward from the Biferno. "It was a hard fight", said General Leese of the winning of Coriano, "and a decisive action in the battle."<sup>62</sup> But it was only the beginning. The capture of Coriano Ridge introduced a week of fighting in which the Eighth Army was to suffer an average of 145 killed and 600 wounded every day, and from which it would not completely recover for many months.<sup>63</sup>

### First Crossings Over the Marano, 14 September

During the night of 13-14 September British sappers bridged the Fornaci, and early next morning the 4th Division began pushing forward across the narrow ravine.<sup>64</sup> Between them and the sea the Canadian right wing had come to life again. After a week of patrolling and small-scale action by raiding parties from both sides, the 1st Division launched its drive to seize a bridgehead across the Marano with two fresh brigades. The 3rd Canadian

\* See p. 697.

Brigade had relieved the 1st astride the Melo on 7 September, and had then quietly sidestepped westward as the 3rd Greek Mountain Brigade, assigned by General Leese to the Canadian Corps to gain battle experience,<sup>65</sup> secretly took over a 200-yard sector south of San Lorenzo in Strada (which was still in German hands). By a common irony of war the Greeks were committed, not in the mountains according to their training, but in the coastal flats, where their role was not expected to involve much heavy fighting. On their right were The Royal Canadian Dragoons, charged with clearing the narrow but closely built-up strip between Highway No. 16 and the sea.<sup>66</sup>

In the early hours of the 14th the Greeks broke gallantly forward towards the Marano. Their task was to secure the right flank of the Canadian attack by capturing a number of enemy-held farmhouses along the river road running south-west from San Lorenzo in Strada. Although their own right was under continuous fire from German paratroopers in San Lorenzo (which was not taken until the morning of the 15th), they cleared a number of these strongpoints--the most troublesome being the Case Monaldini and Casa Monticelli in the centre of their front--at a cost of more than 100 casualties.<sup>67</sup> For this and subsequent operations the brigade was strengthened by New Zealand forces--a tank squadron from the 20th Armoured Regiment and a company of the 22nd (Motor) Battalion, which had been brought up to Riccione on 13 September as a reserve.<sup>68</sup> Also under the Greek Commander, Colonel Thrassivoulos Tsakalotos, were six troops of anti-tank guns, drawn from the three batteries of the 1st Anti-Tank Regiment R.C.A., as well as the reorganized Saskatoon Light Infantry's mortar company and one of its three machine-gun companies. These Canadian sub-units had joined the Greek forces when the 3rd Canadian Brigade was relieved, and they remained in action with them until after the fall of Rimini.<sup>69</sup>

The 3rd Canadian Brigade, attacking west of the Greeks, was temporarily under the command of Lt.-Col. M. P. Bogert, who had taken over on 5 September when Brigadier Bernatchez was hurt in a flying accident.<sup>70</sup> On the left The West Nova Scotia Regiment had a harsh and noisy morning under fire from every weapon that the Germans could bring to bear, as well as from some Allied guns, so confused and ill-reported was their situation.<sup>71</sup> Though they became involved in house-clearing with bayonet and grenade in the Ghetto del Molino, a hamlet on the river road about a mile southwest of San Lorenzo in Strada, the right bank of the Marano was theirs by noon, except for some persistent enemy pockets and two troublesome self-propelled guns. Then came their master-stroke. One of their companies, approaching the bridge that carried the road from Coriano, saw that it had not been blown. A platoon officer, Lieutenant G. M. Hebb (later killed in action), with great courage dashed across and tore the wires from the charges--and the road to the north lay open.<sup>72</sup> The right battalion, the

Royal 22e, after a costly morning full of casualties made themselves firm beyond the river, together with the 12th Royal Tanks supporting them.<sup>73</sup> The Division was now on the start line for the third phase of the battle, that must lead across the bare, harvested fields to the ominous ridge of San Lorenzo in Correggiano, the next objective of the 3rd Brigade.

The tenacity of the attacking troops and the determination of their commanders had saved the approach to the river from coming to an ineffective halt under the fierce opposition put up by the enemy from house, trench, and tank. There was a brief thirty-minute postponement of H Hour for the next phase, and at half-past two both battalions pressed forward again, while the guns bombarded the way in front of them. The enemy replied vigorously with all his guns and mortars. The deadliest fire came from his armour and anti-tank guns, some concealed on the high ground ahead, some lurking in positions at the bends of the Marano to the east of the Canadian crossing-places. It took the leading sections of the Royal 22e two hours to cover 200 yards through the fields. The battalion's objective was the northern half of the long feature, held by troops of the 1st Parachute Division, but its approach to San Martino would take it obliquely across the front of the 29th Panzer Grenadiers in San Lorenzo.<sup>74</sup> Three times the "Van Doos" assaulted, but each time they were driven back with heavy casualties until at last the sun went down and twilight hid them from view. They had still gone only half way to the ridge, but further advance was impossible until the battalion on the left had secured San Lorenzo. On orders from the acting Brigade Commander the Royal 22e dug in about a mile north-west of the river.<sup>75</sup> The battalion's blackest day of the war had cost it 32 killed and 61 wounded.

The West Novas' effort had been equally fruitless. One of their companies was reported to have reached San Lorenzo through the dreadful turmoil of the afternoon's struggle, but one by one the accompanying British tanks had been destroyed and the infantry had been beaten back. At seven that evening two companies had attacked again without armoured support. They failed to reach the top. Last light found the battalion consolidated about half a mile short of San Lorenzo. The brigade would evidently have to make a more deliberate effort against San Lorenzo, which as a breakwater to San Fortunato was holding back the tide of the Canadian attack. That the enemy might be given no time to recover a new attempt was ordered for 3:30 in the morning.<sup>76</sup>

The situation was similarly unresolved but a little more promising in General Burns' left sector, where the 12th Brigade of the 4th Division had secured the north-eastern tip of the Ripabianca ridge, and in a scattered action on the farther side had driven down to the Marano and seized a bridgehead at Ospedaletto. That was as far as General Ward's troops could

go that night. With the hill village of San Patrignano looming 300 feet above them in the darkness the sappers pushed a bridge over to be ready for the 28th Brigade to cross at first light on the 15th.<sup>77</sup> The enemy had now lost the entire Ripabianca ridge, for the 5th Corps had closed up in strength on the Canadian left. The 1st Armoured Division held positions on the ridge due west of Coriano, and on their left the 56th Infantry Division overlooked the Marano from the vicinity of Sensoli. Farther south Monte Colombo had fallen to the 46th Division, which was now menacing Montescudo.<sup>78</sup>

General von Vietinghoff, quick to appreciate that the battle was about to be joined on the next range of hills behind the Marano, took prompt action. He relieved the battered 98th Division in the Montescudo sector with the 356th, which had at last arrived, and ordered the 20th Air Force Field Division forward to the Rimini area. He pulled out the remnants of the 71st Division and packed his front with infantry at the point of greatest pressure by closing in on the centre from both flanks.<sup>79</sup> He relied on this concentration, backed by his artillery, the rough terrain and the onset of an autumn climate which impeded manoeuvre, to hold the Allied attack.

### The 3rd Brigade Takes San Lorenzo in Correggiano, 15 September

Busy with this regrouping, the enemy could not keep either of General Leese's corps from making some headway on the 15th. The 5th Corps finished its scouring south of the Conca, as the 4th Indian Division finally cleared the Gemmano ridge. North of the river the 46th Division took Montescudo, but was stopped on the crest west of the village. On General Keightley's right flank both the 56th Division and the 1st Armoured Division were across the Marano, and holding off German counter-attacks.<sup>80</sup> In the sector of the Canadian Corps the 1st Division and the 4th British renewed their thrust forward from the river.

The pre-dawn attack by the West Novas against San Lorenzo in Correggiano failed—the seriously depleted squadron of the 12th Royal Tanks being in no condition to provide effective aid. Another squadron was ordered forward, and at half-past eight infantry and tanks went in together.<sup>81</sup> Over the bare fields salvos of mortar bombs cracked and spouted. A Tiger tank engaged, was hit and set on fire. The enemy opened up with his machine-guns and called down his artillery, taking further heavy toll. One of the attacking companies lost all its officers. Control was disrupted when the enemy shelled for more than an hour the house occupied by Battalion Headquarters. The action grew confused, but the West Novas, drawing

strong support from the skilfully led British armour, fought their way forward slowly and stubbornly, until by early afternoon they gained a foothold among the outlying shell-battered buildings of San Lorenzo. By four o'clock they had taken the main part of the village—a score of houses clustered on the crest, with the church, as usual, on the highest ground of all. Every available man and weapon were ordered forward to help consolidate, and by half-past six all was secure.<sup>82</sup>

The 3rd Brigade had done equally well in mounting the feature farther north towards San Martino in Monte l'Abate. Aided by the progress of the attack on their left, the Royal 22e, reinforced by a squadron of the 48th Royal Tanks, pushed off at half-past two in the afternoon. Their first objective was the Palazzo des Vergers, which lay about 500 yards north of San Lorenzo, just east of the road along the ridge. This balustraded mansion of 700 rooms, with its deep cellarage providing ample protection for headquarters staffs, and its flat roof giving long perspectives over the surrounding country, was an attractive possession for either side. Almost at once five of the British tanks were knocked out—two of them hit from the Rimini airfield over on the right. Then the squadron commander's tank fell victim, and he himself was killed. Nevertheless, in the face of vicious fire from enemy small arms and tanks the infantry, covered effectively by their own artillery, dashed across the open ground to the ridge, made their way relentlessly up into the grounds of the Palazzo, and with the help of the tanks which were still running, took the place by storm. With this prize in hand the force wheeled to the right and set off northward astride the road leading to the dozen scattered houses which made up San Martino. The manoeuvre stirred up a hornet's nest of machine-guns on the reverse slopes of the ridge, and when the tanks went down to silence them they became exposed to the full view of the enemy over towards San Fortunato and lost another of their number.<sup>83</sup> One Royal 22e company and its tanks reached the church on the northernmost knoll and drove the enemy out of the nearby houses. The main ridge now appeared to be secure, although the enemy still held a group of houses on the west side of the hamlet, and there might be harm lurking on the Belvedere spur—a 150-foot rise crowned by farm buildings, half a mile to the south-west of San Martin—or anywhere in the flats beyond, where 3rd Brigade patrols were already feeling forward towards the Ausa.<sup>84</sup>

But actually the situation at San Martino was more precarious than was realized, for although the two forward battalions now had their supporting weapons with them, there were still enemy prowling about on the ridge itself and among the fields eastward towards the sea, where the 48th Highlanders and the R.C.R., ordered forward on the morning of the 15th, were unable to get past the airfield.<sup>85</sup> Then things began to go wrong. The Canadian



positions at San Lorenzo and at the Palazzo were firm enough, but the exposed knoll of San Martin was allowed to, slip back into enemy hands. During the night of 15-16 September General Vokes moved his reserve brigade up to the San Lorenzo ridge in preparation for the assault on San Fortunato. Unfortunately, presumably through faulty liaison in a confused situation, the Royal 22e company at San Martino was withdrawn\* before the relieving Seaforth Highlanders had taken over.<sup>88</sup> Quick to seize the opportunity, some of Heidrich's paratroopers, creeping in from firetrench and dug-out on the reverse slopes, and covered very accurately by their guns on San Fortunato, repossessed the village and prepared to exploit its obvious tactical advantage to the full. When the leading platoon of the Seaforth went up on the morning of the 16th to occupy San Martino, members of the 1st Parachute Regiment declared themselves as garrison with bursts of fire which quickly sent the Canadians to ground.<sup>89</sup> Misjudgement and fatigue on our side and the initiative of some fifty determined men on the German had changed the tactical face of things, and this easy focal victory for the enemy was to affect the course of the main battle for the next three days. The Canadian Corps' right and centre had been halted nearly two miles away from their main objectives; the 2nd Brigade was still 900 yards short of the start line along the embankment of the Rimini-San Marino railway. So long as the enemy remained in full surveillance of the battlefield from San Fortunato, General Bums' left would also be held up.

On that flank the 4th British Division, attacking from its bridgehead at Ospedaletto, had troubles of its own. The lie of the land across the Marano was similar to that at Coriano and the region to the south, reproducing the rolling hills and open valleys devoid of cover and the higher elevations to the north and west where the German observers took range for their guns. Higher still, clinging none too effectively to its neutrality, stood the Republic of San Marino, its triple peak of Mount Titano rising more than 2400 feet above sea-level. It would have been surprising if the Germans had refrained from using such heights to watch the course of the battle and direct the fire of their artillery. (A 76th Panzer Corps map of 16 September shows the enemy's "Rimini Line" cutting obliquely across the miniature state, and subsequent situation traces reveal the 278th Infantry Division holding positions inside the Republic's boundaries.)<sup>90</sup> Nearer to hand, San Fortunato and the spur carrying Cerasolo, right and left of the front on which the

\* The C.O. of the Royal 22e later declared that "the unit [Seaforth] did not take over our Company localities but took positions as given to them by their C.O." Fearing to be caught by daylight, on orders from his own brigade headquarters, he withdrew his company.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand a 2nd Brigade account states that "during the take over ... the actual group of buildings of S. Martino ... were not occupied by R. 22e R., who were holding the high ground this side."<sup>87</sup>

4th Division was to attack, threatened to make the upper Ausa an expensive crossing.

Early on the 15th the 28th Brigade pushed north-westward through the Ospedaletto bridgehead, captured Patrignano, and gained the road along the crest half way to the river. But they were now overlooked from Cerasolo, which, lying within the 5th Corps boundary, was still an untaken objective of the 1st Armoured Division. The 4th Division's forward battalions were heavily shelled and mortared for the rest of the day and got no farther.<sup>91</sup> Next morning the 28th Brigade's Commander, Brigadier P. G. C. Preston, brought in his reserve battalion to clear his forward slopes; but although early objectives were taken, a strong counter blow drove back the attackers, wiping out one of their platoons and releasing its prisoners.<sup>92</sup> It was clear that until the Germans had been driven out of Cerasolo there was little hope of reaching the Ausa. Accordingly Burns arranged with Keightley to extend the Canadian Corps' operations westward in order that the 4th Division might attack the troublesome feature.<sup>93</sup>

The 16th was no better a day for the right wing or centre. The Greeks were making slow and heavy progress by the sea. They reported many paratroopers and Turcomans killed and a smaller number captured; but in the struggle across the fire-swept open flats surrounding the thickly mined Rimini airfield their battalions (which were organized at only three-company strength) suffered losses difficult to replace.<sup>94</sup> On their left the leading troops of the 1st Canadian Brigade, who were in full view from San Martino, were being subjected to exceptionally heavy shelling and mortaring. The Royal Canadian Regiment had edged forward to the north-west corner of the airfield. The 48th Highlanders, greatly determined but badly cut up, reached a road junction half a mile south-east of the dominating knoll. But for hours the situation was very difficult. Incessant enemy sniping and accurately placed mortar bombs kept all heads down, and the supporting squadron of the 48th Royal Tanks was badly smashed, up by fire from anti-tank guns and *Faustpatronen*.<sup>95</sup>

The day's fighting produced a noteworthy example of the good work done by junior infantry leaders throughout the Italian campaign. Corporal N. J. McMahon, of the R.C.R., was in command of the foremost section in the leading platoon of the company attacking towards the Rimini airfield. When machine-gun fire from a nearby house held up the advance, on his own initiative' he led his men across fire-swept ground to assault the enemy post. In a hand-to-hand fight they killed twelve of the defenders, estimated at a platoon in strength, captured two and put the remainder to flight. Then McMahon, who had personally accounted for five or six Germans, pushed on with his section to seize the company objective. His bravery and initiative brought him the D.C.M.<sup>96</sup>

## The Reverse at San Martino in Monte l'Abate, 16-18 September

Continued enemy control of San Martino had prevented Brigadier Gibson's units from completing the relief of the 3rd Brigade. A renewed attack by the Seaforth about mid-afternoon of the 16th had not availed to throw the Germans off the northern end of the ridge; although that evening the Royal 22e and 48th Royal Tanks did succeed in capturing the spur which projected to the south-west-the Belvedere-after a sharp fight against the 15th Panzer Grenadiers which miraculously cost the Canadians no casualties. The victors spent a wakeful night on the alert against attempted counter-attack, and had to fight to hold the position all through the next day. It was not until 8:00 p.m. on the 17th that they could let their tanks go to harbour.<sup>97</sup>

Elsewhere on the Canadian front the 17th brought little improvement in the tactical situation. The divisional reconnaissance regiment. The Royal Canadian Dragoons, scrambling mostly on foot over the rubble of seaside villas, reached the Fossa Rodella, a narrow ditch a few yards north of the Rimini airfield. The day's excursion up the strip of coast from the Marano had yielded six German machine-gun posts and three 75s, one of them intact.<sup>98</sup> The Greeks, slowly but systematically advancing on either side of the airfield, reached the north-eastern corner, where a dug-in Panther turret which had taken a heavy toll of British armour was destroyed in a daring attack by a single New Zealand tank manoeuvring into range under a smokescreen.<sup>99</sup> But persistent efforts by Brigadier Calder's two battalions in an afternoon attack co-ordinated with another by the Seaforth on their left came to nothing. At the end of their second day of fighting the R.C.R. had lost 74 officers and men, and the 48th Highlanders 86. With their numbers thus seriously reduced, each battalion was compelled to combine the survivors of two companies into one, and continue operations with only three rifle companies.<sup>100</sup>

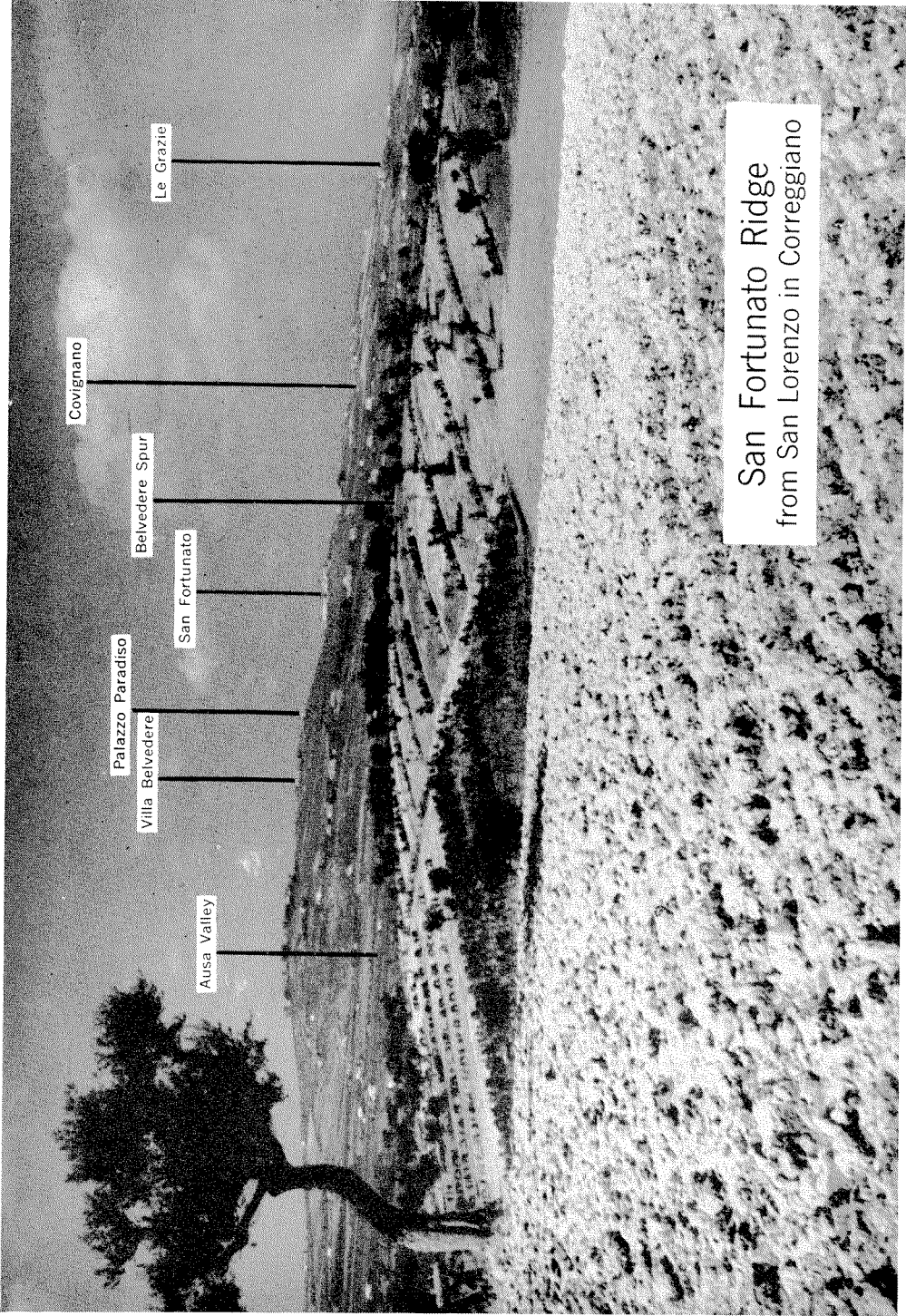
The unsuccessful Seaforth attempt to take San Martino was a costly affair, particularly to the supporting 48th Royal Tank squadron, which from two troops of Shermans and two of Churchills engaged lost six tanks.<sup>101</sup> Aided by an extensive fire plan in which all available gun participated, the attacking "A" and "C" Companies worked their way northward from the Palazzo des Vergers under cover of a thick smoke-screen; but though some infantry sections managed to come within fifty yards of the houses on the knoll, they were beaten back. German artillery on San Fortunato had

\* The artillery of the 1st and 5th Canadian Divisions, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st Army Group R.C.A.<sup>102</sup>



#### ARRIVAL OF C.W.A.C. IN ITALY

Members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps disembark at Naples, 22 June 1944. Some of these girls were employed at First Echelon, in Rome; others joined the Army Show.



San Fortunato Ridge  
from San Lorenzo in Correggiano

every yard of ground about San Martino carefully registered, and the paratroopers there had adopted the effective measure of retiring into dug-outs on the approach of an attacking force, and calling down defensive fire upon the village from their own guns.<sup>103</sup> Yet the need to secure the whole of the ridge was most urgent. Shortly before midnight, after a conference between Brigadier Gibson and Lt. Col. Thomson, the Seaforth C.O., "B" and "D" companies launched the second Seaforth attack of the day. They encountered the same murderous fire, withdrew, re-formed, moved in again, and again had to withdraw.<sup>104</sup> Throughout the night stretcher parties were busy combing the battlefield by the light of burning buildings and haystacks. The Seaforth losses for 17 September were 29 killed, 44 wounded and 17 taken prisoner—a single day's toll exceeded only by the unit's casualties on 23 May in the Hitler Line. So San Martino remained the hard core of the enemy's resistance south of Rimini. With one of his assault brigades for the attack on San Fortunato thus entangled on this intermediate objective, General Vokes was unable to begin his advance across the Ausa until the 18th, and then faced the certainty that his troops would have to fight for their start line.

The fighting in the hills on the Corps' left flank delayed the 4th Division's approach to the Ausa until midnight on 17-18 September. The 28th Brigade's attack on Cerasolo at first light on the 17th succeeded, but the north-eastern extension of the ridge along the Frisoni spur had to be left for a final assault that night. During the day troops of the divisional reconnaissance regiment worked around it to the right and made contact with the 3rd Canadian Brigade reaching across from south of San Lorenzo. General Ward's misgivings about being in position in time for the ensuing phase of the Corps' battle were dispelled, however, when the 6th Black Watch, temporarily under Brigadier Preston's command from the 12th Brigade, cleared the Frisoni spur half an hour before midnight.<sup>105</sup>

General Burns had emphasized to Ward the need for the offensive to be carried across the Ausa not later than the 18th and for the timing of the two divisions to coincide if possible.<sup>106</sup> As things turned out, however, it was the right wing rather than the left that dragged. When the divisional commanders compared their plans with the Corps Commander on the afternoon of the 17th, Ward proposed to try to get two battalions over the river during the night. General Vokes thought it would be better to clear the ground between his outposts and the Ausa in daylight since the area was still thick with the enemy. It was agreed that each would follow his own plans. After further conference with General Keightley, whose attack on the left would reinforce the effect of the Canadian Corps' operations, Burns explained his proposals to the Army Commander. Sir Oliver approved.<sup>107</sup>

## The Fighting at the River Ausa, 17-19 September

The obstacle confronting the Corps beyond the Ausa, and which the enemy had selected to be the anchor of his "Rimini Line", was much greater physically than either the Coriano or San Lorenzo ridges. A bold promontory reaching into the plain from the foothills north of the San Marino Republic, the San Fortunato mass rose sharply to a maximum height of 470 feet above the surrounding country. From the hamlet of Le Grazie, perched on the coastal end less than a mile from the outskirts of Rimini, the ridge extended south-westward for two miles in a rough crescent which had its back to the Ausa. The small San Fortunato village which gave its name to the whole feature\* consisted of a group of houses clustered about a church on the eastern slope near the central and highest part of the crest. A winding road, in places worn down between 20-foot banks of earth and shale, wandered the length of the ridge, and from a handful of houses marked Covignano on the map, midway between San Fortunato and Le Grazie, a similar sunken track branched westward to San Lorenzo in Monte--another tiny hamlet standing on a projection pointing towards the Marecchia. A mile south-west of San Fortunato the ground dropped to a low saddle, from the far side of which the foothills village of Sant' Aquilina looked across the Ausa valley to the Frisoni ridge. Sant' Aquilina was itself dominated by the two prongs of the Ceriano spur--Mount Fagiolo to the north-west and Monte dell' Arboreta to the south-west. The interdivisional boundary for the Corps attack made the 4th Division responsible for the saddle and the adjoining ends of both the higher features. The Canadian objectives were laid along the main San Fortunato ridge.

The air and artillery attack had already begun. A very heavy bombardment before daylight on the 17th harassed the Germans on the San Fortunato ridge for four hours and immediately afterwards two Canadian and three New Zealand field regiments began supporting the 4th British Division's assault on the left. The fire was continued and intensified until 5:00 a.m. on the 18th, when the guns opened up in support of the 1st Division's attack to the Ausa. Smoke-screens were laid to cover the approach of the leading battalions to their start line and smoke shells lobbed on the ridge guided the bombers to their targets.<sup>109</sup> General Vokes' Commander Royal Artillery, Brigadier W. S. Ziegler, had under his control for the main cannonade the guns of four divisions (the 1st and 5th Canadian, the 4th British and the 2nd New Zealand), together with those of the 1st Army Group R.C.A. Their principal targets were known strongpoints along the ridge and particularly the German batteries sited on the farther slopes and in the flats beyond.<sup>110</sup>

\* While the Allies applied the appellation San Fortunato to the whole ridge, locally the entire feature is known as Covignano.<sup>108</sup>

The supporting fire plans were many and varied, and provided for flexibility of control. In general, they consisted of concentrations and linear targets, \_generally in depth, on known enemy positions. These were so arranged in belts that portions could be stopped, paused, brought back, or refired-all at the call of the forward infantry. The fact that only those targets called for were fired on generally made it possible to make available a maximum weight of fire to meet each request.<sup>111</sup>

The gun battle would be fought out by opponents well matched, mass for mass, for when reinforcing the 76th Panzer Corps the enemy had considerably strengthened General Herr's artillery. The latest addition had been seventeen 88s of the 590th Heavy G.H.Q. Anti-Tank Battalion which Heidrich committed on the 17th.<sup>112</sup> There seemed no immediate shortage of ammunition,\* as the Eighth Army's attacking forces already had bitter cause to realize. But the Allied onslaught from the air would go almost unanswered, as mediums of the Tactical Air Force from the Foggia airfields and from bases in Corsica prepared to launch a demoralizing blow against the Tenth Army's left flank.<sup>114</sup> On the 16th the Tactical and Desert Air Forces flew 330 missions in support of the Canadian Corps.<sup>115</sup> On the following day U.S. Mitchells attacked troop concentrations in the Rimini area,<sup>116</sup> and the enemy's Intelligence reported that the defenders found themselves hampered by smoke pots, dropped by aircraft of the Desert Air Force to mark the bomblines in front of the Allied forward troops.<sup>117</sup> On the 18th the number of sorties flown against the San Fortunato feature rose to 486, as 24 light bombers, 228 medium bombers and 234 fighter-bombers were unleashed against the enemy's strongpoints and gun positions, the fighter-bombers alone carrying 128 tons of bombs to their targets.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, the D.A.F.'s effort during this final week of the fighting for Rimini ended a month of close-support operations conducted on a larger scale than ever before in the Italian theatre. Between 24 August and 22 September a total of 11,510 sorties of all types were flown, 8234 of these by fighter-bombers,† the remainder by light and medium bombers. The close degree of co-operation between aircraft and the troops on the ground is revealed in the fact that during this four-week period cab rank was filled 317 times, and from it 1103 fighter-bombers flew against 184 targets requested by "Rover David", the mobile control post on the battlefield.<sup>120</sup>

Enemy testimony to the damaging blows already struck by Allied air power during the battle is not lacking. "We have tried to carry out a tank attack," General Wentzell told Rottiger on 13 September when describing

\* During their telephone conversations of 14 September von Vietinghoff told Kesselring with satisfaction: "Yesterday 76 Panzer Corps fired 11,000 [artillery] rounds".<sup>113</sup>

† These included attacks by the *City of Windsor* Squadron, which had assumed a fighter-bomber role at the end of June, when its Spitfires were fitted with racks to carry a 500-lb. bomb.<sup>119</sup>



events at Coriano, "but owing to air attacks it is impracticable. 29 Pz Gren Div alone lost 19 tanks which were moving up to the front."<sup>121</sup> The Tenth Army's Chief of Staff went on to complain that his artillery was suffering from the Allied air superiority-"and when the artillery is silenced fighting becomes a murderous mess."<sup>122</sup> In elaborating his difficulties to the Army Group Commander, von Vietinghoff cited the vulnerability of German troop concentrations preparing to counter-attack. "If the reserves are kept near the front they are decimated by the preparatory fire; if held further back they are dispersed by attacks from the air."<sup>123</sup>

The renewal of the battle on the night of 17-18 September brought a strange portent to the enemy as the 4th Division attacked towards the Ausa. German sentinels that night saw the omen of a battlefield illuminated by moonlight, but without a moon. The technique of employing anti-aircraft searchlights for such a purpose had been used in Italy in 1918 (when Lord Alexander, then a brigadier-general, had been on the staff of the Earl of Cavan, the commander of the British forces). During the summer of 1944 details were worked out in rear training areas, and after being successfully used by British and Canadian formations in Normandy in mid-July<sup>124</sup> the device was introduced into operations in Italy by the 5th Corps during its attack on the Gothic Line.<sup>125</sup> At that time Brigadier Ziegler had advanced the idea for adoption by the 1st Canadian Division. If searchlights could be deployed on high ground and on the flanks to provide cross-illumination on the principal enemy features while the infantry assaulted across the dark, low ground between, the C.R.A. had argued, they would both create surprise and help the attacking troops to their objectives.<sup>126</sup> Now the Canadian Corps was trying the lights for the first time, to assist the 4th Division's attack on the flank. The artifice worked satisfactorily, and during the remainder of its fighting in Italy the Canadian Corps continued to use searchlights provided and operated by the 323rd and 422nd Searchlight Batteries R.A.<sup>127</sup>

To the Germans the innovation was demoralizing. The admission is to be read in the Tenth Army's war diary for the 19th. "At night, since 18 September, the enemy has been illuminating our part of the battle area with searchlights installed out of range of our artillery, whereby transfer and relief movements, as well as supply operations, which on the field of battle can hardly be carried out except at night, are seriously handicapped. The psychological effect produced on the troops by the battle of materiel itself is heightened by the feeling of helplessness against this new technical weapon."<sup>128</sup>

Thus floodlit and stabbed by the flashes of many guns, the night of the 17th-18th saw the eastern wings of the Eighth and Tenth Armies locked in a battle of savage fury. At midnight on the Canadian Corps' left the

4th Division hit across the Ausa and its annoying little tributary, the Budriolo, which emerged from a re-entrant east of Monte dell' Arboreta to curve around Sant' Aquilina on three sides. Although nearly dry, the stream had banks steep enough to make it an obstacle for tanks. The two assaulting brigades aimed for the hills on either side of this deep gully. On the left the 12th, commanded by Brigadier A. G. W. Heber-Percy, crossed the Ausa with tanks of the North Irish Horse and captured Sant' Antimo, a hamlet between Monte dell' Arboreta and the Budriolo, taking 50 prisoners and establishing a bridgehead half a mile deep. On the right the 10th (Brigadier S. N. Shoosmith), directed against Sant' Aquilina, attacked under artificial moonlight originating from searchlights mounted on Coriano Ridge. The assaulting battalion had trouble at the Budriolo, and although its two leading companies captured a bridge intact, they could not make the passage until eight in the morning. As they moved up the right side of the valley they were heavily bombarded with mortar and artillery. Ordered to consolidate, they dug in with two tanks at the Casa Brioli, about half a mile from Sant' Aquilina, having reached the left end of the brigade objective. By midmorning on the 18th General Ward thus had his forward troops still some 1000 yards short of the road running along crest and saddle towards San Fortunato, and in an exposed and lonely position, for neither the 1st Canadian Division on their right nor the 1st British Armoured on their left had yet crossed the Ausa.<sup>129</sup>

After seeing the Corps Commander on the afternoon of the 17th General Yokes issued new instructions to the 1st Division. The 1st Brigade was to continue to press with its two battalions across the open flats east of San Martin, in order to convey the impression that the main attack towards Rimini would come in that way. The real assault would be made with the other two brigades-the 2nd on the right and the 3rd on the left. The immediate objectives for both were the railway embankment and crossings over the Ausa; allocation of the final objectives on the ridge placed the village of San Fortunato and northward in the 2nd Brigade's sector. From a start line running between the Belvedere and San Martino Brigadier Gibson was to assault with Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and The Loyal Edmonton Regiment. The Edmontons were replacing the Seaforth Highlanders, who, as we have seen, were badly involved in the struggle for the northern end of the ridge. The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment was to come under Gibson's command for exploitation beyond San Fortunato.<sup>130</sup> On the left the 3rd Brigade would lead off with the Carleton and Yorks from a line running 600 yards westward from San Lorenzo in Correggiano; the West Novas and the Royal 22e would then pass through at the River Ausa.<sup>131</sup>

The divisional attack started badly. At 4:00 a.m. on the 18th, only an hour or two after the Seaforth's latest desperate attempt to take San Martino, the Loyal Edmontons moved forward to the assault, in full realization that to secure their start line for the main attack they must storm the paratroopers' stronghold, which for three days had withstood every Canadian onslaught. "A" and "C" Companies, with tanks of the 145th Regiment Royal Armoured Corps, passed through the hard-hit Seaforth and attacked northward along the bare eastern slope of the ridge. By 5:50 they had reached the first battered houses on the San Martino knoll. For the next two hours tanks and men experienced the same inferno of automatic fire and high explosive which had assailed the Seaforth. They were finally forced to withdraw. The Edmontons had suffered casualties of 21 killed and 37 wounded; of the two troops of supporting armour only one tank was still battleworthy.<sup>132</sup> Gibson now ordered Lt.-Col. Bell-Irving to pass his reserve companies and tanks to the west of San Martino through the gap made by the Patricias. While "A" and "C" Companies, reduced to a reported combined strength of 40, dug in 500 yards below the shattered village,, "B" and "D" struck around over the Belvedere spur to follow up the apparent success on the left flank.<sup>133</sup>

Here the divisional commander's intention had been to get the leading battalions of his 2nd and 3rd Brigades across the railway by 7:00 a.m. The first two companies of the Patricias, with tanks from another squadron of the 145th Regiment, had struck off from the area of the Palazzo des Vergers towards a point on the embankment about 1000 yards north-west of the empty shell of San Martino church. But as soon as they began to pick their way through the fields and vineyards on the flats they came under heavy shelling and mortaring. At ten o'clock, having outdistanced their tanks (which had been considerably hampered by the close country and had been reduced to half their strength) and being without anti-tank guns, the Patricias dug in 200 yards short of the railway and more than three hours behind schedule. The total known strength of the two companies was now only 60.<sup>134</sup>

The prospects for the 3rd Brigade were almost as blighted. The Carleton and Yorks, now under the command of Major J. P. Ensor (Lt.-Col. Danby had been wounded on 14 September), took the lead with a squadron of the 12th Royal Tanks on an axis well to the west of San Lorenzo, and by eight o'clock had reached the embankment at several places 1000 to 1500 yards south-west of where the Patricias should by then have been. Here they were hotly received with fire from all arms, and a gun somewhere on the left knocked out one of the tanks. At 10:10 a.m. the battalion reported, "Leading sub-units at 'Helldiver' [the AUSA]", and signalled ten minutes later that the river was a "definite tank obstacle and being held in strength."<sup>135</sup> By now machine-gun fire from hidden positions along the bank had begun to hit the infantry. Anti-tank fire cut into the armour; four tanks had broken

down. To add to the grim picture the forward troops were being strafed by their own aircraft.<sup>136</sup> When the smoke drifted away, enemy-watchers on San Fortunato and San Martino had no difficulty in picking their targets in the open fields in front of the AUSA, and a storm of artillery and mortar shells began bursting with deadly accuracy on the exposed attackers. At 11:10 word reached Brigade Headquarters of six enemy tanks on the far side of the stream pinning down the Carleton and Yorks. The C.O. estimated that to advance farther would result in 75 per cent casualties.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless, so vital was the need for developing tank routes across the AUSA that in the early afternoon Lt.-Col. Bogert asked whether the battalion could attack again to secure the river. Ensor, assessing probable losses from the intensity of the enemy's fire, objected that a daylight attack would be suicidal alike for the infantry and for the sappers who would have to prepare the crossings. With this opinion the acting Brigade Commander agreed, and ordered the Carletons to "firm up" their positions.<sup>138</sup>

Thus the Canadian attack petered out, its right broken at San Martino, its centre in confusion along the railway, its left stuck at the river. The forward troops lay sweating and bleeding in the low ground under direct observation for the rest of the day. In scarcely better plight the 4th British Division clung to their exposed lodgement on the slopes beyond the AUSA and the Budriolo. They could do little but wait until nightfall should enable them to assault the southern end of the San Fortunato barrier from their foothold at the Casa Brioli and Sant' Antimo.<sup>139</sup>

The day was recorded by the Germans as one more of successful defence. "After the fiercest fighting and with heavy losses on both sides noted the Tenth Army war diary, "a break-through is averted. Penetrations were either intercepted by local reserves or thrown back in counter-attacks. . . ." Due credit was given to the artillery for its "decisive contribution".<sup>140</sup> Not that there had not been anxious moments. About mid-morning, before the Canadian Corps' attack had ground to a halt, Herr's Chief of Staff expressed his fears that the 76th Panzer Corps would be forced back to Rimini by evening; and before long Kesselring was to console himself with the thought of the 1st Parachute Division's proven powers in house-to-house fighting.<sup>141</sup>

### The Assault of San Fortunato Ridge, 19-20 September

Admitting the day's frustration, the Canadian Corps Commander saw his divisional commanders and adjusted his plan. It was agreed that General Vokes should order his shattered 2nd Brigade to stand fast while the 3rd, with the Hastings and Prince Edwards under command and the 48th Royal Tanks in support, would attack across the AUSA during the night, establish a

bridgehead, and make the assault upon the ridge. General Ward was to improve his positions over the rivers and be ready to attack to the lateral road, his first objective along the spine of the ridge, when the Canadians were established on its head at San Fortunato.<sup>142</sup>

That night the 4th Division struck again under artificial moonlight. A battalion of the 10th Brigade assaulted towards Sant' Aquilina, getting across the Budriolo and up the far slope before dawn. The bridging was done quickly, and the armour and self-propelled guns followed through to support a successful rush to the brow of the Sant' Aquilina-Casa Brioli spur. Before noon Brigadier Shoosmith's forces held the village, and were within half a mile of the main ridge road. The rest of the 19th was busy with clearing out snipers and collecting some 85 prisoners.<sup>143</sup> The front had begun to move again. Over in General Keightley's territory troops of the 1st British Armoured Division had captured Monte dell' Arboreta, and though they were soon to lose it again they had at least loosened up the sector to the prospective benefit of the Canadian left wing.<sup>144</sup>

In the Canadian centre the troops of the 3rd Brigade pushed across the AUSA and gained a footing on the south-eastern slopes of San Fortunato. The Carleton and Yorks began their advance at 9:30 against an alert and uneasy enemy. Machine-guns fired sporadically at them in the darkness, and they came under fairly heavy shellfire. German tanks could be heard milling about somewhere amongst the vineyards. Shortly after midnight, however, two companies were firm on the other side, and work began on the preparation of crossings for the armour. Sherman bulldozers shovelled out trackways to the river. An Ark\* bridge was put into position; a ditch running across the line of advance was filled in with a fascine.<sup>146</sup> The second phase of the brigade operation began at 4:00 a.m., as the Hastings and Prince Edwards and the West Novas climbed the railway embankment and made for the river. Their objectives were respectively Covignano and San Fortunato village.<sup>147</sup> At six both battalions were reported at the main Rimini-San Marino road (Highway No. 72), where ahead of them vineyards and grain patches began to ascend to formidable Fortunato. Two squadrons of the 48th Royal Tanks were coming up behind them. By halfpast six, the hour set for crossing the highway to scale the heights, all the forward companies were in contact with the enemy.<sup>148</sup>

The shelling increased in intensity. Barrage brought down counterbarrage. The daylight air billowed with the dust and the fumes of the artillery battle and the blasting from the skies. Yet when the bombing ceased and the barrage lifted, leading sections could see the German infantry pouring

\* The Ark was used for spanning narrow water passages with deeply cut banks. A turretless Churchill tank to which were attached fore and aft two American treadway tracks was driven into the bed of the stream. The tracks were then opened out to reach to either bank.<sup>145</sup>

out of their dug-outs, and jumping into their forward weapon-pits.<sup>149</sup> Within a minute they were sweeping the hillsides with their machine-guns, sending the Canadians to ground. From well-concealed positions near the crest enemy tanks and self-propelled guns checked the advance of the armour. The whole attack faltered. The West Novas on the left spent a costly and frustrating day, making repeated attempts to steal forward under cover of smoke laid down by the artillery. At best they covered some 300 yards, only to be beaten back. By evening they were along the highway whence they had started that morning, having lost 18 killed and 45 wounded.<sup>150</sup>

On the brigade right the two leading Hastings and Prince Edward companies had reached the highway before first light, and Lt.-Col. Cameron had ordered up his two reserve companies for the assault on the ridge.<sup>151</sup> The attack was carried to within thirty yards of the crest by some of the British tanks, which made the most of their smoke-screen for a last push to the top. Crawling in single file up the steepest of tracks, they engaged the defenders, losing a tank to a *Faustpatrone*. At 11:00 a.m. they had to withdraw, for the Hastings' companies had not yet caught up, and without their help they could hold on no longer.<sup>152</sup> At the base of the ridge the flagging infantry, broken up by heavy fire, succeeded in re-forming under cover of thick smoke. One company pushed forward with tanks to capture the four-way road junction (which bore the code name "Cookstown") between Covignano and Le Grazie, taking 60 prisoners. But from there the climb to Covignano was too fiercely beset by machine-guns for further progress. The Hastings were stopped on the lateral road which ran midway between Highway No. 72 and the top of the ridge. The British tanks with them had now almost expended themselves: three only were left, and they were low in ammunition. At three o'clock, the infantry dug in.<sup>153</sup> An hour later General Vokes conferred with his brigade commanders. Fresh infantry, fresh tanks, renewed bombardment, and, above all, darkness were needed to storm the crest.<sup>154</sup>

Though the assault remained so far indecisive, the forcing of the defile between the Frisoni ridge and the San Lorenzo feature had resulted in San Martino falling into Canadian hands with no further sacrifice. The surge across the AUSA flats put the parachutist defenders and all of Herr's troops between them and the sea in danger of being cut off. During the night of the 18th-19th a patrol of the 48th Highlanders reported San Martino to be tenantless.<sup>155</sup> Thus ended an unhappy chapter in the 1st Canadian Division's story as, without triumph, it took over mastery of that blackened knoll and prepared to bury its dead, lying among the broken tanks under the hot September sun. During the 19th the Corps' right wing swung forward on San Martino's hinge. Striking northward, the 48th Highlanders left the blood-soaked hill behind them, while the Greeks, working forward from the

airfield, followed up for a mile and a half the enemy's withdrawal on Rimini.<sup>156</sup>

That evening the German Tenth Army, recording the day's conflict as "a battle of materiel of the greatest magnitude", set itself for another Allied "attempt to break through with massed forces" on the morrow.<sup>157</sup> Herr had four regiments defending the battle-scarred ridge of San Fortunato. At the northern tip about Le Grazie, which lay in Heidrich's sector, was the 1st Battalion of the 1st Parachute Regiment. The rest of the feature was being held by the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division. Along his 2000-yard front southwestward from Covignano Major-General Polack had packed seven battalions -two from his 71st Grenadier Regiment, a fusilier battalion from the 20th Air Force Field Division, two battalions from the 314th Grenadier Regiment of the 162nd (Turcoman) Division, and two from his own 15th Grenadier Regiment.<sup>158</sup> Waiting out the Allied bombardment in the shelter of sunken roads, cellars and underground passages, this ordered confusion of soldiery stood ready to man the weapon-pits overlooking the plain, or fight from the rubble of Le Grazie and Covignano and San Fortunato.

Before sundown on the 19th General Vokes ordered the 3rd Brigade to exploit such success as the Hastings and Prince Edwards had gained, regardless of what might happen to the West Novas. The 2nd Brigade was to infiltrate by night over the southern knolls of the main feature, and having got behind the enemy, seize the outlying spurs of San Lorenzo in Monte and Le Grazie and advance over the flats beyond to establish a bridgehead across the Marecchia.<sup>159</sup>

The 3rd Brigade's position was much improved by bringing up the Royal 22e Regiment (who were at the railway) to the left of the West Novas in order to launch them at the Villa Belvedere, a large country mansion 600 yards up the road from San Fortunato. From the fields by the Ausa it was the most prominent building on the ridge and seemed to be at the top of the crest. Actually another massive villa on the far side of the road, the Palazzo Paradiso, stood on higher ground. At Lt.-Col. Allard's suggestion the attack was deferred until last light, in order that the battalion might have the cover of darkness to get a firm grip on the objective and dig in. He intended a two-pronged assault. On the left "A" Company, supported by tanks of the 145th Regiment R.A.C., would push up to the intermediate lateral some 300 yards south-west of the Villa; on the right "C" Company would by-pass all opposition and make directly for the house itself.<sup>160</sup>

The Royal 22e achieved a notable success. When for some reason the tanks did not catch up, the artillery covered the delay by continuing their concentrations for another eighteen minutes; thus aided, the companies fought as a team from one point to the next up the steep slopes through a series of short, fierce clashes. Before midnight, with a hundred enemy

captured, they were in possession of the Villa Belvedere, the basement of which became a prisoner of war cage into which Allard's companies continued to crowd surprised Germans throughout the night. Mopping up in the area was a slow and hazardous procedure because of the darkness and the continuing stubborn resistance. By three in the morning, however, medium machine-guns and anti-tank guns had arrived, and the battalion could assure itself against counter-attack.<sup>161</sup> This Lt.-Col. Allard did by proceeding "to find, pin down and finally destroy one enemy detachment after another until the whole area was completely free of enemy." The quotation is from the recommendation which brought the Royal 22e commander a well-deserved bar to his D.S.O.\* On a number of occasions during the attack on San Fortunato he had made his way forward under heavy fire to visit his leading platoons so as to keep fully informed on the progress of the battle; indeed the achievements of the "Van Doos" that day were in no small measure due to their C.O.'s fine leadership. At 9:00 a.m. the battalion reported company positions in and about the Villa Belvedere, and shortly afterwards announced a company pursuing the retreating enemy westward.<sup>162</sup>

The 2nd Brigade scored a no less spectacular triumph. Brigadier Gibson had planned that the Loyal Edmontons should penetrate between Covignano and San Fortunato to seize San Lorenzo in Monte, and that the Seaforth should follow through and then swing right to take Covignano and Le Grazie. From the Edmonton objective the Patricias were to make the final dash forward to the Marecchia. San Fortunato was to be left for the 3rd Brigade to deal with. The artillery support for the attack received special attention. Heavy fire would come down along three diverging lanes in a series of overlapping concentrations 600 yards deep and 1000 yards wide. The Edmontons, with one company up, had the lane on the left; the Seaforth attacking with two companies, those to the right. The fire plan was flexible: each block could be brought down or called off by the infantry as the movement of the battle required<sup>163</sup>—"like turning a tap on and off", as one of the Seaforth company commanders described it.<sup>164</sup>

The Edmontons, after being delayed by *Nebelwerfer* concentrations and direct tank fire on their forming up area and start line, began moving uphill from the highway at 9:00 p.m. "D" Company was to seize a road junction (code-named "Bovey") on the farther side of San Fortunato, 100.0 yards west of Covignano; "B" was to pass through and capture the battalion's main objective, San Lorenzo in Monte; and two companies in reserve would then come up behind to occupy the ground on either flank. Searchlights, beamed behind the 4th British Division to the left, helped in forming up and keeping direction. The Edmontons' good luck held. Schu-mines† encountered on the

\* Allard won the D.S.O. in directing the Royal 22e Regiment's attack across the Riccio on 30 December 1943.

† See above, p. 516n.



lower slopes were quickly taken out by the sappers. Shelling and fairly heavy machine-gun fire from the enemy seemed to be directed elsewhere, and part of the approach was made in the shelter of sunken roads. But it was too much to expect everything to go right. On reaching the top of the ridge between San Fortunato and the Villa Belvedere, platoons and companies fell out of touch with one another as wireless failed and runners missed their way in the darkness. "D" Company suffered casualties and lost some stragglers, arriving only sixteen strong at "Bovey" crossroads, where it was joined by "B" Company.<sup>165</sup>

Meanwhile Bell-Irving, out of communication with his two forward companies, ordered Captain J.A. Dougan, the commander of "C" Company, which had been following on the left, to push through to San Lorenzo. Near the crest Dougan found a sunken road striking off to the north-west, and conducted his men along it in single file. They ambushed a Tiger and its escort of infantry, and having blown the tracks off with Hawkins grenades, made the final kill with a PIAT. The company commander personally led the charge which routed the accompanying Panzer Grenadiers. A patrol sent into San Lorenzo in Monte found it empty of enemy and by 4:30 a.m. the Edmontoners were in occupation. But they were only just ahead of a party of Germans coming up to take over defence of the village. It was the story of Monteciccardo over again. "Our Bren gunners had a grand time against them, mowing them down right and left."<sup>166</sup> A counter-attack developed almost immediately, but Dougan called down artillery fire which quickly smashed the German ranks. "C" Company took 50 prisoners, besides leaving many enemy dead.<sup>167</sup> Now that the infiltration was completed supporting tanks of the 145th Regiment were called forward.\* By six o'clock they were within half a mile of the Edmontoners. This was as well, for there were Tigers in the area, and the whole feature was still alive with enemy; though these were suffering casualties from the accurate artillery fire being directed on them by the Edmonton company commander. His gallantry on San Fortunato Ridge brought Dougan a well-merited bar to the M.C. which he had won earlier in another assault on an enemy-held height-Hill 736 in Sicily (above, p. 162).<sup>169</sup>

There was much close fighting yet to be done. The 2nd Brigade plan was working out well, however, with the defenders thoroughly disorganized by the presence of Canadian troops behind and among them. At 3:20 a.m., shortly after the Edmontoners had taken the "Bovey" crossroads, Gibson had ordered the Seaforth forward. Passing to the left of San Fortunato "B" and

\* At first the tanks could not negotiate the sunken road, which was still covered by German tanks. In the darkness Major J. R. Stone, the Edmonton's Second-in-Command, who had been coolly dispatching and controlling battalion vehicles while under heavy fire, on his own initiative towed a six-pounder anti-tank gun with an unarmoured 15-cwt. truck over the ridge and up to Captain Dougan's position. For this Stone, who had won the M.C. for gallant leadership of his company at Ortona, was awarded the D.S.O.<sup>168</sup>

"D" Companies crossed the Covignano-"Bovey" road, and by six o'clock were fighting in the area of Le Grazie.<sup>170</sup> "C" Company was sent along the eastern slope of the ridge to secure the "Cookstown" crossroads, 500 yards north-east of Covignano. At 8:54 it was reported heavily engaged, its commander, Major H. L. Glendinning, having organized his three platoons in an encircling attack upon the important junction.<sup>171</sup> Meanwhile units of the 3rd Brigade were pressing the advantage won by the Royal 22e. The West Novas cleared the Palazzo Paradiso shortly before noon, and turned right towards San Fortunato.<sup>172</sup> With their defences penetrated on three sides the badly confused enemy troops could do little more than put up local resistance, and though they fought doggedly in scattered groups throughout the morning, within the next few hours their concern was no longer to defend Fortunato but to escape across the Marecchia. The Hastings and Prince Edwards came forward to assist the Seaforth "C" Company, and by midday "Cookstown" and Covignano had been cleared. In their subsequent mopping up the Hastings captured 112 prisoners. The Seaforth were to turn in a total of 214, of which "C" Company claimed 115. For his brilliant handling of the action, and his personal bravery in rescuing a wounded signaller under heavy fire, Major Glendinning was awarded the D.S.O. One of his non-commissioned officers, Lance-Corporal D. G. Skinner, won the D.C.M. in the same action. With great skill and daring Skinner led his section in a successful assault with rifle and grenade on an enemy-held house overlooking the Seaforth line of approach, and then for three hours beat off a series of German counter-attacks, thereby enabling the rest of his company to win its objective.<sup>173</sup>

### Bridgeheads Over the Marecchia

At 1:30 p.m. (on the 20th) Brigadier Gibson ordered the P.P.C.L.I. (which Lt.-Col. R. P. Clark had taken over from Lt.-Col. D.H. Rosser on 17 September) to pass through the Edmontons at San Lorenzo and with the support of a squadron of the 48th Royal Tanks head for the final Corps objective-the Marecchia crossings.<sup>174</sup> The enemy were streaming off in the same direction, and artillery fire caught bands of their retreating troops in the gullies leading down towards the river.<sup>175</sup> The advantages of observation were at last with the Canadians, who from the San Lorenzo spur had an uninterrupted view into the Romagna plain.

The records of the enemy's telephone conversations for the 20th reveal that the Tenth Army Headquarters had been slow to appreciate the gravity of the situation. At 9:15 that morning von Vietinghoff told Kesselring that no important advances had been made. But by eleven the scene had changed. "Something unpleasant has happened", he announced. In the sector held by the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, the Canadians had succeeded in

breaking through the Turcomans, who were "said to have been battered to pieces." Polack was sealing off the locality with his last remaining forces, and small groups from the 1st Parachute Division-its final reserves-were being rushed to the spot. Herr wanted to pull his artillery back behind the Marecchia, as some of his batteries were under direct machine-gun fire. But a decision to withdraw across the river was too important for Kesselring to be willing to make before discussing it with his staff. He criticized Polack's handling of the battle in one respect. "It was wrong of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division to commit a Turcoman battalion at the front", he charged.<sup>176</sup>

After lunch the two Chiefs of Staff were in no doubt about the necessity of falling back. Wentzell declared the situation on the 76th Panzer Corps' front to be "very strained". The 29th Panzer Grenadier Division had practically nothing left: the 71st Grenadier Regiment had two hundred men, the 15th Regiment a hundred. The Turcomans had practically disintegrated and so had "the Air Force people" (the 20th Fusilier Battalion) committed there. "I think it will be necessary to withdraw behind the river", he said. "Yes, there is really nothing else to do", agreed Rottiger. "One moment, please. I will go and ask the Field Marshal.... The Field Marshal agrees."

The decision made Kesselring apprehensive. "I have the terrible feeling that the thing is beginning to slide." But to Herr, at once closer to the disaster and more far-sighted, withdrawal into the plain was an advantage, an exchange of one terrain for another equally defensible. "He feels-which remains to be seen-", said von Vietinghoff, "that the plain is no less favourable, as our positions there cannot-be seen so well as now, where they are spread out before the eyes of the enemy on the hills."<sup>177</sup> The next few weeks were, to resolve even von Vietinghoff's doubts.

Thus in the afternoon of the 20th the Germans did their best to carry out a fighting withdrawal. The remnants of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, hastily organized into small battle groups, made their way out to the north of San Lorenzo in Monte.<sup>178</sup> At the crossroads at Monticello, a small hamlet less than a mile from the river, one such group took up a stand with five or six Tigers to check the pursuit. They were engaged by heavy artillery and attacked from the air, but without apparent effect. In the late afternoon "C" Company of the Patricias, whose progress thus far had been seriously hampered by difficulties with wireless communications-ascribed to heavy static and the jamming of the air by the great number of stations in the battle area-approached Monticello and was driven back. The battalion was without anti-tank guns, which could not negotiate the steep slopes of San Fortunato.<sup>179</sup> From the brow of the San Lorenzo hill the supporting squadron of the 12th Royal Tanks precipitated a fire fight that went on until nightfall.<sup>180</sup>

Once again the enemy had demonstrated his mastery of rearguard action. The hindrance of Monticello enabled the German main body to withdraw

across the Marecchia under cover of a sudden deluge of rain that threatened to turn the broad bed of the river into, an obstacle and drown the pursuit in a sea of mud. It was not until after midnight that the Patricias' "B" and "D" Companies by-passed the village, to reach the river road by five o'clock on the morning of the 21st. In face of little opposition "A" Company crossed the stony bed of the Marecchia shortly before 10:00 a.m. The enemy had broken contact, and by noon the whole battalion was on the far bank. The Patricias cut the Via Emilia at San Martino in Riparatta and spent the rest of the day enlarging their bridgehead.<sup>181</sup>

### The Greeks Occupy Rimini, 21 September

The capture of San Fortunato Ridge had made Rimini untenable to the enemy, even though Kesselring might suggest a last-ditch stand by Heidrich's paratroopers. On the Canadian right the 1st Brigade was quick to take advantage of the general withdrawal. By mid-morning on the 21st the 48th Highlanders had patrols at the Marecchia, and in the evening the battalion attacked across the river towards Celle. This tiny hamlet at the junction of the Via Emilia and Highway No. 16 was also a 2nd Brigade objective. The Highlanders linked up with the Patricias on the far bank, although machine-gun fire from small but determined German rearguards stopped them short of the village. Before morning leading troops of the relieving 2nd New Zealand Division held the road junction, and the final action by Canadians was the participation by a company of the 48th in a successful dawn attack on Celle.<sup>182</sup>

The sound of heavy explosions in Rimini during the night of 20-21 September presaged an early German withdrawal, and next day the Greek Brigade occupied the city. A stout rearguard action in the darkness at the outlying hamlet of Santa Maria, a mile to the south, had marked the last of the paratroopers' resistance, and early on the 21st a Greek patrol reached Rimini's southern outskirts, to find all the AUSA bridges demolished or badly damaged. Colonel Tsakalotos received permission to go in, and a race ensued between his three battalions and the New Zealand troops serving under his command to capture the city and seize bridges over the Marecchia. The 2nd Greek Battalion reached the main square first, and by eight o'clock the Greek flag was flying from the Town Hall. A pleasing gesture followed in the request for a "Canadian flag" to raise beside it.\* The capture of Rimini was the Greek Brigade's first major triumph and came in part recompense for two weeks of trying action which had cost it 314 casualties.<sup>184</sup> "I was

\* It is recorded that when no Union Jack or Canadian ensign could be found immediately, the distinguishing red banner displayed by one of the Auxiliary Services organizations was lent and duly hoisted.<sup>183</sup>

glad", writes General Alexander, "that this success had so early brightened the fortunes of that heroic country which had been the only ally to fight by our side in our darkest days and that a new victory in Italy should be added to the fame won in the mountains of Albania."<sup>185</sup>

War had laid a heavy hand upon Rimini. Its selection early in the campaign as the Adriatic terminus of the enemy's Apennine position and its importance as the junction of the main coastal railway with the line from Bologna and the industrial north had made it the object of frequent Allied air bombardments. These raids, directed against railway installations and the bridges across the Marecchia and its Deviation, killed upwards of 1000 Riminesi\* and caused widespread material damage-both in the old medieval city on the site of the ancient Roman Ariminum and in the newer area between the railway and the sea.<sup>186</sup> As the tide of the battle engulfed Rimini further harm came from Allied field artillery and naval guns. German engineers contributed to the destruction-in 1943 levelling wide areas on the seaward side of the city in order to provide fields of fire for their batteries against possible Allied landings, and in September 1944 demolishing the AUSA and Marecchia bridges and tumbling buildings into the main thoroughfares to block the Eighth Army's advance. Municipal authorities estimated that from these various causes 75% of Rimini's buildings, many of them famous historic monuments, had been razed or damaged beyond repair.<sup>187</sup> But the splendid old Roman triumphal arch, the Arco d'Augusto, dating from 27 B.C., though shaken by blast still stood, and the retreating Germans had left unimpaired the venerable Ponte di Tiberio,† sole survivor of the ancient bridges, which the High Command had ordered to be preserved "regardless of the disadvantages entailed".<sup>188</sup>

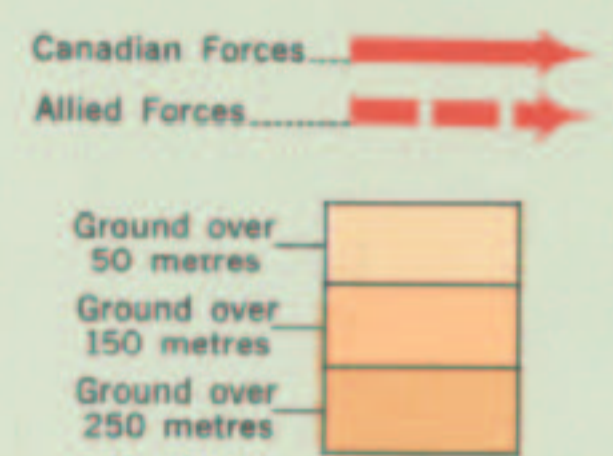
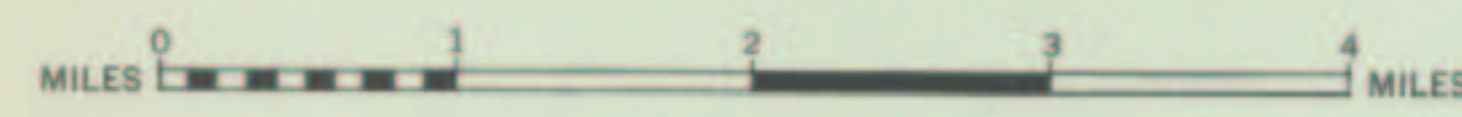
The 1st Canadian Corps was now over the Marecchia along the whole of its front. From Mount Fagiolo in General Burns' left sector, which 4<sup>th</sup> Division patrols had reached during the afternoon of the 21st, the 28<sup>th</sup> Brigade pushed on towards the river, leaving behind its road-bound tanks, which could not move over the sodden ground. Next day two battalions crossed the Marecchia to occupy Santa Giustina and cut the Via Emilia about a mile farther west.<sup>189</sup> On the morning of the 23rd the 12th Canadian Brigade took over this bridgehead as General Ward surrendered control of the left flank to the 5th Armoured Division.<sup>190</sup> Command of the right sector had passed to the 2nd New Zealand Division on the previous day, and the Corps was now ready with two fresh divisions to carry out the next phase of operations towards Ravenna and the north.<sup>191</sup>

\* Most of Rimini's 30,000 inhabitants fled the city, many taking refuge in neutral San Marino, and the then relative safety of San Fortunato.

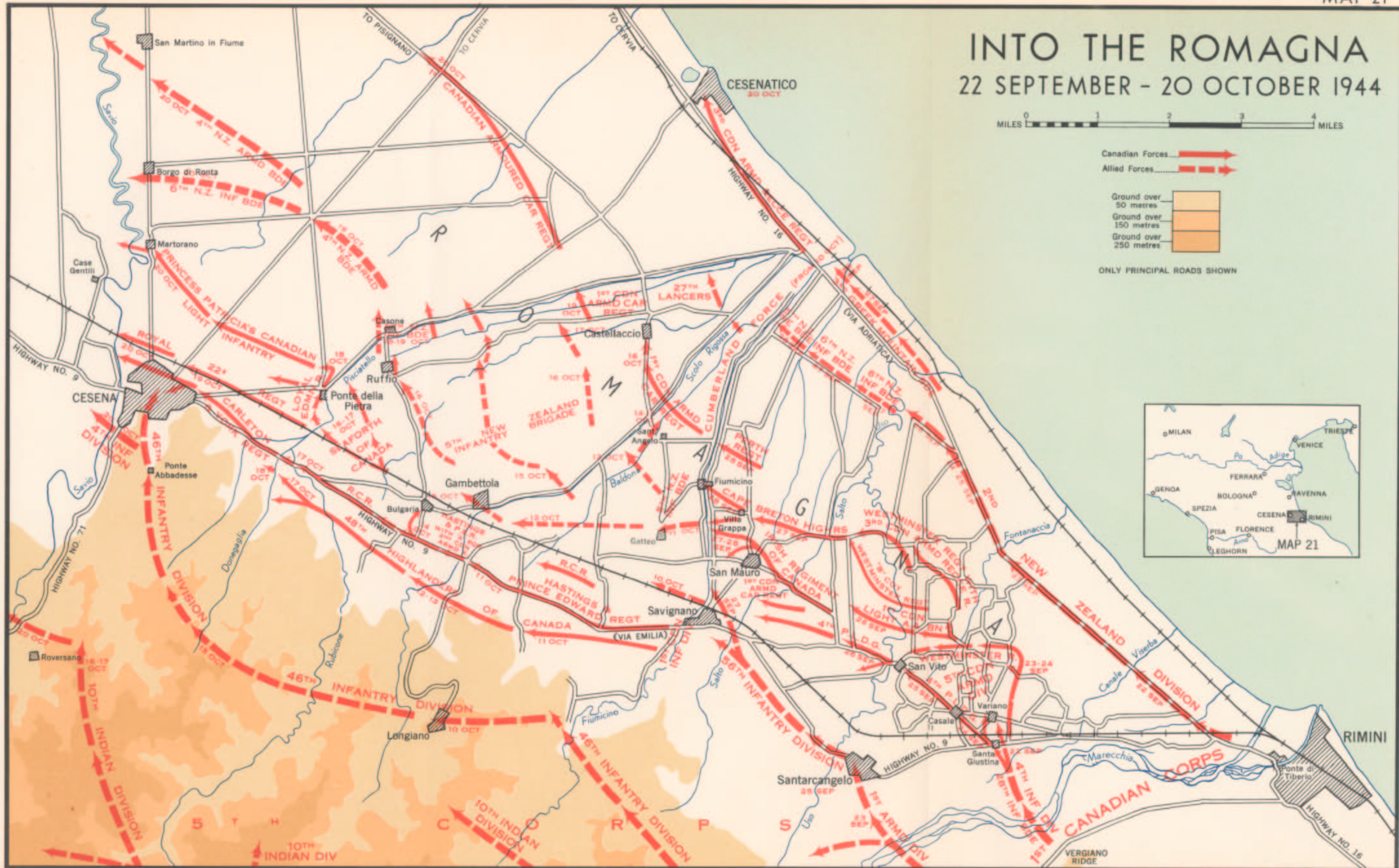
† This bridge, which carried the Via Adriatica and Via Emilia across the Marecchia, was completed by Tiberius in 27 A.D. Begun during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, it is shown on some maps as Ponte d'Augusto.

# INTO THE ROMAGNA

22 SEPTEMBER - 20 OCTOBER 1944



ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN



On the Army left the 5th Corps had been engaged in heavy fighting through the foothills. From a small bridgehead gained over the Ausa at Monte dell' Arboreta on 18 September the 56th Division had battled for the dominating Ceriano spur, the last before the Marecchia and the open plain. A brigade of the 1st Armoured Division was brought in on the 20th to help break the bitter resistance of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division, and on the same day the pressure exerted by the Canadian Corps nearer the sea took effect. The enemy pulled out, and the way was open for General Keightley's forces to cross the river. By this time the 4th Indian and the 46th British Divisions had finished clearing the enemy from the territory of San Marino. They were aided in this task by the 57 members of the state forces of the tiny republic,<sup>192</sup> which on 23 September cast aside its neutrality and declared war on Germany.<sup>193</sup>

### "A Great, Hard-Fought Victory"

General Bums entertained a distinguished party to luncheon on the 22nd in the Officers' Leave Hotel which had been opened in Riccione. His guests were General Alexander, the Rt. Hon. Harold Macmillan (the United Kingdom's Minister Resident at A.F.H.Q.) and General Leese. Afterwards they visited the battle-scorched ridge of San Lorenzo in Correggiano, and then drove across the Ausa up to the pitted skull of San Fortunato.<sup>194</sup> From the Villa Belvedere they could look back at the twin peaks of Tomba and Monte Luro, silent reminders of the 1st Canadian Corps' bitter struggle to break through the Gothic Line. As they turned their eyes to the open plain beyond the Marecchia, it might have seemed that General Leese's three armoured divisions could now sweep in to the north, driving all before them, and that the campaign in Italy was indeed rushing towards a triumphant close.

Certainly in the twenty-six days since the offensive opened, the face of things in north-east Italy had changed. The Eighth Army had advanced more than thirty miles from the Metauro, and by drawing the weight of the German reserves from the Allied centre and left had eased the Fifth Army's forbidding task of fighting through the mountains. General Clark's offensive had begun auspiciously. Instead of advancing by the main Florence-Bologna highway, which would involve an assault upon the Futa Pass, where the German defences were strongest, he had made his principal thrust farther to the east, along the secondary route which crossed the Apennines at Il Giogo and descended the Santerno valley through Firenzuola to meet the Via Emilia at Imola (see Map 23). In fierce fighting which cost its three assaulting divisions 2700 casualties in six days the 2nd U.S. Corps forced the Giogo Pass on 18 September, and pressed northward to take Firenzuola

on the 21st. The subsequent capture of the Futa Pass on 22 September opened the direct route to Bologna. Farther to the east the British 13th Corps, charged with protecting the 2nd Corps' right flank, fought its way over the watershed and began advancing down the Montone and Lamone valleys, directed on Forli and Faenza.<sup>195</sup> The Gothic Line, completely turned at its eastern end, had thus also been pierced over a 30-mile wide front in the centre. The significance of the threat to Imola had not been lost on the enemy. General von Vietinghoff's Chief of Staff was already suspicious of it, and had warned Rottiger at Army Group, "If he gets the quite correct idea of moving to Imola instead of Bologna, we will be trapped in this pocket here."<sup>196</sup> As we shall see, the Germans were to react against the threat with great violence.

But in achieving all this the Allied strength had been badly extended. The fighting just concluded was rated by General Leese as having been as bitter as any in which the Eighth Army had been engaged. The enemy had resisted with great determination, skilfully making the most of the defensive advantages of the terrain. He had used his artillery with telling effect, and had counter-attacked with the utmost persistence—one village was reported to have changed hands ten times.<sup>197</sup> Against the Eighth Army's claim of having "severely mauled" eleven German divisions and taken over 8000 prisoners had to be set more than 14,000 casualties, and the loss of 210 tanks.<sup>198</sup> "The tanks were easily replaceable," writes Lord Alexander, "but the men were not. . . ."<sup>199</sup> Canadian losses were heavier than for any period of equal length either before or after during the Italian campaign. From 25 August to 22 September the 1st Division suffered 2511 battle casualties, 626 of them fatal. An additional 1005 were evacuated because of illness. Up to the time of its withdrawal from action on 19 September the 5th Armoured Division lost 1385 officers and men, including 390 killed. The 4th British Division, which had been in action for ten days, was in somewhat better shape. All four divisions of the 5th Corps were very tired and much reduced in strength.<sup>200</sup>

The Fifth Army had suffered in proportion; indeed "the general manpower of the Allied Armies in Italy was such as to give rise to anxiety."<sup>201</sup> Measures of remustering and reorganization, however unwelcome, had again to be applied. As a result of 7000 casualties sustained by British infantry units, an infantry brigade in each of the 1st British Armoured Division and the 56th Division was reduced to cadre. The 1st Armoured Division, with the honours of its many battles in Africa, was to be disbanded within three months after its arrival in Italy. Every United Kingdom infantry battalion was cut down to only three rifle companies, with a total strength of 30 officers and 700 other ranks, a change which was bound to affect seriously its tactical efficiency.<sup>202</sup>



Yet even with such reduction Leese's battalions considerably outmatched in strength those of von Vietinghoff. The Tenth Army's condition report for the week ending 25 September reveals that of its 92 infantry battalions only ten, classified as "strong", had a strength of more than 400, and 16, "fairly strong", between 300 and 400. There were 26 "average" battalions (200 to 300); 38 had less than 200 all ranks (and two were unreported).<sup>203</sup> These figures provide a striking commentary on the cost of the Gothic Line operations to the German Tenth Army, whose 76th Panzer Corps on 15 September, when the battle of Rimini still had seven exacting days to run, had reported a total of 14,604 casualties suffered since the beginning of the Eighth Army's offensive.<sup>204</sup>

Now that the Canadian Corps was across the Marecchia and astride the Emilian Way it could look back with pride to a great military achievement. That all eight phases of the operation to which General Burns had committed his forces on 10 September had been carried through substantially according to programme in spite of stubborn opposition and many difficulties was a remarkable tribute to the skill of those who drew the plan and to the aggressive determination of the troops who fought and won the battle. Congratulatory messages came to the Canadians from many quarters, none more full of encouragement than those from the Army Commander. To General Burns he signalled:

You have won a great victory. By the bitterest fighting since El Alamein and Cassino you have beaten eleven German Divisions and broken through into the Po Valley. The greater part of the German armies in Italy were massed against us and they have been terribly mauled. I congratulate and thank you all. We must now hit hard day and night and force them back over the Po.<sup>205</sup>

The fighting battalions received a "Well done Canada", sent personally from General Leese to each unit commander.<sup>206</sup> A letter from Colonel Tsakalotos has an interest of its own, as a reminder that the Eighth Army, in which the Canadians were so proud to serve, was, like the Fifth, an army of the United Nations in action. In reply to congratulations from General Vokes the Greek Commander wrote:

I made known your message to all ranks. All us deeply touched thank our div commander and 1 Cdn Inf Div for congratulations. We are happy because they come from glorious warriors. We knew this and now the satisfaction is greater when our small contribution is recognized. Kindly accept respects of Bde and wishes that glory accompanies always yourself and your div. Long live Canada.<sup>207</sup>

Not least in comradeship was the association with the 21st Tank Brigade, whose squadrons had not flinched from expending themselves in action with the Canadian infantry, and were now withdrawn into army reserve to rest and make good their losses. As we have noted, in the course of its operations in Italy the 1st Canadian Division had been frequently supported by British armoured regiments. Officers and men always believed that they

could have no better company in battle than tanks manned by British crews. It seems also that the crews liked working with the Canadians. The same harmony and esteem prevailed among them as had grown up between the men of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade and the British and Indian infantry with whom they fought. It was as though the different nationalities strove for each other's good opinion, at all times making a special effort to go the second mile.

Of the tributes paid to the officers and men of the Canadian Corps for their achievements in the battle for Rimini one, at least, did not reach them. Their gratification at the approbation of General Leese and others might have been the greater had they known that their conduct in operations had won recognition from the Commander of the German Tenth Army. "I am told that the 5th Canadian Armoured Division was excellent", von Vietinghoff reported to Kesselring during the early stages of the fighting, "... though riot strong in numbers, the Canadians are right good soldiers."<sup>208</sup>

## CHAPTER XVIII

### INTO THE LOMBARD PLAIN, SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1944

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#### The 5th Armoured Division's Advance from the Marecchia

“WE WILL debouch into the Valley of the Po”, the troops of the 1st Canadian Division had sung to the tune of "Lili Marlene" as they fought through the hills towards Rimini. This achievement, however, was to be reserved for others. The capture of the Fortunato ridge had brought the Canadians to the edge of the valley, but now once again the fates smiled on the foe.

During the last few days of the battle for Rimini the enemy had been desperately hoping for a decisive break in the weather, but only intermittent rains had fallen. On 18 September Kesselring had told von Vietinghoff despondently, ". . . there is no promise of a change in weather. The rainy season this year is late by two weeks: this is two weeks past the European mean."<sup>1</sup> But even in meteorology the Allies were at variance with the enemy. "The rain in September and October 1944", declared General Alexander, "was both heavier and earlier in its incidence than the general average of past years seemed to prognosticate."<sup>2</sup> Both sides were thus provided with statistical assurance. In any event, as we have seen, a prolonged downpour on the night of 20-21 September helped the 76th Panzer Corps withdraw in good order across the Marecchia River. Already the Engineers of the Eighth Army had begun their race against the spate that would soon come surging down the stony courses of the rivers beyond and fill the watery mazes of the Romagna.

For long the north Italian plain had held an inviting fascination for the Allied staffs, who saw their armoured formations racing across its level expanse in pursuit of the slower-moving enemy. This illusion, soon to be dispelled, was based on an appreciation of the Bologna sector rather than the much less favourable Romagna, which forms the south-eastern tip of the plain, and on whose threshold General Leese's forces now stood. To the Eighth Army, skilled in desert and mountain fighting, the Romagna country was to be a new experience. The region is a flat, well-defined narrow

triangle, with its apex resting on the Marecchia near Rimini, two sides formed by the Adriatic coast and the Apennines, and its base by the River Reno and the Valli di Comacchio-the Largest and southernmost of the shallow lagoons in the Po delta. It is crossed by a series of canalized rivers, many of them bounded by high earthen floodbanks, built to confine the swollen torrents caused by heavy rain or the melting of mountain snows. The reclaimed swamp land between these is intersected by a network of long dykes and irrigation ditches. With their bridges destroyed, the majority of these watercourses became tank obstacles, and when filled by the rains of autumn and winter, barriers to infantry as well.

The only possible axes for an advance north-westward through the Romagna were along the Via Adriatica (Highway No. 16), which the Valli di Comacchio forced inland through Ravenna, Argenta and Ferrara; and the Via Emilia (Highway No. 9), which drew a fairly straight line from Rimini to Bologna, just missing the northern spurs of the Apennines as they fall into the plain. Of the many lateral roads between these two highways the best followed the tops of the floodbanks of the main rivers, and were thus relatively free of vulnerable bridges, though of course not proof against destruction by cratering. South of the Via Emilia communications through the foothills were extremely primitive, and, where the mountain spurs were steep, virtually non-existent. Except then by the two main roads, which, being embanked, were safe from flooding, a main thrust forward across the grain of the country could be made only in comparatively dry weather. In the intervening flats the clay soil, which after even a single shower was greasy and slippery, forming what Lord Alexander called "the richest mud known to the Italian Theatre",<sup>3</sup> in really wet weather became a morass in which vehicles would sink to their axles.

Other factors favoured the Germans. The thickly populated plain was dotted with small villages and farms, which provided them with excellent strongpoints and sniper's posts; when shelled to ruins these merely became more readily defensible. The fertile soil allowed intensive cultivation, so that manoeuvre and visibility were limited by compact little olive groves and orchards and by the heavily vined trellises which hedged the narrow plots of grain. These matted grapevines were invariably grown in rows parallel to the streams, and thus athwart the line of advance; after breaking through two or three such obstacles a tank might become immobilized by the tangle of wire and vines knotted in its tracks. Taking advantage of the attackers' restricted observation the enemy would frequently enfilade alternate rows of trees or vines with his machine-guns and anti-tank guns, so as to deal in turn with advancing infantry and tanks. As may be supposed, he missed no opportunity to impede the movement of Allied heavy equipment and tanks by systematically destroying the small bridges and culverts over the numerous water obstacles. It is true that many of these difficulties arising

from the nature of the terrain were obvious to the Canadians from the beginning, but it was only when the battle had passed into the Romagna that their full effect upon operations were to become apparent.

The 2nd New Zealand Division, the first of the two armoured formations under General Burns' command to get under way, pushed forward on 22 September along the coast against stiffening resistance to the line of the small Canale Viserba, which crossed the Via Adriatica about a mile beyond the Tiberius bridge<sup>4</sup> (see Map 21). That night three divisions of the 5th Corps (the 46th, the 1st Armoured and the 4th Indian) attacked over the Marecchia on a wide front south-west of Santarcangelo\*,<sup>5</sup> and on the following morning, as we have noted, General Hoffmeister's 5th Division entered the battle.

For the next few days, until the enemy should show his hand, the Eighth Army's exploitation was to be carried out by the 1st Canadian and the 5th Corps--each being assigned one of the two available main roads. The Canadian intention was set forth in an instruction issued by General Bums on 17 September. While the 5th Corps attacked across the mountain spurs overlooking the Via Emilia and advanced along that highway on Bologna, the Canadian Corps was to clear the diverging triangle of river-laced flats on the Army's seaward flank. Bums directed the 2nd New Zealand Division on Ravenna, using as its axis the Via Adriatica; the 5th Armoured Division was given the area between the two main highways, and pointed towards the distant target of Castel Maggiore, a small town six miles north of Bologna. Successive bounds for the Corps' advance had been set (a bit ambitiously as events turned out) at the lines of three major rivers--the Fiumicino, the Savio and the Ronco, the last some 25 miles beyond the Marecchia.<sup>6</sup> To gain the first of these Hoffmeister had to cross two smaller watercourses, potentially serious obstacles if the rains continued--the Uso, which pursued a winding course northward past Santarcangelo, and its tributary, the Salto, which crossed the divisional axis about two miles farther west.

Because of the poverty of routes forward the G.O.C. planned to begin his advance on a comparatively narrow frontage, using the 12th Infantry Brigade. With no major road heading north-westward within the divisional sector Brigadier Lind's battalions would make the best of their way along the general axis San Vito--San Mauro--Sant' Angelo (a course roughly paralleling the Via Emilia) and secure bridgeheads over the Uso, Salto and Fiumicino Rivers. In order to maintain momentum they would by-pass any centres of enemy resistance, leaving these to be reduced by the 11th Brigade. The armour would be brought well forward ready to exploit soft spots in the enemy's defences, or to take the lead should that prove feasible. Once the 12th Brigade had crossed the Fiumicino, the 11th would move into the lead.<sup>7</sup>

\* See p. 697.

At 9:00 a.m. on the 23rd the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards began attacking out of the 28th British Infantry Brigade's bridgehead along a secondary road which ran north-westward from Santa Giustina to the River Uso at San Vito.<sup>8</sup> Less than 1000 yards along this route, however, troops of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division were holding the tiny hamlet of Casale, and the even smaller handful of houses at Variano, among the vineyards 500 yards to the east.<sup>9</sup> Almost immediately Lt.-Col. Darling's troops came under heavy artillery and mortar fire from these enemy positions as well as from the high ground about Santarcangelo on the left. The attack lost momentum and by midday had bogged down completely; by nightfall the Princess Louise casualties numbered 80 killed and wounded.<sup>10</sup> A squadron of Strathcona's attempting to support the infantry found its task hopeless. The vineyards were only 50 yards apart and the short fields limited visibility to 400 yards. Tank commanders had to keep their hatches closed because of mortar fire and the accurate German sniping. "More than ever before or since", wrote the regimental historian, "we were dependent upon the infantry to scout ahead for the carefully concealed self-propelled guns."<sup>11</sup>

Lind now ordered the Westminsters to outflank Casale and Variano by a right-hand thrust down a narrow road which reached San Vito from the east. The new attack began at 3:00 p.m., but the infantry soon encountered machine-gun fire, which held them up until after dark. A Strathcona squadron coming forward in support ran into a minefield, which immobilized five tanks; two more bogged down in the soft, deep ditches along the route which the infantry were following. Daylight found the Westminsters and the remaining Strathconas dug in about a mile east of San Vito, with the Panzer Grenadiers maintaining a firm grip on the near bank of the river.<sup>12</sup> In the hope of breaking the deadlock the Brigade Commander attempted another outflanking step, and directed the 1st Canadian Light Anti-Aircraft Battalion-using not more than two companies, for the unit constituted his brigade reserve-to seize the east bank of the Uso at one of the river's many bends, about 500 yards downstream from San Vito.<sup>13</sup>

At midday on the 24th Lt.-Col. W. H. Buchanan (who had succeeded Lt.-Col. W. C. Dick in the command of the battalion) sent one company forward around the Westminsters' right flank. But the enemy was alert to any such move. Making full use of the ample natural cover in the area he first checked the accompanying troop of tanks and then sent the infantry to ground with intense small-arms fire. An attempt by a second company to get forward during the afternoon was equally fruitless, as was an attack by the two reserve companies, which the Brigadier ordered committed during the night. But daylight brought better fortune. A concerted battalion attack with armour and artillery support met only light opposition, and by midday Buchanan had two companies holding the river road.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime the Westminsters had drawn up to the northern outskirts of San Vito. On the

brigade left the Princess Louise, having occupied Variano and Casale, came forward during the afternoon (of the 25th) to clear the few remaining enemy from the town.<sup>15</sup>

Brigadier Lind's plan was to seize a bridgehead some 4000 yards wide; a depth of 1000 to 1200 yards would ensure the engineers at work on vehicle crossings relative immunity from the enemy's mortars. The Princess Louise would secure the left flank opposite San Vito while the Light Anti-Aircraft Battalion, crossing just north of the village, got a footing on the road leading north-west to San Mauro. Two miles downstream The Governor General's Horse Guards, brought forward by General Hoffmeister to clear his right flank, had reached the river after many delays from cratered roads and obstructing ditches. Their commander, Lt.-Col. A. K. Jordan, was ordered to take the far bank (aided by the Westminster's "B" Company, which had joined him at dusk on the 25th), and to push forward to the Rio Salto along his present axis—a secondary road which reached San Mauro from the north-east.<sup>16</sup> Both bridges in the 5th Division's sector had been blown, but the Canadians found only a small amount of water flowing in the gravelly river bottom, which in the San Vito area was about 20 feet wide, so that infantry could cross anywhere. More important, there were several fording-places passable by tanks.<sup>17</sup>

The passage of the Uso began late on the 25th in a heavy drizzle that made the banks greasy with mud. On the left the Princess Louise met only light shelling; by daybreak all their squadrons\* were across, closely followed by a troop of Lord Strathcona's which forded the river without trouble.<sup>18</sup> They overcame stiffening resistance in the fields on the far bank (each side knocking out an opposing tank), and by mid-morning had secured their final objectives, a pair of north and south roads about 1000 yards beyond the Uso.<sup>19</sup> The Light Anti-Aircraft Battalion, slow in starting, crossed about three-quarters of a mile north of San Vito. Their initial bridgehead was not more than 200 yards deep, and they were without anti-tank guns, for the rapidly rising river washed out a barrel culvert which the 14th Field Company R.C.E. had constructed.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless Buchanan put in a pre-dawn attack and reached the first of the two lateral roads. In the meantime an enterprising troop of the 16th Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A. had made its own fording place and manhandled its guns over into the bridgehead;<sup>21</sup> and shortly afterwards additional Strathcona tanks crossed on a scissors bridge with which the sappers had hastily replaced the broken culvert.<sup>22</sup>

On the right flank the brigade's third bridgehead was successfully established by the remaining Westminster companies, which had joined Lt.-Col. Jordan's tanks at the San Mauro road. They were assisted on the far bank by "B" Company, which had made an earlier crossing about a mile

\* Although converted to infantry the Princess Louise continued to refer to their sub-units as "squadrons".

upstream. The Horse Guards continued to be held up by the minefield; its clearing brought a score of casualties (15 of them fatal), incurred when several mines exploded simultaneously, apparently set off by a trip-wire. To save time one squadron moved south, crossed the river on the 12th Brigade's bridge, and at last light rejoined the Westminsters, who were now at the first of the lateral roads and only 500 yards short of the Rio Salto.<sup>23</sup>

It had taken the 5th Canadian Division four days of unexpectedly bitter fighting (which cost the 12th Brigade and its supporting troops 350 casualties) to force the first of the score of rivers between the Marecchia and the north Italian plain. On the Corps right the New Zealanders had made just as slow progress in driving the remnants of Heidrich's paratroopers over the Uso.<sup>24</sup> The 5th Corps had done best on its right. After the 1st Armoured Division had captured Santarcangelo and crossed the Uso on the 25th, the 56th Division had overcome stubborn opposition along the Via Emilia, and was close to the Fiumicino at Savignano.<sup>25</sup> But General Keightley's two divisions in the Apennine foothills—the 46th and the 4th Indian—could not keep pace, and only had light forces over the Uso by the 26th.<sup>26</sup> After the Eighth Army's outstanding achievements south of the Marecchia, these meagre gains were disappointing. General Alexander summed up the situation in a none too optimistic signal to Field-Marshal Wilson on 26 September: "The trouble is that my forces are too weak relative to the enemy to force a break-through and so close the two pincers. The advance of both Armies is too slow to achieve decisive results unless the Germans break and there is no sign of that."<sup>27</sup>

### The German Decision Not to Withdraw

Nor would there be any such sign if Hitler could help it. Field-Marshal Kesselring had already recommended to the German High Command the course that the Allies had reason to expect he might follow—a withdrawal of his forces behind the Po, where he could regroup while carrying out delaying actions south of the river.<sup>28</sup> A timed programme for such a move—aptly code-named "Autumn Fog" (Herbstnebel)—had been worked out at a planning conference at Tenth Army Headquarters on 30 August.<sup>29</sup> The proposals were carried to Germany by General Rottiger, and submitted to the Fuhrer on 23 September. As might have been expected, Hitler turned them down flatly, and immediately sent word to the C.-in-C. that he must adhere to the basic intention of defending the Apennines and the Western Alps. Three days later Kesselring was promised 20,000 men by 1 October. On 27 September he again requested authority to initiate "Autumn Fog", basing his plea on the continued pressure against his southern front and the increased air attacks on his forward and rear areas. He was concerned too about



possible landings on the Riviera and along the Tenth Army's Adriatic flank. Above all he drew attention to the constantly growing danger in the Bologna/Imola area, where an Allied break-through would not only threaten the Tenth Army but might also place the Ligurian Army in the north-west in jeopardy. These representations failed to move Hitler. On 5 October Kesselring was notified that "the Fuhrer, for political, military and administrative reasons, had decided to defend the Apennine front and to hold upper Italy not only until late Autumn, but indefinitely."<sup>30</sup>

Some of these reasons had already been expounded by Rottiger on his return from Germany. At a conference of Kesselring with his Army Commanders on 28 September, his Chief of Staff quoted Hitler as saying that "a withdrawal of the front behind the Po might be too much of a shock for the German people." The wartime production of industrial Northern Italy, which was still working at high pressure, could not be sacrificed; "the loss of the Po plains would have a most deleterious effect on the food situation, as it would mean that the food supplies for the forces committed in Italy would have to come from Germany."<sup>31</sup> Accordingly the Tenth Army received instructions that had a familiar ring. Without waiting for the C.-in-C.'s second appeal to Hitler von Vietinghoff sent a strongly worded directive to all his corps and divisional commanders. They were "not to relinquish one foot of soil to the enemy without inflicting heavy casualties.... The enemy's reserves are not inexhaustible. Heavy casualties in particular would press very heavily on him. The battles of Ortona and Cassino have demonstrated this." The final word was on tactics-"Depth and again depth; reserves and again reserves."<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, in the last few days of September, the enemy was in sore need of the breathing space which the Eighth Army's inability to exploit its earlier successes had given him. Although pressure had lessened on the Adriatic front, in the mountainous central sector the Fifth Army's determined thrusts toward Imola and Forli were threatening to cut off the whole of the 76th Corps. To meet the critical situation in the Santerno valley, where the inner wings of the two German armies had been forced apart by the American penetration, Kesselring had agreed on the 22nd to move the 44th Division from the Cesena area and place it under command of the Fourteenth Army at the threatened sector.<sup>33</sup> The resulting gap in the Tenth Army's order of battle was to be filled by the 94th Division, which had enjoyed a quiet summer in the Udine area at the head of the Adriatic, undergoing complete reorganization after its mauling in the battle for Rome.<sup>34</sup> As yet the enemy was not seriously worried by the Eighth Army's new attacks, which the Tenth Army's war diary described on the 24th and 25th as merely "reconnaissances in force".<sup>35</sup> The expected major Allied offensive in the Adriatic sector had not materialized by the 26th; as a precaution von Vietinghoff's forces reported themselves echeloned far to the rear in order to escape the weight of any

preliminary artillery or aerial bombardment. On that day General Herr accurately divined Allied intentions when he informed his superior that his opponent seemed to have changed his policy of large-scale attacks for one of maintaining constant pressure with smaller forces.<sup>36</sup>

The unexpected difficulties which the 12th Canadian Brigade had encountered in reaching and crossing the Uso caused General Hoffmeister to put the 11th into the lead earlier than he had originally intended. The changeover took place during the night of 26-27 September, and next morning Brigadier Johnston began advancing towards the Fiumicino River with two battalions. Having been warned that rivers might be in spate in a few hours he directed the Irish Regiment on San Mauro, with instructions to go all out to seize a bridgehead there; on the right The Cape Breton Highlanders were given the Horse Guards' former axis and ordered to secure the bridge at the village of Fiumicino.<sup>37</sup>

The Irish had no difficulty in crossing the Salto, which while an obstacle to tanks had been left undefended against infantry. By mid-afternoon they had reached San Mauro. While the 5th Division's artillery continued to shell the village, the infantry pushed on to the Fiumicino, now about 1000 yards distant. Under cover of darkness "A" and "B" Companies reached the near bank, but lost touch with Lt.-Col. Clark's headquarters as wireless communications failed. Details of subsequent events are hard to establish, but it appears that in the early hours of the 28th "A" Company waded the river and reached a road junction 300 yards to the west. About 8:30 a.m. it was surprised by a superior force of infantry and tanks of the 26th Panzer Division,\* and sent back a runner to bring aid. Little was available, for the 5th Armoured Brigade's tanks were still behind the Salto. From the east bank of the Fiumicino "B" Company rushed a platoon forward, but by the time it reached the road junction, the unequal fight was over. The enemy had withdrawn with their captives, leaving behind one wounded and nine dead Canadians. Fifty-three of "A" Company were taken prisoner; only one rifle section, left behind to cover the river crossing, survived.<sup>39</sup> It was an inauspicious introduction to the river which was said to be the Rubicon† crossed by Caesar, unopposed, nearly 2000 years before. The failure however taught a useful lesson: not again in Italy in the 11th Brigade was a company dispatched to take a battalion objective.<sup>40</sup>

On the brigade right The Cape Breton Highlanders, advancing like the Irish without armoured support, had forded the Salto on the afternoon of

\* The 5th Armoured Division's advance inland was taking it obliquely across the 76th Panzer Corps' divisional boundaries, which ran parallel to the coast. At the Uso the 12th Brigade had been opposed by the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division; the line of the Fiumicino from Savignano to Fiumicino was held by the 26th Panzer Division.<sup>38</sup>

† Other claimants to the, distinction were the Uso and the upper Pisciatello.

the 27th; but stiffening resistance by the 29th Panzer Grenadiers had halted them at the western edge of Villa Grappa, a hamlet only 500 yards from the Fiumicino River.<sup>41</sup> On the 28th the Brigade Commander ordered the Cape Breton C.O., Lt.-Col. R. B. Somerville, to reach Fiumicino village, and to seize the bridge there which was reported to be still intact.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, following the pattern of the 12th Brigade's tactics at the Uso, he sent his reserve battalion, the Perths, across country on the Highlanders' right to secure the river road at a point half a mile north of Fiumicino.<sup>43</sup>

It was dark before Somerville's men could get forward, for during the daylight hours the enemy kept the area almost continuously under heavy artillery and mortar fire. They were in the village by ten o'clock, but were too late to save the bridge, which the Germans had demolished early that morning.<sup>44</sup> Farther north The Perth Regiment had secured its objective by last light.<sup>45</sup>

Heavy rain throughout the 28th cancelled Brigadier Johnston's planned night assault across the Fiumicino. By the morning of the following day mud and washed-out bridges and culverts had made most of the roads in the rear impassable. None of the fords across the Marecchia and Uso could be used, and at the former river the only bridge to survive the floods was the timetested Ponte di Tiberio.<sup>46</sup> In a few hours the Fiumicino grew from a shallow stream into a muddy torrent, 30 feet wide, which no patrols could pass. The withdrawal of the last of the enemy over the lower reaches of the river was reported by Runkel "to have been something indescribable. Men drowned and some guns were literally washed away. . . ." <sup>47</sup> All that the battalions of the 11th Brigade could do was to consolidate their existing positions.<sup>48</sup> To the right of the Canadians the 2nd New Zealand Division had reached the river on a two-brigade front,<sup>49</sup> so that the Corps was now holding the east bank from San Mauro to the sea.

The mortaring and shelling that continued to harass The Cape Breton Highlanders did not prevent a distinguished visitor, the Minister of National Defence, from paying them a call on the afternoon of 30 September. Despite the urgings of the corps and divisional commanders to keep out of the front line, Colonel Ralston went forward in an armoured scout car to visit the unit which he had commanded (as the 85th Battalion C.E.F.) in the First World War.<sup>50</sup> It was one of many meetings with Canadian troops which the Minister crowded into a busy nine days in Italy. Everywhere he went he invited the men to discuss their problems with him, and of their commanders and senior staff officers he made searching inquiry regarding the efficiency of the Canadian forces and all matters affecting their general welfare.<sup>51</sup>

Colonel Ralston took special care to inform himself of the situation with respect to reinforcements.\* He learned from Brigadier E.G. Weeks,

\* The whole problem of Canadian reinforcements will be treated in detail in a subsequent volume of this History.

who as Officer-in-Charge, Canadian Section, G.H.Q. 1st Echelon, was responsible for keeping C.M.H.Q. posted regarding the theatre's needs in manpower, that if the 1st Canadian Corps continued to be actively engaged in operations, by approximately 10 October all general duty infantry reinforcements would have been committed and there would be no reserve. As a result the infantry units of the Corps would then have to fight at slightly below their authorized war establishment. While they would still be considerably stronger than the battalions in the British formations of the Eighth Army (which, as we have seen, had been temporarily reduced to a three-company basis), the prospect was unacceptable to General Bums, and he urged that units under his command should be maintained at full strength. In discussions with General Leese the Minister asked Sir Oliver's views on the possibility of reducing the 1st Canadian Division by one infantry brigade. Strongly deprecating this suggestion, Leese declared that the Division was undoubtedly the best in the Eighth Army, that it could always be relied upon to take on a tough job successfully, and that any reduction in its infantry would be a mistake.<sup>52</sup>

#### The Halt at the Fiumicino, 28 September-10 October

At a meeting with his Corps Commanders on 25 September General Leese had attempted to read the enemy's mind. He appreciated that once the Tenth Army had lost the high ground south of Savignano von Vietinghoff would not try to make a prolonged stand anywhere east of the Savio River. In the wider part of the plain which the Eighth Army was nearing none of the rivers, unless they were in spate, seemed a sufficiently great obstacle to invite a protracted defence. Experience taught however that the enemy would strive to impose the maximum delay on the Allied advance. There were two main courses open to him. He might continue to fall back under pressure, in which event Leese proposed to continue the advance with the 1st Canadian Corps directed along the plain towards Ravenna and Argenta, while the 5th Corps, with its left in the foothills, followed the Via Emilia. On the other hand the Germans might manage to stabilize firmly enough on some line to necessitate a strong, co-ordinated thrust to dislodge them. In this case the Eighth Army would regroup for an attack on a three-corps front. The 2nd Polish Corps would be brought up to take over the coastal sector, and both the Canadian and 5th Corps would step to the left.<sup>53</sup> Once the enemy had been driven back to the line Argenta-Imola the axis of advance would swing northward, and the task of crossing the Po would be given to the Canadian Corps.<sup>54</sup> During the next two days, as the enemy's steadfast

resistance persisted, Leese decided to adopt the second course. On the 27th he ordered General Anders to relieve the New Zealanders at the coast.<sup>55</sup>

At this point command of the Eighth Army changed hands. On 29 September Sir Oliver left to assume the duties of Commander-in-Chief, Allied Land Forces South-East Asia. He was succeeded by Lieut.General Sir Richard L. McCreery, who had commanded the 10th Corps from the time of the Salerno landings. The worsening weather and the extension of the flooding on the coastal flank had delayed the move forward of the Polish Corps, and McCreery's first action was to modify the plan for regrouping the Army. He shifted the Poles to his mountainous left flank (where the 10th Corps with only one infantry battalion at its disposal had been "containing" the German 356th Division), intending to pass them down the Savio valley against Cesena, and so outflank the enemy opposing the main body of the Eighth Army in the plain.<sup>56</sup> No one knew better the difficulties of fighting through the hills than the 10th Corps' former commander, yet he appreciated that the Poles could accomplish more there than in the waterlogged coastal region. Various problems arose in putting the new scheme into effect, however, and it was not until 14 October that General Anders took over the 10th Corps' sector. By then the Eighth Army's centre was nearing the line of the Savio and Highway *No. 71*. Accordingly the Poles were directed to strike forward to the next lateral road-Highway *No. 67*, which descended the valley of the Montone north-eastward to Forlì<sup>57</sup> (see Map 23).

The rains which had halted the Canadian Corps at the Fiumicino continued for the first ten days of October, and cancelled a succession of plans for a major assault across the river. The most ambitious of these, calling for a set-piece attack on the night of 7-8 October by two of Burns' divisions in conjunction with a three-division assault by the 5th Corps,<sup>58</sup> had to be shelved in favour of a "wet weather" plan with limited objectives, determined by the difficulty in moving forward supporting arms. But on the evening of the 8th it was decided that the ground was too wet even for the "wet weather" plan, and the Canadian attack was again postponed.<sup>59</sup> During this static period units of the 12th Brigade which had taken over Brigadier Johnston's positions on 2 October, were ordered to patrol nightly across the Fiumicino to learn the enemy's dispositions.<sup>60</sup> The arrival of the cold, wet weather was officially recognized in the brigade order of 3 October: "Effective immediately winter underwear long, as issued, will be taken into wear."<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile the German Tenth Army reported that its divisions on the Adriatic flank had benefited from the lull in operations, which gave them time "for recuperation and for the improvement of their deeply echeloned positions", thereby enabling them to look forward "with confidence" to the

resumption of large-scale fighting.<sup>62</sup> Much of this preparation was to be wasted, however, for by 7 October General McCreery had made up his mind to shift the main weight of the Eighth Army to the left.<sup>63</sup> Early progress by the 5th Corps in the foothills south of Highway No. 9, where the rains had been less damaging to the advance, testified to the wisdom of this decision. On the Corps' left flank the 10th Indian Division had relieved the 4th (soon to be moved to an occupation role in Greece),<sup>64</sup> and on 6 and 7 October it crossed the Fiumicino in conjunction with the 46th Infantry Division on its right (see Map 21 and Sketch 10). The capture of the 1600foot Mount Farneto by the Indians threatened to turn all the German defences northward to the Via Emilia; and on the 10th the 46th Division, having beaten back a determined counter-attack against its open right flank, took Longiano, a town about two miles south of the highway, overlooking the east bank of the Scol\* Rigossa.<sup>65</sup> With the right wing of the 76th Panzer Corps thus endangered, the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division fell back along the Via Emilia from the Fiumicino to the line of the Rigossa canal.<sup>66</sup> On the same day the 56th Infantry Division crossed the Fiumicino at Savignano and their Engineers bridged the swollen stream.<sup>67</sup>

The Canadian part in the Eighth Army's regrouping began on 8 October, when General McCreery directed General Burns to take over the Via Emilia from the 5th Corps. There the 1st Canadian Division would relieve the 56th Division, which was badly in need of a rest after its heavy casualties in the recent fighting.<sup>68</sup> Next morning Burns assigned his three divisional commanders their roles in the new plan. While the 5th Corps continued to attack with two divisions through the foothills, the 1st Canadian Division, leading the advance in the 1st Canadian Corps' sector, would maintain pressure along Highway No. 9. North of the railway the 2nd New Zealand Division would relieve the 5th Canadian Armoured Division and form a strong guard for General Vokes' right flank.<sup>69</sup> With the 5th Corps front becoming the zone of main effort General Keightley would continue to use the Via Emilia as his chief maintenance artery, while the bulk of the administrative and supply traffic of the 1st Canadian Corps would move on Highway No. 16.<sup>70</sup> As a result of the regrouping the Canadian Corps became responsible for an eight-mile sector extending from 1000 yards south of the Via Emilia to the sea.<sup>71</sup> The prospect of campaigning over this area was a grim one. "All divisional commanders," records General Burns in his diary, "pointed out the very bad going and expressed the opinion that we might be drifting into the carrying on of an offensive in similar conditions to those of last autumn and winter, where the hard fighting and numerous casualties resulted in no great gain."<sup>72</sup>

\* *A scolo* is a drainage canal, commonly formed by canalizing a stream.

The Crossing of the Pisciatello and the Advance to Cesena,  
11-19 October

The return of the 1st Canadian Division to action ended a brief rest period in the Cattolica-Riccione area. The programme of reconditioning by means of intensive training, enlivened with various forms of local entertainment and short visits to leave centres in Riccione, Florence and Rome, came to an abrupt halt on 9 October, as General Vokes' troops left their billets to begin the relief of the 56th Division.<sup>73</sup>

It was the G.O.C.'s intention to advance with the 1st Brigade as far as the Pisciatello, a canalized stream crossing the divisional sector about two miles east of Cesena, and then to use the 2nd and 3rd Brigades for the final attack to the Savio.<sup>74</sup> At midday on the 11th The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment began leapfrogging its companies out of the 56th Division's bridgehead west of Savignano. First contact with the enemy came about four o'clock, at the crossroads immediately east of the Scolo Rigossa. There, says the unit diarist, "a fierce fight ensued and the enemy withdrew, leaving a few killed and four P.W."<sup>75</sup> Patrols led the way across the stream during the night, and by next afternoon the battalion was holding a bridgehead some 500 yards deep astride the Via Emilia. The enemy's increased mortar and artillery fire now gave warning that he would resume his rearward movement only under pressure. The 1st Brigade was in range of the guns of two German divisions, whose common boundary crossed the railway line which ran less than a mile north of the Hastings' positions. Immediately beyond the railway the small manufacturing town of Gambettola,\* on the west bank of the Rigossa, was held by a battalion of the 9th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (26th Panzer Division); on the Canadian side of the track was a battalion of the 361st Panzer Grenadier Regiment-left flanking formation of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division. Half a mile west of Gambettola one Grenadier company was guarding Bulgaria, a scattered hamlet astride an important lateral road which crossed the front of both Allied corps.<sup>76</sup> The 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade,† in whose sector of operations Gambettola lay, had taken Gatteo, a mile west of the Fiumicino, but had been halted farther north in front of the hamlet of Sant' Angelo, which the enemy was holding as a strong outpost of his front along the Rigossa.<sup>78</sup> The New Zealanders were thus two and a half miles behind the forward Canadian positions, so that concern was felt for the 1st Brigade's lengthening right flank. As a measure of security The Royal Canadian Regiment moved forward south of the rail

\* See p. 697.

† From 10 to 14 October the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards was under command of the 5th New Zealand Brigade, protecting the New Zealand right flank at Fiumicino village.<sup>77</sup>

way to the line of the Rio Baldona, a small drainage canal about a mile east of the Rigossa.<sup>79</sup>

Late on the 13th Brigadier Calder ordered the Hastings and Prince Edwards to seize the lateral road and clear Bulgaria, so that the advance along the highway might be resumed. He assigned Lt.-Col. Cameron the support of a squadron of Lord Strathcona's Horse, backed by the firepower of the divisional field artillery and a medium regiment. Field regiments were keeping up extremely well, and during the 13th they were able to bring down harassing fire on Bulgaria, which also came under four attacks by fighter-bombers called forward from cab rank.<sup>80</sup>

Bridging difficulties delayed the start of the Hastings' attack on the morning of the 14th. The Engineers had successfully dropped an Ark into the Baldona at Highway No. 9, but a similar attempt to span the wider and deeper Scolo Rigossa failed. German demolitions to the existing masonry bridge were reported to have left too narrow a roadway for the passage of tanks, but as H Hour approached, the Strathconas decided to venture the passage of the damaged structure. The first Sherman proved the reconnaissance report inaccurate by three feet, and the rest of the squadron were quickly across the river.<sup>81</sup>

At 7:30 a.m. a Strathcona troop led the attack against the crossroads south of Bulgaria. As the tanks flushed the Germans out of houses and weapon-pits along the way, "B" Company of the Hastings followed closely behind to mop up stragglers and consolidate the objective. The main assault on Bulgaria began shortly after midday. The armour drove northward along the lateral, with the Hastings' "C" Company in high spirits keeping pace in the roadside ditches, while the artillery brought down a timed concentration on the village. As the attack closed in the fire lifted to targets beyond, and Hastings and Strathconas systematically began clearing the battered buildings. The technique used ten months before at Ortona again proved its worth. The tanks blasted the buildings with high-explosive and machine-gun fire, and the riflemen completed the job. By 4:30 p.m. the area was secure.<sup>82</sup> The action was, in the words of the Strathconas' historian, "a spontaneous demonstration of genuine, whole-hearted co-operation between infantry and tanks." The feeling of mutual confidence was the more remarkable in that the two units had met only four days before;<sup>83</sup> it was the first time in the Italian campaign that a regiment of the 5th Armoured Brigade had been assigned a role in support of the 1st Infantry Brigade.

That night the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division reported the loss of Bulgaria after "heavy fighting and severe casualties".<sup>84</sup> By Canadian count these included 60 prisoners and considerably larger numbers of killed and wounded.<sup>85</sup> The action had cost the Hastings and Prince Edwards eleven killed and nine wounded.

That same night (14-15 October), as Sant' Angelo fell to an attack by the 28th (Maori) Battalion of the 5th New Zealand Brigade,<sup>86</sup> the enemy



loosened his front opposite the New Zealanders, who crossed the Scolo Rigossa to the north of the railway on the 15th and entered Gambettola unopposed. With his right thus secured Brigadier Calder ordered the R.C.R. into the lead. By nightfall on the 16th the battalion had gone only two miles along the Via Emilia, to reach the most easterly of the upper Pisciatello's three branches--according to the maps in the hands of the Canadians another claimant to the name Rubicon. The 48th Highlanders, covering Vokes' left flank, were keeping abreast south of the highway, and on the 17th both units crawled forward a few hundred yards to the next tributary--the Donegaglia.<sup>87</sup>

In order that the 1st Division might approach the Savio on a two-brigade front, it was necessary to change the divisional sectors within the Corps. Following discussions on the 15th with General Vokes and General Freyburg (who had resumed command of the 2nd New Zealand Division), and with the Army Commander next day, Bums directed the Canadian division to take over a wider frontage on the Pisciatello and Savio Rivers. The road running almost due north from Bulgaria to Rufflo replaced the railway line as the interdivisional boundary.<sup>88</sup> Instructing Brigadier Calder to keep pressing towards Cesena, Vokes now ordered the 2nd Brigade to close up to the Pisciatello north of the railway. At eight on the evening of the 16th the Seaforth crossed the tracks north-west of Bulgaria, and by dawn two companies were holding a 1000-yard front which extended along the river from the railway bridge to Ponte della Pietra, a village on the paved road joining Cesena to the seaside resort of Cesenatico\*. In their new positions on the right bank the Seaforth were harassed all day by 88-millimetre and machine-gun fire.<sup>89</sup>

Early in the afternoon of the 17th Lt.-Col. Bogert, who had taken over command of the 2nd Brigade on 6 October when Brigadier Gibson was evacuated on medical grounds, issued his orders for the assault over the Pisciatello. The Edmontons were to make a silent crossing near the railway and then swing north to roll up the enemy positions along the west bank as far as Ponte della Pietra. The river was neither wide nor deep enough to be an infantry obstacle, and about 300 yards north of the railway bridge was a ford which it was hoped might be developed as a crossing-place for tanks. With armour on the far bank it was proposed to deepen and widen the bridgehead sufficiently to allow the Engineers to replace the demolished stone bridge which gave the village its name.<sup>90</sup>

Shortly after ten that night the leading company of Edmontons waded the stream. In pouring rain they pushed north along the far bank to the ford, where they became involved in close fighting in the darkness. About midnight the battalion commander, Lt.-Col. J.R. Stone (Bell-Irving had returned to command his old unit, the Seaforth Highlanders) sent a second company into the fight. The fully aroused Panzer Grenadiers resisted

\* See p. 697.

stubbornly, and daylight found the Edmontons fighting a shifting battle for the possession of a bridgehead roughly 500 yards square.<sup>91</sup> Up to this point the attack appeared to be going well enough, but at six o'clock the engineer reconnaissance party reported that the sandy river bottom made the ford unsuitable for the passage of heavy equipment; nor was it practicable to put in close-support bridging at this point. At once the whole picture changed, for without protection against enemy armour the infantry would be in an unpleasantly vulnerable position during the daylight hours. To give the Edmontons some measure of anti-tank support the Brigade Commander ordered a troop of self-propelled M-10s that was with the Seaforth to be brought forward to the east bank.<sup>92</sup>

Meanwhile an officer of the 12th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, refusing to accept the sappers' findings as final, had made a personal reconnaissance of the ford and decided that his Churchills could safely use it.<sup>93</sup> His judgement proved sound, and at 2:00 p.m. a troop of tanks and a third company of infantry crossed into the bridgehead, to put new life into the Edmontons. With the added help of an extensive artillery and counter-mortar programme they began extending their holdings. By half-past six they had cleared Ponte della Pietra and pushed westward about 800 yards.<sup>94</sup> Much of the credit for this success must go to the skill and daring of a noncommissioned officer of "C" Company, Corporal G.E. Kingston, who took command when his platoon officer was wounded early in the assault. Kingston led his men across fifty yards of fire-swept ground to capture a number of German machine-gun posts, and although wounded proceeded thence to clear a group of farm buildings from which the enemy was directing artillery fire on the Edmontons' crossing-place. In this final episode the platoon captured 21 Germans and killed four. Kingston won an immediate D.C.M., the fourth to go to the Edmontons during the campaign.<sup>95</sup> During the night the bridgehead was enlarged sufficiently to allow the 3rd Field Company R.C.E. to build an 80-foot Bailey bridge at the site in the village.<sup>96</sup> Farther south the 1st Brigade, having failed to advance, beyond the Donegaglia on the 18th, was relieved by the 3rd Brigade during the night.<sup>97</sup>

The Eighth Army had now overcome the last major water obstacle before the Savio. On the 1st Division's right the 6th New Zealand Brigade held a substantial bridgehead over the Pisciatello north of Ruffio, from which units of the 4th Armoured Brigade were preparing to break out;<sup>98</sup> south of the Via Emilia the 5th Corps was on the ridges overlooking the Savio and the 46th Division was moving northward on Cesena;<sup>99</sup> while on the Army's advanced left wing the Polish Corps, having launched its attack from the head of the Savio valley on 17 October, was making solid progress across the hills towards the Montone.<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile the western jaw of the Allied pincers continued to close in as the Fifth Army, maintaining remorseless



pressure in the mountainous central sector, ground daily nearer Bologna and the vital Highway No. 9.

The wisdom of General McCreery's tactics was now apparent. The thrust by the 5th Corps had caught the enemy unaware, adding to the predicament in which the Fifth Army's offensive had placed him. The German withdrawal northward had brought an increasing number of von Vietinghoff's formations out of the foothills into the plain, so that at the very time that the Eighth Army began shifting its weight to its inland flank there were five German divisions\* between the Via Emilia and the sea, and only two (the 114th Jager and 356th Infantry Divisions) opposing the British 5th and 10th Corps in the mountains (see Sketch 10). All but the last of these formations were part of the 76th Panzer Corps, and on 8 October, in order to have unified command over the forces defending the approach to Cesena from the south, General Herr took over the 356th Division from the 51st Mountain Corps.<sup>102</sup>

It was not to be expected that the enemy would maintain for long a greater strength than was necessary on his coastal flank when the demands for reinforcement farther inland were so pressing, especially since the Via Emilia provided him with the means of rapidly shifting his formations from one part of the front to another. First to be moved was the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, which received orders on 8 October to intervene at the junction of the 356th Infantry and 114th Jager Divisions south of Cesena;<sup>103</sup> four days later Kesselring directed its immediate transfer to the Fourteenth Army so as to stiffen the resistance against the 2nd U.S. Corps' drive on Bologna.<sup>104</sup> By that time the need for thinning out the 76th Panzer Corps to meet the demands of the central front was being recognized by everyone except General Heidrich at the coast. That independent paratrooper was holding 7000 fresh reinforcements between the Po and the Adige Rivers, and had visions of fortifying and defending Ravenna. Reminded by Kesselring that such considerable forces could not be kept out of the fighting at such a critical time, Heidrich cited direct orders from Hitler and Goring to rebuild his division forthwith "for Fuhrer and Reich"! Kesselring disallowed the plans for the Ravenna area; but on 10 October his Chief of Staff was to complain, "Heidrich has prevailed again. O.B.S.W. wants to talk to Hermann [Göring] about this; but they already have enough other troubles up there."<sup>105</sup>

On 17 October von Vietinghoff, who for some days had been anxious to break contact east of the Savio so that he might regroup and strengthen his right wing,<sup>106</sup> requested that General Herr, who was now under orders to give up the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division to the 51st Mountain Corps,<sup>107</sup> be permitted to carry out a withdrawal to avoid encirclement. Army Group Headquarters, however, under strict injunctions from the High Command

\* From the coast the 1st Parachute, the 29th Panzer Grenadier, the 26th Panzer, the 90th Panzer Grenadier and the 278th Infantry Divisions.<sup>101</sup>

not to yield ground in any sector, refused, demanding that Cesena be held.<sup>108</sup> The 31-page record of the Tenth Army's telephone conversations on the 18th abounds with elaborations of von Vietinghoff's request to the Army Group Commander and echoes by commanders at a lower level and their chiefs of staff. Early in the afternoon Kesselring gave in to the ceaseless pressure, and on his own responsibility authorized a withdrawal behind the Savio.<sup>109</sup>

As a result of this decision, the 19th saw the 1st Canadian Division advancing on both brigade fronts against negligible opposition. The Patricias crossed the Pisciatello on the newly-completed bridge and headed northwestward towards the Cesena-Cervia road. On the left the 3rd Brigade pushed along the railway and highway towards Cesena. By evening the 200th Panzer Grenadier Regiment had withdrawn from the town, as the transfer of the 90th Division began.<sup>110</sup> Patrols of the Carleton and York entered from the east unopposed while elements of the 46th Infantry Division were moving in from the south. Next morning the Carletons and the Royal 22e, in spite of stiffening rearguard action, reached the Savio on either side of the railway, while farther downstream two companies of Patricias took up positions on the river road near the hamlet of Martorano.<sup>111</sup> Making equally good progress on General Vokes' right, the New Zealanders' 4th Armoured and 6th Infantry Brigades reached the east bank between San Martin in Fiume and Borgo di Ronta late on the 20th.<sup>112</sup> Except in the coastal sector, where the 1st Parachute Division was under only light pressure, the enemy was now behind the Savio along the entire front.

### Cumberland Force on the Coastal Flank

While General McCreery's divisions were thus advancing on the left and in the centre, there had appeared on the Eighth Army's right flank a new style of warfare, ushering in what one Canadian officer called "the era of Groups and Forces".<sup>113</sup> When the decision was taken on 8 October to shift the weight of the Canadian Corps' effort to the left wing, General Burns was faced with the problem of filling the resultant gap in the coastal sector without weakening his main thrust, while at the same time permitting the mass of the 5th Armoured Division to go into reserve. The solution was found in the organization of a force composed initially of the 3rd Greek- Mountain Brigade, a group of New Zealand armour and artillery serving as infantry under the name Wilder Force, The Royal Canadian Dragoons (also dismounted), and certain supporting Greek, New Zealand and Canadian\*

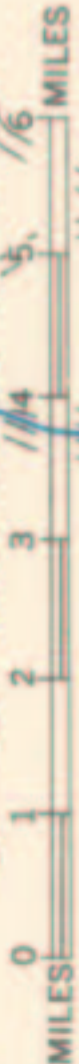
\* Canadian units included the 3rd Field Regiment and 16th Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A., and the 10th Field Squadron R.C.E.

arms and services.<sup>114</sup> The whole was under the Headquarters of the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade and was called Cumberland Force, from the name of the Brigade Commander.<sup>115</sup>

Cumberland Force began its short life of eighteen days on 10 October, when it took over from the New Zealand Division the line of the Fiumicino for three and a half miles inland. There was little action until the 16th, when the enemy, conforming with his forced retirement farther inland, fell back west of Highway No. 16 to the Scolo Rigossa. He continued to hold the sandy coastal strip, however, where the belt of wire, mines, concrete "dragon's teeth" and pillboxes which had been designed to counter a landing from the sea gave him a strong defensive position. On the left The Royal Canadian Dragoons (who in keeping with the current fashion called themselves Landell Force after their commanding officer, Lt.-Col. K.D. Landell) took over Sant' Angelo from the New Zealanders, and by nightfall had patrols near the village of Castellaccio, half way to the Pisciatello. During the next two days The Governor General's Horse Guards and the 27th Lancers relieved the Greek Brigade and Wilder Force in the right and central sectors. It was the end of campaigning in Italy for the Greeks, who now returned to their homeland for occupational duties.<sup>116</sup> Their departure left Cumberland Force with three dismounted armoured units, supported by The British Columbia Dragoons, who used their road-bound tanks mainly to carry out daylight shoots at the request of the "infantry".<sup>117</sup>

The 2nd New Zealand Division's attack over the Pisciatello on the night of the 18th-19th brought a further retirement by the 1st Parachute Division opposite Cumberland Force's left and centre. Taking due advantage the Dragoons and the Lancers inched forward through the mud to the river, one Canadian crossing about a mile north-west of Castellaccio.<sup>118</sup> On the 20th, as the 76th Panzer Corps carried out the major withdrawal sanctioned by Kesselring, General Heidrich, ordered to change places with the 114th Jager Division on the Corps' inner flank, pulled his parachutists back towards the Savio.<sup>119</sup> The Horse Guards crossed the Fiumicino on the Via Adriatica, and preceded by Lt.-Col. Jordan, mounted on a bicycle, entered Cesenatico, the enthusiastic citizens acclaiming them as liberators.<sup>120</sup> On the left the Dragoons reached the Cesena-Cervia road, where the 27th Lancers relieved them in the pursuit. Demolitions and scattered actions against enemy rear parties retarded progress; by nightfall on the 22nd the Lancers were at Pisignano, still a mile and a half short of the Savio (see Map 22).<sup>121</sup> By that time the Horse Guards, pushing along the coastal road, and aided by Partisans with useful information about the enemy's movements, had occupied Cervia without a fight. On the 24th both units of Cumberland Force reached the Savio.<sup>122</sup>

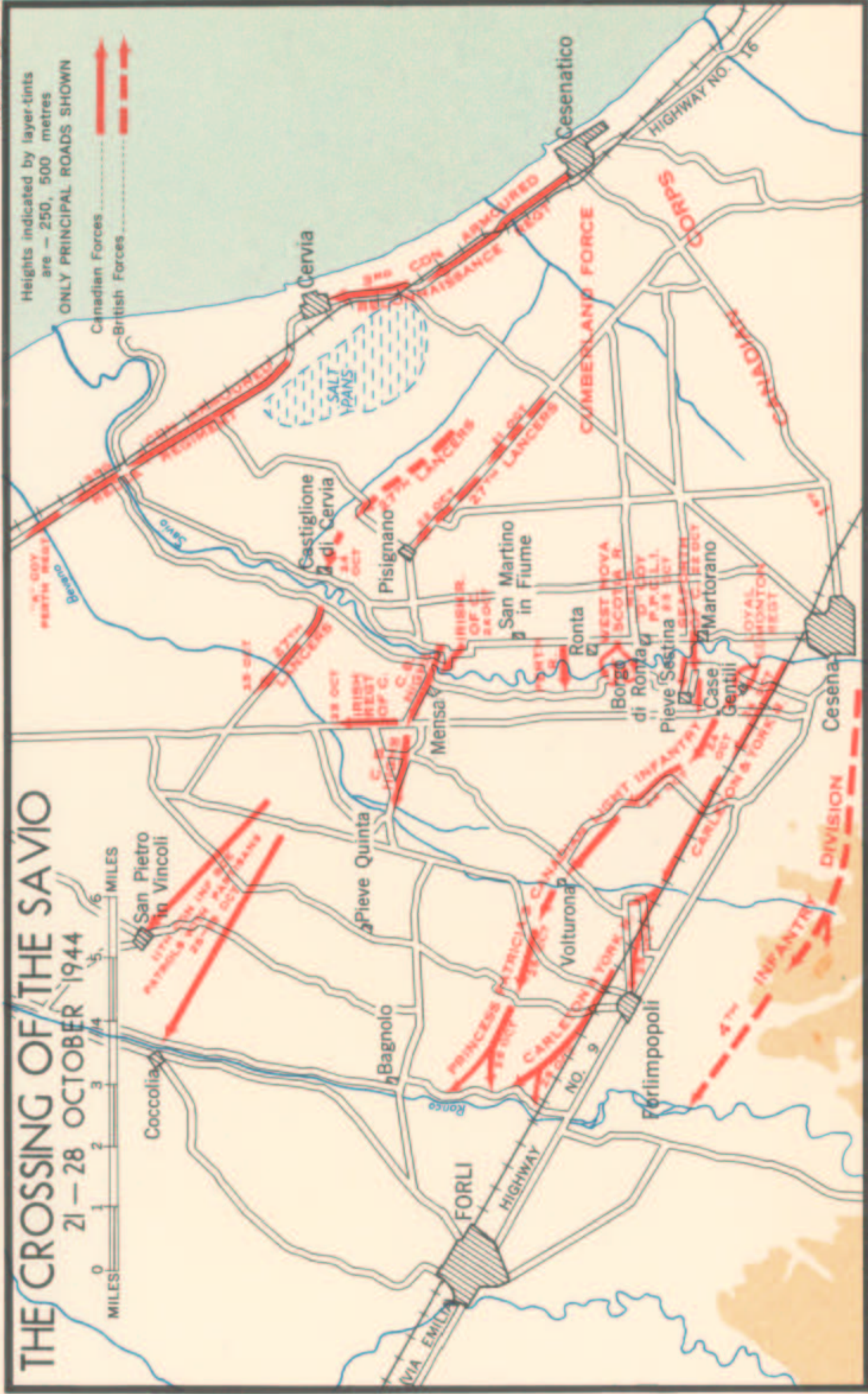
# THE CROSSING OF THE SAVIO 21 - 28 OCTOBER 1944



Heights indicated by layer-tints are - 250, 500 metres

ONLY PRINCIPAL ROADS SHOWN

Canadian Forces  
British Forces



Compiled and drawn by Historical Section, G.S.

Reproduced by Army Survey Establishment R.C.E.

## The Savio Bridgeheads, 20-23 October

The Savio River, which General McCreery's forces must now cross, was a strong natural military barrier, at all times a tank obstacle and when in flood virtually impassable to infantry. The normal water gap was about 50 feet at Cesena, but the sudden spates caused by heavy rains falling over the extensive river basin could quickly produce a torrent threatening to overtop the great earthen dykes, whose crests were 300 feet apart. Allied bombing and German demolitions had put out of commission the high-level bridges on the west side of the town, as well as the crossing at Mensa, six miles to the north; between these points the soft banks and seasonal floodings had through the years defied all civilian attempts to span the river.<sup>123</sup> Within this bridgeless sector local inhabitants had established a number of fording-places for passage when the river was low, but in general the approach roads to these stopped at the top of the bank, and the last 200 yards or more provided no solid footing for tanks. To add to the difficulties confronting the Canadians the enemy had mined the steep slope on either side of the stream.<sup>124</sup>

The Eighth Army allowed the 76th Panzer Corps little opportunity to settle into its new line. Early on the 20th a battalion of the 4th Infantry Division, which had just relieved the 46th Division in the 5th Corps' sector, waded the river 500 yards south of Cesena, to seize and hold a substantial bridgehead.<sup>125</sup> On the same day the 10th Indian Division established a bridgehead at Roversano, three miles to the south, besides making a surprise crossing on the extreme left flank, ten miles upstream from Cesena.<sup>126</sup>

North of Cesena, however, troops of the 1st Canadian Division met no such immediate success. Directed by his Corps Commander on the morning of the 20th to "get a bridgehead over the Savio",<sup>127</sup> General Yokes arranged with Lt.-Col. Bogert that the Patricias should cross that night on a two-company front at the bend west of Martorano. Once they had gained a footing the Seaforth Highlanders would enlarge it to encompass the sprawling village of Pieve Sestina, and would then cut the road running straight north from Cesena to Ravenna.<sup>128</sup> Preparations were made hurriedly, and at 5:00 p.m., after preliminary artillery concentrations, the Patricias scrambled down the slippery banks and began wading the muddy river. In some places the depth of the water and the strength of the current compelled them to swim. Trouble soon developed. The enemy was in unexpected strength, holding the river line opposite Martorano with a battalion of the 9th Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the 26th Panzer Division.<sup>129</sup> Alerted by the barrage, the Germans quickly got their heads up when it ceased, and greeted the Patricias with a hail of mortar bombs and machine-gun bullets. Only one and a half platoons of "D" Company on the right reached the west bank and these, pinned down during the remaining hours of daylight by the enemy fire, withdrew across



the river after dark.<sup>130</sup> "A" Company, late in starting, was caught on the exposed near slopes by the German machine-guns and got only 17 across. Out of communication with the rest of the battalion, the little band clung to a narrow strip of the far bank, being joined by a dozen stragglers during the night. By morning of the 21st a thoroughly aroused enemy was bringing down harassing fire on all eastern approaches to the river.<sup>131</sup>

Lt.-Col. Bogert now gave orders for a brigade attack on a much wider front. Two companies of the Seaforth Highlanders would cross in the area. of the Patricias' venture while the Loyal Edmontons assaulted with one company 1000 yards upstream, where the Savio made a wide curve to the west (Map 22).<sup>132</sup> Artillery support was prescribed on a much larger scale than the actions of the previous weeks had required, although as in the advance to the Pisciatello and the Savio it would be simple, flexible and easily controlled. It would employ the guns of two medium and six field regiments (including the three New Zealand regiments), as well as the 4.2-inch mortars and medium machine-guns of the Saskatoon Light Infantry, firing for the first time as a battalion.<sup>133</sup> Following the practice successfully introduced at San Fortunato, the fire plan provided for individual control of successive blocks of supporting fire by each attacking battalion.<sup>134</sup>

At 8:00 p.m. the barrage opened as Seaforth and Edmontons moved down to the river in pouring rain and plunged into the swift current. Four miles downstream, 71 tanks of the 18th and 20th New Zealand Armoured Regiments began firing in simulated support of an infantry' assault crossing north of San Martino in Fiume. In this diversionary effort, which lasted 75 minutes, they sent 9000 rounds over the river.<sup>135</sup> In the actual area of attack, by nine o'clock leading troops were on the far bank, closely engaged by the enemy. The early loss of the Edmonton company commander brought a temporary break in control, which was quickly offset by the entry of a second company into the battle.<sup>136</sup> Despite increasing enemy resistance the attack went well, and shortly after midnight reserves of both battalions crossed. Two Seaforth companies moved westward to Pieve Sestina, meeting only small parties of Germans, for apparently the enemy-had not yet realized the depth of the Canadian penetration. "A" Company, on the left, had little difficulty in securing its road junction just south of the village. "C" Company reached its objective, the shell-shattered village church, about 2:30 a.m., but almost immediately was counter-attacked by an enemy force of three Panther tanks, two self-propelled guns and about 30 infantry. There was barely time for the battalion's recently-formed tank-hunting platoon,\* which

\* The tank-hunting platoon had been introduced by The Loyal Edmonton Regiment after the fighting for San Fortunato, and adopted by the other battalions of the 2nd Brigade. Its composition varied from one unit to another, but in general it numbered about 20 men commanded by the second-in-command of the anti-tank platoon, and included an assault section of four PIATs and a fire section of Bren guns and rifles. The platoon was well supplied with anti-tank mines and demolition charges.<sup>137</sup>

fortunately was with "C" Company, to set out and camouflage its Hawkins grenades and get its PIATs into position covering the likely approaches.<sup>138</sup>

The action which followed is a striking demonstration of what may be accomplished by well-trained and determined infantry in the face of armoured attack, and is illumined by the gallantry of a member- of the Seaforth's tankhunting platoon-Private E.A. Smith.<sup>139</sup> "C" Company was already under fire from the approaching enemy tanks as Pte. Smith led his PIAT team across an open field to a roadside ditch, which offered the close range he needed. Almost at once a Mark V came lumbering down the road, sweeping the ditches with its machine-guns, and wounding Smith's companion. At a range of only 30 feet, and exposed to the full view of the enemy, Pte. Smith fired his PIAT. The bomb stopped the Panther, and its driver made frantic but futile efforts to turn around and retreat. Immediately ten German infantrymen tumbled off the back of the tank and charged Smith with machine pistols and grenades. Without hesitation he moved into the centre of the road, shot down four of them with his tommy gun, and dispersed the remainder. A second tank now opened fire from a safe distance and more Grenadiers began closing in on Smith. But the intrepid Highlander met this second threat just as steadfastly. Replenishing his ammunition from his wounded comrade in the ditch he continued to protect him, fighting off the enemy with his sub-machine gun until they gave up and withdrew in disorder. In recognition of his heroism Pte. "Smoky" Smith (as the Canadian public came to know him) was awarded the Victoria Cross, the third\* and last to be granted a Canadian in the Italian campaign.<sup>140</sup> The counter-attack had cost the enemy dear. In addition to the tank put out of action by Smith the Seaforth platoon had knocked out with their PIATs and mines a second Panther, a half-track, a scout car and two self-propelled guns-an impressive bag for an infantry force with neither tanks nor anti-tank guns, and one which reflected the highest credit on the platoon commander. Throughout the action Sergeant K.P. Thompson, in the words of the recommendation which brought him a well-deserved D.C.M.,† "with complete disregard for his own safety moved across open ground swept by enemy fire, from one PIAT position to another, encouraging his men, re-siting the weapons to counter the enemy's moves, and controlling the defence." Later "C" Company discovered a third Mark V bogged down in a ditch near the scene of the fight. It was captured intact and subsequently went to help solve the equipment problems of Popski's Private Army.<sup>141</sup>

\* It is worthy of note that each of these three V.Cs. was earned in combat with troops of formations counted among the elite of the German forces in Italy-the 1st Parachute Division at Casa Berardi, the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division at the Melfa, and the 26th Panzer Division at the Savio.

† The bitter fighting to cross the Savio brought to units of the 2nd Brigade one V.C., four D.C.Ms. and four Military Medals.

Half a mile upstream the Edmonton had recovered from their initial setback, and by daylight "D" Company was 300 yards west of the river among the handful of houses shown on the map as Case Gentili. There the Germans launched a counter-attack similar to that which had struck the Seaforth a few hours earlier; tanks and infantry forced the Edmontons back, and took a number of them prisoner. It was only a temporary check, however. At 7:15 "C" Company, which had been joined by the survivors of "D", launched a "counter"-counter-attack upon Case Gentili, assisted by a concentration which Lt.-Col. Stone called down from the 3rd Medium Regiment R.A. On the heels of the bombardment they re-entered the hamlet, finding it nearly flat and peopled by dead or spiritless enemy.<sup>142</sup> The missing Edmonton were released and 35 of their captors taken prisoner.<sup>143</sup>

These successes by the 2nd Brigade were causing the enemy considerable uneasiness. The heavy German casualties from the preliminary artillery fire and the bad going for tanks were jointly blamed for the failure of "promptly initiated counter-thrusts" to reach their objectives.<sup>144</sup> "This is quite a mess at Crasemann's",\* commented Rottiger to Wentzell early on the 22nd. "Yes" replied the latter. "It was a fierce artillery shoot there during the night, and contrary to expectations, and in spite of being thrown back repeatedly, the enemy renewed his attacks with a will. He now has a bridgehead, but the thing has been stopped due to his difficulties in crossing the water with tanks and heavy weapons. We are in difficulties too, because in the counter-attacks our tanks bogged down."<sup>145</sup>

It was, indeed a temporary stalemate, though if anything the odds were with the Germans. At ten that morning (22 October) when General Vokes visited 2nd Brigade Headquarters, Lt.-Col. Bogert was able to report a bridgehead more than a mile wide, with a depth of 1400 yards in the Seaforth's sector. But the situation was not as good as might first appear, for the Engineers, who throughout the night had explored every possibility of bridging the rapidly rising Savio, could hold out no hope of getting supporting arms across the river for at least 24 hours. Furthermore, the bad weather prevented close support by the Air Force.<sup>146</sup> While the divisional commander was still with Bogert, however, an officer of the 145th Regiment R.A.C. (whose tanks were supporting the 2nd Brigade) brought word of a crossing-place near Borgo di Ronta, about a mile downstream from Martorano. Engineers confirmed that the site seemed suitable for bridging. Accordingly the Patricia's--who since the relief of their troops on the west bank by the Seaforth had been employed in supplying the other battalions of the brigade with food and ammunition and assisting in the evacuation of casualties and prisoners--were ordered to move a company to cover Borgo di Ronta and prevent enemy interference with preparations for an attack in that area.

\* G.O.C. 26th Panzer Division, replacing von Luttwitz, who had gone to command an army on the Eastern front.

Early in the afternoon "D" Company, supported by a troop of British tanks, occupied the village, from which the 2nd New Zealand Division, anticipating its relief\* by the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, had already retired.<sup>147</sup>

The plan was for the Patricia company to assault over the river at midnight. Two companies from The West Nova Scotia Regiment (the battalion having been placed under Bogert's command for the operation) would then expand the bridgehead sufficiently to link up with the Seaforth and provide protection for sappers to bridge the river. The goal was the Cesena-Ravenna road, and as the new attack went in the Seaforth would push north-eastward from Pieve Sestina while The Loyal Edmonton Regiment renewed its attempts to break out at Case Gentili.<sup>148</sup>

The rain, which had stopped during the morning of the 22nd, began falling again in the early evening, causing the swollen Savio to rise still higher. At Borgo di Ronta things went wrong from the start. Surprise was lost when the Patricias bumped into a German standing patrol on the near bank, and were unable to prevent some of its members from escaping to the other side. By the time the first platoons had crossed, shuttling two assault boats forward and back on a rope, the defenders had come to life. "D" Company of the West Novas reached the far bank in strength, and began fighting its way northward, clearing farmhouses and taking some prisoners; but "A" Company, following about 4:00 a.m., was caught by a strong force of German infantry and tanks before it could establish a foothold.<sup>149</sup> There was bad news now from the Engineers, who reported that the spongy banks and rising water had defeated all efforts to build a bridge.<sup>150</sup>

In these circumstances the Commanding Officer of the West Novas, Lt.-Col. A.L. Saunders, ordered "A" Company to withdraw. There was no communication with the Patricia platoons, whose company commander, fearing that a water crossing would put his wireless set out of commission, had remained on the east bank.<sup>151</sup> It was later learned that one platoon had been cut off and overwhelmed; the remainder joined elements of the West Novas and withdrew with them to the home bank. By eight o'clock only Saunders' "D" Company remained on the far side, and it was in an unenviable situation. It had reached its objective, a farmhouse 300 yards west of the Savio,<sup>152</sup> but was under pressure on three sides from self-propelled guns, tanks and infantry. Fortunately its No. 18 set was still working, and the company commander, Major J. K. Rhodes, was able to bring down artillery fire which broke up every German attempt to launch a combined attack by infantry and armour. From the east bank of the river a troop of M-10s of the 15th Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A. knocked out an enemy S.P. at 400 yards and shot up the buildings concealing the German infantry.<sup>153</sup> Rhodes

\* The withdrawal of the 2nd New Zealand Division into army reserve initiated a programme of resting and regrouping the formations of the Eighth Army (see below, p. 594). The departure of the New Zealanders ended an association which had begun when the Division came under command of the 1st Canadian Corps seven weeks before.

continued to direct his company's defence until the house which he was using as an observation post "literally crumbled around him" under direct hits; whereupon the wireless set, which had miraculously escaped harm, was moved to a nearby shellhole. But the impossibility of bridging the river made "D" Company's heroic efforts of no avail. With the concurrence of General Vokes, the West Novas were withdrawn shortly before midday under a heavy smoke-screen.<sup>154</sup> Major Rhodes was awarded the D.S.O.<sup>155</sup>

Early that morning General Burns arrived at General Vokes' headquarters and learned of the failure of the Borgo di Ronta attack. After discussion with his divisional commander he decided to make a second attempt, using fresh troops, and conveyed this intention to the Army Commander by telephone. General McCreery, however, appreciating that the operations of the 5th Corps west of the Savio would soon bring about a further withdrawal by the 76th Panzer Corps, ruled against committing the 1st Division to another brigade operation, and directed that it concentrate on maintaining the 2nd Brigade's bridgehead opposite Martorano. Over the rest of the Corps front operations were to be confined to active patrolling. The 5th Canadian Armoured Division, having just relieved the New Zealand Division and taken Cumberland Force under command, would reconnoitre the river on its front for a possible crossing, which in view of the relatively low calibre of the troops which had replaced the parachutists, could probably be made without much difficulty.<sup>156</sup> For the 2nd Canadian Brigade's achievement McCreery had the highest praise. "The way your Brigade secured a big bridgehead," he wrote to Bogert on the 25th, "smashed all enemy counter-attacks, and surmounted all the difficulties of having no bridge behind was magnificent.... Well done indeed."<sup>157</sup> The four days' fighting had cost the brigade (including The West Nova Scotia Regiment) 191 casualties, 33 of them fatal.

The situation on the Army's left front gave grounds for optimism. The bridgeheads gained by the 5th Corps on the 20th had been held and, in the case of the 10th Indian Division, greatly expanded. The 12th Infantry Brigade's position west of the Savio at Cesena was considerably strengthened on the 21st by the completion just above the town of a causeway, formed by leapfrogging three Arks (a fourth was later added) into line across the river bed. By noon seven British tanks were in the bridgehead.<sup>158</sup> To the south the Indians, with two bridges over the river, assaulted late on the 22nd behind a heavy artillery bombardment, and advanced three miles to seize Mount Cavallo, a commanding height in the watershed between the Savio and the Ronco (see Map 23).<sup>159</sup> Farther west the indomitable Poles, fighting through exceedingly rugged terrain, had by 22 October captured the Mount Grosso massif between the headwaters of the Bidente and the Rabbi\* and started to advance down the valleys of these two rivers towards Forli, the

\* The former, and more easterly, of these rivets becomes the Ronco two miles south of Meldola; the other joins the Montone at Forli.

enemy's next main stronghold west of Cesena. German resistance in the mountains slackened on the 24th, and by the 27th the Polish left was in Predappio Nuova, birthplace of Mussolini, while the right was within three miles of Meldola, which the 5th Corps was threatening from the east. By then the Tenth Army had retired behind the Ronco.<sup>160</sup>

Meanwhile General von Vietinghoff's actions were being influenced to an increasing extent by the events at the inter-army boundary, where the gravity of the situation south of Bologna remained undiminished. In the first two weeks of October Major-General Geoffrey Keyes' 2nd Corps, carrying the Fifth Army's thrust northward between the Santerno and the Reno Rivers, had driven a deep salient into the German positions, so that at some points forward troops could look down into the Lombard Plain. The exhausted U.S. Corps launched a final offensive on 16 October, to such good effect that four days later the 88th Division had captured the towering height of Mount Grande, less than five miles from the Via Emilia.<sup>161</sup> This Allied success emphasized to von Vietinghoff the need for further reinforcing the danger zone from the 76th Panzer Corps. On the 22nd he gave General Herr permission in the event of continued Allied pressure to take his line back roughly two miles on either side of the Via Emilia to a position midway between the Savio and Bevano Rivers.<sup>162</sup> Next day it was decided that the 1st Parachute Division should join General Baade's 90th Panzer Grenadier Division on the Tenth Army's right wing.<sup>163</sup>

The 23rd was a busy day for Field-Marshal Kesselring, who had just announced important changes in his command organization. In order to place the entire battle area under unified control the inter-army boundary would be shifted westward to bring the 1st Parachute Corps under von Vietinghoff's command. In addition the commanders and headquarters staffs of the 51st Mountain Corps and the 14th Panzer Corps would be exchanged. (General Feurstein's departure was regretted at Tenth Army Headquarters, where it was ascribed to political considerations.)<sup>164</sup> The reduced Fourteenth Army and the Army of Liguria in the north-west would be welded into a new army group,<sup>165</sup> to be commanded by Marshal Graziani.\* These changes were to come into effect next day, and all headquarters were occupied with the necessary arrangements. During the morning the C.-in-C. South-West visited the three divisions facing the Canadian Corps, moving on afterwards to the critical part of his front. In the late afternoon he called at the headquarters of General Polack's 29th Panzer Grenadier Division in the Bologna area. He did not complete his crowded schedule, however. At eight that evening, † unconscious, and with a severe head wound, he was reported as

\* Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, Viceroy of Ethiopia in 1936-31, became Chief of the Italian General Staff in October 1939, and commanded all Italian Forces in Libya in 1940-41. After the Italian Armistice Mussolini made him Minister of National Defence in his Fascist Republic, and in August 1944 he was placed in command of the *Armee Ligurien*, formerly the *Armeegruppe von Zangen*.<sup>166</sup>

† In Field-Marshal Kesselring's *Memoirs* the date is incorrectly given as 25 October.<sup>167</sup>

being at a casualty clearing station of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division midway between Bologna and Imola. His car had collided in the darkness with a gun coming on to the highway from a side road. He was taken to a base hospital at Ferrara,<sup>168</sup> and did not return to control of operations until the middle of January.

During Kesselring's absence von Vietinghoff assumed the appointment of C.-in-C. South-West and the command of Army Group "C"; General Lemelsen took over the Tenth Army, being succeeded as commander of the Fourteenth Army by General of Artillery Heinz Ziegler.<sup>169</sup> The new Army Group Commander lost no time in challenging the High Command's policy of clinging to ground. On the 24th he announced his intention of pulling back the Tenth Army during the next month to a permanent defence position which would run from Bologna to the Comacchio lagoon—a bold suggestion which surprisingly enough seemed acceptable to Hitler (with the usual reservations).<sup>170</sup> That same afternoon von Vietinghoff ordered a further withdrawal of the 76th Panzer Corps to a new line along the Ronco and Bevano Rivers.<sup>171</sup>

Signs of the impending retirement were apparent on the 1st Canadian Division's front on the 23rd. The 26th Panzer Division's forward zone was inactive, and in the afternoon German shelling of the river eased sufficiently for the 3rd Field Company R.C.E. to start bridging operations at Martorano. During the previous 24 hours the company had managed to get two cable ferries into operation at this site, using assault boats singly and combined into light rafts. By this means much-needed supplies, ammunition and equipment, including four "Littlejohn"\* anti-tank guns and even a jeep, had reached the Seaforth and Edmontons, and more than 70 casualties and 200 prisoners had been evacuated from the-bridgehead.<sup>174</sup> As yet heavy vehicles and tanks could cross only by the Ark causeway above Cesena, although within the city limits British sappers were at work on the great stone Ponte Vecchio. In their successful attacks upon the Savio bridges the Desert Air Force had spared this historic structure at the request of the Eighth Army,<sup>175</sup> but the central arch had been blown by the retreating Germans.<sup>176</sup> By 3:00 a.m. on the 24th the Canadians had a Class 9 floating bridge ready for use at Martorano, and as a result the flow of materiel into the bridgehead greatly increased.<sup>177</sup>

The Divisional Engineers now had considerable stocks of Bailey equipment at the Savio. "We must have accumulated most of the bridging available in the 1st Canadian Corps", observed one of their officers. "So far we have been unable to use any of it."<sup>178</sup> The enemy's withdrawal on the 24th intensified the need for getting tanks into the pursuit, and at six that evening

\* A two-pounder anti-tank gun having a tapered bore in order to increase its muzzle velocity. During the last half of October two troops of the 90th Anti-Tank Battery R.C.A. were equipped with these guns, whose mobility and high penetrating power made them particularly suitable for river-crossings.<sup>172</sup> This was the first use of the guns in Italy<sup>173</sup>

the 4th Field Company began work on a 60-foot low-level Bailey immediately south of the demolished railway bridge. The job was finished and armour was crossing by daylight.<sup>179</sup> The result of this labour was short-lived, however. As though asserting its independence the Savio, swollen by an all-night rain, rose in spate on the morning of the 26th and swept away the Ark causeway and all crossings in the Canadian Corps' sector. Fortunately the old Roman bridge, which for centuries had withstood the river's vagaries, survived this latest ordeal. The broken arch had now been spanned by a Bailey, and for the next three days it carried the heavy traffic of both the 5th and the Canadian Corps.<sup>180</sup>

### The Pursuit to the Ronco

General Herr had timed his withdrawal well. When early on 24 October the 12th British Infantry Brigade attacked from its Savio bridgehead under a heavy artillery barrage, the blow fell mainly on empty ground. There was only perfunctory resistance from German rearguards, and by nightfall the British had crossed the Bevano. A northward shift in the inter-corps boundary gave the 4th Division the Via Emilia, thereby enabling General Ward's leading troops to reach the Ronco late on the 25th.<sup>181</sup> In the Canadian sector the lack of suitable bridges which had handicapped the 2nd Brigade's efforts to cross the Savio was now to slow the pursuit to a snail's pace. There was no active opposition, yet on the 24th the marching Patricias, leading the brigade's advance from the Cesena-Ravenna lateral, covered only two miles.<sup>182</sup> At midnight the Carleton and York drew level along the railway.<sup>183</sup> Next morning the two battalions crossed the narrow, undyked Bevano ditch and on the 26th arrived at the Ronco, six miles farther west. The enemy was in evidence on the far bank, but apart from an interchange of shelling and sniping the area remained quiet. Orders came from General Vokes to both brigades to reconnoitre across the river but not to attempt a major passage. But the speed and depth of the current, matching that of the Savio, kept Canadian patrols on the east bank, which they actively explored from the railway to the village of Bagnolo, three miles downstream. They found no sign of the enemy, although from civilians they heard many tales of German activity farther north.<sup>184</sup>

The bitter fighting which had accompanied the 1st Division's efforts to cross the Savio had had no counterpart on General Burns' right flank. It will be recalled that the 5th Armoured Division had relieved the New Zealanders on the night of 22-23 October,<sup>185</sup> when the 11th Brigade took over a threemile stretch of the river road extending north to Mensa. Cumberland Force, now under General Hoffmeister's command, remained in its old sector astride Highway No. 16.<sup>186</sup>



In spite of the 5th Division's role of conducting only limited operations, the general German withdrawal on the morning of the 24th seemed to justify a crossing of the Savio. Accordingly during the afternoon the Irish Regiment went over unopposed in assault, boats and established a bridgehead at Mensa,<sup>187</sup> the Perths later crossing two miles upstream. The completion of two bridges next afternoon set the stage for the pursuit.<sup>188</sup> Overcoming the hindrance of a few mines and demolitions, by late afternoon on the 25th the Cape Bretons and the Irish were at the Bevano.<sup>189</sup> These advances were duplicated in the coastal sector, where Cumberland Force units followed the 114th Jager Division (which had replaced the paratroopers between the 20th and 22nd)<sup>190</sup> across the Savio, to line up with the 11th Brigade at the Bevano. After dark on the 25th the 27th Lancers waded the river west of Castiglione di Cervia, while four miles downstream a company of Perths, placed under command of The Governor General's Horse Guards, crossed near the broken bridge on the Via Adriatica.<sup>191</sup> Next day an enemy patrol unsuccessfully attacked the Perths' positions, leaving behind four dead and two prisoners.<sup>192</sup> It was a minor skirmish and significant only because it marked the end of action by Cumberland Force; for by that time arrangements were all but completed for the withdrawal of the 1st Canadian Corps into reserve.

### Allied Plans for the Winter Campaign

Even before the Eighth Army reached the Savio General McCreery had decided to relieve the Canadians. Although all three corps of the Army had been committed during October, British and Polish divisions were not as urgently in need of a rest as those of the Canadian Corps; the latter, except for the 2nd New Zealand Division, had been almost continuously engaged in operations since the offensive began in August. As we have seen, both Canadian formations had suffered heavily during the bitter fighting from the Metauro to the Marecchia, when the 1st Division was committed for 28 days and the 5th Division for seventeen. Each had been employed in turn in the ensuing advance, and although neither had then experienced really heavy fighting, the exacting conditions of weather and terrain had prevented full recuperation from the earlier strain. A relief was clearly necessary, but the Army Commander's problem was to find suitable replacements.

There were no fresh formations available. Of the four divisions in reserve, the 46th had only just gone into rest, the 4th Indian Division was earmarked for duty in Greece, and, as we have already noted, a general shortage of infantry reinforcements had left the 1st Armoured and 56th Infantry Divisions no longer operational. There was virtually no reserve of armour (although the limited opportunity of employing tanks in such terrain made this less serious).<sup>193</sup> Realizing the difficulties of advancing in strength across the increasingly formidable water obstacles barring the direct route to Ravenna, and with the example of Cumberland Force to guide him, McCreery decided

to replace the Canadian Corps in that sector with light forces operating under command of an improvised headquarters. This would of course throw still greater emphasis on the operations of the 5th Corps along the Via Emilia and in the Apennine foothills; but towards the end of November, when the Army's advance had reached better going on the right of the highway, the rested Canadians could be committed to good purpose.<sup>194</sup>

It will be obvious that this regrouping formed part of the wider programme which General Alexander and his Army Commanders had drawn up for the Army Group as a whole. In spite of the unprofitable struggle against an enemy aided on one flank by the barriers of rivers and waterlogged plain, and on the other by strong mountain fortresses on which the snows of winter were already falling, fighting was to continue without abatement. This policy followed General Eisenhower's decision to wage a winter campaign on the western front, in the hope of bringing about a German collapse either directly or, by the attrition it caused, in the spring. In keeping with the role of the Italian campaign to supplement the Allied offensive in Western Europe, the Allied Armies in Italy were called upon to assist the operations about to be launched in that theatre. "I considered four possible courses to make that contribution:" writes Lord Alexander, "to transfer troops from Italy to the west, to employ troops from Italy in Yugoslavia, to continue the offensive on the Italian front at full stretch to the limits set by exhaustion and material shortage or to halt the offensive now and build up for a renewal in greater strength at a later date." General Eisenhower chose the third course as likely to have the greatest effect on the operations he was contemplating (for at that time no extra troops were needed in France, and an offensive in Yugoslavia was not likely to influence the Western front).<sup>195</sup>

From the information available at his headquarters there appeared to General Alexander no certainty that the war against Germany would end in 1944, and he thus foresaw the necessity of launching a sustained offensive in his own theatre in 1945. In a letter to his Army Commanders on 10 October he directed that "active offensive operations with all available forces" were to continue as long as the weather and the state of 'the troops should permit (it was hoped that the enemy would be driven back to the line of the Adige River and the Alps); this would be followed by a period of active defence by minimum forces in order that all formations might be rested and trained for a renewal of the offensive in the spring.<sup>196</sup>

The heavy but unprofitable fighting in which the Fifth Army was engaged during the next two weeks\* and the lack of replacements for the Eighth Army

\* On 9 October Clark notified Alexander that at the existing rate of wastage the Fifth Army would be 8000 infantry short by 1 November. In response to Alexander's personal appeal, General Eisenhower at once undertook to dispatch to Italy by air 3000 reinforcements from the resources of the European Theatre of Operations.<sup>197</sup> A simultaneous request by Mr. Churchill to President Roosevelt to deflect two or three American divisions to the Italian front was refused on the grounds that there was no hope of destroying Kesselring's army that winter and that the terrain and weather would prevent any further decisive advance in 1944.<sup>198</sup>

forced a modification in the Allied plans,<sup>199</sup> and by 29 October, when the Commander-in-Chief conferred with Generals McCreery and Clark in Siena, it was apparent that Allied objectives in the near future must fall far short of the Adige line. It was now doubtful whether Bologna and Ravenna could be captured before closing the campaign for the winter—a date which would be largely governed by the timing of the spring offensive, tentatively set to open on 1 February.<sup>200</sup> On the 30th Alexander advised General Wilson of his plans for the next three months. During November the Fifth Army, whose operations he had ordered suspended on 27 October,<sup>201</sup> was to rest and refit. The Eighth Army would continue with two corps its current offensive along the Via Emilia to drive the enemy out of his salient between Forlì and Mount Grande, while at the same time advancing on Ravenna. Both armies would prepare for a combined effort during the first half of December against Bologna, and Ravenna if not already in Allied hands; but all offensive operations would have to cease on 15 December, in order to allow adequate time to prepare for the 1945 campaign.<sup>202</sup>

The relief of the Canadian Corps, originally scheduled for the morning of 27 October, was delayed by the destruction of communications across the rampaging Savio.<sup>203</sup> At midday on the 28th the 5th Armoured Division handed over its commitments between the mouth of the Savio and the Ronco at Bagnolo to "Porterforce", a group of British and Canadian armoured (some dismounted) and artillery units commanded by Lt.-Col. A. M. Horsbrugh Porter, commanding officer of the 27th Lancers. At the same time the 12th Lancers of the 5th Corps relieved the 1st Division along the Ronco south of Bagnolo. The whole of the Canadian Corps (excepting the units with Porterforce) now passed into Eighth Army reserve.<sup>204</sup>

Thus Operation "Olive", the final stage of which was to have been an armoured drive across the Romagna plain, finished its course at the banks of the Ronco. The Canadian Corps' advance of but 23 miles in 33 days was in marked contrast to the spectacular gains made during the heavy fighting through the Gothic Line. On only two occasions after 23 September—in the fight of the 12th Brigade to reach the Uso and the 2nd Brigade's struggle for its Savio bridgehead—had the Corps been committed to anything more than light encounters with enemy rearguards. The slower tempo is reflected in the casualty figures for this final phase of "Olive", which cost the Canadians 355 officers and men killed, 1471 wounded and 92 taken prisoner as against the total of 3896 battle casualties sustained between the Metauro and the Marecchia.

During these last five weeks direct air support of the Canadian Corps' operations had been severely restricted by the continual wet weather, which reduced flying visibility to zero and turned landing-grounds into quagmires. "How is the weather?" Rottiger asked from Army Group Headquarters on 22 October, when inquiring about the 2nd Brigade's attack at the Savio.

"Terrible", replied Wentzell. "It is raining without a let-up. Militarily speaking it is therefore good for us." "So he cannot use his Air Force," agreed Rottiger.<sup>205</sup> With discouraging monotony the daily reports of the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force began: "Bad weather continued to hamper operations."<sup>206</sup> On five of the last ten days in September heavy rain kept the Desert Air Force grounded; and during the worsening weather in October, although aircraft from the D.A.F. and the 12th Fighter Command\*, which was supporting the Fifth Army, were airborne on every day except one, their operations were restricted, and on seven days amounted to less than 100 sorties a day.<sup>208</sup> In spite of these limitations-unfortunately two of the blank days were 22 and 23 October, at the height of the Savio fighting-the D.A.F. supported a number of battlefield attacks as well as taking on communications and supply centres behind the front line. Fighter-bombers worried the German movement across the Savio on the 20th, supported the 1st Canadian Division as it pushed out of the bridgehead on the 24th, and harassed the German retreat to the Ronco. The destruction of the Savio bridges by the D.A.F. has already been noted. This achievement, bound up directly with the Eighth Army's advance, was part of an extensive programme of interdiction in which the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force was responsible for attacks on the enemy's communications as far as the northern edge of the Po Valley, while the strategic bombers applied their efforts to the Italian frontier and the industrial cities of the north. During October fighterbombers and medium bombers of the Desert Air Force, ranging far afield between the Modena-Bologna railway and the Adriatic, blasted railway lines and rail traffic, in three days claiming the destruction of 57 locomotives, besides, taking a heavy toll of boats and barges plying the canals.<sup>209</sup>

### The Armoured Brigade in the Apennines

We must now turn our attention to the central sector of the Italian front, where in an earlier chapter we left the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade at the end of August with the 13th Corps, which formed the Fifth Army's right wing. At that time the brigade had two regiments committed: the Ontarios were supporting the 1st British Infantry Division in the Fiesole sector north of Florence, while the Calgaries, operating under the command of the 8th Indian Division, had crossed the Arno River near Pontassieve (see Map 23). Brigadier Murphy's headquarters and the Three Rivers Regiment were in reserve.<sup>210</sup> General Kirkman's role was merely to keep the enemy under pressure, expanding his bridgehead if further German withdrawals

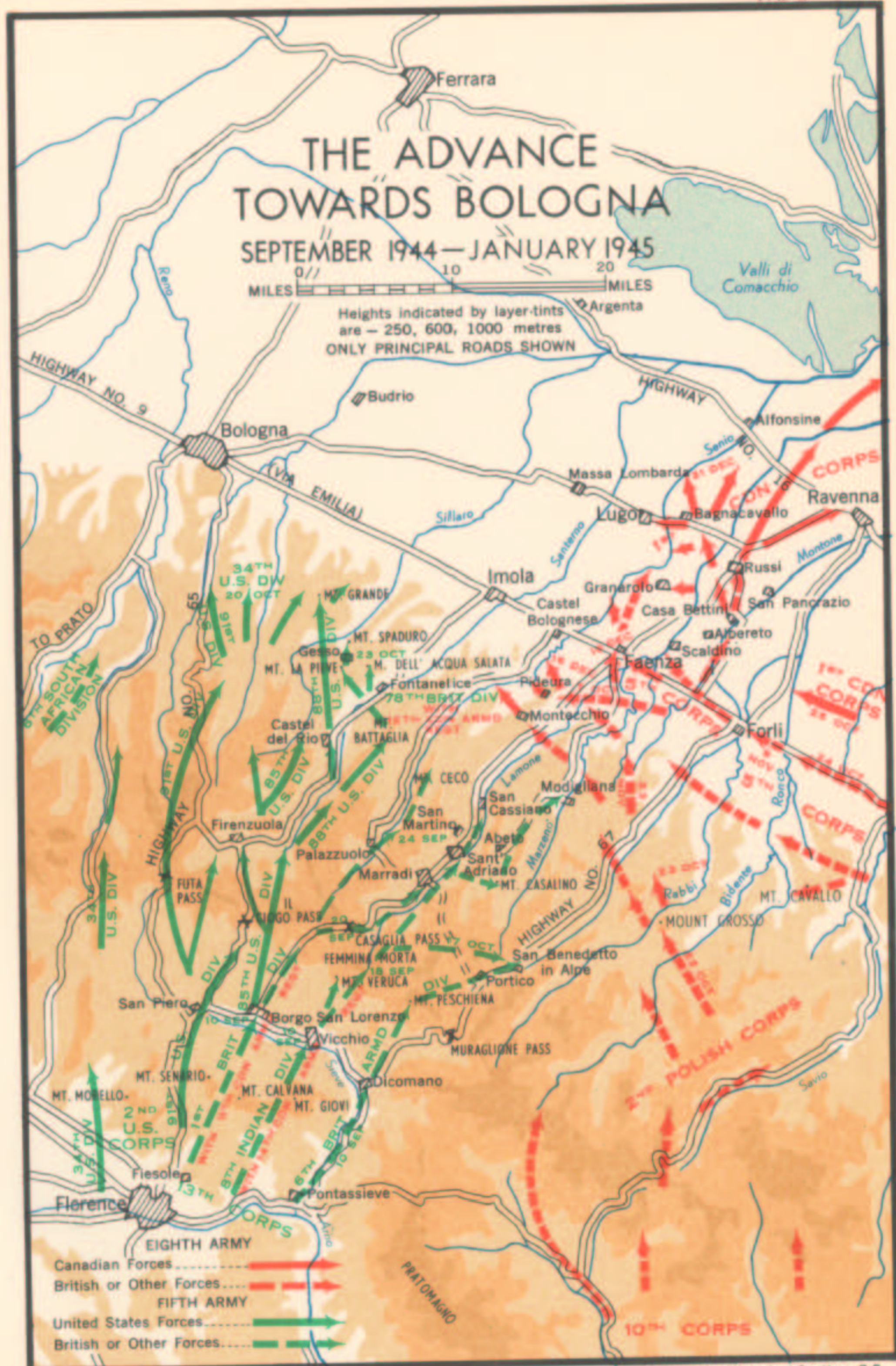
\* To replace the 12th Tactical Air Command, which had been moved to Corsica to support the landings in Southern France, the 12th Fighter Command was formed on 20 September from the U.S. element of the Mediterranean Allied Coastal Air Force. On 19 October it became the 22nd Tactical Air Command.<sup>207</sup>

allowed, and screening with his forward troops the preparations being made by the 2nd U.S. Corps for delivering the main blow in the Fifth Army's forthcoming offensive<sup>211</sup>—the second punch of the two-fisted attack planned by General Alexander against the Gothic Line. It will be recalled that General Clark was to be prepared to strike along the Florence-Bologna axis, as soon as the enemy's strength in this area had been sufficiently weakened by withdrawals to meet the Eighth Army's attack.<sup>112</sup>

It was indeed a formidable military barrier which confronted the Fifth Army. At its narrowest point, between Florence and Bologna, the range of the Northern Apennines is fifty miles wide. Its average crest elevation is between 3000 and 4000 feet, with individual peaks rising to more than 5000 feet above sea-level. The poorly defined line of the watershed lies well towards the south-western edge, so that the Allies were confronted by the steeper side of the range. The rivers, descending in fairly parallel courses to the north-east and south-west, have scored the main slopes with narrow gorges between long irregular spurs, which have themselves been further corrugated by the erosive action of the numerous tributary mountain streams. The result is a confusion of jagged peaks and broken ridges interspersed with deep pocket-like valleys, which provided the enemy with a series of excellent ready-made defensive positions.<sup>213</sup>

The roads in this mountainous region followed the rivers, and only a few skilfully engineered state or provincial highways crossed the main watershed. In the 30-mile wide sector which formed the Fifth Army's central and right flank opposite Florence five mountain passes accommodated the routes over which General Clark's formations might advance. The two best constructed were the Pontassieve-Forli Highway (No. 67) just inside the army's right-hand boundary, and Highway No. 65, the main road from Florence to Bologna. Between these highways two secondary routes led across the mountains from the valley of the Sieve—the more easterly from Borgo San Lorenzo through the Casaglia Pass and down the valley of the Lamone to Faenza, the other climbing from San Piero over the Giogo Pass and descending the Santerno to Imola. The fifth route, half a dozen miles to the west of Highway No. 65, was the road running north from Prato to Bologna. We have seen that these obvious gateways to the northern plains had received the careful attention of Organization Todt. Concrete pillboxes, anti-tank walls and ditches, artillery bunkers and machine-gun posts, supplemented extensively by wire and mines, constituted a deep defensive zone in front of each mountain pass. As we have noted, fortifications were strongest at the Futa Pass, whose relatively low elevation made Highway No. 65 topographically the easiest as well as the most direct route from Florence to Bologna.<sup>214</sup>

General Clark's plan, made known in an operation instruction issued on 17. August, was for the Fifth Army's attack to go in between Highways No. 65 and 67, with the 2nd U.S. Corps on the left striking the main blow



and the 13th Corps giving support on the right. The 4th U.S. Corps, between Florence and the west coast, would maintain pressure against the Fourteenth Army's right, and follow up any German withdrawal. The start line was the eight-mile stretch of the River Arno from Florence eastward to Pontassieve; the preliminary objective was the line of hills between the Arno and the Sieve, about eight miles north of Florence. In the succeeding phase the Army would "conduct further operations to the north to penetrate the Gothic Line."<sup>215</sup> The expected fight in the first phase did not materialize, however, for the early success of the Eighth Army's offensive at the coast, combined with the threat of an attack by the Fifth Army, caused an enemy withdrawal on the central front. On the night of 7-8 September the 4th Parachute Division fell back from Mounts Morello and Senario, initial objectives of the 2nd U.S. Corps, while opposite the 13th Corps the 356th Infantry Division (which was already earmarked as a reinforcement for the Adriatic front)<sup>216</sup> abandoned Mounts Calvana and Giovi.<sup>217</sup>

On the 9th General Alexander, who had been closely gauging the probable effect that the Eighth Army's attack would have on Kesselring's dispositions, signalled to General Wilson: "Have decided to unleash Fifth Army who will now go ahead with their offensive in the centre."<sup>218</sup> Next morning the 2nd Corps began closing to the Gothic Line on a ten-mile front from Highway No. 65 west to the Prato-Bologna road. The 13th Corps, conforming on the right, found no enemy south of the Sieve but only the opposition of broken bridges and cratered roads. Before nightfall patrols of the 1st British and 8th Indian Divisions had crossed the river at Borgo San Lorenzo and Vicchio, while farther east the 6th Armoured Division entered Dicomano on Highway No. 67.<sup>219</sup>

Early on 13 September, just a few hours after the Eighth Army had reopened its attack on the Coriano ridge, the Fifth Army began its assault on the Gothic Line. The main force of the 2nd Corps attack was directed, as we have seen, up the San Piero-Firenzuola road, instead of along the more heavily guarded Highway No. 65. General Keyes sent two divisions, the 91st and the 85th, against Il Giogo Pass and the dominating heights on either side. It took five days of bitter fighting, in which the assaulting troops were supported by a great mass of artillery fire and air bombardment on a considerable scale, before the stubborn resistance of the German paratroopers was broken.<sup>220</sup> By the 18th the 2nd Corps controlled the pass and a seven-mile stretch of the Gothic Line on either side, and the victorious 85th Division was in hot pursuit up the road towards Firenzuola. The elaborate defences of the Futa Pass now lost their significance and were overcome in relatively light fighting by a regiment of the 91st Division; while on the Corps left the 34th Division ended a week-long battle by breaking through between Highway No. 65 and the Prato-Bologna road.<sup>221</sup>

In the meantime the advance by the 13th Corps, limited both in intention and achievement, had been less spectacular. In order best to assist Clark's main thrust Kirkman concentrated the efforts of his forces along the left of the two routes of advance assigned to him. He ordered the 1st Division to open up the Borgo San Lorenzo-Faenza road, and the 6th Armoured Division Highway No. 67. The 8th Indian Division was to advance across the watershed between these two routes, in order to outflank the enemy guarding the Casaglia Pass.<sup>222</sup>

The principal objective of the Indian Division's flanking attack was the Femmina Morta, a mountain 3700 feet high which dominated the Casaglia Pass from the south-east; but three intervening heights must first be taken. Early on the 13th Major-General Russell attacked these positions with two battalions of his 21st Brigade. In support of the 1st/5th Mahrattas on the left was "B" Squadron of The Calgary Regiment. Just before sundown on the 12th a troop of tanks moved forward from Vicchio and climbed a precipitous mountain trail to within 2000 yards of Mount Veruca, the Mahrattas' objective. When the assault went in next day a system of prearranged signals enabled the armour to soften up the German machine-gun posts immediately in front of the advancing infantry, who, records the Calgary diarist, "once again showed their touching and even astounding faith in Canadian tanks by advancing without hesitation one or two hundred yards behind our fire."<sup>223</sup> By nightfall Mount Veruca had been secured with few casualties to the attackers.<sup>224</sup> On the Corps left "B" Squadron of the Ontarios, firing from the Borgo San Lorenzo-Faenza road, similarly supported the 66th Brigade, which was leading the 1st Division's advance.<sup>225</sup>

During the next several days British and Indian infantry made moderate gains, as the German 715th Division (which since the departure of the 356th Division had extended its front westward to the Tenth Army's right boundary) abandoned positions declared by disgruntled prisoners to be considerably inferior in construction to those at the main passes.<sup>226</sup> As they climbed higher into the San Benedetto Alps the foremost Indian troops passed beyond the limits of jeep supply and had to be maintained by mule team. By 17 September the heights in front of Femmina Morta had been cleared, and on the 18th a hard-fighting Gurkha battalion of the 17th Indian Brigade took the mountain in a five-hour battle.<sup>227</sup> This success, coupled with the 2nd Corps' capture of Il Giogo Pass, brought an enemy withdrawal in front of the 1st British Division, whose forces entered the Casaglia Pass unopposed on 20 September.<sup>228</sup> There was no help now that the armour could give until the Engineers had repaired the extensive enemy demolitions on the routes forward, and a Corps order on the 17th granted permission for all but one Ontario and one Calgary squadron to be withdrawn from the line for rest.<sup>229</sup> Without delay parties of officers and men from the two regiments were dispatched to Canadian leave centres in Florence and Rome.



The Three Rivers Regiment, in Corps reserve, continued to carry out traffic control duties on the supply routes.<sup>230</sup>

The 13th Corps was now firmly planted on the watershed, but the terrain ahead was just as uninviting as that which had been won. The narrow gorges between the rugged spurs gave little room for deployment or manoeuvre, and the advance now became a fight for each successive ridge, which, when gained, "was found to be as much commanded by as it commanded the next."<sup>231</sup> For the present, however, the Corps met little enemy opposition. The serious reverses suffered by both wings of the Tenth Army brought an order on 20 September for the 51st Mountain Corps to pull back to Green Line II\* so that by reducing the salient at the centre of von Vietinghoff's front additional forces might be provided to strengthen the threatened areas on the flanks. The withdrawal allowed General Kirkman's troops to make important gains, and on the 24th the 1st Division occupied Palazzuolo and Marradi, at the headwaters of the Senio and Lamone Rivers respectively, and only twenty miles from the Via Emilia. On the same day the Indians linked up with the 6th Armoured Division, which had just captured San Benedetto in Alpe on Highway No. 67, five miles north-east of the Muraglione Pass.<sup>233</sup> On the 25th, in the first close action for Canadian tanks since they crossed the Sieve, the Ontarios' "C" Squadron, supporting the 2nd Brigade in the Marradi area, knocked out a German self-propelled gun.<sup>234</sup> Then opposition stiffened as the enemy rushed in reinforcements in an attempt to close the gap which the 2nd U.S. Corps had opened up at the boundary between Kesselring's armies. These could be spared only from the western part of the Apennine position, where the mountain barrier was widest, or from the equally defensible sector between the main drives of the Fifth and Eighth Armies. The 362nd Division (drawn from the 1st Parachute Corps' right flank opposite Pistoia) and the 44th Division (brought over from Cesena) were inserted in the Firenzuola sector between the exhausted 4th Parachute and 715th Divisions, while the latter's front was further reduced by sidestepping the 305th Division westward to cover Highway No. 67.<sup>235</sup>

Meanwhile the grand scale of the enemy's demolitions continued to keep the road-bound tanks far behind the foremost infantry. The two Canadian squadrons were used chiefly to provide cover for the busy sappers. Every bridge had been blown and in many cases long stretches of the approaches at either end were blasted cleanly away from the face of the cliff.<sup>236</sup> The construction of Baileys became a task of extraordinary difficulty, requiring the erection of timber cribbing and piers up to 70 feet high.<sup>237</sup> It took thirteen days for the Engineers of the 13th Corps to open Highway No. 67 for one-way traffic between Dicomano and San Benedetto. Gunners of the

\* In the sector opposite the 13th Corps this position lay about seven miles behind the main Gothic Line. It ran from Portico on Highway No. 67 through Marradi and Palazzuolo to just north of Firenzuola.<sup>232</sup>

6th Armoured Division assisted by 70 Italian wood-cutters cut more than 14,000 logs on the forested slopes of the Pratomagno, and at Dicomano a section of the 1st Drilling Company R.C.E. quarried thousands of tons of rock to be used as "fill".<sup>238</sup>

The main thrust of the 2nd U.S. Corps was now being made down the Santerno valley by the fresh 88th Division, which General Keyes had put into action at Firenzuola on 21 September.<sup>239</sup> In order to assist this drive the axes of advance for the left and central divisions of the 13th Corps were shifted westward. The capture of Marradi and Palazuolo had given the Corps control of the first lateral road beyond the watershed, and on the 24th the 1st Division was ordered to clear this route and then work down the Senio valley. The Indians were assigned the Marradi-Faenza road, and they began opening up as a supply route ten miles of very indifferent track which crossed from San Benedetto to Marradi.<sup>240</sup> By the 28th they had freed this of enemy, and while the Engineers laboured to fit it for use by armour, the Calgary squadron with the Division started "to look at maps once more", cheered by the prospect of again tackling "ground which would begin, but only begin, to be tankable."<sup>241</sup>

At the end of September the Fifth Army again regrouped. The 88th Division's advance had ground to a stop-although by the 27th the American forward positions on Mount Battaglia, between the Santerno and the Senio, were six miles nearer to the plain than were those of the 13th Corps at Palazuolo. But German repositions to oppose this penetration had weakened the resistance on Highway No. 65, which now became the principal axis of the 2nd Corps. With the shifting of the inter-corps boundary westward, the 1st Guards Brigade, brought over from General Kirkman's right flank, relieved the 88th Division on Mount Battaglia, against which a formidable if heterogeneous force drawn from four German divisions was launching frequent and determined counter-attacks.<sup>242</sup> On 4 October the 78th Infantry Division, which after its rest in Egypt General Alexander had assigned to reinforce Kirkman's tiring divisions, took over the Firenzuola-Imola route.<sup>243</sup> While the 2nd Corps, attacking on a broad front with four divisions, made the Army's main thrust towards Bologna, the 78th Division was to push down the Santerno valley, and the remainder of the 13th Corps, relinquishing its drive on Faenza, would protect General Keyes' right flank by "leaning on the enemy"<sup>244</sup>

Although the Fifth Army had now bitten deep into the Apennines, there was little likelihood of an early break-through into the Po Valley. What had begun in September as a general assault on the Gothic Line continued in October as a multi-pronged series of local attacks in which General Clark's formations exerted unrelenting pressure on the stubborn foe. Each separate thrust sought tirelessly to find a weak spot through which the enemy's defences might be penetrated, thereby staving off the paralyzing grip of

static warfare. Early October found all three regiments of the 1st Armoured Brigade committed, as the Three Rivers came out of reserve to support the 78th Division along the Corps' new left-hand axis.<sup>245</sup> On the right the Calgaries had two squadrons with the 8th Indian Division in the Marradi area; the Ontarios were with the 1st Infantry Division north-east of Palazzuolo, and for the first few days of October, until Calgary tanks could negotiate the miserable track across from Highway No. 67, also supporting an Indian brigade north-east of Marradi.<sup>246</sup>

The enemy's defensive tactics were to block the routes forward—a simple matter of demolition with every road frequently crossing and recrossing its winding river gorge—and to hold the dominating heights between the valleys with strong infantry forces blessed with excellent observation for their supporting artillery. Two such peaks which extended the German defence line southward from Mount Battaglia were Mount Ceco and Mount Casalino, respectively overlooking the Senio and Lamone valleys from the east. It took the 3rd Brigade five days of costly fighting (in which a gallant private of the 1st Duke of Wellington's Regiment won the Victoria Cross) to capture and hold Mount Ceco. From the road in the valley below Ontario tanks helped in some measure by shelling the German positions, although during the battle and the ensuing counter-attacks the squadron lost three tanks to enemy fire.<sup>247</sup>

The 2200-foot Mount Casalino guarded an important road fork at Sant' Adriano, three miles north-east of Marradi, and its retention by the 305th Division blocked the Indian Division's plan to develop a second thrust towards Faenza by way of the valley of the Marzeno, a small tributary of the Lamone. On 7 October the 19th Indian Brigade gained a foothold on the mountain's lower slopes, but during the next ten days failed in all attempts to wrest the rocky crest from the defending battalion.<sup>248</sup> Finally on the 17th the Calgaries' "A" Squadron, which had been delayed by heavy rains that made the unmetalled roads impassable, managed to get two troops forward to support an attack by the 17th Brigade. With fire from the tanks silencing enemy machine-guns and mortars in San Martino to the north, the Gurkhas assaulted the summit and in a bitter fight ejected the stubborn defenders, many of whom wore the edelweiss badge of the trained mountain soldier.<sup>249</sup>

The situation improved somewhat on 22 October when the 305th Division, whose long bulging front on the 51st Mountain Corps' left flank was now being threatened by the Polish advance east of Highway No. 67 (see above, p. 590), shortened its lines by withdrawing to the north. In fog and rain the Calgary tanks followed the Indians' slow, two-pronged advance, occasionally shelling enemy positions on neighbouring hills. By the 25th they were about five miles beyond Sant' Adriano; "A" Squadron was at San Cassiano on the main Lamone axis, while "B" Squadron, swinging to the right, had reached Abeto on the Modigliana road.<sup>250</sup>

The Three Rivers meanwhile had seen action with the 78th Infantry Division on the Corps' left flank. Moving forward through II Giogo Pass the first of "C" Squadron's tanks joined the 38th Brigade on 7 October as it relieved troops of the 88th Division at Castel del Rio, and a week later the remaining squadrons were assembled at Firenzuola.<sup>251</sup> The Division's immediate task was to capture the high Gesso ridge west of the Santerno, German occupancy of which was restricting the salient which the 2nd U.S. Corps was driving towards Bologna. On the 15th the 11th Brigade assaulted Mount la Pieve, a key height five miles north of Castel del Rio. In closer support than usual was the Three Rivers' "C" Squadron, which during the tortuous move up to Gesso had left one of its tanks at the bottom of a mountain ravine 100 feet deep. The enemy's machine-gun and artillery fire broke up the attack and disabled three Canadian tanks, although their crews remained in them until nightfall and expended every round of their ammunition in covering the withdrawal of the infantry.<sup>252</sup>

Two days later the 6th Armoured Division took over the Imola road and the ground east of the Santerno,<sup>253</sup> allowing the 78th Division to concentrate its effort on a narrower front. The acting G.O.C., Brigadier R.K. Arbuthnott, now committed his two remaining brigades, and in the early hours of the 19th the 36th Brigade attacked Mount la Pieve from the west with the support of all the guns in the divisional area. To the infantry's surprise they met no opposition. The German 334th Division, inserted at the end of September on the Fourteenth Army's extreme left wing,<sup>254</sup> had fallen back to a fresh line of heights south-east of Mount Grande.<sup>255</sup> As we have noted above (p. 591), the 88th Division seized Mount Grande early on the 20th, but it took five days of costly fighting by the 38th (Irish) Brigade, assisted in the final stages by the 11th, to capture the towering Mount Spaduro on the other side of the Sillaro valley.<sup>256</sup> Two miles to the south-east the 36th Brigade took Monte dell' Acqua Salata on the 21st,<sup>257</sup> although the Grenadiers clung stubbornly to a fortified farmhouse, Casa Spinello, on a high ridge linking the two mountains. From the hamlet of Gesso tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment, which had supported the initial assault by the Irish Brigade, kept Spinello under fire until the 23rd, when the 2nd London Irish Rifles drove the enemy from the rubble piles.<sup>258</sup> That night the 11th Brigade completed the clearing of Mount Spaduro. In the opinion of some of the attackers, the fighting about Gesso ridge had shown the 334th Division, not previously regarded as a particularly formidable opponent, "to be as fanatical and determined as the famous 1 Para Div."<sup>259</sup> The formation had earlier won the commendation of the Fourteenth Army for its vigorous counter-attacks at Mount Battaglia,<sup>260</sup> and in reporting to Kesselring the action north of Gesso von Vietinghoff added his word of praise for the divisional commander: "There was very hard fighting. Bohlke has again done very well."<sup>261</sup>

On October 27th, as we have seen, General Clark suspended the offensive. Bad weather, exhaustion and a shortage of men were the compelling reasons. Exceptionally heavy rain had fallen from mid-September throughout October, dispelling all hope that the over-burdened roads would dry out before the ice and snow of winter claimed them. Artillery support was hampered both by the immobility of the guns and by a general shortage of ammunition. The enemy, on the other hand, always holding the advantage in rear communications, had been able to increase his resources in artillery (the Fifth Army's forward positions were now within range of heavy railway guns sited in the Bologna area)<sup>262</sup> and his fire was inflicting extensive casualties. Allied superiority in air power, which might have had a decisive effect on the German supply routes and gun positions, was neutralized by the deteriorating weather. Except for the recently committed 78th Division every formation in the 2nd and 13th Corps was very tired. A tremendous strain had been imposed on the artillery, Engineers and infantry, who, apart from occasional brief local reliefs, had fought for two and a half months under conditions of extreme hardship.<sup>263</sup>

The 13th Corps, shifting slightly to the left so as to take over Mount Grande, while giving up Highway No. 67 to the Poles, was ordered to "hold its position defensively," follow up any enemy withdrawal, and provide its weary troops with whatever rest was possible.<sup>264</sup> There was little promise of fighting for the Canadian armour. The task of keeping supplied and building up communications for a renewal of the offensive was given high priority. For most of the next month 100 men of the Three Rivers were employed on road work.<sup>265</sup>

Thus the regiments of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade, whose operations north of the Arno had been more of a struggle against topography than against the Germans, now found the hostile weather the most uncompromising foe of all. "Now the rains have come...." wrote the diarist of the Three Rivers Regiment at the end of October. "The clouds just let go for twenty-four hours on end, and every gorge and gully becomes a little torrent of water. The [bankseats] for Bailey Bridges soften up, roads are cut up, landslides come down and the results are almost impossible to cope with."<sup>266</sup>

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE BATTLE OF THE RIVERS, DECEMBER 1944

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#### The Canadian Corps in Reserve

WHEN the Canadians went into reserve at the end of October there was talk in the messes that the Corps might shortly be withdrawn from the Mediterranean theatre to join the First Canadian Army in North-West Europe; and the appointment on 2 November of General McNaughton as Minister of National Defence strengthened this opinion. Other rumours were rife—one going the rounds that the Corps was slated for Burma.<sup>1</sup> Events soon showed, however, that in the immediate future at least the existing role would not be altered.

There were several changes in the higher commands of the Corps. On 5 November Lieut.-General Burns relinquished the appointment of Corps Commander. Although he was an officer of very distinguished abilities, nevertheless there did not exist between General Burns and the British senior officers that personal relationship of friendly mutual understanding which is so important. There was some suggestion that the lack of confidence expressed by the Commander of the Eighth Army after the fighting in the Liri Valley (above, p. 451n.) had in time come to be known to the Corps Commander's Canadian subordinates<sup>2</sup> (who as we have seen had in July assured him of their own confidence in him). This combination of circumstances produced a situation where it was impossible for him to carry on as G.O.C. Yet in leaving the Corps General Burns could look back on a satisfying record of achievement by the Canadian formations under his command. As he subsequently reported to General Crerar, the Corps had taken "all objectives assigned to it, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy, which comprised the best German divisions in Italy. Though progress was not always as rapid as desirable, nevertheless, during our periods of action, we went farther and faster than any other Corps."<sup>3</sup>

Major-General Vokes carried on as acting G.O.C. until the arrival from Holland on 16 November of Lieut.-General Charles Foulkes, former commander of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. Vokes then left for North-West Europe to take over the 4th Armoured Division from Major

General H.W. Foster, who in turn came to Italy and the command of the 1st Division. Pending General Foster's arrival, Brigadier J.D.B. Smith, General Burns' Brigadier General Staff, commanded the 1st Division, his place at Corps Headquarters being taken by Brigadier George Kitching.<sup>4</sup>

It was well into the first week of November before all units of the Corps found accommodation in the reserve area. Hard fighting had considerably reduced the number of buildings capable of keeping out the rain; practically every building of any size still standing was roofless and windowless.<sup>5</sup> Rear Corps Headquarters remained at Rimini, while Main Headquarters moved back from Cesenatico to Riccione, which also housed the headquarters of the 1st Division and two of its brigades. The establishing of the 3rd Brigade at Cattolica, five miles farther along the coast, kept the infantry division fairly well concentrated. Major-General Hoffmeister's formations were less closely grouped. The 12th Brigade at Morciano was reasonably near Divisional Headquarters at San Giovanni in Marignano; but the 5th Armoured Brigade was at Cervia, 30 miles to the north-west, while the 11th Brigade at Urbino could only be reached, because of the state of the intervening roads, by a detour of 50 miles.<sup>6</sup>

The extensive training with which all were occupied during November was enlivened by the introduction of several new types of equipment, some of which had already proved their value in North-West Europe. The 12th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment demonstrated the Crocodile flame-throwing tank to each unit of the 5th Armoured Brigade;<sup>7</sup> every infantry battalion was issued four carrier-mounted Wasp flamethrowers,<sup>8</sup> and infantry and armoured units received an allotment of the smaller man-handled Lifebuoys.<sup>9</sup> About mid-November the infantry brigades received their first Weasels \*-tracked amphibious carriers with a reputation of having a good performance in mud.<sup>12</sup> Engineer training emphasized, as might be expected, bridging and rafting. An important development of the earlier "Plymouth" bridge (see Chapter XIII) was the "Brown" bridge, which was produced under the direction of Capt. B.S. Brown, of the 4th Field Company R.C.E. It was designed to span an 80-foot gap under assault conditions, like its predecessor being brought into position on two tanks, but having the advantage that no tank was lost in the launching.<sup>13</sup> The infantry's urgent requirement for a lightweight portable footbridge was met by the introduction of the "Olafson" bridge (invented by Capt. E.A. Olafson, R.C.E.M.E., on the basis of a suggestion made by Brigadier Bernatchez).<sup>14</sup> Fifteen-foot lengths of half-inch pipe were welded into sections 18 inches wide, each weighing 200 pounds; by connecting these together a gap of 45 feet could be spanned.<sup>15</sup>

\* The amphibious Weasel ("M29C") was developed from the American "M29" Light Cargo Carrier, a half-ton vehicle originally designed for the First Special Service Force to use in operations in snow.<sup>10</sup> Its light construction and its wide tracks particularly suited it for use in swampy ground; afloat its low freeboard made it unsuitable for navigation in other than calm water.<sup>11</sup>

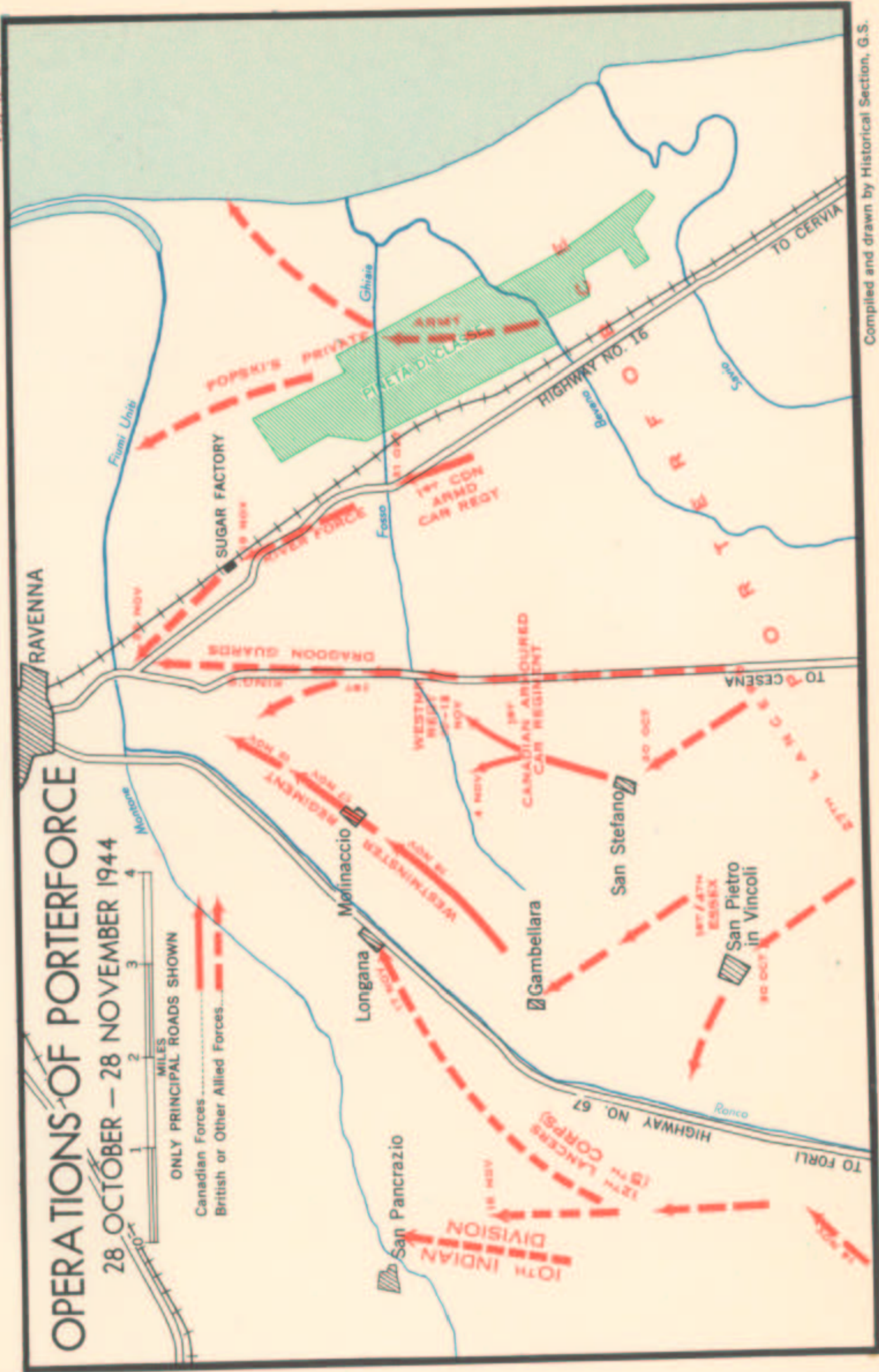
There was time now for relaxation. The Auxiliary Services soon had cinemas, clubs and recreation centres in operation in Riccione, Cervia and Urbino; and Canadian entertainment units, including two detachments of the Army Show, were kept busy throughout November giving performances to large and appreciative audiences.<sup>16</sup> Every brigade area had its full programme of sports. At Rimini a display of war art attracted more than 3600 all ranks, who saw 169 exhibits representing the work of British and Canadian official war artists and other contributors serving in the Allied forces.<sup>17</sup> Seven-day visits to Rome and Florence began early in November; but the most welcome news of all was the announcement of the inauguration of a programme of 30-day leaves in Canada (see Volume I, Chapter XIII). The first fortunate group, all of whom had qualified by having five years' continuous overseas service\* (time spent in a theatre of operations counted double), sailed from Naples on 30 November, in time to be home for Christmas.<sup>19</sup> Those who remained in Italy might derive some consolation from officer-led discussions on the problem of rehabilitation, in preparation for the time when the termination of hostilities should allow them too to return to Canada.

#### The Operations of Porterforce, 28 October-30 November

We have noted that not all the units of the Canadian Corps were in reserve during November. Serving with the 27th Lancers as part of Porterforce were The Governor General's Horse Guards, The Royal Canadian Dragoons and The Westminster Regiment (which was supported by the mortars of the 12th Independent Machine Gun Company (The Princess Louise Fusiliers)), as well as certain artillery and Engineer units (at various times the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Field and the 2nd and 5th Medium Regiments R.C.A., and the 12th and 13th Field Companies R.C.E.).<sup>20</sup> Lt.-Col. Horsbrugh-Porter's tasks were to protect the 5th Corps' right flank, capture Ravenna, and thereafter to continue opening up Highway No. 16 to the north and west.<sup>21</sup> His field of operations extended some ten miles inland to the canalized lower Ronco, which at the outskirts of Ravenna joined the Montone to form the Fiumi Uniti. Of the numerous canals and irrigation ditches intersecting these treeless flats the principal barrier was the Fosso Ghiaia, which crossed the front about three miles south of the Uniti (see Map 24). Two of the three routes converging on Ravenna from the south were in this sector—the Via Adriatica on the right, and the provincial highway from Cesena in the centre.

\* Since September (when 88 applications were approved) members of the Canadian Corps had participated in the "Tri-wound Scheme", which had been modified to give a six-month tour of duty in Canada or the United Kingdom to personnel with three years' continuous overseas service who had been wounded twice.<sup>18</sup>





Compiled and drawn by Historical Section, G.S.

Reproduced by Army Survey Establishment R.C.E.

Highway No. 67 from Forli, following the west bank of the Ronco, ran within the 5th Corps' boundary.

When Porterforce took over from the 5th Armoured Division on 28 October, the Horse Guards (formerly with Cumberland Force) had advanced without their tanks along the Via Adriatica three miles beyond the Bevano River, across which patrols of the 27th Lancers on their left were also operating.<sup>22</sup> Facing the force from secure positions behind the dyked Ghiaia was the 114th Jager Division,\* commanded by Colonel Hans Joachim Ehlert, while west of the Ronco were elements of the 26th Panzer Division.<sup>23</sup> On the 29th the Horse Guards were relieved by The Royal Canadian Dragoons, who found themselves in a completely novel situation. The enemy's breaching of the Savio dykes had spread a great sheet of water over the countryside, across which the Via Adriatica reached like a causeway, broken at intervals by a demolished bridge or the flooding of some lower stretch of the road. Along that highway troops and vehicles moved "like the targets in a penny shooting gallery", and enemy artillery was prompt to take advantage of so fine an opportunity for practice.<sup>24</sup> Slowly the Dragoons edged forward on foot, their supplies being brought forward in DUKWs, and by the end of October "D" Squadron had reached the Fosso Ghiaia.<sup>25</sup>

In a sharp action on the 31st the squadron cleared the last enemy outposts from scattered houses south of the Ghiaia. Heavy mortar and machine-gun fire assailed the Canadians as they approached the canal, and the small house in which the squadron commander, Major A. L. Brady, had established his command post received six direct hits from a German 88. This fire killed two of Brady's staff an officer who was relaying his orders back, and his headquarters sergeant. He himself was wounded and knocked unconscious. On regaining consciousness he repaired his telephone line in full view of the enemy and successfully called down artillery fire upon the offending gun. He then rallied the assault troop, whose leader had been killed, and personally led them to the final objective on the canal bank.<sup>26</sup> Thus was gallantly won the first of four D.S.Os. awarded to officers of The Royal Canadian Dragoons in Italy. Meanwhile on Lt.-Col. Landell's left the 27th Lancers, who with a better network of secondary roads over which to move had to contend with muddy but not flooded ground, occupied San Stefano and San Pietro in Vincoli between Highway No. 67 and the CesenaRavenna road, although the enemy astride the central route continued for many days to cling to defended positions south of the Fosso Ghiaia.<sup>27</sup>

The situation changed little during the opening days of November. The colourful Popski's Private Army came under command of Porterforce on the 1st and took over the sector between the Via Adriatica and the coast. Major

\* Unfortunately no records of the German Tenth Army after 31 October 1944 are available. From the enemy formations opposing the Canadians during their last months in Italy the war diary of only the 114th Jager Division (for September-December 1944) has come to light.

Peniakoff established his headquarters in the Pineta di Classe, a pine forest on a ridge of sand dunes stretching across the Ghiaia east of the highway,<sup>28</sup> and from this island base DUKWs transported his heavily-armed jeeps over the flooded land and along the coast to launch a series of hit-and-run raids which reduced one by one the enemy posts south of the Fiumi Uniti.<sup>29</sup> Porterforce had been given full authority over the operations of the Partisans in its sector, who, organized into the 28th Garibaldi Brigade by the Italian Committee of Liberation in Ravenna, for several weeks had been harassing the Germans in the surrounding country. On 28 October about 300 of these guerrillas, believing that the Eighth Army was about to enter Ravenna, marched down the Cesena road while German reliefs were in progress and reached the Allied lines in safety. A detachment led by a burly stone-mason, Ateo ("Atheist"), joined forces with Popski on the coast, while others worked with patrols of the armoured-car regiments, furnishing welcome information about the enemy's positions.<sup>30</sup>

In the meantime the 5th Corps, which had been held up south and east of Forli for a week or more by bad weather and the stubborn enemy, on 7 November attacked with the 4th and 46th Infantry Divisions between the Ronco and the Rabbi. The drive made good headway against bitter opposition, and on the 9th Forli fell to the 4th Division; by the 14th the British Corps had reached the Montone along its whole front.<sup>31</sup> These successes had their effect on the coastal flank, where Colonel Ehlert began slowly to draw back towards Ravenna.<sup>32</sup> By the middle of the month Porterforce was over the Fosso Ghiaia and mopping up the remaining scattered enemy posts south of the Fiumi Uniti.<sup>33</sup> The Germans yielded ground readily. There\_ was a brief skirmish on the 17th when a company of the Westminsters, who had relieved The Royal Canadian Dragoons, assisted a patrol of the King's Dragoon Guards (who had replaced the 27th Lancers) to clear the village of Molinaccio, less than three miles from Ravenna.<sup>34</sup> Two days later nonCanadian elements of Porterforce on the Via Adriatica, operating under the name of River Force, ousted a troublesome enemy rearguard from a sugar factory about a mile south of the Fiumi Uniti, capturing nine prisoners.<sup>35</sup>

On the 25th the 1st Canadian Corps took over from the Eighth Army operational control of Porterforce, which did not yet, however, lose its identity. As first step in the regrouping for a renewal of the offensive, the Westminsters, with a squadron of The Governor General's Horse Guards under command, relieved troops of the 10th Indian Division on the 5th Corps' extreme right flank. In their new sector east of San Pancrazio the Canadians found the enemy well dug in and showing no intention of withdrawing across the Montone except -under strong pressure. But the weather remained bad, and overflowing canals and rivers reduced activity by either side to aggressive patrolling. As the month closed Porterforce passed under command of the 5th Armoured Division and its Canadian units

rejoined their parent formations.<sup>36</sup> Their brief service with the force had been arduous, but their contribution worth while. At a cost, up to 24 November, of 56 British and 30 Canadian casualties, Porterforce had secured the Eighth Army's right flank, and had taken 171 prisoners, killing and wounding probably as many more.<sup>37</sup> For another ten days the force, reduced in effect to the 27th Lancers and Popski's Private Army, continued as a separate command, and, as we shall see, played an important part in the capture of Ravenna.<sup>38</sup>

### The Planning of Operation "Chuckle"

Final plans for the resumption of the main effort were drawn at a conference of the Army Commanders on 26 November. They recognized that it would be desirable for the Eighth Army to be across the Santerno River before the Army Group struck its concerted blow. General McCreery had in fact begun a full-scale attack on 21 November with this object; but it was not expected that the task could be completed before the end of the first week in December.<sup>39</sup> Then, on word from General Alexander, some time after the 7th (depending upon the weather) the two Armies would launch a combined offensive to secure Bologna-the Eighth by a westerly thrust north of the Via Emilia, and the Fifth by a drive northward along Highway No. 65. They would meet in the area of Budrio, nine miles northeast of the city (see Map 23).<sup>40</sup>

On 29 November McCreery confirmed verbal instructions already given his Corps Commanders. He planned to attack with three corps up-the Canadians on the right, the 5th Corps on the Via Emilia and the Polish Corps on the hilly left flank.<sup>41</sup> Simultaneous operations on this broad front were made possible by the existence of a suitable axis of advance between Highways No. 9 and No. 16. This was the secondary road which left the Ravenna-Faenza lateral near Russi and ran west to Bologna, passing through Bagnacavallo, Lugo and Massa Lombarda. To reach the Santerno, its intended start line in the combined offensive, the Eighth Army had first to advance over two other major rivers, the Lamone and the Senio. (McCreery felt the forecast of bridgeheads over the Santerno by 7 December too optimistic, and in an appreciation to Alexander's headquarters suggested that he would do well to have crossed the Senio by that date.)<sup>42</sup> The Canadian Corps was allotted the new axis and directed to capture Russi, cut Highway No. 16 north-west of Ravenna in order to ensure the fall of that city, and then advance through Lugo to establish a bridgehead over the Santerno in the general area of Massa Lombarda.<sup>43</sup>

The joint attack initiated by the 5th Corps and the Poles on 21 November to capture Faenza and the high ground to the south-west did not make the

expected progress. From bridgeheads which General Keightley had earlier secured over the Montone south-west of Forli the 46th Division fought slowly westward, while the 4th Division, turning north across the Via Emilia, began pushing back the tired 278th Division from the fertile flats between the Montone and the Lamone. To secure his defence positions on both rivers the enemy fell back to a switch-line about a mile in front of the FaenzaRavenna road. On the left the Poles advanced across the Marzeno tributary to the Lamone, and by the 26th both corps were holding the east bank of the river on a broad front extending as far north as Scaldino, four miles downstream from Faenza. The city itself was still in the hands of the 26th Panzer Division, now depleted to a fighting strength of less than 1000.<sup>44</sup> Blocked by stubborn resistance at the Montone opposite San Pancrazio, the 10th Indian Division then swung a brigade across the river at Highway No. 9 to attack northward along the left bank. The result was a holding which was to provide the Canadians with a jumping-off place for their big assault. Heavy rain now brought operations to a halt, and the end of the month found the Germans facing the Eighth Army from behind a water barrier that began along the Lamone and ended at the Fiumi Uniti, and which was broken only by the five-mile switch-line running from Scaldino through Albereto to the Montone bridge at Casa Bettini, roughly three miles upstream from San Pancrazio (see Map 25).<sup>45</sup>

Early in November the Canadian Corps Headquarters had worked out plans to capture Ravenna by an encircling attack which involved an amphibious landing north of the city.\* Someone's sense of humour gave the proposed operation the code name "Chuckle", and when the scheme was abandoned in favour of the army group plan the name was retained to designate the Canadian part in the Eighth Army's offensive. Planning for this began two days after the arrival of the new Corps Commander, and on the 21st he informed his divisional commanders of his intentions. On its return to the line the Corps would take over the Eighth Army's front from Casa Bettini to the sea. The 1st Division, attacking through the 10th Indian Division's holding west of the Montone, would seize Russi from the south and thrust forward on the Corps axis across the intervening rivers to Lugo. The 5th Armoured Division would advance on the right, cut Highway No. 16 near the Lamone and capture Ravenna. The timing of the Corps' attack would depend on the Indian Division's capture of the Casa Bettini bridging site-the first good one north of Faenza.<sup>47</sup>

The ground ahead of the Canadians was no more promising than that over which they had fought during late September and October. The three major rivers which flowed north-eastward across the axis of advance all ran

\*A battalion group formed around the Seaforth Highlanders was to land in DUKWs at the base of the Comacchio spit and drive inland to cut Highway No. 16 at Mezzano, where it would link up with a 3rd Brigade thrust northward through Russi.<sup>46</sup>

between high flood-banks, which gave the enemy excellent observation of the intervening flats and provided him with sites for burrowed-out shelters and machine-gun positions.<sup>48</sup> Although numerous streams and canals drained the flats between the main watercourses, with the coming of the winter rains the ground, true to its marshy origin, was likely to become water-logged and obstructive to movement off the main roads. As in earlier operations bridging was to be a major problem, largely because of the great difficulty in developing suitable approaches over the sodden fields. To move forward between the rivers was an arduous task; to cross them a formidable one indeed.

Aided by these natural defences the enemy was holding the long front opposite the Canadian Corps with only two divisions—the 114th Jager on the coastal flank as far inland as San Pancrazio, and the 356th Infantry Division to its right. Both were part of the recently formed 73rd Corps, commanded by General of Infantry Anton Dostler. The new headquarters, created on 1 December by the conversion of the Venetian Coastal Command, had come into being in order to ease the strain of administering 30 divisions in Army Group "C" with only seven corps headquarters (three of them German-Italian).<sup>49</sup> It was believed by Canadian intelligence staffs that both divisions confronting them were under strength in artillery, and without tanks, for all known reserves of armour had been identified with the 76th Panzer Corps in the Faenza sector.<sup>50</sup>

#### The 1st Division's Repulse at the Lamone, 2-5 December

On 25 November Brigadier Smith (Major-General Foster did not assume command until 9 December) held a conference in the Teatro Dante, in Riccione, at which he briefed all officers down to company and squadron commanders on the 1st Division's role in the forthcoming attack. The operation was designed in four phases: the 3rd Brigade was to drive north from the Indians' bridgehead, take Russi and force a crossing over the Lamone River; the 2nd Brigade would then seize Bagnacavallo and establish a bridgehead over the Senio; the third phase assigned to the 1st Brigade the capture of Lugo and exploitation to the Santerno; and in the final stage the 3rd Brigade would re-enter the battle and capture Massa Lombarda.<sup>51</sup> General Foulkes had decided to start the 5th Armoured Division's assault also from the bridgehead west of the Montone, so that it would be closely correlated with the 1st Division's effort in the opening phase. To this end one battalion of the 12th Brigade would concentrate behind the 3rd Brigade and, simultaneously with Brigadier Bernatchez's attack, thrust along the left bank of the river and clear the San Pancrazio area for bridging operations. Brigadier Lind's units would then push north, secure the village of Godo

on the Faenza-Ravenna road, and cut Highway No. 16 two miles east of the Lamone. At the same time other elements of the 5th Division would drive on Ravenna from the west while Porterforce moved in from the south. The 11th Brigade, in reserve for the initial stages of the operation, would be ready to face up to the Lamone beside the 12th, with both formations prepared to assist Brigadier Smith's drive westward.<sup>52</sup> Against an enemy reported to be poor in gun strength the 1st Division would have the support of its own artillery and the 1st Army Group R.C.A. For the first two phases of his attack Brigadier Smith was allotted all available Wasp flamethrowers, as well as a squadron of Crocodiles, which would pass to the 5th Division after the Lamone crossings were secured. Planned air support included the employment of rocket-firing U.S. Thunderbolts, working for the first time with Canadian troops in Italy.<sup>53</sup>

On 28 November the 3rd Brigade and its supporting arms moved from its rest area to concentrate between the Ronco and the Montone north of Forli. As the Indians had not yet secured the bridging site at Casa Bettini their engineers began to work on an alternative site 1000 yards upstream.<sup>54</sup> The Canadian passage into the bridgehead was complicated by the fact that north of Highway No. 9 the Montone was spanned by only a low-capacity pontoon bridge and two footbridges; so that all heavy vehicles had to cross the river at Forli, where the one available road along the west bank was rapidly breaking down under the weight of traffic. The shallow bridgehead was already crowded with road-bound tanks, vehicles and guns, whose deployment into the adjacent farmyards had been prevented by the shrewd enemy's destruction of the entrances across the deep wayside ditches.<sup>55</sup>

The ground dried enough on the 30th for the 10th Indian Division to manoeuvre their tanks; thus supported they attacked and secured Albereto, and out of its ruins picked 40 German dead.<sup>56</sup> This gain loosed the enemy's stubborn hold on Casa Bettini, which was cleared early on 1 December.<sup>57</sup> At first light the Canadian marching troops began crossing the Montone and by late afternoon the brigade had taken over the bridgehead, relief being accelerated by the completion of the Indians' Bailey bridge during the morning. At 9:00 p.m. General Foulkes assumed command of the whole area from Albereto to the coast.<sup>58</sup> There were now three Canadian battalions in position between Albereto and the Montone. On the left was the Royal 22e Regiment, its outer flank covered by two squadrons of The Royal Canadian Dragoons; the West Nova Scotias were in the centre; and on their right, near Casa Bettini, were the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards, waiting to lead the 12th Brigade's attack.<sup>59</sup> As they settled into their positions the forward troops could see through the leafless vines the roofs of Russi, less than three miles to the north.

That night Brigadier Bernatchez gave his battalion commanders their final instructions. The brigade objectives lay on two major communications

which crossed its front beyond Russi. About a mile and a half north-east of the town was the important junction of the Faenza-Ravenna highway with the road leading west through Bagnacavallo to Massa Lombarda--the route selected as the main Corps axis. A thousand yards north-west of Russi the railroad from Ravenna split into two lines running west to Bologna and south-west to Faenza. The 20 foot embankment which carried the more northerly branch across the open ground between the Lamone and Bagnacavallo provided, as events were to show, a defensive position of singular advantage. The West Novas on the right were to by-pass Russi and seize the road junction to the north-east. At the same time the Royal 22e would attack to secure the line of the railway west of Russi and if possible take intact the northern railway bridge over the Lamone. This done, the Carleton and Yorks, in reserve, would be prepared to assault across the river downstream from the bridge. On the right flank the Princess Louise, which had been placed temporarily under Bernatchez's command for the preliminary moves, would revert to its parent formation at H Hour and clear the west bank of the Montone to San Pancrazio.<sup>60</sup>

A thick screen of smoke laid down ahead of the start line by the guns of the 1st Field Regiment briefly obscured the sunny morning skies across the 3rd Brigade's front, as, promptly at nine o'clock on 2 December, 36 Spitbombers of the Desert Air Force began strafing and bombing enemy positions ahead of the curtain. It was the Canadian Corps' first introduction to an Air Force "Timothy" target.<sup>61</sup> After thirty minutes the infantry began to assault behind a series of heavy artillery concentrations.<sup>62</sup> Initially the two 1st Division battalions met little opposition as they pressed forward across the familiar network of drainage ditches, and by eleven o'clock the West Novas were closing to the Scolo Via Cupa--a rather wider ditch with five-foot dykes which crossed their path about a mile south of Russi. Here they met much more determined resistance, and although "B" Company gained an insecure footing astride the obstacle, an attempted breakout failed, and in the late afternoon the remainder of the battalion was still on the near bank.<sup>63</sup> On the left the Royal 22e had made three unsuccessful attempts to eliminate a strong enemy position at a junction on the Faenza road two miles south of Russi; German S.Ps. had knocked out two tanks of the supporting squadron of North Irish Horse.<sup>64</sup> "The enemy", reported von Vietinghoff that night to the High Command, "has been attacking the sector of 356 Infantry Division since midday with strong forces supported by tanks and ground-attack aircraft, accompanied by heavy artillery fire, and during the afternoon he extended his attacks to the right wing of the 114 Jager Division. . . . In several counter-thrusts it was possible to throw back the spearheads repeatedly, and with the last available forces ... more or less to seal off the penetration."<sup>65</sup>

As the brief winter day came to an end, the 3rd Brigade prepared to renew its attack. The Germans did the expected by pulling back under cover of



darkness, enabling the Royal 22e, advancing again shortly before midnight, to make good progress. Lt.-Col. Allard's instructions to by-pass enemy strongpoints where possible were so well followed that "C" Company reached the railway junction north-west of Russi at 3:00 a.m. and in a short fight drove off the surprised enemy.<sup>66</sup> The West Novas did equally well. "B" Company had managed to keep a platoon on the north side of the Via Cupa, and behind this slender bridgehead sappers of the 4th Field Company R.C.E. worked through the night installing a Bailey bridge.\* At two in the morning two companies crossed the narrow ditch and pressed northward, followed at 4:30 by supporting arms moving over the completed bridge.<sup>68</sup> When Lt.-Col. Saunders' leading troops entered Russi at seven o'clock they found it clear of enemy, but at the northern outskirts they met a hail of fire from the railway beyond.<sup>69</sup> The brigade accomplished little more that day (3 December) as the inner wings of the two enemy divisions held firm, denying the approach to the Lamone.<sup>70</sup> During the afternoon the Royal 22e pushed into the triangle formed by the two railway lines and the river, only to be stopped by fire from front and flank. On the right the West Nova Scotias were held short of the railway, still nearly two miles from their road junction objective.<sup>71</sup>

Late afternoon brought word that the 5th Armoured Division had cut the railway east of Godo, and with the prospect of lessened resistance on his right flank Bernatchez decided to commit his reserve in a fresh attempt to roll his stubborn opponents back to the Lamone. At 9:30, under cover of a thick fog which blotted out the full moon, the Carleton and Yorks attacked through the Royal 22e, directed on the northern railway bridge and the crossing of the Bagnacavallo road a mile downstream. Simultaneously from the Russi area the West Novas struck north across the railway.<sup>72</sup> They found that the Germans had withdrawn across the Lamone, so that apart from small pockets of resistance still east of the river they were opposed only by heavy shelling from the far bank. The Carletons reached the destroyed rail and road bridges at 8:00 a.m. on the 4<sup>th</sup>,<sup>73</sup> and were joined on the river bank by the Royal 22e in the fork of the railway.<sup>74</sup> As the 3rd Brigade had been fighting for more than forty-eight hours, during which its infantry battalions had suffered 106 casualties, the divisional commander now gave to Brigadier Calder the task of securing a crossing over the Lamone before the enemy should have an opportunity to settle into his new line.<sup>75</sup>

The 1st Brigade's effort began inauspiciously. Early in the afternoon (4 December) the Hastings and Prince Edwards, following a "Timothy" air attack and preliminary artillery fire, tried to seize a small bridgehead south of the road bridge. Unfortunately there had been no opportunity for

\* The Engineers' achievement owed much to the inspired leadership of Lieutenant J. E. Reesor, who was awarded the M.C. He made the preliminary reconnaissances in broad daylight under small-arms and mortar fire, and throughout the moonlit night, as this heavy fire continued, by his own example rallied his men to the effort required to complete the task.<sup>67</sup>

reconnaissance, and the magnitude of the Lamone obstacle seems to have been badly underestimated.<sup>76</sup> Fifty yards from the river the leading company suddenly met intense machine-gun and mortar fire which defeated all efforts to gain the top of the near dyke. A renewed attempt an hour later also failed, and the acting G.O.C. called off the venture.<sup>77</sup> It was decided to use the R.C.R. and the Hastings in a more deliberate assault at one o'clock that night (the latter battalion to be handled by its Second-in-Command in order to give him experience).<sup>78</sup> During the evening patrols from both battalions went forward and with great caution and no little difficulty crossed the steep, grasscovered flood bank-25 feet high on the land side, 40 feet on the river side -to the water's edge. An R.C.R. patrol commander was drowned while attempting to swim the river; his men returned with word that the water was five feet deep and 35 feet wide, fast running and icy cold.<sup>79</sup>

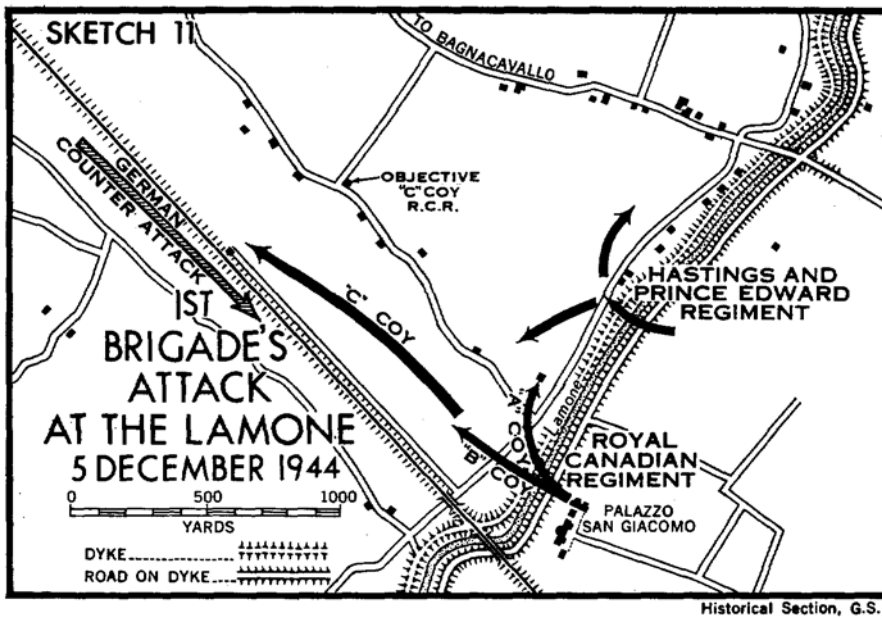
Brigadier Calder planned to attack on a mile-wide front, with the R.C.R. on the left immediately north of the railway and the Hastings on the right just above the Bagnacavallo road (see Sketch 11). Battalion objectives were about 500 yards beyond the lateral road which ran below the far dyke. His supporting artillery included all the fire resources of the division as well as four medium regiments.\* At ten minutes before H Hour the medium guns started shelling the river road, and as the infantry crossed the start line the 25-pounders began firing a series of prearranged targets reaching back from the west bank.<sup>81</sup> At first things went well on the left. The bulk of "A" and "B" Companies of the R.C.R. were ferried over in assault boats manned by "D" Company, and gained the lateral road without meeting opposition. The only setback came when one platoon of "B" Company attempting to cross on the ruins of the railway bridge was practically wiped out by mortar fire. At 3:00 a.m. "C" Company, crossing on two Olafson bridges, pushed forward to enlarge the bridgehead, but in the darkness swung too far to the left and ended up alongside the railway.<sup>82</sup>

The first light of day was beginning to filter through the thick grey mist which shrouded the river flats when elements of a specially formed counterattack group, having advanced along the south-west side of the high railway mbankment, launched a sharp attack against the bridgehead. The 114th Jager Division recorded:

Through the counter-attack, which had been ordered by the Division and organized by the commander of 741st Jager Regiment, and which was carried out by the Divisional Reconnaissance Battalion [A.A.114] reinforced with assault guns and engineers and elements of 356 Inf Div, the enemy bridgehead was first sealed off, then reduced and, after particularly effective support from our own artillery, smashed. . . .

Special commendations for their role in this attack were recorded for "elements 356 Recce Bn" and the 17th Company, 741st Regiment.<sup>83</sup>

\* The 1st, 2nd and 5th Medium Regiments R.C.A. and the 3rd Medium Regiment R.A.<sup>80</sup>



Seldom have the advantages of a covered approach been more effectively demonstrated. The R.C.R. were caught without armour and with virtually no anti-tank defence; two Littlejohns rafted over before daybreak were not yet in position, and the obscuring fog prevented effective use of the battalion PIATs. From machine-guns lining the 20-foot crest the Germans poured a hail of fire into "B" Company on the left flank and soon overran its headquarters; leaderless, and reduced to less than thirty in number, the survivors withdrew to the dyke. "C" Company, farther forward, suffered even more heavily. Caught in the outburst of fire from the railway above them before they had dug in, the troops prepared to make a stand in a large stone farmhouse. Before long shells from a self-propelled gun shooting through a breach in the embankment brought down the building on their heads, and under the covering fire German infantry closed in on the survivors. Only twelve men managed to extricate themselves and join "A" Company and the remnants of "B" Company at the river road. There they prepared to make a stand as the battalion commander sought to retrieve the situation by sending over his reserve company. By that time, however, the enemy had rung down a solid curtain of fire along the river line and attempts to cross only brought further casualties.<sup>84</sup>

On, the right flank the Hastings, preparing to deliver their second attack in twelve hours, suffered an unfortunate reverse when, as a result of forming up ahead of the start line agreed upon with the artillery, they came under fire from the medium guns.<sup>85</sup> That was at one o'clock. A new attempt was made

at four, and by seven o'clock three companies had crossed by assault boat and footbridge and were in contact with the R.C.R. on their left. A little later they encountered the first enemy resistance, as smallarms fire hit them from houses along the Bagnacavallo road. Wireless communications were poor-the massive wall of the dyke shielded the 18-sets - and the Hastings were beset by rumours, including one that the R.C.R. had abandoned its bridgehead. For a time Battalion Headquarters had no contact with its forward troops, and shortly after 11:00 a.m. word came that the three companies had retired to the near bank.<sup>86</sup> Upon learning of this withdrawal the R.C.R. received permission from the Brigade Commander to pull back their remaining company. "The apparent success of 0630 hrs", recorded the R.C.R. diarist bitterly, "had turned into a ghastly failure before 1200 hrs."<sup>87</sup>

That night von Vietinghoff reported, "The bridgehead over the Lamone which had been formed north-west of Russi was smashed in a determined counter-attack which was carried out in perfect co-operation with the artillery, and in which the enemy suffered considerable casualties."<sup>88</sup> In less than twelve hours these had numbered 164 for the two Canadian battalions involved. Of a total of 205 all ranks of the R.C.R. who crossed the river, 29 were killed or died of wounds, 46 were wounded and 31 became prisoners of war. The Hastings casualties numbered 58, the majority of them from the fire of the supporting guns.<sup>89</sup> The Canadian repulse was followed by changes in the command of the brigade and The Royal Canadian Regiment and the replacement of the Hastings and Prince Edwards' Second-in-Command.

#### The Capture of Ravenna, 4 December

While the 1st Division was thus contesting the Lamone crossing, the 5th Division had been making more satisfying progress in its task of clearing the Corps' right flank. General Hoffmeister's operations began on the morning of the 2nd, it will be recalled, with the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards attacking north-eastward along the left bank of the Montone, and so avoiding the necessity of an opposed river crossing at San Pancrazio.<sup>90</sup> Like the 3rd Brigade on its left, the battalion at first met only light opposition; but this stiffened about a mile and a half from San Pancrazio, directly east of the bend in the Scolo via Cupa where the West Nova Scotias were having trouble. There were no further gains during daylight.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, on orders from Brigadier Lind, the Westminster, whose role originally had been to remain east of the Montone until San Pancrazio had been captured, had taken advantage of a heavy fog which hung over the river flats during the morning to put one company across in assault boats south of the village. The enemy's slow reaction showed that he had not expected this move, and before he could

rally, the Westminsters had secured a firm bridgehead. By dark, having bridged the river with a chain of assault boats, Lt.-Col. Corbould had two companies closing in on San Pancrazio.<sup>92</sup>

In the meantime The Lanark and Renfrew Scottish Regiment had followed the Princess Louise across the Montone and moved up on their right. At 6:00 p.m. Lind ordered both units to advance. Threatened with enclosure between the 12th Brigade's two wings, the Germans fell back on Godo. Towards dawn on the 3rd the Lanarks linked up with the Westminsters on the river bank, and by eight o'clock they had together cleared the long straggling village of San Pancrazio. The brigade now made good strides forward. Passing around the Lanark and Renfrews' right flank, the Princess Louise waded the Scolo via Cupa and after a rapid cross-country march cut the Ravenna road just east of Godo. This achievement, as we have already noted, brought a further withdrawal of the Germans opposing the 1st Division and enabled the Lanarks, who had been held up by fire at the canal, to occupy Godo before nightfall.<sup>93</sup>

It was part of Brigadier Lind's original plan that once the brigade had cleared the west bank of the Montone the Westminsters should strike northward from San Pancrazio with all speed to seize the crossroads at the village of Piangipane, midway between Russi and Highway No. 16.<sup>94</sup> At 4:00 p.m. Lt.-Col. Corbould set off with Battalion Headquarters and his three motor companies, all moving in single file across country, heavily laden and on foot. During the night they ambushed an enemy column of sixteen vehicles on the Ravenna road, knocking out with their PIATs two 75-mm. S.P. guns and three half-tracks. There were six Canadian casualties, against ten Germans killed and 23 taken prisoner.<sup>95</sup> By daylight on the 4th engineers of the 10th Field Squadron had opened the road from San Pancrazio to Godo, allowing two squadrons of The British Columbia Dragoons (Lt.-Col. H. H. Angle had taken over command of the regiment on the death of Lt.-Col. Yokes) and a battery of anti-tank guns to come forward.<sup>96</sup> Thus supported, and with the road beyond Godo swept of mines by the 5th Assault Troop C.A.C., (see above, p. 474n.),<sup>97</sup> the Westminsters entered and cleared Piangipane early in the afternoon.<sup>98</sup>

With armour and wheels over the Via Cupa the tempo of operations quickened. South of Ravenna Porterforce had observed signs of an enemy withdrawal, and already strong patrols of the Lancers and Popski's Private Army were crossing the Fiumi Uniti.<sup>99</sup> Spurred on by this competition two squadrons of the Princess Louise accompanied by a squadron of the Dragoons pushed rapidly eastward from Godo. The only opposition came from a lone Panther tank guarding the junction with Highway No. 16; it knocked out one of the B.C.D. tanks before falling victim to the squadron's guns. A few minutes later (it was now 4:00 p.m.) the tanks were stopped by a demolished bridge a mile west of Ravenna, but the infantry entered

the historic city alone and joined hands with the 27th Lancers in Garibaldi Square.<sup>100</sup>

The capture of Ravenna, once the seat of the imperial court of the Western Roman Empire, and now a provincial centre of 30,000 population, was significant chiefly for the accommodation the city offered the Eighth Army for winter quarters and administrative installations. Although Ravenna retained its ancient status as a seaport by virtue of the six-mile long canal connecting it with the Adriatic at Porto Corsini, the satisfactory railway position enjoyed by the Allies\* made its use as such unnecessary, and no immediate steps were taken to sweep the offshore waters of mines or to restore the harbour facilities, which had suffered severely from Allied bombing and German demolitions.<sup>102</sup>

In a release to the press the Allied High Command, in one of its rare identifications of a unit by name, credited the fall of Ravenna to "a brilliant encircling movement by the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards which outflanked the city and forced the enemy to withdraw to avoid being trapped."<sup>103</sup> Due recognition must also be given, however, both to the contribution of Porterforce and the activities of the Partisans in the desolate flats north of the city. The 900 guerrillas making up the 28th Garibaldi Brigade were commanded by an Italian officer, Lieutenant Arrigo Boldrini, who worked under the *nom-de-guerre* of "Major Bulow". Bulow had visited Corps Headquarters on 20 November and had been briefed on the part his force was expected to play in the coming offensive.<sup>104</sup> On his return journey, which was made through squall-roughened seas by rowboat from Cervia, he took with him Major D. M. Healy, an Italian-speaking officer of the Corps intelligence staff, who was to provide liaison between General Foulkes and the Partisans.<sup>105</sup>

Until the main Canadian offensive began Bulow's men were chiefly employed in gathering intelligence of the enemy's movements and strength for Major Healy to pass to Corps Headquarters by wireless. In order to deceive the vigilant enemy Healy employed the very young, the aged and the infirm-though he found that to extract accurate military information from such untrained observers required "the patience of an angel, an inexhaustible supply of cigarettes and a fund of good humour."<sup>106</sup> More popular with the bulk of the Partisans were the raids on the enemy's patrols and isolated posts. On 2 December, in co-ordination with the Corps attack, the 28th Garibaldi Brigade commenced an all-out effort against the German communications and rear installations. Five aircraft dropped the Partisans arms and supplies, and patrols of Popski's Private Army brought by rowboat along the canals 60,000 rounds of small-arms ammunition. At daybreak on the 4th a band

\* At the end of November the full development of Rimini as a railhead made it possible to dispense with the one at Ortona and thus eliminate an extremely long road-haul. On 4 December the Cesena railhead began supplying the 5th Corps and Polish Corps, and plans were in hand to bring Forli similarly into use.<sup>101</sup>

of 300 attacked Porto Corsini, and after brisk fighting in which both sides suffered several casualties, settled down to hold the garrison in siege. The most spectacular effort, however, was made in the area lying immediately south of the Valli di Comacchio. There on the 5th the Partisans seized Sant' Alberto and three neighbouring villages, withdrawing only when counter-attacked by a German force of five self-propelled guns, several armoured cars and some lorried infantry.<sup>107</sup> On 7 December the bulk of Bulow's irregulars were withdrawn on orders from Corps Headquarters to Ravenna, where they began refitting in preparation for further service.<sup>108</sup> During their main operations from 3 to 6 December they had taken 27 prisoners and had counted 37 German dead; Major Healy estimated that at least 75 of the enemy had been killed and from 30 to 50 wounded.<sup>109</sup>

The last phase of the 5th Division's plan went without a hitch. By the time Piangipane was secure General Hoffmeister had brought Brigadier Johnston's 11th Brigade forward from Cervia to take over his right flank. Advancing through the Westminsters in the late afternoon of 4 December the Perths on the right and the Irish on the left, each supported by B.C.D. tanks, cleaned out the pocket between the Lamone and Highway No. 16, the Germans blowing the bridges at Mezzano and Villanova as the Irish approached.<sup>110</sup> West of Piangipane the Lanarks and the Westminsters cleared to the interdivisional boundary, and by the morning of the 6th the armoured division had closed up to the Lamone on a five-mile front.<sup>111</sup> Cut off by the 11th Brigade's sudden thrust, the left wing of the 114th Jager Division, forming the extreme eastern tip of the German Tenth Army, was forced to fall back towards the Valli di Comacchio, harassed all the way by persistent bands of Partisans.<sup>112</sup>

### The Corps Assault Across the Lamone, 10-11 December

The December offensive had not opened simultaneously on all parts of the Eighth Army front. Both Godo and Russi had already fallen to the 1st Canadian Corps when on the night of 3 December the 46th Division of the 5th Corps and the Polish 3rd Carpathian Division launched a joint attack across the Lamone south of Highway No. 9. The British drive against the Pideura ridge six miles south-west of Faenza met stiffening resistance in broken ground which restricted deployment of the infantry and seriously impeded the supporting tanks. On the 7th the 46th Division took Pideura village from the German 305th Division, which, however, retained its hold on the main ridge to the north. Farther south the Polish Corps had secured the left flank by capturing Montecchio and the surrounding high ground, and

was threatening to cut off enemy troops retiring before the 13th Corps' advance up the Imola road (see Map 23).<sup>113</sup>

It seemed to von Vietinghoff that the Allied intention was to force him to commit his main reserves in the threatened area and thus weaken the Bologna sector, and so for a time he did nothing to aid the hard-pressed 76th Panzer Corps. By the 8th, however, when the temporary lull in activity on the Canadian front suggested that the Eighth Army's main effort might be along the Via Emilia, he had brought over the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division from behind Bologna and committed it south of Faenza between the 26th Panzer and the 305th Infantry Divisions.<sup>114</sup> Next day the Panzer Grenadiers launched against the 5th Corps' bridgehead a violent counterattack, which the 46th Division repulsed with great skill and determination, inflicting severe damage also on the 90th and 305th Divisions. Unfortunately General Keightley could not press this advantage, for the relief of the 46th Division was long overdue, and regrouping of his Corps could not be further delayed.<sup>115</sup> The Tenth Army was afforded little breathing space however, for almost at once the front west of Ravenna burst into flames as the divisions of the 1st Canadian Corps stormed over the Lamone.

Immediately after the 1st Brigade's failure to secure a bridgehead west of Russi, General Foulkes' headquarters had begun preparing for a co-ordinated attack by both divisions on the night of the 6th. Meteorological reports that day, however, gave warning that storms in the mountains might soon result in flooded rivers which would not only jeopardize the winning of crossings over the Lamone but might also sweep away the Montone bridges in the rear. General McCreery therefore decided to postpone the attack until a return of the water levels to normal should assure the operation a reasonable chance of success.<sup>116</sup> The enforced wait gave the Canadian formations an opportunity to extend their reconnaissances and complete their regrouping for the attack. On 9 December Brigadier Smith surrendered command of the 1st Division to Major-General Foster, and took over the 1st Brigade.<sup>117</sup>

The delay was tiresome to the waiting troops, who twice carried their boats forward to the river bank in preparation for attacks that were cancelled, each time losing a night's rest. Often the worst part of a battle is the contemplation of it, and positive steps were taken to see that morale should not suffer. "The apparent indecision of the last two days must make good grousing for the men," wrote Brigadier Johnston on the 8th to his battalion commanders. "I want every man to understand the reason for the action taken." His message to the troops reminded them of the assurance given earlier by the C.-in-C. and the Army Commander that they would not be asked "to fight both weather and enemy"; it told them of the adverse meteorological reports and what these implied; and called on them to be prepared "to act quickly when the weather is in our favour, and in the meantime to accept the delay with resignation."<sup>118</sup> For the next few days

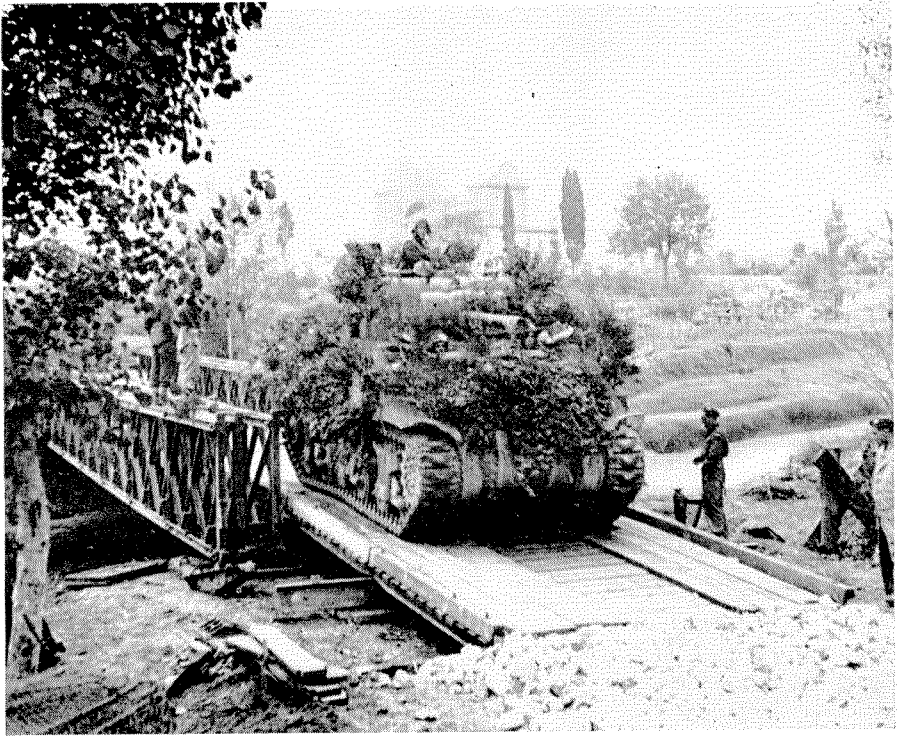


hostilities were confined to occasional artillery exchanges; on the 9th Traversara, on the far bank opposite the Lanark and Renfrew, was heavily attacked by the Desert Air Force.<sup>119</sup>

The Corps plan provided for a two-divisional assault on a four-mile front, with the 5th Division crossing at Villanova and Borgo di Villanova (two villages on the west bank of the Lamone roughly two and three miles respectively above Mezzano), and the 1st Division attacking immediately south of the main axis. The initial effort in each sector would be made on a single brigade front, although on the left the 1st Division's subsequent exploitation to the Senio called for the successive employment of all three of its brigades.<sup>120</sup> Playing upon the German sensitivity in the 5th Corps' sector, the 43rd Indian Lorried Brigade was to make a feint attack on the Canadian left shortly before the main effort; and it was hoped to add to the enemy's confusion by staging a diversionary fire demonstration on each flank of the 5th Division's attack.<sup>121</sup>

The terrain to be covered was not encouraging. Between the Lamone and the Senio, the eastern bank of which represented the final goal of the Corps operation,<sup>122</sup> lay four miles of country with physical characteristics already unpleasantly familiar to the Canadians. The passage of the Lamone promised to be but the first of a series of contests to win bridgeheads over strongly defended water barriers. In the space of less than two miles the Corps front was crossed by three dyked water courses--the Fosso Vecchio, the Canale Naviglio and the Fosso Munio--while on the right the Fosso Vetro, just east of the - Vecchio, was a fourth obstacle in the path of the armoured division.

By the 10th the weather had improved and the rivers subsided sufficiently for the Canadian Corps to strike. The 5th Armoured Division led off, hoping to take the enemy by surprise. At 7:30 in the evening the Perths and The Cape Breton Highlanders slipped across the Lamone in assault boats.<sup>123</sup> There had been no preliminary artillery bombardment at the points of attack, but on either flank the night was in an uproar as the 5th Armoured Brigade opposite Mezzano and the 12th Brigade in the Traversara area strove to divert the enemy's attention by firing everything from rifles to anti-aircraft guns. By eight o'clock any surprise had been lost, and the thunder of the divisional artillery was added to the din.<sup>124</sup> Half an hour later the guns of the 1st Division opened up with a series of concentrations which introduced a novel fire plan.<sup>125</sup> After raking the battle area for thirty minutes they fell silent, resuming their bombardment after a pause of twenty minutes. It was hoped by the designers of this stratagem--and as results proved not without good grounds--that during the interval the Germans, assuming that an assault was imminent, would emerge from their shelters to man their forward defences, and would thus be caught in the open when the barrage unexpectedly began again.<sup>126</sup>



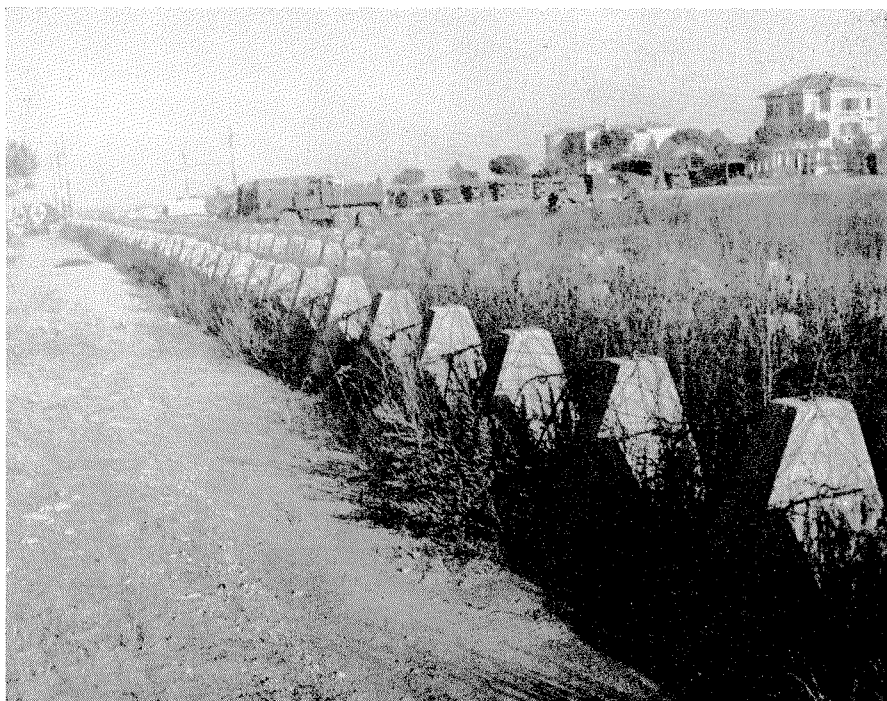
#### CANADIAN ARMOUR AT THE USO

The first Canadian tank to cross the Uso River at San Vito, 26 September 1944. It is a Sherman of Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians), supporting the 4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards.



#### ACTION AT CESENA, 20 OCTOBER 1944

Crossing the street under enemy fire is a soldier of The Carleton and York Regiment. The self-propelled gun is a 17-pounder of the 1st Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment.



#### GERMAN ANTI-TANK DEFENCES ALONG THE ADRIATIC

Concrete "dragon's teeth", designed to protect Cesenatico against amphibious or seaborne tanks. Their effectiveness was not tested; for the Germans withdrew and The Governor General's Horse Guards entered the town unopposed on 20 October 1944—by land.



*Photograph by the Author, 1948*

#### THE LAMONE RIVER

Looking downstream (north-eastward) at the site of The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment's crossing (right to left) on 5 December 1944. The flood banks rise 40 feet above the river level.

Three battalions of the 1st Division now moved to the river's edge with unit pioneers and carrier parties from the rear echelons bearing the assault boats and Olafson bridges. Their sector of attack was that in which the 1st Brigade had suffered its bloody repulse a week before, but this time the benefit of experience, a more careful reconnaissance, a superior artillery plan and the employment of an additional battalion in the assault were to ensure a complete success at the minimum cost. At half-past nine, by the eerie glow of searchlights which anticipated the rise of the moon, the crossing began—at the right the Carleton and Yorks astride the broken bridge on the Bagnacavallo road; at the left the 48th Highlanders (placed under Bernatchez's command for the operation)<sup>127</sup> on both sides of the railway embankment; and the West Nova Scotias in the centre. The two flanking battalions achieved immediate and overwhelming success. Early difficulties with the footbridges (the Highlanders' was a span too short, and the Carletons' sank at one end during the launching) were overcome by putting the assault companies across in boats. The swiftness of the attack, combined with the artillery deception, demoralized the defenders of the western dyke, and by midnight both battalions held firm bridgeheads covering their crossing-places.<sup>128</sup> During the night the Carleton and Yorks alone took 84 prisoners, at a cost of only twelve casualties,<sup>129</sup> and the commander of one of their assault companies declared: "I have never seen so many wounded, maimed and dead Germans in another area of similar size."<sup>130</sup>

By contrast the West Novas for a while fared badly. Their sector immediately below the railway bridge, scene of the R.C.R.'s earlier attempt, was apparently under close watch by the enemy. Heavy defensive fire fell on the assembly area, disorganizing one of the assault companies, and at the river edge the other was met by an inferno of mortar and machine-gun fire. It was relying solely on an Olafson bridge for its passage, and when the swift current capsized this before any troops could cross, there was a forced withdrawal to wait for assault boats to be brought up.<sup>131</sup> About midnight, however, Brigadier Bernatchez, exploiting success already attained, directed the West Novas to attack inwards through the bridgeheads of the two flanking battalions. The plan worked, and by first light the two jaws of the pincers had met.<sup>132</sup> As they cleared the west bank of the river the West Novas learned the strength of the enemy's defences; in addition to destroying two S.P. guns which had been firing through gaps in the dyke, they discovered on the reverse side of the embankment numerous weapon-pits near the crest and a series of deep and strongly timbered dug-outs spaced at intervals of 20 feet, "impervious to artillery fire, and equipped with every possible device including electric lights."<sup>133</sup> Before daylight on the 11th engineers of the 1st and 4th Field Companies had two light rafts in operation, and with gratifying promptness each infantry unit received its anti-tank guns. During the next 24 hours these crossings were developed into Class 9 floating bridges, although

the heavy enemy fire kept daylight work at a minimum. The situation was considerably relieved on the morning of the 13th, when the 13th Field Company completed a 160-foot Bailey bridge on the Bagnacavallo road.<sup>134</sup>

With all three assault battalions west of the Lamone Brigadier Bernatchez ordered the Royal 22e Regiment to pass through the Carleton and Yorks and expand the bridgehead to the Fosso Vecchio. Lt.-Col. Allard had excellent support from the artillery and from medium machine-guns and heavy mortars of the Saskatoon Light Infantry, firing on prearranged targets, but the Germans gave way so reluctantly that by nightfall his battalion had covered only 2000 yards astride the Bagnacavallo road and was still 500 yards short of the canal. The West Novas and the 48th Highlanders were then in less advanced positions south of the railway. The 22e penetration had been along the common boundary of the German 356th Infantry and 114th Jager Divisions, whose inner wings had now been rolled back on a three-mile front.<sup>135</sup>

The attack by the 5th Division had gone well. Before the enemy in Villanova could brace himself for the assault the Cape Bretons were over the dyke and into his midst. The village yielded 43 prisoners, and by two in the morning the Cape Bretons had reached the Via Aguta, a lateral road a mile beyond the river. On the left the Perths had taken Borgo di Villanova without trouble and were advancing along the Via Cocchi, which led north-west to the Naviglio Canal.<sup>136</sup> Judging the time ripe to commit his reserve battalion Johnston sent The Irish Regiment of Canada across the river at Borgo di Villanova to drive to the left and link up with the 1st Division. By first light on the 11th the Irish had seized the junction of the river road with the Via Cogollo--the next road south of the Via Cocchi linking the Lamone and the Naviglio. Pushing rapidly westward they captured intact the Fosso Vetro bridge, and after beating off two small counter-attacks reached the Fosso Vecchio about midday, to be halted by its demolished bridge. Lt.-Col. Clark's troops had then advanced 3000 yards, taken 50 prisoners and killed and wounded probably as many more.<sup>137</sup> Much of the success in both divisional sectors had been due to the sterling work of the D.A.F., whose 312 sorties on the 11th was its biggest effort in close support of the Canadians for any single day in December.<sup>138</sup>

The blows struck by the 1st Canadian Corps had caught the German 73rd Corps without any available reserves, for, as we have observed, von Vietinghoff had consistently viewed the renewed Eighth Army offensive as an attempt to draw off his strength from the Apennine front, and he had only with the greatest reluctance brought the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division into the battle against the 5th Corps. Yet if Dostler was to seal off the Canadian penetration west of Ravenna he had to have early assistance. Accordingly a battle group was hastily assembled from formations of the 76th Panzer Corps in the Faenza area. It included the reconnaissance battalion of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division and a battalion of

the 278th Infantry Division, plus an advance battalion of the 98th Infantry Division, which von Vietinghoff had decided to throw in to bolster the 114th Jager Division's crumbling right flank. Early on 11 December this scratch force counter-attacked the northern end of the 5th Division's bridgehead.<sup>139</sup>

The onslaught hit the Westminsters, who had been committed that morning under Brigadier Johnston's command on the 11th Brigade's right, north of Villanova. German infantry supported by from 15 to 20 tanks and self-propelled guns moved in from the direction of Highway No. 16 (which westward from Ravenna is more commonly called the Via Reale than the Via Adriatica) and although engaged by aircraft of the Desert Air Force, closed on the Canadian positions. After a sharp, hour-long struggle the Westminsters beat off the attack, taking several prisoners and damaging four of the German tanks with their PIATs. Two further attempts by the enemy during the afternoon failed,<sup>140</sup> and by nightfall his chance had gone, as the devoted efforts of the Engineers, working continuously under, direct fire, enabled the Canadians to face the Germans on more equal terms. At 6:45 that evening the 10th Field Squadron completed a Class 9 floating bridge which allowed light vehicles, carriers and anti-tank guns to cross into the bridgehead. Nearby the 14th Field Company had a heavier (Class 40) pontoon bridge ready for tanks shortly after 5:00 a.m. on the 12th,<sup>141</sup> and the completion that same night of a Bailey bridge eight feet above the water ensured a crossing in the Corps sector even should the Lamone suddenly rise.<sup>142</sup> That evening Brigadier Lind took over command of the 5th Division's right flank from Villanova to the Via Reale.<sup>143</sup>

By midday on 12 December it was apparent that the enemy's main forces had withdrawn behind the Naviglio in the sector between Bagnacavallo and the highway. The 1st Brigade, which General Foster had put in on the right of the Royal 22e Regiment on the previous afternoon, had met only light artillery and mortar fire in crossing the Fosso Vecchio. At 8:30 a.m. the Hastings and the R.C.R. (commanded now by Lt.-Col. W. W. Reid, former C.O. of the Perths) reached the Naviglio about 2000 yards downstream from Bagnacavallo\*, having linked up with the Irish, who were maintaining their steady advance along the Via Cogollo.<sup>144</sup> In the 5th Division's centre The Perth Regiment reached the Vecchio at the Via Cocchi,<sup>145</sup> as did the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards a mile and a half downstream.<sup>146</sup> The 5th Armoured Brigade had kept pace on the extreme right flank. Early on the 12th the 8th New Brunswick Hussars drove their tanks across the Lamone at Villanova, and moved north along the Via Aguta to Highway No. 16, where they met dismounted patrols of Lord Strathcona's Horse which had crossed on the rubble of the Mezzano bridge.<sup>147</sup>

\* The name goes back to the days when the horses of travellers approaching Bagnacavallo received involuntary baths in the flooded low ground about the town.

## The Naviglio Bridgeheads, 12-15 December

Canadian soldiers peering over the top of the Fosso Vecchio's eight-foot dyke on the misty afternoon of 12 December could see some 500 to 700 yards away across flat, treeless fields their next objective,-the Naviglio Canal, whose 20-foot earthen embankment formed their western horizon. The Corps Commander planned to force the passage of the canal by a simultaneous attack of both his divisions. On the right General Hoffmeister's 12th Brigade would seize a bridgehead opposite Villanova deep enough to reach the Fosso Munio, which here was a quarter of a mile west of the Naviglio. General Foster's intention was for the 1st Brigade to assault with one battalion a mile and a half below Bagnacavallo, with the 2nd Brigade standing by for exploitation.<sup>148</sup> Tanks of the armoured brigade would support both efforts. Civilians reported that the Naviglio was dry, the Germans having dammed it near Faenza a few days earlier in order to provide a better water obstacle in that sector.<sup>149</sup>

In the meantime the enemy was taking hurried steps to reinforce the 73rd Corps, whose battered formations were in no condition to withstand for long a renewed Canadian assault. The remaining regiments of the 98th Infantry Division arrived from positions near the Futa Pass and by the 13th had been inserted between the 356th Infantry and 114th Jager Divisions.<sup>150</sup> General Dostler thus faced the Canadian Corps with a comparatively fresh division deployed in the danger area between the Vecchio south of Bagnacavallo and the Naviglio west of Villanova; in spite of Canadian advances the outer wings of his two flanking divisions still rested on the Lamone. Prisoner identifications revealed that the weakened ranks of the 114th Jager Division had been stiffened by the arrival from north of the Po of "Field-Marshal Kesselring Machine Gun Battalion No. 1". This unit had been formed in November and had served with the Fourteenth Army until 4 December, when Army Group ordered its transfer to the Tenth Army. On 11 December it was placed under the command of the Jäger Division.<sup>151</sup> (In the closing months of the campaign each of the two German armies in Italy employed one of these heavily armed units.)<sup>152</sup>

The attack on the Naviglio began between nine and ten o'clock on the night of the 12th. The two assaulting battalions of the 12th Brigade, the Lanark and Renfrews on the left astride the Via Cocchi, and the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards 2500 yards farther north, successfully negotiated the fire-swept flats west of the Vecchio but met a stubborn and aggressive defence along the banks of the Naviglio. Only two squadrons of the Princess Louise reached the far side, and these were rapidly cut into isolated segments by furious counter-attacks. At the same time increased enemy fire on the

eastern approaches prevented reserve squadrons from moving forward to the canal. Stragglers bearing alarmist reports of the fighting began arriving back at the start line, and at 1:40 a.m. the acting C.O., Major A.E. Langston (who had taken over from Lt. Col. Darling on the 9th), ordered what was left of his forces to withdraw to the Vecchio.<sup>153</sup> The battalion had lost 21 killed, 46 captured and 21 wounded in the night's action. On the left the Lanarks were stopped by heavy fire from a group of enemy-occupied houses on the far dyke (identified on the map as Osteria\*). Unable to cross the Naviglio, they formed a strong position on the near bank which they held under constant pressure for two full days, suffering losses of 111-38 of them fatal.<sup>154</sup> Bad weather denied them help from the air, and for a long time they had no tank support, for the hail of mortar and machine-gun fire which the enemy was pouring on the exposed crossings of the Via Cocchi frustrated the bridging efforts of the Engineers. It was mid-morning on the 13th before the 1st Field Squadron R.C.E. using an armoured bulldozer had filled in a passage over the Vetro so that tanks of The British Columbia Dragoons could move up and give the Lanarks supporting fire from the Fosso Vecchio.<sup>155</sup> Three hours later an Ark bridge in position in the Vecchio enabled the armour to reach the near bank of the Naviglio.<sup>156</sup>

Meanwhile the 1st Brigade had met with better success. Forward companies drew back from the Naviglio to allow the artillery to soften up enemy positions, after which the Carleton and Yorks, placed under Brigadier Smith's command to make the initial assault, swarmed across the dry bed of the canal at the site of an abandoned water-mill. They quickly established a solid footing on the west bank, collecting in the process 45 surprised prisoners. Shortly after midnight the Brigade Commander committed the Hastings on Lt.-Col. Ensor's right, and by 4:15 a.m. on the 13th the two units held a bridgehead 1100 yards wide and 700 deep.<sup>157</sup> Ominous sounds of troops and vehicle movement from all parts of the perimeter acquired added significance from a warning by divisional Intelligence that a "possible counter-attack by 190 Recce Regt† may be with tanks from the north."<sup>158</sup> In the face of this threat Smith had already ordered the two battalions to hold firm and had directed the R.C.R. to close up to the canal behind the Carleton and Yorks' left flank. Now, as an additional precaution, he asked for air support over the area as soon as it was light.<sup>159</sup>

Shortly before eight o'clock German infantry and tanks attacked the Carletons,<sup>160</sup> and within an hour the entire perimeter was under assault.<sup>161</sup> A serious situation developed. Once the enemy armour was at close quarters it was impossible to employ defensive artillery fire; on the other hand, from two high towers in Bagnacavallo German observers, immune from air attack

\* The designation "Osteria" (Italian for "inn") appears frequently on large-scale maps, and was commonly treated as a place name in the records of both sides.

† Actually the 190th Reconnaissance Battalion of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division.



because of a low ceiling which kept Allied craft grounded,<sup>162</sup> were able to direct their fire with great accuracy upon the Canadian positions. It was impossible to screen these towers by smoke, and although our artillery obtained hits on them, they remained standing.<sup>163</sup> Under the repeated enemy blows the defences of the bridgehead began to crumble. In a short time the Hastings' "B" Company had been cut off and overrun, and Lt.-Col. Cameron was obliged to withdraw the remainder of his battalion to the shelter of the canal dykes. By half-past ten renewed pressure was forcing the Carleton and Yorks back to the line of the Naviglio as Ensor reported to Brigade that the situation was "very sticky".<sup>164</sup> Fortunately relief was at hand. Engineers of the 1st Field Company had just completed a bridge over the Vecchio south of the Via Cogollo,<sup>165</sup> and soon a squadron of B.C.D. tanks came streaming forward to save the bridgehead.<sup>166</sup>

While these waited for engineer aid to get them across the Naviglio, the enemy dealt yet another blow against the Carleton and Yorks on the far side. Towards midday three tanks approached from the west, closely followed by infantry. This new threat was mastered by the initiative and daring of two officers, each of whom had won the Military Cross earlier in the campaign. Working together Captain D. E. Smith, commander of the Carleton and Yorks' "C" Company, and Captain P. G. Newell, an artillery observation officer with the battalion, towed a six-pounder gun by jeep across the canal, and with a hastily organized gun crew manhandled it into position in time to knock out the leading Tiger. Artillery fire called down by Newell and renewed efforts by Smith and his men beat off the German infantry and the remaining tanks. (Both officers were awarded bars to their M.Cs.)<sup>167</sup> By this time the sappers had bulldozed a tank track across the Naviglio, and the first of the B.C.D. Shermans entered the bridgehead.

The arrival of the armour ensured retention of the hard-won crossing, although neither of the assaulting battalions was in condition to regain the ground originally held. Before the day ended they had withstood no less than thirteen determined attacks by the 190th Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion and crack troops of the Kesselring Machine Gun Battalion.<sup>168</sup> Both received the Army Commander's personal congratulations on their achievement.<sup>169</sup> The Carleton and York casualties of two killed and 16 wounded had been surprisingly light; by contrast the Hastings had lost three killed, seven wounded and 59 taken prisoner. The task of restoring the bridgehead was given to The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, which the G.O.C. had placed under Brigadier Smith's command when things began going badly with the 1st Brigade.<sup>170</sup> Under cover of artillery fire and smoke Lt.-Col. Stone's troops attacked at 4:00 p.m. in close co-operation with a second squadron of the Dragoons. Fighting continued into the evening, and when daylight failed the battlefield was illumined by searchlights. Although opposition was stiff there were no organized counter-attacks, and by midnight the bridgehead

had been restored.<sup>171</sup> By that time responsibility had passed to 2nd Brigade Headquarters, and the Seaforth Highlanders had joined the Edmontons west of the canal.<sup>172</sup>

That evening General Foulkes worked out a plan with General Hoffmeister for utilizing the 1st Division's now firmly established bridgehead to break the deadlock on the 5th Division's front.<sup>173</sup> Early on the 14th, the Westminsters would be put through the 2nd Brigade to push north along the left bank of the canal. Their arrival opposite the 12th Brigade's left flank would be the signal for the Lanarks, still in position astride the Via Cocchi, to renew their attack over the Naviglio,<sup>174</sup> while on the Lanarks' left the 11th Brigade, paralleling the Westminsters' advance, would free the right bank of any remaining enemy.<sup>175</sup>

This bold left hook was successful. By midday on the 14th Lt.-Col. Corbould had a company across the Naviglio and moving northward along the Via del Canale, accompanied by a squadron of Lord Strathcona's Horse. Ahead of them D.A.F. Spitbombers raked the German positions on both sides of the canal; so close was their support that empty cartridge cases fell among the Lanarks, waiting to enter the fight.<sup>176</sup> Softened by this treatment the enemy resisted only feebly. By 9:30 p.m. the Westminsters had reached the Via Chiara, half a mile south-west of Osteria; fifteen minutes later the Lanarks began crossing the dry bed of the canal.<sup>177</sup> Westminster casualties numbered only four killed and 16 wounded. Against this they claimed a total of 106 enemy captured.<sup>178</sup>

The light opposition met by the Lanark assault companies as they swarmed over the canal bank was in marked contrast to what they had encountered two days before. During the night they cleaned up small enemy parties, and by daylight on the 15th they were holding an area 500 yards deep behind Osteria. The Strathconas' arrival along the canal road at eight o'clock completed the first phase of the 12th Brigade's operation. By then the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards had begun passing through to join the Westminsters for the attack towards the Senio.<sup>179</sup> The first troops at the Munio found the bridges blown, and brisk fire from its far bank clearly revealed the enemy's intention to hold there. By late afternoon the two battalions had dug in on a front extending 1000 yards downstream from the bend in the canal at the Via Chiara.<sup>180</sup> During the day a squadron of The Governor General's Horse Guards, assisted by a company of Lanark and Renfrews, had cleared the brigade's right flank by a rapid sweep from Osteria along the west bank of the Naviglio to its crossing over the Munio, half a mile south of the Via Reale.<sup>181</sup>

Meanwhile the German 98th Division had renewed its violent attacks on the 1st Division's bridgehead north of Bagnacavallo. Preceded by the concentrated fire of six artillery and two mortar battalions,<sup>182</sup> an estimated two companies of infantry backed by seven tanks strove for over two hours

on the afternoon of the 14th to overrun the Edmonton company holding the 2nd Brigade's right flank. But the defenders stubbornly stood their ground, aided by strong support which included eventually the artillery of both divisions and the fighter-bombers in cab rank. On the left the Seaforth simultaneously drove back lighter attacks without difficulty.<sup>183</sup> Lt.-Col. Bogert (his promotion to the rank of Brigadier, although effective from 7 October, was not announced until the following January) now brought the Patricias over the Naviglio; and in a series of local attacks on that and the following night all three battalions enlarged the 2nd Brigade's holding in preparation for a breakout.<sup>184</sup> The most spectacular gain was the securing of a road fork (on the Via Guarno, 1000 yards west of the Naviglio) by the Edmonton's "C" Company after an inspired dash of 400 yards across open fire-swept ground. The charge was led by Lieutenant E.M.K. MacGregor, a platoon commander who had taken over "C" Company when its commander was wounded on the previous day, and was the culminating incident in a sterling display of leadership which brought the young subaltern the Military Cross.<sup>185</sup> Daylight on the 16th found the enemy still clinging stubbornly to his main line of resistance from Bagnacavallo to the bend in the Munio; it was clear that a much greater effort would be required to get the 1st Canadian Corps to the River Senio.

As the Canadian advance slowed to a halt the 5th Corps resumed the offensive south of the Via Emilia. On the night of 14-15 December the 2nd New Zealand and 10th Indian Divisions, supported by 400 guns, attacked the Pideura ridge south-west of Faenza, while on their left the Poles closed up to the Senio. It took twenty-four hours of close, bitter fighting with the 715th Infantry and the 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions for the Commonwealth forces to gain their objectives. The Germans, handicapped by heavy casualties and the loss of their key positions, withdrew across the Senio. On the 16th 5th Corps spearheads reached the river, and Faenza, outflanked on the west, fell into the hands of the 43rd Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade. To the north, however, the enemy still clinging close to the Lamone held the northward progress of the 5th Corps at the outskirts of the city.<sup>186</sup>

Meanwhile important changes in command had taken place. On 12 December General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson left A.F.H.Q. to head the British Joint Staff Mission in Washington. General Alexander, raised to the rank of Field Marshal,\* became Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean. Lieut.-General Mark Clark succeeded him at Headquarters Allied Armies in Italy, which resumed its former designation of Headquarters 15th Army Group. Lieut.-General Lucian K. Truscott Jr., who had commanded the United States 6th Corps at Anzio and in Southern France, assumed command of the Fifth Army.<sup>187</sup> The appointment of these senior commanders

\* His promotion, announced on 27 November, dated from 4 June, the day of the fall of Rome.

who were already engaged in the campaign meant that their take offer was accompanied by the minimum of disruption. Clark very soon made plain his intention of continuing the existing pattern of offensive, and on the 20th he instructed General McCreery to "proceed with current operations with the object of launching an attack to force a crossing of the Senio River in conjunction with Fifth Army's attack", which he hoped to deliver against Bologna a few days before Christmas.<sup>188</sup>

### The 1st Brigade's Fight South of Bagnacavallo, 16-18 December

Although by 15 December the Canadians had carved a large salient out of the German front west of the Lamone, the 73rd Corps continued to hold firm on either flank and to deny the approaches to the Senio. Opposite the 5th Armoured Division the enemy defended the natural barrier of the Fosso Munio, and farther south he manned a strong switch-line which ran from the Vecchio to the Lamone near Boncellino, within the railway fork west of Russi.

After crossing the Lamone the 3rd Brigade had maintained steady pressure against this section of the German defences. There had been an unsuccessful attempt by the West Nova Scotias on the 13th to cross the Vecchio south of its demolished railway bridge,<sup>189</sup> and on the 15th the Royal 22e in a fierce struggle captured a brickworks midway between the canal and Bagnacavallo, driving off subsequent German attempts to regain it.<sup>190</sup> It seemed likely to General Foulkes that the capture of Bagnacavallo would bring about the collapse of the whole line; but a direct assault on the old walled town would be costly and of dubious outcome. A break-through on either side, seemed to be the answer. Accordingly he decided to bring his left up to the Naviglio south of Bagnacavallo, and then attack simultaneously over this canal and over the Munio in order to encompass the town. It was hoped that an advance by the 5th Corps northward from Faenza between the Senio and Lamone would ease Foulkes' task by loosening the enemy defences on his left.<sup>191</sup>

The Canadian troops assaulting in that sector were faced with the necessity of crossing both the Fosso Vecchio and the Naviglio Canal, and of fighting their main action in an area overlooked by both Bagnacavallo and the towering bank of the Senio, which in that sector ran less than 2000 yards west of the Naviglio. To gain surprise it was planned that the 1st Brigade would ease up to the Vecchio in a series of local advances and then thrust in strength towards the dry canal. The Corps' main effort would follow, with the 11th Brigade striking across the Munio while the 2nd Brigade took up the 1st Division's attack south of Bagnacavallo. The inner wings of both Canadian divisions would endeavour to link up west of the town.<sup>192</sup> General

Foster's regrouping was completed by the 16th. South of the railway the 1st Brigade, supported by The Royal Canadian Dragoons, replaced Brigadier Bernatchez's troops.<sup>193</sup> They in turn took over the Naviglio bridgehead from the 2nd Brigade, which thus terminated a stand that had "included some, if not the toughest fighting ever experienced by this brigade-never before has the shelling been heavier or his counter-attacks stronger."<sup>194</sup>

At daybreak on the 16th the 1st Brigade began to skirmish forward, the R.C.R. approaching the Fosso Vecchio immediately south of the railway, and the 48th Highlanders on the left working westward from Boncellino. The angle which the German switch-line made with the Vecchio meant that although the R.C.R. start line was only a few hundred yards from the latter, the Highlanders had a mile to cover to reach their objectives-two bridges, as yet unblown, over the canal. But hopes of achieving any easy gains were soon dashed. The troops of the 98th Division were securely dug in and on the alert, having plenty of backing from tanks, artillery and mortars; while a well-planned system of demolitions on the roads and tracks leading to the Vecchio held up the Churchills of the 12th Royal Tanks supporting the Canadian infantry.<sup>195</sup> At the end of the first day's fighting the R.C.R. was still east of the canal, while Lt.-Col. MacKenzie's Highlanders had gone only 800 yards from Boncellino and had suffered 37\* casualties.<sup>197</sup>

By late afternoon on the 17th General Foster, deciding that the "nibbling" method had failed, directed Brigadier Smith to mount a full-scale attack on the Fosso Vecchio.<sup>198</sup> This went in at 4:00 o'clock next morning, supported by all the Corps artillery within range,<sup>199</sup> and initially met with considerable success. On the right the R.C.R., fording knee deep on the rubble of a demolished road bridge, established a foothold on the far bank, eventually strengthening it to two companies. Thirty surprised Germans, including part of a battalion headquarters (of the 289th Grenadier Regiment), fell into Canadian hands. The success was short lived, however, for at dawn the usual counter-attack by tanks and infantry developed, and the R.C.R. companies, with no anti-tank guns in the bridgehead, were forced back to the east bank. They had sustained 40 casualties, including two officers and 17 men taken prisoner.<sup>200</sup> On the left, where the intention was for The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment to take over the attack, the action was equally disappointing. The battalion had not recovered from the casualties suffered in the Lamone and Naviglio battles. Four company commanders had been killed or captured in those operations, and their replacements had not had time to learn to know their men-or their men them. Rifle companies were woefully under strength, one being made up of drivers, batmen and cooks.

\* Among these was a Bren gunner, Private J. A. Bray, who although seriously wounded in the stomach took charge when his section leader became a casualty, and with his fire drove off two counter-attacks (during the second of which a German bullet broke his leg), thereby saving his platoon position. His great fortitude and resolution brought Bray the D.C.M.<sup>196</sup>

Some platoons were led by corporals.<sup>201</sup> A fine display of initiative by the 48th Highlanders' forward company resulted in the seizure intact of the more northerly of the two Vecchio bridges, but the Hastings, who appear to have become disorganized east of the canal, failed to exploit this success, in spite of urgent messages from the Brigadier.<sup>202</sup> Elements of one company joined the Highlanders just across the captured bridge, but the armoured cars of The Royal Canadian Dragoons could not get forward in time along the narrow rain-soaked road. There was no help from the air, for very bad visibility kept aircraft on the ground.<sup>203</sup> Shortly before nine o'clock a counterattack by tanks and infantry drove the Canadians back over the stream.<sup>204</sup> An hour later the Germans had blown the bridge and the action was over.<sup>205</sup> "Our own troops", declared von Vietinghoff in his daily report to the High Command, ". . . thus achieve a complete defensive victory, in which 98 Inf Div plays a special part."<sup>206</sup> And in a "Divisional Order of the Day" issued on the 18th, Lieut.-General Alfred Reinhardt passed on to his troops congratulatory messages from corps, army and army group commanders, and paid special tribute to "the tank crews of 504 Tiger Tank Battalion and 1 Panther Battalion of 4 Tank Regiment, who rendered untiring service in true *camaraderie d'armes* in halting and throwing back the enemy."<sup>207</sup>

#### The Advance to the Senio, 19-21 December

The attempt to break through south of Bagnacavallo having failed, General Foulkes at once went to Hoffmeister's headquarters and in conference with his two divisional commanders and the brigadiers concerned laid plans for a concentrated attack at the centre of the Corps front.<sup>208</sup> It was decided that on the night of the 19th the 11th Brigade should advance over the Fosso Munio in the sector at present held by the 12th Brigade. Simultaneously on the left the 2nd Brigade would launch an assault between the bend in the Munio and the bridgehead which the 3rd Brigade was holding west of the Naviglio. As Bogert's attack gained momentum he would turn south across the 3rd Brigade's front to cut off Bagnacavallo, while the 11th Brigade continued forward to the Senio. The two attacks would begin in silence, with prearranged artillery support to be available once surprise was lost. Both the 1st and 3rd Brigades were to stage fire demonstrations, and south of Bagnacavallo a psychological warfare unit was to broadcast battle noises simulating an impending assault.<sup>209</sup> Canadian troops, in that sector later reported that the enemy's reaction with very heavy mortar fire testified to the realism of the noisemakers' programme.<sup>210</sup>

The opponents consisted in the main of the three regiments of the 98th Infantry Division-the 289th Grenadier Regiment in front of the 1st Division,

and the 117th and 290th opposite the armoured division.<sup>211</sup> A captured order issued on 18 December by General Reinhardt left little doubt of his determination to hold the Munio-Bagnacavallo-Vecchio line. Estimating the Canadian infantry strength at "4 much weakened battalions, 3 weakened battalions and 5 full strength battalions", supported by "1 armoured brigade and 1 tank battalion", the G.O.C. directed that efforts to seize the Senio crossings must be counteracted by putting into practice "the principles often propounded by myself". Defence in the present situation meant "not holding to the last man in one main line of resistance" but the organization of a "deep main sector of resistance . . . through the conversion of all heavy weapon positions, H.Q., etc., into nests of resistance." Immediate reserves for counter-attack were to be held well forward in order that they might strike at the most opportune moment-at the first stages of a water crossing or when the attacker had just broken into the main line of resistance; but Reinhardt warned that because of the attackers' air superiority such countereffort must be made not by full battalions in closed formation but rather by several simultaneous attacks on the scale of the fighting patrol.<sup>212</sup> During the next two days the Canadians were to have bitter proof of the soundness of General Reinhardt's "principles".

As a preliminary to the 5th Division's attack, units of the 12th Brigade secured crossing-places over the Munio in local actions which saw Canadian troops employing flamethrowers against the enemy for the first time in Italy. (It had not been possible in previous operations to get these weapons far enough forward to bring them into use.)<sup>213</sup> On the afternoon of the 16th four Wasps followed a Westminster company to the near bank just north of its bend at the Via Chiara and from the dyke top flamed enemy weapon-pits on the opposite side of the canal. The searing flame's terrifying effect broke the morale of the defenders, who, as the Canadians waded across, "either threw down their arms and ran or surrendered as prisoners."<sup>214</sup> That same evening the Princess Louise Dragoons gained a shallow foothold on the far bank, about 1000 yards downstream,<sup>215</sup> but the Lanark and Renfrews' attempt to extend this on the 19th failed.<sup>216</sup>

In the area of the 5th Division's intended attack the 30-foot wide Fosso Munio, flanked by dykes five feet high, was in itself a military obstacle, whose defensive value was considerably increased by the wide field of fire afforded by the muddy flats which extended for 600 yards to the west. Beyond this expanse of plowing the familiar pattern of small grain plots hedged in with rows of poplars supporting the grapevines stretched to the towering floodbank of the Senio. The Via Chiara ran the full distance from the Munio to the Via Rossetta, the lateral road beside the Senio; and 1200 yards to the north the parallel Via Sant' Antonio began 300 yards west of the canal, though it was little better than a farm track.





At dusk on the 19th the assaulting battalions of both divisions moved into their forming up places and at eight o'clock the attack started, unheralded by artillery fire. The weather was cool, but no rain was falling. Almost at once the attackers ran into strong opposition in all sectors, and there began a bitter fight which lasted all that night and through the next day. The 11th Brigade's units negotiated' the Fosso Munio without mishap. The immediate objective of the Irish on the right was a group of farm buildings at the near end of the Via Sant' Antonio; the Perths, directed along the Via Chiara, were to secure its junction with the Via Guarno, which ran in a generally southerly direction across the 2nd Brigade's front into Bagnacavallo.<sup>217</sup> The two battalions would then advance along the parallel routes to the Senio. The two leading Irish companies had almost reached their first goal when they suddenly came under withering machine-gun fire which aroused the whole area and forced them back. Attempts to advance with artillery support failed, and daylight found them dug into the deep plowing, just forward of the Munio. There they remained throughout the 20th, in full view of the enemy and harassed continually by his heavy mortaring.<sup>218</sup>

On the left the Perths, crossing through the Westminsterers at the bend of the canal, met the same stern resistance when "B" Company had led the way half a mile along the Via Chiara. Lacking cover of any sort-for in the darkness the enemy was firing on "fixed lines" down the straight roadside ditches-the Perths paid heavily, and by midnight they were back at the Munio. An hour later, however, Lt.-Col. Andrew sent "A" Company forward in a wide sweep to the right. Overrunning the few enemy posts it encountered, by 3:30 a.m. the company, commanded by Major R. Cole, had advanced 1000 yards from the Munio and was digging in around the Casa della Congregazione, an isolated farmhouse 200 yards north-east of the junction with the Via Guarno.<sup>219</sup>

While it was still dark tanks of the 2nd Armoured Regiment moved up to the Munio in readiness to support another Perth company in a reinforcing attack up the Via Chiara.<sup>220</sup> By great misfortune, however, an Ark bridge put in by the Engineers during the darkness was found to be at a bad angle, so that vehicles could not cross. A fascine was rushed forward and armoured bulldozers began filling in the canal, but by the time this crossing was ready the site had attracted the attention of every enemy weapon within range<sup>221</sup>—one observer estimated the rate of fall of artillery shells in the area to be 150 per minute.<sup>222</sup> German self-propelled guns covering the crossing from close range knocked out a Strathcona Sherman and two M-10s on the Canadian side of the canal.<sup>223</sup> Shortly after 1:00 p.m. the enemy armour was driven off by medium artillery,<sup>224</sup> and at two o'clock the first Canadian tanks crossed the Munio under a heavy smoke-screen.<sup>225</sup>

All this time the "lost" company of Perths, completely surrounded and under unceasing attack, clung to its positions at the Casa della Congregazione.

Again and again it beat back the 98th Fusilier Battalion (General Reinhardt's reconnaissance unit), and by early morning it had taken twenty prisoners. The final German effort came shortly after midday when some 30 Fusiliers closed in on the farmhouse. But the Perths were ready for them. A solid artillery barrage called down by Major Cole about his position boxed the enemy in, and the defenders' small-arms fire completed the job. Seven Germans survived, to join the ranks of the prisoners.<sup>226</sup> The tide of battle had now turned, for "A" Company's gallant stand had largely offset the consequences of the bridging mishap at the Munio. At 3:25 the first Strathcona tanks rolled into the farmyard.<sup>227</sup> Overhead a clearing sky enabled D.A.F. Spitfires to strafe enemy guns and transport along the road to the Senio.<sup>228</sup> Perth casualties to the end of the day were 32 killed and 49 wounded; the Irish losses numbered 42, eight of them fatal. For his skilled leadership and "courageous determination" in holding the brigade bridgehead, Cole received the D.S.O. His second-in-command, Lieutenant T. Cooper, was awarded the M.C.<sup>229</sup>

The all too familiar pattern of infantry unsupported by armour engaged in costly effort against strong enemy positions was repeated on the 1st Division's front. Although in that sector no water obstacle barred the way, the many small tree-bordered fields and vinerows restricted tank movement to the roads-and these were all heavily mined. Lt.-Col. Bogert had planned his operation in three stages. First the Edmontons and Patricias would strike across the Via Guarno and two more lateral roads to secure the line of the Munio above its second bend; in succeeding phases the Seaforth and Patricias would swing south-west so as to cut off Bagnacavallo while gaining the near bank of the Senio on the left of the 11th Brigade.<sup>230</sup>

At 8:00 p.m. on the 19th the attack went in silently on a front extending 1000 yards southward from the Via Chiara to the Via Pozzarda. It was soon seen that the enemy had made every farmhouse a nest of strong resistance. One of these was Casa Argelli, about 800 yards east of the Via Guarno. The Edmontons, advancing on the brigade right, found it fortified by machinegun posts and covered by the fire of a self-propelled gun at Casa Peli, a group of buildings half a mile to the west. The attackers were held up for most of the night, and it was only after a fresh company dispatched by Lt.-Col. Stone in a wide outflanking move had taken Casa Peli that the Germans relinquished Casa Argelli. It was then daylight, and all across the front and along the flanks the enemy's self-propelled guns and tanks were giving his infantry strong defensive support.<sup>231</sup> Meanwhile the Patricias' right-hand company, advancing astride the Via Pozzarda after getting past the machinegunners in Casa Argelli, had captured the 'junction with the Via Guarno. Under the spirited leadership of Lieutenant W. D. L. Roach the company beat off a strong counter-attack and took 15 prisoners. Roach was awarded the D.S.O. As day broke two companies pushed on towards the next lateral

road-Lo Stradello; but less than 100 yards from it they were pinned down by vicious fire from three sides, and were only extricated with the greatest difficulty under cover of high explosive and smoke from their supporting guns.<sup>232</sup>

The morning of the 20th saw little change in the situation. Both Bogert's units tried to consolidate or add to their gains, while the Engineers worked feverishly clearing the mined roads to let tanks forward. It was an unpleasant and dangerous task, for the resourceful enemy, not missing a single trick, had all his mines covered by machine-gun fire from the open flank north of Bagnacavallo.<sup>233</sup> In the afternoon a company of Patricias with a troop of British Columbia Dragoons attempted unsuccessfully to reach Lo Stradello through the Royal 22e Regiment on their left,<sup>234</sup> but a similarly supported left hook by the Edmontons through the Patricias at the Via Pozzarda freed the Via Guarno north to Casa Peli, and brought in another 25 prisoners.<sup>235</sup> By last light enough mines had been lifted for the tanks and support weapons to advance, and before midnight the Patricias were firm on Lo Stradello.<sup>236</sup> The day's fighting had cost them 17 killed and 28 wounded; the Edmontons had suffered 30 casualties.

The 1st Division had now penetrated from 700 to 1000 yards into the enemy's defences and was well up with the 5th Division, which had broken through at the Munio farther north. The 98th Division had been hit severely; though General Reinhardt might draw some consolation from the fact that his troops had lived up to their Crimean tradition of fighting to the last man and had regained some of the prestige lost at the Gothic Line, when in two weeks more than 2000 had been taken prisoner.<sup>237</sup> Late on the 20th he ordered a general retirement to the relative security of the Senio embankments.<sup>238</sup> Throughout the night both Canadian divisions moved forward, as organized resistance practically ceased. On the right, daylight found the Irish along the Via Rossetta.<sup>239</sup> The Cape Breton Highlanders mopped up opposite Fusignano, and by midday Brigadier Johnston had the two battalions, supported by anti-tank guns and a squadron of tanks, facing up to the river's high eastern floodbank on a 4000-yard front.<sup>240</sup> In General Foster's sector the Seaforth passed through the Edmontons and linked up with the Cape Bretons near the Senio.<sup>241</sup> During the morning of the 21st the Patricias, moving south along the Munio, reached Bagnacavallo,<sup>242</sup> which patrols of the Carleton and York had already entered and found empty of Germans.<sup>243</sup> That afternoon Seaforth patrols confirmed that the 98th Division was back to the river and by nightfall the battalion had taken up firm positions which extended the Corps frontage another 3000 yards south to the Bagnacavallo-Lugo road.<sup>244</sup>

On the Canadian left the enemy's withdrawal was not so complete. During the day the R.C.R. and the Hastings crossed the Vecchio and Naviglio and pushed to within a few hundred yards of the Senio.<sup>245</sup> But opposite Cotignola,

a town on the Senio's left bank south-west of Bagnacavallo, the enemy kept the 48th Highlanders from crossing the Vecchio until late afternoon, and then held firm at the line of the Naviglio.<sup>246</sup>

The Canadians had at last reached the Senio, although that difficult obstacle (the Germans still held the dyke on the east bank) and the Santerno River beyond yet lay between the Eighth Army and its intended start line for the final drive on Bologna. Not that the Canadian Corps had any reason to be ashamed of the part it had played so far. A review of its accomplishments in the first three weeks of the December offensive was given by General Foulkes in his Christmas message to the troops. The Canadians had cleared the enemy from 145 square miles of Italian territory (sufficient, said the G.O.C., "for a two-and-one-half acre allotment for each Canadian soldier in Italy"), and had liberated the city of Ravenna, besides four towns, thirty villages and nearly 1000 smaller communities. In an advance of nine miles they had forced the passage of three strongly defended water lines, compelling the enemy to bring in a fresh division from another part of his hard-pressed front.<sup>247</sup> The 14 German officers and 1656 other ranks taken prisoner testified to the rough handling which the Corps had given this and other formations employed against it.<sup>248</sup> All arms and services had contributed to the general success. The gunners had fired 184,000 rounds of shells-the equivalent of 1200 3-ton lorry loads; the sappers had opened more than 200 miles of road and erected 29 bridges, or more than half a mile of bridging, much of their work being done under hostile mortar and artillery fire; the Signals had laid some 2600 miles of cable, and dispatch-riders had delivered more than 28,000 packets.<sup>249</sup> But the cost had been great. In the twenty days since the offensive began on 2 December the 1st Canadian Corps had suffered casualties of 548 officers and men killed, 1796 wounded and 212 prisoners of war. These were heavy losses, and averaged only six per day less than those sustained in the Gothic Line fighting.

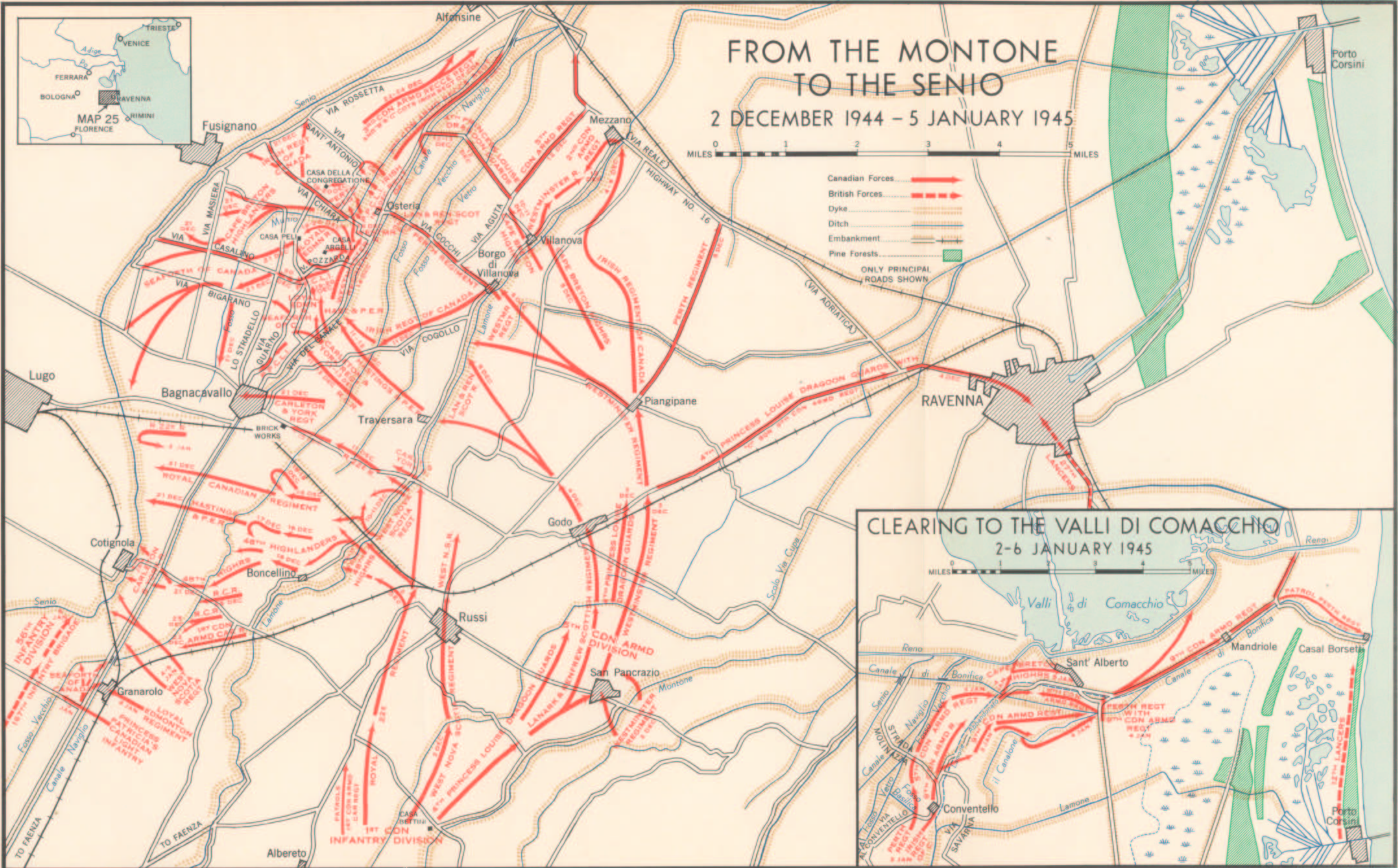
During the last ten days of the year a series of reliefs gave the Canadian infantry short periods of rest and enabled many of them to enjoy the sixth Christmas of the war out of range of enemy artillery and away from the noise of battle. Along the Senio there were numerous small-scale actions as both sides adjusted their front line and jockeyed for key positions on the east bank. South of Bagnacavallo steady pressure from the 5th Corps and the Canadian left wing forced the enemy first from the Lamone to the Vecchio, and then to the Naviglio, which he continued to hold until early in the New Year.<sup>250</sup> By Christmas Eve, in a series of sharp actions in which flamethrowers played a useful part, The Governor General's Horse Guards and the Irish Regiment had cleared the right flank north-eastward from the Via Sant' Antonio to within a mile of Highway No. 16. There the advance ended, for a strong German garrison still held Alfonsine, where the highway crossed the Senio,<sup>251</sup>

## The Offensive Abandoned

On 20 December, five days after the deadline set by General Alexander at the end of October for offensive operations to cease, Clark notified his Army Commanders that "the time is rapidly approaching when I shall give the signal for a combined all-out attack of Fifth and Eighth Armies."<sup>252</sup> General McCreery was to clean up the area between the Munio and the Senio, and be prepared to assault across the latter river at the same time that the Fifth Army struck northward at Bologna.<sup>253</sup> But before the signal was given the enemy made an unexpected move which brought further delay. On the day after Christmas the German 148th Division, with which had been incorporated elements of the newly-formed fascist Monte Rosa and Italia Divisions, struck a sudden blow against General Truscott's western flank, which was lightly held by the 92nd Division, a formation of coloured troops operating under Army command on the left of the 4th U.S. Corps. By the evening of the 27th the enemy force (which Fifth Army estimates placed at about 1000 German and 300 Italian troops)<sup>254</sup> had penetrated five miles down the Serchio Valley. The attack in itself was not serious\* (according to one German source its purpose was to take prisoners and relieve the pressure on the 51st Mountain Corps),<sup>256</sup> but a successful exploitation might endanger the great supply base of Leghorn. (Ten days earlier on the Western front the enemy had launched his great Ardennes counter-offensive, and the possibility of a similar desperate enterprise in Italy could not be completely ignored.)<sup>257</sup> Accordingly the U.S. 1st Armoured Division and two brigades of the 8th Indian Division were moved to the threatened area, and by the end of the month these forces had completely restored the situation.<sup>258</sup> Meanwhile however, on 28 December General Truscott directed "a further postponement of planned operations pending clarification of the situation on the west flank."<sup>259</sup>

The Eighth Army was even less ready for the joint effort, and on Christmas Day McCreery wrote to Clark requesting that the timing of the two-army attack be reviewed. He pointed out that the heavy fighting during the first half of December had seriously depleted his stocks of ammunition.<sup>260</sup> During those fifteen days the Army had used 500,000 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition, and the availability of only 612,000 rounds for operations in the next five weeks would clearly not permit any major offensive during that period. What was worse, any such effort would be made in wintry conditions when the probable absence of air support on two days out of three would increase the demands on the artillery. He further pointed out that the exhausting three weeks of fighting which the Eighth Army had just completed

\* Alexander suggests that the venture was inspired by Mussolini, who wished for a spectacular success for his new Italian formations.<sup>255</sup>



(during which it had drawn in three German divisions\* from the Fifth Army's front) had reduced by that length of time his Army's capacity to carry on a simultaneous offensive with the Americans, so that if a joint attack were launched his effort might well be expended by the time General Truscott's forces most urgently needed assistance.<sup>261</sup>

The Fifth Army's own shortage of ammunition, in spite of its two months of limited action, was almost as serious, for reduced allocations to the theatre during November and December had prevented accumulation of a substantial reserve.<sup>262</sup> In these circumstances the poor prospects of reaching Bologna that winter were only too apparent to Field-Marshal Alexander. On 30 December he decided to abandon the existing plan and "to go on the defensive for the present and to concentrate on making a real success of our Spring offensive."<sup>263</sup>

\* The 98th Infantry Division and the 90th and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions. Allied and enemy dispositions on the Italian Front on 31 December 1944 are shown in Sketch 12.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE END OF THE CAMPAIGN, JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1945

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#### Clearing the Granarolo Salient, 3-5 January

WHEN the decision was reached to go on the defensive for the winter two local operations still faced the Eighth Army, and more especially the Canadian Corps. The close of the December offensive had left the enemy in possession of two considerable areas east of the Senio. On the Canadian right, between Ravenna and the Valli di Comacchio, he held a line which ran inland from Porto Corsini, crossed the Fosso Vecchio at Highway No. 16 and met the Senio south-west of Alfonsine. On the left he retained a salient which rested on the Naviglio opposite Cotignola, extending southward beyond Granarolo. All this territory the Eighth Army had to clear before it could establish a satisfactory winter defence line.<sup>1</sup>

The south shore of the Valli di Comacchio was of particular value to both sides. It provided the Germans with an avenue through which they could reinforce via the narrow spit on the Adriatic side of the lagoon, as well as giving them a base from which to strike at Ravenna; its possession by the Eighth Army would make it possible to launch amphibious attacks in support of a major thrust along Highway No. 16 once the main offensive was resumed. By cutting the south-western dykes of the Comacchio on one side of the road and the high banks of the Reno River on the other, the enemy had flooded extensive areas and so created an easily defensible defile through which the highway passed at Argenta, fifteen miles north-west of Alfonsine. Flanking waterborne operations might therefore be expected to play an important part in accelerating an Allied advance.<sup>2</sup>

This concept of an attack through the Argenta Gap represented a departure from the plan issued at the end of November, which had called for the westward drive to continue along the Russi-Lugo axis at least as far as Massa Lombarda "with a view to the further advance of 1 Cdn Corps either to the north or to the west."<sup>3</sup> Some credit for the change belongs to General Foulkes, who shortly after his arrival from North-West Europe had proposed such a scheme to General McCreery. The new Corps Commander



had had considerable experience of operations in very similar terrain in Holland and he was much disturbed at the prospect of employing his forces in frontal assaults against the numerous river lines which lay athwart a westward advance.<sup>4</sup>

The probable course of future operations against the Tenth Army's left flank was evidently disturbing the German High Command at about the same time. On 9 December General Jodl, Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Staff, speaking on behalf of the Fuhrer, emphatically told von Vietinghoff that the Valli di Comacchio was not to be regarded as impassable terrain in which economy of troops could be practised. Experience in Belgium and Holland had proved that the Allies, aided by their special equipment, could easily overrun the sector in strength. (The German High Command was apparently unaware of the shortage of these amphibious vehicles in the Italian theatre, where, as General Foulkes put it, "the Eighth Army was operating across Caesar's rivers using almost the same equipment.")<sup>5</sup> Jodl insisted that holding this Adriatic sector must "remain the principle for the further conduct of operations" in order that a surprise penetration and a resultant collapse of the whole front might be avoided. Ten days later von Vietinghoff reported having taken special measures ("laying of mines, establishment of strongpoints" and the provision of reinforcements) for the defence of the Comacchio area.<sup>6</sup>

The operations undertaken early in January against the Granarolo salient were actually a continuation of the 5th Corps' northward push from Faenza which had started on 19 December. Advancing against stubborn resistance and in bad weather-snow fell in the plains on the 23rd-the 56th Division on the west side of the Naviglio and the New Zealanders to the east had by the end of the month cleared almost to the inter-corps boundary, which crossed the canal at the village of Granarolo, 3000 yards south of Cotignola.<sup>7</sup> The defenders of the German pocket were thus threatened from two directions, although between them and the Canadians to the east they had the Naviglio barrier. General McCreery's plan was to launch the main effort from the south, using an infantry brigade of the 56th Division, and the 7th Armoured Brigade supported by an infantry battalion carried in "Kangaroos"\*. Several hours before this attack the 1st Canadian Division would make a surprise assault across the Naviglio above Granarolo.<sup>10</sup>

Major-General Foster named the 2nd Brigade for the Canadian task. On the afternoon of 3 January the Royal 22e, with artillery, mortars and

\* These armoured personnel carriers had been introduced into operations in Normandy by Lieut.-General Simonds, G.O.C. 2nd Canadian Corps. This was the first time that they had been used in Italy.<sup>8</sup> It is of interest to note that in the spring of 1944, on the suggestion of the 1st Canadian Corps, the Mechanical Warfare Experimental Establishment, situated near Naples, converted 50 universal carriers for the transportation of troops or urgent stores such as ammunition. All propulsive machinery was removed, the carrier being towed by a tank.<sup>9</sup>

flamethrowers in support, fought a stiff diversionary action west of Bagnacavallo, making an unsuccessful attempt to gain control of the Senio right bank south of the railway.<sup>11</sup> The noise of this deception was just dying down when the Patricias crossed the Naviglio half a mile south of Granarolo. After an overpowering barrage had driven the enemy back to the shelter of some houses about 600 yards to the west the infantry stormed through and rounded up 50 prisoners. By 10:30 p.m. they had captured intact a bridge across the Vecchio 1000 yards west of Granarolo. (In its upper reaches the Fosso Vecchio lay west of the Naviglio Canal, crossing under it a few hundred yards north of Granarolo.) An hour later the Seaforth began passing through the Patricias and advancing northward to cut off Granarolo from the rear.<sup>12</sup> There was hard fighting at two bridges in the vicinity of the village; it took Lt.-Col. Bell-Irving's men until 11:00 a.m. on the 4th to reach the intersection of the two canals.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime the Edmontons, completing the third phase of the brigade operation, had entered Granarolo at first light unopposed.<sup>14</sup>

The 5th Corps' attack from the left, launched early on the 4th, made excellent headway. Air attacks and counter-battery fire almost silenced the German artillery, and as the tanks swept north-eastward (keeping well over towards the Senio in order to encircle the enemy) the frozen ground gave freedom of movement which enabled them to avoid the thickly-mined roads. The Kangaroos were an outstanding success. By midday infantry of the 167th (London) Brigade had made contact with the Patricias at the Vecchio,<sup>15</sup> and before the day ended the east bank of the Senio was clear as far north as San Severo (between Granarolo and the river), and 200 Germans had fallen into 5th Corps hands.<sup>16</sup> That night the enemy gave way all along the front. North of Granarolo the Carleton and Yorks and the West Novas were across the Naviglio by midnight, and on the 5th they reached the Senio opposite Cotignola.<sup>17</sup> On their left the 56th Division was by then along the river to the east of the 2nd Brigade. Lt.-Col. Bogert's troops had killed or wounded an estimated 60 enemy and taken 75 prisoners, all at a cost of 29 Canadian casualties. His subsequent report justly described the operation as "one of the neatest battles this Brigade has ever had."<sup>18</sup>

#### The 5th Armoured Division's Advance to the Valli di Comacchio, 2-6 January

On General Foulkes' other flank an attack by the 5th Armoured Division to secure the German-held ground south of the Valli di Comacchio was now in its fourth day and meeting strong resistance which demonstrated the tactical importance that the enemy placed upon that sector.

Hoffmeister had appreciated that the lie of the ground favoured a drive north-eastward between the Lamone and the Fosso Vecchio, and hence parallel to the main obstacles. The canalized lower reaches of the River Reno skirted the southern shore of the Comacchio, and therefore would not affect the operation. Indeed only one water barrier lay athwart an advance in this direction-the Canale di Bonifica,\* which ran eastward about a mile on the near side of the Reno. It was recognized by the planners that the proposed thrust would be dangerously exposed to counter-attacks from the Alfonsine area against its left flank and rear, but this risk, which as will be seen was a real one, was accepted.

At Highway No. 16 the Lamone and the Vecchio are about a mile and a half apart, but just south of Conventello this space was reduced to a gap of 1000 yards by a drainage canal-the Fosso Basilica-which ran northwestward into the Fosso Vetro. South of this ditch the ground was marshy and impassable to vehicles. Opposite the Basilica the Lamone had been turned into a new course eastward, but the former river bed continued northward past Conventello as the Lamone Abbandonato, and the Via Savarna running along its high eastern bank offered Canadian armour a good means of advance. As might be expected, the enemy was conscious that the Conventello area provided the most promising approach for a Canadian attack, and on 1 January Hoffmeister's intelligence staff was able to identify the 3rd Battalion of the 721st Jager Regiment, approximately 250 men strong, astride the narrow gap. Of the remaining two battalions of the regiment one was stretched across the marshes to the coast while the other was west of the Fosso Vetro. Major-General Ehlert's second regiment, the 741st Jager, was believed to be in divisional reserve north of the Bonifica<sup>19</sup>

The Canadian G.O.C. planned his operation in two phases: first the 11th Brigade would deliver a set-piece attack to smash the enemy's defence system at Conventello, after which the 5th Armoured Brigade, closely followed by embussed infantry, *would* exploit to the Canale *di* Bonifica, secure a bridgehead, and capture Sant' Alberto, beside the southern dyke of the Comacchio.<sup>20</sup> Two factors were calculated to contribute to the rapid advance of the armour, which was the essential part of the plan. The attack would not be launched until the ground was sufficiently frozen to allow tanks to operate, and as added insurance of mobility fifteen of the armoured brigade's tanks were equipped with Platypus "grouzers"-special track extensions which almost doubled the surface in contact with the ground, thereby not only improving traction but also distributing the weight of the tank over a wide area and thus reducing the risk of bogging down.<sup>21</sup> In order to free the two formations for their task the 12th Brigade had taken over the line of the Senio; while on its right the 9th Armoured Brigade, which since mid-December had held

\* The canal is known locally as the Destra Reno, from its full title, Canale di Bonifica Destra del Reno (see p. 697).

under Corps command the quiet sector from the railway to the coast, came under Hoffmeister on 30 December and extended its responsibilities westward to the Via Sant' Antonio.<sup>22</sup>

During the early hours of 2 January the two assaulting battalions of the 11th Brigade formed up about a mile north of Mezzano, between the Via Reale and the Lamone. At five o'clock the guns of the divisional artillery\* began firing into the German lines, and under the dim glow of artificial moonlight the infantry, supported by a squadron of the 8th New Brunswick Hussars, broke forward across the frozen ground—the Irish on the right near the river bank and the Perths on the left heading for the eastern end of the Fosso Basilica. Meeting only moderate resistance they were soon in the midst of the enemy defences and rooting the Germans from one strongly built stone farmhouse after another. Daylight brought close and effective aid from low-flying aircraft of the Desert Air Force. By three o'clock the infantry's job was done. The Irish had cleared Conventello and the Perths were covering the narrow defile from firm positions north of the Basilica ditch. The ten-hour action had cost the two units 15 killed and 42 wounded; they had inflicted heavy casualties on the 721st Jager Regiment, and had captured 73 prisoners.<sup>23</sup>

With the success of the first phase assured General Hoffmeister started his armoured brigade moving forward from Mezzano about midday. The British Columbia Dragoons pushed northward along the Via Savarna, engaging "all houses, barns and haystacks on the way",<sup>24</sup> while the New Brunswick Hussars (commanded from mid-December by Lt.-Col. J. W. Eaton) struck out across country through the Perths' positions. By mid-afternoon tanks had reached the narrow Strada Molinazza, which crossed the front about a mile north of Conventello. Here the Hussars were stopped by a deep roadside ditch which was defended by "numbers of S.Ps. and Panthers firing from the north."<sup>25</sup> There was work here for the infantry, and the Dragoons halted at the road junction on the Via Savarna for The Cape Breton Highlanders to catch up, the leading company arriving in Bren carriers soon after dark.<sup>26</sup> Just before dawn on the 3rd the Canadian positions along the Lamone Abbandonato were heavily shelled for more than an hour. A series of enemy counter-attacks followed, the most serious coming from a force of about 50 Germans who debouched from the wide, tree-grown river bed against the right-hand Cape Breton company. The fighting was brisk. By eight o'clock the last of the attackers had been driven off, although not before they had destroyed a jeep and put a tank out of action with *Faustpatrone* fire.<sup>27</sup>

\* Commanded now by Brigadier J. S. Ross, who early in December had succeeded Brigadier Sparling as C.R.A. 5th Armoured Division. The latter had become Commander, Corps Royal Artillery upon Brigadier Plow's appointment as Brigadier Royal Artillery, First Canadian Army.

These efforts by the enemy failed to delay for long the armoured brigade's progress. That evening the New Brunswick Hussars discovered a crossing over the Molinazza ditch, and by 9:00 a.m. both regiments were again on their way. The country west of the old Lamone bed was very close. The small fields were lined with rows of low pollarded trees between which grapevines hung from steel wires stretched six or seven feet above the ground. These limited visibility in many places to as little as forty yards, while the wires were forever catching in the turret hatches and restricting the free turning of the turrets themselves.<sup>28</sup> Fortunately enemy opposition on this flank was light, and midday found the leading tanks within a half a mile of the Bonifica. Farther east The British Columbia Dragoons, advancing with a squadron on either side of the Abbandonato, had met and driven back five separate groups of German tanks and self-propelled guns.<sup>29</sup>

Early in the afternoon, when air reconnaissance reported that the enemy armour had withdrawn to the Bonifica, Brigadier Cumberland directed the New Brunswick Hussars to make a dash eastward to secure the bridge which carried the Via Savarna over the canal about a mile south-west of Sant' Alberto. Just as the first tanks reached the crossing however, the enemy blew the span, leaving the Hussars facing a major obstacle, 80 feet wide, with a water gap of 25 feet, partly ice filled.<sup>30</sup> Cumberland thereupon ordered Lt.-Col. Angle's Dragoons to make for a second bridge two miles farther east along the canal; but a German post in a farmhouse about 1000 yards from the Savarna held them up, and by the time this was dealt with the daylight had gone.<sup>31</sup> During the night the Perths came forward to join the armour in front of the Bonifica.<sup>32</sup>

In the meantime the enemy had been preparing a strong counter-blow designed to cut off the Canadian armour from its base and drive it into the trackless marshlands north of Ravenna. He gathered together behind the Fosso Vetro a battle group of four battalions\* drawn from the 16th S.S. Panzer Grenadier Division (which had been transferred from the front south of Bologna "as the strongest combat division", to relieve the exhausted 98th Infantry Division),<sup>34</sup> the 26th Panzer Division, and the 114th Jager Division;<sup>35</sup> with this force he hoped to drive a wedge through to the Lamone south of Conventello.<sup>36</sup> Fortunately the Canadians were disposed to meet just such an eventuality. To the west of Conventello between the Strada Molinazza and the Fosso Basilica stood the Westminsters, brought in from the 12th Brigade to replace the Perths. On their left were the 1st Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps and dismounted elements of the 12th Lancers, both under command of the 9th Armoured Brigade. In reserve about Conventello was The Irish Regiment of Canada.<sup>37</sup>

\* The 1st Battalion, 36th S.S. Panzer Grenadier Regiment and the three divisional reconnaissance battalions.<sup>33</sup>

The German attack came in through the darkness at 4:30 on the morning of the 4th, preceded by a sharp artillery bombardment which lasted thirty minutes. Near the Fosso Basilica the enemy succeeded in penetrating between the flank companies of the Westminsters and the British rifle battalion, and ere long he had pushed to within 500 yards of the Lamone River. But that was the limit of his success. Canadian artillery brought down heavy fire to seal the breach, while from all sides of the pocket the defenders poured such an effective volume of small-arms fire that at dawn a company of Irish working with a troop of New Brunswick Hussars easily mopped up the surviving Germans.<sup>38</sup> Captured officers admitted that the weak point in the enemy's plan had been his inability to get supporting arms forward over the multiple water obstacles east of Alfonsine--a problem only too familiar to the Canadians. His difficulties had been enormously increased by the Desert Air Force, which from 8:15 a.m. kept the line of the Fosso Vetro under continual attack.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless the German attempt might have succeeded had it not been for the steadiness of the defending infantry coupled with the devastating fire of the Canadian artillery. The cost to the attackers was heavy. They left 200 behind as prisoners and lost a large number of killed and wounded. The defending force got off lightly; the Westminsters, for example, reported only seven wounded.<sup>40</sup>

Two miles to the north the Canadian advance had been temporarily checked. During the morning of the 4th dismounted troops of The British Columbia Dragoons captured intact the road bridge south-east of Sant' Alberto, but could not get their tanks on it because of a minor intervening waterway, named it Canalone. By early afternoon, however, a second squadron arrived with a company of Perths along the far bank of the obstructing Canalone and crossed the Bonifica.<sup>41</sup> While this was taking place, prospects of securing a bridgehead at the Via Savarna without the necessity of a major operation had improved when a Cape Breton patrol forded the Bonifica on the ruins of the blown bridge and brought back 28 prisoners as proof of low enemy morale. During the afternoon the battalion crossed the canal in strength, and at last light it was joined on the far side by B.C.D. tanks arriving from the newly-won bridge to the east. Early on the 5th a patrol reported that the enemy had withdrawn from Sant' Alberto.<sup>42</sup>

The next two days saw the Canadians sweep through to the coast against negligible opposition. The Cape Bretons mopped up 50 German stragglers in Sant' Alberto and cleared the right bank of the Reno River as far west as the Vecchio. (The presence of prisoners from the 710th Infantry Division, elements of which had been brought down the Comacchio isthmus to support the 741st Jager Regiment, testified to the enemy's determination to hold the line of the Bonifica. The division was von Vietinghoff's latest acquisition to the theatre, having arrived in Italy on 15 December after a non-stop move from Norway.)<sup>43</sup> On the right the Dragoons and the Perths, opposed only by desultory enemy artillery fire, occupied Mandriole on the 5th, and next

morning reached the coast at Casal Borsetti and cleared the base of the Comacchio spit. On the same day patrols of the 12th Lancers, operating under Brigadier Cumberland's command, swept the narrow coastal strip northward from Porto Corsini to complete the 5th Division's assignment.<sup>44</sup>

Thus ended an undertaking which demonstrated convincingly the principle of co-operation between all arms. Against eight enemy battalions identified in the battle area General Hoffmeister had committed two armoured regiments and the equivalent of five infantry battalions. In five days he had gained all his objectives, taken 600 prisoners and killed and wounded a great many more-300 enemy dead were counted in the area. Total Canadian casualties numbered less than 200. German equipment destroyed or captured included eight Panther tanks and twenty anti-tank guns.<sup>45</sup> The Desert Air Force, like the artillery, had rendered yeoman support. In the first four days of the operation, its aircraft flew 746 sorties, delivering low-level strafing attacks and dropping 276 tons of bombs.<sup>46</sup> Nor must the contribution of the Engineers be forgotten-such as the work of the two sappers who removed a ton of explosives from the Bonifica bridge to enable tanks to cross.<sup>47</sup> With such diversified support given to the infantry it is perhaps not surprising that no occasion was found to use the Crocodile tanks of the 12th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, which were available throughout the operation. There seems to have existed a Canadian preference for the carrier type of flamethrower. (Canadian humour is probably behind a complaint by the British unit-in its report of what it styled an "abortive visit"-that among various tasks the flamethrowers were told "to be prepared to engage a Tiger tank and to thaw the River Reno!")<sup>48</sup>

The successful liquidation of the enemy-held areas east of the Senio brought General Foulkes laudatory messages from both the Army Group and Army Commanders. General Mark Clark's read:

My sincere congratulations on the successful attacks by your troops during past few days. The operation was thoroughly planned and executed. Despite strong enemy resistance and counter-attacks Cdn Corps and 5th Corps pressed forward taking a heavy toll of enemy dead and many prisoners.<sup>49</sup>

General McCreery paid tribute in the same vein, praising the "splendid fighting spirit and great skill" shown by the two formations. In passing these commendations on to the troops under his command the G.O.C. added his appreciation for "the way that all the soldiers have conducted themselves during these operations."<sup>50</sup>

### Holding the Winter Line

Having thus tidied up affairs on its flanks, the Canadian Corps settled down into its second winter line. It was the Eighth Army's purpose to hold the front with as few troops as possible, relying on immediate counter-attack

should the enemy attempt a sudden break-through (although the state of his reserves seemed to preclude the likelihood of any such effort on a major scale).<sup>51</sup> To prevent any considerable German penetration the Army Commander ordered two "stop lines" to be organized along the rivers Lamone and Montone, with switch-lines between them. All bridges forward of these stop lines were prepared for immediate demolition.<sup>52</sup>

For the majority of the Canadians there were depressing memories of static positions maintained a year before in the chilly dampness and mud north of Ortona. But this time the weather started off more propitiously. Most of January was clear and cold; there were light falls of snow, but hardly any rain, and the frozen ground remained firm (although the rivers stayed open). Such relatively favourable conditions helped to keep up morale, which seems to have received a further lift from the close proximity of the foe. From Alfonsine to the Reno the enemy was still between the Senio and the Fosso Vetro; south of the Via Reale the line hugged the right bank of the Senio, with the dyke itself being held in some places by the Germans, in others by the Canadians. Frequently the German slit-trenches were only a few yards from the Canadian positions. In such cramped quarters patrol clashes and fire fights came often, and in the intervening lulls inventive minds improvised new weapons of war or devised unorthodox uses for existing ones. The R.C.R. found a PIAT fired at a high angle most effective against German footbridges across the Senio.<sup>53</sup> The Seaforth produced the "V-2" -a large catapult made from the inner tube of a car tire, capable of throwing a No. 36 grenade fifty yards. Another ingenious creation (inherited from the Lanark and Renfrews) was the "Dagwood", which sandwiched a 36 grenade between two Hawkins 75s in a sandbag. When thrown the 36 set off the other two; according to a unit account, "the resulting explosion was terrific, and reports state that they had a bad effect on the morale of the enemy." The effect on the Seaforth was of course just the opposite. "The end of the Senio tour will find the regiment in better spirit than for a long time", declared the same writer. This was shortly after some experimenters had filled a motor car with high explosive and sent it careering down the floodbank into an enemy post.<sup>54</sup>

A week before Christmas General Heidrich had issued to his 1st Parachute Corps a comprehensive directive on defence and training, and on Kesselring's orders this had been circulated throughout all Army Group "C". Defence, like attack, was to be aggressive. "In static battle conditions such as the present," Heidrich wrote, "fighting should never cease. The 'leave me alone and I will leave you alone' attitude must be entirely absent."<sup>55</sup> Now, along the 27-mile front which the Canadians were holding, it seemed as though both sides were following this precept. Scarcely a night passed without patrol activity of some kind. It might be a reconnaissance to confirm the whereabouts of a suspected enemy position, an ambush to waylay his supply traffic,



or a more pretentious attack to seize a disputed vantage point on the dyke or destroy a particularly annoying weapon post. These larger raids could be costly to the attacker, as the Patricias found in one such venture on 2 February: two of their platoons suffered 37 casualties when the explosion of a German demolition charge buried a complete section in the rubble of a building and a rescue party was almost wiped out by heavy mortar fire.<sup>56</sup> Retaliatory measures followed, and each side scored its measure of successes; but credit for the most neatly executed raid of the whole period must go to the enemy. In the early hours of 16 February near Conventello a German platoon penetrated an R.C.R. company area after a mortar bombardment had boxed it in from the remaining battalion positions. The raiders carried off 17 prisoners from a large building without having to fire a shot.<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that in these various encounters the Canadian infantry could not count on substantial support from their artillery, for there had been a drastic reduction in the Corps' allotment of ammunition. A.F.H.Q. had taken over control of all stocks when the period of "active defence" started, and had fixed a quota of ten rounds a day for field guns and five for mediums. The air support available was similarly reduced as the Desert Air Force cut down the number of its daily sorties in order to rest and train for the spring offensive.<sup>58</sup>

One result of the 5th Armoured Division's successful operation south of the Comacchio had been a further strengthening of the German Tenth Army's left wing at the expense of the Bologna front. On 8 January the 42nd Jager Division relieved the badly shaken 114th Niger Division, which was moved north of the lagoon, and two days later the 362nd Division was inserted on the 16th S.S. Panzer Grenadier Division's right in the Lugo area, opposite General Foster's left flank. The 76th Panzer Corps was now in control of all formations south of the Valli di Comacchio, General Dostler having taken his headquarters northward to supervise the 114th Division's coastwatching duties south of the Po.<sup>59</sup> Early in February Kesselring (who had resumed command of Army Group "C" on 16 January) had to give up the 16th S.S. Division to the Eastern front,\* where the outstanding successes of the great Russian winter offensive which began on 12 January were bringing urgent demands for reinforcement from Italy. On its departure the 362nd Division and the 42nd Jager closed in to fill the resulting gap.<sup>61</sup> The only other change opposite the 1st Canadian Corps came early in February when the regimental group from the 710th Division which had been holding the Comacchio spit transferred its responsibilities to the 114th Jager Division and moved northward to rejoin its parent formation at Venice.<sup>62</sup>

\* The 356th Infantry Division had preceded the 16th S.S. Division to *Army Group South*, having been withdrawn from the 76th Corps' right wing during the third week in January.<sup>60</sup>

After a series of brigade and battalion reliefs, the 5th Canadian Armoured Division went into reserve on 14 January, handing over its sector south of the Comacchio to the Gruppo Combattimento Cremona (commanded by General Clemente Primieri)-the first major Italian formation to come under command of the Canadian Corps.<sup>63</sup> This was formerly the Cremona Division of the Italian regular army. It had helped expel the Germans from Corsica in September 1943, and a year later had moved to Southern Italy, where it was reorganized and given British weapons and transport. It was one of five such Italian combat groups (each roughly the size of a British brigade, although much stronger in infantry) \* to enter the line after being equipped and trained by A.F.H.Q. The Germans, quick to realize that the Canadian division had been relieved, tested the newcomers with a series of sharp raids and night attacks. At first these won them some forward outposts, but once the Cremona Group had settled down it gave a good account of itself, proving its fighting spirit in vigorous and successful counter-attacks.<sup>65</sup>

On 10 February responsibility for the whole Canadian front passed to General Foster, as Corps Headquarters prepared (according to instructions which were actually the cover plan for a much more significant assignment) to "move into Army Group reserve ... to train for operations in the spring." For the time being the 1st Division remained in the Senio Line, on 16 February passing to the command of the 5th Corps.<sup>66</sup> A week later the Canadians fought what proved to be their last action in Italy. During the night of the 24th-25th two companies of the 362nd Division came in twice upon the Seaforth and Loyal Edmontons in their positions south of Fusignano. With the aid of skilfully directed defensive fire (the Seaforth three-inch mortars were "firing more or less straight up in the air") both attacks were beaten off, the second being neatly caught as it was sky-lined on top of the Senio dyke. Seven Germans were taken prisoner, while their wounded kept stretcher bearers busy throughout the night. The two Canadian battalions suffered casualties of nine killed and 26 wounded.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile on 1 February The Calgary Regiment of the 1st Armoured Brigade had arrived in the Adriatic sector. It was the first step in a move which would have seen the brigade serving once again with the Eighth Army, had not other plans intervened.<sup>68</sup> Since the end of October Brigadier Murphy's three armoured regiments had found their support of the 13th Corps reduced almost to a static role. Worsening ground conditions had brought a further deterioration in communications, and supply routes could only be maintained with the utmost difficulty. On 7 November the diarist of the

\* Total strength of the Gruppo Cremona (on 7 January) was 445 officers and 7121 other ranks. In addition to two regiments of three infantry battalions each the group included a field artillery regiment of four batteries, an anti-tank and an anti-aircraft battery, two engineer companies, a signal company, and appropriate medical, supply, and ordnance units.<sup>64</sup>

Three Rivers Regiment noted that a horse was being sought for the use of Lt.-Col. F. L. Caron, the Commanding Officer. "Under present conditions when even jeeps cannot make some of the roads and tracks, several horses would be a most useful addition to the Regimental War Establishment".<sup>69</sup> The extreme case occurred in the 1st British Infantry Division's sector, where The Ontario Regiment's "A" Squadron, sent to relieve an American unit on Mount Grande (see Map 23) had to take over the U.S. tanks *in situ*, since movement by armour over the snow-blocked mountain trails was impossible.<sup>70</sup> Under such conditions the Ontarios could at best provide artillery support for the limited attacks made by the infantry. On at least one occasion "B" Squadron, in the divisional "Gun Line" west of Gesso, fired at ranges of from 8000 to 11,000 yards, obtaining sufficient elevation for these distances by running the noses of their tanks up a steep bank.<sup>71</sup>

Hemmed in by winter the troopers made the best of their unenviable environment. Many found satisfactory quarters in substantial shelters which they had excavated from the hillside and walled in with ammunition tins filled with earth and fine rock. Roofs of wood waterproofed with a pup tent or tarpaulin shut out the weather, and what one unit diarist described as "the central heating of a 25-pounder ammo tin"<sup>72</sup> kept the interiors comfortably warm. Here the men were safe from anything but a direct hit.<sup>73</sup> Not so fortunate however, were the Ontario crews manning the immobile Shermans on Mount Grande. Exposed to continuous observed fire from mortars and machine-guns, they had virtually to live inside their tanks.<sup>74</sup> Small wonder that two of the crews returning to Borgo San Lorenzo for a rest after "twenty consecutive days and nights in their tanks said it was the toughest time they had ever experienced."<sup>75</sup>

Apart from The Ontario Regiment's move there was little change in the dispositions of the Canadian armour during the last two months of 1944. The Three Rivers Regiment, supporting the 78th Division and the 6th Armoured Division in the Santerno valley, spent Christmas at Castel del Rio, with two troops of tanks frozen in at Gesso and the balance of its forward squadrons at Fontanelice\* on the Imola road.<sup>76</sup> On the 13th Corps' extreme right flank "B" Squadron of The Calgary Regiment assisted Gurkhas of the 8th Indian Division in cleaning up around Modigliana in midNovember, and on the 25th it crawled forward another two miles toward Faenza.<sup>77</sup> By this time, however, the Polish Corps' westward drive on the Eighth Army's left was carrying it across the Indian front, which by 17 December was held by only one brigade. "To reach the enemy we would have had to cut North-West into the mountains and bare escarpments," wrote the Calgary diarist on the 8th. "This we could not do . . . Our

\* See p. 697.

usefulness to 8th Indian Division was ended." For the rest of December Lt.-Col. Richardson concentrated his regiment in the Marradi area, to await the next move.

This was not long in coming. At Christmas the threat against the Fifth Army's left flank sent the bulk of the 8th Indian Division, as we have seen, hurrying westward to Lucca, and on 30 December the Calgaries began moving into a rest area at San Donato, near Florence.<sup>78</sup> The perilous journey over the eighteen miles of treacherous mountain roads to Borgo San Lorenzo, took seventeen hours. Ice lay in sheets over the steep gradients, and "for every foot tanks moved forward, they slipped a yard"; at the end of the ordeal some speedometers registered 70 miles. By great good fortune and the skill of the drivers the expedition was completed without mishap. A warm tribute came to Richardson from the Brigade Commander. "I consider the feat of your regiment one of the finest it has performed", he wrote, "and I bear in mind in saying so the most outstanding work which it has performed in the face of the enemy from Sicily to the Northern Apennines."<sup>79</sup>

After spending most of January at San Donato the Calgaries embarked upon what was to prove their final operational role in Italy. A long rail trip by way of Arezzo and lesi brought them to the Forli area, where they came under command of the 5th Corps and were assigned to support the 56th Division in its Senio positions opposite Cotignola.<sup>80</sup> Here the squadrons spent the first three weeks of February in a more or less static role, occasionally carrying out individual tank shoots which were usually followed by reports of "Jerry stretcher bearers carrying away casualties."<sup>81</sup>

Late in January the remainder of the armoured brigade had received orders to concentrate on the Adriatic coast for a period of rest and training at Porto San Giorgio, 45 miles south of Ancona. This would make the Canadian armour available for the Eighth Army's spring offensive and preclude the necessity of the hazardous journey across the mountains when the winter snows were melting.<sup>82</sup> As it was, the Three Rivers Regiment was forced to leave to the 78th Division the six immobile tanks in the Gesso area.<sup>83</sup> The transfer to the coast began on 31 January, with the Ontarios being the first to ship their tanks. Four days later, however, as Brigadier Murphy's headquarters was preparing to leave Borgo San Lorenzo, further movement of the brigade was suddenly cancelled.<sup>84</sup>

### The Case for Reuniting the First Canadian Army

It will be recalled that when it was decided in the autumn of 1943 to build up the Canadian strength in Italy to a full corps, the Canadian Government had accepted the possibility that such a dissipation of its forces



#### DISTINGUISHED VISITORS AT CORPS HEADQUARTERS

Lieut.-General Charles Foulkes (left), G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps, meets Lieut.-General Sir Richard McCreery, G.O.C.-in-C. Eighth Army, and Lieut.-General E. W. Sansom (right), Inspector General of the Canadian Army. This photograph was taken at Riccione on 12 February 1945.



#### COMMANDERS DISCUSS THE MOVE TO FRANCE

Major-General H. W. Foster (left), G.O.C. 1st Canadian Division, and Brigadier J. D. B. Smith, commanding the 1st Infantry Brigade, at the transit camp at Leghorn on 6 March 1945.



#### IMPROVED WINTER QUARTERS IN THE APENNINES

This "tank hut" in the Mount Grande sector accommodates three men of The Ontario Regiment's "B" Squadron. The photograph was taken on 21 January 1945, two days before the unit began its move out of the mountains.



#### OPERATION "GOLDFLAKE"

Troops of the 1st Canadian Division arriving at Leghorn on 9 March 1945 prepare to embark for Marseilles.

might necessitate the disbandment of its overseas Army Headquarters. That Army Headquarters had survived, however, and from the end of July 1944 had been playing an important role in the campaign in North-West Europe, with British and Allied formations replacing the 1st Canadian Corps in its order of battle. Canadian soldiers in both theatres cherished the hope of serving together before the end of the war, and in Ottawa it had become a matter of national policy that the enforced separation of the Canadian forces should be ended as soon as a reunion could be justified on military grounds.

An opportunity for impressing this view upon the British Chiefs of Staff came in May 1944 when the War Committee of the Cabinet was preparing a directive to General Crerar authorizing his troops to participate in the invasion of Western Europe in combination with forces of the United Kingdom. No other part of the instructions sent to the Army Commander underwent so many changes in drafting as the paragraph suggesting a reunion of the Canadians in Western and Southern Europe. Even after the formal directive had been cabled to London the War Committee further amended it to read:

At the request of the Government of Canada certain formations of the First Canadian Army were despatched to the Mediterranean theatre with the objects at that time of increasing the effectiveness of the Canadian participation in the war and obtaining battle experience. Now that those objects have been gained the Government of Canada regards it as highly desirable that, as soon as military considerations permit, such formations now serving in the Mediterranean theatre as well as field formations and units elsewhere, should be grouped under unified Canadian command.<sup>85</sup>

It was, however, the unamended version (which included a statement that the reunion was desirable from a national point of view and in order to make the most effective contribution under existing circumstances)<sup>86</sup> that General Stuart quoted a month later to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He took care to underline the phrase "as soon as military considerations permit", while Sir Alan Brooke promised to see that these requests were met as soon as military *and shipping* considerations allowed.<sup>87</sup>

The matter came up again that autumn. When the Combined Chiefs of Staff met in September for the second Quebec Conference the defeat of Germany in the near future was accepted as a foregone conclusion, and discussion centred mainly about the war against Japan. In considering the provision of troops for zones of occupation in Europe the Combined Chiefs recognized that it would "probably be the policy to withdraw Dominion forces as early as possible after the defeat of Germany for repatriation at an early date", and in the Mediterranean theatre General Wilson was instructed that these "should not be employed on occupational duties in Austria, Greece or Dodecanese or for internal security duties in the Middle East until after discussion with Dominion Governments, which is being initiated forthwith."<sup>88</sup> On 26 September the British Government formally inquired whether Canada

would permit her forces to be used on these specific duties while waiting for shipping to become available for their repatriation.<sup>89</sup>

The War Committee of the Cabinet deferred its decision until 9 November, when General McNaughton reported that the C.G.S., Lieut.-General J. C. Murchie, had recommended against the Combined Chiefs' proposal ("on the ground that it had always been the intention that the 1st Canadian Corps in Italy should join the 1st Canadian Army in Northwest Europe, as soon as practicable").<sup>90</sup> Emphasizing the desirability of repatriating Canadian troops as soon as possible after the defeat of Germany, the formal reply (sent on 14 November) explicitly forbade their use in such diverse fields, with the possible exception of a short period of occupation duty in Austria or North-East Italy. It further stated that the Government of Canada would welcome the transfer of the 1st Canadian Corps from Italy to join the First Canadian Army "even before the defeat of Germany".<sup>91</sup> In reply, the British Government "noted" the Canadian wishes, but pointed out that such a move might prove impossible, not only for reasons of transport but because "the resulting weakening of our forces in the Mediterranean might involve risks which could not be accepted."<sup>92</sup>

A new development was revealed by Brigadier E. G. Weeks on his return from Italy early in December to take up the appointment of Major-General in Charge of Administration at C.M.H.Q. From Field-Marshal Alexander he had learned that the 1st Canadian Corps would be withdrawn for the months of January and February for a rest in the Naples-Campobasso-Salemo area. Moreover, from conversations with staff officers he had gained the impression that the Canadians might be used in an operation against the Dalmatian coast and that they would certainly undergo amphibious training while at rest.<sup>93</sup> (At the end of October, when proposing to General Wilson that the 1945 operations should open with a major offensive in Yugoslavia by the Eighth Army, Alexander had asked for assurance that his Canadian divisions would not be removed "to join their comrades in France",<sup>94</sup> and had been told that there was "no present intention to withdraw any of the forces now at your disposal.")<sup>95</sup> When Brigadier Weeks' information reached Ottawa, the Minister of National Defence at once instructed General Murchie to convey through C.M.H.Q. to the G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps (with copies to the War Office and Field-Marshal Alexander for information) a notification that Canadian troops would not be employed outside Italy without the concurrence of the Canadian Government. At the same time Mr. Mackenzie King telegraphed Mr. Churchill informing him of the amended instructions to General Foulkes. "This formal step seems necessary", he said, "since I have given a public assurance\* that Canadian troops will not

\* The Prime Minister was presumably referring to an answer made by him to Mr. Fred Rose, M.P., on 6 December, to the effect that no Canadian troops were stationed in Greece, and that "this government has no wish to interfere in the internal affairs of liberated countries where that can possibly be avoided."<sup>96</sup>



serve in Greece without the consent of the Canadian Government."<sup>97</sup> A prompt answer from London expressed Mr. Churchill's surprise and grief "at the suggestion that you might find it necessary to issue a public statement that Canadian troops shall not be used in Greece. Such a statement could only increase our difficulties and postpone a settlement of the present troubles in that country."<sup>98</sup> In his reply Mr. King remained firm. He reiterated that his assurance had been given that Canadian forces should not be sent to Greece "without the consent of the Canadian Government. That is a very different matter which is open to no objection and does not increase your difficulties."<sup>99</sup> It was a significant development, marking as it did the first occasion on which the Government of Canada insisted upon its right to consider and sanction a plan of campaign in which Canadian troops were to be employed. The year came to an end with an understanding having been reached that "without prejudice to their early repatriation" Canadians in the Mediterranean might be used for occupation duties, "but not outside Austria or North-east Italy".<sup>100</sup>

In London C.M.H.Q. continued to raise the issue whenever a chance presented itself. At a meeting of the British Chiefs of Staff with the Canadian Joint Staff Mission in mid-January, Field-Marshal Sir Alan Brooke named three possible courses of action that were under consideration for the conduct of future operations in Italy. The first was to continue to drive northward, the second was to cross the Adriatic and join forces with Marshal Tito in cleaning up Yugoslavia, and the third was to transfer the bulk of the 15th Army Group to France. Asked to comment, Lieut.-General The Hon. P. J. Montague, Chief of Staff at C.M.H.Q., seized the opportunity to state that if the third course were adopted the Canadians would definitely desire their troops in Italy to rejoin the First Canadian Army.<sup>101</sup>

Thus briefed the British Chiefs of Staff met their American colleagues less than a fortnight later at Malta en route to the Crimea Conference. It was agreed that the primary object in the war against Germany should be to build up the maximum possible strength on the Western Front and to seek a decision in that theatre.<sup>102</sup> In pursuance of this policy it was decided to reinforce General Eisenhower's armies at the expense of the Mediterranean theatre. The British Chiefs of Staff proposed that up to six divisions (not more than two of them armoured) might be spared. In suggesting that this number be reduced to five, General Marshall pointed out "that it was felt wiser to leave the Fifth Army intact as a well-balanced organic force, and that it would be preferable to reinforce France with British and Canadian divisions in order to increase the strength of Field-Marshal Montgomery's Army."<sup>103</sup> Sir Alan Brooke pointed to the obvious "great advantages in moving the Canadian divisions to enable them to join up with the remainder of the Canadian forces in France", and Field-Marshal Alexander (who was present for only part of the Conference) added that "the Canadian divisions

were the easiest to move quickly; one was already out of the line and could be moved at once and the other approximately a fortnight later."<sup>104</sup>

The matter was settled along these lines, and a directive to Lord Alexander advised him that three divisions should be withdrawn at the earliest possible date, with further complete formations to follow when forces in Greece could be released. The United States Twelfth Air Force was to be made available for transfer, with two fighter groups to be sent at once.<sup>105</sup> C.M.H.Q. received the news from the War Office on 5 February, and promptly informed Ottawa,<sup>106</sup> where the War Committee of the Cabinet noted with approval the proposed move.<sup>107</sup> "I am very glad to learn from you", Mr. King cabled Mr. Churchill on the 9th, "that operational considerations now make it possible for the Canadian Army to be united again."<sup>108</sup>

### Operation "Goldflake", the Move to North-West Europe

There was need for speed if the troops from the Mediterranean were to reach their new battle positions in time to take part in the spring offensive. Immediately upon receiving the directive of 2 February, A.F.H.Q. proposed that all Canadian formations, together with the 5th (British) Infantry Division (which had but recently arrived from Palestine), be sent from Italy via Marseilles; the 46th and 1st Divisions were to follow from Greece and the Middle East.<sup>109</sup> (It may be noted here that the directive was later amended and only three divisions moved to the Western front.)<sup>110</sup>

Following a two-day conference at General Eisenhower's main headquarters in Paris details of the proposed route and the method of movement were incorporated in an administrative order issued under the code name "Goldflake". This assigned overall coordination to SHAEF, the responsibility for embarkation to A.F.H.Q., and control of the force while in transit through their respective areas to the Communications Zone of the European Theatre of Operations United States Army (ETOUSA) and the 21st Army Group. Sea movement from Italy was to be carried out by L.S.Ts., cargo vessels for mechanical transport, and troopships, sailing at regular intervals from Leghorn and Naples. The schedule arranged for a rate of discharge at Marseilles of 40 tanks, 650 wheeled vehicles, 50 carriers, and 3700 personnel per day. Accommodation was provided at the French port for 10,000 troops in tents and 200 vehicles.<sup>111</sup>

The first official intimation of the impending move reached Headquarters 1st Canadian Corps on 4 February,\* and initiated a series of daily conferences

\* Actually Foulkes had learned of the move from General Marshall, whom he met at Headquarters 15th Army Group in Florence immediately after the Malta Conference. Without breaking security he instituted indoor staff exercises at Corps Headquarters, with the result that much of the preliminary planning was completed by the time the official notification was received.<sup>112</sup>

at which the very considerable amount of administrative detail was worked out.<sup>113</sup> The immensity of the task was increased by the fact that the Canadian units and formations in Italy were so widely scattered. Corps Headquarters was then at Ravenna. To the north-west the 1st Division was dug in along the River Senio. On its left the tanks of The Calgary Regiment were supporting the 56th (London) Division, while those of the Ontarios had reached Porto San Giorgio.<sup>114</sup> The Three Rivers Regiment and the headquarters of the armoured brigade, en route from the Fifth Army's mountainous front to the Adriatic, were then at Borgo San Lorenzo, north of Florence.<sup>115</sup> The 5th Armoured Division was in reserve and spread along the coast for 30 miles from Cervia to Cattolica, with troops of its 12th Infantry Brigade stationed inland at Camerino, 30 miles south-west of Iesi.<sup>116</sup>

Administrative centres were even more widely dispersed. 1st Echelon was in Rome, with 2nd Echelon and No. 1 Canadian Base Reinforcement Group at Avellino. There were Canadian General Hospitals on the east side of the peninsula at Iesi (No. 1) and Cattolica (No. 3), in the centre at Perugia (No. 14), and west of the Apennines at Rome (No. 5), Caserta (No. 15) and Avellino (No. 28). Sprinkled throughout both army areas and the rear administrative districts were the Field Punishment Camps, Leave Centres, Convalescent Depots, Medical and Dental Stores, Graves Registration Units, Town Majors, and other miscellaneous units falling into the category of G.H.Q. and L. of C. Troops.\* All these forces had to be funnelled through the two ports on the west coast, and the task of directing the bulk of them across the 15th Army Group's lines of communication without interrupting the normal maintenance of the Eighth and Fifth Armies required careful planning and skilful timing of the necessary trains and road convoys.<sup>118</sup>

As word of the impending move spread through the troops there was widespread gratification that the longed for reunion with the rest of the First Canadian Army was indeed to become a reality. Italy held no great attraction to the majority, and war diaries convey the impression that there was generally less regret at leaving the country than at ending the long and happy associations with the Eighth Army-the common task not yet finished. As members of that army the Canadians had enjoyed a certain freedom from the rigid adherence to laid-down establishments and drill-book procedures which had properly been demanded by Headquarters First Canadian Army

\* Not involved in the forthcoming move were some 35 Canadians numbered among the 1300 Civil Affairs Officers who were serving in Italy with the Allied Commission (before November 1944 the Allied Control Commission). Besides controlling the operations of Allied Military Government in the combat zones, the Commission supervised administration of the rearward areas which had been progressively handed back to Italian jurisdiction. To the tasks of safeguarding military operations from interference at the hands of a hungry, dissatisfied population, of bringing effective government to regions disorganized by the ravages of war, and helping to restore democratic life to a society oppressed and stratified by Fascism, this small group of Canadians, many of whom could draw on experience in law, finance, medicine or some other specialized field, made a contribution beyond the implication of their numerical strength.<sup>117</sup>

during the long period of training in the United Kingdom; so that to many officers the prospect of a return to more or less rigid standard practices just for the sake of being "correct" held no great appeal.<sup>119</sup> Yet there must have been few whose sense of national pride was not stimulated by the thought of again becoming part of a unified Canadian army. The understandable feeling of frustration of serving in a theatre which was recognized as secondary in importance to North-West Europe was now replaced by the inspiring prospect of rejoining their comrades of the 2nd Canadian Corps for the final march on Berlin. To one small section of the Canadian troops in Italy, the absentees and deserters, the news of "Goldflake", when it somehow got around to them, was of special significance. During the final year of the campaign the number of Canadian deserters not apprehended ran about 100 at any one time, with another 100 absent without leave but not yet struck off strength.<sup>120</sup> To avoid being stranded in Italy these hastened to give themselves up either to their respective units or the base reinforcement battalions at Avellino.<sup>121</sup>

Small advance parties from each Canadian formation and the majority of the senior commanders and their staffs travelled by air from Florence (General Foulkes and a small planning staff flew to General Crerar's headquarters in Holland to start immediate work on plans for the crossing of the Rhine),<sup>122</sup> but for the main body of troops the long trek began on 13 February, when Corps Headquarters and about half the Corps Troops left Ravenna on wheels for Naples.<sup>123</sup> The route lay south over the Via Adriatica, along which the northward journey had been made so slowly and at such great cost. The convoys, staging three nights on the way, rolled through Ortona and Rocca San Giovanni (where Corps Headquarters had been introduced into operations more than a year before), and from Termoli turned inland to cross Italy by way of Foggia and Avellino to Naples. The first flight sailed on 22 February aboard the troopship *Esperance Bay*,- docked at Marseilles two days later, and early on the 26th set off northward across France, following a route whose temporary road markers read "GF". It was a five-day drive by way of Lyon and Dijon, skirting Paris on the east side and passing through St. Quentin and Cambrai (with their memories of the First World War) to cross the Belgian frontier near Mons\*-in all a distance of 674 miles from Marseilles to the dispersal point at Renaix.<sup>125</sup> As might be expected, the troops were in excellent spirits, and if any boosting of morale were needed, the Auxiliary Services were on hand at all staging camps providing picture shows and distributing free chocolate bars and cigarettes.<sup>126</sup> On arrival in Belgium the Corps passed to General Crerar's

\* Canadian units assigned to duty on the lines of communication in France and Belgium included Now. 41 Army Transport Company and 1 Motor Ambulance Company R.C.A.S.C., 3 and 16 Field Dressing Stations R.C.A.M.C., 3 Light Recovery Section R.C.E.M.E., and a strong representation of the Canadian Provost Corps.<sup>124</sup>

command and was given responsibility for the left wing of the 21st Army Group. At midday on 15 March, while Canadian formations continued to arrive from Italy, General Foulkes' headquarters became operational again north of Nijmegen, with the 49th (West Riding) Division under command.<sup>127</sup>

In the meantime the 5th Armoured Division, routed through Leghorn, had begun the transfer of approximately 20,000 troops, 5600 wheeled vehicles, 450 tanks and 320 carriers. The tracked vehicles went first by rail, heavy tanks loading at Rimini on 10 February, and lighter tanks and carriers at Riccione. After a fifty-hour journey to the west coast they were shipped by L.S.T. to Marseilles, and reloaded on flat-cars to be hauled northward to Ath in Belgium.<sup>128</sup> Hoffmeister's wheeled convoys crossed Italy by a circuitous route of 315 miles which led through Porto Civitanova, Perugia and Florence. Embarkation at Leghorn began on 15 February, and twelve days later the first troops reached their new area at Dixmude.<sup>129</sup> On arriving in Belgium Headquarters 12th Infantry Brigade was disbanded and its units returned to their original roles, as the 5th Armoured Division resumed its normal organization.<sup>130</sup> Re-entering the line south of Arnhem on the last day of the month, the Division was employed by General Foulkes in a rapid drive northward which penetrated to the IJsselmeer and sealed off Western Holland.<sup>131</sup>

Despite its wide dispersion, the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade concentrated in Leghorn with the utmost dispatch. Ontario and Calgary tanks arrived by ten special trains from Iesi and Forli respectively, while the Three Rivers sent theirs by 24-wheeled Army Service Corps transporters across the Apennines and down the Arno Valley.<sup>132</sup> Embarkation was completed by 8 March and a week later the brigade was in the vicinity of Lauwe in Belgium.<sup>133</sup> Within a month of breaking off action in the mountains of Italy it had a regiment committed with the 49th Division on the Nijmegen "island", and was proudly claiming the distinction of having been in action longer than any other Canadian formation in the war.<sup>134</sup>

Major-General Foster's 1st Infantry Division was the final formation to move. Its relief along the Senio by the 8th Indian Division began on 23 February, and the honour of being last to leave the line fell to Brigadier Bernatchez's 3rd Brigade, which relinquished its positions to the 19th Indian Brigade at 6:00 p.m. on 27 February.<sup>135</sup> Embarkation began at Leghorn on 7 March. "Thus we leave Italy," wrote the diarist at divisional headquarters, "a country we neither loved nor hated, a country so full of history, so beautiful and at the same time so dirty, so modern in its antiquity ...."<sup>136</sup> A journey of more than 800 miles brought the Division to Itigem, north of Brussels. Of all the Canadian formations which came from Italy it alone saw service on German soil, and that for barely three days. On 3 April it concentrated in the Reichswald Forest, temporarily becoming part of Lieut.-General Simonds' 2nd Canadian Corps. It moved thence north

of Zutphen to storm across the IJssel River on 11 April. On the 13th the Division reverted to General Foulkes' command for the final operation of clearing Western Holland.<sup>137</sup>

Army Troops and the balance of Corps Troops followed, and by the end of March 3534 officers and 54,638 men had been transferred to NorthWest Europe.<sup>138</sup> There were still some administrative units to be moved. Nos. 1, 3 and 5 Canadian General Hospitals had already gone to the northern theatre, but Nos. 14 and 15 Hospitals were slated to return to England for disbandment. As the other hospitals left Italy their patients were taken over by No. 28 General Hospital (which had been formed in October 1944 as No. 1 Field Hospital). It was the last Canadian hospital to serve in Italy, and was disbanded at Avellino on 19 April 1945.<sup>139</sup> Because of the limitations of the staging camps in Italy most of the nursing sisters went by road to Rome and were lodged at the Canadian Officers' Hotel ("The Chateau Laurier") until called forward at the latest possible date for embarkation.<sup>140</sup>

The movement of the Canadians from Italy necessitated the transfer of huge quantities of equipment in addition to what accompanied the troop convoys. "Goldflake" occurred in the midst of a vast re-equipment programme, when barely half of some 9000 Canadian vehicles received since September 1944 had been issued to units. The remainder were ferried from Naples to Marseilles and from there convoyed to Belgium by No. 1 Special Vehicle Company R.C.O.C. This *ad hoc* organization moved 4500 vehicles a total distance of more than two and a half million miles, meeting with only 28 road accidents.<sup>141</sup> A special ship took nearly 600 tons of stores, mostly Canadian uniforms which had arrived too late for issue, direct from Naples to Antwerp. Many tons of material which would not be needed in NorthWest Europe-canteen supplies, office stationery and equipment, surplus kit and the like-went back by freight to the United Kingdom.<sup>142</sup>

It was obviously of the utmost importance to conceal from the enemy as long as possible the shifting from one theatre to another of such a large body of troops, and, as we have already indicated, a cover plan had been adopted to disguise the move as no more than a mere regrouping in rear areas.<sup>143</sup> Perpetration of the deception, which was code-named "Penknife", was the responsibility of a specially formed organization called the 1st Canadian Special Basra\* Unit, made up of some 230 officers and men drawn from No. 1 Anti-Malaria Control Unit and similar small groups which were being disbanded. From their headquarters at Macerata Basra personnel drove hither and thither putting up formation and unit signs and pulling them down again. Widely scattered detachments of the Royal Canadian Signals maintained the normal flow of wireless traffic by filling the

\* "Basra" was a code name allotted by the 15th Army Group to Canadian Corps Headquarters for the cover plan. The 5th Armoured Division was known as "Haifa", the 1st Infantry Division as "Poona", and the 1st Armoured Brigade as "Simla".

air with dummy messages: the measure of their success was the enemy's frequent attempts to "jam the air." To aid in the deception all Canadian clubs, hostels, leave centres and hospitals were kept open as long as possible, while *The Maple Leaf* continued to be published daily in Rome until mid March.<sup>144</sup>

More than once before the enemy had fallen victim to Allied stratagem, and an examination of his Intelligence records reveals how completely he was hoodwinked by "Penknife". A situation map which was issued by the Armed Forces Operations Staff on 26 February showed the 1st Canadian Infantry Division still in the line, with the 5th Armoured Division in reserve near Rimini, and Corps Headquarters on the Savio; the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade was identified at Ravenna.<sup>145</sup> On 17 March (by which time all formations were either in Belgium or well on their way) both Canadian divisions and Corps Headquarters were shown in 15th Army Group reserve in the Ancona area, although the exact position of the armoured division was queried and the whereabouts of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade was admittedly unknown.<sup>146</sup> Subsequent maps issued during March indicated an increasing bewilderment concerning the Canadian movements, and it was not until 19 April that the Italian theatre was shown free of all Canadian formations.<sup>147</sup>

It was doubtless due in no small part to these security measures that the bulk of the "Goldflake" forces were transported from Italy to France with little interference from either the German Navy or Air Force. Throughout the entire movement the Allied navies kept close watch on the enemy-held coast from north of Pisa to the French border, carrying out extensive minesweeping operations and on several occasions bombarding Italian ports.<sup>148</sup> One "genuine naval action" occurred.<sup>149</sup> On the night of 17-18 March, the *Premuda*, a fast and well-armed British-built destroyer (which from being the flagship of the Yugoslav Navy had passed through Italian into German hands) sailed from Genoa with two other German-manned destroyers to lay mines off the north-western tip of Corsica. While returning from this task the enemy flotilla\* was engaged by two destroyers of the Royal Navy, H.M.S. *Meteor* and *Lookout*, and both the *Premuda's* companion vessels were sunk.<sup>151</sup> Thereafter Canadian convoys took a more southerly route, passing through the Strait of Bonifacio, between Corsica and Sardinia.<sup>152</sup>

The manner in which the Canadian public should be informed that its army was at last reunited was as carefully considered in Ottawa as had been

\* No evidence has been found to suggest that these enemy craft were attempting to intercept one of the Leghorn-Marseilles convoys. An entry (18 March) in the war diary of the German Naval Operations Staff describes the minelaying operations, and goes on to report: "After the mines had been laid as planned the three boats were encircled on the way back by enemy destroyers. Up to now only TA 32 has returned and has not yet reported details."<sup>150</sup>

the announcement of the landings in Sicily twenty months before. As long as the enemy remained in ignorance of the move silence was imperative, but it was hoped that when in due time the news was released from the European theatre, it could simultaneously be disclosed in Ottawa by the Canadian Prime Minister.<sup>153</sup> By the middle of March however, knowledge of the movement had become common throughout Canada. Anxious to make an announcement in the House of Commons, which had reconvened on 19 March, Mr. King sought the good offices of Mr. Churchill, pointing out that the news had "through interruption of the mails from Italy and other causes become known to a considerable number of people including our press whose silence is being maintained only through censorship."<sup>154</sup> It was to no avail. There were strong grounds for believing that the enemy had not yet appreciated the extent of the weakening of the forces in Italy,<sup>155</sup> and the British Prime Minister replied that General Eisenhower, in consultation with Field-Marshal Alexander, had recommended to the Combined Chiefs of Staff that the information should only be made public as each individual formation became identified in North-West Europe by the enemy.<sup>156</sup>

Eventually security was broken through a Canadian Press despatch, dated 3 April, which revealed that all Canadian infantry and armoured formations were together once more as an army under General Crerar's command.<sup>157</sup> In view of the open speculation and comments which followed in press and Parliament, on 10 April Mr. King directly appealed to General Eisenhower "to release the news within the next day or so."<sup>158</sup> Although the Germans were not believed to have identified elements of the 1st Canadian Corps in his theatre, Eisenhower agreed on 12 April to allow publication, provided that current operations in Italy were not prejudiced.<sup>159</sup> It was not until the 20th, however, that A.F.H.Q. felt free to give the necessary clearance.<sup>160</sup> By then Parliament had been prorogued and Mr. Mackenzie King was attending the San Francisco Conference. The official announcement of the transfer was made by General Crerar on 23 April, with a simultaneous statement in Ottawa by Mr. J. L. Ilsley, the Acting Prime Minister.<sup>161</sup>

### The 1st Special Service Battalion on the Riviera

The troops who sailed from Italy in mid-February in the opening stages of "Goldflake" were not the first Canadians to leave the Mediterranean theatre. The previous December had seen the disbandment of the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, which as a component of the First Special Service Force had found itself consistently pursuing a course apart from the main body of Canadian troops.

It will be recalled that after the capture of Rome the joint Canadian-American Force had left the Fifth Army to prepare for the Allied assault



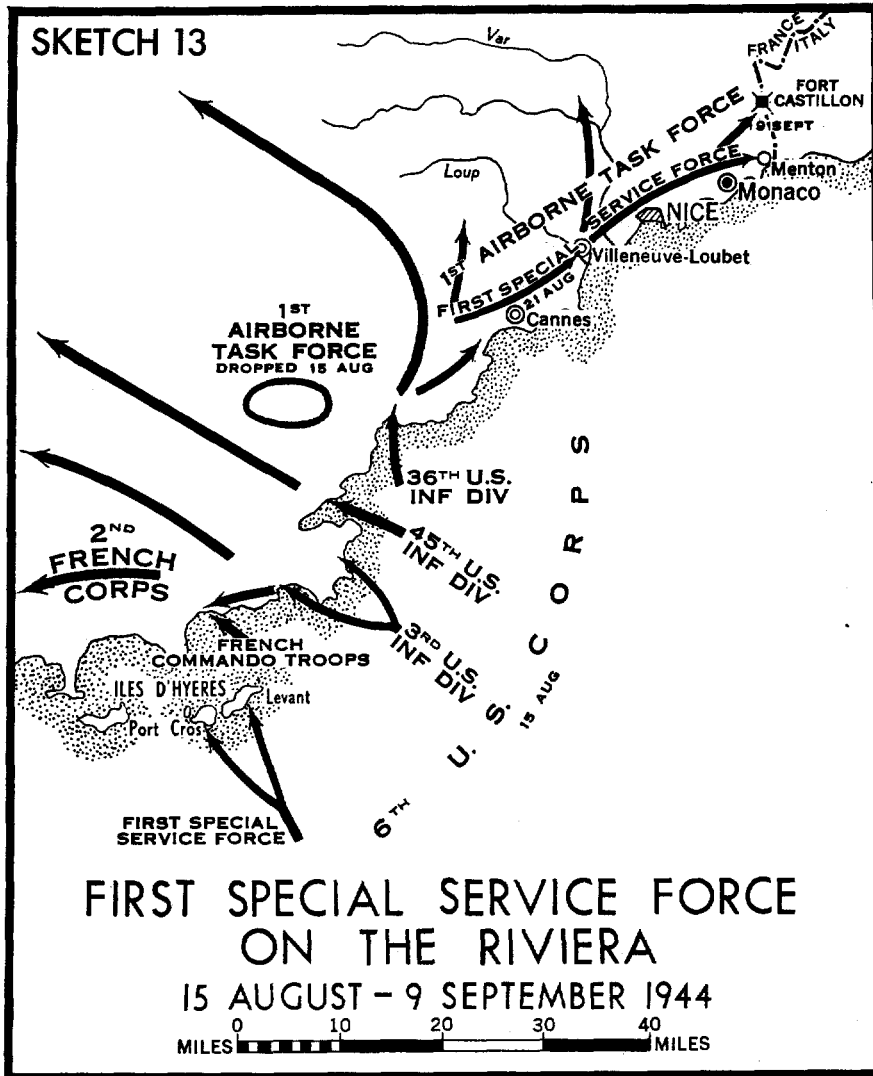
upon Southern France, the code name of which for greater security was changed early in July from "Anvil" to "Dragoon".<sup>162</sup> After a brief rest on the pleasant shores of Lake Albano,<sup>163</sup> twelve miles south-east of Rome (Map 15), the Force carried out six weeks of intensive "invasion" training at Santa Maria di Castellabate, at the south end of the Gulf of Salerno.<sup>164</sup> This gruelling period of preparation ended with a rehearsed landing, conducted in company with a French commando group, on the Pontine Islands, 60 miles off the Naples coast. On 11 August the Force embarked for a staging area in Corsica.<sup>165</sup>

Detailed planning for "Dragoon" had been going forward since the beginning of March at Major-General Alexander M. Patch's Seventh Army Headquarters, which until 4 July was designated for security reasons "Force 163".<sup>166</sup> The final pattern of invasion called for an assault landing east of Marseilles by Major-General Truscott's 6th Corps (the 3rd, 36th and 45th U.S. Divisions), assisted by French commando forces and backed by overwhelming naval and air support. The immediate "follow-up" would bring in the French 2nd Corps (composed of divisions formerly with the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais) under General de Lattre de Tassigny, who as the build-up proceeded would assume his original position as G.O.C.-in-C. Army "B"\* with two French corps under his command.<sup>169</sup> Prior to the 6th Corps' landings the First Special Service Force, operating directly under the Seventh Army, was to remove a threat to the left flank by capturing the German-held islands of Levant and Port Cros, the two easternmost of the Iles d'Hyeres, seven miles off the French coast<sup>170</sup> (see Sketch 13).

The main amphibious assault was delivered at 8:00 a.m. on 15 August by the three American divisions on a fifteen-mile front between Toulon and Cannes, the landings being watched by Mr. Churchill from the deck of a British destroyer.<sup>171</sup> Earlier that morning more than 5000 troops of a combined British-American Airborne Task Force† had dropped by parachute some ten miles inland to block the enemy's reinforcement routes from the interior.<sup>173</sup> Extensive glider-landings followed; in all 9000 airborne personnel were carried over from the Rome airfields into the bridgehead.<sup>174</sup> The honour of making the first sea landing on the French mainland fell to the French commando troops, who were carried to their assignment on H.M.C.S. *Prince*

\* In April 1944 the French Committee of National Liberation had confirmed General de Lattre's appointment to command Army "B", consisting of "all the French land forces summoned for the landing in the south of France."<sup>167</sup> The arrangement subsequently agreed upon by A.F.H.Q. and General de Gaulle left General Patch's Seventh Army with sole direction of the planning of "Anvil" and the initial phase of the operation, while assuring de Lattre of his full Army Command when the time was appropriate. On September he took over Army "B", which ten days later became the First French Army.<sup>168</sup>

† This force had been organized and was commanded by Major-General R. T. Frederick. Composed of units formerly comprising the Seventh Army Provisional Airborne Division, on 15 August it became the 1st Airborne Task Force. Frederick was succeeded in the command of the First Special Service Force by Colonel E. A. Walker.<sup>172</sup>



Historical Section, G.S.

*David*, one of two Canadian Landing Ships Infantry sharing in Operation "Dragoon".<sup>175</sup>

Shortly before midday on the 14th the First Special Service Force sailed from Corsica aboard H.M.C.S. *Prince Henry*, H.M.S. *Prince Baudouin*, and five transport destroyers, escorted by five American torpedo boats.<sup>176</sup> Before midnight the ships had taken station about three miles south of the Hyeres, and in the early hours of the first anniversary of the Kiska enterprise the

troops began paddling ashore in inflated rubber dinghies, which assault landing craft had quietly towed to within a quarter of a mile of land.<sup>177</sup>

Resistance on the island of Levant was overcome without much trouble. The 2nd and 3rd Regiments (the latter commanded by a Canadian-Lt.-Col. R. W. Becket) beached on the east shore, and scaling eighty-foot cliffs overran the five-mile length of the island, finding the eastern battery merely wooden guns manned by stuffed dummies. Before the end of D Day Force Headquarters had landed and the fighting on Levant was over. A mile to the west the smaller Port Cros proved more formidable. Roping their way up the vertical cliffs battalions of the 1st Special Service Regiment, led by Lt.-Col. Akehurst, occupied the eastern half of the island without difficulty, but were stopped by a cluster of forts in the port area. Most formidable of these was Fort de l'Eminence, a Napoleonic stronghold with twelve feet of concrete and rock protecting the sides and top of its central chamber. Rounds from the eight-inch guns of the cruiser U.S.S. *Augusta* caromed off like ping-pong balls. Rockets from sixteen Maurauder aircraft made no impression. Heavy bombers were not available, and it was not until the afternoon of the 17th, when the battleship H.M.S. *Ramillies* steamed up to put a dozen 15-inch shells into the target, that the battle ended abruptly.<sup>178</sup> Canadian casualties in the capture of the two islands numbered 10 killed and 32 wounded.

Relieved by French garrison troops, the Special Service Force moved over to the mainland and on 21 August re-entered operations just west of Cannes, where it replaced the 2nd Parachute Brigade, the British component of the First Airborne Task Force.<sup>179</sup> While the main Franco-American forces (which on 16 September became the 6th Army Group\* under Lieut.General Jacob L. Devers)<sup>181</sup> drove the German Nineteenth Army northward through the Rhone valley, the Special Service regiments began a series of rapid advances along the Riviera coast that was to bring them in less than three weeks almost to the Italian boundary—a distance of some 45 miles. They pushed eastward on foot against light opposition on a front ten miles wide—each day bringing its quota of two or three towns liberated, a number of machine-gun positions destroyed, and a score or so of prisoners captured. During the first week the briskest fighting took place on 25 August for possession of Villeneuve Loubet, a town on the Loup River, ten miles east of Cannes.<sup>182</sup>

The pursuit continued with the Canadians and Americans close on the heels of the retreating Germans. At a small inn east of the Loup Colonel Walker and his staff signed the register immediately below the signatures of Lieut.-General Fretter-Pico, G.O.C. 148th Division, and his staff, "who had checked out hurriedly the previous evening."<sup>183</sup> On the 30th the Force forded

\* Prior to this date (on which command of the enterprise passed from General Wilson to General Eisenhower) General Devers' Headquarters was designated Advance Allied Force Headquarters Detachment<sup>180</sup>

the Var River without incident; but here the narrow coastal plain ended, and resistance stiffened amid the mountains behind Nice. Up to this point the Special Service Force, advancing under the command of the First Airborne Task Force, had been flanked on either side by American airborne units, but on 3 September the 2nd Regiment relieved the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion immediately west of Monaco (special orders were issued against entering the principality),<sup>184</sup> and thenceforward the coastal sector was included in Colonel Walker's commitments.<sup>185</sup> Three days later patrols into Menton, only two miles from the international boundary, found the city evacuated,<sup>186</sup> and by the 9th the Force had taken up positions which they were to hold unchanged for the next seven weeks. The German 34th Division, which had replaced the 148th, was firmly ensconced in the fortifications of the Little Maginot Line, where the French had blunted the Italian invasion in 1940. Aided by fire from American destroyers and the French battleship *Lorraine*,<sup>187</sup> Special Service regiments reduced these forts one by one, Fort Castillon, five miles north of Menton, alone putting up a prolonged fight. When it fell at the end of October the enemy withdrew across the Italian border.<sup>188</sup>

By this time General Devers' armies were far to the north, fighting in the Vosges Mountains preparatory to essaying a break through the Belfort Gap to the Rhine.<sup>189</sup> For the forces on the Mediterranean coast, however, the campaign seemed to be petering out in a long and unpleasant anti-climax, as they found themselves "sitting up on the mountains day after day", exposed to cool, wet weather that contradicted all popular conceptions regarding the climate of the sunny Riviera.<sup>190</sup> There were no regrets among the First Special Service Force when it was relieved on 28 November by Japanese-American troops of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.<sup>191</sup> The First Airborne Task Force had already been disbanded, and its parachutists had gone north to reinforce formations of the First Allied Airborne Army.<sup>192</sup>

For the Special Service Force General Eisenhower's headquarters had no requirement which would enable it to preserve its identity. At the Quebec Conference in September General Marshall had pointed to the availability of the "Plough" force for winter operations in the Alps,<sup>193</sup> but no such role had materialized. As its name indicates, the Force was a highly specialized assault team, even though, as we have seen, it had fought for considerable periods as normal infantry. That it should continue to be employed in a general role was inevitably regarded by many as a military waste. As early as January 1944, when the provision of suitably trained reinforcements was creating a difficult problem in Ottawa, the withdrawal of the Canadian component had been seriously considered on- both sides of the Atlantic. The Canadian viewpoint was that the special type of training which the Canadian personnel had received could "be used to better advantage for the common cause in prospective operations being planned for the forces in the United

Kingdom."<sup>194</sup> A Canadian withdrawal, however, would have meant breaking up the Force, which was then fighting in the Anzio bridgehead. Neither the Combined Chiefs of Staff nor the Commanders in the Mediterranean favoured such a course. Accordingly arrangements were made to reinforce both the Canadian and United States elements with non-parachutists.<sup>195</sup> By October, however, the feeling in Ottawa had grown that "the continued employment of this Special Force on operations detached from those upon which the main forces of the Canadian Army were employed constituted a dispersion of our forces for which there is no special necessity."<sup>196</sup> When, therefore, the Department of National Defence learned from Washington that SHAEF recommended the disbandment of the First Special Service Force, it immediately gave its approval.<sup>197</sup>

On 5 December the Canadian members of the Force paraded past their American comrades in a final salute at Villeneuve Loubet, and shortly afterwards embarked at Marseilles for Italy. Their operational tour in France had lasted 107 days, during which Canadian casualties had numbered 30 killed, 156 wounded, and four taken prisoner. Landing at Naples on the 9th, by evening they were all at Avellino, where they "received a good reception back into the Canadian Army."<sup>198</sup> Those who had not trained as parachutists re-entered the stream of infantry reinforcements for the 1st Canadian Corps; the remainder, approximately two thirds of the officers and one half of the men, sailed immediately for England to reinforce the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion.<sup>199</sup>

A remarkable experiment in military co-operation thus came to an end. In the Force's two and a half years of existence Canadian and American soldiers forgot differences of nationality in the performance of a common task\*-whether in training together on the snowy plains and hills of Montana and the rain-soaked Aleutian tundra, or fighting shoulder to shoulder in the mountains before Cassino, in the Anzio beachhead and along the Riviera coast. In these operations the Force lost some 450 killed, of whom 155 were Canadians. It gained an enviable reputation as a first-class international fighting unit.

### The Final Allied Offensive in Italy, 9 April-2 May

Although the 1st Canadian Corps had left the Mediterranean before Field-Marshal Alexander opened his final offensive in that theatre, it seems appropriate to include a brief account of the fighting that ended the campaign in which Canadians had played so important a part.

\* Yet it must be recorded that as they compared their lot with that of their American companions-in-arms and the rest of the Canadian army from which they were separated, the members of the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion could observe certain inequalities that arose almost inevitably from the administrative problems peculiar to their unit. As already noted, these problems are discussed in Volume I of this History.

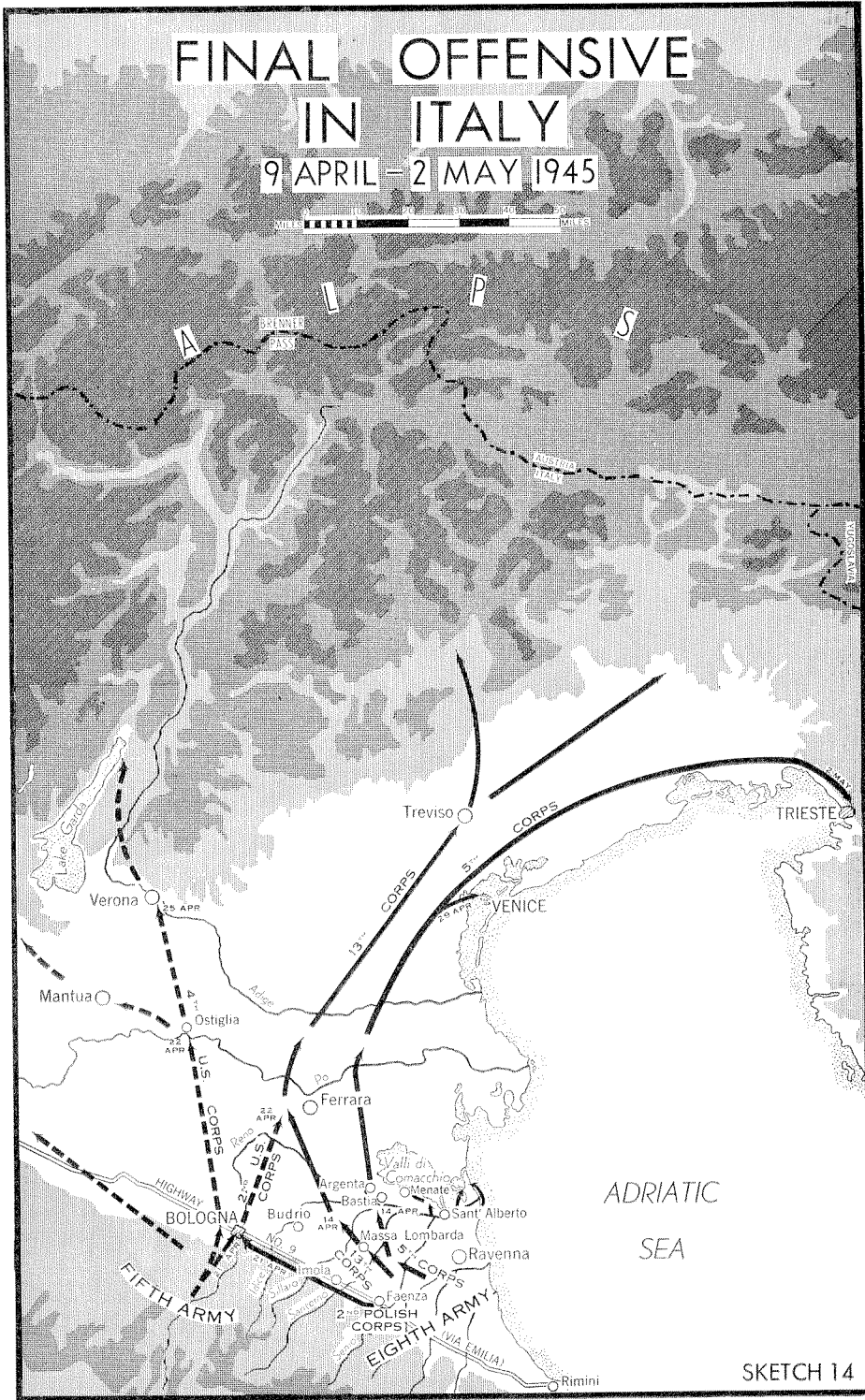
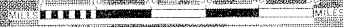
When the Combined Chiefs of Staff at Malta decided (in the words of Lord Alexander) "to strip Italy once more of tried and tested divisions for the benefit of the Western Front",<sup>200</sup> they re-defined the Supreme Commander's role in a directive which set very modest aims, and appeared to limit him "to a mere offensive-defensive". He was to continue to hold solidly the existing front and contain the enemy formations then in Italy, but was "to take immediate advantage of any withdrawal or weakening of the German forces."<sup>201</sup> In spite of the reduction of their strength the Allied commanders in Italy considered that they could "do something more drastic and decisive" than this, and Alexander was able to persuade the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, that his original plan of the previous winter might still be followed, with certain modifications.<sup>202</sup> On 12 February General Clark directed both his armies to submit plans for an operation to cross the Po.<sup>203</sup> During the next six weeks the final pattern of the offensive was worked out, and on 24 March Army Group Headquarters issued orders for "an all-out attack 10 April 1945 to destroy maximum number enemy forces south of the Po, force crossings over the Po River and capture Verona."<sup>204</sup>

The winter lull in operations had allowed the enemy to develop a formidable array of defences in Northern Italy, although it was apparent that he had no intention of withdrawing from his existing positions unless compelled by heavy Allied pressure or a further weakening of his own forces through the transfer of troops to other theatres. Since mid-February two more formations (the 710th and 715th Infantry Divisions) had been withdrawn,<sup>205</sup> but at the beginning of April von Vietinghoff (who had resumed command of Army Group "C" on 11 March when Kesselring was appointed C.-in-C. West)<sup>206</sup> still had 24\*German and four Italian divisions<sup>208</sup> opposing a total of 17 Allied divisions and nine independent brigades together with four Italian Combat Groups.<sup>209</sup> The eastern end of his static winter front was strongly backed by a series of river lines behind the Senio--the Santerno, the Sillaro and the Idice (see Sketch 14). Italian and other enforced labour had been employed to honeycomb with fortifications the floodbanks beside these tributaries of the Reno, special attention being paid to the positions along the Idice.<sup>210</sup> This was the "Ghengis Khan" line, which was anchored in the flooded country west of the Valli di Comacchio, and from the northern fringe of the Apennines in front of Bologna led over the central heights of the chain to merge with the western stretches of the Gothic Line. In the German rear considerable work had been done on two other main defence lines--a series of positions along the left bank of the Po and its tributary the Ticino (west of Milan), placed to cover a withdrawal of the Army of Liguria

\* On 10 April a shortening of Army Group "C"'s eastern boundary placed the 97th Corps, which had been guarding the head of the Adriatic with two divisions, under the command of Army Group "E", whose responsibility was the Balkan theatre of operations.<sup>207</sup>

# FINAL OFFENSIVE IN ITALY

9 APRIL - 2 MAY 1945



SKETCH 14

Historical Section, G.S.

from the north-west; and the main Adige (or Venetian) line, which crossed the 80-mile gap between the Adriatic and the Alpine rampart behind Lake Garda, and was designed to guard the approaches to the north-eastern passes which led into Germany.<sup>211</sup>

It was General Clark's intention to employ the "strategy of the twohanded punch" which had been used so successfully in the battle for Rome and the assault on the Gothic Line. An advance north-westward on Ferrara by the Eighth Army and an American thrust northward past Bologna to Ostiglia would complete a pincers movement aimed at entrapping the majority of the German forces between the Apennines and the Po. The Fifth Army would then drive for Verona and Lake Garda in order to cut off the Axis forces in north-west Italy, while on the right the Eighth Army exploited towards Venice and Trieste.<sup>212</sup> The Eighth Army's attack would open three days before the Fifth Army's offensive, in order that each might benefit from the full support of the Allied air power, and in the hope that this initial assault against the enemy's left flank might draw off his reserves from the area in which General Truscott's main blow was to be delivered.<sup>213</sup> There were, however, certain preliminary operations to be undertaken by both armies.

General McCreery's main problem was how to force the strongly held Argenta Gap and thereby turn the Genghis Khan line and its outlying positions. The belated allotment to the Mediterranean theatre of 400 Landing Vehicles, Tracked\* (called in North-West Europe "Buffaloes" and in Italy "Fantails") brought a solution. He decided to use these for an amphibious right hook across Lake Comacchio and the adjoining flooded area so as to outflank the defences in the gap.<sup>215</sup> Early in April steps were taken to gain local advantages for the coming attacks and confuse the enemy. In the first three days of the month the 2nd Commando Brigade, landing on both sides of the long Comacchio spit, cleared it to the north-east angle of the lagoon, taking nearly 1000 prisoners from the 162nd (Turcoman) Division. Next, islands in the middle of the lake were secured, and at the end of the same week the 56th Division, attacking across the Reno west of Sant' Alberto behind heavy artillery and bomber support, secured a substantial bridgehead as a base for further operations.<sup>216</sup> On 5 April, at the extreme left of the Allied line, the 92nd Division launched a diversionary attack along the Ligurian coast. In spite of strong resistance in the mountainous terrain by the 148th Division (which, it will be recalled, had opposed the First Special Service Force on the Riviera) Massa, the western anchor of the Gothic Line, was captured on the 10th;<sup>217</sup> equally gratifying was the intelligence that the Fourteenth Army

\* In the previous December A.F.H.Q. had asked the Combined Chiefs of Staff to supply L.V.Ts. for river crossing operations in the Po Valley, on the scale of 200 per assaulting brigade, basing its requirements on "information given by Commander I Canadian Corps from his experience in Walcheren operations."<sup>214</sup>



had dispatched to the west coast a strong battle group of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division, the only Army Group reserve\* south of the Po.<sup>219</sup>

On the evening of 9 April the 5th Corps and the 2nd Polish Corps stormed across the Senio. During the afternoon 825 heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force, employed in close support of the ground forces for the first time in Italy, had drenched with fragmentation bombs a wide strip 3000 yards west of the river, and the ensuing artillery bombardments were interspersed by concentrated attacks from large numbers of medium bombers and fighterbombers.<sup>220</sup> An hour before dark 150 Wasps and Crocodiles began flaming the Senio banks, and close behind them the infantry plunged into the attack--the 8th Indian Division north of Lugs, the 2nd New Zealand Division at the Cotignola bend, and the Poles on their left, north of the Via Emilia.<sup>221</sup> The German 98th and 362nd Divisions, on whom the brunt of the 5th Corps attack fell, resisted strongly, but by the morning of the 12th the assaulting divisions had gained a foothold across the Santerno, and the same afternoon the New Zealanders captured Massa Lombarda.<sup>222</sup>

By that time General McCreery had successfully launched his flanking operations. Early on the 11th a brigade of the 56th Division crossed the floods in Fantails to seize Menate, six miles behind the Senio. On the following night the same division carried out another landing opposite Argenta, but ran into stiff opposition; for von Vietinghoff, now that the point of the Allied attack was disclosed, had rushed the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division south across the Po to join in the defence of the gap.<sup>223</sup> On 14 April the 78th Division, attacking northward through the Indians to Highway No. 16, captured the vital bridge over the Reno at Bastia and entered the battle for Argenta, but it was 18 April before the last German positions in the defile were overcome. South of the inundated area the 13th Corps Headquarters with the 10th Indian Division under command had been brought in on the Polish right, and by April the New Zealanders, now with General Keightley, had crossed the Sillaro. On the same day the Poles entered Imola, having inflicted heavy losses on the 26th Panzer Division and the 4th and 1st Parachute Divisions as these formations successively side-stepped northward across the line of the Allied advance.<sup>224</sup>

With the German left wing reeling under the Eighth Army's savage blows, General Truscott unleashed the Fifth Army. On the morning of the 14th, after a preliminary attack by 500 aircraft of the Tactical Air Force, the 4th Corps assaulted with three divisions west of Highway No. 64, on the left bank of the Reno.<sup>225</sup> Next day the Strategic Air Force, switching from its tasks with the Eighth Army, launched "the most sustained heavy bomber close support effort ever undertaken in the Mediterranean."<sup>226</sup> In three days

\* At the end of March von Vietinghoff, fearing an Allied landing north of the Po, sent his other remaining motorized formation, the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, to watch the coast between Venice and Treviso.<sup>218</sup>

more than 2000 bombers struck repeatedly at targets between Bologna and the fronts on which both Allied armies were advancing.<sup>227</sup> Late on the 15th four divisions of the 2nd Corps attacked east of the Reno and astride Highway No. 65, the easterly of the two main routes converging on Bologna from the south. In bitter fighting the Americans dislodged the stubborn defenders from their last Apennine positions, and on 20 April the 4th Corps' 10th Mountain Division broke out of the hills to cut the Via Emilia west of Bologna.<sup>228</sup> On the same day von Vietinghoff, having reported to Hitler that "as a result of heavy battle losses our forces in the Italian theatre are strained to such an extent that, if we persist in our policy of static defence, an enemy breakthrough at Lake Comacchio, Bologna and Spezia can in all probability not be prevented",<sup>229</sup> ordered a general withdrawal to the Ticino-Po positions.<sup>230</sup>

He was too late. The next two days saw the Allied pincers close upon a large part of the badly disorganized German formations. On the 22nd the 6th Armoured Division, leading the 5th Corps' breakout from the Argenta Gap, met the Fifth Army's right flanking formation, the 6th South African Armoured Division, west of Ferrara. Trapped in the bend of the Reno the German 65th and 305th Divisions were virtually annihilated, the U.S. 88th Division alone taking 7000 prisoners in the area.<sup>231</sup> The Polish Corps, having killed more than 1000 Germans in its advance from the Senio, entered Bologna on the 21st, two hours before American troops of the 34th Division came in from the southwest.<sup>232</sup> Late next day the 10th Mountain Division reached the Po west of Ostiglia, beating by a few hours in the race for the river units of the 6th Armoured Division and the 8th Indian Division.<sup>233</sup>

As the Allied Armies closed up to the Po the Tactical Air Force struck vigorously against the congested ferry sites and temporary crossings; by 23 April the last pontoon bridges had gone the way of the permanent bridges destroyed in the previous summer (above, p. 464).<sup>234</sup> Many of the Germans (including General Heidrich, now commanding the 1st Parachute Corps) escaped by swimming,<sup>235</sup> but the bulk of the equipment of three army corps was left behind. Every approach was choked with vehicles, guns and tanks which had been destroyed by air attacks or artillery shelling or abandoned by the enemy in his headlong flight. By the evening of the 25th nearly 50,000 German front line troops had fallen into Allied hands.<sup>236</sup>

The remnants of the German armies in Italy were now ripe for destruction. Carefully prepared plans for set-piece assault crossings over the Po were discarded as the enemy showed no inclination to defend the north bank. First of the Allied formations to cross was the remarkable 10th Mountain Division, which was ferried over in DUKWs southwest of Mantua on the 23rd and 24th.<sup>237</sup> Within three days it had seized Verona and was heading for Lake Garda. Following closely behind, other American formations turned northeast towards the Adige in a race with divisions of the 5th and 13th Corps, which had crossed the Po respectively east and west of Ferrara. There was

hardly a check at the Adige, which light forces in DUKWs, Fantails and D.D. tanks\* crossed on the 27th-for the Venetian line now lacked the troops to man it.<sup>239</sup>

Five days of pursuit remained. At the call of the Italian Committee of National Liberation of Upper Italy the Partisans had risen to harry the fleeing enemy columns, and in town after town the Allied pursuers found the German garrisons already ousted. The Fifth Army's thrust to the Alpine foothills had split the German forces in two, sealing the fate of the 51st Mountain Corps in the western Apennines and Graziani's Army of Liguria, spread over north-west Italy from the Gulf of Genoa to the Swiss border. While the 10th Mountain Division fought its way up the shores of Lake Garda to close the Brenner Pass, other formations of the 4th Corps fanned out across the upper Po Valley to block the remaining escape routes into Austria and round up the entrapped enemy; on the extreme Allied left the 92nd Division cleared along the Ligurian coast.<sup>240</sup> North of the Adige the two British Corps raced across the flat plains for Venice, which fell to the 56th Division on 29 April. General McCreery's destruction of the Tenth Army was now virtually complete. While his armour struck north towards the Austrian border, the New Zealanders rounded the Gulf of Venice to Trieste, where General Freyberg took the capitulation of several thousand German troops on 2 May.<sup>241</sup>

All hostilities in the theatre ended at noon that same day, as an instrument of unconditional surrender signed three days earlier came into effect. Secret negotiations for a capitulation had been started in February through the good offices of a prominent Italian industrialist, Baron Luigi Parilli, and two Swiss intermediaries, Dr. Max Husmann and Major Max Waibel.<sup>242</sup> There were discussions in Switzerland during March between Dr. A. W. Dulles, Chief of the American Office of Strategic Services, and General Karl Wolff, who in addition to holding the important office of "Highest S.S. and Police Commander in Italy" was at that time the Plenipotentiary-General of the German Armed Forces in Italy.<sup>243</sup> By mid-April Wolff had gained the agreement of von Vietinghoff and his army commanders to the necessity of surrender, and on 2 April, after delays caused by both sides, the final instrument was signed in the Palace at Caserta by representatives of von Vietinghoff and Wolff and by Lieut.-General Sir William Morgan, Alexander's Chief of Staff.<sup>244</sup>

An unforeseen complication now arose, when Field-Marshal Kesselring, who from 28 April was Supreme Commander of both the Western and Southern fronts, refused to sanction the capitulation and on 30 April replaced von Vietinghoff and his Chief of Staff, Rottiger, with General of Infantry Friedrich Schulz (former C.-in-C. Army Group "G") and Major-General

\* These British amphibious Duplex Drive tanks, which had been used successfully in the Normandy landings, were first employed in Italy at the Po crossings.<sup>238</sup>

Wentzell. Wolff and Rottiger (who did not immediately follow his chief to join the Army Group Commanders' Reserve in Germany) made desperate last-minute efforts to win over Kesselring, even going so far as to arrest Schulz and Wentzell to prevent their countermanding orders to cease fire. Then, at 11:00 p.m. on 1 May, the announcement of Hitler's death released the German commanders from their oath of allegiance, and at 4:30 next morning Kesselring gave his consent to an armistice.<sup>245</sup> Hostilities ended promptly at midday. In the first mass German capitulation of the war 207,425 survivors of Army Group "C" laid down their arms.<sup>247</sup>

### From Pachino to the Senio - The Balance Sheet

It remains only to attempt to assess the value of the Allied effort in Italy. The Italian campaign's major contribution to the general victory in Europe may not be denied; but whether equal results might not have been more economically gained had Allied strategy taken a different course is a question which will long be debated. The directive given to General Eisenhower in May 1943, to carry out such operations in exploitation of the conquest of Sicily as would be best calculated "to contain the maximum number of German forces",<sup>248</sup> had remained in effect throughout the campaign.<sup>249</sup> Moreover, as Lord Alexander points out, "The supreme directors of Allied strategy were always careful to see that our strength was never allowed to grow above the minimum necessary for our task."<sup>250</sup> At one time or another during the twenty months of the fighting in Italy they withdrew no less than 21 Allied divisions to benefit other theatres.

A rough measure of how well the role was fulfilled is given by the number of divisions which each side found it necessary to maintain in the Mediterranean theatre. On such a basis of comparison the Allies would seem to have achieved their purpose. In mid-October 1943, six weeks after the invasion of the Italian mainland, there were 19 German against 15 Allied divisions in Italy,<sup>251</sup> and with the exception of a brief period in the spring of 1944, when Alexander had 27 divisions opposing 23 of the enemy's,<sup>252</sup> the number of Axis formations in Italy consistently exceeded that of the Allies. In the summer of 1944, when according to the Supreme Commander "the value of our strategic contribution was at its greatest,"<sup>253</sup> 20 Allied divisions faced 25 of the enemy's in Italy, besides helping to tie down 17 in the Balkans †

\* On 9 April Army Group "C" had a total strength of 439,334 Germans (plus 160,180 Italians). German casualties during the last offensive were estimated at 5000 killed, 27,000 wounded and sick, and some 200,000 taken prisoner (before the final capitulation).<sup>246</sup>

† According to General Westphal the Allied campaign in Italy kept about forty German divisions, "that is to say, one-fifth of the German ground forces", distributed throughout Italy, Yugoslavia and Greece.<sup>254</sup>

and eleven in Southern France, whose presence in those areas was in part due to the threat offered by the forces under Alexander's command.<sup>255</sup>

On the surface these are satisfying figures, but a little consideration will show that mere numbers of divisions engaged on either side afford an inadequate basis of comparison. Such statistics exclude the large number of non-divisional troops employed all the way from the front line to the rearmost areas, and reflect neither the differences in the establishments of the opposing formations nor the considerable fluctuations which casualties and shortages of replacements caused in their manpower—as we have seen, there were times when German formations were reduced to a mere fraction of their authorized strength. Moreover, they take no account of the fact that the Allies had very large air forces in the theatre, and the Germans almost none. Yet to determine the actual number of opponents that each side was containing on any given date is extremely difficult, for not only is there a dearth of statistics from enemy sources but such as have become available from captured documents were not rendered in a form which permits an exact comparison with Allied strength returns. A German High Command graph of the "Actual Strength of Army Group 'C'" for the first year of the Italian campaign (it includes ground forces committed by Air Force and S.S. formations) shows a fairly steady increase from 195,000 on 1 July 1943 to 411,000 twelve months later. On 1 April 1944, when the German total was 393,000,<sup>256</sup> the British Eighth Army gave its "fighting state" as 190,182,<sup>257</sup> while the U.S. Fifth Army reported an "effective strength" of 359,565.<sup>258</sup> This total of 549,747, however, made up little more than one third of the Allied strength in the theatre (including the air forces), which on 31 March was 1,577,932 all ranks.<sup>259</sup> Throughout 1944 the total strength of Allied forces in Italy continued to exceed one and a half million,<sup>260</sup> with that of the two armies fluctuating in the neighbourhood of 600,000. When the final offensive opened in April 1945, Army Group "C", which as we have seen (p. 678) was then 599,514 strong, faced a total of 616,642 all ranks (including 70,468 Italians) in the Fifth and Eighth Armies.<sup>261</sup>

In the matter of casualties there is no question as to which side had its strength drained more by the campaign. From D Day for Sicily (10 July 1943) to the opening of the final offensive (9 April 1945) the losses to the Allied ground forces in killed, wounded and captured numbered 304,208 all ranks.<sup>262</sup> Figures based on enemy records show for the same period an estimated total of 426,339 German casualties.<sup>263</sup> By 2 May, when the fighting ended, Allied losses had increased to 320,955,<sup>264</sup> while the enemy total (excluding those involved in the final capitulation) had reached 658,339.<sup>265</sup>

Most readers will agree with Lord Alexander that the assistance given the general Allied cause by the operations in Italy reached its peak before the attack on the Gothic Line. Up to that time the campaign had yielded notable strategic gains. The twelve months which followed the invasion of Sicily had

deprived Germany of her Axis partner; opened to Allied shipping the important sea route through the Mediterranean to the Middle East and India; gained air bases on the Italian mainland which considerably increased the effectiveness of the great bombing programme against Germany; and enhanced Allied prestige by winning a decisive victory which led to the capture of Rome and set the stage for a successful invasion of Southern France.

In July 1944, however, there seemed little in Allied plans likely to produce any further spectacular contribution by the forces in Italy. When the decision to invade Southern France killed the proposal by Generals Wilson and Alexander for a full-scale drive into the plains of Hungary, the need for an assault against the Gothic Line lost its urgency, even had the withdrawal of troops for "Anvil" left General Alexander with sufficient strength for the task. The validity of the arguments put forward in 1943 still held. At the White House meetings which followed the Quebec "Quadrant" Conference' Mr. Churchill, in reiterating his conviction that "having regard to the requirements of 'Overlord' " the Allies "should be very chary of advancing northward beyond the narrow part of the Italian Peninsula", had proposed an alternative more within Allied capabilities.

I should like it to be considered whether we should not, when we come up against the main German positions, construct a strong fortified line of our own, properly sited in depth. Italian labour could be used on a large scale for the purpose. Italian troops could naturally take part in defending the line. Thus, by the spring, we should be able in this theatre either to make an offensive if the enemy were weak, and anyhow to threaten one, or on the other hand stand on the defensive, using our air power, which will in the meanwhile have been built up, from behind our fortified line and divert a portion of our troops for action else where either to the West or to the East.<sup>266</sup>

Had such a plan been adopted in the summer of 1944, all the evidence and experience of the campaign up to that time argue that the Germans would have continued to retain large bodies of troops in Northern Italy, for Hitler's frequently demonstrated policy of "clinging to ground" would not have permitted a withdrawal across the plains to the Alpine barrier. But the directors of Allied strategy fell between two stools. Having ruled out a fullscale offensive into the Balkans they did not call a halt in front of the Gothic Line. Instead, they ordered General Alexander's weakened forces "to advance over the Apennines and close to the line of the River Po" (above, p. 464). The result was the bitter and unprofitable struggle which wore out the last four months of 1944, and cost Canada her heaviest casualties of the campaign.

None of these strategical considerations can alter the fact that the Allied Armies in Italy had waged and won a hard and well-fought campaign. Always the attacker, they had carried out four major amphibious landings, and three times attacked the enemy with the full strength of an Army Group.<sup>267</sup> Fighting

much of the time in country where, in the words of Lord Alexander, "it is generally agreed, a superiority of at least three to one is required for successful offensive operations",<sup>268</sup> their polyglot forces, in which 26 nations were represented,<sup>269</sup> drove the enemy from one position after another up the whole length of the peninsula to complete his destruction on the northern plain. We have noted, that the needs of other theatres deprived the Allied commanders in Italy of the use of airborne troops or amphibious forces\* with which they might have offset the advantages that the narrow and mountainous Italian frontage gave the enemy. That they were forced to advance by attacking through the defensible defiles of restricted valley or narrow coastal plain was the greater challenge to their generalship.

To these successes Canadian troops had made no small contribution. Except for the last two months of the war Canadian formations were engaged in all the major phases of the campaign; when it left Italy the 1st Division had served continuously in the theatre for a longer period than any other division in the Eighth Army.<sup>271</sup> In the long advance from Pachino to the Senio the Canadians had fought against twenty different German divisions. At least four of these—the 1st Parachute, the 29th and 90th Panzer Grenadier and the 26th Panzer Divisions—stand out both for the quality of their performance and the frequency with which they were encountered; for, as we have learned from enemy records, the reported appearance of the Canadians in a given sector was generally the signal for the Germans to commit there the best formations in the theatre.

Of the 92,757 Canadians of all ranks who served in the Italian theatre (the figure includes 1178 members of the 1st Special Service Battalion) more than a quarter became casualties. The killed numbered 408 officers and 4991 men; the wounded 1218 and 18,268 respectively; and 62 officers and 942 men were taken prisoner. The addition of 365 who died from causes other than enemy action brings the total Canadian casualties to 26,254. Approximately 60 per cent of these were suffered in the five major operations† in which the Canadians were engaged, for, as we have seen, the men who wore on their shoulders the name of Canada were identified with the costliest struggles of the entire campaign.

The Canadians' departure from Italy before the last blow was struck deprived them of a share in the final triumph. As they moved to fresh fields of endeavour, however, an experienced fighting body of the highest calibre,

\* German strategists, lacking full knowledge of these limitations, have criticized what they term "the methodical ways of the Allies" and their "desire to undergo as little risk as possible." They declare that by landing near Rome instead of Salerno the Allies could have seized the whole of central and Southern Italy by the autumn of 1943, and that a landing near Leghorn early in 1944 "would almost certainly" have cut off Army Group "C" and led to the reduction of the whole peninsula that summer.<sup>270</sup>

† Total Canadian battle casualties in these operations were: Sicily, 2227; the Moro River and Ortona, 2605; the Liri Valley, 3713; the Gothic Line and the Battle of the Rimini Line, 4511; and the advance from the Montone to the Senio, 2581.

they might look back with satisfaction upon their share in a long and hard task. The reputation gained by their fellow countrymen in other campaigns had not suffered at their hands, and to the growing record of their nation's military achievements they had added new and worthy battle honours. The names of Ortona, the Hitler Line and the Gothic Line will live the longer for the Canadians who fought and died there. It was good to have earned the tribute expressed in Field-Marshal Alexander's generous farewell message to General Foulkes:

It is with great sorrow and regret that I see you and your famous Canadian Corps leaving my command.

You have played a distinguished part in our victories in Italy, where you leave behind a host of friends and admirers who will follow your future with the liveliest interest.

Good luck and Godspeed to you all in your coming tasks in the west, and may victory crown your new efforts as it has done in the past.<sup>272</sup>





## **APPENDICES**

*APPENDIX "A"*  
 ALLIED ORDER OF BATTLE  
 ALLIED ARMIES IN ITALY, 25 AUGUST 1944

## FIFTH UNITED STATES ARMY

Brazilian Expeditionary Force

2ND UNITED STATES CORPS:  
 34th U.S. Infantry Division  
 88th U.S. Infantry Division  
 91st U.S. Infantry Division

4TH UNITED STATES CORPS:-  
 1st U.S. Armoured Division  
 6th South African Armoured Division  
 85th U.S. Infantry Division

13TH BRITISH CORPS:  
 1st British Infantry Division  
 6th British Armoured Division  
 8th Indian Infantry Division  
 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade

## EIGHTH ARMY

2nd New Zealand Division  
 Italian Corps of Liberation\*  
 3rd Greek Mountain Brigade

1ST CANADIAN CORPS:  
 1st Canadian Infantry Division  
 5th Canadian Armoured Division  
 21st British Tank Brigade.

2ND POLISH CORPS:  
 3rd Carpathian Infantry Division  
 5th Kresowa Infantry Division  
 2nd Polish Armoured Brigade

5TH BRITISH CORPS:  
 1st British Armoured Division  
 4th British Infantry Division  
 4th Indian Infantry Division  
 46th British Infantry Division  
 56th British Infantry Division  
 7th British Armoured Brigade  
 25th British Tank Brigade

10TH BRITISH CORPS:  
 10th Indian Infantry Division  
 9th British Armoured Brigade

OTHER ALLIED FORMATIONS WHICH SERVED IN THE ITALIAN THEATRE  
 10 JULY 1943-2 MAY 1945

## BRITISH FORMATIONS

1st Airborne Division  
 5th Infantry Division  
 7th Armoured Division  
 50th Infantry Division  
 51st Infantry Division  
 78th Infantry Division  
 2nd Parachute Brigade  
 2nd Special Service Brigade  
 4th Light Armoured Brigade  
 23rd Armoured Brigade  
 231st Infantry Brigade  
 Jewish Infantry Brigade Group

## AMERICAN DIVISIONS

1st Infantry Division  
 2nd Armoured Division  
 3rd Infantry Division  
 9th Infantry Division  
 10th Mountain Division  
 36th Infantry Division  
 45th Infantry Division  
 82nd Airborne Division  
 92nd Infantry Division

## OTHER FORMATIONS

1st French Motorized Infantry Division  
 2nd Moroccan Infantry Division  
 3rd Algerian Infantry Division  
 4th Moroccan Mountain Division  
 First Special Service Force  
 43rd Indian Lorrain Infantry Brigade

\* Consisting of elements of the Legnano and Nembo Divisions; subsequently reorganized into six Combat Groups--Friuli, Cremona, Legnano, Folgore, Mantova and Piceno.

*APPENDIX "B"*  
ENEMY ORDER OF BATTLE\*  
ARMY GROUP "C", 12 AUGUST 1944

<p>ARMY LIGURIA 90th Panzer Grenadier Division</p> <p>KORPSABTEILUNG LEER (later Corps Lombardy): 34th Infantry Division 3rd Italian Infantry Division (San Marco) 42nd Jager Division 4th Italian Mountain Division (Monte Rosa) 135th Fortress Brigade</p> <p>FOURTEENTH ARMY 362nd Infantry Division</p> <p>75TH CORPS (Corps Headquarters being transferred to Army Liguria): 20th Air Force Field Division 16th S.S. Panzer Grenadier Division</p> <p>14TH PANZER CORPS: 65th Infantry Division 26th Panzer Division 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division</p> <p>1ST PARACHUTE CORPS: 29th Panzer Grenadier Division 4th Parachute Division 356th Infantry Division</p>	<p>TENTH ARMY 1st Parachute Division</p> <p>51ST MOUNTAIN CORPS: 715th Infantry Division 334th Infantry Division 305th Infantry Division 44th Infantry Division 114th Jager Division 15th Panzer Grenadier Division (being transferred to the Western Front)</p> <p>76TH PANZER CORPS: 5th Mountain Division 71st Infantry Division 278th Infantry Division</p> <p>VENETIAN COAST COMMAND 162nd (Turcoman) Infantry Division 98th Infantry Division</p> <p>ADRIATIC COAST COMMAND 3rd Regiment, Brandenburg Division 94th Infantry Division</p>
<p>OTHER GERMAN FORMATIONS WHICH SERVED IN THE ITALIAN THEATRE 10 JULY 1943-2 MAY 1945†</p>	
<p>1st S.S. Panzer Division (Adolf Hitler) 2nd Parachute Division 8th Mountain Division 16th Panzer Division 19th Air Force Field Division 76th Infantry Division 92nd Infantry Division 148th (Reserve) Infantry Division</p>	<p>155th (Field Training) Infantry Division 157th Mountain Division 188th (Reserve) Mountain Division 232nd Infantry Division 237th Infantry Division 371st Infantry Division 710th Infantry Division Hermann Goring Panzer Division</p>

\* From Schematic Order of Battle of the German Army, 15 Aug 1944.

† Not including Italian troops. Besides the two Italian formations listed in the Order of Battle for 12 August 1944, the 1st (Italia) and 2nd (Littoria) Infantry Divisions served with the German forces after the Italian capitulation.

## APPENDIX "C"

CANADIAN ARMY UNITS IN ITALY  
(19 August 1944)

Formations and units are grouped by corps. Designations are those authorized by General Orders at the time (except for certain modifications made for the sake of brevity and consistency, or as concessions to current usage). The complete roll of units is too long to be printed here. Thus headquarters of formations and supporting arms and services, as well as such relatively small units as Field Dressing Stations, are not included; although all made important contributions.

## CANADIAN ARMoured CORPS

4th Anti-Tank Regiment  
Stn Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment

## 1ST ARMoured BRIGADE

11th Armoured Regiment (The Ontario Regiment)  
12th Armoured Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment)  
14th Armoured Regiment (The Calgary Regiment)

1ST CORPS TROOPS  
7th Anti-Tank Regiment  
1st Survey Regiment

## 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

1st Armoured Car Regiment (The Royal Canadian Dragoons)

## FIRST CANADIAN ARMY TROOPS

No. 1 Army Group R.C.A.:  
11th Army Field Regiment  
1st Medium Regiment  
2nd Medium Regiment  
5th Medium Regiment

## 5TH ARMoured DIVISION

3rd Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment (The Governor General's Horse Guards)

## CORPS OF ROYAL CANADIAN ENGINEERS

## 5th Armoured Brigade:

2nd Armoured Regiment (Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians))

1ST INFANTRY DIVISION  
2nd Field Park Company  
3rd Field Company  
4th Field Company

5th Armoured Regiment (8th Princess Louise's (New Brunswick) Hussars)

9th Armoured Regiment (The British Columbia Dragoons)

5TH ARMoured DIVISION  
4th Field Park Squadron  
1st Field Squadron  
10th Field Squadron

## FIRST CANADIAN ARMY TROOPS:

"A", "B" and "G" Squadrons, 25th Armoured Delivery Regiment (The Elgin Regiment)

1ST CORPS TROOPS  
9th Field Park Company  
12th Field Company  
13th Field Company  
14th Field Company

## ROYAL CANADIAN ARTILLERY

## 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

1st Field Regiment R.C.H.A.  
2nd Field Regiment  
3rd Field Regiment  
1st Anti-Tank Regiment  
2nd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment

G.H.Q. AND L. OF C. TROOPS  
1st Drilling Company

## 5TH ARMoured DIVISION

17th Field Regiment  
8th Field Regiment (Self-Propelled)

## ROYAL CANADIAN CORPS OF SIGNALS

1st Armoured Brigade Signals  
1st Infantry Divisional Signals  
5th Armoured Divisional Signals  
1st Corps Headquarters Signals

CANADIAN INFANTRY CORPS*	3rd Infantry Brigade Company
1ST INFANTRY DIVISION	5th Armoured Divisional Troops Company
The Saskatoon Light Infantry. (M.G.)	5th Armoured Divisional Transport Company
1st Infantry Brigade:	5th Armoured Brigade Company
The Royal Canadian Regiment	11th Infantry Brigade Company
The Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment	12th Infantry Brigade Company
48th Highlanders of Canada	No. 31 Corps Troops Company
2nd Infantry Brigade:	No. 32 Corps Troops Company
Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry	1st Corps Transport Company
The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada	No. 1 Motor Ambulance Convoy
The Loyal Edmonton Regiment	No. 1 Headquarters Corps Car Company
3rd Infantry Brigade:	No. 41 Army Transport Company
Royal 22e Regiment	ROYAL CANADIAN ARMY MEDICAL CORPS
The Carleton and York Regiment	1st ARMoured BRIGADE
The West Nova Scotia Regiment	No. 2 Light Field Ambulance
5TH ARMoured DIVISION	I ST INFANTRY DIVISION
11th Infantry Brigade:	No. 4 Field Ambulance
11th Independent Machine Gun (The Princess Louise Fusiliers) -	No. 5 Field Ambulance Company
The Perth Regiment	No. 9 Field Ambulance
The Cape Breton Highlanders	5TH ARMoured DIVISION
The Irish Regiment of Canada	No. 7 Light Field Ambulance
12th Infantry Brigade:	No. 8 Light Field Ambulance
12th Independent Machine Gun Company (The Princess Louise Fusiliers)	No. 24 Field Ambulance
4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards	1ST CORPS TROOPS
The Lanark and Renfrew Scottish Regiment†	No. 4 Casualty Clearing Station
The Westminster Regiment (Motor)	No. 5 Casualty Clearing Station
1st CORPS TROOPS	G.H.Q. AND L. OF C. TROOPS
1st Corps Defence Company‡	No. 1 General Hospital
ROYAL CANADIAN ARMY SERVICE CORPS	No. 3 General Hospital
1st Armoured Brigade Company	No. 5 General Hospital
1st Infantry Divisional Troops Company	No. 14 General Hospital
1st Infantry Brigade Company	No. 15 General Hospital
2nd Infantry Brigade Company	No. 28 General Hospital
	No. 1 Convalescent Depot
	CANADIAN DENTAL CORPS
	No. 1 Dental Company
	No. 3 Dental Company
	No. 8 Dental Company
	No. 11 Base Dental Company

\* The 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion (part of the First Special Service Force) had left Italy to fight in Southern France.

† Before 13 July 1944, the 1st Light- Anti-Aircraft Regiment R.C.A. (1st Corps Troops).

‡ Provided by The Lorne Scots (Peel, Dufferin and Halton Regiment), which also furnished platoons for defence and/or employment duties at divisional and brigade headquarters. ,

ROYAL CANADIAN ORDNANCE  
CORPS

No. 201 Infantry Ordnance Sub-Park  
 No. 205 Armoured Ordnance Sub-Park  
 No. 1 Corps and Army Troops Sub-  
 Park

ROYAL CANADIAN ELECTRICAL  
AND MECHANICAL ENGINEERS

1st Armoured Brigade Workshop  
 No. 1 Army Tank Troops Workshop  
 1st Infantry Brigade Workshop  
 2nd Infantry Brigade Workshop  
 3rd Infantry Brigade Workshop  
 5th Armoured Brigade Workshop  
 11th Infantry Brigade Workshop  
 12th Infantry Brigade Workshop  
 1 Infantry Troops Workshop  
 No. 5 Armoured Troops Workshop  
 1st Corps Troops Workshop  
 No. 1 Recovery Company

## CANADIAN PROVOST CORPS

No. 1 Provost Company (R.C.M.P.)  
 No. 3 Provost Company  
 No. 5 Provost Company  
 No. 1 L. of C. Provost Company  
 No. 35 Traffic Control Company\*

## MISCELLANEOUS

Canadian Section G.H.Q. 1st Echelon  
 A.A.I.  
 Canadian Section G.H.Q. 2nd Echelon  
 A.A.I.  
 No. 1 Base Reinforcement Group: No.  
 No. 1 Base Reinforcement Depot  
 No. 2 Base Reinforcement Depot

\* Formed on 15 June 1944 from the 35th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery R.C.A. (1st L.A.A. Regt.).

*APPENDIX. "D"*  
 PERSONS HOLDING PRINCIPAL APPOINTMENTS  
 IN THE CANADIAN ARMY IN THE ITALIAN THEATRE\*

1st CANADIAN CORPS  
 (1 October 1943—25 February 1945)

*G.O.C. 1st Canadian Corps*

Lt.-Gen. H. D. G. Crerar, C.B., D.S.O.....	23 Dec. 41 - 19 Mar. 44
Lt.-Gen. E. L. M. Burns, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.....	20 Mar. 44 - 5 Nov. 44
Lt.-Gen. C. Foulkes, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.....	10 Nov. 44 - 17 Jul. 45

*B.G.S., 1st Canadian Corps*

Brig. G. A. McCarter.....	1 Oct. 43 - 6 Jun. 44
Brig. J. D. B. Smith, C.B.E., D.S.O.....	7 Jun. 44 - 11 Nov. 44
Brig. G. Kitching, D.S.O.....	12 Nov. 44 - 1 Jul. 45

*D.A. & Q.M.G., 1st Canadian Corps*

Brig. J. F. A. Lister, O.B.E.....	8 Apr. 43 - 19 Sep. 44
Brig. W. P. Gilbride, C.B.E., D.S.O.....	20 Sep. 44 - 8 Jul. 45

*C.C.R.A., 1st Canadian Corps*

Brig. H. O. N. Brownfield, C.B.E., M.C.....	24 Oct. 43 - 26 Dec. 43
Brig. E. C. Plow.....	27 Dec. 43 - 18 Dec. 44
Brig. H. A. Sparling, D.S.O.....	19 Dec. 44 - 10 Jun. 45

*C.E., 1st Canadian Corps*

Brig. A. B. Connelly.....	23 Jun. 43 - 26 Jul. 44
Brig. C. A. Campbell, O.B.E.....	27 Jul. 44 - 24 Apr. 45

*C.S.O., 1st Canadian Corps*

Brig. C. S. McKee, E.D.....	10 Jan. 43 - 11 Jan. 45
Brig. A. E. Wrinch.....	12 Jan. 45 - 10 Jun. 45

1st CANADIAN INFANTRY DIVISION  
 (10 July 1943—25 February 1945)

*G.O.C. 1st Canadian Infantry Division*

Maj.-Gen. G. G. Simonds, C.B.E., D.S.O.....	29 Apr. 43 - 31 Oct. 43
Maj.-Gen. C. Vokes, C.B.E., D.S.O.....	1 Nov. 43 - 30 Nov. 44
Maj.-Gen. H. W. Foster, C.B.E., D.S.O.....	1 Dec. 44 - 15 Sep. 45

*G.S.O. I, 1st Canadian Infantry Division*

Lt.-Col. G. Kitching, D.S.O.....	14 Dec. 42 - 30 Oct. 43
Lt. Col. C. M. Harding.....	1 Nov. 43 - 4 Apr. 44
Lt.-Col. M. P. Bogert, D.S.O.....	26 Apr. 44 - 6 Oct. 44
Lt.-Col. J. W. Eaton.....	12 Nov. 44 - 8 Dec. 44
Lt.-Col. W. S. Murdoch, M.B.E.....	9 Dec. 44 - 6 Jul. 45

*A.A. & Q.M.G., 1st Canadian Infantry Division*

Lt.-Col. W. P. Gilbride.....	29 Apr. 43 - 23 Mar. 44
Lt.-Col. J. S. Adam.....	25 Mar. 44 - 22 Dec. 44
Lt.-Col. H. Williamson, O.B.E.....	23 Dec. 44 - 15 Sep. 45

\* Officers are shown with rank and decorations as of the day on which they relinquished the appointments concerned. Names of officers who held acting appointments or were detailed temporarily to command are not shown unless they were subsequently confirmed in these appointments. No distinction is made between acting and confirmed rank.



<i>C.R.A., 1st Canadian Infantry Division</i>	
Brig. A. B. Matthews, D.S.O .....	15 Jan. 43 - 3 Mar. 44
Brig. W. S. Ziegler, D.S.O., E.D.....	4 Mar. 44 - 23 Aug. 45
<i>C.R.E., 1st Canadian Infantry Division</i>	
Lt.-Col. G. Walsh, D.S.O.....	1 Apr. 42 - 2 Jan. 44
Lt. Col. K. J. Southern, D.S.O .....	2 Jan. 44 - 27 May 44
Lt.-Col. E. H. Webb, D.S.O.....	28 May 44 - 9 Sep. 45
<i>C.R., Sigs., 1st Canadian Infantry Division</i>	
Lt.-Col. J. H. Eaman .....	18 Jan. 43 - 22 Dec. 43
Lt.-Col. B. W. G. Grover, O.B.E., E.D.....	23 Dec. 43 - 12 Sep. 45
<i>Comd., 1st Infantry Brigade</i>	
Brig. H. D. Graham, D.S.O., E.D .....	15 Jan. 43 - 17 Dec. 43
Brig. D. C. Spry, D.S.O .....	18 Dec. 43 - 12 Jul. 44
Brig. J. A. Calder .....	13 Jul. 44 - 8 Dec. 44
Brig. J. D. B. Smith, C.B.E., D.S.O.....	9 Dec. 44 - 2 Jun. 45
<i>Comd., 2nd Infantry Brigade</i>	
Brig. C. Yokes, D.S.O.....	24 Jun. 42 - 31 Oct. 43
Brig. B. M. Hoffmeister, D.S.O.....	1 Nov. 43 - 19 Mar. 44
Brig. T. G. Gibson .....	13 Apr. 44 - 6 Oct. 44
Brig. M. P. Bogert, D.S.O., O.B.E.....	7 Oct. 44 - 4 Jun. 45
<i>Comd., 3rd Infantry Brigade</i>	
Brig. M. H. S. Penhale .....	8 Apr. 43 - 11 Oct. 43
Brig. T. G. Gibson .....	12 Oct. 43 - 12 Apr. 44
Brig. J. P. E. Bernatchez, D.S.O., O.B.E.....	13 Apr. 44 - 2 Jun. 45

### 5th CANADIAN ARMOURED DIVISION (1 October 1943-25 February 1945)

<i>G.O.C. 5th Canadian Armoured Division</i>	
Maj.-Gen. G. G. Simonds, C.B.E., D.S.O .....	1 Nov. 43 - 29 Jan. 44
Maj.-Gen. E. L. M. Burns, O.B.E., M.C.....	30 Jan. 44 - 19 Mar. 44
Maj.-Gen. B. M. Hoffmeister, C.B.E., D.S.O., E.D.-.....	20 Mar. 44 - 6 Jun. 45
<i>G.S.O. 1, 5th Canadian Armoured Division</i>	
Lt.-Col. W. C. Murphy, E.D .....	6 May 43 - 26 Feb. 44
Lt.-Col. H. H. Angle .....	27 Feb. 44 - 31 Aug. 44
Lt.-Col. W. C. Dick, O.B.E.....	14 Sep. 44 - 6 Jun. 45
<i>A.A. &amp; Q.M.G., 5th Canadian Armoured Division</i>	
Lt.-Col. F. B. Matthews .....	7 May 43 - 22 Mar. 44
Lt.-Col. C. H. Drury, O.B.E.....	23 Mar. 44 - 19 Jun. 45
<i>C.R.A., 5th Canadian Armoured Division</i>	
Brig. R. O. G. Morton .....	31 Jan. 43 - 12 Dec. 43
Brig. H. A. Sparling .....	27 Dec. 43 - 18 Dec. 44
Brig. J. S. Ross, D.S.O.....	19 Dec. 44 - 29 Nov. 45
<i>C.R.E., 5th Canadian Armoured Division</i>	
Lt.-Col. J. D. Christian, O.B.E.....	21 Jul. 43 - 24 Apr. 45
Lt.-Col. M. C. S. Brown, D.S.O.....	24 Apr. 45 - 11 Jun. 45
<i>C.R. Sigs., 5th Canadian Armoured Division</i>	
Lt.-Col. A. E. Wrinch .....	16 Jul. 43 - 11 Jan. 45
Lt.-Col. R. H. Widdifield, E.D.....	12 Jan. 45 - 29 Oct. 45

*Comd., 5th Armoured Brigade*

Brig. G. R. Bradbrooke, M.C. ....	15 Sep. 42 - 22 Feb. 44
Brig. J. D. B. Smith, O.B.E. ....	23 Feb. 44 - 6 Jun. 44
Brig. I. H. Cumberland, D.S.O., O.B.E., E.D. ....	7 Jun. 44 - 11 Nov. 45

*Comd., 11th Infantry Brigade*

Brig. G. Kitching, D.S.O. ....	1 Nov. 43 - 13 Feb. 44
Brig. T. E. D'O. Snow ....	14 Feb. 44 - 23 Jun. 44
Brig. I. S. Johnston, D.S.O., E.D. ....	24 Jun. 44 - 6 Jun. 45

*Comd., 12th Infantry Brigade*

Brig. D. C. Spry, D.S.O. ....	13 Jul. 44 - 12 Aug. 44
Brig. J. S. H. Lind, D.S.O. ....	13 Aug. 44 - 12 Mar. 45

## OTHER FORMATIONS

*Comd., 1st Armoured Brigade*

Brig. R. A. Wyman, E.D. ....	2 Feb. 42 - 26 Feb. 44
Brig. W. C. Murphy, E.D. ....	27 Feb. 44 - 25 Jun. 45

*Comd., No. 1 Army Group R.C.A.*

Brig. R. J. Leach, M.C. ....	15 Sep. 41 - 25 Jan. 44
Brig. W. E. Huckvale ....	26 Jan. 44 - 7 Dec. 44
Brig. L. G. Clarke, O.B.E. ....	26 Dec. 44 - 3 Apr. 45

## ADMINISTRATIVE APPOINTMENTS

*Officer-in-Charge, Canadian Section 1st Echelon, A.F.H.Q.\**

Lt. Col. D. K. Tow† ....	26 May 43 - 15 Oct. 43
Brig. A. W. Beament ....	20 Oct. 43 - 12 Feb. 44
Brig. E. G. Weeks, M.C., M.M. ....	13 Feb. 44 - 29 Nov. 44
Brig. W. G. H. Roaf, O.B.E., E.D. ....	18 Dec. 44 - 8 Apr. 45

*Officer-in-Charge, Canadian Section 2nd Echelon, A.F.H.Q.\**

Lt.-Col. V. S. C. McClenaghan, M.C., E.D.‡ ....	27 May 43 - 29 Nov. 43
Col. M. S. Dunn, O.B.E., E.D. ....	30 Nov. 43 - 25 Mar. 45

*Comd., No. 1 Base Reinforcement Group*

Brig. E. W. Haldenby, M.C., V.D. ....	16 Oct. 43 - 12 Nov. 44
Brig. T. G. Gibson ....	13 Nov. 44 - 23 Feb. 45

\* Before 1 Jan. 45 variously designated 1st or 2nd Echelon 15th Army Group or A.A.I.

† Lt.-Col. Tow served as Assistant Adjutant General. The appointment was redesignated Officer-in-Charge on 20 Oct. 43.

‡ Lt.-Col. McClenaghan served as Assistant Adjutant General. The appointment was redesignated Officer-in-Charge on 19 May 44.

## ABBREVIATIONS

A.A.I.	Allied Armies in Italy
A.A. & Q.M.G.	Assistant Adjutant & Quartermaster General
"A" Branch	Adjutant General's Branch
A.C.M.F.	Allied Central Mediterranean Force
A.D.C.	Aide-de-Camp
A.D.M.S.	Assistant Director of Medical Services
A.D.O.S.	Assistant Director of Ordnance Services
A.D.Q.M.G.	Assistant Deputy Quartermaster General
A.F.H.Q.	Allied Force Headquarters
A.F.V.	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
A.G.	Adjutant General
A.G.R.A.	Army Group Royal Artillery
A.O.K.	<i>Armeeoberkommando</i> (Army Headquarters)
A.O.P.	Air Observation Post
A.Q.M.G.	Assistant Quartermaster General
Armd.	Armoured
Arty.	Artillery
B.B.C.	British Broadcasting Corporation
Bde.	Brigade
B.G.S.	Brigadier, General Staff
Bn.	Battalion
Brig.	Brigadier
C.A.C.	Canadian Armoured Corps
Canmilitary	C.M.H.Q. [Address used in telegrams]
Capt.	Captain
C.A.W.	Canadian Army Staff, Washington
C.B.	Companion of the Order of the Bath
C.B.E.	Commander of the Order of the British Empire
C.C.R.A.	Commander, Corps Royal Artillery
C.C.S.	Combined Chiefs of Staff
Cdn.	Canadian
C.E.	Chief Engineer
C.E.F.	Canadian Expeditionary Force
C.G.S.	Chief of the General Staff
Cie	<i>Compagnie</i> (Company)
C-in-C.	Commander-in-Chief
C.I.G.S.	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
C.M.F.	Central Mediterranean Force
C.M.G.	Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George
C.M.H.Q.	Canadian Military Headquarters, London
C.O.	Commanding Officer
C.O.H.Q.	Combined Operations Headquarters
Comd.	Commander
C.O.S.	Chiefs of Staff
C. of S.	Chief of Staff
Col.	Colonel
Coy.	Company
Cpl.	Corporal
C.P.S.	Canadian Planning Staff
C.R.A.	Commander, Royal Artillery
C.R.E.	Commander, Royal Engineers
C.R.S.	Captured Records Section, Washington

C.R. Sigs. ....	Commander, Royal Signals
C.S.I. ....	Companion of the Star of India
C.S.M. ....	Company Sergeant Major (Warrant Officer, Class II)
C.S.O. ....	Chief Signal Officer
D.A.F. ....	Desert Air Force
D.C.G.S. ....	Deputy Chief of the General Staff
D.C.I.G.S. ....	Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff
D.C.M. ....	Distinguished Conduct Medal
D.D.H.S. ....	Deputy Director Historical Section
D.D.M.O. (O) ....	Deputy Director of Military Operations (Overseas)
	[War Office]
D.Hist. (D.H.S.) ....	Director Historical Section
Div. ....	Division
D.N.C.X.F. ....	Deputy Naval Commander Expeditionary Force
D.S.D. ....	Director(ate) of Staff Duties
D.S.O. ....	Companion of the Distinguished Service Order
E.D. ....	Canadian Efficiency Decoration
E.N.S.A. ....	Entertainments National Services Association
E.T.O.U.S.A. ....	European Theatre of Operations United States Army
FLAMBO ....	A.F.H.Q. Advanced Administrative Echelon
Fol. ....	Folio
F.O.O. ....	Forward Observation Officer
G.A.F. ....	German Air Force
G.C.B. ....	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath
G.C.M.G. ....	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George
Gdfk. ....	Goldflake
Gen. ....	General
G.H.Q. ....	General Headquarters
G.O.C. ....	General Officer Commanding
G.O.C.-in-C. ....	General Officer Commanding-in-Chief
G.S. ....	General Staff
G.S.C. ....	General Staff Corps (German)
G.S.O. ....	General Staff Officer
H.E. ....	High Explosive
H.F. ....	Harassing Fire
H.G. Div. ....	Hermann Goring Division
H.M.S. ....	His Majesty's Ship
H.Q. ....	Headquarters
H.u.D. ....	Hoch and Deutschmeister (Grand Master of the Teutonic Order)
Inf. ....	Infantry
I.O. ....	Intelligence Officer
J.P. ....	Joint Planners
K.G. ....	Knight of the Order of the Garter
L.A.A. ....	Light Anti-Aircraft
L.A.D. ....	Light Aid Detachment
L.C.A. ....	Landing Craft, Assault
L.C.I. (L) ....	Landing Craft, Infantry (Large)
L.C.M. ....	Landing, Craft, Mechanized

## ABBREVIATIONS

695

L/Cpl. ....	Lance Corporal
L.C.T. ....	Landing Craft, Tank
L.C.T. (R) .....	Landing Craft, Tank (Rocket)
Lieut. (Lt.) .....	Lieutenant
L.M.G. ....	Light Machine Gun
L. of C. ....	Lines of Communication
L.S.I. ....	Landing Ship, Infantry
L.S.P. ....	Landing Ship, Personnel
L.S.T. ....	Landing Ship, Tank
L.V.T. ....	Landing Vehicle, Tracked
Maj. ....	Major
M.B.E. ....	Member of the Order of the British Empire
M.C. ....	Military Cross
M.E.T. ....	Enemy Mechanical Transport
M.G. ....	Machine Gun
M.G.A. ....	Major General in charge of Administration
M.M. ....	Military Medal
M.T. ....	Mechanical Transport
Mtn. ....	Mountain
N.A.A.F. ....	Northwest African Air Forces
N.A.A.F.I. ....	Navy Army and Air Force Institute
N.A.T.A.F. ....	Northwest African Tactical Air Force
N.A.T.O.U.S.A. ....	North African Theatre of Operations United States Army
N.C.O. ....	Non-commissioned officer
N.D.H.Q. ....	National Defence Headquarters
N.Z. ....	New Zealand
O.B.E. ....	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
O.B.S. ....	Oberbefehlshaber Sud (Commander-in-Chief South)
O.B.S.W. ....	Oberbefehlshaber Sudwest (Commander-in-Chief South West)
O.C. ....	Officer Commanding
O.K.H. ....	Oberkommando des Heeres (Army High Command, Berlin)
O.K.W. ....	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Armed Forces High Command)
O.P. ....	Observation Post
Ops. ....	Operations
P.A. ....	Personal Assistant (used here to designate General McNaughton's personal files)
P.G. (Pz. Gren.) .....	Panzer Grenadier
PIAT .....	Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank
P.P.A. ....	Popski's Private Army
Pte. ....	Private
P.W. ....	Prisoner of War
"Q" Branch .....	Quartermaster General's Branch
Q.M.G. ....	Quartermaster General
R.A. ....	Royal Artillery
R.A.C. ....	Royal Armoured Corps
R.A.F. ....	Royal Air Force
R.A. (V) .....	Rear Admiral ("V" Force)
R.C.A. ....	Royal Canadian Artillery
R.C.A.F. ....	Royal Canadian Air Force
R.C.A.M.C. ....	Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps
R.C.A.S.C. ....	Royal Canadian Army Service Corps
R.C.E. ....	Royal Canadian Engineers

R.C.E.M.E. ....	Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
R.C.H.A. ....	Royal Canadian Horse Artillery
R.C.N.V.R. ....	Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve
R.C.O.C. ....	Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps
Recce. ....	Reconnaissance
Regt. ....	Regiment
R.E.M.E. ....	Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
R.N. ....	Royal Navy
S.A.A. ....	Small arms ammunition
S.D. (W) ....	Staff Duties (Weapons)
Sgt. ....	Sergeant
SHAEF ....	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
Sitrep ....	Situation Report
S.N.O.L. (R) ....	Senior Naval Officer Landing ("Roger" Beach)
S.P. ....	Self-Propelled
Sqn. ....	Squadron
S.S. ....	Special Service
S.S. (German) .....	Schutzstaffel (Protective Unit) (Nazi party organizations, including military formations)
T.C.V. ....	Troop-carrying vehicle
Tpr. ....	Trooper
U.K. ....	United Kingdom
U.S. ....	United States
U.S.S. ....	United States Ship
V.C. ....	Victoria Cross
V.D. ....	Colonial Auxiliary Forces Officers' Decoration
W.D. ....	War Diary
W.E. ....	War Establishment
W.F.St. ....	Wehrmachtsfuhrungsstab (Armed Forces Operations Staff)

## THE PRONUNCIATION OF ITALIAN GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Italian words are commonly accented on the penultimate, or next to the last, syllable. Names appearing in the text which are exceptions to this rule are listed below, and are stressed as shown. Certain other names whose pronunciation will be familiar from their usage in English have not been included in the list. Most of these end in -ia or -io, and are accented on the antepenultimate syllable (e.g., Anzio, Calabria, Catania, Emilia, Lucrezia, Savio and Spezia).

Àssoro	Forlìmpòpoli	Pòpoli
Àvola	Gállico	Porto Empèdocle
Basèlice	Gambèttola	Rìmini
Biscari	Ìmola	San Stèfano
Bonifica	Ìspica	Sant' Àgata
Brindisi	Mèlito	Sant' Àrcangelo
Càiro	Migliònico	Santarcàngelo
Cattòlica	Mòdena	Santo Spirito
Cefalù	Mòdica	Tàranto
Centùripe	Montespèrtoli	Tèrmini Imerese
Cercepiccola	Pàssero	Tèrmoli
Cesenàtico	Paternò	Tivoli
Còmiso	Pèllaro	Tràpani
Fontanèlice	Pèsaro	Vùlture

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## CHAPTER V

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## CHAPTER VIII

*From Calabria to the Foggia Plain,  
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## CHAPTER IX

*The Fortore and Biferno Rivers, October 1943*

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## CHAPTER X

*The Upper Sangro Diversion and the Battle of  
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## CHAPTER XI

*Ortona, December 1943*

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## CHAPTER XVII

*The Ortona Salient, January - April 1944*

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## CHAPTER XIII

*The Battle for Rome Begins, May 1944*

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## CHAPTER XIV

*The End of the Battle for Rome, 24 May - 4 June 1944*  
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17. 51st Mtn. Corps Situation Trace, 25 May 44 (C.R.S.--55779/4).
18. Note 2, above.

19. Report by 2nd Cdn. Armd. Regt. Account of Action given by Lieut. E. J. Perkins to Historical Officer, 5th Cdn. Armoured Div.
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38. Recommendation for D.S.O., Lieut. E. J. Perkins.
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## CHAPTER XV

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## CHAPTER XVI

*The Breaking Of The Gothic Line, 25 August - 2 September 1944*

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## CHAPTER XVIII

*Into the Lombard Plain, September-October 1944*

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## CHAPTER XIX

*The Battle of the Rivers; December 1944*

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The End Of *The Campaign, January-February 1945*

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1. Memo from Commander, Eighth Army, to Chief of Staff, A.F.H.Q., 29 Dec 44. Appendix "B"-12 to *Operations of British Forces in Italy, III, "B"*.
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